

SOCIAL MEDIA, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Studies and Perspectives
from Africa

edited by

Abiodun Salawu | Francis O. Amenaghawon
Ikemefuna T.P. Okudolo | Muchativugwa L. Hove

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of our colleague, Professor
Itumeleng Meko (1966-2021), the man who brought the idea of the
conference that birthed this book*

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
Section I: Sociology and Culture of the Use of Social Media	1
1 Uses and Gratification Theory, Social Media and Fake News	3
– Wole ADAMOLEKUN; Tshepang Bright MOLALE & Kunle OGEDENGBE	
2 Analysis of Social Media Users' Attitudes to Fake News in Nigeria	17
– Ikechukwu Williams EKE	
3 Social Media Message Sharing, Fake News, and Media Credibility Among Nigerian Undergraduates	35
– Olayinka Susan OGUNDOYIN, Daniel Ikesinachi NWOGWUGWU & Lasisi OLAGUNJU	
Section II: Politics and Governance	57
4 Fake News as Threat to Democracy: Reflections on the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria	59
– Esther Likita OGBA & Thomas A. ALEMOH	
5 Impact Assessment of Social Media-Political Communication Linkage in Nigeria's Election Campaigns (1999-2019)	76
– Ikemefuna Taire Paul OKUDOLO	
6 The Impact of Exposure to Fake News and Hate Speech on Social Media on Voting Behaviour	

During the 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election: Evidence from the South-East	97
– <i>Joseph Oluchukwu WOGU & Patrick EGWU</i>	
Section III: Communication and Info-Tech	115
7 Elements of Fake News in Facebook Comedy Skits: A Study of Dr Whiteberry and Alaariya	117
– <i>Israel Ayinla FADIPE & Abiodun SALAWU</i>	
8 Fake News Among Student Social Media Users: An Opinion Survey	134
– <i>Olugbenga ELEGBE</i>	
9 Lexical Choices in Nigerian-Based Online Hate Speeches	147
– <i>Mufutau Temitayo LAMIDI</i>	
10 Disinformation Campaigns against Zimbabwean Female Politicians on Twitter	164
– <i>Thulani TSHABANGU</i>	
11 Impact of Media Presentation of Herders' Attacks on Farmers on the Public Perception of Herders	182
– <i>Francis Osamwonyi AMENAGHAWON & Emmanuel Ademola OWOYEMI</i>	
Section IV: Education and Civil Societies	201
12 Fake News and Media Literacy-Perceptions of Selected WhatsApp Users in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria	203
– <i>Olayinka Abimbola EGBOKHARE & Francis Osamwonyi AMENAGHAWON</i>	
13 Social Media and the Weaponisation of Fake News: The Case of '#EndSARS' protest	221
– <i>Bimbo Lolade FAFOWORA</i>	
14 Social Media as Sites for Misinformation: The Capacity of Revictimising the Victim and Glamourising Tragedy	246
– <i>Muchativugwa Liberty HOVE</i>	

Section V: Jurisprudence and Related Legal Matters	267
15 Re-examining Hateful Messages in the Nigerian Media and Legal and Policy Options for Curtailing It – <i>Olusola O. ISOLA</i>	269
16 Reliving the Gupta Imbroglia in South Africa: A Conspiracy Theory Perspective of Fake News on Social Media – <i>Tshepang Bright MOLALE, Moses Ofome ASAK</i>	286
17 Understanding Rumour... Fake News! and Rumour Control – <i>Ayanfeoluwa Oluwatosin OYEWO, Obaloluwa Obed OYEWO & Olusola Oyeyinka OYEWO</i>	305
18 Fake News Defames People in Malawi – <i>Muyanga Macquba Innocent ZIBA</i>	326
<i>Index</i>	341

Introduction

Social Media, Fake News and Hate Speech

*Abiodun SALAWU**

Some Conceptual Grounding

The advent of social media has made possible the widespread of fake news and hate speech. Fake news and hate speech had been before the emergence of social media. What social media did was the fast and widespread dissemination of problematic messages as well as the appropriation of the digital affordances of the media for manipulation of images. Dang (2021) remarks that social media platforms provide an inexpensive communication medium that allows anyone to quickly reach millions of users. Unfortunately, this same vehicle provides space for discourses that are harmful: and these include bullying, offensive content and hate speech. Inventors of fake news concoct stories to misinform, sway opinions, spread propaganda, incite hate, alter perceptions, etc. through opinions, predictions and blatantly fabricated narratives (Agarwal and Sureka, 2017).

According to the Council of Europe's Information Disorder Report of November 2017, there are three different kinds of information

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that can intentionally or unintentionally harm (Giachanou and Rosso, 2020:3503-3504). One is *misinformation*, which can also be regarded as *satire*. It is false information but not created with the intention to harm. It comes in the form of exaggeration. The second is *disinformation*, otherwise called *fake news*, and is deliberately created to deceive other users. The third is *malinformation*, which has the intention to cause harm. Hateful comments, phishing, catfishing, doxing, swatting, and revenge porn are examples. A great amount of fake news, hoaxes, hurtful comments, inaccurate reviews and offensive content is published and propagated every day on social media which can lead to a lot of negative consequences for society. For example, in the political domain, fake news stories have been criticised as having an impact on the results of elections and referendums, whereas the propagation of inaccurate information about vaccines has caused a measles outbreak, a disease that was almost eradicated. In addition, according to UN experts “hate speech has exacerbated societal and racial tensions, inciting attacks with deadly consequences around the world” (Giachanou and Rosso, 2020:3503).

McGonagle (2017) observes that some researchers do not regard fake news as necessarily false or fabricated claims alone. For instance, Dentith (2017:66) notes that some statements can be “misleading”, and containing “significant omissions”, especially taking claims out of context in ways that undermine truth. Gelfert (2018:100) adds that it could be statements that tend to “mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths.” Other forms of content, namely brazen hoaxes, pranks, satires, or parodies, might be included in fake news, but “they need not be slurs on the truth” (MacKenzie and Bhatt, 2018:11).

Doshi (2017) gives the following types of fake news:

- (i) Satire or parody. There is no intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool.
- (ii) False connection. When headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content.
- (iii) Misleading content. The misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual.

- (iv) False context. When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
- (v) Impostor content. When genuine sources are ‘impersonated’ with false, made-up sources.
- (vi) Manipulated content. When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as with a ‘doctored’ photo.
- (vii) Fabricated content. News content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

People have different reasons for creating and spreading fake news. Wardle (2017) summarises these reasons under the following Ps: poor journalism, parody, (to) provoke, passion, partisanship, profit, political influence or power, and propaganda. She further outline the following reasons for the creation of fake news:

- (i) Intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person;
- (ii) Financial gains by getting people to click on sites so that they are exposed to advertising;
- (iii) To persuade others to take action to support or oppose a cause or political candidate;
- (iv) To deceive or prank people;
- (v) Increased popularity of social media such as the Facebook news feed;
- (vi) To increase readership and improve rates because ‘eye-popping’ headlines on social media feeds make it easier for users to share content without evaluating or reading it. This creates a viral storm of sound bites without substance because the vulnerable recipients unknowingly are enlisted as amplifiers and multipliers;
- (vii) Confirmation bias – people are more likely to accept information that confirms their beliefs and dismiss information that does not; and
- (viii) Increased political polarisation and hostile government actors who generate and propagate fake news, particularly during elections (Wardle, 2017:1-101).

Fake news has deleterious effects on the profession of journalism and the society. It devalues and delegitimises voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data – all of which undermine society's ability to engage in rational discourse based upon shared facts. It promotes 'safe news' at the expense of difficult or challenging news stories. It drains credible sources of their scarce resources in attempts to debunk inaccurate information capable of inflicting both financial and reputational damage.

For the society, it causes moral panic or mass hysteria; and damages public trust. It triggers an unconscious, biased way of processing information which makes even smart people believe in falsehoods that support their ideological and partisan predispositions. It entrenches stereotypes, generalisations and inequality in society. Fake news kills (Doshi, 2017; Muigai, 2017) when it causes panic among people making people run helter-skelter and thus into danger; and when it causes ire among people leading them to violence and deaths.

Synopses

Chapters in this book have dissected the issue from various angles, and they have been grouped accordingly. The book is divided into five sections. The first section focuses on the Sociology and Culture of the Use of Social Media. Chapter 1, entitled "Uses and Gratification Theory; Social Media and Fake News", Wole Ademolekun, Tshepang Molale and Kunle Ogedengbe examined the uses that purveyors of fake news put it to. The chapter also ascertained the gratification that people gain from the publication of fake news on social media. The chapter found that people use social media to promote fake news in order to satisfy their various desires. Such desires include the promotion of different positions such as personal, sectional, divisive, ideological, religious, political, and economic well-being. While buttressing the uses and gratification theory of the media, the chapter recommended that social media should be used for positive objectives rather than for promoting divisive positions while also calling for the adoption of the gatekeeping concept by social media platforms.

Chapter 2 authored by Ikechukwu Williams Eke with the title, “Analysis of Social Media Users’ Attitudes to Fake News in Nigeria”, analysed the comments social media users made on the outrageous fake news story that *ThisDay* newspaper published in 2020. The fake news story claimed that the US Embassy denied the Nigerian popular preacher, David Oyedepo, visa renewal. The analysis yielded six themes that showed that social media users have critical and disapproving opinions on fake news and a negative and incredulous attitude toward fake news. They expressed distrust in the willingness of the media and the government to curb the proliferation of fake news – a situation that could potentially make the discourse around fake news in Nigeria even murkier. In Chapter 3, Olayinka Susan Ogundoyin, Daniel Ikesinachi Nwogwugwu and Lasisi Olagunju’s study investigated the extent to which message sharing on social media had impacted the credibility of social media messages among Nigerian undergraduates. Using media dependency, and the uses and gratifications theories as a theoretical framework, the findings revealed that despite respondents’ exposure to and knowledge about fake news, they were not often sharing fake news. Instead, they verified their news sources before sharing news. Hence, they still enjoyed news credibility and believed some of the news from social media platforms. The chapter is entitled, “Social Media Message Sharing, Fake News, and Media Credibility Among Nigerian Undergraduates.”

The theme of the second section of the book is “Politics and Governance.” The section starts with Chapter 4 titled, “Fake News as a Threat to Democracy: Reflections On the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria.” In the chapter, Esther Likita Ogba and Thomas A. Alemoh examined the threat of fake news to a democracy like Nigeria’s. The primary objective of the study was to identify the impact of fake news on democratic practice in Nigeria using the 2019 electoral process as a reference point. The chapter found that both government and individual political actors freely engaged in the use of fake news during the period under review. In Chapter 5, “Impact Assessment of Social Media-Political Communication Linkage in Nigeria’s Campaigns (1999-2019)”, Ikemefuna Taire

Paul Okudolo assessed whether social media as a medium of political communication has contributed to galvanizing hate speech, fake news, calumny and character assassination of political opponents via campaigns during elections. The chapter covered Nigerian elections between 1999 and 2019. It noted that the policy mechanisms to curtail the use of social media from spreading hate speech and character assassination in elections between 1999 and 2019 were weak and incapable of discouraging the dissemination of lies and fake news against opponents. Chapter 6 explored the impact of the widespread use of social media on the prevailing political polarisation in Nigeria, which the principles of federalism and the presidential system itself were introduced to neutralise. The chapter authored by Joseph Oluchukwu Wogu and Patrick Egwu is titled, “The Impact of Exposure to Fake News and Hate Speech on Social Media on Political Polarisation during the Nigeria Presidential Elections 2019: Evidence from the South-East.” The results of the study revealed that fake news and hate speech aggravate the prevailing political polarisation in Nigeria.

The third section of the book titled “Communication and Info-Tech” opens with Chapter 7, “Elements of Fake News in Facebook Comedy Skits: A Study of Dr Whiteberry and Alaariya”, authored by Israel Ayinla Fadipe and Abiodun Salawu. The study examined elements of fake news in the Facebook comedy skits of Dr Whiteberry (Baba Kamo) and Baba Alaariya. Premised on the uses and gratification theory and also on digital rhetorical theory, the authors qualitatively content-analysed ten comedy skits downloaded from YouTube starring both comedians together and separately. Also, the study interviewed 25 respondents about their reception and perceptions of the comedians’ works. Analysis of the comedy skits revealed that the comedians used deliberate lies, exaggeration and untruthfulness to tell stories on the lessons of affluence, bravery, ingenuity, aspirations, political campaign promises, work ethics, and religious practices they observed in the society. Olugbenga Elegbe in Chapter 8, “Fake News Among Student Social Media Users: An Opinion Survey”, examined the knowledge, sources and content of social media users on fake news

with a view to determining its influence on their social values. Mufutau Temitayo Lamidi in Chapter 9, turned to “Lexical Choices in Nigerian-Based Online Hate Speeches.” Thulani Tshabangu in Chapter 10, “Disinformation Campaigns Against Zimbabwean Women Politicians on Twitter”, informed us that the Zimbabwean Twitter space also known as ‘Zwitter’ is a site for dark participation where female politicians are subjected to fake news, hate speech, personal attacks, public shaming, cyberstalking, intimidation, cyberbullying, gender trolling, ridiculing, sexual harassment and online misogyny. The use of indigenous African languages enables Twimbos – as Zimbabweans on Twitter are known, to express themselves more freely in languages of their choice. “The Impact of Media Presentation of Herders’ Attacks on Farmers on the Public Perception of Herders” is the title of Francis Osamwonyi Amenaghawon and Emmanuel Ademola Owoyemi’s Chapter 11. The study asked the following questions: How does the knowledge of fake news checkers influence news selection? Does the knowledge of fake news checkers aid media gatekeepers in identifying hate speech?

The fourth section of the book is termed “Education and Civil Societies”, and it opens with Chapter 12, “Fake News and Media Literacy: Perceptions of Selected WhatsApp Users in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria” authored by Olayinka Abimbola Egbokhare and Francis Osamwonyi Amenaghawon. The chapter chronicled the perceptions of selected WhatsApp users from the University of Ibadan on the phenomena of fake news and media literacy. Findings revealed that respondents have a high level of awareness of what constitutes fake news but a low level of media literacy. Bimbo Lolade Fafowora in Chapter 13, “Social Media, and the Weaponisation of Fake News: The Case of the #EndSARS Protest”, where she explored the instrumentality of social media and fake news in the mobilisation and suppression of the EndSARS protest of 2020 in Nigeria. This study utilised the hypodermic needle theory, and the uses and gratification theory in examining the role and influence of social media in the birth of the social movement as well as the Nigerian government’s subsequent deployment of

fake news as one of the means of halting the EndSARS protest. Findings revealed that both EndSARS advocates and the Nigerian government utilised fake news to evoke public sympathy and debunk claims against each other. In Chapter 14, “Social Media as Sites for Misinformation: The Capacity of Revictimizing the Victim and Glamourising Tragedy”, Muchativugwa Liberty Hove unpacked both the textual and visual vocabulary of war and genocide, and in the process, sought to understand how successive generations interpret these memories in Africa through literary historiography.

The theme for the fifth and last section of the book is “Jurisprudence and Related Legal Matters.” It starts with Chapter 15, “Re-examining Hateful Messages in the Nigerian Media and Legal and Policy Options for Curtailing It”, authored by Olusola O. Isola. The chapter explored the dangers posed to Nigeria’s democracy by hateful messages in the media, examined regulatory mechanisms to curtail its spread through the media. It concluded that new legal measures which can portend a clampdown on the media and stifle the freedom of information which might not be the solution to the problem. The chapter, however, noted that there are existing laws that can discourage the media from engaging in spreading hateful messages if adequately enforced. The aim of Chapter 16, “Reliving the Gupta Imbroglia in South Africa: A Conspiracy Theory Perspective of Fake News on Social Media”, by Tshepang Bright Molale and Moses Ofome Asak was to conceptualise conspiracy theory through the lens of the Gupta’s propaganda machinery on their social media and mainstream media platforms; and to identify the mechanisms for the spread of such fake news. The Gupta brothers originated from India and they were alleged to have been involved in ‘state capture’ in South Africa. Ayanfeoluwa Oluwatosin Oyewo, Obaloluwa Obed Oyewo and Olusola Oyeyinka Oyewo, in Chapter 17 “Understanding Rumour: Fake News and Rumour Control”, discussed the legal implications of fake news as well as how the transmission of rumours and fake news could be controlled because of their insidious nature. Chapter 18, the last chapter in the section and ultimately in the book is titled, “Fake News Defames People in Malawi” by Muyanga Macquba Innocent Ziba, presented results

from a study exploring the impact of social media on hate speech in Malawi. The study revealed the impact of the agenda-setting theory as well as the two-step model of communication.

Conclusion

The chapters in the book have variously come as either conceptual or empirical, and they have provided perspectives and evidence around the issue of the use of social media for the dissemination of fake news and hate speech.

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SECTION I

Sociology and Culture of the Use of Social Media



Uses and Gratification Theory, Social Media and Fake News

Wole ADAMOLEKUN¹; Tshepang Bright MOLALE² & Kunle OGEDENGBE³

Abstract

The uses and gratification theory of the media underpinned this study. The study examined the uses that purveyors put fake news to. It also ascertained the gratification that people gain from fake news publications on social media. The fact that social media lacks gatekeeping made its uses to be for all. This chapter critically advocated the place of the journalistic gatekeeping on social media. Primary methodology (in-depth interview) and secondary methodology (desk research) were employed. The chapter found that people use social media to promote fake news in order to satisfy their various desires. Such desires include promotion of different positions such as personal,

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³ Kunle OGEDENGBE, PhD is the former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Management and Social Sciences, Trinity University, Lagos, Nigeria.

sectional, divisive, ideological, religious, political, and economic well-being. While buttressing the theory, the chapter recommends that social media should be used for positive objectives rather than for promoting divisive positions while also calling for the adoption of gatekeeping by social media platforms.

Keywords: *Fake news, disinformation, misinformation, social media, uses and gratification theory*

Background to the Study

The preponderance of fake news in the media, especially, social media has become a common thing. This has made many people not to even read the mainstream media as they are fed up with unfathomable news on social media which they carry about with their mobile gadgets. Fake news has infiltrated scholarly and daily discourses and conversations. It is used to demonise traditional news media organisations (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2017). This development is having a negative effect on the mainstream media as their sales drop and its multiplier effects on other revenue-generating enterprises that weigh heavily on circulation. Such include advertisement, sponsorship, and supplements. This negative impact of fake news published by social media should be checkmated in order to preserve mainstream media, particularly newspapers and ensure societal sanity.

Problem of the Study

Fake news has dominated the social media and its impact on the mainstream media is negative. This is persistent because of the lack of gatekeeping on social media. Despite the obvious negativity of fake news, it is, however, surprising that the purveyors of fake news have not desisted from the practice. This persistence must be a function of the benefits they gain from fake news. These benefits are unknown. These unknown benefits are the gaps that this work aims to fill and this underlines the problem of this study. The unravelling of the benefits of fake news is the focus of this chapter. It is the belief of these researchers that if the benefits are

unravelling and appropriately satisfied through legitimate ways, the preponderance of fake news will be checkmated. And also the fortune of the mainstream media will be positively affected.

Objectives of the Study

This is to assess what purveyors of fake news benefit from the practice. Specifically, the objectives are to:

- (i) Identify those who employ fake news;
- (ii) Find out the techniques used by the purveyors of fake news;
- (iii) Examine the extent of gatekeeping in the social media where fake news is usually published;
- (iv) Investigate what the purveyors of fake news use it for; and
- (v) Explore the gratification that the purveyor of fake news gains.

Research Questions

The followings are the objectively derived research questions.

- (i) Who are those that employ fake news?
- (ii) What are the techniques used by the purveyors of fake news?
- (iii) To what extent is gate keeping employed on social media where fake news is usually published?
- (iv) What do the purveyors of fake news use it for?
- (v) What do the purveyors of fake news gain from it?

Literature Review

The study's literature review covers relevant concepts, theory underpinning the work and past studies.

Conceptual Review

Defining and Explaining the Theory

Dennis McQuail cited in Ajilore (2017) defines theory as a set of constructs that are linked together by relational statements that are internally consistent with each other. Theory is also seen as an organised set of concepts, explanations and principles of some aspect of life. Theory is an interrelated set of constructs or variables formed into propositions or hypotheses that specify what relationship

exists among variables in terms of magnitude or direction. It is a set of interrelated constructs or variables, definitions and propositions that presents a systematic view of the phenomenon by specifying relations among variables to explain the natural process. Theories are also described as sets of statements with certain relationships among classes of variables. The rationale of a theory is to enhance scientific understanding through a systemised structure that can be explained and that can predict a phenomenon (Folarin, 2002). Characteristics of theory include intellectual rigour, dynamism, predictive power, economy, social value, and capacity for social reform.

Uses and Gratification Theory

This theory was put forward by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). The theory explains why and how people use the media and the needs they want to be met through the usage of the media. McQuail (2010) states that people use the media because of the perceived satisfaction, needs and wishes. The uses and gratification theory, therefore, focuses on the purposes for which people consume the media.

Katz and Foulkes (1962) cited in Abdullahi and Abdullahi (2020) say the theory is a method for understanding why and how individuals seek out and use specific media to satisfy their specific needs. Abdullahi and Abdullahi (2020) add that Herzog (1944) and Wimmer and Dominick (1994) use the term gratifications to describe specific types or dimensions of satisfaction reported by audience of daytime radio broadcast programmes. This made scholars to become interested in why audiences engaged with different media including radio and newspaper. The theory addresses how individuals choose the media that satisfies their needs and allows them to realise their gratifications including the enhancement of knowledge, entertainment and relaxation, social interaction and remuneration or reward (Ko, Cho, and Roberts (2005) cited in Abdullahi and Abdullahi (2020)). Uses and gratifications are the motivations behind why an individual makes media choices and the satisfaction that the individual gets from this choice.

Social Media

Social media are online media. They are platforms that are mediated through the Internet. Online journalism is the media share of the digital revolution (Ganiyu and Akinreti, 2011). It is a media practice where news is reported with different data and these include texts, photos, illustrations, maps and videos. The publication of the story is aided by the Internet. Tools of online/social media include a computer, android phone and the Internet. Social media are part of the new media revolution as the online newspapers. Social media are platforms that are used for engagement and they serve as channels of news for people. They lack control and it is this lack of control or gatekeeping that makes them to be easily available to fake news (and even hate speech). Examples of social media platforms include Facebook, X (formerly called Twitter), YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram, Webio, etc. They are interactive and personal media that the receivers get information on the go as the instrument of accessing the information, such as a mobile phone, is compatible and carried about by individuals.

Fake News

Fake news is misleading information which is purposely disseminated as news which is usually to malign the reputation of somebody or a group before the estimation of right-thinking members of the society. Expectedly, the term is also used to refer to any publication that the subject feels bad about. It usually emanates from different categories of people including the government, private and public spokespersons, international communicators, religious leaders, and political leaders including private individuals. Allen *et al.* (2020) define fake news as false or misleading information masquerading as legitimate news and it is omnipresent online with serious consequences for business, democracy, reputation and humanity.

Fake news abound in the media these days especially when a former President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, made the social media platform, Twitter (now called X), his official medium of communication. The lack of gatekeeping by these online media made it easy for fake news to be published. Governments

across the world are finding ways of checking fake news. Such governments include those of the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The ban of Twitter by the Nigerian government in 2021 is said by some analysts to be because of the lack of gatekeeping on the site (Oyeleye, 2021). The Nigerian government has accused many people of using social media to incite negative behaviour in the country especially in promoting anti-government's feelings.

Misinformation also thrives on social media. Akinfeleye (2006) defines misinformation as published incorrect information. He differentiates misinformation from disinformation. Disinformation he defines as when the source deliberately manipulates the psyche of the people and it is deliberately negative. Disinformation is always negative. Wardle (2017) cited in Tandoc *et al.* (2017) says misinformation is the inadvertent sharing of false information while disinformation is the deliberate creation and sharing of untrue information. Conspiracy theory also emerges from fake news. Conspiracy theory is an evil scheme that is usually employed by powerful groups within the political and social settings of a society to frame or skew a position in a way that favours them. They usually want others to believe their idea (the conspiracy). It is usually with a negative implication. It is a selfish endeavour which is to ensure that decision-makers make favourable decisions to them when they do not deserve it. They usually get this positive decision towards them as an aftermath of fake news (Oyeleye, 2021).

Empirical Studies

Molina *et al.* (2021) identify seven types of fake news in their study. The types of fake news they found are false news, polarised content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism. According to the authors, these are commonly used by governments through political contents, political parties and public agencies.

Allen *et al.* (2020) found that news consumption in America is more from other sources than social media. Americans get most of their news from the television as against social media which

represents roughly five times more than news online, and fake news comprises only 0.15% of American daily media consumption.

Collins *et al.* (2020) explored different approaches that fake news can be combated on social media and submitted that though identifying fake news is a complicated challenge, it is a task that must be done. The researchers underline the application of hybrid-machine learning techniques and human effort to fight misinformation on social media.

In their study, Tandoc *et al.* (2017) identify six ways that the term fake news represents unlike Molina *et al.* (2021) who identified seven. The study which was done through a secondary research of examining various works where the term fake news was used in different fields of journalism, computer science, political science, and psychology has six dimensions to fake news. These dimensions are news satire, photo manipulation, news parody, propaganda, news fabrication, and advertising and public relations. Their only meeting point with Molina *et al.* (2021) is (news) satire.

Methodology

A qualitative approach of in-depth interviews and secondary research were employed to answer the research questions. In-depth interview is to ask relevant questions thoroughly on an issue in details, meticulously, deeply and painstakingly. Jegede (2005:93) says, “qualitative studies are designed to understand the context (psychological, social, political or economic) in which research questions are situated.” He adds that in doing this, “the researcher must not only be interested in the responses provided by respondents but also the circumstances of the responses.” In-depth interviews were conducted with three knowledgeable people (key informants) on the thrust of the research. The researchers stopped at the third interviewee when responses from the third interviewee were not different from the responses of the initial two. As such, the saturation point was reached by the third respondent.

The saturation point is when the sample used in an in-depth interview becomes reliable especially when nothing new

is being said again by the fresh sample in the in-depth interview (Ogedengbe, 2019). Researchers limited samples in qualitative study at the saturation point because in qualitative research, a sample does not follow the statistical sampling used in quantitative research but theoretical sampling (Flick, 2014:151). Theoretical sampling is the case where the researcher determines the sample of the study by stopping to interview further samples when he or she reached the saturation point which is the stage in research where what the researcher is being told, is not different from what he had heard in the study from earlier respondent(s). This sampling method significantly differentiates qualitative methodology from quantitative methodology. Two of the respondents were people in the media industry before taking full-time employment in academia while the third was a field professional who is a part-time lecturer in institutions across England, Jamaica, the United States of America, and Africa including Nigeria. He was head of a foremost professional journalism training body in Nigeria.

Results

Research Question One: Who are Those Who Employ Fake News

Theme: Those Who Employ Fake News

The respondents gave people who employ fake news to include the government, private and public spokespersons and political leaders. According to the respondents, these people employ fake news in order to achieve inordinate ambitions that they are not ready to get through legitimate means and/or they are not competent or qualified to get what they are aiming at. It is for these inordinate ambitions that these people resort to fake news in order to be relevant. One of the respondents noted, 'The purveyors of fake news are in our midst especially government officials who want to force unpopular policies and actions of government down the throat of the people through manipulative and framed propositions. Government publications in both print and broadcast media are known for these practices where rather than having real news what they publish are propaganda, half-truth and even lies'. Another of

the respondents said, 'Purveyors of fake news even go to the extent of engaging influencers on the social media to portray issues from their perspectives without regard to the truth'. Another one said, that fake news 'is usually out of logic'.

Research Question Two: What are the Techniques Used by the Purveyors of Fake News

Theme: Techniques Used by the Purveyors of Fake News

Techniques used by the purveyors of fake news, according to the respondents, are lies, false news, opinion articles, commentary, propaganda, advertisement, interpretative analysis, and citizen journalism. Two of the respondents said the purveyors of fake news use outright lies as false or fake news while another said that through opinion articles in newspapers and commentary on broadcast stations, purveyors of fake news come up with many conspiracies that are to toe a particular line rather than giving a balanced report of issues. One of them said, 'Propaganda is very common in fake news and asked rhetorically: how do you want anyone to believe that the American election that brought in President Joe Biden is rigged? That was the epitome of fake news. Even, the inordinate ambition of Donald Trump did not make him accept defeat which is a manifestation of his promise not to accept the result of the 2016 US presidential election if he lost to Hillary Clinton'. All the respondents agreed that the purveyors of fake news slant advertisements in their favour especially political advertisements since advertisements are usually unedited by the media. One of the respondents said, 'through interpretative analysis of the issues at hand, purveyors of fake news use persuasive information to derail the people with their fake news'. The particular respondents advised the people to be media literate in order to be able to identify fake news and guard against it.

Journalism as it is practised by professionals deals with facts of occurrences based on ethical considerations derived from the canons of journalism. Ethics says what is being passed to the audience should be facts without opinion (Okunna, 2003). However, the issue of internet journalism that everybody now practises has brought more

harm than good. Citizen journalism, one of the respondents says, ‘gives room for everybody irrespective of professional training to report events which implies that fake news will continue to be with us for a long time’. He adds, ‘citizen journalism is not professional by any standard. The citizen journalists are not trained in reporting, editing, interview techniques and even proper photo handling. Also, they are not knowledgeable in the ethics of the profession that would have guided their actions against the abuse of the media channels they are invading. It is therefore not surprising that they commit blunders and misrepresent incidences they are reporting ... The newsroom which hitherto strengthens the credibility of media content and the established journalism norms appears to have been compromised and damaged by the pervasive effects of fake news. To fix this will be a Herculean task by all stakeholders in the media industry’, he submitted.

Research Question Three: To What Extent is Gatekeeping Employed in Social Media Where Fake News is Usually Published
Theme: Gatekeeping on Social Media

All the respondents gave terse answers here with submissive body countenances. They said that gatekeeping is not usually employed on social media and this makes it a veritable tool for fake news. Hear one of the respondents: ‘A situation where anybody can sit behind his or her computer and push out information to the whole world without anybody crosschecking as is the case in the social media made gatekeeping to be a mirage’. The respondent added that though some of the platforms are trying to remove fake news after publication, the fact that it was published earlier before removal is no gatekeeping.

Research Question Four: To What Use do the Purveyors of Fake News Put Them

Theme: Use of Fake News

The respondents said that the use that the purveyors of fake news put it to is psychological, that they want the readers to be captured for their inordinate ambitions. This, they said is because the media

is the message and they know that the media is subjective. So, they use fake news to exhibit the subjectivity of the media. Other uses submitted by the respondents include the promotion of different positions such as personal, sectional, divisive, ideological, religious, political, and economic well-being. One of the respondents said that studies have shown that purveyors of fake news are addicted to it while generating fun from the addiction. According to this respondent, 'Some users of fake news especially on social media are addicted to their gadgets and since they have an addiction issue they just dish out whatever they think afterall there is no gatekeeping'.

Research Question Five: What do the Purveyors of Fake News Gain from Them

Theme: Gains from Fake News

According to the respondents, fake news meets the objectives of the purveyors of changing the news of the day through conspiracy because of the people who believe in the alternative opinion. Buttressing this, one of the respondents said, 'The media is the message and for this those who are followers of the social media believe nothing from the mainstream media'. In this light, another respondent said the mainstream media is censored by the government but social media is not and so more believable than the mainstream media by the purveyors and readers of fake news. This respondent buttressed her argument that the supporters of President Trump never believed anything outside Trump's social media news.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that those who employ fake news include government and its spokespersons which is in line with the submission of Molina *et al.* (2021). Techniques used by the purveyors of fake news according to the respondents are lies, false news, opinion articles, commentary, propaganda, advertisement and interpretative analysis. These are in alignment with Molina *et al.* (2021) and Tandoc *et al.* (2017). The study also found that gatekeeping is not employed on social media and its problems should

be solved as supported by Collins *et al.* (2020) who said that fake news should be combated on social media. Furthermore, the study found that the purveyors of fake news use it to get what they do not deserve, especially, political uses which is supported by Molina *et al.* (2021). The last finding of the study is that the purveyors of fake news gain gratifications of psychological fulfilment and political advantage in line with the submission of Tandoc *et al.* (2017). The postulations of the uses and gratification theory are supported by this work as the users of social media have gains that gratify their desires as evidenced by the findings of this study.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This chapter has examined the concept of theory including the uses and gratification theory, social media and fake news. It is obvious from the study that social media platforms are without gatekeepers and this is a recommended area for managers of social media platforms to work on in order to ensure that they are devoid of fake news and its accompanying negativity. Gatekeeping must be employed in all social media spheres in order not only to promote the ethics of journalism but also to rescue society from the ruins of fake news.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the future of the mainstream media be protected through adequate checkmating of fake news. Also, purveyors of fake news should satisfy their ambitions legitimately without recourse to fake news. In addition and for a robust atmosphere, it is recommended that readers should be media literate in order to be in a good position to identify fake news and checkmate the disoriented psychological state the purveyors of fake news put them in.

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Analysis of Social Media Users' Attitudes to Fake News in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study analysed the comments social media users made on the fake news story of ThisDay newspaper published in 2020. The fake news story claimed that the US Embassy denied the popular Nigerian preacher, David Oyedepo, visa renewal. Using thematic analysis, the study sought social media users' opinions on the story as well as their attitudes to fake news. Also sought was the social media audience's reactions to government's occasional peddling of fake news and constant condemnation of media reports that were critical of it as fake. The analysis yielded six themes that showed that social media users have critical and disapproving opinions on fake news and a negative and an incredulous attitude toward fake news. They expressed distrust in the willingness of the media and the government to curb the proliferation of fake news – a situation that could potentially make the discourse around fake news in Nigeria even murkier.

Keywords: *Fake news, social media, misinformation, audience research, thematic analysis, active audience theory*

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Introduction

Fake news when viewed generally as an existential media and communication phenomenon, à la rumour, propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and allied concepts, is not new (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2017). When viewed as a distinct scholarly discourse, however, the term ‘fake news’ is relatively new.

Studies show that fake news began to draw research attention around 2016 (Blaber *et al.* 2019; Cabañes, Anderson and Ong, 2019) following the US presidential election campaigns. In addition, owing to its fairly generic nature attempts to define fake news have not been conclusive. Hence, scholarly literature on the concept shows at least three broad categories of definitions.

Although fake news is a relatively recent phenomenon (Blaber *et al.*, 2019) globally, it is even comparatively more recent in Nigeria (Wilson and Umar, 2019; Apuke and Omar, 2020). It is also problematic to define, to classify and, therefore, to understand. Added to this is the Nigerian government’s tendency to label news critical of it as fake (Busari, 2017; Le Roux, 2020; *Premium Times*, 2021; @fisayosoyombo, 2021). In fact, the government has been known to peddle fake news (*Premium Times*, 2021). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Nigerians have a low level of information and media literacy, which has led to limited knowledge of fake news (Apuke and Omar, 2020).

Since fake news researchers (Duffy, Tandoc and Ling, 2019; Apuke and Omar, 2020) advocate the need to avoid studying it from a Western-centric standpoint but to study it in its local contexts, this chapter contends that the bewildering nature of fake news and the Nigerian government’s attitude to fake news have the potential to further complicate the understanding of the term. Therefore, the study analyses how social media users discuss and share meanings in the context of fake news (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017) and the effect the Nigerian government’s paradoxical stance on fake news has on the country’s social media audience.

Defining Fake News

Attempts by researchers to define fake news have not been easy. This has prompted researchers to often resort to categorising fake news (Wardle, 2017). Tandoc *et al.* (2018), for instance, attempted to categorise fake news and came up with a six-category typology of the term, viz. propaganda, news satire, advertising, news parody, manipulation, and fabrication. Toeing this path, this study reviews scholarly literature on fake news and suggests that the definition of the phenomenon should be viewed from three broad categories.

The first category comprises definitions that emphasise the presence of a malicious intent, an intention to deceive, a lack of factual basis, and a semblance of realistically portraying news reports (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir and McStay, 2018; McGonagle, 2017; Wardle, 2017; Tandoc *et al.*, 2017; Duffy *et al.*, 2019; and Visentin, Pizzi and Pichierri, 2019). For instance, Visentin *et al.* (2019:100) define fake news as “fabricated stories that are intentionally false, realistically portrayed, and potentially verifiable.” The second category views fake news as media content that can be made up wholly, or partially factual, which is often without intent to malign. Examples of this, drawn from Tandoc *et al.* (2017), are news satire, news parody, and advertising. The third class of definitions, an emerging one, explores the tendency of influential individuals, elite groups, and governments to disparage otherwise factual reporting, to shut down news stories they consider critical, to discredit credible reporting, and to stifle dissent (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017; Blaber *et al.*, 2019).

Of interest is McGonagle’s definition, cited in Apuke and Omar (2020:318), which explains “fake news as information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.” This definition captures the first and third classes of fake news definitions, for while fake news can be fabricated reports presented as credible news to fool the audience, it can also mean an attempt to cause the media audience to doubt factual but unflattering news stories. It is this novel notion of fake news that is explored further in this study.

Fake News in Nigeria

Fake news, depending on how one views it, may or may not be a recent phenomenon. When viewed generally as an age-long media and communication phenomenon – like rumour, propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation – fake news is not recent. When, however, it is considered a distinct intellectual concept, fake news is relatively recent. This differentiation serves to put to rest possible attempts to equate fake news with any of those communication phenomena and conclude that it is by no means recent. In any case, researchers have warned against a Western-centric approach to studying fake news (Duffy *et al.*, 2019). They favour a situational cum contextual approach that factors in the intricate dynamics of fake news in a given locality. Whether it is viewed as recent or not, fake news is comparatively under-researched in Africa (Apuke and Omar, 2020). In Nigeria, Wilson and Umar, cited in Apuke and Omar (2020), report a low level of awareness of fake news.

When Pate and Ibrahim (2019) write that political actors in Nigeria are wont to misinform their unwary citizens, some instances come to mind. Following the abduction of over 300 students in Katsina State on December 14, 2020, Mr Garba Shehu, a spokesperson to President Muhammadu Buhari, “told BBC Hausa that only 10 students were taken away by the gunmen” (Kabir, 2020, para. 4). Six days after, the kidnapped students (about 344) were freed, and that made Mr Shehu to apologise on Twitter for spreading fake news. Similarly, Busari (2017) narrates how the President Goodluck Jonathan-led administration waved off as a hoax the kidnapping, on April 14, 2014, of almost 300 young girls in Chibok town by Boko Haram terrorists. A video evidence Boko Haram released would later expose the government’s ‘hoax’ and ‘alternative facts’ narrative for what it was. Again, Le Roux (2020) reports that despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Nigerian Army branded as fake news the October 20, 2020 fatal shooting of the #EndSARS protesters in Lagos. Additionally, *Premium Times* newspaper on June 3, 2021 reported that the presidency in Nigeria had accused *Foreign Affairs*, a magazine based in the US, of spreading fake news. The magazine had published a

story entitled, “The Giant of Africa is Failing”, co-authored by John Campbell, a former American ambassador to Nigeria; and Robert Rotberg, a researcher.

So, the Nigerian government that vehemently condemns fake news (and has even proposed a social media bill – The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019 – to help curb the menace of fake news) also peddles fake news.

The Role of Social Media Audience in Fake News

Studies have underscored the prime place of the audience in researching fake news (see, for instance, Blaber *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, Tandoc *et al.* (2017:148) have noted the role of the audience as the missing factor in their attempts to define fake news. They argue that it takes the audience buying into a false news story to make it truly fake. For them, this is more so “in the context of social media, where information is exchanged, and therefore meanings are negotiated and shared.”

Researchers have also attested to social media being the prime driver of fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; and Klein and Wueller, 2017). Therefore, fake information, packaged and presented as legitimate, truthful, and accurate, in the hands of a social media audience is what makes for viral and visceral shares and retweets. Citing Nielsen and Graves (2017), Wasserman (2017:8) notes that audience research in four European countries found a close link between people’s understanding of fake news and “the amount of trust they have in journalistic and political elites.” Therefore, considering that there are established cases of the government in Nigeria peddling fake news, the Nigerian media audience can quite easily lose trust in the government. In addition, the government’s pastime of labelling reports critical of its action and inaction as fake news, as Tandoc *et al.* (2017) put it, potentially discredits and demonises the news organisations whose reports it condemns.

The social media audiences sampled for this study were reacting to the fake news story *ThisDay* published on its website and Twitter

handle on January 31, 2020. The false news alert the U.S. Mission Nigeria issued reads:

#FalseNews Alert! Be advised, the reports making the rounds about a visa being denied to Nigerian Bishop Oyedepo are false. If you have seen this manufactured item in the media, help defeat this #misinformation by communicating to everyone that it is completely false.

From the number of reactions the U.S. Mission Nigeria's disclaimer attracted, social media users might have seen the *ThisDay* story as a classic, unambiguous case of fake news. If they felt so, their reason, of course, would be that the incident did not involve the government, which they have reasons not to trust with regard to what fake news is or is not.

Active Audience Theory and Fake News

The active audience theory is a departure from the earlier notion that media audiences are passive, docile, and submissive. The passive audience theorists posit that media audiences imbibe media texts without subjective interpretation other than that intended by the producers of the texts. On the contrary, the active audience theory holds that media audiences are thoughtful, critical, and dynamic. Therefore, Evans, cited in Morley (1993:13), writes that contemporary audience research in media studies mainly highlights two assumptions: "(a) that the audience is always active (in a nontrivial sense), and (b) that media content is always polysemic, or open to interpretation."

This holds true with the fake news discourse in which the audience plays a huge role. Tandoc *et al.* (2018) have highlighted, with a series of pertinent questions, the strategic role of the audience in fake news research.

Does fake news remain fake if it is not perceived as real by the audience? In other words, can an article, which looks like news, but is without factual basis, with an immediate intention to mislead, be considered fake news if the audience does not buy into the lie? (Tandoc *et al.* 2017:148)

They add that although journalists construct news when it comes to fake news, the audience appears to be co-constructors because the “fakeness” of fake news is established when the “audience perceives the fake as real.” This suggests that even if the notion of the audience as a passive consumer of media messages were valid (Morley, 1993, has debunked this), it would not have applied to social media cum fake news audiences who actively negotiate, re-negotiate and share meanings.

Social media audiences are active, so they often also actively propagate fake news, and fake news thrives more on social media (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Warner-Søderholm *et al.* 2018). Therefore, the engaged, networked social media audience actively negotiates meanings inherent in social media posts, fake or real.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study aimed at determining the opinions and attitudes of social media users to fake news in Nigeria. It also aims to ascertain the effect of the Nigerian government’s well-documented hypocritical attitude (see, for instance, @fisayosoyombo, 2021) to fake news on social media users. The researcher used a qualitative research method known as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004), to analyse the comments Facebook and Twitter users made on the disclaimer the U.S. Mission Nigeria issued, debunking a fake news story *ThisDay* newspaper published on January 31, 2020.

The researcher chose to analyse Facebook and Twitter comments because the study focuses on social media audience and the U.S. Mission Nigeria posted the disclaimer that generated the analysed comments on Facebook and Twitter.

On July 5, 2021, when the researcher drew the sample for the study, the disclaimer had 1,400 comments, 3,800 shares, and 2,000 likes/loves on Facebook, and on Twitter, it had 6,800 retweets, 928 quote tweets, 6,328 likes, and 569 replies. Because the researcher was interested only in the textual comments readers made on the disclaimer, the shares/retweets, likes/loves, and quote tweets were left out.

The population of the study, therefore, was 1,969 comments, being the addition of the total sums of the Facebook and Twitter comments/replies. Out of the 1,400 Facebook comments, 456 were direct comments on the post, and 944 were meta-comments. Out of the 569 Twitter comments, 220 were direct comments, and 349 were meta-comments. To arrive at a sample, the researcher excluded the meta-comments from comments readers made directly on the posts. The sample then became 676 comments, being the addition of direct comments readers made on the posts on Facebook and Twitter.

The researcher excluded the meta-comments because they were mostly reactions to other comments rather than responses to the main posts. The comments were studied and analysed from July 5-11, 2021.

The study's units of analysis were the words, phrases, and sentences used in each of the sampled comments. Nowell *et al.*'s (2017:4) phases of thematic analysis were adopted. The phases entail familiarisation with the data, generation of preliminary codes, identification of themes, reviewing of identified themes, describing and naming the themes, and writing up of the report. After going through these phases, the researcher arrived at six themes, which were then analysed to arrive at the results of the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The tables below present the results of the qualitative data collected from Facebook and Twitter and analysed thematically.

Table 2.1: Comments on fake news in the Nigerian media

Theme	Description	Exemplar quote
Fake news in the Nigerian media	Comments that discuss fake news in the Nigerian media	The spate of fake news coming from mainstream media in Nigeria is alarming. I wonder what the guild of editors, NUJ, NBC and other critical stakeholders are doing about it. Everyday fake news is tiring nah.

Table 2.1 previews social media users’ comments that pertain to fake news. The exemplar quote, for instance, shows that the commenter thinks that fake news has become routine in the Nigerian media, thus the commenter’s use of the words, “spate,” “alarming,” “everyday”, and “tiring.”

Table 2.2: *ThisDay* story’s credibility and condemnation

S/N	Theme	Description	Exemplar quote
1.	<i>ThisDay</i> condemnation	Comments that condemn <i>ThisDay</i> for indulging in fake news	Shame on you @THISDAY-LIVE You are now purveyors of #fakenews.
2.	<i>ThisDay</i> story is true	Comments that believe the <i>ThisDay</i> story despite the disclaimer	It’s true, U.S. Embassy is lying.
3.	<i>ThisDay</i> story is false	Comments that recognise the <i>ThisDay</i> story as fake news even before the disclaimer	It’s so disappointing to know that a national daily newspaper like this day is involved in this, I knew the news was false the moment I came across it, not good for our journalism.
4.	Incredulity	Comments that suggest that there is more to the <i>ThisDay</i> story than the US Embassy disclaimer	There are more to this than the damage control you are presently doing. Tell us what truly transpired.

Table 2.2 embodies four related themes that sum the opinions and attitudes of the sampled social media users to fake news.

Table 2.3: Comments on the Nigerian government and fake news

Theme	Description	Exemplar quote	Subthemes	Exemplar quote
Government comments	Comments that discuss the government in relation to fake news	The Nigerian government needs improved ways to fight fake news.	Pro-government	Very impressive way of getting across to people, your government needs to support our government in regulating social media so that we can stop this menace of fake and unbalanced journalists.
			Anti-government	Buhari Media Center take note. They have been the ones spreading the news.

Table 2.3 covers the comments that discuss the Nigerian government with regard to fake news. In the first subtheme, commenters support the government’s proposed social media bill. The second subtheme embodies the views of commenters who think the government spreads fake news.

Social Media Users’ Opinions on Fake News

Data show that social media users have strong opinions on fake news in Nigeria. Over all, they seemed to think it is evil, and they condemned it in strong terms. Some of the words and phrases the commenters used include “fallacious news”, “rumor”, “false information”, “misinformation”, “lie”, “propaganda”, “false propaganda”, “mischievous news”, “non existent news”, and “*ndi asiri*” (means “gossips” in the Igbo language).

The commenters also overwhelmingly condemned *ThisDay* for publishing a fake news story. “See how @THISDAYLIVE rubbished

themselves. Very silly sets of people”, reads one of the comments. In fact, some comments suggested that *ThisDay* newspaper habitually publishes fake news. Therefore, for this commenter, the Oyedepo story spelt doomsday for the newspaper. The comment reads: “@THISDAYLIVE Lobatan, you see where you (sic) lies and heavy engagement in false news has taken you!”

The commenters, data show, did not spare the Nigerian media. They had strong words for the media in Nigeria in general. One commenter wrote, “Nigerian news papers are just platforms for fake news.” Some of the commenters, therefore, variously described media practice in Nigeria as “blind journalism”, “copy and paste journalism”, and “fake journalism.”

Attitudes of Social Media Users to Fake News

Data show that social media users' overriding attitudes to fake news are critical, disapproving, and negative. A large number of the comments analysed for this study condemned fake news in strong terms.

Another attitude gleaned from the data is a general feeling of incredulity among an equally large number of social media users. These commenters did not know what to believe. They think that the *ThisDay* publication had some truth. This implies that the U.S. Embassy disclaimer did not represent the whole truth about what transpired between the U.S. Embassy and Bishop Oyedepo. One commenter in this category wrote: “Thanks for the update. But in Africa, we believe there's no smoke without fire. So kindly give us the full detail, Wetin [*what*] really occur?”

Effect of Government's Attitude to Fake News on Media Users

Data show that a large number of the social media audience believed the *ThisDay* story despite *ThisDay* issuing a corrigendum in which it said the story was “incorrect” (Editor, 2020) and apologised to Oyedepo. Also, despite the U.S. Embassy's disclaimer in which it said the story was “completely false” and a “manufactured item” (@USinNigeria, 2020), a great number of commenters questioned

the veracity of the disclaimer. This might as well mean that the government by evidently peddling fake news has created distrust between the Nigerian media and their audience. Beyond this, some social media users seemed to be aware of the government's shift in stance on fake news. For that, they vilified the government. This commenter (see Table 2.3), for instance, wrote: "Buhari Media Center take note. They have been the ones spreading the news."

Another commenter thought s/he had an unexpected development in the incident:

Plot twist. This fake news was sponsored to drive up the social media bill. See proponents of the bill shouting social media bill..... And by God it's working. Target a respected religious leader, and watch the whole country scream SMB [*Social Media Bill*].

This finding, of course, will be explained further in the next section.

Discussion of Findings

This study principally aims to gauge how the usually engaged and networked social media users actively interrogate, discuss, interpret, and share media texts in order to form opinions and attitudes on fake news, especially in the face of the inconsistent attitude of the Nigerian government toward the phenomenon. To do this, the study analysed the opinions and attitudes of social media users on a known fake news report.

Findings show that the sampled social media users overwhelmingly condemn fake news using diverse but related terms such as "fallacious news", "rumor", "false information", "misinformation", "lie", "propaganda", "false propaganda", "mischievous news", "non-existent news", and "*ndi asiri*", which is Igbo language for "gossips." Therefore, the attitude of social media users' to fake news is mainly critical and disapproving; they see fake news as a negative phenomenon. This is also evident in the manner they called out *ThisDay* newspaper for publishing a fake news report. Similarly, they were unsparing in their criticism of the Nigerian media.

Many of social media users also seem to be well aware of the attitude of the Nigerian government to regularly dismiss as fake, reports that it finds unflattering. For this, they seem to think the government is hypocritical. Some of the commenters expressed support for the government's proposed social media bill; they think the bill will help to curb the proliferation of fake news and hate speech in the country.

Apuke and Omar (2020:318) have reported a low level of knowledge of fake news in Nigeria. However, it would appear that their recommendation of an increase in "fake news awareness, media and information literacy among Nigerians" has yielded some positive results. Accordingly, the sampled social media users seem to have an appreciable knowledge of the media and fake news. It is also possible that commenters in this study showed that level of awareness because they are social media users, who should be more media savvy than, say, the average traditional broadcast media audience.

The huge numbers of comments, retweets, likes, shares, and quote tweets that the U.S. Mission Nigeria's disclaimer garnered could mean that social media users, as one commenter observed, saw the *ThisDay* story as a "typical case of fake news", different from the routine back-and-forth accusations between the media and the government. In addition, that the social media users showed in-depth and mainly informed engagements with the U.S. Mission Nigeria's disclaimer also corroborates the submission by Tandoc *et al.* (2017) that it is characteristic of the social media audience to actively negotiate and share meanings they deduce from media texts.

As the study hypothesised earlier, the Nigerian government's practice of dismissing as fake, reports that question its action and inaction is potentially misleading and confusing. This appears to be substantiated because a large number of the commenters expressed utter incredulity regarding the *ThisDay* story. They said they did not know what to believe, despite the U.S. Mission Nigeria's disclaimer and *ThisDay* debunking the story. This could be an indirect effect of the government's penchant for branding credible media

reports as fake, and even indulging in fake news as literature has shown. Therefore, when, as Pate and Ibrahim (2019) observe, the government misinforms its citizens, blurring the term “fake news”, among other things, could be the consequence.

The other possible consequence is that social media users in this study have shown a lack of faith and trust in the government to discourage the peddling of fake news. Many of the commenters accused the government, and rightly so, of peddling fake news. Another potential consequence of the government’s hypocritical attitude to fake news is a lack of trust in the Nigerian media among the commenters. They were quite critical of the media. In fact, they not only accused the media of regularly indulging in fake news but also concluded that media practice in the country is nothing but “blind journalism”, “copy and paste journalism”, and “fake journalism.” This is hardly surprising, for as Wasserman (2018:8) has stated, a study of four European countries has shown that there is a close connection between people’s conception of fake news and the level of “trust they have in journalistic and political elites.” Similarly, Tandoc *et al.* (2017:138) posit that condemning otherwise factual reports as fake news discredits and demonises the media as well as results in “further muddying discourse around fake news.”

Furthermore, that social media users engaged quite in depth with the U.S. Mission Nigeria’s disclaimer, and expressed informed opinions, attitudes, and insights, shows a resonance with the central axiom of the active audience theory, which holds that the media audience is thoughtful, critical, and dynamic. Similarly, the divergent views gleaned from the social media users corroborate the second main assumption of the active audience theory as advanced by Evans, who writes “that media content is always polysemic, or open to interpretation” (Morley, 1993:148).

Conclusion

The Nigerian government has been harping on the dangers of fake news since the phenomenon was made popular in 2006 during the US presidential campaigns. In fact, the government has even

proposed a social media bill to help curb the proliferation of fake news and hate speech in the country. For a government that appears to be doing so much to discourage fake news, its well-documented peddling of fake news and habit of dismissing credible media reports critical of it is, to say the least, misleading, hypocritical, and condemnable.

Although the social media users sampled for this study expressed strong opinions in the condemnation of fake news and adopted a negative attitude towards it, they also expressed a disturbing lack of trust in the media and the government in curbing the proliferation of fake news. Beyond this, the hypocritical attitude of the government to fake news, and the government's wanton demonisation of the media, may have created a general feeling of incredulity among social media audiences in Nigeria, with regard to fake news. This situation can complicate the media audience's cognitive efforts to understand the fake phenomenon and seek ways of tackling it.

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Social Media Message Sharing, Fake News, and Media Credibility Among Nigerian Undergraduates

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Abstract

*S*ocial media platforms have increasingly become great news sources famous for disseminating news and information. However, despite being excellent news sources, they are also harbingers of fake news. While several studies have established relationships between social media platforms and fake news, fewer studies have examined how message sharing impacts the credibility of social media platforms. Therefore, this study investigated how message sharing on social media impacted the credibility of social media messages among Nigerian undergraduates. The media dependency, and uses and

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gratifications theories framed the study, while mixed-methods data were gathered among undergraduate students from the University of Ibadan and Bowen University, Nigeria. The convenience and purposive sampling techniques guided the selection of the institutions and respondents. Quantitative data was gathered through a structured online questionnaire to 248 respondents, while qualitative data was collected through an in-depth interview with ten participants. The findings revealed that some respondents shared fake news despite their exposure and knowledge of fake news, while others verified their news sources before sharing. Hence, they still enjoy news credibility and believe some news from social media platforms. The study recommends creating verification sites where users can always confirm their news before sharing, while enablers of fake news must face strict sanctions.

Keywords: *Social media message sharing, fake news, media credibility, Nigerian undergraduates.*

Introduction

The increase in fake news through various social media platforms is a significant concern locally and globally (Allcot and Gentzow, 2017; Sellnow, Parrish and Semenas, 2019; Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jimenez and Reyes de Cozar, 2020; Wasserman, 2020). These studies cast doubts over the credibility of some information disseminated through the Internet and social media platforms. Fake news is deliberately disseminating false information or misinformation through (social) media to mislead others. The proliferation of fake news among these platforms arises from numerous content producers posting unverified online content, making it difficult to ascertain the credibility of such news (Sunder, 2008; Faraon & Jaff, 2020). These content producers have become citizen journalists who have bypassed the traditional gatekeeping process. Bypassing traditional news gatekeepers also gave rise to the scourge of fake news as those with access to the Internet write and post unauthorised and unverified information (Eldridge II, Garcis-Carretero and Broersma, 2019).

There is no doubt that social media platforms are reputable for faster dissemination of information than mainstream media. Sadly, the menace of fake news is tarnishing this reputation. According to some scholars, fake news includes satirical reporting, amusing political commentary, false reporting, derogatory jokes, inconsistent reporting, conflicting information, and an unrealistic, pre-generic, manipulative, and negative portrayal of politicians (Balmas, 2014; Hussain, *et al.*, 2019). As a social menace, fake news cuts across different sectors, including political, social, economic, entertainment (Hussain *et al.*, 2019), religious, and education.

Recent research revealed that youths, especially those aged 15-35, are the most social media users (Barnhart, 2021; Khoros, 2021). The youths use social media platforms to fulfil their social, economic, political, and entertainment gratifications. In Africa and Nigeria, specifically, a handful of these youths are students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. According to Boateng and Amankwaa (2016), social media encourages students to connect and advance knowledge in teaching and learning. Students also share messages, sometimes unverifiable, with one another. Bersama (2018), cited by Hussain *et al.* (2019), presents findings on students' social media platforms and fake news. Bersama found WhatsApp (84%) as the most used platform, followed by Facebook (8%), blogs (4%), and Twitter (1%). Similarly, the results of Tayo, Adebola and Yahya's (2019) study on social media usage among Nigerian undergraduates revealed WhatsApp (97%), Facebook (85%), and Instagram (65%) as the three most used platforms, while undergraduates use social media platforms for socialisation, information, academic, business, and entertainment. Also, Herrero-Diz *et al.*, (2020) found that students are more likely to share contents that connect with their interests even if such is false.

Despite being excellent news sources, social media platforms are a harbinger of fake news. Some pieces information from social media platforms are presented in ways people believe and share without verifying their authenticity. Also, social media users' trust in these platforms further encourages them to share unverified

news, thereby placing the credibility of online information at risk. While several studies have established a relationship between social media platforms and fake news, fewer studies have examined how message sharing impacts the credibility of social media platforms. Therefore, this chapter investigates how social media message sharing has impacted the credibility of social media messages among Nigerian undergraduates.

Social Media Use

Social media are computer-mediated interactive digital media platforms (Manning, 2014). These platforms facilitate user-to-user interaction and enable the creation and sharing of media content among users. Examples of social media platforms include (in no particular order) Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok, among others. These platforms also enable users to socialise with one another, share news and ideas, and support and mobilise against anti-government policies, among many other uses. Research has shown that social media users increase yearly. For instance, a 2021 Social Media Fact Sheet revealed that only 5% of American adults accessed at least one social media platform in 2005. However, by 2011, almost half of all Americans used at least one social media platform. In 2021, an estimated 72% of American adults used some form of social media platform. Kemp (2021) believes social media users worldwide have surpassed 3.8 billion.

In Nigeria, social media users have also increased over the years. Nigeria's 2018 digital trends report statistics revealed an estimated 22 million active social media users (Kemp, 2018). However, recent statistics from Statista in 2021 show an estimated 43 million social media users in Nigeria (Varrella, 2021), with more than 70% of these users between the ages of 13-34. The annual social media usage trend portends that more users will emerge as the years move. A further implication of the rising statistics of social media users is that it could be used to spread fake news since there are no readily available sanctions.

Fake News and Trust in Social Media Information

Fake news refers to media content that is either false, half-true, or contextually inaccurate. These contents include news satire, parody, falsification, deception, advertisement, and propaganda (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2017). Also, Shu *et al.* (2018) submit that using social media for news consumption could be likened to a double-edged sword. They argue that the ease of access to social media and its relatively cheap features make it available for misuse by purveyors of fake news who exploit its speed and wide reach to wreak havoc. Tandoc *et al.* (2017) also opine that the definitions of what constitutes fake news are two-dimensional – levels of facticity and deception.

Often, news consumers do not have the time to cross-check the information received from social media. Thus, the credibility of these news sources becomes necessary. News credibility is associated with the trust reposed in media content by consumers. Studies on news credibility have attracted the attention of scholars who have examined various aspects of audience perceptions. For instance, Talwar *et al.* (2019) investigated associations between social media's dark sides and fake news-sharing behaviour using extensive cross-sectional data from 1022 WhatsApp users. They found that verifying news before sharing had a detrimental impact on online trust.

Additionally, Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) study on social media and fake news in the 2016 US presidential election found that while only 14% of American adults considered social media to be their primary source of election news, they had lower trust in the information they obtained there than they did from traditional sources. Additionally, Leeder (2019) investigated the evaluation and dissemination of fake news by US college students. The conclusions showed that trustworthiness and identification correctness ratings had little bearing on people's propensity to share news reports. Also, Naeem, Bhatti and Khan (2021) investigated how bogus news spread on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic endangered public health. They discovered that information about

COVID-19 was rife with exaggerations, conspiracy theories with dubious evidence, and pseudoscientific explanations for the virus's diagnosis, cure, prevention, and spread. They concluded that fake news was widespread on social media.

Also, Eger *et al.* (2020) investigated trust-building and fake news on social media. Their objective was to explore the factors of users' gratifications associated with using social media by Central Europe university students. They found that students use social media primarily for maintaining relationships and satisfying their entertainment and information needs. Finally, Sulaiman, Adeyemi and Ayegun (2020) examined social media message sharing among Nigerian youths, the reasons for sharing, and how the sharing encouraged the spread of fake news. They discovered that the COVID-19 epidemic affected the behaviours of Nigerian teenagers regarding sharing messages through influencing relationship-building with social media networks, enjoyment, taking risks, and political tendencies. These studies showed the relationships between fake news, social media and news credibility.

Theoretical Framework

The media dependency and the uses and gratification (U&G) theories framed this study. The fundamental tenet of Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur's 1976 media dependency theory is that people use the media to meet certain needs. The more the media meets these requirements, the more reliant and attached people get to it. The theory outlines how audiences, the media, and a larger social system interact (Hussain *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, the U&G theory, propounded by Blumber and Katz in 1974, explains why individuals actively seek out particular media outlets and content for satisfaction. The theory focuses on what people do with the media and the satisfaction derived from media use. Hence, the choice of media use must benefit the users as they seek gratification from each selected media. As such, media audiences are active in their choice of media to meet their needs. As a result, media use depends on internal elements, such as how well

it satisfies certain requirements, and external factors, which may restrict what and how media is utilised.

The U&G theory shares similarities with the media dependency theory. It is assumed that dependency levels hinge on the frequency of social media use (Wok and Ghazali, 2011). In more explicit terms, individuals tend to use social media more because of its quick access to information that bothers on so many distinct areas. Information that gets to social media users is usually instantaneous, making it sometimes difficult to verify the information before sharing it with their acquaintances. The non-verification of messages makes it easier to share fake news, thereby misleading people. However, easy access to information makes individuals depend more on social media for their thirst for information, and they use it more because it meets and satisfies their needs by providing information on various topics of interest.

Methodology

The study employed mixed methods research of quantitative and qualitative data. A total of two hundred and fifty-eight (258) undergraduates participated in this study. Quantitative data was gathered through a structured online questionnaire to two hundred and forty-eight (248) respondents, while qualitative data was gathered through an in-depth interview with ten (10) participants. The convenience sampling technique guided the selection of two universities in the south-west region of Nigeria – the University of Ibadan, a government-owned institution, and Bowen University, a private institution. The purposive sampling assisted in selecting respondents and participants for this study. Quantitative data was analysed and presented in tables and percentages, while qualitative data responses were merged with related themes in the quantitative data. Both data sets were gathered simultaneously, merged and discussed qualitatively. The findings are presented in the next section.

Data Analysis

Table 3.1: Summary of respondents’ demographic distribution

Demographic information		Frequency	Percentages
Gender	Female	172	67%
	Male	86	33%
	Total	258	100
Institution	Bowen University	194	75%
	University of Ibadan	64	25%
	Total	258	100

The findings reveal more female (67%) respondents than male (33%). Also, the opinions of undergraduates of Bowen University (75%) are more than those of the University of Ibadan (25%). Bowen University students were physically present on campus, while most University of Ibadan students were at home. This accounts for the disparity in the respondents’ figures.

Table 3.2: Respondents’ most frequently used social media platforms

Item		Frequency	Percentage
Respondents who use social media		258	100
Frequently used social media platform	WhatsApp	210	81%
	Twitter	80	31%
	Facebook	41	16%
	Instagram	171	66%
	SnapChat	29	11%
	Others	39	15%

Data from the multiple-choice item presented in Table 3.2 reveals that all the respondents, 258 (100%), have and operate social media accounts. Therefore, they are eligible to participate in the study. Also, more respondents use WhatsApp (81%), followed by those

who use Instagram (66%), Twitter (31%), Facebook (16%), and Snapchat (11%). Respondents' other social media platforms include, YouTube, Telegram, LinkedIn, Tiktok, Pinterest, and iMessage. The study further investigated respondents' social media usage levels. The findings are presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Respondents active social media use

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Very active	147	57%
Active	99	38%
Rarely active	12	5%
Total	258	100

Results from Table 3.3 reveal that more respondents are *very active* social media users, with only 5% *rarely active* social media users. This finding implies that since there are more active social media users, they will likely be exposed to social media messages, and share and receive messages on these platforms. The results from the qualitative data also revealed that there are more active social media users. "I use my social media platforms very often, every day to be precise", a participant said. "I am very active on all my social media platforms", another participant noted.

Table 3.4: Involvement in message sharing on social media platforms

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Often	82	32%
Very often	66	26%
Sometimes	74	29%
Rarely	32	12%
Never	4	1%
Total	258	100

Table 3.4 reveals that while 29% of respondents are *sometimes* involved in message sharing, more respondents are (*very*) *often*

involved in message sharing. In addition, 12% of respondents are *rarely* involved in message sharing, while 1% are *never* involved in message sharing. Similarly, qualitative results show that more participants share messages on social media platforms *very often*. “I like to always share exciting messages”, a participant said. Another participant noted, “I forward interesting news, from politics to entertainment to religious and so on [sic].” The findings imply that more respondents are active and often (very) involved in message sharing and may likely have shared fake news.

Since the respondents are active social media users who often share messages on social media platforms, the study examined their perceptions of fake news and involvement in sharing fake news. The findings are presented in Tables 3.5 and 3.6.

Table 3.5: Respondents (frequency of) encounter with fake news

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency of encounter with fake news	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	209	84%	Very often	47	19%
No	20	8%	Often	119	48%
Not sure	19	8%	Rarely	81	33%
Total	258	100	Never	1	0.4%

Table 3.5 reveals that 84% of respondents have encountered fake news through social media platforms. Similarly, the qualitative data revealed that 9 out of 10 respondents had experienced fake news on social media platforms. This finding implies that almost 3 out of 5 social media users may have encountered fake news in their social media dealings. Furthermore, more than 50% of respondents (very) *often* encounter fake news, while 33% of respondents *rarely* encounter fake news.

However, the study further probed how the respondents identified fake news. The qualitative data revealed that when such news sources are unreliable and unverifiable when there is a lack of

essential details in the content or over-exaggeration of the news or information, such news is likely fake. Also, when there is incomplete information, photo-shopped pictures, sensational news (from fake blogs), and news where their comment sections give them away were emerging themes from how the respondents identified fake news.

Since the respondents (very) often encounter fake news on social media platforms, the study further examined their involvement in sharing fake news. The findings are presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Respondents’ involvement in sharing fake news in the past

Response	Frequency	Percentage
No	117	47%
Unknowingly	59	24%
Yes	49	20%
Uncertain	23	9%
Total	248	100

Table 3.6 reveals that almost half (47%) of respondents have *not previously shared fake news or information on social media*. However, 24% of the respondents have *unknowingly* shared fake news, another 20% have shared fake news, and 9% are *uncertain* if they have shared fake news in the past. Similarly, qualitative data from in-depth interviews revealed that more participants had shared fake news. “Unfortunately, I have found myself sending news that turned out to be fake”, a participant stated. Another participant noted, “I once broadcasted [sic] news that I found out later was fake.” While data implies that more respondents have been careful not to send out fake news, others sometimes have, unknowingly, shared fake news on social media platforms.

Furthermore, the study also sought respondents’ opinions on the contribution of message sharing in spreading fake news on social media. The findings are presented in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7: Extent of message sharing contributing to fake news

Extent	Frequency	Percentage
Very great extent	69	28%
Great extent	99	40%
Little extent	74	30%
Very little extent	8	2%
Total	248	100

The findings from Table 3.7 reveal that more respondents, 68% believe that message sharing among social media users contributes significantly – to a (great) *extent* – to the spread of fake news, while 32% of the respondents believe that there is (very) *little extent* of message sharing contributing to sharing fake news on social media platforms. The findings imply that more respondents believe that sharing messages on social media platforms can significantly impact the menace of fake news on social media platforms.

To determine why social media messages contain fake news, emerging themes from the qualitative data revealed that many of those who share fake news do so to trend, gain popularity, chase *clout*, gain attention, or the need to be relevant. Others opined that people share fake news to drive more readers to their sites, to gain active engagement with such stories, or the need to be the first with breaking news. Some other respondents opined that the lack of social media regulation or adequate gatekeeping, lack of experience in journalism ethics, and the lack of useful information sources were responsible for the rise in fake news on social media platforms.

Table 3.8 reveals that more respondents, 61% (very) *often* verify social media messages before resending/sharing them on social media platforms, while 25% of respondents *sometimes* verify messages and another 12% of respondents *rarely* verify social media messages. On the contrary, 6 of the 10 interview participants do *not often* verify messages before sending them out. The data, thus, implies that more respondents verify social media messages before

sending them out. However, some citizens *sometimes*, *rarely*, and *never* verify messages before sending them.

Table 3.8: Frequency of message verification before (re)sending them

Frequency of message verification	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	85	33%
Often	73	28%
Sometimes	65	25%
Rarely	31	12%
Never	4	2%
Total	258	100

The respondents were further required to provide instances where they shared unverified news, which turned out to be fake. The qualitative data revealed some instances as stories around Nigerian President Buhari, during the heat of the coronavirus pandemic, during the October 2020 #EndSARS protests, and other social issues. Some of the examples include, “During the COVID-19 era. I spread fake COVID-19 prevention measures.” Also, another respondent noted that, “...there was a time a news [sic] that the president of Nigeria, Buhari was dead and that the one sitting in Aso Rock is not the real president of Nigeria.” In addition, another respondent stated that, “The news that President Buhari was getting married, I retweeted the news on Twitter, and a few days later, I realized that it was fake”, while another respondent spread fake news “about Buhari losing the 2019 presidential election.”

Other respondents revealed that, “During the #ENDSARS Protest, an NYSC Corper’s lifeless body was circulated that he was killed during the protest. Meanwhile, it was a scene from a movie he shot months before the #ENDSARS and came out to debunk the messages later.” Another respondent opined, “I shared fake news during the #End SARS period ... I was sent a message about massive bombing in the whole country ... I forwarded the message without verifying if it was true.” Also, another respondent shared,

“The statement that COVID-19 doesn’t affect Africans”, while another respondent shared, fake news, “During the lockdown, I heard Buhari was giving a certain amount to all Nigerians if only we clicked on a link. After forwarding, I clicked on the link and didn’t see anything useful.”

Furthermore, the findings reveal that other respondents have retweeted or shared stories on social media, such as “I once shared a link that says clicking it will give extra airtime. The link went to far places. It wasn’t even working”, while another respondent shared “news about the president of the US trying to wage war with the Russians.”

The respondents’ opinions reveal that they had shared unverified news on social media at some point in their lives. Despite this revelation, they still believe social media platforms enjoy news credibility. The findings are presented in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9: Social media platforms and news credibility

Respondents opinions	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	130	50%
No	41	16%
Maybe	57	22%
Undecided	30	12%
Total	258	100

Table 3.9 reveals that 50% of the respondents believe that social media platforms still enjoy news credibility, while 16% disagree. Also, 22% of the respondents partially agree, while 12% are undecided. Similarly, qualitative data findings agree with the quantitative data, as 7 of 10 interview participants agree that social media platforms still enjoy news credibility. Therefore, the results imply that more respondents agree than those who disagree that social media platforms still enjoy news credibility despite the menace of fake news.

The study further queried the respondents' level of trust or belief in the messages that emanate from social media platforms. The findings are presented in Table 3.10.

Table 3.10: Respondents' level of trust/belief in social media messages

Respondents opinions	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	34	14%
Often	84	33%
Sometimes	101	41%
Rarely	26	11%
Never	3	1%
Total	248	100

Despite respondents' beliefs in the credibility of social media messages, they are divided on the trust/belief in the news or information that emanates from social media platforms. For instance, 34% and 14% of the respondents agree that they *often* and *very often* believe news or information from social media platforms, while 41% of the respondents *sometimes* believe news or information that emanates from social media platforms. However, 11% of the respondents *rarely* believe, and 1% *never* believe any news or information from social media platforms. The results from the qualitative data reveal interesting dynamics. The participants believe that the *source/sender of the information sometimes determines the trust/belief in the news*, while others sometimes trust and believe news from social media platforms. The findings imply that more respondents sometimes believe news and information from social media platforms.

Finally, the respondents were required to suggest how various social media platforms and users could ensure and maintain news credibility. The findings from the qualitative data revealed that these social media platforms and their users must always confirm news before sharing while their users must retrieve news from verifiable and credible sources. In addition, the respondents advised that

verification sites be created to verify news while strict sanctions – including suspension of users and platforms – be placed on erring social media platforms and users.

Discussion

This study investigated the extent to which Nigerian undergraduates perceived how fake news affected the credibility of social media messages. Respondents are active social media users across four major platforms – WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. These platforms are similar to Varrella (2021) statistics, Berita (2018) and Tayo *et al.* (2019) who listed WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as popular social media platforms. Since youths are active social media users, they are (very) often involved in sharing messages on these social media platforms. Hence, the likelihood that they will come across fake news and share fake news. This fulfils the assertions of the media dependency theory as undergraduates use the media for various needs. Indeed, the qualitative and quantitative data from the study revealed that a majority of Nigerian undergraduates had and still encounter fake news. More than half of the respondents had encountered fake news. Instances when participants experienced and shared fake news were during the supposed news of President Buhari's health, rumoured death, and marriage to another woman, the October 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, among other several fake news. These instances reveal the increasingly popular phenomenon of fake news and how unsuspecting users spread it.

In addition, social media users share fake news to trend or gain popularity, chase clout or get the necessary attention, and drive readers (traffic) to their sites. Others share fake news since there is no strict regulation governing online news or adequate gatekeeping, while others share fake news because they lack proper guidance on journalism ethics and are unsure of its effects on society. Nonetheless, respondents experience fake news, can identify it, but may likely not share it. Indeed, the findings from this study revealed that more respondents were more careful not to send or share fake news, even though some others had unknowingly shared

fake news on social media platforms. Despite sharing fake news in the past, they are now better informed not to share it.

Concerning some contributing factors to the scourge of fake news, the respondents agree that (unverified) message sharing on social media platforms often spread fake news to a great extent. Thus, to reduce the spread of fake news, they verify social media messages, news, and information before sharing. However, others sometimes, rarely, and never verified messages before sending/sharing them. The findings revealed that despite social media's ability to spread fake news, more respondents agree that social media platforms still enjoy news credibility and further believe some of the news and information from social media platforms. Therefore, the study revealed that users must always confirm the news and their sources before sharing to maintain news credibility. At the same time, verification sites should be created to verify news and enact strict sanctions – including suspension of users and platforms – on erring social media platforms and users.

Conclusion

Social media platforms have become significant sources for disseminating news and information for political and entertainment purposes. Also, social media users are increasing daily, with the youths being the most substantial users involved in daily message sharing. Despite social media's numerous advantages, they are enablers of fake news. Sadly, the result of the study showed that fake news is a part of the social media ecosystem and undergraduates often encounter fake news on these platforms. Interestingly, while fake news is easily shared through these social media platforms, many youths still help to spread these fake messages by sharing them. However, despite their exposure to fake news on social media platforms, more youths often verify news before sending them out. Therefore, they still believe in the media's credibility because much news passes through verification before posting. Thus, verification sites could be created where users can confirm stories before sending them, thereby increasing credibility on social media platforms. Also, offenders who spread fake news must face strict sanctions.

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SECTION II

Politics and Governance



Fake News as Threat to Democracy: Reflections on the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

This chapter examines the threat of fake news to democracy. The discourse is premised on the source credibility theory and uses textual analysis in reviewing ten selected posts related to the 2019 elections in Nigeria. The chapter observes that both the government and politicians freely used fake news during the period. It recommends that fake news be curtailed in Nigerian politics through a partnership between the authorities and social media handlers while exposing the citizens to media and information literacy for them to acquire competencies to manage social media content.

Keywords: *Fake news, democracy, Nigeria, 2019 elections, citizen journalism*

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Introduction

Fake news, otherwise called fake information, has existed for a long time. Human beings are often anxious to know what is new and this quest sometimes drives people to care less about verifying the authenticity of the news they are so eager to hear. Sometimes what is peddled as correct information may look too convincing to doubt. It is common to hear an average Nigerian, for instance, attribute unconfirmed reports to the grapevine which in local parlance is termed, *them say*. It is usually very hard to get to the roots of such rumour-mongering.

Before the advent of the new media, instances abound where fake news had been used in the conventional media to pursue sinister objectives against the public interest. A case in point was what transpired between Britain and Germany during World War I. Information on *The Guardian* archive (2015) says that in 1917, General John Charteris, a commanding officer in the British army, was purported to have taken pictures of German soldiers picking up corpses of war casualties and sent them to British and China newspapers with the horrifying caption depicting how Germans were turning soldiers' corpses into soap in a factory called *Kadaververwertungsanstalt* in what has been described as "the master hoax" of World War I. The purpose of the destructive and absolutely misleading information was simply to trigger the provocation of the international community to support the allied forces against a purportedly morally debased Germany. Although there is controversy about the origin of the story since some critics argue it could not be evidentially attributed to the general as he supposedly claimed in a public speech (Marlin, 2002), the fact is that the nasty story was actually run by the press and the cunning plan really worked. Although some scholars label this episode as propaganda, for the purpose of this chapter, we chose to call it fake news because what was disseminated to the public was untrue, malicious and misleading. According to *The Guardian* (2015), the true version of the story is that the Germans were carrying away their own dead soldiers for burial and not for the horrific savagery

they were portrayed to have committed as depicted in the obnoxious pictures.

According to Kanno-Youngs and Kang (2021), the President of the United States, Joe Biden, publicly decried the dysfunctional role that social media platforms were playing in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Biden observed the disservice in the area of false information peddled about the virus and particularly vaccination against it which was thought would be warmly embraced by the global community. The reality is that the vaccination intervention is challenged based on incorrect information posted on social media platforms like Facebook, as specifically mentioned by the evidently disillusioned president. This is an indication of the enormous threat that false information on social media poses to humanity in its entirety considering the grievous implications of downplaying the threat of a global incubus such as COVID-19.

What is generally referred to as information disorder could easily occur resulting in unimaginable confusion where fake news thrives. The Internet and social media have made citizens closely connected more than ever before thereby elevating gossip to the level of public discourse as Wilson (2015) has rightly opined: "Social media ... have only strengthened the traditional gossip and the rumour mills but have not replaced phatic communication (communication as practised in interpersonal communication)." Nigerian citizens are not excluded from the deluge of information on these platforms as they actively participate in online interactions. Wilson (2015:16) states further that, "If you are not on the Internet and social media regularly you may sound like an old fashioned academic just yanked out of the belly of a dinosaur."

One of the major challenges in the digital age is the task of knowing the truth from fake information. Burkhardt (2017) has noted the difficulty in distinguishing between what is fake and what is real, especially during political activities. Adeshina and Oluwakemi (2020:163) have rightly opined that, "... discerning truth from hearsay has become an enormous task" adding that the capacity of fake news "to distort the eventual truth makes it a threat to society."

Fake news can quickly spread through social media and is quite challenging to correct. Such news has the capacity to distort the truth and render it useless among political actors and followers. Social media in Nigeria have become a pervasive force in the political system, changing the communication dynamics among journalists, political leaders and the electorate. It has widened political discourse and participation and enriched, although obfuscating public debate sometimes.

It is against this backdrop that this chapter intends to explore the threat that fake news poses to democracy in Nigeria by examining how fake news was used during the election in focus.

Objectives

- (i) To examine select cases of fake news pertaining to the 2019 general elections.
- (ii) To identify the perceived purpose of peddling such fake information on social media during the elections
- (iii) To pinpoint the potential threat that fake news generally poses to democracy in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated on the source credibility theory which “holds that the perceived credibility of the originator determines how the receiver will react to the message” (Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017:140). In this context, the message is a political communication which Alemoh (2011:272) as well as Alemoh and Gambo (2016) describe as all forms of communicative strategies employed by political actors to influence the thinking and perception of their audience. A political actor could be an individual, group, organisation or government that is directly or indirectly involved in the business of politics (Alemoh, 2021).

Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) aver that by implication, “The attitude that the audiences display when they receive a message to a great extent is dependent on how they see the source – how and what they perceive the source to be.” This

has to do with credibility. According to Asemah (2011:200), source credibility theory is a variant of attitude change theories which help to “explain how the attitude of the mass media audience are formed, shaped and changed through communication and how such attitudes that have been developed affect or influence the behaviour of the people.”

This theory is relevant to this study because those who peddle fake news on social media are seen as credible sources by the public who tend to believe whatever such people dish out on the media platforms. On the part of the disseminators of the fake messages, they are fully convinced that since the public perceived them (message source) as credible, they take advantage of their gullibility to deceive the unsuspecting public.

Literature Review

Fake news is stories that are false or fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes (University of Michigan Library, 2021). The story may be propaganda that is intentionally designed to mislead the readers or may be designed as a ‘click bar’ written for economic incentives (the writer profits from the number of clicks people make on the story) and for political reasons. Similarly, Pate (2021) has submitted that fake news is completely false information, photos or videos that are falsely created, and spread to confuse or misinform the populace. It can be information, photographs or video manipulated to deceive, trick or mislead people, and it includes all photographs shared as news or as harmless satire but designed to fool people. From the foregoing submissions, it could be deduced that fake news and hate speech share common borders, especially in view of the intentions behind their use and the likely similar negative impact they have on society. Iyorkaa, Onyilo and Emmanuel (2020:154) have concisely defined hate speech to be, “Any speech that is used to demean persons based on their identifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity and predispose them to acts of violence” adding that “hate speech is intended to tarnish the image or reputation of an individual, group or organization.”

The propensity of hate speech towards violence primarily is one major distinguishing feature between it and fake news even though the latter could equally trigger violence at times.

Classification of Fake News

Generally there are two main classifications of fake news: (a) high-profile fake news which emanates from sources that could be considered highly placed like government functionaries, corporate bodies, high-profile individuals, etc. and (b) low-profile fake news such as those spread by ‘ordinary’ users of social media. Such content usually borders on gossip. The above classifications could be further sub-divided into other categories:

- (i) **Information:** Information comprises stories that are known about a given topic, the act of informing, imparting knowledge or notification. Stories on political topics are often distorted in an attempt to gain political advantage during electoral process.
- (ii) **Misinformation:** Misinformation is false or inaccurate information mistakenly or inadvertently created or spread with the intent not to deceive.
- (iii) **Disinformation:** Disinformation is false information, deliberately created and spread in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth (Berger, 2018:7; see also Possetti and Matthews, 2019). In Nigerian politics, this is common among politicians whose intent is to take advantage of the perceived and imagined flaws of political opponents. Sometimes it is to gain the support of the electorate.

Methodology

A textual analysis of ten (10) selected posts by political actors on social media relating to the 2019 general elections in Nigeria was done with particular attention on the element of fake news in each. The posts were generated and disseminated by spokespersons of the political parties, compiled and published on February 10, 2019 by Iroanusi of *Premium Times*, an online newspaper. Interestingly, all

the posts have verifiable web links which attest to their authenticity. The newspaper equally gave a brief profile of each case in a bid to ascertain the veracity of each post as intended by the sender. On this basis, a descriptive analysis of each post was done in order to bring to the fore the risk component involved as a threat to democratic practice in Nigeria.

In essence, the discussion presented here is anchored on the secondary data analysis method which, according to Nyam (2016:165), “Refers to the analysis of data originally collected by another researcher, but often for a very different purpose other than that which the secondary analyst is concerned with.” Citing Irwin & Winterton (2011), Nyam (2016:165) further notes that “secondary analysis is an established research method” adding that “The method enables greater use to be made of data beyond the project which originally produced them.”

Analysis of Selected Election Related Posts

The following posts as obtained from Iroanusi (2019) and Orizu (2020) are analysed below.

- (i) *President Muhammadu Buhari had taken his campaign trail to Kano State to solicit the support of the government and people of the state in the forthcoming general elections. Although he was received by an average crowd, the president’s special adviser on social media, Lauretta Onochie, posted a video of a large crowd in a stadium which she claimed were people of Kano who came out to receive the president. She tweeted, “PMB in Kano. Thank you, Kano” (<https://twitter.com/Laurester/status/1091052740430782464?s=19>). Checks by Premium Times showed that the video was from an annual Islamic celebration of “Maulud of Sheikh Ibrahim Inyass” which took place at The Eagle Square in April 2018. This was done to misinform the populace in order to gain support for the APC candidates during the electoral process. This was deceptive, misleading, and poses a threat to the integrity of the election.*

We agree with the submission of the newspaper that the above post was misleading in creating a false impression and

intended to deceive the populace (the target) into believing that the APC candidates were popular in the election. Very unfortunate, neither the party nor government officials reacted to the allegation by *Premium Times*. The risk here is that the electorate could, through this means, be hoodwinked into voting for unpopular candidates in an election. Democracy cannot thrive on the basis of falsehood which is a negation of electoral integrity.

- (ii) Prior to the election in 2019, *Ms Onochie* took to Twitter to post a picture of food in packs with ₦500 attached to each. In her tweet, she claimed that the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, had distributed the food when he went to campaign in Sokoto. She had written, "Keep them in poverty, give them handouts – Atiku in Sokoto Yesterday" ([pic.twitter.com/jumaW5Vi4A-Lauretta Onochie@laurestar](https://pic.twitter.com/jumaW5Vi4A-LaurettaOnochie@laurestar) December 4, 2018). Findings by the Centre for Democracy and Development showed that the photos which dated February 2017, emerged when a Lagos-based charity organisation, Kakokun Foundation, distributed the food (and money) to the homeless and less-privileged in Lagos state. The story was more of character defamation of the candidate of the opposition party (PDP).

We also agree with the verdict of *Premium Times* on the above post that it was defamatory to the PDP candidate, who was the main opposition candidate to the incumbent president (from APC). The danger inherent here is that character assassination has no place in a democratic setting where political actors are judged on merit. For the government to have allowed this to happen (since there was no rebuttal from its end) tells much of its complicity in the process.

- (iii) Again, *Ms Onochie* posted a random picture of a road construction attributing it to the incumbent president. In her post, she claimed the project was the, "Nasarawa-Jos Road. "Buhari Again!!! Sai Baba." Further checks revealed that the photos were in fact from a construction site in Rwanda! After

severe backlash from Nigerians on Twitter, she was forced to apologise, describing the initial photo as “a big mistake” and was later suspended as social media aid to the President.

Our comment on the above post is that like the ones preceding it which obviously came from the same source, the intention was to create a false impression of a performing President that should be reelected to the State House. This is deception which, unfortunately, could not be ignored by Nigerians especially after her earlier attempts at misleading the public. Commendably, the Presidency’s reaction was in the right direction at least as a face-saving gimmick.

- (iv) *Similarly, Festus Keyamo, the spokesperson of the Buhari Campaign Organisation, in October posted a picture of an abandoned rail track with a tree growing from it. “This is how trees grew in-between rail tracks between 1999 and 2015. Those were the years of ‘Initiation and Started’, when they (PDP) ‘swallowed’ all the money but never completed. Now this is the ‘Completion Era’ as the tracks are beginning to roar back to life” (<https://twitter.com/fkeyamo/status/105b591170082627584/photo/>). A check by The Cable showed that the picture was taken in the Middle East. However, Mr Keyamo later claimed he had used the picture as “an illustration”. but the aim was to misinform.*

We agree with the above submission that the intention of the post was to misinform and present the previous PDP-led government as a failure while portraying the ruling APC as a stable cleaner. Unfortunately, the public saw through the veil and ‘forced’ the author to recant the post. Such misleading posts constitute international embarrassment to any nation and there lies a greater danger.

- (v) *In December 2018, one of Atiku Abubakar’s support groups known as Atiku Abubakar 2019, posted a picture of U.S President Trump holding up a poster with Mr Abubakar’s face on it – allegedly endorsing him for the presidential election. It quoted Mr Trump as saying, “Support AtikuObi presidency to reduce*

unemployment, poverty and lifelessness of the economy as my govt has done in America. I think America first, Atiku thinks Nigeria first.” Findings by Crosschecknigeria, a coalition of several media houses showed the picture was fake. The original picture showed that it was first used on September 3, 2015, when Mr Trump was the Republican presidential candidate for the U.S. presidential elections. The group seems to have disappeared.

Concerning the above post, we wish to observe that another international embarrassment was served Nigeria as a nation through this post. Politicians in democratic societies would not stoop so low as to concoct lies to such an abominable degree as to impersonate a sitting president of another country. Evidently, this is actionable in a court of law because it is libellous as it is defamatory.

- (vi) *An All Progressives Congress (APC) publicity secretary, Joe Igbokwe, posted three photos on his Facebook page claiming they were from a Nigerian military offensive against Boko Haram. “PMB President Muhammadu Buhari no dey carry last as a war general.” Investigations by African Check revealed two of the photos are from Nigeria and one was three years old. A further search showed that the picture of billowing smoke was taken on November 8, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq, by a US Marine. The fighter jet is a Russian Sukhoi Su-25 snapped by news platform, AP while it took part in a joint military exercise with the army of Belarus in October 2008. The third photo seems to date from December 2015, when the Nigerian army tweeted it with the caption: “Troops are continuing their advancement towards the main camp of the [Boko Haram] sect in Sambisa forest.”*

Our comment on this post is that it was a miscalculated attempt at building an impressive image for a president who was obviously drowning in a fight against insurgency in his country. Worst still is the fact that the author of the post was an official of the then – ruling party. Such a development

definitely sends the wrong signals to the international community on the type of democracy Nigeria is practising.

- (vii) *In January 2019, former aviation minister, Femi Fani-Kayode, took to his Twitter account to allege that operatives of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) had surrounded the home of suspended Chief Justice of Nigeria, Walter Onnoghen. The spokesman of the Yoruba social cultural group, (Afenifere), Yinka Odumakin, shared a video clip to further buttress Mr Fani-Kayode's claims describing the siege as desperation on the side of the ruling APC. Messrs Fani-Kayode and Yinka Odumakin are critics of the Buhari administration and supporters of Atiku Abubakar. Their claims turned out to be false as the embattled CJN and the anti-graft agency debunked the news. An enraged EFCC threatened to take the matter up. Mr Fani-Kayode has since deleted the tweet and apologised to the EFCC. However, the motive was to heat up the polity.*

It is our candid opinion here that the desire to heat up the polity was anti-democratic and coming from a former government functionary makes it even more sinister to the corporate existence of the nation given the sentimental interpretation the post could have generated. The former minister's action through this post was clearly antithetical to democracy.

- (viii) *A former aid to ex-Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Olusegun Obasanjo, Doyin Okupe, tweeted a fake picture to show massive turnout at the PDP campaign in Dutse Jigawa State, the Guardian reported. The picture which he captioned, "Pdp governorship campaign rally in Dutse, Jigawa State, 3rd Jan 2019" was used to distort the reality of what really happened during the campaign. According to the Guardian, the picture likely first appeared online on September 10, 2017 to illustrate the preparation of "Ambazonia Independence." Mr Okupe has since deleted the picture. This also was used to deceive the Jigawa State voters.*

We observe concerning the above post that it was a reenactment of what APC did in Kano earlier as cited in this

study. However, both actions were wrong as they were both intended to deceive the electorate into thinking of a phoney crowd-pulling capacity for the two mega parties. It clearly shows that both political parties, who were the leaders in the Nigerian political space at the time, had openly adopted the deception strategy as an electioneering ploy. This, in itself, is undemocratic.

- (ix) *The sitting President of Africa's largest democracy, Mr Muhammadu Buhari, had been forced to refute repeated claims that he had died and a clone was now running his office. "This is the real me", said Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari, dismissing the allegation as "ignorant rumours" after a period of ill health, on his official Twitter page. The Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, who noted that fake news is taking new dimension in the country, disclosed this when he received officials of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, adding that the latest of the hatchet by the traducers was the publication on President Buhari mental state. "It will amaze you that recently we unveiled almost 476 online publication sites that are dedicated to daily engaging in churning out fake news to fight the government", he observed. The Minister noted that fake news was taking a new dimension and threatening the existence of the country.*

In the above post, we wish to state that the insinuations about the identity of the President could stir up wild flames in the country. In as much as the sources of the allegation had not been able to prove their case publicly, the insinuation could be left in the garbage of rumour-mongering. Nevertheless, it was an issue that could truncate the democratic experience of the nation and it was just right for the President to have responded swiftly as he did.

- (x) Twitter was also alleged by some critics to be working for both Buhari and Atiku's camps amplifying false stories and contributing to the polarisation of the discourse through building animosity and intimidation during the general

elections. Instances of false stories related above were spreading on social media platforms including Twitter which could have marred the election as a threat to democracy.

Our take on this is that Twitter and other social media handles that were facilitating the dissemination of fake news appeared to have been more commercially motivated than playing a social responsibility role in helping Nigeria to consolidate her nascent democracy by delisting the authors of such nauseating posts on their platforms or even verifying the posts for authenticity. The negative reaction of Twitter to President Buhari's post on its platform some time ago, though generated a furore, indicates that the social media operators are not helpless in regulating the media space they are selling to subscribers except when they choose to turn a blind eye to issues of public concern.

Major Findings of the Study

This study was set first to examine select cases of fake news pertaining to the 2019 general elections. On the strength of the foregoing analysis, ten cases have been examined in this study. However, nine were direct posts by party officials, political actors and even government functionaries. What this points to is that both government and individual politicians are guilty of the use of fake news for driving their electioneering interest. The tenth review is not a direct post but a strong indictment of the social media operators in facilitating the flow of fake news on their platforms without sanctioning any of the culprits. This is unlike what the world witnessed recently when Twitter swiftly deleted the posts of President Muhammadu Buhari and another by Nnamdi Kanu on the grounds of being offensive to public taste.

Secondly, the study was set to identify the perceived purpose for peddling such fake information on social media during the elections. From the findings of this study, it is clear that the authors of those posts had the following intentions: (i) to misinform and deceive the electorate to gain support for political parties; (ii) to

create a false impression of performance by the government; (iii) to defame the character of candidates of opposition parties; (iv) to heat up the polity to create chaos and divert attention from salient issues; and (v) to paint a phoney picture of the popularity of candidates and parties.

The third objective of the study is to identify the potential threat that fake news generally poses to democracy in Nigeria. We could glean the following points from the study pertaining to this objective: (i) Misinformation could lead the electorate into making wrong voting decisions in choice of candidates to occupy public office; (ii) character defamation could deflate the ego of any political actor and this could also lead to litigation and threat to sustenance of democracy; (iii) fake news could lead to international embarrassment when photographs of projects executed in other countries are dubiously copied and projected as if they were done by the home government making such claims; (iv) fake news could cause a diplomatic misunderstanding between countries as it was the case of false claim that President Donald Trump supported Atiku Abubakar in the election under review; (v) fake news could provide a covering for non-performance of government in power since there is a way to manipulate information to deceive the public; (vi) fake news could be used to heat up the polity which could cause chaos among groups and sections of a culturally and ethno-religiously diverse country like Nigeria; and (vii) democracy cannot thrive in an atmosphere of crass deception of the people.

Based on our findings in this study, we would readily agree with Hassan (2019) that the spread of fake news in an election season is typically geared towards generating more votes for those involved, although through electoral manoeuvring. Fake news could also be aimed at dividing the electorate or “suppressing votes of one’s rivals.” Hassan (2019) further opines that:

The proliferation of social media platforms is geared towards the quick spread of fake news. This is working as disinformation is nurturing animosity along religious, ethnic and regional divides which are often already tense in Nigeria. It is increasing distrust in both specific candidates and the process as a whole.

False information in Nigeria spreads through various channels but social media provides the cheapest and quickest way to access millions through Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. What such people share at times is called *impostor content* in which case information manipulators would attach the name of a reputable media organisation or a popular journalist to a fake story as if it were originally attributed to the person or organisation so impersonated.

Conclusion

This study has unveiled the fact that fake news was openly used in Nigeria during the 2019 general elections by government functionaries and respected individual political actors. Obviously, those who indulged in the unwholesome act did so just to deceive the electorate, who trusted the message sources, with the intention to gain an upper hand in the election in line with the tenet of the source credibility theory. Fake news is even more dangerous when it is coated with the venom of hate speech which could spark off ethno-religious conflagration and dent the image of public personalities. Essentially, this study has debunked the usual claim by the government in power alleging that detractors were always in the business of spreading fake news against it. The government also spreads fake news!

This study, therefore, concludes that for a democracy at a formative stage as in Nigeria, the need to curb the menace of fake news in all its ramifications is desideratum.

Recommendations

- (i) This chapter strongly advocates that government should curb the spread of fake news using legitimate means or strategies that would not impinge on the fundamental human rights of the people before fake news destroys the political fabric of Nigeria.
- (ii) Nigerian government should collaborate with social media operators in curbing the spread of fake news.

- (iii) Media and information literacy education in Nigeria should be encouraged so that the public would gain the required competencies to manage information on social media.

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5



Impact Assessment of Social Media-Political Communication Linkage in Nigeria's Election Campaigns (1999-2019)

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Abstract

Generally, social media use is visible in election campaigns today. Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, social media has become a viable instrument of political communication during elections. The dearth of scholarship that analyses the effects of social media influence on Nigeria's electoral campaigns prompted this chapter. Thus, the chapter focuses on examining the effects of social media usage for political communication and its impact on worsening social vices like hate speech, fake news, calumny, and character assassination of political opponents via campaigns during elections. Its span covers Nigeria's Fourth Republic democratisation transition from 1999 to the general elections in 2019. It adopts an eclectic theoretical framework grounded on the political communication theory and James W. Carey's transmission model of communication. The chapter

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analyses data using the qualitative content analysis method. The chapter found among others that e-campaigns were deployed mostly for uncivilised ends in campaigns during the understudied period. The mechanisms to curtail the use of social media to indulge in hate speech and other social vices in election campaigns between 1999 and 2019 were weak to discourage perpetrators. This misuse of social media in election campaigns during the understudied period, unfortunately, did not occasion significant arrest or prosecution of those perpetrating uncivilised deeds such as hate speech, fake news and calumny because of the weak and effectual public institutional mechanisms to curb its misapplication. The chapter recommends among others the promulgation of stiffer punitive measures like imprisonment of those guilty of using social media to broadcast defamation of character, libel and slander among other vices against other contestants in the elections. It also recommends huge court-ordered compensation for election contestants who suffer damage from vices like hate speech, calumny and fake news perpetrated via e-campaigning.

Keywords: *Social media, political communication, Carey's transmission model of communication, election contestations, political campaign, Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2019)*

Introduction

The deployment of social media in election campaigns is one of the new and exciting trajectories in the Nigerian political sphere since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Thus, social media has emerged to the average Nigerian as a potential channel of communication and the deepening of interactions with political constituencies. Hence, Gibson, Rommele and Williamson (2014) note that social media politicking signifies a kind of maturity, modernity and development in politics. Essentially, political communication via social media is today a global phenomenon that denotes amongst others the adoption of technological applications in politics. Also, social media application in political engagements in Nigeria connotes a dynamism that reflects a kind of capacity-building allied to the globalisation drive (Okudolo, 2020).

It is acknowledged that digital politicking is an enabler of political communication electoral politics (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2010; Harris and Lock, 2010). According to Dollarhide (2019), prominent social media politicking networks being utilised globally are Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook Messenger. Others are WeChat, Instagram, QZone, QQ, Sino Weibo, and Douyin/TikTok. Similarly, Adegoke (2017) and the Harrisberg (2021) acknowledge that e-campaigning networks common in Africa and therefore Nigeria are Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, WeChat, and Facebook Messenger. Important also to note is that unsolicited social media email messages that are political is a common feature in Nigerian politics today.

In this chapter, political communication, by using social media to campaign, can interchangeably be referred to as e-electioneering, e-campaigning, digital politicking, social media political communication or social media politicking. Consequently, Goodyear and Armour (2019) hold that social media politicking is conceptualised as the use of the structural architecture of information communication technology (ICT) to propagate political messages like manifestos, and political ideologies and publicise political activism and activities. It entails the deployment of ICT technology in political activities that social media is somewhat highly conspicuous. Social media's usefulness in political campaigns lies in its power to allow information to become public knowledge to target audiences rapidly and fast.

To underscore this usefulness, a 2018 Pew Research Center survey carried out by Smith and Anderson (2018) indicates that out of every 10 Americans, 7 use social media. Furthermore, there are signs of increasing usage of internet-able technologies generally in least-developed, developing and even advanced industrialised socio-political states. Additionally, a Pew Research Center survey conducted by Perrin and Anderson (2009) found that the global social media audience was mostly between 19 and 26 years who are often the most vibrant and radical of age ranges that usually ask probing questions of governance, politics and political occurrences. These statistics indicate that social media use in political communication

is today a reality given its relevancy and indispensability in an ICT-inclined era (Gibson *et al.* 2014; Dollarhide, 2019).

Similarly, Omotayo and Folorunso's (2020) study of Nigerian youths of Oyo State's political participation through social media found that more than 98% of the youths participated via Facebook. It also found that over 93% participated through WhatsApp; over 50% used Yahoo Messenger; Instagram (60.2%); and 55.3% participated using Twitter. The aforesaid study also showed that political advocacy constituted 95.3% of youths' participation level, 91.9% of participation modes were regarding political campaigns, 90.7% were about communicating with politicians, and 87.3% are about political debates cum discussions. The study also showed that reporting and monitoring electoral malpractices constituted 85.1% of the participation level; 80.4% were about public consultations (80.4%), lobbying interest groups constituted 64.9%, sending a letter to elected/appointed/permanent public officials via ICT constituted 64.9% and reading cum reacting to blog news on political issues was 64.9%. Consequently, the chapter theorises about the impact of social media politicking in the Nigerian context between 1999 and 2019.

Review of Social Media Value in Political Communication

Modernisation of politics is represented by the values e-electioneering portends in political communication according to Pineiro (2015). This implies that playing politics is better off under an e-campaigning model. Politicians thrive best in political communication because digital politicking is highly impactful for the purpose. By social media approach of communicating messages to political constituencies using ICT technologies to propagate opinions, manifestos, views and news, this approach has provided the advantage of timeliness, speediness and quickness (Lipschultz, 2022). In the view of Mukhongo (2020), social media politicking has brought about improvements in the brinkmanship associated with politics and political contestations.

Crook and Harrison (2008) notes that the application of social media across all socio-human undertakings constitutes innovation,

modernity and development. Hence, the author accepts that social media politicking encapsulates a positive enabler to political actors. In this vein, e-campaigning represents a revolution as a dynamic intervention for ease, cheapness, and speed with which political messaging between politicians and the electorates happens. It signifies the dismantling of the old social order whereby political communication goes on physically. The old social order of political communication by physical presence is restrictive of the audience reach at a time; is found to be highly laborious, and is known to be costlier than the digital medium. This explains why Stieglitz, Brockmann and Dang-Xuan (2012) noted that e-electioneering enables political actors in election competitions to easily and speedily share their experiences, ideas, opinions, ideas/ideologies and knowledge with the electorate and the public at large with many conveniences to them nowadays.

It is a well acknowledged fact that the value of social media, and also in general, the use of ICT technology in political communication is well-documented. Leahy's (2018) study asserts that the digitalisation of political communication contributes to improving civility in politics. Pineiro's (2015) research proves the positive impact and influence of ICT application on rectitude in political engagements among political gladiators. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012) hold that digital politicking has proven to enable greater political participation in politics, especially for the common man thereby bridging the inequality gap in political discussion and participation. The study by Barber (1998) shows that e-electioneering makes politics to be more interactive. Karpf's (2009) research supports the view that ICT-inclined political communication reduces the transaction cost of interactions as well as supports the building of political institutions such as prosecutorial structures for misuse/abuse of social media.

Ida, Saud and Mashud (2020) believe that social media politicking has helped to bring about an enhancement in social systems where political participation is fraught with irregularities and criminalities. Such criminalities and irregularities persist due to poor ICT infrastructure, incapacity to police misuse of e-campaigning,

and organisation of elections that raise legitimacy questions. Their study's data gathered from four hundred online surveys (200 each from Pakistan and Indonesia) shows that social media has especially improved young people's participation in politics. Social media has been acknowledged to have enormously aided contestants in an election in their sensitisation of the public to their manifestos (Pineiro, 2015).

Scholars such as Goodyear and Armour (2019) hold that e-campaigning has benefited youth participation in politics globally as it has allowed them to make inquiries, raise questions and get information speedily from contestants seeking their votes. The social media medium of political communication has also enabled the general public to realise their potential and power as the true decider of political control since the medium promotes avenues to socialise, chat and gather the information that ultimately sways votes and governance (Khan, 2017). Besides reaching out to national electorates, social media also performs a huge role in the globalisation of information, political programmes, and politics and also aids the globalisation of political happenings within national political spheres (Michaelson, 2011). According to Halpern *et al.* (2017), deductive reasoning about e-electioneering is by extension a boost to the all-important role the traditional media play in increasing political participation.

Does social media political communication have disadvantages as well? It is equally noteworthy that digital politicking has its flip side. For one, it has aggravated and almost made easy the 'politics of acrimony'. The hypothesis that e-campaigning has worsened fake news, hate speech and character assassination propagation in an election will very likely be accepted as an outcome of the research, particularly in socio-political states that have weak and ineffectual policing, judicial and prosecutorial public institutions. Social media politicking too has a strong influence on accentuating political violence when deployed in that regard (Mpofu & Matsilele, 2020). Theorists of political violence acknowledge the profound effect of fake news and hate speech political messaging using social

media results on democratic stability (Mpofu & Matsilele, 2020; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011). Democratic instability induced by e-electioneering activities is potentially possible in political states with ineffectual juridical legalistic policies in the areas of policing and prosecution as well as having in place a debilitating justice administration regulatory structure (Okudolo, 2020). This aforesaid point is not unusual. According to Macnamara and Kenning (2011), political communication nowadays constitutes a fundamental aspect of socialisation – social interactions that unfortunately are not duly regulated in many countries. A by-product of unregulated social media communication is usually that it ignites contestations, contentions and disagreements that may be inclined to stimulate violence and potentially be acrimonious.

Theoretical Framework

By its intellectual sociological foundations, political communication theory is concerned with how governance, public policymaking and political affairs generally are influenced through the communication of active political actors in the politics of brinkmanship (McNair, 2018). The theory explains how focused communication about political affairs generally (that is, messages, information, news, views/opinions, among others) spread through mass media and modern forms of mass communication like social media to influence citizens' perceptions particularly. Within the political science field, political communication theory does not emphasise the medium of communication *per se* but the purpose and content of the communication cum message as unearthing a political idea, interest, impression or notion. The theory stresses the content of communication as being political as long as it aims further to unearth a political view, message, interest, ideology or debate (Denton & Woodward, 1998). Accordingly, Swanson and Nimmo (1990) note that e-electioneering is intentional communication to impact public awareness, beliefs, and deeds of political substances mostly geared towards persuasion. According to McNair (2018), political communication theory explains the entire gamut of how

the agenda-building of political actors is reflected in their focused communication about manifesto or political ideology. To McNair therefore, a political personality's verbal and written statements, as well as his/her dressing and communication styles, including haircut style constitutes political communication as long as they enable him or her to propagate a political identity or image in the subconscious mind of others, especially the voting public.

Accordingly, political communication comes in various forms: written and verbal statements, intonation, behaviour, attitude, or even hair, dressing and flamboyancy styles. Take for instance the image and identity-building that the haircuts of President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Un add to their political communication. Or the issue raised by opposition forces in American politics that Trump was patronising his own tie-making company and hotels while as President of the USA. Some pundits say such acts of Trump are unethical of a political office-holder living on taxpayers' money to facilitate parochial interests rather than the general good. One can see how the simple act of Trump's tie-wearing ballooned into a huge political debate. Accordingly, political communication includes politics campaigns, manifesto propagation, policy statements, public discussions/debates on politics, political speeches and news as well as attitudes, preferences, and choices of political players inclined to be of a strategic political gain. Hence, Bakir (2013) talks about strategic political communication (SPC) as a form of communication, with manipulative, persuasive and focused intent often utilised to influence public opinion on sensitive issues. Political brinkmanship in an election period is usually anchored on Bakir's notion of SPC. Thus, political communication theory lays credence to how socio-human communication within the political environment encompasses a largely directed motif to sway citizens' behaviour and motivate them towards self-interest or influence their opinions on a political subject of contestation.

Distinctively, therefore, modernisation of political communication theory in practice, which is precisely what digital politicking is about, is tilted towards manipulating, persuading and influencing others on

self-interested topics. In evolutionary terms, the advent of the World Wide Web combined with innovative technological advancement in ICT-inclined mass media underscores the impetus of the social media political communication era. In this context, social media use in political communication will be concerned with the dissemination of information inclined to be of a strategic political purpose and content. The spreading of such information through social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp or Yahoo Messenger indicates the political communication theory in this context. The above view explains why Gibson *et al.* (2014), Theocharis and Quintelier (2016), Okudolo (2020), and many others posit that the rudiments of political development can be sought in the willful embrace by modern political actors of social media politicking in the election brinkmanship game globally.

With regards to James W. Carey's transmission model of communication, Carey's (2009) transmission view of communication contrasts significantly with his ritual view. In the main, the ritual view of communication typifies a communication that is devoid of the substance of manipulation, persuasion or influence (Carey, 2009). It is a communication that is geared towards the propagation of shared values, fellowship codes, standards or norms and information spreading simply to notify of new occurrences, trends or ordinary news purported just to inform. The ritual view of communication implies information dissemination for the sake of informing and nothing more than that. According to Carey (2009), the ritual model is more inclined toward society's nuance transformation through communication. It is communication about the strengthening of shared values, beliefs, and common normative rituals of a group or society such as communication amongst religious associations or news about governance outcomes.

On the other hand, the transmission model of communication according to Carey (2009) identifies with a conscious role of information disseminators to control, manipulate, persuade or influence the audience or general public. According to Kaplan (2003), the primary goal of a kind of transmission view of communication is to the effect

of influence perception. Carey explains the transmission model of communication as a form of messaging meant to impart, transmit and provide news to the decoders (i.e. those that receive the information) chiefly to the resolve of persuading, manipulating, influencing and controlling the opinion/view about the information. The foregoing intellectualisation of Carey's transmission model of communication is common in socio-human interactions or organised settings wherein brinkmanship-driven decision-making and upheavals are common occurrences in human interrelationships such as in business setups or politics (Massey, 2001).

Carey uses the example of the regular news reports in newspaper dailies to indicate the ritualistic view of communication as distinct from the transmission model. As a consequence of Carey's dichotomisation, he suggests that the political communication via social media or digital politicking for information dissemination is therefore inclined to be of a transmission model type because it naturally will have the insignia of manipulation, and persuasion or control embedded within the messaging. For certain, the study of Stamm (1985) lays credence to the claim that ritualistic newspaper communication facilitated community nature while the transmission model facilitated narrow-minded interests more. Stamm (1985) believes that newspaper reports only instigate nuanced changes to community life's ideology, perception or belief, but political campaigns stimulate more radical cum fundamental modifications, especially on perceptions.

It is to be held that the transmission model of communication through social media bears the marks of a good example of modernisation of community life. With the advent of digital news propagation (i.e. social media) and its mass followership or readership that far surpasses the ritualistic media platforms arose the multifaceted dimension of the effect of information propagation on community life. In a socio-political environment wherein poor regulation and ineffectual policing of digitalised news messaging persist, Qayyum *et al.* (2010) hold the belief that the ritualistic view of news is bound to be naturally subordinated to the transmission

model of communication. The implication of Qayyum *et al.* thinking to the chapter's context is that the advent of social media politicking implies more information dissemination to persuade, influence, control and oftentimes manipulate perception to impact public opinion.

It is to be noted that some fundamental consequences emanate from our eclectic theoretical framework in line with the chapter's attempt to develop a middle theory on the variables being measured. One consequence is that our eclectic theoretical framework reinforces the assertion that social media political communication reflects a modernisation and development in political engagements, particularly in present-day election campaigns. Stieglitz, Brockmann and Dang-Xuan's (2012) research assert this point. The authors found that a flip side of e-electioneering is that it fosters election contestants' abilities to deploy ICT for communicating acrimonious deeds. Another practical consequence is that digital politicking could be deployed to promote hate speech most especially in politically tensed electoral competitions typical in nations like Nigeria where strongmen reign over the political process and above state regulations. Such an outcome demonstrates very graphically how politicians use online platforms in campaign engagement for "uncivilised" acts as Kahne and Bowyer's (2018) study notes. Thinkers like Ida, Saud, and Mashud (2020) and Zhang, Seltzer and Bichard (2013) acknowledge a global reality of e-campaigning targeted at winning young people's support: they often are manipulative to sway the mass support of youths against other political ideas being sold to them by the contenders for elective office. This means that social media political communication, by the general way it is used by modern political actors, always bears a transmission dimension of communication.

Methodological Issues

This section elucidates the methodological concerns of the chapter. It is worth stressing the chapter's focus: Examining the impact of social media-political communication nexus in Nigeria's Fourth

Republic electoral campaigns between 1999 and 2019. The scope and range of the chapter covers all elections between 1999 and 2019, and is anchored on the qualitative methodology. Three data collection sources were triangulated to generate data and they are participant observation, interviews and document analysis. The data were analysed utilising the qualitative content analysis method.

Results, Analysis and Discussion

Analysis and discussion of these two thematic codes yielded the following results below:

Civilised

There appeared to be e-campaign messages devoid of maligning another person. One of the interviewees, a PhD candidate in the Political Science Department, University of Lagos is quoted thus:

... It is just in few [sic] occasions you read posts that simply is [sic] publicising manifesto or a public service done for the good of the country. But these posts can be counted compared to the countless posts aimed at throwing jabs at the opposition.

The study of Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) found that Oyo State youths and by generalisation Nigerian young peoples' political participation improved through e-electioneering. Analysed contents of works of literature corroborated the view that especially Facebook and Twitter posts that reflected developmental topics discussed to enlighten and suggest policy solutions to Nigeria's national problems increased among Nigerian university students. This finding is supported by the research conclusions of Fasae and Adegbilero-Iwari (2016), and Okoro and Santas (2017). The chapter's author observed also found that harmless campaign posts were mostly those stating an obvious reality. For example, the picturesque posts were mostly those of the parties' logos as they are already known to the public. Other instances of harmless posts include messaging about already delivered lectures, speech at a fund-raising event; public enlightenment of the contestant's manifesto; speech delivered at a religious circle; or news of humanitarian

public services carried out by public office seekers. These ‘harmless’ messages reflective of e-electioneering were targeted at galvanizing the political participation of a select group. Unwuchola, Adinlewa and Udeh (2017) opine that such harmless political communication has the prospect of heightening the participation of the targeted group to vote amid the worsening rate of voter apathy during the understudied period. Content analysis of works of literature about digital politicking between 1999 and 2019 exposed these facts: Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Yahoo Messenger and YouTube were prominent in social media for political communication (e.g. Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020); civility in the social media political communication was less the incentive in e-campaigning during the study scope (e.g. Okudolo, 2020); and that interlocutors who are party stalwarts of the competitors for elective offices were less inclined to sustain civility in the political communication.

Uncivilised

Several quotes from the interview transcripts lay credence to too many uncivilised acts in social media political communication during the understudied timeframe:

- (a) ... These politicians are just out to tarnish the image of opponents in the election process through their social media campaigning.
- (b) Hardly are the social media posts about their manifestoes. It is usually more fabricated stories of another or one that lampoons the other.
- (c) It is very wrong to me to use the graphics of a wrestler and plant the head of a contestant on a wrestling figure that is a perceived ‘loser’ wrestler just to degrade him.
- (d) Based on the aspect-dimension-content most times, the message is not brilliantly presented and this to me is a function of a poor level of enlightenment, education, and critical thinking. In short, the poor quality of Nigeria’s education shows in the e-campaign because these politicians feel they are dealing with uncivilised and uneducated Nigerians.

What the above quotes denote is that uncivilised deeds like lampooning, fake news, hate speech, calumny, etc were prevalent in social media politicking between 1999 and 2019. Perhaps, this reality is not disconnected from the poor level of policing deployed to curb the misuse of social media in politics. Onah and Nche (2014) and Okoro and Santas (2017) studies noted that social media use produces desirable or undesirable outcomes hinged on the amount of the morality of the actors in the game. From observation, the election brinkmanship via social media political communication was deployed mostly to denigrate opposition candidates. The political gladiators during the understudied scope and range of the chapter availed the chance generated by the social media politicking to push misrepresentation, hate generally, and false or fake news against other participants in the polls mostly. Awkwardly, these uncivilised acts predominated the e-electioneering domain due to some reasons. One reason is the absence of well-articulated prosecutorial regulations to discourage elective office contestants from using social media political communication for devious acts such as calumny, hate speech, fake news, and image laundering of themselves. Nwodu's (2007) study supports the adduced reason above. Another reason is the do-or-die inclination of contestants who desire to win at all costs in a political system that lacks a special policing infrastructure to checkmate abuse of social media in digital politicking (Mustapha, 2017). It is observed that Nigeria has many strongmen/women in politics who operate as if they are above the state's public policies. Therefore, observance of the rule of law and constitutionalism are largely absent in e-campaigning exchanges. This particular reason, the researches of Okoro and Nwafor (2013) and Nche (2012) can explain why e-electioneering during the study timeframe produced toxic ends in socio-human relations. Based on the pervasiveness of immorality in social media political communication, political actors who have little or even no moral profundity, and with a win-at-all-cost mindset in an election, Nigerian political actors and contenders for elective offices very likely used e-campaign marketing to peddle falsehood, assassinate opponents' character and whitewash their

manifestos. The studies of Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016), Lawal (2010), and Nkala (2012) infer that the voting pattern and behaviour of the federating ethnicities and other social groups correlate with the dominant nature of social media political communication use in Nigeria. Participant observation interpreted data to suggest that the existence of weak public institutional frameworks to check uncivilised communication through digital politicking and the high rate of military-like mentality towards political debates, dialogues or discussions during the study period aggravated acts of bad mannerism in social media politicking. The studies of Nwabueze and Ezebuonyi (2012) and Omenugha, Ukwueze and Malizu (2011) in many respects lay credence to such interpretation.

Summary of Findings

Each of the summaries herein is in tandem with the aforementioned espoused chapter focus and analysed thematic codes:

- (i) The dominant political culture in e-campaigning in Nigeria's Fourth Republic which encompasses socio-political history, political values, and dominant mentality in politics pursuance to devotion to the rule of law and constitutionalism in election politicking supported the perpetration of uncivilised deeds like spreading hate, fake news, calumny, etc. against election opponents. This speaks to the predominant trend in social media political communication during the understudied period.
- (ii) The legal-jurisprudential frameworks and public-institutional policies geared toward curtailing misuse of social media political communication which ordinarily constitutes the basis of the learning environment of how e-campaigning should fare positively during the study period were weak, dysfunctional and ineffectual in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Thus, there needs to be in place a strengthened policing infrastructure to arrest perpetrators who deploy e-electioneering for uncivilised deeds. Again, Nigeria needs to formalise a social media use act to empower prosecutorial agencies like the courts to convict those who willfully abuse social media politicking easily. The

formalisation of a social media politicking regulation and ethics act in Nigeria will greatly help to curb the criminal usage of social media political communication for uncivilised deeds in election contestations.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing analysis, our data show overwhelmingly that e-campaigning between 1999 and 2019 in Nigeria's Fourth Republic was employed for uncivilised acts like propagation of hate, fake news, libel, calumny, slander and many other dehumanising acts against contenders for elective office. The data show little desire of politicians to accentuate civility in political communication brinkmanship through social media. Unfortunately, the civilised aspect of e-electioneering in Nigeria will not be realisable if the political actors continue to eschew high moral rectitude and mature temperament, as well as, not embrace an intellectual mindset towards the social media-political communication nexus in their acts of politics. Aside from the aforesaid, we posit that without punitive measures like imprisonment time for suspected peddlers of uncivilised acts in their digital politicking and court-ordered monetary rewards cum compensation for elective office seekers' personalities dented via e-campaign, the abuse of social media politicking will not abate in Nigeria.

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The Impact of Exposure to Fake News and Hate Speech on Social Media on Voting Behaviour During the 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election: Evidence from the South-East

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Abstract

The contest for power, particularly in presidential elections in Nigeria, is driven by religious and ethnic affiliation. Such a contest turns gruesome because elites fail to guarantee the principles and rules of a genuine federation, with the winner-takes-all syndrome which generates and sustains the separatist agenda, insurgency and terrorism. Prejudice, fake news, and hate speeches have become instruments in the hands of political parties, political elites and their supporters, courtesy of social media. These aspects have dominated election and political activities during the 2019 presidential election. With social media, the rich and the poor, urban and rural dwellers, religious associations, politicians and organised civil liberty associations, citizens and government officials have also become unhindered consumers, originators, and conveyors of

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such prejudice, fake news, and hate speeches. This chapter explores the impact of this scenario on the voting behaviour of south-east residents during the 2019 presidential election. This chapter adopts survey research as a method of data generation, with 385 respondents as the sample, and SPSS version 20.0 tools for measures of central tendency as its analysis tool. The study results demonstrate that fake news and hate speech influence the voting behaviour of residents of south-east Nigeria. The chapter recommends that government should fast-track the social media bill before the national assembly to regulate social media and control the increasing cases of hate speech and fake news.

Keywords: *Fake news, hate speech, Nigeria, politics, social media*

Introduction and Background

Nigeria, just like any other part of the world, is battling the raging problem of fake news and hate speech. Both fake news and hate speech have become common to the extent that there is hardly any issue of public interest where information about it is not diluted by fake news and hate speech. For example, security information in Nigeria is characterised by fake news such that people sit in the comfort of their rooms and churn out unverified information regarding why security challenges have persisted, those responsible, and instances of insecurity, among others. Also, when security challenges rare their ugly heads, some Nigerians capitalise on them to display hate against other tribes. Instead of seeing at the security challenges as a general problem, they attribute it to certain tribes or groups. Aondover (2021) regrets that both hate speech and fake news are common in Nigeria and they pose a serious challenge to the corporate existence of the country. Political actors and gladiators have taken advantage of the economic hardship, public disagreement with the government, separatist agitations and perceived marginalisation to promote hate speech and fake news (CDD, 2018a; Pate, 2018).

There are many conflicts currently happening in Nigeria. Examples include banditry, terrorism, and agitations, among others. These challenges are attributed to increased poverty, corruption

in governance, and political maneuvering among other unholy practices (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). These challenges have become fertile grounds for passing information that is not true. Information that targets people, their identities, religion and cultural values.

Although social media have been found useful for positive economic activities like advertising, health communication, political awareness and other important activities that can elevate mankind, they have also raised concerns regarding their abuse. In Nigeria, for example, social media platforms have been widely used for the promotion of hate speech, fake news and other communication that does not promote the unity of the country. Ende and Dzukogi (2012) say that through social media, people utilise abusive words to assassinate the character of others while also posting misinformation. They add that issues such as religion, the economy, politics, and security that normally generate controversies attract more hate speech and fake news. Ring (2013) notes that the fact that social media platforms are decentralised with less monitoring makes it easier for people to share fake news and promote hate speech. Awual (2018) says that social media platforms have been used to promote hate speech against peoples' ethnic groups, religions and sexual orientations.

Fake news refers to stories that lack the minimum media journalism's requirements of accuracy, balance, truth, and objectivity. One of the motivations for posting fake news is to influence the views of people and play a role in their behaviour and decision-making. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) say that fake news refers to news articles that are purposefully untrue and have the propensity to mislead those exposed to it. There are two basic elements from the definition of Allcott and Gentzkow. First, fake news is false information and that is intentional, not a mistake. With this in mind, therefore, we can say fake news is a strategy for some people to cause chaos and influence public opinion. Those who spread fake news manipulate it with the aim to influence the general public (Ogbette *et al.*, 2019). Regrettably, people are not usually logical in assessing situations, especially when political issues arise. With this reality, it is typically easy to manipulate them.

Politicians also recognise that the voters are vulnerable, and as such, they attempt to feed them with misinformation. Voters on their part, are vulnerable to fake news because they have pre-existing political affiliations. Therefore, any information that supports their political ideologies is okay with them.

The prevalence of fake news in politicking could result from the desperation of politicians. During the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria, fake news featured predominately as unverified information was shared online about potential presidential candidates, political parties, the government in power and the election umpires. For example, immediately after Atiku Abubakar won the presidential ticket of his party, the Peoples Democratic Party, some individuals impersonated him on social media to promote fake information about the presidential campaigns (Ojebode, 2018). To worsen matters, some traditional newspapers were finding it difficult to differentiate the fake Twitter account from the original one, hence they were carrying information from the fake Twitter account as coming from Atiku Abubakar (Ojebode, 2018). The fundamental point to note here is that competition for political power normally leads to desperation of politicians and those who support their political ambitions. When this happens, communication, an instrument of propaganda, is used to influence the voters.

Hate speech is another problem that has emanated from social media use in Nigeria. Hate speech, according to Onanuga (2018) is any communication that reveals dislike for people, their culture, gender, ethnicity, race or religion. According to The British Institute of Human Rights (2012), cited in Wilson and Jibrin (2019), hate speech refers to all types of communication that trigger the feeling of dislike against an individual or group. Usually, hate speech promotes enmity, and attacks people, their belief system or identity. It is important to point out here that people are normally different in different areas. For example, people differ in the area of gender, which can either be male or female, occupation, religion, and ethnicity, among several other differences. People are also sensitive

to these differences and any attack on these affiliations affects their emotions and they are likely to react. Politicians realise this and are quick to utilise it for their political advantages.

Alakali, Faga and Mbursa (2017) regret that hate speech has become very common in Nigeria to the level that the online space has become very tense. They add that hardly does any online communication take place without the emergence of elements of health speech. People who directly attack have yet to examine how this fake news and hate speech impact characterised the political information posted on different social media platforms. Typically, politicians and their supporters deploy fake news and hate speech on social media to polarise voters along ethnic, religious and tribal lines. There have been studies about fake news and hate speech in Nigeria (Bukar and Ibrahim, 2020; Pate and Ibrahim, 2020; Onyemaobi, ND; Adedokun, 2019), with most of them focusing on their impacts on democratic dispensation and security issues in Nigeria without a mention of social media. Despite these efforts, researchers have yet to examine how this fake news and hate speech impacted Nigerians during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. The researchers attempted to fill the gap with specific attention to south-east Nigeria. The specific objectives include to:

- (i) Determine the extent by which voters from the south-east were exposed to fake news and hate speech on social media during the 2019 Nigeria presidential election.
- (ii) Identify the social media platforms through which respondents are exposed to fake news and hate speech during the 2019 Nigeria presidential election among residents of the south-east Nigeria.
- (iii) Determine the extent to which exposure to fake news and hate speech on social media impacted the voting behaviour of residents of the south-east during the Nigeria presidential elections in 2019.

Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election: The Place of Social Media, Fake News and Hate Speech

Nigeria's 2019 presidential election was keenly contested, just like any other election in the country. During the year, two major political parties fielded candidates – Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Incidentally, both candidates were from northern Nigeria. While Atiku is from Adamawa State, north-east Nigeria, Buhari is from Kastina State, north-west Nigeria (Sule, 2018). The election was significant to the country because it threatened the survival of the country's unity (Page and Tayo, 2018).

In that election, there were 73 fielded candidates for the top job of the presidency to be decided by 72, 775 502 voters who had collected their permanent voter's cards (PVCs). However, eventually, only 27, 351, 583 votes were cast and valid in that election. The implication is that the voter turnout in that election was 39.09% (Sule, 2019).

Campaigns in that election polarised Nigeria significantly (Egbunike, 2019). Although both candidates were from the north, Atiku was perceived as being friendly to the south while Buhari was regarded as been hostile to the south. Again, the APC was branded a Fulani party while the PDP was branded a more friendly party to both Christians and Muslims. This labelling played out throughout the election season to a level that heightened ethnic tensions among Nigerians and the two leading political parties.

Nigeria is a country with strong ethnic identities. Politicians sometimes exploit these differences during elections, owing to the evident necessity to divide their opponents into 'we' and 'them' camps. As a result, charges that Obi deported northerners were intended to rekindle ethnic tensions between the Igbo and, Hausa, Fulani, which culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (Egbunike, 2019). In the 2019 presidential election, fake news was also utilised by PDP supporters on social media to sway voters against the APC. There were tweets from a PDP supporter saying that the Yoruba had set fire to Igbo-owned shops in Lagos. The stories were bogus, and the Lagos State Police immediately debunked them (Egbunike, 2019).

On February 13, Twitter user, Souljah, claimed that Ballard Partners, a Washington, DC-based public relations firm that was supposedly recruited as a publicist for Abubakar's presidential campaign, had produced a poll that anticipated Abubakar's loss (Egbunike, 2019). The survey's findings were relayed in a letter signed by Brian Ballard, CEO of Ballard Partners, and written to Olusola Saraki, Director-General of Abubakar's campaign, on February 5 (Egbunike, 2019).

For obvious reasons, Souljah's tweet became viral, receiving over 1 million likes and 1 million retweets. The presidential election was originally scheduled for February 16 (later postponed to February 23), which would have been disastrous for the opposition PDP because the poll would have taken place three days before the elections (Egbunike, 2019). On the other hand, Ballard Partners denied the stated vote, calling it fraudulent and claiming that they had not conducted any survey research on behalf of the PDP (Egbunike, 2019).

On December 4, 2018, Lauretta Onochie, a presidential adviser to Buhari (at the time, the incumbent presidential candidate), posted a photo of food and 500 naira bills that she said was shared with the crowd during Abubakar's presidential rally the day before in Sokoto, north-west Nigeria. The claims made by Onochie were utterly bogus.

The 2019 presidential election was a rerun of 2015 when both the APC and the PDP used disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda efforts on social media to dupe the unwitting public. They did this by creating phoney social media profiles and using them to spread smear campaigns, false information, and misinformation.

Empirical Review

The literature review focused mainly on empirical literature because the fundamental concepts have already been explained in the introductory segment of this study. Arcan (2013) investigated the interrupted social peace with particular attention to hate speech in Turkey. Arcan used qualitative data and found that hate speech significantly interrupts social peace. The aspect that Arcan did not examine was whether hate speech is linked to political polarisation, which is a gap that the current study seeks to fill.

Auwal (2018) conducted a study to ascertain the comments that online users make regarding the Biafra agitation. The researcher focused on the quit ultimatum which a section of northern youth issued against the Igbo in their locality. The researchers applied content analysis and examined comments from social media users. They found that the comments of social media users reflected a deep sense of hatred for one another. The researchers reported further that there were many instances of hate speech. Inobemhe *et al.* (2020) examined new media and the proliferation of fake news in Nigeria. The researchers found that hate speech is common among Nigerian social media users.

Manuel and Ana (2018) examined a sample of 1002 United States of America adults. Their findings identify a significant statistical relationship in demographics such as gender, age, political orientation and fake news sharing among the sample examined. Mavridis (2018) found that, generally, social media platforms are utilised to share fake news among social media users.

Theoretical Framework

The mere exposure theory was applied to frame this study. Zajonc propounded the theory in 1968. Zinbarg *et al.* (2005) suggest that the basic assumption of the theory is that repeated exposure to stimuli culminates in an affective reaction. In other words, when people are exposed to a stimulus frequently, this is likely to produce a response. For example, the mere exposure theory elucidates that there is bound to be an effect if social media users are repeatedly exposed to fake news and hate speech. This theory is relevant to the current study because it provides the framework for understanding how exposure to fake news and hate speech may influence voters. To complement this orientation, the researchers applied the technological determinism theory. The fundamental postulation of the theory is that technology plays a critical role in shaping the activities of people in the 21st century society (Nwabueze, 2014). The researcher found this theory useful because it offers information for investigating the impact of social media in the proliferation of

fake news and hate speech in Nigeria. The researchers considered the mere exposure theory a useful framework for the current study because before people can be influenced by fake news and hate speech, they must be exposed to it. If they are not exposed to it, it will be impossible for them to be influenced. Within this context, it can be said that exposure is an important requirement for voters to be influenced by fake news and hate speech. Political parties and campaign planners understand that exposure is important before their messages can be effective. For this reason, they make use of different strategies to promote exposure. Among the strategies include using different social media platforms, attaching the messages to important events or individuals, and making the content persuasive and convincing. Politicians also make use of different appeals such as fear, emotion, and in some cases, outright blackmail. The goal is to ensure that voters are exposed to such messages and eventually, cast their votes their political parties.

Methodology

The researchers used a survey design to conduct this study. The study area is south-east Nigeria. The population of this study was all social media users from south-east Nigeria. The area comprises five states: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo. There is currently no information on the total number of social media users from each state of the federation in Nigeria. However, Onuora *et al.* (2020) estimate that there are 24 million Nigerians are active on social media platforms. The sample of this study was 385 respondents. This was determined through the use of the Cochran formula. The sampling technique for this study was multistage. This was done in the following stages:

Stage One

In the first sampling stage, the researchers considered the five states as clusters. These states are Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo.

Stage Two

This stage of the sampling procedure involved the selection of the state capitals for the study. The researchers purposively selected the state capitals where the respondents were sampled. The state capitals were chosen because there is a high possibility of sampling people from different parts of the states as a result of the urban pull.

Stage Three

At this sampling stage, the researchers applied simple random sampling to select the participants who eventually took part in the study. The respondents were chosen randomly in public and commercial places like churches, schools, markets, motor parks and recreational centres.

The researchers developed and used a questionnaire to collect data for the study. The researchers organised the questionnaire in a four-point Likert scale format. The researchers requested and got the comments of three experts on the validity of the questionnaire. The researchers were strictly guided by the comments of experts in making modifications on the instrument. Additionally, the researchers applied test-retest approach with two weeks interval, revealing a correlation coefficient of .75; which was regarded as high. The researchers applied percentages to analyse the results, and these were presented in charts.

Results

The researchers administered a total of 385 questionnaires to the respondents. However, 352 copies representing 91%, were filled and returned. The bio-data of the result shows that the sample was 59% male and 41% female. Additionally, the results establish that the mean age of the respondents was 25 years. Concerning religion, the sample was 96% Christians and 4% Muslims. The apparent dominance of Christians in this sample was because the south-east is predominantly made up of Christians. The result is further presented based on the research questions as seen below:

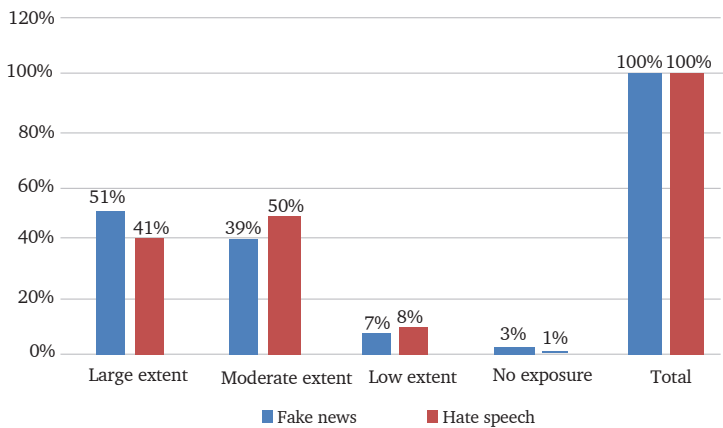


Fig. 6.1: Extent of voters' exposure to fake news and hate speech

In Figure 6.1 above, the researchers examined the degree voters were exposed to hate speech and fake news. It was found that majority of the respondents reported a large extent of exposure to fake news but a moderate extent of exposure to hate speech. It was also found that whereas 3% reported no exposure to fake news, 1% reported no exposure to hate speech. The researchers further determined that social media platforms exposed respondents to hate speech and fake news. The results are represented in Figure 6.2 below:

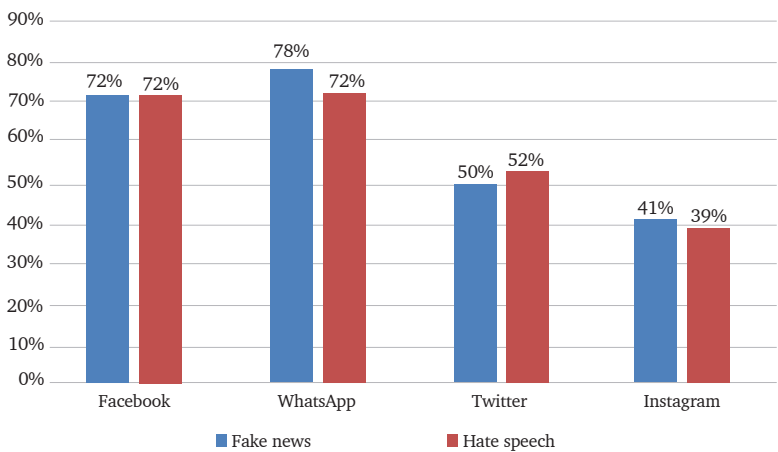


Fig. 6.2: Social media platforms through which respondents are exposed to hate speech and fake news

From the chart above, it was found that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most platforms that voters were exposed to hate speech and fake news during the election. This implies that exposure to information during politicking season is not the same across the social media channels.

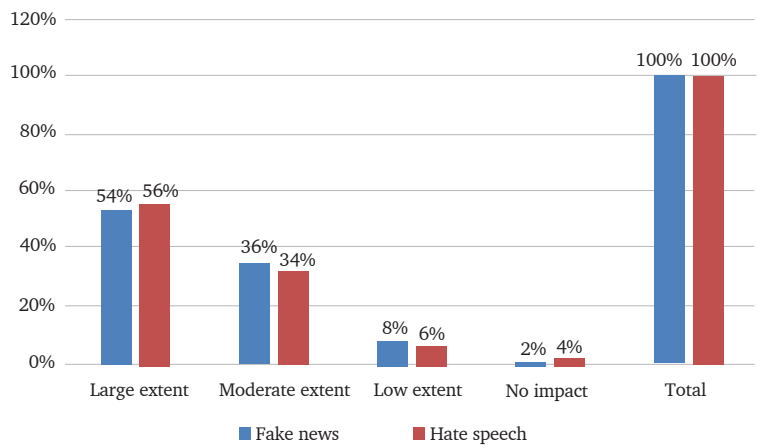


Fig. 6.3: The extent of the impact of fake news and hate speech on voting behaviour

Figure 6.3 above was plotted to determine the impact of fake news and hate speech on political polarisation. It was found that more than half of the respondents reported a large extent. Comparatively, hate speech impacts voting behaviour more than fake news. The implication is that when interventions are being considered to address the problem of hate speech and fake news, greater attention will need to be paid to hate speech more because it impacts on election voting than fake news.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, the researchers examined how fake news and hate speech contributed in explaining the voting behaviour of voters from south-east Nigeria during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. To achieve this general objective, the researchers outlined three specific objectives.

In the first objective, the researchers sought to determine the extent of exposure to fake news and hate speech on social media during the 2019 Nigerian presidential election among residents of south-east Nigeria. It was found that most of the respondents reported the most significant extent of exposure to both fake news and hate speech during election campaigns. This result implies that fake news and hate speech were common on social media during the 2019 election. During such times, political actors to outsmart their opponents engaged in different strategies, thus giving room for the proliferation of hate speech and fake news via social media (Zinbarg *et al.* 2005).

In the second objective, the researchers sought to determine the social media platforms through which respondents were exposed to fake news and hate speech on social media during the election among residents of Southeast Nigeria. The study results show that the social media platforms through which respondents are exposed to fake news and hate speech include Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. This result shows the level of acceptance of social media platforms as channels of information sharing. Knowledge of the social media channels through which voters get exposed to fake news and hate speech is important because Delli and Keeter (1993) show that the majority of voters do not pay close attention to politics; hence rely on information which they receive from a few others to make informed voting and political decisions. Also, Lau and Redlawsk (2001) in their study reported that voters rely on information from politicians in making decisions regarding whom they want to vote. It is because of voters' reliance on information from politicians and political parties that political parties invest energy in making sure that they swindle voters in their favour. Voter behaviour is one of the ministries politicians normally try to resolve. Just like in advertising, where it is said that the consumer is the king, in constitutional democracies, legitimacy belongs to the people. Also, in representative democracies, voters have the power to decide who represents them in power and politicians are normally struggling to influence that decision.

In the third objective, the researchers sought to assess the extent to which exposure to fake news and hate speech on social media impacted residents of the south-east during Nigeria's presidential election in 2019. The result confirmed that such exposures significantly impacted the voting behaviour of south-east residents. Nigeria is a country where people are susceptible to their ethnic and religious affiliations. Such sensitivity makes them vulnerable to fake news and hate speech that is linked to ethnic or religious affiliations. This study has added a new dimension to political thought by adding the influence of hate speech and fake news on political polarisation. This study has also extended the study of Besley and Burgess (2002), who reported that voters are influenced by information from social media. In their study, Dyck and Zingales (2002) equally documented that social media are now at the centre of political communication. Finally, Hamilton (2003) notes that technologies are important in politicking. Information from this researcher could be beneficial in explaining the role of fake news and hate speech in developing democracies like Nigeria. The country is still battling with the effects of fake news and hate speech. During elections, all political gladiators and their supporters engage in different degrees of campaigns that sometimes result in name-calling and other negative practices. The result of this study has implications for the mere exposure theory. It has shown that when people are exposed to fake news and hate speech, it significantly impacts their voting decisions. What this means is that efforts are required to ensure that voters are not exposed to hate speech and fake news. Although this might be difficult, it is not impossible.

Recommendations

Fake news and hate speech significantly impacted the voting behaviour of residents in south-east Nigeria during the 2019 presidential election. The fundamental contribution of this study is that it has provided empirical evidence for understanding the impact of social media fake news and hate speech on voting behaviour in Nigeria. The researchers, therefore, make three recommendations. First, it is recommended that government continue its campaign

to discourage fake news and hate speech among Nigerians. Such a campaign should be extended to highlight politics, especially during political seasons. Also, it is recommended that government should fast-track the social media bill before the national assembly to regulate social media and control the increasing cases of hate speech and fake news. Finally, further studies could examine the impact of fake news and hate speech on voter perceptions of candidates' credibility in a presidential election. There are three basic limitations in this study. First, the researchers did not study if the impact of fake news and hate speech differs based on age. This is important because the use of social media is not the same across all ages. Also, the researchers did not interrogate the role of gender, income as well as other demographics. It is also expected that other researchers will address these limitations.

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SECTION III

Communication and Info-Tech



Elements of Fake News in Facebook Comedy Skits: A Study of Dr Whiteberry and Alaariya

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Abstract

A part from the censure role, comedy skits contain elements of fake news which are capable of being believed by the audience. This assertion points to the nexus between social media, comedy skit productions and fake news spread. Against this background, this study examined elements of fake news in the Facebook comedy skits of Dr Whiteberry (Baba Kamo) and Baba Alaariya. Premised on uses and gratification theory, and digital rhetorical theory, the researcher qualitatively content-analysed ten of the artists' comedy skits downloaded from YouTube. Also, the study interviewed 25 respondents about their perceptions of the skits. Analysis revealed that the comedians employed deliberate lies, exaggeration and untruthfulness to tell stories about the lessons of affluence, bravery,

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ingenuity, aspirations, political campaign promises, work ethics, and religious practices in the skits. However, very few respondents believed that the comedy skits contain exaggeration and incitement against authority. Others indicated that they enjoyed the comedy skits' critique of societal vices and their repercussions, moral advice, tension relief, and laughter. Therefore, the study argues that the comedians deliberately deployed fake news elements to comment on societal issues. The problem lies in the target audience, mostly young Nigerians who may unconsciously begin to believe and live the lies and exaggeration depicted in the stories.

Keywords: *Fake news, comedy skits, Facebook platforms, indigenous cultural elements, humour*

Background to the Study

Fake news comes in different forms on online platforms. Online comedy skits are one of them. The use of comedy skits has dominated most online platforms in recent times. More so, the Facebook platform has become one avenue where all sorts of comedy skits are aired. Comedy skits are short performances in which comedians employ humour to entertain, criticise someone or ridicule some ills in society. However, the audience often forgets or laughs off the inherently significant messages because comedy skits engender spontaneous laughter.

Meanwhile, there are many avenues through which fake news is spread on social media. Narwal (2018:977) foregrounds that: "Social media is acting as a double-edged sword for universe in a way of consuming news." It is possible because of its accessibility, popularity and cost-effective distribution channel that allows people to gain news from social media. Moreover, comedy is an example of social media news content that people use for fake news. Harsin (2018) also confirms that fake news comes in different forms such as comedy, news shows, satires and parodies. At times, people mix true and false as news stories to misleading ends. These are stories that are invented and lack basic facts. Sinclair (2020) further

explains that people can use parody to spread fake news and find solutions to fake news problems in society.

Also, Apuke and Omar (2020) list fake news effects in Nigeria as death, conflict escalation, political hostility, and societal panic. They reasoned that fake news thrives due to media control, interpersonal trust and youth unemployment. Ogbette *et al.* (2019) equally explain that fake news creates tension, killings and pandemonium, which are retrogressive for the peace and unity of Nigeria. Also, they attributed the major causes of fake news to the quest for relevance, hostile government and civil actors, poor regularization of the Internet and money-making. However, Sinclair (2019) says satirists can generate parody as a resource for media literacy education, considering the context in which they intend to use the parody materials. She emphasises the need to distinguish between parody and fake news such that both the author and the audience will have a similar understanding. Andersen and Søe (2020) reason that people cannot remove the fake news epidemic entirely, but they should understand the phenomenon and thus manage it.

Fake News

Fake news is a pandemic, going by the deadly and psychological effects it has had so far upon human experiences and activities. Unfortunately, humans empower it to the detriment of themselves and their communities. In modern times, social media platforms have become breathing grounds and enablers of fake news spread. Constante (2019:4) describes the context surrounding fake news with social media platforms thus:

The subject of fake news is closely related to the Facebook model that searches to generate clicks; in fact, with these clicks we create a dystopia of information, because it uses the power of the Internet to unchain false news but, above all, clicks, which generate profit, and therefore we have a whole series of strategies that recapture the Internet, either in the economic or political arena.

He explains the very nature of fake news that appears innocuous on one hand because it can be used to generate profits on social media,

but it has negative consequences. Even Moinuddin *et al.* (2017) buttress this point that social media networks, which currently have an estimated 2.3 billion users worldwide, are facilitating a surge in the dissemination of fake news. Furthermore, Sadiku, Eze and Musa (2018) describe humorous fake news as news fabrications usually presented in the format of professional journalism, sometimes mimicking real news but also with an intense parody that gives the audience a hint to alert them on the humorous nature or intent of the news. This explanation is deceptive if the onus of falsity detection is left to the audience alone.

Moreover, Showunmi (2018) discovered that most respondents agreed that there was the presence of fake news on radio, television, newspapers, the Internet and social media, and that people relied on internet news more than conventional media news. In another instance, Ojebode (2018) observes that fake news meanings come from what we know as fake news and what our politicians force on us. This assertion shows that what people understand as fake news is influenced by their imaginations, perceptions, and society. Brody and Meier (2018:3) say, “Fake news is information that is inconsistent with factual reality.” It means such information originates from the ‘sender’ of fake news, is transmitted through a communication channel and is then received by the general public. So, fake news is intentional, with a purpose and targeted at people.

Online Comedy Skits

Online comedy skits have become prevalent materials people encounter on many social media platforms these days. With the advent of the Internet and different new platforms, there has been an increase in online comedians worldwide. Nigeria’s case is not different. More people, especially youths, have taken to online comedy productions in one form or the other. Since it is impossible to focus on all of the youths involved in this new rave, the study narrowed it down to two well-known actors who use the Yoruba language for online comedy skits and are among the popular comedians in south-western Nigeria. Adelere Adeyemo Oluwafemi,

alias Baba Alariya, is in his late twenties. Although he studied library and information science, he has a flair for being funny and making people happy at the same time. He started his comedy from the church while he was in a drama group. His love for comedy started in year the 2006 when he was still in secondary school. He loves to tell people stories that originated from the Yoruba tradition of *Aalo*. His elder brother, a television and radio presenter, further helped him in 2010 to sharpen his skills. In 2016, he became a full-time comedian on Instagram and Facebook. He has over 150,000 followers with 2,846 posts on his wall (Rahman, 2021). Like his counterpart, Yahaya Habeeb Olatunji, alias Dr WhiteBerry or Baba Kamo, is also an online comedian in his late twenties. He began his career as a master of ceremonies (MC) in 2015, combining it with acting. He has been featured in many Yoruba Nollywood movies. However, he is more famous for his online comedy skits where he acts as Baba Kamo with other notable characters such as Alfa. Also, he constantly collaborates with Baba Alariya in rib-cracking comedy skits on social media platforms. They are both distinguished by their dressing, which portrays typical Yoruba elderly person with grey hair and a gaunt physique (Thenaijafame, 2021).

In addition, Sturges (2015) explains that comedians utilise social media platforms to test material and build their profiles with potential audiences. This strategy is one of the reasons online comedy is lucrative as it allows for a steady increase in anticipation and audience participation. Sawadogo (2019:55) further explains this notion that, “reception of local comedy films is based on a symbiotic relationship between the viewer and the culturally proximate nature of the comic construction.” He believes that audiences choose and identify with culturally similar stories and images.

Moreover, while describing African local humour productions, Sawadogo equally points out that comedic films hinge on the cultural values, mores and ethos of the context in which they are produced concerning storytelling, aesthetics, thematic treatment, and the development of genres. Looking at this notion from

stand-up comedy, Sunday and Filani (2018:97) observe that, “Nigerian stand-up comedians joke with culture by manipulating shared cultural representations, distorting collective knowledge, manipulating stereotypes and projecting personal beliefs ...” They believe that stand-up comedians mediate and negotiate social realities, using cultural beliefs, motifs and representations, to determine acceptable contemporary culture.

On the other hand, Orji (2018:24) posits that, “satire and humour, as enjoyed in all venues of stand-up comedy acts in Nigeria, are just a contemporary addition to what masks had done in the past.” As an ancient dramatic phenomenon, he believes that masking is a comic tool for contemporary stand-up comedy. Masking, he believes, is an avenue to speak truth to power and an opportunity for the performance of self in ways that are at variant with the authentic self. Nevertheless, this method too reeks of deliberate deceit to achieve an end. So, online comedy nature is the one that appropriates and twists these forms of performance to achieve some noble ends that may eventually have a semblance of fake news.

Theoretical Foundations

Social media platforms are powerful and influential communication channels because of their intrusion capability, coupled with the sheer high number of young, literate and savvy internet users. Online comedy production companies rely so much on this advantage from social media platforms’ users in viewership, posting, likes, dislikes and comments that trail online comedy content by the users. Based on this reality, this study adopted the uses and gratification theory and digital rhetoric theory. According to Griffin (2012), the origin of uses and gratification theory emanated when Elihu Katz suggested that media scholars should invert the commonly asked question of what media do to the people. He believes that the basis of the theory is the need for gratification. The uses and gratification theory further refined Andrew Maslow’s hierarchy of needs which specifies different categories of needs that people aspire to attain. People have various needs that must be met. It stands to

reason that individual media audience seeks certain gratifications when consuming media contents. It presupposes that how media affect people must consider that people deliberately use media for particular purposes. In this study, social media audiences of Nigerian online comedy skits view these skits for different reasons or purposes. In line with the possibility that online comedy skits may harbour fake news elements, the study would seek opinions of the selected online comedy skits' audience.

Furthermore, Eyman (2015) defines digital rhetoric theory as the application of rhetorical theory to digital texts and performances. Originally, rhetoric is the process of creating meanings to persuade people. This theory is based on the idea of Aristotelean rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory. The invention uses multimedia channels for persuasion in digital practice such as video, audio, text, and graphics. The arrangement uses ready-made materials or remixing works, while style uses colour, motion, interactivity in performance. Delivery in digital practice involves the distribution system of the performance. Lastly, memory has to do with information literacy, knowing how to store, retrieve, and manipulate information. Beyond this, rhetoric relies on logic, ethics and feelings to drive arguments. Online comedy artists readily apply these rhetorical canons and principles for their performances.

Methodology

This study examined fake news elements in the comedy skits of Nigerian online comedians: Baba Alariya and Dr Whiteberry (Baba Kamo). It adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and quantitative content analysis methods to gather data. It conducted twenty-five online interviews through google form for Nigerians who are social media users, showed interest in the study, and followed the online comedians. Respondents were aged, 18 to 45 and with 75% and 25% male and female respondents. Respondents were chosen essentially based on those who understand Yoruba enough to understand the online comedy skits. They came from different educational backgrounds, age groups and occupations.

The interview guide contains questions on the definition of fake news, the meaning of online comedy skit, description of the sampled comedians' acts, and observations of fake news elements in the comedy skits on social media platforms. Other questions include lessons/pleasures/gratifications derived from watching the online comedy skits, kinds and frequency of messages audiences posted on the online comedians' pages, their perceptions about the role the comedians' acts in promoting Yoruba indigenous language, cultures and traditions, and their perceptions about the use of their online comedy skits as fake news avenues. The researcher grouped the interviewed data based on the emerging themes and correlated them with the study's objectives to answer the questions raised regarding the gap in the literature. The study used excerpts from the interview data in the "Discussion of Findings" section for clarity.

Moreover, the study sampled ten online comedy skits of the comedians, from very many they have released together and separately on social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The researchers mostly downloaded these video online comedy skits from YouTube and got some from the WhatsApp updates of friends. The researchers watched and listened to these comedy skits for a while. The comedy skits' duration ranged from two to four minutes. For the purpose of this research, the researchers further watched, observed and listened to the comedians' conversations to determine the kind of issues they discussed and the rhetorical formats they used in discussing them.

Results

Table 7.1 represents the analysis of selected online comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo). The study based the analysis on the titles of the comedy skits, messages, elements of fake news and character. The titles given to the comedy skits reflected the elements of fake news observed: lies, untruthfulness and exaggerations. For instance, titles such as, "Two old fools, Baba Alariya I doubt your heaven", "Baba Alariya, I go break bottle on your head one day", and "London Tailor, we no dey disappoint costoma", reflected the comedians' environmental realities and

occurrences. They further demonstrate pervasive moral depravities that appear in peoples' relationships with one another, leaders and government, vice versa. The comedians especially expose the mentality and lifestyles of the younger generations in their attitudes to fake living. So, these show in the messages that are inherent in their comedy skits. The comedians reveal that people's lies revolve around affluence, bravery, ingenuity, aspirations, political campaign promises, work ethics, and religious practices.

Table 7.1: Analysis of some selected online comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo)

Title	Message	Elements of fake news	Character
Two old fools, Baba Alariya I doubt your heaven (2:42 min.; July 10, 2020; 88,636 views; 63 comments)	Happy birthday messages; Affluence	Magic clothe costing \$2 billions; Magic footwear (lies)	Baba Kamo & Baba Alariya (comments: They have come again, the truthful liars.)
Somebody father: just forget heaven (3:36 min.; June 11, 2021; 28,200 views; 50 comments)	Bravery, ingenuity, aspirations	A child's miraculous escape from lion; Another child's miraculous escape from shark in the well (lies)	Baba Kamo & Baba Alariya (comments: Why always you lie can't you tell yourself true for once?)
Presidential campaign 2023; vote for us (4:09 min.; June 12, 2021; 18,255 views; 21 comments)	Phony political campaign promises (OPP)	Government does every-thing including providing basic amenities (lies)	Baba Kamo & Baba Alariya (comments: truth said in jest?)

Examination wickedness (2:54 min.; May 9, 2021; 46,686 views; 57 comments)	Examination is not true test of knowledge	Examination is bad	Baba Kamo (comments: This content is educative and entertaining barakalahu fee)
London Tailor; we no dey disappoint costoma (2:53 min.; May 14, 2021; 29,721 views; 25 comments)	Work ethics, integrity, truthfulness importance	Quarkery, phoniness, fakery, lies	Baba Kamo (comments: Baba kamo oniro)
Baba Alariya, I go break bottle on your head one day (2:57 min.; May 23, 2021; 27,257 views; 18 comments)	Consequence of deceit	Lies, exaggeration	Baba Kamo & Baba Alariya (comments: Get down from your landlord car)
Is it your fasting, <i>pe le o secretary Olohun</i> (2:45 min.; April 23, 2021; 48,256 views; 41 comments)	Religious fasting stories/ fabu about big fish and grandmother feeding them	Lies, exaggeration	Baba Kamo & Baba Alariya (comments: liars, when one is lying the other will be thinking on what to say.)
Forbidden Fruit (2:41 min.; May 7, 2021; 50,062 views; 41 comments)	Apple saga	Lies, the devil's instrument	Baba Kamo & Alfa
Baba Alariya and the Tenant (4:09 min.; March 21, 2021; 23,461 views; 17 comments)	High rentage cost in Lagos	Lies about needs	Baba Alariya & Aboki
Why blackmailing me (3:51 min.; Feb 28, 2021; 35,121 views; 30 comments)	Land investment; property ownership	Lies, untruthfulness	Baba Kamo, Alfa

Table 7.2: Audience responses to online comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo)

Question	Response
If you are to describe fake news, it means	Incorrect and misleading information; incorrect account of particular incidents; unverified information; deliberate misinformation; lacks merit and substance; not true and unreal information; false information to create unnecessary chaos; misleading; harmful to society; untrue or half-truths; an unauthenticated news and unverifiable sources; news lacking authenticity and no source confirmation
How will you describe online comedy skits?	Comic reliefs; informative and entertainment; fun-filled; tension relief; funny; reliefs to coping with Nigerian situations; many are misleading and unimpactful; entertainment; hilarious; sources of entertainment for common man and they sometimes address societal vices: just to make people laugh; Shot funny videos put together for the purpose of creating audience and making an earning on social media.
How will you describe Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo) online comedy skits?	Funny and full of wisdom; satirical; overdone; using comedy to analyse social happenings; funny and relatable; funny; bit educative; comedians; funny; they produce their contents in Yoruba and address current issues; I don't know about them; never heard about them
What elements of fake news stories have you observed in the artists' online comedy skits?	Exaggeration; inciting people against government; none has been observed; not in particular; not sure; none; I have not observed that before; no idea; never seen them

What messages/ lessons do you learn or pleasures do you derive from the comedy skits of these artists	Moral advice; update on human interest events; for sleeping therapy; tension relief; pure comic relief; just relief; not to be living a fake live; just for laugh; none; they speak on societal vices and repercussions; none
How do you think the comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo) promote Yoruba indigenous language, cultures and traditions?	Promotes Yoruba language in comedy; Yoruba dressing; to a little extent; extensively; dress and language; very well; they should improve on moral and cultural teachings; promotes indigenous language; Yoruba language as performance and infusion Yoruba cultural and moral values; don't know yet

Table 7.2 reveals the responses from interviewees who were knowledgeable about Nigerian online comedy skits, particularly the comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo). Although most interviewees indicated that they did not observe any elements of fake news in the artists' online comedy skits, a few raised the issues of exaggeration and inciting people against the government in the comedy skits of the artists. It appears that most interviewees praised the artists' works. These adulations further show when asked to state the gratifications or pleasures they derived in their comedy skits. They mentioned the critique of societal vices and their repercussions, moral advice, tension relief, laughter, and sleeping therapy. However, they describe the comedians' works as funny, full of wisdom, satirical, overdone, a bit educative, and critiquing social happenings. This implies that the interviewees generally favoured more the contents of their comedy skits than the few issues related to fake news. They did not intentionally focus on the fake news elements in the comedy skits, maybe they did not understand the full import of fake news phenomenon. Moreover, because the comedians are Yoruba who do their online comedy skits in the same language, most interviewees admitted that the comedians' works promoted the Yoruba language, dressing styles, cultural and moral values, and teachings.

Discussion of Findings

This study argued that online comedy skits have elements of fake news because of the nature and practice of comedy in the Nigerian society. Therefore, it explored this notion in the online comedy skits of Baba Alariya and Dr WhiteBerry (Baba Kamo), using the uses and gratification theory and the digital rhetoric theory to analyse selected online comedy skits and fans' views about them. First, findings reveal that the titles of the selected comedy skits reflected fake news elements like lies, untruthfulness and exaggeration. The findings are consistent with Harsin (2018) and Sinclair's (2019) submissions that comedy news, parodies and satire are fake news, and comedians use them to spread fake news. Indeed, Ojebode (2018) and Brody and Meier (2018) describe fake news as information inconsistent with factual reality. It is based on account of something that did not happen; something that is a mere fabrication of someone's imagination. Therefore, the comedians' contextual narratives about affluence, bravery, ingenuity, aspiration, political campaign promises, work ethics, and religious practices expose different fake lifestyles typical in Nigerian society. Thus, the messages in the skits are mere fabrications. They only mimic the happenings in society. They reflect trends that most Nigerian youths especially have imbibed regarding fame and richness. Their comedy skits are barometers of psychological directions of people's penchant for fakery.

Furthermore, comedy skits are satirical productions which Sadiku *et al.* (2018) also regarded as one of the types of fake news. Also, their purpose is entertainment, though comedians use them to discuss public issues and for social commentaries. However, the problem may lie in whether the target audience enjoys the entertainment, believes the lies and exaggeration, or both. Besides, the findings also reveal that comedians use the invention of computer technology, the internet and social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to deliver their messages to the target audience (Eyman, 2018). With the power of media convergence, comedians can reach and interact with

their audience through sound, sight, text, and image. They use materials from their environments to tell specific stories as they affect society. Sometimes, they disguise themselves to confidently portray characters to pass across messages (Orji, 2018).

On the other hand, Sawadogo (2019), and Sunday and Filani (2018) describe them as an interface between people and society, sometimes recreating or deliberately twisting cultures. The two comedians depict this style in their dressing as older men, which in Yoruba culture depicts authority, an elder or a sage. The fake news elements also reflect the Yoruba storytelling culture and the deliberate use of exaggerated humorous stories to teach morals. More so, Sunday and Filani (2018:97) observe that: “Nigerian stand-up comedians joke with culture by manipulating shared cultural representations, distorting collective knowledge, manipulating stereotypes and projecting personal beliefs.” This submission indicates that the comedians deliberately employed fake news elements, technology, the internet and cultural materials to tell stories to disseminate messages and garner audience or followers, which translates to profits (Sturges, 2015).

Regarding fake news elements, few interviewees mentioned the use of exaggeration and incitement against the government. However, most of them did not see any fake news elements in the comedy skits. Instead, they found the comedy skits funny, full of wisdom, educative, and analysing social and current happenings. Also, the gratifications they derived include the critique of societal vices and their repercussions, moral advice, tension relief, laughter, and sleeping therapy from the comedy skits. This finding shows that though media content like online comedy skits affect the audience, they deliberately engage in them for specific purposes. They may not care about how the comedians deliberately infuse a few elements of fake news in their production to pass their messages. Interviewees’ responses show that their views about this determine what they want from viewing and responding to comedy online skits. Some interviewees even responded that they were not aware of the use of comedy skits for any purposes except for

laughter. This finding particularly shows that the audience actively participates in media audience, as shown in the viewership and comments numbers in Table 8.1, describing the level of interaction between the online comedy skits, comedians and their audience. Moreover, this realisation also shows the power of social media, which Narwal (2018) describes as a double-edged sword for good and bad endeavours.

However, this means that people are not conscious of what fake news means; thereby, they are ready to participate in its spread in society, especially when it is disguised as comedy. Going by the virulent effects of fake news, comedy will continue to be a vehicle to spread fake news. The psychological effects of fake news elements in the comedy skits are on the credibility of the messages comedians intend to pass across. Thus, Sturges (2015:6) offers this advice that, “The comedian in the age of social media is both an artist and a technician employing a range of creative and communication skills to produce new jokes with the flavor of authenticity.” That flavour of authenticity is very significant because comedians need to give the audience valuable messages that are not overshadowed by only entertainment. Otherwise, the target audience may begin to believe and act on the ‘realities’ that those online comedy skits paint. They may be vicariously copying the very lifestyles the comedians denounce in their works. Showunmi (2018) agrees that fake news negatively influences people’s perceptions of social issues. Its physical effects manifest in conflicts and wars at different levels of human relations.

Conclusion

Social media platforms are powerful; combining the potency with intoxicating effects of online comedy skits of the examined artists on their fans can make fake news spread easily, and an innocuously normal phenomenon. Still, fake news is a slow-consuming epidemic in any human society. The problem is that it quickly mutates, adapting to different fields of human endeavours such that it is becoming a new normal in people’s psyche. The findings of this study, the popularity and effects of comedy generally, and people’s

susceptibility to comedy in whatever format are haunting shreds of evidence that fake news can be dangerous in the manner of its influence. Therefore, comedy artists are responsible for adequately distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Though the examined artists did this function, they need to clarify people's incapability to look for signs of comedy and jokes. As Narwal (2018) points out, social media platforms in which comedies or jokes are dispersed are double-edged swords that can either heal or wound millions of people.

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Fake News Among Student Social Media Users: An Opinion Survey

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Abstract

The occurrence of fake news and how such news contents were actually shared on social media has been continuously investigated. This study examines the knowledge, sources and content of social media users on fake news with a view to determining its influence on their social values. The qualitative design was adopted to collect data for the study. Two focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted with 6 students in groups spread across various departments in the Ikire mini-campus of the Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. The opinions of six lecturers from different departments were obtained through in-depth interviews. The opinion of a majority of the students from the FGD sessions showed that they already have a basic knowledge of fake news and have experienced fake news, in one way or another on their social media platforms. Most of these students still show considerable minimal knowledge about the sources of the fake news but agreed that they take caution when consuming information

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from sites or blogs that are not familiar or that look somewhat strange. Opinion of lecturers shows that there is a relationship between the reading interest of online users of information shared online and their likelihood of being a victim of fake news. This is because the content of fake news is developed to attract certain readers whose interest aligns with the content of the news or write-ups.

Keywords: *Fake news, political process, social media, students of Federal Polytechnic, Ede*

Introduction

Fake news became a subject of discussion among academics and news media organisations. Fake news is potentially harmful news content that is not totally true and the source cannot be verified. Hence, around the world, the level of trust in news content that cannot be traceable to a particular source or verifiable is declining generally among various institutions. This study recognised the role of social media as a highly effective platform to spread their messages cheaply and quickly, but on the other hand, provide content of fake news information to promote particular ideas or ideals which they favour.

In Nigeria, prior to the 2019 general elections, the country's political landscape witnessed an increase in insurgence, insecurity, perceived marginalisation, confusion and economic challenges. Hence, political actors willingly took advantage of these gaps to misinform and promote political, ethnic and religious affiliations and reinforce false beliefs for political gains during the election period. The reports from Adanikin (2019), showed that misinformation has increasingly become a problem in Nigeria. The platforms to spread this misinformation were created by politicians deliberately for their personal interest by using the media of mass communication.

Hence, there are so many sources with untrustworthy content which led a lot of the media audience to retreat into social media angle to seek further information. A majority of Nigerians at this period access the social media landscape for information but are also vulnerable to the danger of misinformation (Adanikin, 2019).

Therefore, the objective of the study is to examine students' knowledge of social media about fake news in the Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State, the sources of the fake news available to them, the contents of the fake news they access on social media and how fake news influence their social values.

Literature Review

Studies on fake news can be divided into three categories, how fake news occurs, its effects, and how its spread can be counteracted. Hence, for this study, the related literature on misinformation provides the foundation for the study on the fake news genre (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler, 2017).

The occurrence of fake news has been continuously investigated and how such news contents were actually shared on social media. In terms of its structure, fake news tends to be less informative than genuine news, using less complex and more personal language, and likely to have longer titles, which contain the main claim of the article (Horne and Adali, 2017). Fake news on social media is spread not only through social bots but also by humans (Mustafaraj and Metaxas, 2017).

Several scholars have submitted promising methods to detect or combat fake news however; research on automated detection is still inconclusive (Pomerleau and Rao, 2016). Tan, Plummer and Saenko (2016) use Facebook data to examine the propagation of news from original sources in social media. Their findings showed that original press releases are shared very rarely on social media, but only in news articles. They also trace how sentiments about the news change across the stages of propagation, compared to the original press release. However, some words emphasised in the press release and news articles fail to propagate and new words may be added that might influence the meaning, sentiment and interpretation of the original message (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). They find an increasing subjectivity in the diffusion of news due to the social interactions in the process. News articles

that stay true to the wording of the source in the form of press releases enjoy no advantage in terms of popularity.

Arnaboldi, Busco and Cuganesan (2017) confirm that online social networks have the same qualitative and quantitative properties as offline social networks. Jang *et al.* (2018) use Twitter data to compare the origins and evolution patterns of false information. Tweets about fake news showed greater modifications in content over the spreading process. Del Vicario, Bessi and Zollo (2016) explore how two types of information, scientific news and conspiracy theories, may lead to a scenario where homogenous communities with similar news consumption patterns are polarised in echo chambers. Their finding shows that selective exposure to information drives the formation of echo chambers. Lerman and Ghosh (2010) tracked how interest in news stories is spread among users. They show that, even if the two sites under study are structurally different, the spread of information follows similar patterns.

Aymanns, Foerster and Georg (2017) make the spread of news as a social learning game in a network. They found that friends of a user in social networks are not just passive intermediaries for the news, but they influence their friends' beliefs with their stance towards the news.

In summary, one can deduce that fake news differs in some crucial aspects from genuine news and mainly disseminated through social media, where such news gains a lot of attention. The actual audience for fake news, however, appears to be more limited than first anticipated. Few studies have considered whether citizens perceive fake news to be accurate, but research on its effects on attitudes is lacking. Furthermore, fact-checking has only a limited effect, while research on automated detection is still developing.

Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive research design was adopted for the study, which involves the use of focus group discussions (FGD) with students and in-depth interviews with lecturers. Two FGDs were conducted with two groups of students to sample their opinions on fake news, its sources and content, and the effects it has on students while the In-depth interview sessions were conducted with six lectures.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Twelve students and six lecturers form the sample size for the study while the purposive and convenience sampling techniques were employed. These sampling techniques were chosen so that all the respondents would have equal representation from students and lecturers. Hence, two focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted involving six students in each group (12 students in all) spread across various departments in the Ikire mini campus, while the opinions of six lecturers from various departments were obtained through an in-depth interview.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group discussion sessions were conducted in the conference room of the polytechnic to ensure adequate comfort for participants. In-depth interviews were conducted in lecturers' offices. The data collected were transcribed, grouped, interpreted and analysed. Findings were discussed extensively and presented in themes according to the focus of the study.

Findings and Discussion

The focus of the study is to examine the knowledge of fake news among student social media users in the Ikire mini campus of the Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State. The sources of fake news, the contents of fake news they access on social media and how fake news influences their social values. All these issues are discussed below.

Knowledge of Fake News by Social Media Users

The focus group discussion was carried out among students of the Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State to obtain information about their experience on fake news. When asked: What are those signs that give out a news story online as fake, one of the discussants said; “I will first of all take a look at the date of the news story, to see if the event happened recently. If there is a disparity, I will conclude that such news is not genuine. After clicking on the link, if the news does not start on a serious note like that of conventional news, I will conclude it is fake news.”

He further explained:

I take the issue of the source seriously. For instance, in 2016, there was fake news on the number of students admitted to the school. On seeing the news, I checked the source and I concluded instantly because the source is not trustworthy. I check the sentences and the content. Once I see that the language usage is poor, like syntax and concord, I will just say, this is likely to be a fake news.

Speaking further on his level of knowledge of fake news on online news outlets, another respondent states that: “I mostly check for pictures or images. Most of these fake items we see online usually come with distorted images. This is because they want to force the news on their readers, hence the desperate use of unrelated pictures.” However, the respondent’s level of knowledge seems to be deficient when he added that, “I think the sign I look out for is when it is only few sites carrying supposedly big news.”

On the issue of skills in identifying fake news sites, most of the respondents in the focus group discussion agreed that they like reading from reliable sources only and do not get excited by unnecessary sensationalism. Another guideline is to ensure they approach the news with a clear mind and eagerness to get informed. According to one respondent, “Once I see that character assassination is prominent in news item, I term it as likely fake.”

The respondent further stated:

If the site is new, I may think or rate her credibility low but if it has been operational for a long time and we have been used to it, then fine. Something happened recently, I read on Opera News that Lionel Messi is injured and won't be able to play the Champions League match against Manchester United, when I asked my brother who is more versatile than me in that field, he debunked it. Since then, I stopped reading any news that comes from Opera.

When asked which of the social media platforms spread fake news the most, all participants in the FGD, chorused "Facebook." They took turns to discuss why they all settled for Facebook as the social media platform that is the most susceptible to fake news. One of the discussants expressed his views on why he thinks Facebook is the most used platform for spreading fake news, he stated that "it is because almost everyone can open a Facebook account with any available phone. Most of the celebrities are victims of fake information that users upload about them on a daily basis. Facebook users are also into the act of uploading unrelated pictures to deceive their unsuspecting readers." Further, one of the participants stated thus:

I have experienced how people were blackmailed on Facebook, which is the social media platform I am most familiar with. So, having this knowledge at the back of mind, I always approach any information I encountered online with a lot of caution. What I know is that Facebook is not regulated. Anybody can post anything from one corner of his room. My knowledge of fake news came from the fact that we can all fall victim of fake news someday.

On whether a knowledge-based approach should be applied to tackle the menace of fake news, a respondent was of the opinion that ignorance is a very deadly disease and it is only when you know the gravity of what you are doing that you can adjust to its realities. People just do things based on their interests.

He stated further:

Yes, knowledge-based approach can work. Government should see fake news as a national emergency and treat it as such. If the masses can be mobilized in tackling HIV/AIDS and most recently, Ebola and Lassa fever, then we can start orientating the people about the harmful effects of fake news.

Hence, Abu-Fadil (2018) advocates that there should be literacy in the news sector (including literacy about journalistic standards and ethics); advertising, computer, public relations, intercultural communication and other sectors of the economy. This should include understanding how communications interact with individual identity and social developments.

Sources of Fake News Available to Social Media Users

To examine this view, an interview was conducted with Dr Taiwo Stanley Osanyemi, a senior lecturer in the General Studies (GNS) Unit, the Federal Polytechnic, Ede. The interview focused on the sources of fake news.

When asked whether the respondent has some sites, he had blacklisted on reading the news and why, the interviewee said that, “Yes, I do. There is no way you will be active in our somehow rowdy and chaotic online community in Nigeria, and you won’t have to blacklist some sites every now and then. There are many websites, especially during the last electioneering process.” On the issue of social media platforms that are more likely to spread fake news, he gave a rating list of (1) Facebook, (2) WhatsApp, (3) Instagram, he answered further thus:

The originators of social media have good intentions at the onset. It is the users that are deploying it to suit their needs of causing disharmony in the society. Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram are good and useful for social interaction.

Another important question asked by the researcher to extract a deep understanding of the interviewee about the source of fake news was to know to what extent he trusts the source of news

before relying on the content. He explained that, “I don’t just read all forms of junks online. I read news only from established sources that can be trusted. If you share a particular news item from a dubious site with a funny URL with me, I will just overlook it. The source is very important.”

Corroborating his above views, he stated further:

The moment you see a fake content, elements of fake will be all around it. It is either the language is exaggerated; the condemnation will be too much the symbolism there will be above board; and the colouration of events. Once I see all these, I recheck the source and make my conclusions.

Although most studies do not consider some of these examples, journalistic presentation can also involve video and radio news formats with manipulation tools. By doing this the information is presented under false pretence which can result from journalistic research which does not follow professional standards, hence fake news may be described as an unethical journalistic effort. This will lead the audience to assume such news articles as genuine and credible news articles.

The Contents of Fake News that Social Media Users Read

On the issue of what motivates or attracts people to any given write-up or news item online, Mr Wale Aliu of the General Studies Unit of the Federal Polytechnic, Ede, answered thus:

What easily attracts my attention anytime I am reading an online content is the headline. When you go to the content even from the headline, you will discover that they are just used to catch the attention and arrest the interest of the reader. By the time you get to the content, you discover there is disparity between the headline and the body.

Most people trust traditional media to always report the truth at all time and the same goes for the interviewee. When asked that other than traditional media, how best does he trust the content of news items that emanated from blogs or Facebook pages, he

said: “I can’t really trust any news from blogs because most of them are fake. Their design is mainly to deceive people, to let people believe what they are selling. Sincerely, they are not to be trusted especially the blogs.” Also, when asked whether he has any celebrity he follows on any social media platform or if he commands a large followership online, he answered in the affirmative. “Yes, I have a Facebook page and anytime I post on it, I make sure it is a verifiable claim because I have many followers too. I also have friends who enjoy large followerships. I trust their contents creation because they always write on entrepreneurship; on how to make people more self-reliant.”

The most agitating question on the minds of online media consumers and victims of fake news is when the government will take action against this threat to free information. The interviewee was asked about his opinion on the calls in some quarters that the government should introduce censorship to fight fake news, he answered thus: “Sincerely, that should be done.”

Influence Fake News on the Values of Social Media Users

On how fake news may influence the values of social media users Mr Olasehinde Akeem, a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing, the Federal Polytechnic, Ede, in an interview says that:

Yes, it affects the value systems in the society because if care is not taken, fake news will become a norm in our society and its believability will reach the sky. Our people no longer believe in the sanctity of truth and the consequences of lies.

This interviewee believes that sources of fake news have negative influences on consumers of news. His answer to a related question gave credence to that. He opined that, “Honestly, we have a big problem on our hand. This is because many people take what they read online especially on blogs hook, line and sinker. It can lead to public disturbance, ethnic violence, health-related complications, wars and even change of government.”

However, trying to measure the extent of peer pressure and the kind of influence it has on the interviewee, the respondent was

asked: to what extent do you share news because it emanated from a trusted person such as a boss, senior colleague, etc.? He answered thus:

I do get different kind of information from blogs, Facebook and Instagram but what I normally do is to do a kind of test. I check the accredited media sources before I start spreading it.

Conclusion

The dangers inherent in the spreading of fake news should encourage the government to engage in the massive orientation campaigns to mobilise the masses against the habit of spreading fake news. Also, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the body charged with regulating the activities of radio and television broadcasting in Nigeria should keenly monitor broadcasting stations in the country and adequately sanction any media house spreading fake news. The national and state assemblies should enact laws that will criminalise the act of spreading fake news and such laws should come with severe punishment such as jail terms and heavy fines for offenders. For instance, the activities of bloggers, online newspapers, radio and television stations should be regulated to the barest minimum in Nigeria.

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Lexical Choices in Nigerian-Based Online Hate Speeches

Mufutau Temitayo LAMIDI¹

Abstract

Fake news and hate speech are downsides in the social media. Scholars have studied hate speech from different perspectives, neglecting largely the aspect of lexical choices, which reveals authors' inclination in texts. This study, therefore, examined how lexical choices contribute to hate speeches shared on social media. Data were sourced through participant observation and convenient sampling methods from purposively sampled WhatsApp groups. The study, adopting lexical choices as a framework, established that word choice in hate speeches is slanted to influence readers to accept authors' views. It concluded that hate speeches probably contribute to the current insecurity in Nigeria and advised readers to scrutinise them for neutrality before acting on them.

Keywords: *Hate speech, lexical choices, WhatsApp, social media platform, forwarded messages, insecurity in Nigeria*

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Introduction

Social media is a purveyor of the good, the bad and the ugly. The good ones include business transactions, entertainment and news reports (Lamidi, 2020:1), while the bad, ugly ones are cyberstalking, cyberbullying, misinformation, fake news and hate speech, among others.

Different definitions have been offered on hate speech in extant literature; though Hidayati *et al.* (2021) and Di Rosa (2019) note some weaknesses in them. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that hate speech uses offensive and threatening language that targets people based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, colour, gender, race, sexual orientation, or disability (Gitari *et al.*, 2015:215; Johnson *et al.* 2019) and it occurs when people use language “for the purpose of humiliating, insulting, degrading, and slandering other individuals or groups of society that they do not like” (Hidayati *et al.*, 2021:308). Hence, hate speech is a product of hatred, envy and other negatives. By mixing hatred and false information, authors discredit, cast a slur on a personality or group, or make the target of the speech look bad enough to be denigrated. They also attempt to spread the hate as far as possible through dedicated websites associated with a cohesive group of members as well as through popular sites such as Yahoo!, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, sometimes inciting violence in its wake.

This study examines word choice in hate speeches shared through WhatsApp groups, to sensitise readers to scrutinising hate speeches by paying close attention to the author’s choice of words so as to determine whether or not the speech should be further shared.

Previous Studies

Many studies have approached the problem of hate speech in society from different interdisciplinary perspectives, but only three such approaches which are necessary for understanding the current study are discussed here. These are computer technology and language; language, philosophy and law; and language/linguistics. Studies from the perspective of computer technology-cum-language

are Gitari *et al.* (2015), Sigurbergsson & Derczynski (2019) and Tang & Daizell (2019). Gitari *et al.* (2015) attempt to determine hate speech in online forums, blogs and comments section. Using a rule-based approach, they developed a classifier to determine subjective and objective sentences in hate speeches. A speech is considered subjective if it contains feelings, views or beliefs, but objective if bare of these. Sigurbergsson & Derczynski (2019), like Gitari *et al.* (2015), observe that offensive language as used in hate speech and cyberbullying on online social media is harmful and requires automatic methods for detection. Based on user-generated data from Reddit and Facebook, they developed four automatic classification systems to categorise and target offensive language in English and Danish. They suggest that sharing information across languages and platforms leads to good models for the task.

Finally, premised on the fact that social media and other online sites are being increasingly scrutinised as platforms for cyberbullying and hate speech, Tang & Daizell (2019) acknowledge existing continuous efforts to stem the tide through machine learning algorithms, such as support vector machines. They note that apart from predicting patterns of negative speech, these algorithms appear difficult to understand and, while classifying comments as negative or neutral, the authors of these algorithms did not identify the subcategories of the negative speech. Tang & Daizell (2019) address this challenge by introducing a two-stage model for classifying text, using data from Twitter and Wikipedia. The first stage clarifies each comment as either negative or neutral while the second creates features specific to each subcategory. The study suggests that the algorithms are useful in categorizing comments into subcategories.

These three studies confirm that hate speech is a problem that must be solved. They also created algorithms that can be used to identify online hate speech on Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo! and Wikipedia. However, one wonders if these can work with WhatsApp and if an average Nigerian phone user can apply such algorithms to detect hate speech on WhatsApp.

Extant studies have also discussed hate speech from the viewpoint of law, philosophy and language. In this respect, Di Rosa's (2019) thesis is that "philosophical understandings of the distinctions between *speech* and *action*" (p. 108) are varied. While some scholars distinguish *pure speech* from *other actions*, others see no difference between them. Given the disparate views, Di Rosa suggests a theory of performativity, derived from Austin's speech act theory, to understand the phenomenon very well. The study concludes that different conducts fall under the concept of hate speech. When speech is inciting or disseminating information, the State should be careful to punish the former and spare the latter; and protect human rights, focusing on the content and the means of expression.

Just like Di Rosa (2019), Hornsby (2003) takes a philosophical and legal look at a distinction between free speech and hate speech. She tries to present an egalitarian position of free speech in a more visible manner than it had been. While agreeing with the libertarians not to regulate speech or its speakers, she suggests that hate speech also has the tendency to hurt victims or targets, working through reciprocity. The focus of these studies is a call for a profound understanding of hate speech. They suggest that each citizen has a right and government must ensure that each person's rights are not trampled on. One way of doing these is to distinguish between free speech and hate speech (Tang & Daizell, 2019) and another is to distinguish when a speech is capable of inciting or otherwise (Di Rosa, 2019). These seem to apply to government, legal minds and scholars in the field rather than to the ordinary person using a phone. Of course, there are laws against hate speech in Nigeria, but how effective are they?

Another category of studies is from a linguistic perspective. He and Zhou (2015) examine the different lexical choices and verbal messages of the three safety accidents in China as reported in *China Daily* and *The Washing Post*, to reveal the ideologies in the stories. By pairing the words from the two newspapers for observation, the study observes that although the newspapers outwardly present *a façade of objectivity and neutrality, they are actually not*

neutral. Contrarily, they use six pairs of words from newspaper reports on each accident with embedded ideologies in order to influence their readers' views of the world. The study concludes that the newspapers, through their specific word choices, present the same events in disparate ways that reflect their peculiar ideological views and national interests. Hence, word choice in language can be used covertly to influence readers of written messages. This result tallies with the current study's aspiration to sensitise readers on the need to be watchful of messages they read/share on the WhatsApp platform. Readers should be critical of posts, especially hate speeches, which they read online, before they act according to the emotions brewed from/by that post.

Finally, Riyono *et al.* (2018) investigate the ideology of the translator of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk (The Dancer)* through the lexical choices in the novel. Through different texts, the authors unveil discrepancies in word meaning between the translation and the source text. They show that, in translation, ideologies differ from one culture to another and therefore translations are not always accurate or even faithful. This confirms that authors can impose their own ideologies on words in translation, making audiences read what purports to be the faithful rendition of the original text.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that writers have peculiarities in their use of language. Given writers' ideologies (He & Zhou, 2015; Riyono *et al.*, 2018), individuals infuse their ideas into a message they want to share. Even when the message is factual (He & Zhou, 2015), authors always slant the message to suit their purposes. Thus words in hate speeches are chosen with some intent. This study intends to unearth such gradation of meaning in sampled texts.

The prevalent problem of hate speech in Nigeria is emphasised by Ukwueze and Ogbonna (2015), and Nwaoke and Uzoagba (2021). While the former opine that hate speech has become a handy tool in the hands of supporters of politicians who use it in persuading voters and persecuting adversaries, the latter suggest that politicians use hate speech to gain power or perpetuate themselves in power. These studies underscore the need to address the problem of hate

speech from the grassroots, i.e. the masses who constitute the largest part of the population and are the primary consumers of hate speech. The different perspectives presented in this review reveal that there is a paucity of studies on the lexical choices in hate speech in Nigeria, and this study hopes to fill this gap.

Obviously, hate speech is a common phenomenon; and their authors, through skilful choices of words, infuse their intended ideas in them. This can potentially injure victims' psychology or rights to association and information. Readers unaffected by the content of the message may innocently share hate speeches to other platforms, thereby compounding the victims' problems. Nigeria is at a very crucial moment facing serious security challenges, where ethnicity and religion have continued to polarise the citizenry. Consequently, people are set on edge and are eager for information anywhere to guide their acts and movements. Thus, examining the lexical choices in hate speeches enables the researcher to advise prospective readers and sharers.

Therefore, this study underscores the need to discern whether a message is hate speech or not before sharing it. It examines how words mean in the context of hate speech. Being a qualitative research, the study is anchored on the concept of lexical choice. Lexical choice refers to the selection of words for specific needs (hate/praise). This choice is expected to meet the semantic needs of the author. The relevant questions which this chapter attempts to answer are: What types of words and expressions are used in hate speech? What is the semantic implication of the words used? What are the goals of lexical choices in the context of hate speech?

Lexical Choices

The word is a very important concept in language. Within generative grammar, words and their linguistic properties are assumed to be located in the lexicon (Radford, 2009:14). Each word can be identified with its morphological, syntactic, categorial, contextual, semantic, pragmatic, phonological and selectional features (Lamidi, 2008:61). Thus, each word has its own identity. Words are also

imbued with different shades of meaning; hence there is no one-to-one correspondence between a word and its meaning. Rather, meanings shade into one another, leading to semantic issues such as synonymy and ambiguity.

The competent language users can choose words to achieve specific meanings they want to put across. When they get hold of words, words instantly become tools to influence the audience, create a style for themselves, etc. Thus, the words are in themselves innocuous, but the user makes them powerful, influencing people positively or negatively. Therefore, words can be presented subjectively or objectively. A word infused with feelings, views or opinions is already subjective. The objective word is plain without any imputed meaning (Gitari *et al.*, 2015).

Each author also has an ideology, and a perspective on specific issues. In using language, such ideologies emanate, and these may be imposed on an author's speech or writing, perhaps with a view to influencing readers or listeners (Riyono *et al.*, 2018). A dictionary entry is innocuous. However, when imbued with a user's ideology, it acquires a new stance, ready to do the bidding of its new creator.

Zhang (2011) has divided words into three categories according to their emotional colouring. The first are commendatory words, which are positive words. They give a positive account of an individual or a situation. According to Zhang, they have active evaluation depicting a user's favourable attitude to descriptive objects. The second are derogatory words, the opposite of commendatory words. The term has negative evaluation reflecting a user's negative attitude. The third are neutral words, which are neither complimentary nor derogatory; they are just in-between. Neutral terms state the fact without evaluation, and users make no evaluative comments on descriptive objects.

This study evaluates words in hate speeches on their content and classification along these three levels. These are necessary to understand and underscore the impact of the choice of specific words and expressions in the message and the possible effect on the readers.

The Data

Forwarded messages depicting hate speeches were sampled through participant observation and convenient sampling methods from purposively selected WhatsApp chat groups to which the researcher belongs. The sampled platforms were 8: 3 old students' chat groups, 1 religious group, 2 politics groups, and 2 social discussion groups. The data collected were largely on religion, ethnicity and politics. The samples were scrutinised for elements of hatred. Identified expressions were extracted and subjected to content analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

For ease of interpretation, the data analysis is presented along major themes (religion, politics and ethnicity), which often overlap one another in some data.

Religion

Data related to religion are on only Christianity and Islam.

Hate Speech with Spirituality

Hate speech can show authors' spirituality to authenticate their claims. Consider:

My brethren, I am barr. Mrs Martha Nkemjuruma for Obi, a solicitor and advocate of Federal Republic of Nigeria, but above all, a member of the body of Christ in this nation. I was called to the Nigerian Bar in 2005. A Corporate lawyer with companies and financial institutions.

I am not passing this message to you as a job seeker or one needing any kind of help from anyone especially in the body of Christ, nor a Pastor, deaconesses but as one under instruction this morning by God to pass this message to God's people in this nation ... This morning, 11/09/2019, *the Lord showed me where everyone in this nation was made to bow to Islam* and its gods in a Revelation.

The lexical choices in paragraph 1 above are for religious identification. Nigeria is a multi-religious country with three prominent religions: Christianity, Islam and traditional religion. The chosen words identify

the writer as a Christian. Christians usually refer to themselves as “brethren”. This is complemented with “body of Christ”, a reference to the totality of Christians in Nigeria.

Nigerians also respect positions and achievements. Unlike poor preachers who seek financial reward/assistance in commercial vehicles at bus terminals, this author identifies herself as a “barrister” and “corporate lawyer” just to show that she is a woman of means. However, for a lawyer, her language competence is suspect. Nevertheless, the chosen commendatory words establish her status as a committed Christian-cum-successful lawyer.

Religion is a delicate topic in Nigeria. So, Christians and Muslims view each other with suspicion. While Christians criticise government for attempts to make Islam a state religion, Muslims are always agitating for their rights that had been purportedly trampled on. The second paragraph of the text becomes meaningful when interpreted against this background. Given the stance above, devoted Christians are unlikely to want Christianity “to bow to Islam” and will most likely accept the posted message as authentic. The author deliberately chose the expression “bow to Islam” to stir up latent hatred for Islam among Christians. Given the not-so-cordial relationship between the two religious bodies, the “revelation” that Christianity is bowing to Islam is sure to draw the ire of Christians. Hence, this is expected to pit Christians against Muslims.

The use of “instruction”, “message”, “God” and “Lord”, establishes that the message is from *God*. Nigerian prophets often foretell the future, claiming that they had visions. Some of such have been confirmed to have come to pass. Hence, audiences can relate to the concept of seeing visions, especially from a *brethren* under God’s *instruction*. Furthermore, the use of “everyone” shows the message is for every Christian, but excludes Muslims and traditional religion believers.

Also, the use of “gods” denigrates the Islamic religion, implying that Muslims do not worship the *true God*. This exemplifies the choice of derogatory words. Muslims may not take kindly to this claim. There had often been altercations between Muslims and

Christians over the real God between who or what both sides worship. Muslims claim that Christians worship three gods, because the latter believes in Trinity. However, Christians believe that Muslims worship the unseen god, or at best, the Sun (since Muslims pray, facing the East). Hence, most Christians may agree with the author. Thus, the author has sown the seed of discord to stir up Christians against Muslims.

Hate Speech with Past Atrocities on Members

The following data is on religion and international politics. The excerpt presents the agonies Bosnia Muslims purportedly suffered at the hands of Christian Serbs. It is a remembrance of perceived evils done to Muslims in the past; and it alerts Nigerian Muslims to get ready to retaliate should similar issues arise in Nigeria.

Lest we forget! Today and always. In Remembrance of 350,000 Bosnian Muslims Death didn't come easy🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄 *The Genocide by the Christian Serbs against the Muslims of Bosnia.*

✦ *Approximately 100,000 Muslims were martyred.*

✦ *60,000 women and girls were raped.*

...

☹️The Serbs put thousands of Muslims in detention camps, tortured them, and starved them, until they became skeletons!

👤When a Serb commander was asked: Why? He said, "Because they don't eat pork!

....

💎The Serbs raped children. A 4-year-old girl, blood running between her legs.

The Guardian published a report on it entitled: The child whose guilt is being a Muslim.

....

👤Here we must record with ink of shame ... the positions of the Orthodox Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was at that time the Secretary General of the United Nations, He sided blatantly with his Serb brothers.

....

🔪 The Serbs were singling out Religious Scholars, Masjid Imams, Intellectuals and Businessmen for killing.

....

The speech documents the atrocities as “350,000 Bosnian Muslims Death”, “The Genocide by the Christian Serbs against the Muslims of Bosnia”, “Approximately 100,000 Muslims were martyred”, and

60,000 women and girls were raped. While the conflict between Christian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims was reported when it held, these figures look outrageous. The author's attempt here is to open old wounds. Again, these incidents did not happen in Nigeria. Why would an author forward it to chat groups in Nigeria? It is probably a 'wake up' call for Nigerian Muslims to note what Christians did to Muslims and be on their guard. The message reported the complicity of Boutros-Boutros-Ghali, former UN Secretary-General. He is accused of siding with Christian Serbs against Bosnian Muslims. The message goes further to accuse "The Serbs of singling out Religious Scholars, Masjid Imams, Intellectuals and Businessmen for killing." It is part of the attempt to let contemporary Muslims know what Muslims suffered. While there was indeed a Bosnian war, the details of the atrocities are probably exaggerated for effect.

Christian Serbs were said to have imprisoned and starved Muslims until they "became skeletons ... Because they don't eat pork!" The reason given is deliberate. The author harped on *pork* to infuriate Muslims whose religion forbids eating pork. What the author implies is that they are being punished for their faith. Another expression is, "The Serbs raped children, a 4-year old was among them." The choice of words here is meant to incite Muslims. For instance, in the text, "The child whose guilt is being a Muslim", the author chose *guilt* deliberately to imply that the girl was being punished for the 'offence of being a Muslim'. All these are to rouse Muslims' emotions and make them angry at Christian Serbs or their counterparts in Nigeria.

Politics

Hate speeches can criticise government's policies and embarrass government just to cause disaffection among the citizenry.

Let us 'shine our face'. It is no longer news that our country now has open borders with Egypt. What do we think, is the implication? Are the Egyptians our relatives? Do we have similar culture as we do with some West African countries? ... Trouble is looming! ... We did not believe there could be Fulani invasion of the south west and south east when the alarm was

raised. Has it not happened? Is it not happening? Read what is happening in Syria and Myanmar and you will know ethnic cleansing is possible.

The Nigerian government had announced a free visa policy which enabled visitors from African countries, Economy Community of West African States, United Nations and African Union to enter Nigeria without first obtaining visa. The above text starts with a peculiar Nigerian expression “shine your face”, which means ‘be vigilant’. The author observes that the country now has “open borders” (to refer to government’s free visa policy) with *Egypt* (as strangers from distant places and with whom Nigeria has no “similar culture”). This is an innuendo to suggest that government’s visa policy has made the borders porous for any stranger to come in unchecked. The result is that *our security problem might increase, just like the Fulani invasion in the south west*. The reference to the Fulani invasion of south-west Nigeria is a direct reference to the security breaches in the area which had been attributed to the Fulani ethnic group and for which the federal government had proved inefficient in tackling. The warning is an indirect criticism of government and a warning for citizens to be watchful, especially regarding security.

Ethno-Religious Profiling

Hate speeches may also delve into ethnic/religious profiling. When some people are found to have committed malfeasance, the particular ethnic or religious group could be identified as the culprit in subsequent mentions of that and other crimes. Thus, in the following excerpt, the Fulani were accused of a crime. Since they are Muslims, both their race and the Islamic religion are profiled as culpable.

I venture north to Adnan, where Lyndia David, 34, tells her story of survival. On the morning of March 15, rumors reached her village that Fulani raiders were nearby.

The 2019 Global Terrorism Index estimates that Fulani extremists have become deadlier than Boko Haram and

accounted for the majority of the country's 2,040 documented terrorist fatalities in 2018 ...

On July 15, she says, Fulani extremists stormed into her village on long-saddle motorcycles, three to a bike, shouting 'Allahu Akbar!' They torched houses and killed her four children before her eyes.

In this text, "Lyndia David" is a Christian name. Contrarily, the Fulani are perceived as Muslims. This implies that Muslims killed a Christian. The Fulani are described as "extremists", which means they are criminal elements. The idea of extremists actually came from the expression *Islamic extremists*, which described Muslims fighting wars based on their faith, which people believed was to the extreme. The merger of the word *extremist* with *Fulani* becomes meaningful when the meaning of *Islamic extremist* is included. Hence, the Fulani are 'Islamic extremists that are Fulani'. This interpretation is confirmed in the choice of "Allahu Akbar", a term used by Muslims, in the third paragraph. 'Islamic extremists' is considered derogatory and hateful by Muslims, who believe they are practising their faith as advised in the Qur'an. This is religious profiling.

Many times, in the Nigerian media, the Fulani ethnic group has been fingered in criminal activities such as kidnapping and farmer-herder conflicts. Given the common occurrences of these, and possibly to rebuke the sitting Nigerian President who is Fulani (as at the time this chapter was written), that his tribesmen are the ones causing disaffection in the country and with his protection, many bad things are attributed to the Fulani, even when other ethnic groups commit the crimes. This is clearly ethnic profiling. Such profiling fails to show that not all Fulani or Muslims are criminals. And there are criminals in other ethnic groups and among adherents of other religions too.

Hate Speech with Spurious Claims

Sometimes, hate speech contains spurious claims supporting certain positions being put forward:

... The president of our country has halted all the secrets moves ... to forcefully islamize Nigeria, but the stern warning of Donald Trump has made him to subside his plans.

There will be a referandom in America that is intended to forcefully REMOVE Trump from being the president, REMOVE ALL the laws that protects the rights and privileges of Christians.

Who are the people behind this plot? It is the Gays, the Lesbians, the members of the New world order, the Illuminati together with IGNORANT Christians, but MASTERMINDED by Satan.

All the claims in this excerpt are spurious as there has been no proof or mention of them elsewhere. The word “Islamize” purports that Nigeria plans to establish Islam as a state religion, though government denies this.

There is also a purported “stern warning” of the Nigerian government by Donald Trump, the former American President, which prompted the Nigerian government to suspend “all the secret moves to forcefully islamize Nigeria.” Rumours are rife in Nigeria that world powers dictate to governments of developing countries. While this might be true with states that depend economically on the superpowers, world powers may not interfere in affairs which do not threaten their interests in a country.

The author also mentions a “referandom” (sic) to “remove” Trump from office forcefully and “remove all the laws that protects the rights and privileges of Christians.” This apparently contradictory claim shows a total lack of knowledge of how a democracy works. The power to make, amend or repeal (*remove*) laws lies with the parliament. Again, it is the government that conducts a referendum through its appointed agency. This error suggests that the author only attempts to cook up hate speech against the government of the day.

The mention of “Gays”, “lesbians”, “members of the New world order”, “the Illuminati”, “IGNORANT Christians” and “Satan” as the groups to conduct the referendum is further evidence of ignorance. The text contains no proof of *islamization*, *secret moves*,

stern warning and forceful removal of Trump (He finished his term successfully!). It is just to denigrate the Nigerian president.

Conclusion

The lexical items used in the sampled online hate speeches cut across several content word categories and appear to be the main purveyors of hate in different contexts. Authors use derogatory words to put victims down; commendatory words, to praise others; and neutral words, to present supposed facts and figures. Expectedly, derogatory terms dominate the text, thus influencing readers' perception of the victim.

Guided by the writer's interest and lexical choices, hate speech is designed to make a victim look bad. It may contain spurious claims, half-truths and outright falsehoods designed to confuse, misinform and convince readers to accept and act on the message. Given the perceived and seemingly negative views by some Nigerian citizens, the perceived hatred towards the sitting government is perhaps fuelled by hate speeches. Hence, hate speech is probably a major factor contributing primarily to disunity and insecurity in Nigeria. Therefore, readers of shared messages should exercise caution before forwarding messages which may be hate speech.

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Disinformation Campaigns against Zimbabwean Female Politicians on Twitter

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Abstract

Fake news and hate speech are part of disinformation campaigns that confront societies today. They are rampant in uncontrolled digital news environments and often spread on social media platforms through “likes” and “shares”. This study focuses on how the social media platform X formerly known as Twitter affords ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe to contribute to disinformation campaigns against female politicians. The chapter argues that the Zimbabwean Twitter space also known as “Zwitter” is a site for dark participation where female politicians are subjected to fake news, hate speech, personal attacks, public shaming, cyberstalking, intimidation, cyberbullying, gender trolling, ridiculing, sexual harassment and online misogyny. The use of indigenous African languages enables Twimbos – as Zimbabweans on Twitter are known, to express themselves more freely in languages of their choice. This contributes to Zwitter becoming a dark and ultra-conservative place for the expression of hate speech, fake news, deep-

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seated patriarchal beliefs, conservatism, and misogynist views about female politicians.

Keywords: *Disinformation, Twitter, Zimbabwe, politics, social media*

Introduction

In a healthy democracy access to accurate information about political processes such as elections and about politicians vying for public office is very critical. In Zimbabwe, there is often a spread of inaccurate and misleading information about opposition female politicians with the intention to deceive the masses. This disinformation manifests itself as fake news and hate speech spread on social media in particular Twitter. Digital technologies are the drivers of the current disinformation campaigns against female politicians in Zimbabwe because they have democratised content creation tools and dissemination platforms such as Twitter. Disinformation in the form of fake news and hate speech have appeal because it is seen as pleasurable and enjoyable. Fake news and hate speech are also itinerant and migratory because even when the content is removed, it may find expression elsewhere, possibly on the same platform under a different name or in different online spaces through 'likes' and 'shares'. This chapter views the Zimbabwean Twitter space also known as Zwitter as a site for disinformation campaigns that enables ordinary Zimbabwean Twitter users known as Twimbos to spread fake news and hate speech against female politicians. The chapter further argues that Twimbos often resort to their indigenous (vernacular) languages to express sexist comments that question the political acumen and suitability of female politicians for public positions. The use of indigenous African languages on Zwitter increases citizen participation and the number of political debates sometimes in dark ways that contribute to disinformation in the form of rampant fake news and hate speech. The study is anchored on the concept of disinformation and outlines how Zwitter functions as a platform for disinformation campaigns where female politicians are subjected to fake news, hate speech, personal attacks, public shaming, cyberstalking, intimidation, cyberbullying,

gender trolling, ridiculing sexual harassment, and online misogyny. It is a timely contribution to debates on gendered disinformation campaigns on female politicians in Africa.

Research Context

Zimbabwe can be regarded as an authoritarian state which is under a military junta that assumed power following the November 2017 *coup d'état* that disposed President Robert Mugabe. Mugabe had ruled the country for 37 years with a heavy hand since independence from British colonial rule in 1980. His successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa despite initially announcing a 'new dispensation' to signal a breakaway from past Mugabe dictatorial tendencies has largely retained the systems that sustained Mugabe, namely a captured judiciary, biased state media, draconian laws, repression, deep-rooted patronage networks involving traditional leaders, a corrupt political establishment, and a partisan security sector (Hlatywayo and Mangongera, 2020:6). The country has a monolithic and repressive media system, where the mainstream media of print and broadcasting are owned and controlled by the state through the Ministry of Media, Information and Broadcasting Services except for a few privately owned and digital native media outlets. The state media are blatantly biased and serve the narrow interests of the ruling political elites and state securocrats. Apart from their preoccupation with preserving the status quo, the state-controlled mainstream media serves as a propaganda tool that deliberately misinforms the public to keep the ruling ZANU PF party in power. Due to their bias, the state media have abandoned their public sphere mandate of being an open market for the exchange of ideas and information. Marginalised groups such as women and opposition politicians rarely receive positive coverage from the mainstream. As a result, dissenting and oppositional views often find expression in privately owned and alternative media spaces. Privately owned and alternative media operate under a repressive environment which makes it difficult for them to execute their public sphere and watchdog roles. This repressive environment

includes the selective application of draconian media laws aimed at muzzling media freedoms, physical harassment of journalists, the violation of their premises and equipment as well as the lack of access to inputs and audiences. An additional challenge of privately-owned media in Zimbabwe is that it is sometimes captured by powerful politicians who bribe journalists to have stories about them published. Women as newsmakers are usually excluded and marginalised by both the state and privately-owned media because of their peripheralised role in society as homemakers who must be seen but not heard. Ncube and Yemurai (2020:61) describe the deep-seated patriarchy in Zimbabwe as follows:

In traditionally patriarchal societies, the public space is the preserve of men. Given that politics is also performed in the public space, it therefore implies that it is the domain of man. Thus, a woman who decides to enter politics is not in her place. The place of the woman is the private space of the home.

Another challenge faced by female politicians as newsmakers is that they don't have the financial muscle to bribe journalists to cover their stories. In any event, if female politicians appear in mainstream media, they are often portrayed in a biased manner that feeds into prevailing gender stereotypes that link political leadership to men and honesty and compassion to women. This has forced some female politicians such as Linda Masarire of the opposition Labour Economists and Democracy (LEAD) party and Fadzai Mahere of the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDCA) party to resort to social media platforms for the expression of counterhegemonic discourses and political contestation. Social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook provide female politicians with rare opportunities to participate in public debates and to express opinions on controversial topics. Politicians use social media for the purpose of entering direct dialogue with citizens and encouraging more political discussions. Twitter is one of the most used social media platforms by politicians. Both female politicians under study use Twitter for everyday political expression and contestation. Although women can express themselves on Twitter,

there are challenges that limit them such as state surveillance, gendered digital divide, self-censorship due to patriarchy and the need to conform to societal expectations by not expressing radical politics and dissenting views. Female politicians also face online violence in the form of sexual harassment, unauthorised use and manipulation of personal information, including leaked images and videos. Female politicians increasingly face the challenge of disinformation that occurs in digital and online spaces that result in the spread of fake news and hate speech.

Disinformation Manifesting as Fake News and Hate Speech

One of the present societal challenges is information disorder. The ongoing information disorder can be characterised by a three-part typology advanced by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017): disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. *Disinformation* describes “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country”; *misinformation* is “information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm”; and *malinformation* is “factual information released to discredit or harm a person or institution, such as doxing, leaks, and certain kinds of hate speech” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017:20). According to Fallis (2009) disinformation is not new as it has been around for many years in the form of forged documents, doctored photographs, deceptive advertising, deliberately falsified maps, and government propaganda. For disinformation to occur there must be an intention to deceive and actual falsity, that is intentional spread of falsehoods. Bennet and Livingstone (2021) define disinformation as intentional falsehoods or distortions, often spread as news, to advance political goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis. In recent years disinformation has emerged as a subject of academic debate because it has become more rampant aided by the rise of digital technologies and social media platforms that make it easy to execute disinformation campaigns.

The chapter also deals to some extent with fake news and hate speech which are part of disinformation campaigns. Fake news can simply be defined as false or misleading information that appears to be news, spread on the Internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke. It is false information passed off as factual. Hate speech is part of disinformation which makes common slurs and vitriol previously contained in private spheres more visible and accessible (Udupa *et al.*, 2020:4). Hate speech employs discriminatory epithets to insult and stigmatise others based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other forms of group membership (Ogbonna and Okafo, 2020:204). Central to the study is an endeavour to demonstrate how disinformation against female politicians occurred on Zwitter in the form of fake news and hate speech.

Methodology

This study is primarily a case study that focuses on disinformation campaigns on Twitter against two prominent female opposition politicians in Zimbabwe, Fadzai Mahere and Linda Masarire. Digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis (CDA) were the main data collection and analysis methods. Digital ethnography sometimes referred to as 'online' or 'virtual' ethnography is conducted around the use of sites and services such as blogs, chatrooms, forums and news platforms (Hine, 2000). The virtual ethnography entailed observing the everyday participation behaviours of the two female politicians on Twitter specifically what they tweeted and how other tweeps responded to their content. Throughout the observation process, the researcher was on the look for false, deceitful, hostile and uncivil content that was tantamount to a disinformation campaign against the two female politicians under study. To obtain current data that yielded new findings, the observation process was a year from June 2020 to June 2021. Critical discourse analysis was deployed to analyse the corpus of conveniently sampled Tweets to discover themes and meanings. The model of CDA applied in this study was initially developed by van Dijk (1988) and subsequently

varied over the years to analyse discourses at the textual and contextual levels. For this study, a Tweet was considered a text. At the textual level, the analysis focused on Tweets to establish the use of grammatical devices that may have constituted disinformation. The contextual level analysis was concerned with the thematic issues emerging from the Tweets and their relationship with the socio-political, cultural, and economic conditions of existence in Zimbabwe.

Findings and Discussion

Before a detailed discussion of the findings is made, it is important to shed light as to who the two female politicians are and how they are perceived by Twimbos. The way and how they are regarded is important in determining the amount of disinformation they were subjected to. Both women have been subjected to disinformation campaigns with almost equal measure, although it may seem that Masarira is frequently targeted due to her socio-economic background and political preferences. Masarira, 39, had +60K followers on Twitter at the time of conducting the study. She is regarded by most Twimbos as a nymphomania and despicable political prostitute. She is seen as a political flip-flopper having served the founding Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) from 2001-2005, joining the splinter Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T) until 2008, serving the People's Democratic Party from 2014-2017, re-joining the MDC-T in January 2018 and subsequently fired to form her opposition party Labour Economists and Democracy (LEAD) in April 2019. Due to her controversial background, Masarira on numerous occasions has been a victim of disinformation campaigns on social media and various digital news sites. Masarira brands herself as a mother of five, trade unionist and gender activist. Despite this self-branding, Masarira is often a victim of disinformation campaigns on Zwitter because she is perceived to be unkempt, comes from the ghetto, is a known political flip-flopper, a self-confessed recovering alcoholic, and is amorous since she has five children from previously failed marriages.

By contrast, Mahere is seen by Twimbos as beautiful, single, smart and intelligent. Mahere brands herself as an intelligent and self-conscious beauty who puts career goals ahead of love, sex and marriage. Aged 35, at the time of this study, Mahere had +400K followers on Twitter. A lawyer by profession, she was the spokesperson for the biggest opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDCA). Before joining the MDCA, Mahere had contested the 2018 elections as an independent member of parliament. She comes from a rich spoilt background, that afforded her private school and later university law education at home and in the UK. Her overseas education makes her speak English with a British accent. Mahere is conscious of her beauty, dresses smartly, goes to the gym and is every man's crush on Zwitter. She is well-read and eloquent as she often tweets motivational and philosophical quotes. As an intellectual, her politics is well thought and refined. Although Mahere is prone to more positive reviews, she has not been spared of the disinformation campaign. Based on the above we already see how a Marxist class analysis can be useful to understand how Mahere and Masarira are treated on Twitter and the amount of disinformation campaign news they are likely to receive. In the discussion that follows, I first demonstrate how the two women used Twitter for political communication and then use a corpus of selected Tweets as anecdotal evidence to show the occurrence of disinformation against the two female politicians.

Twitter and Political Communication

In recent years, Zimbabwe has seen an increase in high-level government officials, including President Emmerson Mnangagwa, using social media to engage Zimbabweans on Facebook and Twitter, (Chitanana and Mutsvairo, 2019). Politicians use Twitter to increase their visibility, and sell their political ideas and party manifestos. As a tool for political communication, Twitter can be used by politicians in election campaigns and by citizens to share their opinions about candidates and their policies. The interactive features of Twitter enable politicians to reach out to and even

engage in reciprocal conversations with members of the public. Twitter is a political tool that helps construct new participatory forms of political engagement.

Both female politicians used Twitter as an everyday tool for communicating their political ideas. Mahere's content usually promoted the policies of the MDCA, as she was the party spokesperson. She used her handle to retweet MDCA official announcements and to increase the visibility of the party to her +400,000 followers. The MDCA party's manifesto and ideology rivals ZANU PF's nationalist ideology because it appeals to the urban working class and enunciates a vision for a better Zimbabwe founded on democratic principles. Mahere also retweeted counterhegemonic content from other like-minded opposition politicians and pro-democracy activists that exposed the ruling ZANU PF party and government's disregard of good governance, democracy and human rights. Her personal Twitter account was also used for self-branding, positioning herself as a thought leader and vibrant opposition politician determined to deliver a new Zimbabwe by exposing the ruling party's corrupt activities and other transgressions. How Twimbos responded to Mahere's content depended much on their political affiliation. In general ZANU PF supporters and propaganda armies deployed by the party on various social media platforms known as *Varakashi* (The Destroyers) received her tweets with disdain and responded with incivility and hostility. They argued that she was a beneficiary of ZANU PF policies as her father, a former civil servant managed to get her a good upbringing. In contrast, MDCA supporters warmed up to Mahere's content and enjoyed online interactions with her. To them Mahere was the face of the opposition and represented the party well largely because she was young, beautiful, smart and intelligent.

Similarly, Masarira used her Twitter account to post both personal political views and to retweet policy programs and events of her political party LEAD. Although LEAD is an opposition outfit, it is seen by MDCA supporters as an appendage of the ruling ZANU PF because its politics is sympathetic to the status quo and has some

similarities with ZANU PF's nationalist and black empowerment policies. LEAD advocates for democracy, equality, gender balance, women and girl child rights, and economic and political freedom and inclusion of marginalised groups. Masarira's soft spot for the ruling ZANU PF is sometimes seen in her tweets that endorse the status quo and her attendance to state functions and events where she mingles with ruling party bigwigs, allegedly receiving freebies at such events.

It is anticipated that any political discussion in the public sphere must be critical and rational. However, this study finds that Twimbos often responded to political content by the two women through delegitimation, infantilisation and shaming which constituted hate speech. Whenever Masarira announced LEAD policies using her Twitter account, she was always shamed or delegitimised. To illustrate this on June 23, 2021, Masarira changed her profile picture into a presidential campaign poster with her picture inscribed, "Nyika mukadzi, Musha Mukadzi, 2023 hutungamiri kuvanhu" translated to mean "a nation and a home are built by women, in 2023 people must lead." In response to this Twimbos engaged in uncivil and hostile attacks on her without engaging the content of her political message which underscored the need for women political leadership. Some Twimbos delegitimised her saying her political ambitions were delusional, asking who in their right senses would vote a "hure" – translated to mean a whore because she did not have a home for herself and was known for patronising bars drinking alcohol, preying on young men for sex. Some Twimbos vowed never to vote for Masarira in the upcoming 2023 presidential elections because the country cannot be led by a prostitute hence delegitimising her political ambitions using love, sex, and marriage. Because of her previous failed marriages, some Twimbos suggested that she starts by building a home for herself before thinking of leading the nation.

Another example of delegitimation using the case of Mahere would suffice. As of January 2021, Mahere signed off her tweets with the slogan "We need new leaders" aimed at mobilising

dissent against the ruling government and winning MDCA's new supporters. On June 29 she urged Zimbabweans not to normalise any form of abuse from ZANU PF such as wrongful imprisonment, poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, torture and violence, looting, corruption, illegal demolitions and incompetence. Instead of engaging with the content she had raised about poor governance some Twimbos attacked her at a personal level using marriage and love as frames of delegitimisation. A Twimbo @Tshaje2 questioned, "So even absence of husband needs new leadership here nhayiwe [are sure about this you] Fadzi." This unwarranted attack is tantamount to a disinformation campaign couched as hate speech that delegitimises Mahere's political contestations based on her marital status. Each time the two women posted political content on Twitter, Twimbos responded with comments that amounted to disinformation campaigns bordering on their physical looks, character and previous associations, leaks about personal love and sexual relationships, sordid family backgrounds or past experiences and failed love life.

Due to their youthfulness, it was easy for senior male politicians to infantilise both Mahere and Masarira. The presidential spokesperson, George Charamba who is known to be uncouth on Twitter especially against women perceived to be critical of the state nicknamed Mahere *nyembesi* translated to mean tears or used in reference to a crybaby. Although others including Mahere herself argued that *Nyembesi* was used in a context to mean hure in the Shona language which translates to a prostitute, Charamba refuted that he used the nickname to mean Mahere was a prostitute. What is worrying is why Charamba chose to give Mahere a nickname instead of addressing her formally using her birth name. The infantile nickname *Nyembesi* arose after Mahere consistently took to Twitter to decry government ineptitude in service delivery and a disregard for human rights. Charamba perceived Mahere's unrelenting cries for a better Zimbabwe as a form of weakness and dismissed her as an infantile crybaby who did not understand the complexity of Zimbabwe's crisis.

Disinformation Campaign Against Female Politicians on Zwitter

Both female politicians understudy were subjected to disinformation campaigns with varying degrees. The disinformation campaigns that both women suffered from sought to discourage their political activities by exposing their sordid past and maliciously prying on their present personal lives. In most cases, the frames of love, sex and marriage were used to fame the fake news and hate speech.

Mahere was largely subject to disinformation campaigns that portrayed her as having double standards. The disinformation alleged that while she publicly proclaimed her opposition to the ZANU PF maladministration, her lavish lifestyle was secretly being funded by ZANU PF top politicians who were also bedding her. Some Twimbos also accused Mahere of being a beneficiary of ZANU PF corruption through her former civil servant father. More often some Twimbos run a disinformation campaign that Mahere was in a secret love affair with her boss and MDCA party president, Nelson Chamisa who elevated her from being a political nonentity to the position of party spokesperson. It is possible that disinformation campaigns against Mahere came from ZANU PF sympathisers and propaganda armies on Zwitter known as *Varakishi* – The Destroyers who were purposively deployed to trash opposition politicians. The disinformation campaign on Mahere was meant to discredit her political prowess and her rise as one of the most powerful opposition politicians.

Disinformation campaigns against Masarira were peddled by MDCA sympathisers who were angry with her fallout with the MDC party and for forming her LEAD party. The disinformation on Masarira centred around her private and political life. The fact that Masarira had established an opposition party of herself annoyed most MDCA supporters who alleged that she was in the pay of the ZANU PF who funded her to establish LEAD so as to split the electoral vote in the 2023 elections. Masarira's LEAD was seen as sympathetic to the ruling ZANU PF. Disinformation campaigns often tried to reveal Masarira's poverty and struggle to get a decent

living through politics, her alcohol and drug abuse problem, her alleged failure to bath and dress appealing, and her sex and love life with young men leading to alleged illegal abortions.

Although both women were targets of disinformation campaigns, they were sometimes guilty of spreading fake news through their Twitter accounts. Mahere was on January 21, 2021 arrested on allegations of communicating false statements prejudicial to the state when she Tweeted that police in Harare had beaten to death an infant while enforcing COVID-19 lockdown rules. Mahere was initially charged with violating Section 31 of the Criminal Code which deals with publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state and was later freed on bail after spending a week in police cells. When Mahere announced her arrest on Twitter some users sympathised with her and others took the opportunity to express misogynist opinions that women were of loose morals, known liars and gossipers.

Another form of disinformation against female politicians manifested itself through hate speech. Presidential Spokesperson George Charamba through his Twitter handle @jamwanda2 used parody and satirical tweets to denigrate and delegitimise women perceived to be vocal against the state. Parody tweets are those that imitated or misrepresented female politicians usually in a humorous way. Satirical tweets use witty language to convey insults or scorn about female politicians especially saying one thing but implying the opposite. On June 22, 2021 @jamwandaa2 posted Mahere's picture and captured it, "The hair on your hair suits you." The satirical tweet at the surface level commended Mahere for her beautiful looks at the same time exposing her fakery by putting on artificial hair. When analysed in relation to the political context, the Tweet effectively dismissed Mahere as a fake politician with previous links to ZANU PF through her father.

Disinformation against the female politicians also spread on Zwitter through false connections. On Zwitter a disinformation campaign alleged Mahere and Nelson Chamisa were in a secret love affair. This emanated from the fact that Chamisa promoted Mahere to a senior position as the party spokesperson ahead of

other deserving candidates. Such disinformation campaigns had the potential to incite public hatred of Mahere as a marriage wrecker. This was particularly potent because Chamisa's wife maintained an unconvincing low public profile and the few public appearances she made left Chamisa's diehard followers thinking that she was not beautiful and impressive as Mahere. The disinformation targeted at Mahere was not always mischievous as some of her followers and MDCA supporters believed she was rightfully in love with Chamisa. Such followers genuinely wanted Mahere to be in a happy marriage with Chamisa projecting them as a power couple and Zimbabwe's first family in future. Disinformation against the female politicians also came in the form of misleading content. This type of content is when there was a misleading use of information to frame issues or individuals in certain ways by cropping photos or choosing quotes or statistics selectively. For example, Mahere and Chamisa's pictures wearing matching yellow outfits taken at different locations and dates were manipulated to suggest that the two were secretly meeting at plush hotels for sexual escapades and were expecting a baby.

Blurring the Private and the Public

Zwitter follows closely the political, economic and socio-cultural developments in the country such that it can be described as a site for democratic contestation where there is public deliberation of the most topical issues affecting the country. Most discussions that occur on Zwitter are assumed to be in the public interest or relate to the common good. Issues that are of a personal and private nature are often discouraged because they are thought to be self-serving and narcissistic. Both female politicians often suffered abuse on Zwitter when they posted issues that other users perceived to be private and not in the public interest. This contributed to the confusion about what constitutes a 'good' tweet and the blurring of the private and the public. Both female politicians were in the habit of posting personal photographs known as 'selfies' in private settings such as at home, the gym and the office. Although unintentional, the selfies exposed the women's aesthetic qualities directing

Twimbos to their bodies as objects of gaze. On each occasion when the women posted selfies, male followers always commented on the physical appearances of the women using highly charged sexual references. Posting selfies was perceived to be desperate attention-seeking hence their online presence was interpreted as a ploy to attract men. This was particularly true of the single Mahere as men always drooled on her looks and attempted to ‘take a shoot at her’, asking her out for a date. Mahere did get the attention she needed on Twitter as a suitor, Dr Lenon Gwaunza, a neurologist based in South Africa decided to ‘shoot his shot’ at her. The suitor convinced Zwitter to support his plea for a date with Mahere and some corporates pledged to pay for their date including the venue and meals. Zwitter was particularly excited about this romance as they thought Mahere had at least found a life partner and will concentrate on her love life away from politics on Twitter.

Although disinformation in the form of hate speech and fake news is bad, some female politicians like Masarira did not help to extricate themselves from the trap of this as their behaviour sometimes invited scorn especially when they posted content of a private nature such as weekend outings with lovers. For example, on June 28, 2021, Masarira posted pictures of herself and a newly found lover in a private outing declaring that she had found happiness, contentment and peace in her life. This would be celebration turned nasty as Twimbos body-shamed her by zooming into her pictures to make fun calling her all sorts of names while others said despite her ugly looks Masarira must have been too good in bed to entice young men.

In some instances, Masarira was also guilty of providing too much detail about her private life on a hostile platform as Zwitter. On July 5, 2021 she tweeted: “This morning after ... convincing my sugary ding ding to get vaccinated we went to Wilkins & Marlborough clinic & were told they have ran out of ... the #covid19 vaccine. Our last stop was Parirenyatwa Hospital & we were advised that they only have second dose.” Although raising vital points about the shortage of COVID-19 vaccines in Zimbabwe, Masarira attracted

scorn by mixing public interest issues with the private and personal. By referring to her lover as “sugary ding ding”, Twimbos attacked her with different forms of hate speech some calling her a “bitch” with unsatiable sexual desires. A user @PMZ21 responded harshly to Masarira’s tweet:

Chihure chenyu ichu! Munovaviwa panyo here panogara pachida kukwenyewa? [This is loose morality! Do you have itchy privates that need to be scratched all the time]. don’t fucken tell us abt sugary dind ding .. you filthy bitch! Have moral you sucker! For how long are you to continue fucking around like this? Are you teaching any of your subjects healthy living?

The user advances the disinformation against Masarira by saying she is a nymphomaniac. Masarira can be partly blamed for seeking relevance and justification on Twitter by posting her private affairs in the public sphere. She also played into patriarchal expectations that a woman of good standing is a married one hence she often tried too hard to impress Zwitter by posting content themed around love, marriage, family, and motherhood.

Conclusion

This chapter deployed the concept of disinformation to demonstrate how Twitter has led to the proliferation of hate speech and fake news against female politicians in Zimbabwe. Disinformation campaigns against female politicians in Zimbabwe are mainly peddled by men to silence and induce fear into female politicians so that they maintain low profiles on social media and steer clear of contentious politics. The use of indigenous African languages on Zwitter made it easy for Twimbos to engage in uncivil and hostile disinformation campaigns against the female politicians. The disinformation campaigns used themes of marital status, physical appearance vis-à-vis political competency, the political public vis-à-vis the domestic private, misogyny and cyber violence to delegitimise, infantilise and shame female politicians.

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Impact of Media Presentation of Herders' Attacks on Farmers on the Public Perception of Herders

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Abstract

The trend of herders' attacks on farmers and farming communities has taken a new dimension since about seven years in Nigeria. The frequency of the attacks has almost become a new normal leading to arson and killing of thousands of farmers and displacement of many more. However, the effect of the media presentation on public perception of herders is yet to be given adequate attention in literature. This study therefore focused on the influence of media presentation of the herders attack on farmers on public perception of herders.

The study adopted survey design and questionnaire as instruments. Three hundred and sixty-seven (367) questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Data were analysed using percentages and frequency

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tables. The study revealed adequate awareness of herders' attacks on farmers. Social media, mainstream media, interpersonal communication, religious organisations and international media were the sources of information about the attacks. The media presentation has negatively influenced the perception of the herders who are seen as terrorists, Boko Haram, aggressors, invaders, heartless, warmongers, violent, and inhumane while it portrayed the farmers as victims, helpless and unprotected.

The media effectively performed social responsibility and agenda-setting functions by providing adequate information on the attacks and by influencing public perception. Security agencies should be more proactive in their response to the attacks.

Keywords: *Herders attacks, farmers, violence, social media, media presentation.*

Introduction

Conflicts between nomadic cattle herders and farmers have grown in frequency over the years, becoming a common occurrence in most West African countries including Niger, Chad, Mali and Nigeria. These pastoralists and farmers' conflicts have had a negative impact on the prosperity of communities and nations affected by such attacks. The current herders-farmers clashes have a long-standing history with varying historical underpinnings. Land disputes between herdsmen and peasant farmers are not a recent phenomenon (Gursoy, 2021). However, over time, this conflict has evolved, becoming notably more violent and destructive since the early 21st century, as noted by Egbuta (2018).

The frequency has spread and intensified, in Nigeria in the past decade especially with the new dimension to the conflicts since 2015. It has become worrisome in recent times. In 2016 it entered a perilous state as the conflict has begun to threaten the national cohesion of Nigeria as it has been linked to poverty, migration and religious groups (Egbuta, 2018; Nwankwo *et al.*, 2020). It becomes more worrisome as different actors have been identified among whom are the nomadic Fulani herders and the farmers as primary

actors and government, security agents, politicians and others as secondary and pseudo parties. All these parties have added another dimension to the clashes, and this has generated much agitation among concerned Nigerians (Gursoy, 2019). Government and security agencies claim to be working, condemning those gruesome attacks and mindless killing of innocent souls of Nigerians. Yet, the conflicts have continued unabated. Pastoralists who are mainly of the Fulani ethnic stock have repeatedly attacked farming communities and farmlands not only in the north but also in the southern region. They have also been accused of armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, rape as well as ethnic cleansing. The consequences of such attacks include reprisal as well as increasing agitation for secession by the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) in the south-east and calls for Oduduwa Republic by some Yoruba groups in the south-west of Nigeria.

Since we live in a media-influenced society, the coverage of issues or their framing by the media usually redefines and influences public perception of events. Essentially, the media can shape opinion and set an agenda for peace and conflict, cultural promotion, development and political mobilisation. With the available information gleaned from the mass media the public forms perceptions of herders-farmers conflict or the increasing attacks on farming communities by herders. Such opinions range from the perception of the conflict or attack itself, the attackers or herders, the attacked or farmers, the handlers of the conflict, security agencies, government and others. The reason is that the selection, framing, and reporting of news, particularly in relation to conflicts, hold the potential to shape public perceptions and opinions on these matters. The media plays a crucial role in setting the agenda, which can exert both direct and indirect influence on the course of a conflict (Olomojobi and Ajilore, 2018). Therefore, Gilboa's argument for prioritizing the study of the media's functions in the context of conflict is well-founded (Gilboa, 2009). This is because media framing affects perceptions in conflict situations. The perception may be positive, negative or neutral. The essence of

the study therefore was to interrogate the impact of the coverage of the attacks on farmers by the herders on public perception of the herders. The study is a segmented review of relevant literature, methodology, findings and conclusions.

Literature Review

The herders-farmers' conflict in Nigeria has generated a renewed academic discussion as many academic interests have been concentrated on it. The conflict has been considered from various angles such as illiteracy, underdevelopment, ethnoreligious factor, being politically motivated among others (Gursoy 2019; Odiegwu-Enwerem, Oso and Amodu 2020; Lynch 2008; Kempf, 2007; and Lynch & McGoldrick 2005).

Tracing the violent conflict from the year 2020, Gursoy (2020:14) accounts that it has led to the death "of thousands of Nigerians. The total number of casualties cannot be ascertained because there were many dead bodies found in the bushes." This is possible because of the proliferation of arms which has constantly increased the armament of non-state actors. Genyi (2017) contends that attacks by Fulani herdsmen with weapons on villages with weapons started about two decades ago. For him, this is why the traditional negotiation mechanism is no longer effective in resolving the conflict. It is thus advised that sincere efforts be made by the government and concerned agencies to prevent the proliferation of small arms into the country.

Having researched the attacks extensively, Amnesty International (AI) created a well-detailed account with the data they gathered from the study conducted. From the interviews with the victims of the attacks, it was revealed that the conflict has escalated into deadly violence. Their result showed that the farmers who were hitherto the main victims of conflict have also begun to retaliate against Fulani and as a result, both sides have suffered from the attacks and the response from the government is grossly inadequate. According to the report, "there were incidents of 312 attacks and reprisal attacks in 22 states and the FCT between January 2016 and October

2018. It is estimated that not less than 3,641 people might have been killed, 406 injured, 5,000 houses burnt and 182,530 people displaced as a result of the attacks” (Amnesty International 2018). The study conducted by Nwankwo *et al.* (2020) sheds light on the dual victimisation experienced by both farmers and herders, though with a higher casualty rate among the former. This aligns with the narrative of victimhood as investigated by Tade and Yikwabs (2019), who found that farmers suffered losses due to attacks by herders, while herders also perceived themselves as victims. Nwankwo *et al.* (2020:203) further elucidated that the discourse in newspapers predominantly focused on the incidents, emphasising the roles of both the attacked and the attacker. The authors emphasised that the media tends to highlight crimes associated with these conflicts, often adopting an apocalyptic tone in their headlines.

These include *herdsmen killing, killer herdsmen, herdsmen attacks, killing by herdsmen, and herdsmen destroyed, herdsmen/farmers’ crises* mostly in the southern newspapers while on the other hand, some kind of reversed captions were found in northern newspapers. All of these were done to create an impression in the mind of the people depending on which section of the country or ethnic group the newspaper is published from. This confirms position of the Jibo (2003) and Nnabuihe (2015) on sectional media representing ethnic biases in Nigeria.

Olomjobi and Ajilore (2018:38) astutely observe that the long-standing clashes between pastoralists and peasant farmers in Nigeria, termed internal conflict, have recently surged in frequency, garnering substantial media attention. They highlight the significant role of the media in conflict scenarios, emphasising their potential to influence the trajectory of a conflict, public opinion, and comprehension of the underlying issues. Duan and Takahashi (2016) further assert that media presentations and commentaries regarding conflicts can shape both positive and negative perceptions among the populace, consequently moulding their stance towards the conflict. In the realm of conflict reporting, the media wields the power to play either constructive or detrimental roles. They possess the capacity to incite or exacerbate conflicts, while also holding

the potential to contribute to their amelioration and resolution (Olomjobi and Ajilore, 2018:38).

Having considered the observations of Skorup (2017 & 2018) and McQuail (2010), Odiegwu-Enwerem *et al.* (2020:283) observe that:

Despite regulations and controls on the media, there still exists distorted messages and emotionally charged content, whether positive or negative. Much of this content is driven by the need to attract readership and sell newspaper copies. This highlights the tension between journalistic responsibility and the commercial aspects of the media industry.

Accordingly, scholars such as Odunlami (2017), Isola (2015), Albert (2015) Omenugha, Uzuegbunan & Omenughaa (2013) among others have also accused the media of instigating and escalating conflicts and sustaining violence through sensationalism, promoting prejudicial stereotypes about groups and individuals and other provocative presentations. Nnabuihe (2015) and Sonwalkar (2004) add that the presence of a socio-cultural binary in media coverage of conflicts, where delineations between 'us' and 'them' or 'we' and 'they' are starkly pronounced. This reality is echoed by Olomjobi and Ajilore (2018), who highlight that this often leads to news coverage being tinged with ethnic biases. Unfortunately, such bias has the potential to fuel the escalation of conflicts rather than promote resolution. This underscores the crucial role the media plays in shaping perceptions and attitudes in conflict situations.

It is therefore good to note that the media reserves the power, through their contents' presentations to shape the opinion and perception of the members of the public about the herders'. Therefore, the media reportage of the herders-farmers conflict can aid the de-escalation or escalation of the conflict fuelled by public perception of the herders.

Media and Conflicts

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human existence and different conflict situations require different media/system of communication.

Each conflict situation has unique characteristics which influence both the communication channel employed and the response to information communicated through the channel (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Effective information management is based primarily on truth which is also a core value of the journalism profession (Adeyeye *et al.* 2013), bringing parties to negotiations is based on truth and balanced reporting which further enhances the trust of the parties to the conflict. The implication of this is that these functions and other functions are performed by the media under different circumstances.

Relying on the conciliatory power of the media, Obianyo (2007) observes that since the birth of Nigeria as a nation, the Nigerian press has been immersed in the twin struggle of maintaining Nigeria's corporate existence and building an integrated nation by playing mediating role in political conflict. Hence, it can be argued that the mass media play significant roles in peace building and conflict negotiation, considering their importance in information dissemination (Anyadike, 2009). It is on this note Reuben (2009:46) argues that, "the media, with their power to disseminate messages and information mass audiences at the same time, possess a unique ability to escalate or deescalate conflict, that is, to influence a dispute along different proportions and stages."

The media's approach to conflict reportage is indeed a nuanced one. Reuben (2009) rightly points out that journalists consider various factors to gauge the newsworthiness of a conflict, including the individuals involved, the scale of damage, and the relevance to the audience. Apuke and Omar (2021) further expound on this, emphasising the role of factors like low prominence, lack of objectivity, use of negative language, and framing in shaping media coverage of conflicts. The consideration of the public's perspective in conflict reporting may stem from economic considerations, as suggested by Udoakah (2006) in Olomajobi and Ajilore (2018). This indicates that media organisations may weigh the potential benefits against the costs in determining their approach to conflict coverage.

Examination of the antecedents of the media in relation to conflict in Nigeria revealed evidence of political and electoral

violence, and religious and ethnic crises among other conflicting relations (Amenaghawon, 2016; Ishola 2015, 2010; Albert 2015; Adedayo and Agbaje 2011; and Jibo, 2003) found that the media were 'sensational' and 'explosive' in their coverage of many national conflicts thereby contributing to the escalation of such conflicts into full-scale violence or war. There were reported scales of violence and political and/or religious crises between the Christians and Muslims on one side and the north and south on the other. These often play out in the nation's politics and are usually amplified by the mass media, and have further polarised the Nigeria press along ethnic lines (Jibo, 2003) as a split still exists in the media along the north-south ethnic/geopolitical divide (Onwuneli and Olimma, 2016). Ishola (2010) has also argued that the history of the Nigerian press is intertwined with conflict and adds that irresponsible reporting by the media partly contributed to the circumstances that led to the collapse of the first and second republics in Nigeria. Again, in their study of the *television news perspective of conflict reporting*, Akpoghiran and Otite (2012) report that the audience does not believe that NTA's news coverage on conflict possess any serious impact of national unity.

The findings Onwuneli and Olimma (2015) do not entirely agree with some studies that accuse Nigerian media of exacerbating conflicts. They conducted a study on the coverage of the 1988 religious riots in Zaria, Kaduna State and found that the media were not as 'sensational' and 'explosive' in their reporting of the crises as suggested by previous research. This contradicts the analysis of the framing of the bombing of Saint Theresa's Catholic Church in the *Daily Trust* and *The Guardian* newspapers Amenaghawon's (2015). This shows that there can be variations in media behaviour and responsibility depending on the specific context and time period.

Statement of the Problem

Pastoralist-farmers conflict in Nigeria has continued over the decades unabated such that it has resulted into the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of property worth billions of dollars culminating in collateral economic damages as many farm

settlements have been taken over by herders, and farmers were driven away from their farms. A worrisome pattern is the increasing attacks by those labelled as Fulani herders on farmers and farming communities in different regions of Nigeria. Fifty-seven per cent of the death occurred in 2018 alone, precisely between January and October 2018, while 21% occurred in 2017 and 22% in 2016 (Amnesty International, 2018).

The continued escalation of violent conflicts has spurred a renewed scholarly focus on how this conflict can be perceived and resolved. This indicates a growing academic interest in understanding and finding solutions to the intensifying violence. As concerned Nigerians have continued to consider the magnitude and consequences of the matter, much of the scholarly attention has essentially been concentrated on the causes and course of the conflict, economic effects and security implications, the effect on national integration, media coverage of the conflict, the framing pattern in the media and such related areas (Gursoy 2020; Odiegwu-Enwerem *et al.*, 2020; Oboh, 2016), while the implication of the media presentation of conflict on the public perception of the conflict has not been adequately explored in the literature. In order to fill this gap, this study investigated the impact of media coverage of herders' attacks on farmers on the public perception of herders.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed at studying the impact of media presentation of herders' attacks on farmers on the public perception of the herder. The specific objectives were the following:

- (i) To find out the sources of information about herders' attacks on farmers to the members of the public.
- (ii) To study the impact of the information about herders' attacks on farmers on the perception of the herders.
- (iii) To study the impact of the information about herders' attacks on farmers on the perception of the farmers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theories of social responsibility and agenda-setting in media. The social responsibility theory asserts that the press should have the freedom to carry out its functions, as granted by the libertarian theory. However, it emphasises that this freedom should be exercised with a sense of responsibility and self-regulation (Uzuegbunam, 2021; Baran and Davis, 2003). This implies that while the press enjoys freedom, it also carries an obligation to act ethically and in the best interests of society. The paramount duty of the media operating under this theory is to perform its basic societal responsibility of providing information, education, enlightenment, serving as a watchdog, advertising, entertainment, and self-sufficiency (Uzuegbunam, 2021). This is consistent with the position Bittner (2003) holds that “a press has the right to criticize government and institutions but also has certain basic duties of maintaining the peace and stability of the society.” It is therefore expected that news media should be responsible in their presentations since whatever is presented in the media will go a long way moulding the opinion and perceptions of their audience – positively or negatively.

The agenda-setting theory attempts to make predictions that the media has a great influence on their audience by inculcating what the audience should think about, rather than what they think. The thesis of the agenda-setting hypothesis developed from earlier studies that examined the media effect on mass media audiences (Wimmer and Dominic, 2003). Lipman (1922) pioneered the investigation of how the media as social forces create images and pictures in the heads and minds of the audience. The thesis of the theory is that if a particular story is given much prominence and is frequently reported, the audience will tend to attach more significance to it. Scholars such as Semiu (2015), Ishola (2010), McQuail (2010), Wanta and Ghanem (2006) and Lang & Lang (1966) have observed mass media as a powerful institution that forces attention to certain issues by creating an image of an object

or event, suggesting what individuals in the mass media should think about, know about and have feelings about. The salience of issues in news content will determine the public perceptions of the most important issue, and then analyse the extent of influence by guidance of the media. Therefore, the perspective in which journalists and members of the public employ to think about each object is central to the news agenda and its daily set of objects-issues, personalities and events. As a result, the public perception of herders can be greatly influenced by the media placement and emphasis on the conflict.

Methodology

The design adopted for the study was a survey. A questionnaire was the instrument used. Three hundred and twenty-seven copies of the questionnaire were distributed among respondents. The population for the study included users of radio, television, newspapers and social media: Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp. These were members of the public who were neither farmers nor herdsman but who had adequate information about herders' attacks on farmers and had formed opinions based on the information they received from the media about the conflict. A total of 327 of the population who were residents of Oyo State were sampled using purposive and simple random samplings. The data generated were analysed using percentage tables and frequency counts.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in the tables below according to the research objectives.

Objective 1

Sources of information about herders' attacks on farmers.

Table 11.1: Extent of awareness of herders-farmers conflict

	Frequency	Per cent
Very great extent	65	19.9
Great extent	148	45.3
Little extent	94	28.7
Very little extent	14	4.3
No extent	4	1.2
Missing	2	.6
Total	327	100.0

From Table 11.1 above, it is evident that the respondents were much aware of the herder-farmers clashes as most of the respondents indicated that they were aware of the clashes between herdsmen and farmers. The implication is that the extent of awareness of the attacks and how it is framed by the media would shape public perception of the parties in the conflict.

Table 11.2: Sources of information on the herders-farmers' attacks

	Frequency	Per cent
Interpersonal Communication	44	13.5
Social Media	145	44.3
Mass Media	104	31.8
Religious Group	25	7.6
International Media	7	2.1
Missing	2	.6
Total	327	100.0

Results from Table 11.2 indicate that a majority of the respondents got to know about the herders-farmers clashes mainly through social media and mass media. Therefore the way these platforms present the various occurrences of attacks can determine the views the public would have of the herders or the farmers.

Objective 2

The impact of the information about herders' attacks on farmers on the perception of the herders.

Table 11.3: Opinion on portrayal of herders by the media

	Frequency	Percent
Victims	9	2.8
Terrorists	180	55.0
Aggressors	59	18.0
Foreign invaders	40	12.2
Herdsmen	36	11.0
Others	1	.3
Missing	2	.6
Total	327	100.0

The results above substantially depict the herdsmen as terrorists, aggressors and foreign invaders. The implication of this is that herdsmen are seen by a vast majority of the public as marauders and callous killers of harmless farmers.

Table 11.4: Perception of herders after reading/listening to media representation

	Frequency	Per cent
Boko Haram	187	57.2
Foreigners who terrorise	11	3.4
Heartless and inconsiderate	28	8.6
Inhuman and aggressive	40	12.2
Violent set of individuals	8	2.4
Warmongers	30	9.2
Others	21	6.4
Missing	2	0.6
Total	327	100.0

Having read or listened to the presentation of the herders in the media, as indicated in Table 11.4, that herders have been perceived by the media audience as Boko Haram, foreign invaders, terrorists, heartless and inconsiderate of the plight of others, inhuman and aggressive beings, beasts and warmongers. This has gone to show that the herders do not enjoy the sympathy of the respondents and as such lack the sympathy of most of the populace.

Objective 3

The impact of the information about herders' attacks on farmers on perception of the farmers

Table 11.5: Whether representation of herdsmen-farmers attacks' affected perception of farmers

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	87	26.6
No	149	45.6
Undecided	73	22.3
Missing	18	5.5
Total	327	100.0

As seen in Table 11.5, the presentation of the herders-farmers attacks in the media did not affect the perception of many of the respondents about farmers.

Discussion

Findings of this study showed that members of the public have adequate information about herders' attacks on farmers because the media gave extensive coverage of the attacks. This was possible because the attacks got adequate space in the media through which the people were informed about the conflict. There was a clear slant of the perception of the herders as the aggressors and attackers, resulting from respondents' engagement with the contents of the media. Therefore, the media in Nigeria perhaps reflecting the aggressive or unhindered attacks of farming communities by herders have mostly labelled the mainly Fulani-herders as attackers of helpless farmers.

Most of the information about the attacks were obtained through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter and WhatsApp. This finding reflects the increasing dependence of the public on social media platforms for news on local and international occurrences. The challenge however is that a majority of the public do not use fake news checkers to identify fake news, misinformation, facts and infodemics. Also, the preference for social media ahead of mainstream media such as newspapers, radio and television

as sources of information on the herders-farmers conflict or what is more aptly viewed as herders' attacks on farmers have myriad implications. It reflects the dwindling influence of traditional media on public perception, an increase in the channels through which the public receives news and other contents and a higher number of citizens in the country.

The presentation of the herders' attacks on farmers in the media has greatly tainted the image of the herders as they were seen by vast majority of the members of the public as terrorists, callous, invaders, oppressors, intimidators, Boko Haram, heartless, inconsiderate, inhuman, beast, violent set of individuals, warmongers, fluid traitors and violent among other grave images. This is a buttress to the findings of earlier studies that the armed herders and foreign Fulani attackers, with illegal armaments, often carry out deadly attacks on the local people (Ayadiuno *et al.*, 2020; Gursoy, 2019; Egbuta, 2018; and Nwankwo *et al.*, 2020), and that the invaders do not always return to where they came from but rather occupy the lands of the local farmers they attacked and killed (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, the farmers are not presented in the media in a manner capable of tainting their image. Rather, they are presented with sympathetic expressions as they are often considered to have been compromised by government and security agencies. This is a buttress to the fact that Nigerian government did not show any serious commitment to curbing the attacks (Olomajobi and Ajilore, 2018) and that 'the weak security mechanism' in Nigeria is not able to prevent attacks between conflicting groups. As a result of the media presentation, the farmers enjoy public sympathy against the Fulani herdsman.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that the media performed a social responsibility role of informing the public and giving adequate coverage of matters of public importance. As such, the media greatly impacted the perception of the people on herders/farmers' attacks on farmers by setting the agenda through their presentation of the

conflict. Also, it is clear from the findings that social media have risen to prominence as a platform that shapes public perception of issues. Aside from providing empirical data on the impact of the portrayal of herders attacks on farmers on public perception of the herders, this study will serve as a precursor for further studies on the implication of media presentation of the conflict on the public perception of farmers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- (i) Further studies can be carried out to compare the public perception of the herder-farmers conflicts across the various regions in the country.
- (ii) Security agencies should be more pro-active in their response to the attacks and other security issues in the country.
- (iii) Journalists should be trained on conflict-sensitive journalism to further aid them in providing early warning signs of conflict, and how to deescalate conflict through objective reportage.

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SECTION IV

Education and Civil Societies

Fake News and Media Literacy-Perceptions of Selected WhatsApp Users in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

The recurrent relay of fake news and the resultant information crisis is fast approaching an epidemic status in Nigeria. Daily, the number of people with access to mobile media is growing and this cuts across social and demographic variables. The use of the mobile device for networking and information sharing is fast surpassing its use for the basic telephony for which it was originally conceived. In fact, many network providers are now more focused on selling data than airtime. News sources and news dimensions have morphed into monumental dimensions. This growth has equally led to information hybrid and the feverish desire to click and share. Many times, people have been victims of unchecked, unverified, unsubstantiated and deliberately manipulated

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news. Pictures and identities of individuals have been connected to fake news and screenshots of parody institutional accounts have been falsely used for information dissemination. This paper chronicles the perceptions of selected WhatsApp users from the University of Ibadan on the phenomena of fake news and media literacy. Researchers gathered quantitative and qualitative data using surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Findings show that respondents have a high level of awareness of what constitutes fake news but a low level of media literacy. The study advocates for more government involvement through policy formulation and concerted efforts by all stakeholders especially teachers and media practitioners to entrench media literacy and avoid crises as a result of misinformation via social media.

Keywords: *Fake news, media literacy, information, WhatsApp*

Introduction

More than ever before, globally, the term fake news is in greater use and has become a cause of much concern. This development is further eroding an already weakening trust in the media (Kestler-D'Amours, 2017). In the fast-advancing era of personally mediated society, the spread of fake news is fast and wide. The discussion about 'fake news on social media' is a regular feature among scholars and laymen alike. As much as these discussions are going on unabated, the exchange of misinformation, disinformation, biased information and outright lies still occurs daily with far reaching effects. Fake news has been a constant and often central element of the political communication dynamics. For instance, the role fake news played in the 2016 American election is one issue that generated so much focus among scholars and critics especially with the fear that exposure to fake news may have had an effect on the final outcome of the election (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017:212). Facebook and Google have come under serious attack for promoting the spread of fake news. Social media is ablaze with lots of misrepresentation, misstatement, concealment of information, and inaccurate information, all of which have caused confusion about current issues and events.

As it appears, ‘incongruously, the information age has simultaneously given us the misinformation age’ (Pierre, Treen and Pitt, 2018). It would seem that the more information people have access to, the more misinformation they are exposed to. The information sources are vast and hordes of messages are churned. In addition, dissemination is just one click away and thus ensues an unending process of sending and receiving. The development and evolution of fake news are matters of everyday public concern especially as its impact on knowledge, attitude and action are immeasurable. One worrisome aspect of the discourse is the tendency to daily see comments in WhatsApp groups debunking information which had earlier been. Many times, WhatsApp group members call out fellow members to question the authenticity of their forwarded posts.

The spread of fake news has been associated with the growing use of technology especially the upsurge in the use of social media by both literates, half-literates and illiterates. Fake news as it has been discussed recently (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Shane, 2017) seems “to have gained an unprecedented level of prominence through the rise of social media.” To some others, the increase in dissemination of fake news springs from a combination of political, technological and cultural trends. Anyone with a mobile technological apparatus can become an information source. Social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, have further influenced the way news is disseminated and consumed. Facebook users can upload or share content without either checking their sources or verifying the links provided by others. Any user can upload anything with no editorial check for inaccuracy (Nathan, 2017). This dynamic nature of social media and the fact that virtually everyone who has access to a device can post information promotes social media’s suitability for peddling misinformation. Thus, like Tambuscio, Ruffo, Flammin & Menczer (2015), submit, “although social media have facilitated and diversified knowledge diffusion processes, they offer fertile ground for the creation and propagation of misinformation.”

The term fake news has been defined from different perspectives and this is not surprising considering the current level of debate

surrounding the phenomenon. To McNair (2018), it refers to news and information of all kinds, unsubstantiated rumours, malicious gossip and other forms of fact-based content which is fake or in some way deemed to be other than true. Furthermore, Lazer *et al.* (2018: 1094) define fake news as: "... fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent." So, "fake news, in its present form, consists primarily of highly salient (if implausible) fabricated claims that are created to spread on social media. A common tactic among fake news creators is to use highly partisan political content to drive engagement" (Pennycook and Rand, 2018). The purveyors of fake news attempt to lace the information with some baits by injecting some truths or half-truths or half lies and by focusing on newsworthy subjects like politics, health, economy or celebrities. Unfortunately, many people get hooked by the flashy headlines and click to share before digesting or critically appraising the information.

The studies suggest a notable trend: individuals exposed to a combination of high levels of fake news and hard news tend to perceive the fake news as more realistic and authentic compared to those who are exposed solely to high levels of either fake or hard news. This finding underscores the complex interaction between exposure to different types of news content and the perception of authenticity and realism (Conroy *et al.*, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2015). In another study, findings indicated that Facebook engagement (likes, comments, shares) was actually greater for the top 20 fake news stories than the top 20 real news stories in the three months leading up to the American Presidential election of 2016 (Silverman *et al.*, 2016). This is one way to explain the word 'post-truth'. The Oxford Dictionary (1995) declared 'post-truth' as the word of the year in 2016 and defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." This is of concern as it is becoming imperative for psychologists to develop an explanation for the factors that make people more prone to believing fake news.

The situation is further compounded by the observation of passivity or predominant poor news literacy or media literacy culture where “many people do not update their beliefs when presented with corrective information that runs counter to their pre-disposition” (Cook, Ecker and Lewandowsky, 2015). This has implications for the receiver going by the underpinnings of the framing theory and considering what their existing frames are. Thus, looking at Fairhurst and Sarr’s (1996) three elements of framing: language, thought and forethoughts, what elements of the news influence people’s perception of the ‘truthiness’ of the news? How many of the receivers are aware that a lot of the information that is daily presented to them as facts is not true? Like Damico and Panos (2016:275) opine, “we are daily inundated with streams of information, much of it unvetted and we know that these streams are imbued with the agendas, purposes and values of authors, agencies or sponsors.”

If unchecked, fake news may cause confusion in the fact checking process and eventually undermine an informed citizenry (Jang and Kim, 2018). A study showed that 88% of Americans said that fake news has caused confusion about the basic facts of current events and a quarter of them reported that they have shared fake political news online. In another survey, 31% of the respondents admitted that they had in the past shared fake news without knowing. Even young people who are known to be very active online may not be astute when it comes to their ability to detect fake news. Clearly, saying one can detect fake news is not exactly proof of one’s ability and it appears more people are being taken in because they really lack the ability to tell fake from real news. The question arises, what then should be the role of the fifth estate? One can acknowledge that this is manifested as the public capacity to build reality through re-producing the ideologies prevailing in society that were promoted by the mass media. The social class has the capacity to use their different classes and positions to monitor the work of the media. If this is done properly, they can determine what

is permitted by cyberspace in terms of powerful digital abilities in promotion, communication and interaction.

Moreover, one wonders what other efforts are in place to check the spread of fake news on social media. Since there is currently no specific mechanism for dealing with fake news stories spread online through social media, different organisations apply different methods to safeguard their credibility. It has been reported that social media and web search industries are already taking steps to reduce the prevalence of fake news in peoples' feeds (Dutton, 2016). Facebook formed an official task force to work on the problem of fake news as they and Google came under serious attack for providing platforms for the malaise. For instance, since March 2017, Facebook has begun showing pop-up warnings to users when they are about to read or share content that comes from a site thought to produce fake news (Hunt, 2015). Other efforts made at detecting fake news include the development of algorithms and fact checkers.

Methodology

This study applied the purposive sampling technique in the initial selection of the respondents for the study. Only respondents who understand fake news and who are active users of WhatsApp were selected. In addition, a convenience sample was drawn from among students of the University of Ibadan. A total of 550 copies of the questionnaire were administered and only 500 of the returned copies were validated fit for analysis. The questionnaire had sections which featured both close and open-ended questions covering demographic and psychographic variables related to the study. Quantitative data was analysed using frequency distribution, simple percentages, correlation analysis and one-way ANOVA using the SPSS 15.0 software. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Two professionals were interviewed on a one-on-one basis. They were: Mr Maxwell Adeniyi, head of the Online Unit of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN); and Wale Oni, a social media critic. The structured interview guide featured 8 items.

Results and Discussion

The study attempted to answer two research questions. The first question sought to establish the perception of fake news among WhatsApp users.

What is the perception of fake news among WhatsApp users

Table 12.1: Themes and patterns common in fake news/information on WhatsApp

Themes/Patterns	Frequency	Per cent
Politics	174	34.8
Religion	131	26.2
Scandal about Celebrities	53	10.6
Health	34	6.8
Ethnic Crises	67	13.4
Stranger than fiction stories	14	2.8
Economic News	27	5.4
Total	500	100.0

To answer the question on respondents' awareness of fake news on WhatsApp, as depicted in Table 12.1, more than 95% of the respondents acquiesced to the fact that they are aware of the preponderance of fake news on WhatsApp. Respondents strongly agreed with the notion that fake news causes confusion about relevant issues and events. Almost all the respondents (98%) were in support of the statement that fake news influenced people's attitudes. The researchers followed up this question by seeking to know the perception of the respondents about the themes that are common to fake news. To Maxwell Oyekunle, the Online News Editor of FRCN, the average Nigerian is concerned about happenings around him both in the country and beyond. They are mostly concerned about news from the world of politics, sports and of course, news about crimes and absurdities going on in the nation and the world at large.

Majority of the FGD participants slightly differ from the view of the respondents to the questionnaire on the commonest theme of fake news. The FGD participants chose religion and politics. Aside from religion, 14 respondents noted that they have received

a lot of fake health news and political news. Only 5 out of the 22 participants said that they had seen fake news about ethnic crises and celebrity scandals, while 2 of the discussants admitted that they had received fake news on the economy.

K (Male.UG): ... yes Religious news, then health like the case with Ebola, when one good Nigerian girl posted that we all should add salt into our bathing water. This news spread eh and every parent made sure their children did it.

A (Female UG): ... news that Linda Ikeji's pregnancy was fake for a moment filled the air and everybody was carrying it on their heads.

On the issue of attribution of fake news to credible sources like opinion leaders or in some instances unpopular elements in the society, the majority of the respondents admit that they had fallen victims before. Most people are equally aware that having a name attached to a post is not sufficient proof of the authenticity of the information. Respondents gave many reasons for these false attributions. To some, it is to catch the attention of the reader, for others, it's for credibility. Some others believe that stories are falsely attributed to some people with the aim to slander or dent their image. The Online Editor of FRCN observed that the purveyors of fake news always have a need to create a false sense of authenticity, to give their story or opinion a 'strong' influence factor. As a result, they are left with no choice but to invoke the name of a person they see as a credible source. To Wale Oni, this false attribution is done to seek legitimisation for the disinformation contained in the news. Quotations and attributions are hallmarks of journalistic reports, so they tend to mimic media legacy as closely as possible in order to add legitimacy.

It is not surprising that scandals and false stories about celebrities feature in the list of the most popular themes of fake news. As a result, the concept of character assassination is defined as the deliberate targeting of an individual's private life, behaviour, values, and identity with the intention to cause harm. This often involves the distortion of personal information and the publicizing of private matters. Additionally, achievements and success records

may be questioned or cast in a negative light (Icks and Shiraev, 2014). This practice can have severe consequences for the reputation and well-being of the targeted individual.

Celebrities and politicians are easy targets of fake news on social media. Findings from the FGD show that all the participants agree that while there is so much fake news on social media in general (Facebook, Instagram), WhatsApp is the most fertile ground. As one of the participants said:

J (Female): For me ooo (sic), I see more fake news on WhatsApp. Some in form of BCs, other will just be news headline and other headlines with links that will direct you to the site of the news.

The respondents all agreed that fake news spread on WhatsApp or any other media can be very dangerous. Some of the dangers highlighted by the respondents are political crisis, civil unrest, confusion, religious incitement, selfish interest, financial profit, tribal conflict, wrong perception about someone or a group of people, mind manipulation, blackmail among others. Further in relations to this, the Online Editor of FRCN was of the opinion that, “the main motive of fake news is usually profit, whether monetary or otherwise; to gain an unfair advantage over others and to create fear because they (the fake news purveyors) are also insecure.” In a similar view, Wale Oni observed that:

It is purely in fulfilment of psychological need such as sense of belonging. Sharing fake news helps the sharer to confirm their existing biases and help them to cognitively appreciate the existence of new information that supports their orientations and which puts the other groups in bad light.

The views of the respondents to the questionnaire and the social media critic resonate with those expressed by the participants in the focus group. Here are some excerpts:

T(Male): I see fake news as a scheme by a set of people (well especially political news) to incite the people against the other party and to maybe distract Nigerians from the main problem

we should be facing. Basically, they use it to mess with people’s mind

J(Male): Sometimes eh, it’s for propaganda. Known or unknown to the propagandist, these news can cause a lot of damage. For example when you hear something like Fulani herdsmen killed about 100 people along Benin-Ore road...

B(Female): ... all these news you hear that Boko Haram are already in the south west and are putting HIV infected blood in watermelon, people started looking at these people somehow and even the watermelon guy you know very well...you begin to suspect him.

K(Female): There was a time when it filled WhatsApp and Facebook that the Muslim are planning to Islamize Nigeria. This caused a lot of rift among Muslims and Christians ...

What are the correlations between media literacy and perception of fake news

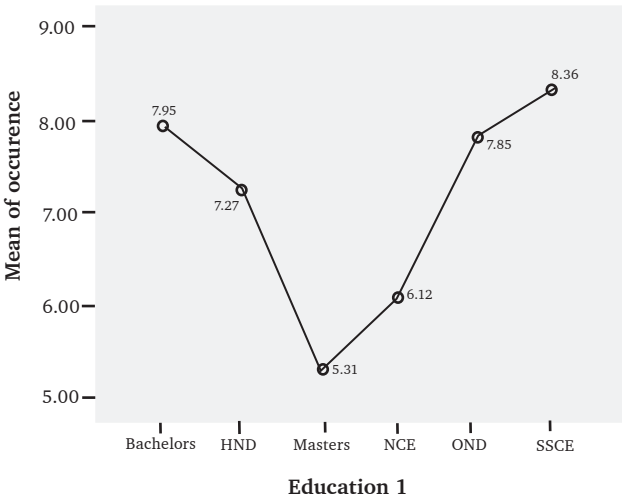


Fig. 12.1: one-way ANOVA of perception of fake news and respondents’ level of education

The second research question sought to know respondents' views on the relationship between media literacy/news literacy and the perception of fake news. First, questions were asked to find out what aspects of WhatsApp posts can be falsified. A majority of the respondents, 407(82.4%) believe that *Sahara Reporters*, an online newspaper does not carry fake news but just a little over half of the respondents 286(57.2%) were willing to say the same about major Nigerian newspapers.

While almost half of the sample, 239(47.8%) said they had never experienced this, about one-third of the sample, 157(31.4%) admitted that they had unknowingly forwarded fake news before. To 155(31%) respondents, this experience of being the purveyor of fake news made them feel embarrassed on the group page where the misleading content was shared. In another twist, a total of 422 respondents representing 84% of the study population admitted that they had circulated fake news on WhatsApp at some point in the past. It is understandable if out of ignorance, a person forwards a post that turns out to be false. What would motivate someone to deliberately post fake news? Some of the reasons given include fun, idleness, intention to mislead, quest for popularity, selfish interest and need for attention.

Sometimes, just after sharing a broadcast, one may receive information that contradicts one's post. For example, on October 23, 2018, the news was all over social media that Chief Ernest Shonekan, former Nigerian interim president was dead. A few hours later, a family source debunked the news and reported that the man was in Canada receiving treatment. Respondents were asked what their experience was with regards to who debunks fake news. The general view from 301(60.2%) of the respondents was that other participants apart from the one who shared the false news often debunk fake news. Respondents expressed the view that it is rare that the source of the fake news is also the one who debunks it.

Table 12.2: Respondents’ experience with sharing and debunking fake news

Items	Never	Often	Once in a while	Always
The person who posted a message debunked it	42 (8.2%)	144 (28.8%)	29 (59.6%)	16 (3.2%)
Another person on the page debunked it	24 (4.8%)	301 (60.2%)	148(29.6%)	26 (5.2%)
You shared news you didn’t know to be fake before	239 (47.8%)	103 (20.6%)	148 (29.6%)	9 (1.8%)
You shared news that you knew was fake	422 (84.4%)	24 (4.8%)	47 (9.4%)	7 (1.4%)

Respondents were asked about the steps they take before forwarding posts they receive on WhatsApp. These questions were asked to ascertain the degree of media literacy displayed by the respondents in this study. A vast majority of the respondents 475(95%), claimed that they vetted information before posting howbeit to different extents of frequency ranging from great to a little extent.

The authenticity of this claim about fact checking and verification was further tested when participants were asked if they knew what fact checkers were. A majority of the respondents, 320(64.2%) had no idea and as further proof, 346(69.4%) said they had never used fact checkers before. Of the 30% who claimed to have used fact checkers before, 28.8% named the fact checker they had used as search engine while only 19(3.8%) respondents were able to name Africa Check and Afrimash.com as examples of fact checkers. This bit of information was cross-checked with the FGD participants who were mostly students of communication. A majority of the FGD participants, could not name any fact checking site, only one participant mentioned Snopes.com. The researchers then asked how the respondents verify information they receive from WhatsApp, majority of participants said they cross-check with information from newspapers and radio or trust the credibility of the source. There was no mention of television broadcasts. This

might be a pointer to the fact that the television is no longer a popular news source among young Nigerians.

On the other hand, when Wale Oni, the social media critic claimed:

I use a range of web-based fact-checking tools such as Google query, reverse image search on Google and Berify, Full Fact (UK), Politifact, Fackcheck.org while I also belong to a community of individuals who have dedicated their services to rid Nigerian social media (#SocialMediaInNigeria) of fake news, disinformation and nefarious activities of individuals under the guise of social media ‘influencers’ on Twitter. I sincerely hope we can have this group officially registered as a fact-checking outlet and a signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network currently being engaged by social media corporations to down-rank news blogs from social media news feed.

With the facts available about the low level of information on fact checking, it becomes important to put media literacy on the front burner so that informational crises can be avoided.

The issue then remains who should spearhead media literacy? How, where and when should media literacy be taught?

Table 12.3: What respondents do before posting WhatsApp news

Items	Great extent	Small extent	Little extent	No extent
I usually post the things I receive only after verifying them	231 (46.2%)	99 (19.8%)	140 (28.0%)	30 (6.0%)
I post when the story is from someone credible	235 (47.0%)	155 (31.0%)	44 (8.8%)	66 (13.2%)
I vet information from online sources before reposting	187 (37.4%)	120 (24.0%)	168 (33.6%)	24 (4.8%)
I always go back to cross-check if stories are really from the news sources associated with them	104 (20.8%)	261 (52.2%)	101 (20.2%)	33 (6.6%)

Table 12.4: Correlation between media literacy and perception of fake news

Variable	Media literacy	Perception	Mean	SD
Media Literacy	1	.092*	24.80	4.27
Perception	.092*	1	8.06	1.62

* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Results in Table 12.4 reveals that there is a positive significant correlation between media literacy and perception of fake news ($r = .092$). Thus, a high level of media literacy/news literacy increases the perception of fake news while a low level of media literacy has the opposite effect.

The discussants in the FGD introduced an interesting dimension to the discussion which appears to highlight a relationship between media literacy and age. A majority of them argued that media literacy and news literacy play a major role in the perception of fake news and the spread of it on WhatsApp. Some of them pointed out that their parents, who were not social media savvy, send more fake news to them than their friends and contemporaries do. Some also commented that having a level of media literacy will afford one the opportunity to trace the information back to the original source which will help know which one is true or not. Seven out of the 22 respondents claim they use fact checkers to check if a particular news is true or not. Here are some of their views;

F (Male): most people that share fake news are not even social media literate. Most of our parents. Once they see it online, they share to us not knowing that all these things are fake.

G (Female): Most of the BCs I get from my mom is either don't do this or they are fighting here, don't go ...

Clearly, there is an urgent need for critical literacy, people need to have the understanding that all texts present particular ways of seeing the world and attempt to position readers so they will support these views (Moje *et al.*, 2000). As the findings in this study have

shown, there is still much ground to be covered before Nigerians can effectively the issue especially with reference to WhatsApp.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study showed that there are clear indications that the respondents are aware of the problem fake news constitute and the effects it can have on the readers. It also showed that the respondents knew that fake news causes confusion about current issues and influences people's attitude. They know that fact checkers are useful for verification, clarification and confirmation. However, more than 60% of them did not know what fact checkers are and only 3% could name at least one fact checker. A little over half of the sample still believe in newspaper as a credible information source even though an online newspaper, Sahara Reporters was rated higher (82.4%) as a credible information source than the news in print. The study shows a low level of media literacy and a dependency on traditional news sources for the verification of online news.

Increased documentation on the influence of social media on civil engagement and participation is recommended. Also, the Nigerian government should be sensitive to the role fake news on social media played in political communications in other well-established democracies. For example, the 2016 US presidential elections and thus develop a viable social media policy. It is clear that other non-governmental agencies, media experts, librarians, journalists, celebrity/celebrated bloggers, journalism educators and teachers at all levels need to be actively involved in the process of improving information consumption on social media. With a youth population of over 85 million, an age group well accustomed to the use of mobile media, there is a need to encourage the development of youth-friendly fact checkers that will ease the process of information verification on social media. There is therefore an urgent need for media literacy advocacy.

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Social Media and the Weaponisation of Fake News: The Case of the ‘#EndSARS’ Protest

Bimbo Lolade FAFOWORA¹

Abstract

Social media has not only been useful in promoting social relations and interaction among people but it has also been instrumental in mobilising mass movements and resistance as well as the proliferation of fake news which has conversely affected society. This chapter explores the instrumentality of social media and fake news during the EndSARS protest in Nigeria utilising the propositions of the hypodermic needle theory (HNT) and the uses and gratification Theory (UGT) in examining the instrumentality of social media and fake news for the mobilisation and suppression of the #EndSARS protests. The data comprises textual and graphical posts collected from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and analysed thematically. The findings showed the discursive utilisation of fake news to advance narratives suiting the agenda of the EndSARS advocates and the Nigerian government. In line with the propositions of HNT and UGT, the findings established

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the manipulative utilization of fake news and social media by the various stakeholders of the protests leading to catastrophic outcomes.

Keywords: *Social media, fake news, media effects*

Introduction

Digital media technologies have not only redefined the ubiquity of human communication but have also pulled down primordial barriers to human interactions. The change is evident in the ease of acquiring and disseminating information through social media with little or no censorship in many climes. This has democratised communication to a large extent in many countries of the world. A major fallout of this freedom, however, is the deliberate or inadvertent use of social media to promote and propagate non-factual or false content known globally as fake news. Advancements in digital media technologies and the emergence of social media have aided fake news proliferation across the world in unimaginable ways (Thornton, 2020). Fake news permeates almost every sector of society – from religion to medicine, science, and politics to name a few (Fafowora and Nyaga, 2020).

Despite its ubiquity, fake news is a slippery term to define. Some scholars describe it as an amorphous term that covers different forms of disinformation and misinformation, sometimes, produced with malicious intent and oftentimes consumed and redistributed or circulated by unsuspecting members of the public (Uberti, 2016; Ireton and Posetti, 2018). Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) describe fake news as “news articles that [are] intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.” Furthermore, Bakir and McStay (2017), define fake news as “either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context.” They noted that fake news is an unconfirmed story or with doubtable accuracy that is widely circulated online. However fake news is defined or described, one certain thing about the phenomenon is that it is deliberately produced by individuals or groups to deceive (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019). While the production of fake news might be deliberate, such cannot be said

about its circulation, especially in this era of *laissez-faire* access to information through digital devices.

Fake news or disinformation has not only become a means for individuals to advance certain agenda, but it has also become a threat to peace and stability in many countries. History is replete with instances of the dire consequences of fake news globally. For example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was said to be premised on some unverifiable newspaper articles published by the New York Times (Krug, 2017). Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2016 United States Presidential election, there were claims and counterclaims of the possible influence of a series of externally motivated disinformation campaigns targeted at voters in the US through social media (Hughes and Waismel-Manor, 2021). The United Kingdom's Brexit poll was another instance that underscores the dire consequences of fake news or disinformation. In the Global South, countries like the Philippines, Kenya, and South Africa have experienced the negative impacts of the deployment of disinformation or fake news at different critical moments in their political histories. In Nigeria, fake news has been deployed by politicians to malign their opponents during election campaigns. Also, individuals with political or partisan interests have propagated disinformation which has fuelled mistrust and ethnoreligious clashes across the country (Anderson, 2019; Hassan and Hitchen, 2020). Most recently, the EndSARS protest which took place in several states across Nigeria in October 2020 was another instance in which Nigerians experienced the dire consequences of fake news.

This study, therefore, examines the instrumentality of fake news in the mobilization and abrupt quelling of the #EndSARS protest. Specifically, the researcher examined how pro-EndSARS campaigners and a parastatal of the Nigerian government utilised fake news to further their respective agenda during the protest. The study is hinged on the propositions, namely hypodermic needle theory (HNT) or magic bullet theory and the uses and gratifications theory. HNT proposes that media messages have a direct impact on the opinions and actions of media audiences

(Nwabueze and Okonkwo, 2018) while proponents of UGT posit that media audiences selectively utilise media to fulfil certain needs (Watson and Hill, 2012). To this end, the researcher examined how pro-EndSARS campaigners and their main opposer, the Nigerian government utilised fake news to galvanise the protest using accusations and counteraccusations that propelled and quelled the flames of the #EndSARS protests. A study of this nature is crucial given the perceived influence of media (fake news) on people's attitudes and choices (Smith, 2017).

The following are the research questions guiding this study:

RQ1: How was fake news deployed during the #EndSARS protest?

RQ2: What are the reactions of online audiences to some of the identified fake news posts?

RQ3: How did the #EndSARS protesters and government utilise social media during the protest?

Overview of the #EndSARS Protest

The #EndSARS campaign is a social movement by Nigerian youths who were displeased by the indiscriminate killing and harassment Nigerians suffer at the hands of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) division of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). SARS was established in 1992 to combat the rising cases of organised crimes in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2020). Over time, there were widespread claims of gross violation of human rights by SARS officials. They were, particularly, accused of apprehending well-dressed youths with tattoos, dreadlocks, iPhones, or laptops – many of whom they accuse of committing *Yahoo-Yahoo* (internet fraud). The accused were usually extorted, brutalised or arrested and incarcerated illegally; sometimes, leading to the victim's death. The campaign to disband SARS began on Twitter in 2017 out of public outrage against the excessive high-handedness of SARS; thus, #EndSARS was born. The Twitter campaign was followed by a small physical rally on December 11, 2017 in Lagos, Nigeria (Akinpelu, 2020). The campaign was re-ignited in June 2018 but soon fizzled out after the inspector general of police announced the

government's plan to reform the unit. The movement was rekindled on Twitter in October 2020 following the circulation of a video of another case of SARS harassment. This time, the protest garnered massive online support both within Nigeria and beyond through an intense social media campaign, that highlighted the atrocities of SARS by posting pictures and names of alleged victims of police brutality. Mass demonstrations broke out in about 13 cities across Nigeria. The protest was brought to an abrupt end on its tenth day with the shooting of unarmed protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate (Aljazeera, 2020; Maiangwa, 2020).

Literature Review

While the Internet has aided the proliferation of fake news, the spread of disinformation was limited to small groups of participants with similar ideologies because of the structural characteristics of the Internet at its early stages (Karpf, 2021). Then it was easier to ascertain the veracity of information because sources of (dis) information were traceable. Increased access to the Internet and monetisation of digital content have, however, changed the dynamics of fake news creation and dissemination such that anyone with a digital device can generate and propagate fake news. For instance, a group of Macedonian teenagers generated tons of targeted fake news during the 2016 American presidential election (Hughes and Waismel-Manor, 2021).

Now, fake news can be deployed for hegemonic power tussles and to delegitimise political opponents as seen during the American presidential election (Farkas and Schou, 2018:303-304). Similarly, during the 2019 Nigerian General Elections, political parties deployed disinformation licentiously to malign their opponents through social media (Hassan, 2019). Furthermore, fake news can be used to delegitimize and undermine the credibility of mainstream or critical media as seen during Trump's administration. Although social media are emancipatory technologies that allow marginalised groups to participate in political conversation, they can contribute to undermining democracy and national security while eroding public trust in traditional media by proliferating fake news (Wasserman

and Madrid-Morales, 2019; Cheeseman *et al.*, 2020). The harm in social media and fake news lies in their subjective deployment and weaponisation during power contestations. Within the past decade, several mass demonstrations have morphed from social media to physical spaces – Arab Spring, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the #EndSARS protest are classic examples. Similarly, fake news has had serious impacts on society – the 2016 US presidential election, and the 2017 Kenyan election among others (Hassan, 2019; Mutahi and Kimari, 2020).

Hypodermic Needle Theory

The hypodermic needle theory (HNT) proposes that mass media have a direct, powerful, and uniform impact on the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of their audiences (Borah, 2016). The theory proposes that the media penetrates the mind and modifies the thoughts and actions of their audiences correspondingly. HNT is regarded as an over-simplistic theory of media effects with inadequate postulations which disregard the intervention of extraneous factors such as interactivity and conscious logicity in the influence of media on individuals (Severin and Tankard, 2014). In addition, HNT has been criticised for considering media audiences as passive recipients who react or respond similarly to media messages (DeFleur, 2016). HNT's lack of consideration for media audiences' ability to selectively consume media invalidates its usefulness as a credible media effects theory. Although HNT is not considered reliable for studying media effects, advancements in information technology and the new trends in the production, consumption, and reactions to social media messages are redirecting the attention of scholars to this theory. Thibault (2016:70) aptly opines that the assumed importance and impact of virality associated with new media highlight a need for the reconsideration of HNT. It is, therefore, expedient to examine the possible influences of social media through the HNT lens.

Uses and Gratification Theory

The uses and gratification theory (UGT) presupposes that media audiences are not passive consumers of media messages; rather, they utilise media messages selectively to fulfil certain needs. UGT acknowledges that media exert a significant influence on society; albeit, in consonance with certain factors (Borah, 2016). Unlike HNT, UGT highlights the agency of media audiences expressed through intentionality in their media usage and consumption choices. The theory also postulates that individuals have disparate needs that are shaped according to their experiences and culture (DeFleur, 2016). UGT has been mainly criticised for its vague and non-theoretical approach as well as its failure to establish a connection between human needs and the motivation to satisfy those needs (Severin and Tankard, 2014). Although UGT was developed during the early stages of electronic broadcasting, its applicability transcends the traditional media to the emergent social media that has not only revolutionised communication but also dismantled previously held assumptions about media (Stafford, Stafford and Schkade, 2004). Both HNT and UGT are relevant for understanding the utilisation of social media and fake news during the #EndSARS protest.

Methodology

The researcher examined the deployment of fake news during the #EndSARS protests through selected social media posts and online audience reactions to ascertain the deployment and instrumentality of social media during the protest. The qualitative content analysis (QCA) method was used to analyse the data thematically. QCA entails a systematic analysis and organisation of large textual datasets to identify patterns and create units of meaning (Mayring, 2019). The data for this study was collected retrospectively using the keywords #EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality to search for social media posts on the EndSARS campaign. After this, some of the posts with a minimum of 100 likes or comments were purposefully selected from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The #EndSARS campaign generated over three million tweets and seven hundred and forty-

four retweets before the protest was quelled on the 20th of October 2020 (BBC News, 2020). Owing to the peculiar nature of viral social media posts, many of the posts were duplicates. To streamline the dataset, 54 of the #EndSARS fake news posts deployed by EndSARS protesters, the Nigerian Army HQ, were purposefully selected. The data was manually coded and analysed thematically using the inductive analysis approach which involves the breaking down of data into smaller units after which coding and categorisation of the data were done based on the researcher's reading and interpretation of the raw data (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Each of the selected posts and the accompanying comments were carefully read and re-examined before it was coded and categorised. The findings are presented under three categories namely, the deployment of fake news during the protests, the reactions of the online audiences, and the instrumentality of fake news in the protests.

Findings

The analysis of the selected posts showed that both the initiators of the #EndSARS protest and the Nigerian government utilised social media discursively to promote narratives that were favourable to their cause and earn sympathy from the audience. The findings are presented in three categories in the following section based on the research questions that the study sought to answer.

Deployment of Fake News During the Protests

Fifty-four social media posts comprising pictures and videos of claims and counterclaims that were shared during the #EndSARS protests were analysed to examine the deployment of fake news during the protest. The analysis showed how pro-EndSARS protesters stirred up emotions and built sympathy for their movement by posting graphic images and videos that lucidly highlighted SARS atrocities.² The post that evoked the most emotive response from the public

² The pieces of evidence were in textual, pictorial, and video formats.

leading to the protest was the video of the assault of one Joshua Ambrose from Ughelli, Delta State by unidentified policemen. As the video gained traction online, various reports of SARS atrocities surfaced online. The outrage against SARS intensified leading to the breakout of physical protests across several states. Many who shared and retweeted the video of the harassment and alleged death of Joshua Ambrose did not get the counterclaim that he did not die as claimed in the video.

Although it can be surmised that the protest was birthed by fake news, this by no means absolves SARS of alleged gross violations of human rights. Consequently, the government took advantage of the lapses in the #EndSARS movement's claims by debunking many of the other claims made by the protesters even in the face of glaring evidence. One of these was the controversy surrounding the Lekki Toll Gate shooting.³ Another instance of dis/misinformation during the #EndSARS protest was that of a lone female protester who sat on a lion head statue weeping while holding a rolled-up Nigerian flag during the protest at Enugu. The claim was that the lady had three brothers who were killed by SARS on the same day. The first post that published the 'news'⁴ had over 15,000 retweets. Celebrities and other well-meaning people with huge followings retweeted and shared the post to show support for the disbandment of SARS. The story was later debunked but it got fewer engagements than the initial fake news post which had 490 comments, 15,800 retweets, 807 quote tweets, and 18,300 likes from a single source alone. The post that debunked the claim was shared the following day on the same Twitter page and it had only 24 comments, 264 retweets, 22 quote tweets, and 510 likes. Several other pages that debunked the claim also had similar low engagements except for a media personality whose disclaimer post accumulated 271 comments,

³ On October 20, 2020, members of the Nigerian army opened fire on protesters. The actual casualty figure is still unknown.

⁴ It was published as news but eventually turned out to contain misinformation.

5,215 retweets, 394 tweet quotes, and 4,241 likes. This shows that fake news can gain more traction than disclaimers and updates published afterwards to correct erroneous claims – this highlights the difficulty in attenuating the impact of fake news.

At the Enugu Protest today, this young woman who refused to fly the Nigerian flag sat on top of this Lion statue and appeared to be crying.

Who knows who she is?

What's the story? Can someone find her?

[#TheEnuguNetwork](#)

Had a brief chat with Ugwu Blessing Ugochukwu whose image with a folded flag at the Enugu protest trended days ago. She denied losing her brothers to SARS.

"It's 100% fake news. I am the victim. I will share my story later."

[#StopFakeNews](#)[#EndsSARS](#)[#StopPoliceBrutality](#)



Fig. 13.1: Viral post of the lady whose brothers were killed by SARS

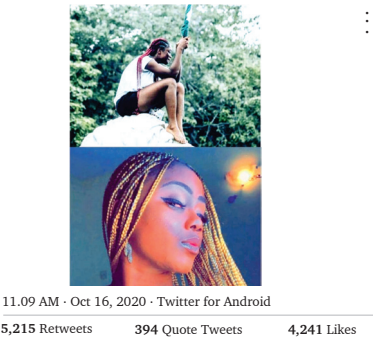


Fig. 13.2: Post debunking the claim in Figure 13.1

The peak of fake news dissemination occurred on the night that military men shot at unarmed protesters at Lekki. As DJ Switch⁵ was live streaming the incident on Instagram, various posts emerged online with differing claims about the incident. Many EndSARS supporters tagged international legacy media and non-governmental organisations like the BBC, CNN, Aljazeera, Fox News, ABC News, NYTimes, The Daily Show, United Nations, and Amnesty International, among others. In response, these organisations published the stories without being on the ground

⁵ A popular Nigerian disk jockey and social media influencer who was one of the protest coordinators.

to verify the information picked off the web. With this action, the protesters gained the needed international attention, albeit, with distorted information.⁶ The Nigerian government, on the other hand, seeking to mitigate the bad publicity, tweeted disclaimers through the Nigerian army social media accounts initially denying the deployment of soldiers to the Lekki Toll Gate. As verified evidence began to surface, the government modified their rebuttal confirming the presence of armed soldiers at the Lekki Toll Gate; however, they claimed that the soldiers were armed with blank bullets and that no protester was shot. The Nigerian army deployed fake news in its attempt to control the narratives and re-direct the sentiments of the public. As Farkas and Schou (2018) posit, fake news can be utilised for hegemonic power tussles.

Why why why 🤔🤔🤔 stop
killing our people 💔💔💔
[#EndSARS](#) 🗿 [#ReformPoliceNG](#)
[#UnitedNationsHelpNigeria](#)
[#UnitedNations](#) [#UnitedKingdom](#)
[#UnitedStatesofAmerica](#)



9:12 AM · 21 Oct 20 · Twitter for iPhone

8,832 Retweets

184 Quote Tweets

Fig. 13.3: A supposed victim of the Lekki Toll Gate shootings



One of the fake pictures circulated as being one of those shot dead by soldiers at the Lekki Toll Gate. But the photos was originally taken from a drama staged by the Akwa Ibom State chapter of the Nigeria Christian Corpers Fellowship and the lady is alive.

Fig. 13.4: Disclaimer showing that the picture was recontextualised

⁶ While the shooting of mass protesters was real, many of the posts shared online were curated from unrelated events and incidents.



Fig. 13.5: Disclaimers on the Lekki Toll Gate Shootings from the Nigerian Army

Reactions of Online Audiences

To examine online audiences' reactions, the researcher evaluated comments accompanying the selected posts. Contrary to the critique of HNT's proposition of a direct and uniform media effect, the online audiences' reactions to some of the fake news shared during the protest indicate that audiences' reactions were mediated by pre-existing factors such as experiences,⁷ political affiliations, ethnicity, and religion. This nullifies the direct effects assumption of the proponents of HNT. Meanwhile, the analysis showed a clustered pattern in the reactions. Thus, the analysed comments were grouped under three categories, namely pro-government, pro-EndSARS, and neutral.

⁷ Some of the audience had experienced police brutality directly or knew someone who had.

Pro-Government

This cluster consists of comments that promote and support the actions and narratives promoted by the Nigerian government during the protest. Some of these comments were posted by people who have partisan political interests and are in support of the government in power. Audiences in this cluster claimed that the allegations levelled against the Nigerian army were baseless and conspiratorial. The following comment was taken from one of the Lekki shooting disclaimer posts shared on the Nigerian army Twitter page:

I repeat no single dead recorded in Lekki (sic), everything you saw on social media is photoshoot (sic). Whoever wrote the script to destroy the whole of Yoruba land and Lagos State shall never know peace in their entire life. May Allah bless Yoruba land and Nigeria.⁸

In many of the comments, people who were not at the scene of the incident did not only request to see the corpses of the allegedly dead protesters, but some commenters believed that soldiers could not have fired live ammunition directly at the protesters. The next excerpt is an example.

Even if soldiers fired, I believe it was the usual fire in the air to disperse the protesters so as to clear the road. Where are the victims of the gunshot that you only forgot to snap their pictures to show the bullet wound[s] on them even if they are dead? Please stop this nuts [madness] (sic).

Other commenters who supported the Nigerian army's narratives claimed that the protest was organised with the intent of overthrowing the president. Despite watching live streams from the protest grounds showing protesters covered in blood, some of the audiences still disbelieved the claims.

⁸ Commenters' identities were removed for ethical and privacy purposes. The Nigerian army was mentioned because it is a public parastatal.

Pro-EndSARS

The pro-EndSARS cluster contains comments that boldly condemned the shooting of protesters and rebuttals issued by the Nigerian army. Pro-EndSARS advocates did not only support the disbandment of SARS but also accused the government of conspiring with certain influential persons against the protesters. The comments mostly contain invectives directed at the Nigerian government. An example is presented as follows:

So, this was the plan. As you people are seeing this comment just go and tell the person/people that instructed you that they are very horrible at planning and they haven't won just yet. All of you will suffer!

In another viral disclaimer post shared by a popular news blog that had previously shared an update about the protest, the comments were a blend of opinions supporting either the positions of the Nigerian government or that of EndSARS protesters. Some comments like the example below opposed the sharing of disclaimers because of the fear that it would cast doubts on all of their claims.

This kind of news is not for now. It will now look like everything we are saying or posting is fake... Why?

Despite the revelation that some of the posts shared by the EndSARS supporters are fake, some commenters preferred that such information be circulated and promoted on social media to avoid jeopardizing their campaign. This indicates that while media messages may not have a similar impact on individuals, audiences use social media to gratify personal or group needs. For instance, fake news was to drive the agenda of each of the opposing parties in the EndSARS campaign.

Neutral comments

The third cluster comprises comments that express sentiments that are neither in support of the government nor EndSARS advocates. The opinions expressed by these commenters are conciliatory – appeasing both parties and condemning the spread of fake news.

Some comments also expressed confusion about the credibility of information that permeates social media. Examples are given below:

... when I saw that video. I cried out my eyes Fake news everywhere. Don't know whom to believe again.

Other comments underscored the need for regulatory mechanisms such as a social media bill to curb the production and spread of fake news in society. Others called for the arrest and punishment of people who fake news promoters and the need for fact-checking. An example is presented below:

Please fact-check information (sic) before you post them. That's one quick way we can reduce the tensions everywhere now and restore (sic). Let's not forget the reason for the peaceful protest we started.

The analysis confirms that media messages certainly have an impact which can be similar or divergent depending on certain intervening factors. The findings indicate that just as certain pre-existing socio-political considerations influence audience media preference, pre-existing factors combined with the right media messages can evoke predictable reactions. While media audiences may not be passive as assumed by HNT, the predictability and similarity of their reactions are still debatable.

The Instrumentality of Social Media and Fake News in the Protests

The preceding sections have attested to the engagement of fake news as one of the weapons employed by the EndSARS protesters and the Nigerian government. This section focuses on how each of the opposing groups utilised both phenomena to further their respective agenda.

Pro-EndSARS advocates

The #EndSARS campaign is a leaderless and borderless movement comprising an undefined number of Nigerian youths. Although the group's membership is indeterminate and widely dispersed, their

rallying point is the desire to compel the Nigerian government to disband SARS and end police brutality, and bad governance.

To this end, the protesters utilised social media for the following purposes:

- (i) **Publicity and awareness:** Social media, especially *Twitter* provided a platform for Nigerians to report cases of police harassment using eyewitness accounts which gained traction as they were shared and picked up by legacy and new media organisations, celebrities, and influencers with large followings (Dambo *et al.*, 2021). This created the needed awareness about the excesses of SARS and the Nigeria police in general. It also provided an avenue for public awareness, engagement, and sympathy that led to the growth of the movement. With increased awareness came the concerted demand for an end to the gross violation of human rights being perpetrated by SARS. This unified cry for the disbandment of SARS led to the birth of the #EndSARS campaign.

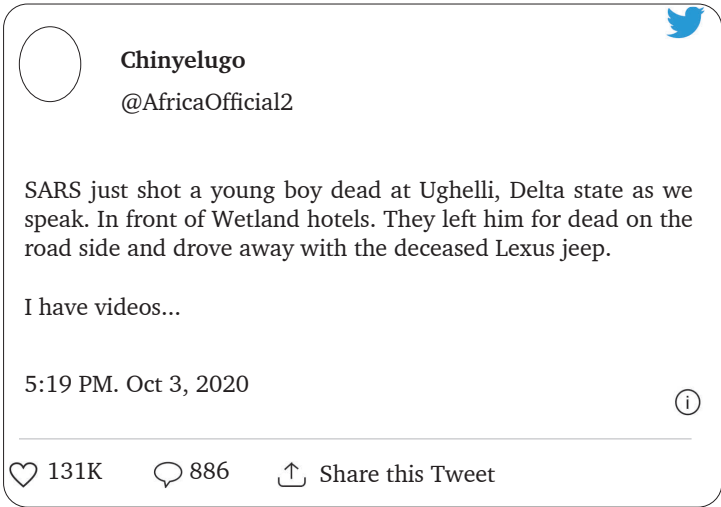


Fig. 13.6: A tweet reporting the Ughelli incident

- (ii) **Mobilisation:** One advantage of social media is that it provides an avenue for political engagement and social mobilisation among the hitherto marginalised segment of society (Dambo *et al.*, 2020). Although #EndSARS did not gain traction when it was created in 2017, its resuscitation after reports of the killing of a young man at Ughelli broke the Internet when influencers with large followings tweeted and shared it leading to their followers retweeting, resharing, and tagging famous brands and other notable personalities to support the cause. Utilising the hashtag function of Twitter, the campaigners tagged and retweeted ‘#EndSARS’, making it one of the trending topics on Twitter worldwide.⁹



For that innocent man who was killed for carrying dreads.
For the families who have lost someone due to FSARS.
For all mothers whose flicker of hope was quenched by bastards in unwashed polos.
For that youth who was brutalised for driving a posh car.

[#EndSarsParmanentlyNow](#)



11.16 AM . Oct 6, 2020 . Twitter for iPhone

827 Retweets 18 Quote Tweets 1,009 Likes

Fig. 13.7: Rinu’s tweet calling for a physical protest in Lagos

⁹ The hashtag had 48 million tweets from 5 million unique users between October 5-14, 2020 (see, <https://www.nendo.co.ke/post/endsars-analyzing-48-million-tweets-in-10-days-using-brandwatch>).

- (iii) Two days into the online campaign, Rinu Oduala¹⁰ – a media strategist, called for a 3-day peaceful protest that culminated in massive uprisings across the country. Thus, through a concerted online campaign, aggrieved Nigerians were able to mobilise physical protests in 19 states with several other solidarity protests from Nigerians in the diaspora with members of the international community weighing in on the #EndSARS protest.
- (iv) **Seek justice for victims:** Aside from asking for the dissolution of SARS, the protesters used social media to seek justice for all victims of police brutality. This was contained in the protesters' five demands which they called #5FOR5. Their demands are as follows:
 - (a) Immediate release of all arrested protesters.
 - (b) Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families.
 - (c) Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct.
 - (d) In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed.
 - (e) Increase police salaries so that they are adequately compensated for protecting the lives and property of citizens.
- (v) **International support:** EndSARS advocates took advantage of the ubiquity of social media to get the attention of the international community to the human rights violations happening in Nigeria. Celebrities like Beyonce, Kanye West, Rihanna, John Boyega, Naomi Campbell, Nicki Minaj, and Anthony Joshua lent their voices to the campaign. The campaigners also got the attention of the United Nations and other notable international organisations.

¹⁰ Rinu had over 338,000 followers on Twitter as at the time of writing this report in October 2021.

- (vi) **Coordination:** The #EndSARS campaign had no leader; yet, the campaigners used a combination of social media platforms to kickstart and coordinate the protest. They coordinated the activities of the protesters by sharing real-time updates and useful information from the protest grounds – donations, food deliveries, emergency support lines, and a host of other useful information were posted from an online communication centre. The live streaming of the Lekki Toll Gate shootings is also an example of how the protesters utilised social media to further their agenda during the protest.
- (vii) **Sustaining the campaign:** The shootings at the Lekki Toll Gate might have abruptly ended physical protests, but pro-EndSARS advocates sustained the protest online. With the same hashtag, they continually advocate for police reform and justice for victims of police brutality.

Nigerian government

Unlike EndSARS protesters, the Nigerian government's utilisation of social media during the protest revolved around two themes as stated below:

- (i) **Apprise the public:** From the early stage of the protests, some State Governors went on social media to announce their support for the campaign. The Lagos State Governor shared constant updates on his Twitter and Instagram handles. The federal government was silent on the issue at the early stage. Later, updates of the president's discussion with the inspector general of police were posted online. Similar action was taken by the IGP when he announced the disbandment and rebranding of SARS.
- (ii) **Reframing the narrative:** The government also utilised social media in their attempt to reframe the narratives about the gross violations of human rights committed during the protests by debunking many of the claims made by the protesters. Some serving government officials were vocal in their rebuttals against the protesting youths. Lastly, the Nigerian army unit

that was at the centre of the massacre which took place at Lekki Toll Gate was unequivocal in their rebuttals of the October 20, 2020 killing of unarmed protesters.

Conclusion

As has been shown in the preceding sections, the liberty to create and disseminate messages through social media has aided the production and spread of fake news which in turn has been used to promote socio-political agenda. The findings of this study underscore how fake news can be deployed to gratify collective or individual needs. As Lee (2020) posits, fake news can be deployed by both government and social movement advocates to delegitimise or polarise protests and pressurise constituted authority and sustain social movements. Judging by the EndSARS protest and other similar examples, I concluded that fake news has become a weapon of war with the capacity to produce catastrophic outcomes. The economic cost of the EndSARS protest was put at 1.5 trillion nairas, that is, approximately 3.9 billion US dollars (Asu, 2020). While there are contentions about the casualty figure, reports indicate that approximately one hundred lives were lost due to the EndSARS protest (Amnesty International, 2020; Guardian Nigeria, 2020; Adediran, 2021).

Although this study did not utilise an experimental method – a requisite for making definitive causal claims, the findings are indicative of the potency of social media messages on its audiences according to the propositions of the hypodermic needle theory, albeit, in conjunction with other factors. As Lee (2020) notes, factors such as “demographics, trust in government, movement participation, support for political factions, and media” significantly influence people’s perception of incidents. Similarly, demographic variables like age, gender, education, and cultural orientation impact the acceptance and spread of fake news in society (Rampersad and Althiyabi, 2020). Essentially, young and less educated internet users are more likely to accept and spread fake news. With many of the EndSARS advocates being youths, one can postulate the impact of

the deployment of fake news during the protest. Although DeFleur (2016) argues that media audiences' selective media consumption style moderates the assumed impact of media, hypothetically, media audiences with similar media consumption patterns, ideologies, and goals are likely to respond to media similarly.

The mass shooting at the Lekki Toll Gate quelled the EndSARS protest, however, the deployment of fake news by the main actors in the protest lends credence to arguments about the potency of media messages. Claims posted online by EndSARS agitators set off a chain reaction starting with an online uproar that culminated in the loss of lives and property across Nigeria. Media audiences may not be passive receptors of media; however, it is unarguable that media can induce certain reactions in people. It is pertinent, therefore, for various stakeholders – government, technology innovators, media professionals, and society at large to seek effective ways of curbing the proliferation of fake news.

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Social Media as Sites for Misinformation: The Capacity of Revictimising the Victim and Glamourising Tragedy

Muchativugwa Liberty HOVE¹

Abstract

This chapter assesses social media as sites for misinformation and engages with the capacity of such sites to generate a revictimisation of victims and therefore glamourising tragedy. It focuses on both the textual and visual vocabulary of electioneering, harping on the possibilities of war and extermination of the opposition and, in the process, discusses how diverse subjectivities interpret atrocities leading up to elections in Africa through critical literary historiography. The chapter, “Social Media as Sites for Misinformation: The Capacity of Revictimising the Victim and Glamourising Tragedy”, traces the experiences of election campaigns in a state that has waned into a spectacle for dictatorships, characterised by an under-reported genocide in Africa so that we identify the characteristics of specific stages such as classification, symbolisation, dehumanisation, organisation, extermination and,

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finally, denial in the post-election period. Perceptions and experiences of and about elections in dictatorial states are best exemplified in the campaign messages and the use of social media platforms to lure voters while simultaneously discrediting the opposition; this is also evident in literary historiography that invariably turns into satirical and humorous writings that lampoon the dictatorships. These modes constitute both the packaging and distribution of tropes of tragedy, devastation and loss. We argue that it is these modes of social media representation that provide graphic images of dictatorship, including the causes for such strife and tensions as disseminated through social media platforms. Televisual exhibitions, mass media communication platforms and literary representations purvey more compassion fatigue rather than truthful confrontations with past and present electoral violence and violations. Juridical attention to the aftermaths cannot guarantee that the facts of elections and strife are fully redressed; rather, they revictimise victims and (un)intentionally glamourise tragedy.

Keywords: *Revictimising, social media, torture narratives, literary packaging, semiotic resources*

Introduction

All elections in Zimbabwe since 1980 have been characterised by intense contestations, civil unrest and incessant harassment of the opposition parties. The path to the ballot has therefore been lined by corpses, highlighting the factitious contestations for power. Social media has been utilised after the coup in 2017 to classify, dehumanise, and exterminate the oppositional voices, and in the final stages post the elections, to deny responsibility. Three inter-related discourses have exerted palpable influence in shaping the perceptions of and about elections as moments for civil unrest and extermination rather than the inauguration of democratic practices. Eric Schmidt once said, “The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity does not understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.” And indeed, while the importance of news on social media platforms and the Internet

in today's society as drivers of communication, gateways to vast tons information and enablers of socio-political participation to any type of social group is irrefutable, the digital and communication technologies have scaled up and posed innumerable problems to state security agencies, technology companies and researchers in its diffusion of misinformation, extremist content and hate speech. Disinformation and hate speech have become even more intricate given the development of social media platforms and search engines' algorithms, which curate and proliferate content on atrocities, civil unrest and electioneering, magnifying an already existing party, and group polarisation. The cyberspace has become an intractable source of horror and violent languaging disseminated on mass media platforms, to purvey the struggle for new political allegiances and revictimise the victims rather than confront past and present experiences of extermination, displacement and harm. The narratives in the election messages cannot guarantee that elections are understood more fully; rather they revictimise the victims and (un)intentionally glamourise tragedy. This chapter assesses the trope of revictimisation and the consequences that this exerts on the citizens and viewers of such palpable violence. Civil unrest, driven by the military machinery and personal exposure to violent experiences is logically the fodder upon which feed mass communication technologies, the cinematic and the narratological.

This chapter also engages with a pernicious practice that we call atrocity conspiracy. Atrocity conspiracy in the social media privileges difference. It exploits dead bodies, images and victims of the political friction between agonistic forces. The images that are disseminated here are packaged and distributed primarily to a Western and privileged audience. When the West accesses these images, the general reception and consumption is accompanied by the classification of Zimbabwe (and postcolonial Africa) as a violent space that cannot extricate itself from corruption, the looting of national resources, the evolution of an oligarchy of untouchables, and underdevelopment. The packaged images of victims of persecution, violence and genocidal experiences, if

at all they gain access to these archives, suffer from secondary revictimisation as they re-live the experiences. Atrocity conspiracy and the evolving tourism selectively depict and project profiles of victimisation where the emotional contagion is re-inscribed in the psyche of survivors. Memes, images and collages of violence have a disturbing effect that disrupts the representation of history about the totality of election experiences and the attendant hate speech. A narcissistic propensity is evident in the packaging of journalists who 'disappear' from the constituencies where they should be reporting, the 'discovery' of mutilated bodies of members of the opposition, and often, their mutilation by the military, confirming the barbarity of the perpetrators of such election violence. We thus examine how, through examples of fear and paranoia, and in the construction of in-group/out-group dynamics, conspiracies play a key role in identifying, constructing, and ultimately demonising *the* 'other' who is believed to be responsible for a variety of social and political failings.

Narratives of Victimhood, Resentment, and Populism

The ruling ZANU PF in Zimbabwe has largely relied on a narrative adept at both containing and invigorating current frustrations among its electorate. The 'blame game' from the party machinery drives the point on economic sanctions imposed on the state, the effects of these sanctions on the national economy and the detrimental consequences of 'democracy-driven intervention policies' from Britain, the USA, and generally the entire West. Political correctness in the newspeak of the ruling party is anchored on an ultra-nationalist script that proclaims it is the citizens of the country alone who can rebuild and resuscitate the national economy: '*Nyika inovakwa nevene vayo*'. This, however, has been appropriated by the oppositional social media in exemplifying 'free speech', and the meme in Figure 14.1 depicts the ways in which the ultimate results of the elections culminate in a personalisation of the state. The irony blends into sarcasm and dark humour. The national president speaks with disdain: *Nyika inotongwa nevana vangu; Igocherwa*

nevana vangu (My direct children shall rule this country; my true sons shall also mine this country till all the resources are depleted).

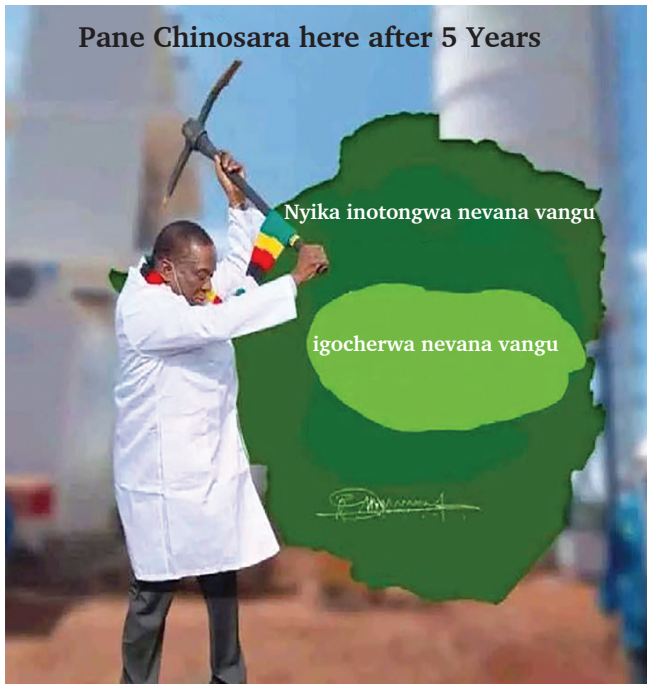


Fig. 14.1: A meme depicting the personalisation of the state

Loosely translated, the critique in the subtitle, “Pane chinosaurs here after 5 years” harps at the looting of resources, and the appointment of the president’s sons to ministerial cabinet posts which becomes a moment of ‘personalising’ the state and its apparatus into a dynasty. Post-election results reinscribe colonial historiography: if the colonial mission was to partition and exploit Africa among European nations, the postcolonial target is to spawn and foment a dynasty that owns the states already partitioned (Dowden, 2008). In the book, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, Dowden (2008:13) observes three critical aspects during the scramble for Africa:

- (i) The arbitrary drawing of Africa’s borders generated artificial homogeneity; in the delineation of constituencies, the new

borders are also divisively created to generate porous margins that the ruling elite can always manipulate to their political ends.

- (ii) The new borders mapped ethnicities into communities that colonialism designed; the partitions have generated devastating civil unrest; and in the post-election delineations, new propensities towards revulsion of the state emerge
- (iii) The aftermath of the Lancaster House Conference is still experienced today, specifically the negative effects of patronage politics. It is these artificial partitions that have fuelled intra-country and ethnic-family fissures where hate speech, victimisation and revictimisation have become the forte of the postcolonial state. We see in this example the concrete ways in which social media are sites for misinformation, suffused with all the capacity of revictimising the victim and glamourising tragedy.

Reid (2015:239) writes about what he calls “States of anxiety” and argues that the history of the nation is fraught with intrigue, aggression and marginalisation. It is in these ‘imagined’ states that conflict and strife are part of the long-run effects in the architecture of the Lancaster House Conference. Since the consequences of the Lancaster House Conference are the borders that grouped together different ethnicities in its cartography and, the rivalries that were set aflame, including hate speech, there have been a myriad agenda-setting constellations of loyalties. Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2011:10) also register that since 1980, in Africa, there have been forty-nine civil wars. Many of these wars were fanned aflame through hate speech vocabulary, delimbing and outright extermination of perceived ‘outsiders’ and ‘traitors.’ Invariably, when pre-election and post-election conflicts escalate to merit international attention, the responses from the West cluster around documenting the imprisonment of opposition party members, arson and macabre killings of those in the opposition. The following patterns have emerged as responses from the so-called ‘international’ community:

- (i) Presidential statements, correspondences and press interviews that condemn violence at the time of voting.
- (ii) State security department visits to constituencies and sites of violence.
- (iii) American, French and British ‘observer mission’ interventions, soft and hard as in the Russia-Ukraine conflict currently raging in 2022.
- (iv) Articles and social media opinions disseminated through WhatsApp, YouTube videos and Facebook posts that (mis) inform as much as they display macabre brutalities that line the paths to the contested ballot box.

In Zimbabwe, these choreographed and patterned responses were evident. There is a Western agenda that silences the murders, imprisonments and hate speech. We read this as an agenda that seeks to ‘narcotise’ sceptics of democratic processes when the election wars are fought within the state and the closely contested constituencies. In such instances, the stock-in-trade is that the “subaltern” (a’ la Spivak) and the “other” (a’ la Edward Said) is both agent and victim; therefore the West stands askance and trains its arsenal of photo-journalists to capture and archive the ‘moments of madness’.

Again, as argued above, those who oppose the stance of Western democracies are billed as perpetrators of violence while those leaders in the West are regarded as statesmen and stateswomen who remain untouched by the international election observers, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) observer missions, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Selective targeting of “over politicised” individuals by Western governments in Syria (Asad), Libya (Muammar Gaddafi), Iraq (Saddam Hussein and Tariq Aziz), Zimbabwe (Robert Mugabe and a number of his ‘War Cabinet’) and Palestine (Yasser Arafat and Ali Halimeh) are justified as targets for inquests, sanctions and punishment. Trespassing into the Middle East is choreographed by the same Western-based media as ‘sanitised interventions’. Military interventions designed to access minerals

and oil are recorded as proffering democratic processes and peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Cameroon and even Nigeria. Again the irony is that peace and democracy have become intangible in the wake of all the military interventions that come from Britain, France, and the United States. This way, the election observer missions and the ICC's mandate of ending impunity, rape, genocide and hate speech for the worst crimes in the world through 'justicing the victims' has been characterised by tensions and divisive engagements. African Union (AU) member states in October 2013 just fell short of unanimously resigning from the binding clauses of the international election observer missions and ICC.

The crimes for which all genocidaires have been charged constitute situational gravity. Those African states where crimes against humanity are committed are targeted for such juridical questioning and ultimate sentencing by the ICC. Yet another instance of the selectivity of the justice system envisaged in the ICC lies in the mass atrocities committed in Zimbabwe in the Gukurahundi massacre. Because the imperial power, Britain, had its own ulterior interests at the time of Gukurahundi, there was no 'spectacle' and no 'filming' of the atrocities. Independent journalists were actively dissuaded from recording the grotesque and therefore the ICC could not prosecute the military and secret servicemen who perpetrated the atrocities. The hate speech disseminated against the 'dissidents' was allowed by both the Zimbabwean government and the Western media to demonise the amaNdebele. Britain, France and America have been cited as hypocritical because of their participation in Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Ukraine and how they manipulate domestic (dis)order and international governance and opinion. African genocidaires therefore perceive themselves as 'othered' by an inane judicial system that 'globalises' the 'rule of law', justice and impartiality yet remains partial and selective.

Hate speech and 'situational gravity' imply three volatile elements:

- (i) Harms evoking 'human alarm' and, therefore, 'global concern';
- (ii) Systematic execution of the crimes; and

- (iii) State-sanctioned crime is graver than the crimes of oppositional party groupings.

For these three reasons, the international observer missions invariably express outrage and condemnation of all election outcomes, specifically when the liberation struggle political party retains power. In short, the international election observer missions comprise impotent legal and imperialist institutions. Partisan 'international' considerations downplay 'other crimes' while highlighting others. The mass and social media highlights purposefully selected events over others. Mass media and the Internet focus on the most televised crimes. The argument here is that criminal law is not only about deterring future wrong or exacting retribution. Rather, criminal law forms and reinforces a moral consensus among the law-abiding. This way, criminal law enhances social solidarities that ultimately spawn corruption while criminalising the opposition parties.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009:182) observes that, "systems of governance that emerged in pre-colonial Africa and [after Berlin] were underpinned by complex ideologies involving authoritarianism, militarism, populism ... patriarchal tendencies, kinship and communalism." In sum, power and governance are permeated and mediated by such crucial ambiguities and contradictions.

Without condoning the specific 'masterminded deaths and killings' of oppositional contenders, hate speech and abuse of social media platforms by the ruling party induce, mental health problems that are consequences of war and strife, experiences that revictimise the victims. Munashe in Kanengoni's *Pawns* (1997), commits suicide at the end of the war in Zimbabwe because of the horrors that are indelible on his mind. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the most invisible ogre created by war and hate speech, hounds Munashe till he takes his life. After the CNN, Al-Jazeera, eNCA and BBC cameras have left the post-election constituencies in Zimbabwe, PTSD and tears become the language for expressing the most profound trauma. Grief, internal and psychological crises, harrowing memories, emotional wheals, invisible voices and frequent gunshots, explosions and delimbed body parts crystallise to revictimise the

victims. Indeed, there is an urgent need for scholarship to seek an epistemological understanding of revictimisation. This could take the form of multidisciplinary scholarship that examines evolving histories, emerging marginalities and the unstated agenda of visual representations, social media representations, and hate speech.

The Tempestuous Templates of Misinformation on Social Media

In 2016, ‘post-truth’ was chosen as Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionaries. However, the term is symptomatic of an era rather than just a year: “an era of boundless virtual communication, where postcolonial national politics thrives on a repudiation of facts and commonsense.” Post-truth is an adjective often associated with nationalist politics which is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” One of the principal tensions in the experiences of social media and election processes in Zimbabwe relates to the efficacy of media as a representative field of this episode and post-truth. Put simply, visual media have more successes in representing and historicising hate speech experiences that unfolded in Zimbabwe post ‘the coup that never was’.

Genocide is derived from Latin roots, *genos* (race/tribe) and *cide* (killing). Genocide, therefore, quite often, is social, political and perhaps much more ‘every day’ and permanent in its effects, rather than just an ungraspable and unspeakable, accidental moment of madness, implicating ‘them’ instead of ‘us’. Patriarchal loyalties, ethnic cleavages and resource plunder often drive misinformation and hate speech agendas.

Zimbabwe witnessed atrocity, ‘Ndebele cleansing’, torture, mass starvation by death and lasting psychological scars that drove many Ndebele-speaking people into suicide. Writing of the media war in Biafra, Achebe (2013:199) clarifies his position relative to the impact of televisual images, hate speech and propaganda:

In the televised Biafran War, blood, guts, severed limbs from the war front *flooded* into homes around the world ... in real time. Television *invaded* without mercy the sanctity of people's living rooms with horrifying scenes of children immiserated by war ... Biafra became synonymous with *tear-gutting imagery* of starving babies ... blown out bellies, skulls without subcutaneous fat ... (my emphasis).

In connecting to my thesis of televisual revictimisation, Achebe confesses that “for those of us on the ground in Biafra, where this tragedy continued to unfold, we used a different language ... the language of memory, of death, of despair, suffering and bitterness” (Achebe, 2013:199). Gukurahundi was not televised; the mass media was ‘throttled’ into under-reporting and the West (Britain) had its eye on other imperatives than reporting on the tear-gutting imagery of ‘dissident men and women’ killed and shoved down disused mines in Gwanda and Kezi. The language and images conveyed through television de-sanctified the privacy of home and their impact was invariably to wrench tears and compassion fatigue from the viewers.

Achebe invites readers of this work of fiction to smell the heavy odours of diarrhoea, visualise the washed-out ribs and dried-up bottoms of the dying refugee mother's child. Each reader emerges with a different tapestry of pictures rather than the selectively manufactured images of photojournalism. There is currency and fidelity in this language of memory, layered with bitterness over the futility of life is absent in still and social media pictures. At the end of the dissident war in Zimbabwe, with over a 20,000 amaNdebele gouged by vultures, maggots, gunfire and Chinese-made machetes at the hands of Perence Shiri, the denial, takes on an ominous form. Matabeleland is not a subject open to discussion; Matabeleland has not been taught as part of the bitter Zimbabwean contested political and election experience; Matabeleland has been de-historicised. Yet, ironically, Matabeleland remains a stubborn, ineradicable episode. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace Report *Breaking the Silence* is, therefore, read as an important addition to

the conversations about genocide and the experiences of both the victims and perpetrators of violence.

Witnessing and Picturing Violence: Photojournalism and Glamourising Tragedy

In 1994, Kevin Carter, a South African photojournalist published a photograph of a child being stalked by a vulture in the conflict in Sudan. Kevin Carter committed suicide when this disturbing picture was circulated in media circles. Whereas Susie Linfield (2010) argues that viewing photographs of torture, mutilation and death is *not* exploitative but rather a necessary step in alleviating political violence, Carter's death suggests that photographs are exploitative, deceitful, pornographic and voyeuristic. The drones, the pangas, the machetes and landmines that are made in the US, the UK, France, China, Russia and other states are not pictured in the violent furore dramatised in postcolonial African states. Such weapons are made and supplied on the immoral and capitalist understanding that they bring in profits to the global transnational corporations (TNCs) rather than used to kill and maim the electorate.

DeCesare (2013:1), asks pertinent questions related to photojournalism:

How do you stay safe, stay ethical and tell good stories when you are covering (election) violence, and dealing with [women] and children, and foreign cultures ... Why do words so often fail to express the impact of terror, tragedy and disaster? What does it take for survivors to tell their stories? ... What role do journalists play in the process of finding narratives, meaning, and justice in the face of atrocity?

In witnessing and picturing election violence, genocide, and massacre, the photojournalist becomes a participant in the strife, taking angles of victims and their victimisation. This process *revictimises the victim*. Pictures of election violence and war capture atrocity, bloodshed and tears. Injustice emerges from such narratives of election rallies denied because they have not been authorised by the ruling party's police bureaucracy, hence the subtitle of this

chapter, “glamourising tragedy.” The violence verges on the gross and macabre. A post-truth era creates an ethical twilight zone, where the stigma attached to lying and (mis)information is lost, and lies could be told with impunity and with no consequences for the perpetrator’s reputation. That results in the creation of rumours, ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories, which could go viral in a short time and generate false realities and serve propaganda purposes (Al-Radhan, 2017). In the case of Carter, photojournalism becomes complicit in tragic scenes, both as recorded and displayed in the public necklacing of the ‘burning [Mozambican] man’ in South Africa’s xenophobic attacks in 2008 and other ethnicised episodes characterise the ‘exceptionalism’ of post-apartheid South Africa. Like pornography, photojournalism means “the violation of dignity, exploitation, objectification, putting misery and horror on display, moral and political perversion ... *a practice in excesses*” (Campbell, 2012:6).

Modernity’s culture of spectatorship, coupled with its relent-less exposure to harrowing images, maps photojournalism’s preoccupation with crisis coverage and glamourising tragedy. The visual displays and spectacles of genocide encourage and ratchet a cultural meme where international responses to crises in Africa are explicitly insufficient, indifferent, or, avoided altogether. The political economy of disturbing ‘international conflicts’ where no oil, diamonds and other exploitable natural resources occur is that they are not compelling enough to galvanise concerted ‘international’ responses. Campbell (2012:20), however, perceives the particular individual image as a stimulus to international responses, arguing that:

- (i) A single individual is viewed as a psychologically coherent unity, whereas a group is not;
- (ii) Identifiable victims are more ‘vivid’ and therefore more compelling; and
- (iii) Identifiable victims are actual.

He argues that ‘emotional contagion’ produced by particular individual shots of powerless victimhood consolidates the deployment of photojournalism’s peripatetic search for “good

stories.” Lippmann’s (1986) “agenda setting theory” examines the impact of social media on audiences’ perceptions of and responses to events that create indelible pictures in the minds of diverse audiences. The selectivity of the media, especially photojournalism and fake news, primes the presentation and positioning of horror.

The Agency of Performative and Ideological Prisms

Two films on genocide, “Hotel Rwanda” and “Sometimes in April” are both seen as performative and ideological prisms through which mass participation in hate speech and genocide was disseminated. Ethnicity is foregrounded in both films, emphasising a demonisation of ‘the other’ and the bloody reprisals that followed this invocation. Juvenal Habyarimana, then president of Rwanda, and a Hutu himself, set in motion a bloody agenda against the Tutsi minority as part of a legitimising protocol, *rubanda nyamwinshi* (majority rule) for his dictatorial power. The Tutsi minority was delegitimised through classification as *inyenzi intokanyi*, the cockroaches. Political power at the end of the colonial reign had been passed over to a Tutsi ‘aristocracy’. Habyarimana re-invented the Hutu with a vengeance. Radio stations became a key site for disseminating hate speech and stilted propaganda that resonated with the ‘purity’ of the Hutu grouping. For instance, Simon Bikindi, a Hutu singer, composed anti-Tutsi songs that were played incessantly on Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTL) to reinforce their marginalisation and dehumanisation.

In a review of the film “Hotel Rwanda”, and the compassion fatigue that it generates, Campbell (2012:6) argues that this film tackles “one of the most horrifically ugly events [displaying] a terrifying campaign of genocide ... while the rest of the world looked and did nothing.” Paul Rusesabagina, a Hutu himself, stars as the hotel manager at Les Mille Collines in Kigali. A successful businessman, he wields massive political capital as he is well-connected. But his wife, Tatiana, is a Tutsi. As the violence escalates, Rusesabagina’s hotel becomes a ‘refugee camp’, and his ‘guests’ (the Tutsi minority) grow more exposed to precarity each day as the

Hutu siege becomes a menace at roadblocks, in churches and every space in Rwanda.

“Sometimes in April” explores vexed and polarised ethnicities, the Hutu and Tutsi. In the real and the reel, one Hutu family is torn apart by the genocidaires and Idris Elba stars in defying Hutu hegemony and tries to move his Tutsi wife to safety. Honore, Augustin Elba’s brother, has been arrested and is awaiting trial in Arusha, Tanzania, for the bloodless role that he and other journalists played in the Rwanda genocide. A United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Prudence Bushnell, is cast in role to convey her frustration and sadness since she fails to persuade the US to intervene in the genocidal crisis in Rwanda. The reason proffered in the rejection to intervene is cold: to avoid ‘another Mogadishu’ where eighteen American soldiers were killed in active combat in Somalia.

In both films, as the genocide unfolds, the ‘international’ world looks askance. Journalistic figures range from 620,000 to 800,000 Tutsi killed during 2004 alone in Rwanda (United Human Rights Council, June 2014). Both reels and the photographs shot and disseminated during the conflict constitute an intertextual narrative linking the political situation in Rwanda to the “*consumption matrix*” where viewers reacted vicariously to the displays of horror. In tandem, these tropes of representation (un)intentionally glamourise tragedy and call upon the world to react in specifically packaged ways. Nicholas Sarkozy, then French president, encountered the Rwandan genocide at the Memorial of the Rwandan genocide during a state visit in Kigali February 25, 2010. He remarked that, “France and the international community ... failed to act during the genocide because [they] suffered a kind of blindness.” His public remarks came *after* the event. Evidently, the largely faceless victims of this genocidal episode, as depicted in the mural, died and are forever beyond the reach of the filmic, social media and photographic displays. Equally, the survivors have their memories of departed ones endlessly stoked in *revisiting* the scenes of horror and *re-looking* at the perpetrators. Such experiences *revictimise* the

victims. When ‘the good story’ of genocidal and election-rigging crime is told, it is the victim’s narrative that is *re-membered*. Such painful stories are tremendously important in the memorialisation and reconstructive processes; they represent a difficult equilibrium between ethics and *reconstruction*, torture, hurt and memory. Injustice becomes a verb in the social media, cinematic and systematic catalogue of rape and de-limbing of election-violence victims.

In *Mending Wounds: Healing, Working through, or Staying in Trauma*, Masterson, Watson and Williams (2013:1) argue that “trauma disrupts the ordinary mechanisms and representations of consciousness and memory.” I concur that, “trauma is a shattering experience that disrupts and distorts memory, rendering it thereby vulnerable and fallible in reporting events” (Masterson *et al.*, 2013:1). Trauma testimonies, such as the burdened versions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC) in 1994, are validated through the tears and wounds of the victims. The regaling of violence and torture, rape, and hopelessness constitute a process towards closure, a prolonged moment of inscribing new identities by the victim, especially as the same victim attempts to integrate the present ‘other’ that was lost during the re-membered episode of victimisation. I also perceive, in the election-violence victims, an agonised denial of loss that enlists the past because the present is linked to that past and its history. Since the ‘history’ of the future is privileged in consciousness as possibility, healing and redemption are prioritised in the process of reconstructing both the scarred body and the traumatised psyche.

The scarred body and its disorienting traumatised experiences challenge videographic, filmic and social media versions to the extent that apartheid violence and the massacres at Sharpeville call for a more nuanced hieroglyph, a tapestry that invents mimicry of the perpetrators of violence. Authorised state violence publicly proclaims to the world of the political opposition members, ‘I kill; therefore I am’, while the victims attempt to reconstruct identities that escape criminalised hate speech vocabulary. The wounded

body, raped and disfigured, maimed and mutilated are indexical, disturbing images that defy mending and reconstruction. Perverse photographs and filmic projections apparently flounder in their 'search for good stories', especially when the hiatus of the viewer and the viewed becomes compounded with hegemonic silencing and perverse practices.

In the civilisational paradox that tampers discursive practices on election violence, we argued that there are irreducible tensions and contradictions that, ironically, plague and enrich mass media and social media and photojournalism relative to democratic imaginaries. These tensions surround the representation of the victim, the 'other'. We contend that social media harbours an ethnographic impulse, approaching the victim from a mission of 'salvation', rescue, rehabilitation and circulating both the debased subject/object and the image. An ethnographic proximity to scenes of victimisation, an intimacy with the victim, and a focusing and re-focusing of the lens all collude to project both compassion and glee. I am aware of the ire that arises from such a viewpoint, but I am equally aware that the incompatibilities between the visual and the written cannot be dichotomised nor rationalised away as though they were enabling binaries.

Holland (2010) and Godwin (2009), in the tradition of Michel Leiris and Claude Levi-Strauss, take on a dual position as informants to a largely European audience and detached ethnographers about the implosion of a state called Zimbabwe. In both roles, there emerges a burgeoning dichotomy between social media and literary representation. The verifiable subjectivities captured through the camera lens lack the representation of thoughts and feelings, experiences and phenomena that are conveyed through a literary lens. Literary narrative strives to occupy the intimate interior of subjectivities and experiences that it explores.

Media houses and social media inscribe perspectives that transmit hermeneutically positive or negative valences of revictimisation through the image. These ideologically oppositional channels have become tools of *apodioxis* – that refusal of all argumentation –

because of the ‘real, the reel, the visual’ that each channel selectively adopts to project to audiences. Each projection of election violence conveys a standpoint, a politicised statement, an (in)adequate index of authorial intentions. Representational problems are endemic to the ethnographic gaze that capitulates to the stereotypes of coloniality.

‘Secondary victimisation’ is indeed a misnomer for the experiences that election-violence survivors go through as social media cinematic reels investigate and arrive at ‘conclusive’ judgments over the perpetrators of violence. Suicide (recorded and unrecorded), post-traumatic stress disorders, emotional re-scarring and solitary confinement in claustrophobic police cells are all pre-eminent signatures of revictimisation, a re-engagement with the sordid details of experiences that victims of military, police and civilian strife would rather efface than see replayed and re-enacted.

Conclusion

We argued that election violence involves specific stages: classification, symbolisation, targeting, dehumanisation, organisation and finally, denial. Racialised and ethnicised classifications become specific instances for the dehumanisation and extermination of black subjectivities. Language, race, gender, sex and xenophobic episodes all constitute markers of identity that have spurred election violence and genocide. A manufactured and conveniently contextualised identities, including ascribed markers, have been marshalled to organise political campaigns, crusades and the installation of discredited appointees in postcolonial governments.

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SECTION V

Jurisprudence and Related Legal Matters

Re-examining Hateful Messages in the Nigerian Media and Legal and Policy Options for Curtailing It

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Abstract

Spreading of hate messages in the media is a prevalent and worrisome phenomenon across the globe because it has caused and contributed to public violence, humanitarian disasters, genocides and mass killings in many countries. While this danger has been recognised and measures taken to prevent its prevalence in some countries, other countries, including Nigeria are yet to develop mechanisms for curtailing the spread of hate messages in the media. In Nigeria, hate messages are more prevalent during political activities, especially at election periods. Spreading false and hateful information has stimulated violent activities such as mob actions, public violence and rioting and murder of political rivals during elections. Sufficient attention has not been paid to this dangerous trend and adequate preventive measures have not been developed to curtail it. This work explores the dangers

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posed to Nigeria's democracy by hateful messages in the media and examines extant and proposed regulatory mechanisms to curtail its spread. It concludes that new legal measures which can portend a clampdown on the media and stifle freedom of information may not be the solution to the problem. However, there are existing laws that can discourage the media from engaging in spreading hateful messages if adequately enforced. Rather than legal actions, civic engagement, public education and enlightenment of media workers could be more potent in addressing and reducing the spread of hateful messages in the media in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Hate messages, media in Nigeria, legal actions*

Introduction

Deployment of hate speech in the mass media has become a worrisome trend in official circuit in contemporary Nigeria. The pervasiveness of social media and its diffusion among the population, coupled with the global opportunities it offers for spreading hate messages and fake news has accentuated official attempts at regulating the media. Observers within civil society, academia and the media have noted that any legal or policy measures towards curtailing hate speech could stifle press freedom, whereas press freedom is critical to the nourishment of democracy. Nevertheless, it is recognised that unfettered deployment of hate messages could be injurious to democracy and peacebuilding and could destroy the very fabric of the institutions of state that serves as pillars of democracy.

Peacebuilding and development cannot take place where hate speech is very common in the media. In fact, different ethnicities and other groups cannot live peacefully together in a democracy that is permissive of hate messages. In the course of history, violent conflicts, state divisions, bloody wars and genocides have resulted from the transmission of hate messages and the adoption of hate speech. This was exemplified by the anti-Semitic propaganda that ushered in the Nazi party into political power in Germany in the late 1930s, the anti-Muslim rhetoric that eventually culminated into the Bosnian civil war and the propaganda built around hatred of Tutsi

ethnicity which eventually led to genocide in Rwanda (Gourevitch, 1999; Ndiaye, 1993). In all of these instances, the media provided the platform to publicise inciting and hateful messages to prepare the populace and the environment for massive killings and grievous atrocities. The link between violence and hate speech has been confirmed by a number of empirical studies (Cantril, Gandet and Herzog, 1940; Bryant and Zilman, 1986; Conteh-Morgan, 2004).

Hate speeches are expressed all the time in all media and in ordinary discourses in Nigeria; however, it becomes more dangerous before and during an election when intense competition among political elements stimulates an appropriate environment to engage in physical violence to outwit competitors in order to catch more votes. This trend has been noticeable in Nigeria since independence. However, in the fourth republic, the 1999, 2011 and 2015 elections had witnessed very high deployment of hate messages during campaign prior to elections, during elections and after (CITAD, 2016). It is also remarkable that elections have been associated with violence since independence in 1960 up to the Fourth Republic (Isola, 2010). Even though this chapter is not predicting that Nigeria could slide into genocide or the kind of violence witnessed in the countries earlier cited, all the ingredients that engendered violence in those countries are present in Nigeria, a country that survived a civil war and has been grappling with insurgency and protracted terrorism attacks in the last one decade.

The country is very diverse with about 350 ethnic nationalities and languages, even though English is the acknowledged official language (Falola and Heaton, 2008). Citizens are adherents of many religions, but Christianity and Islam are predominant. However, religions also coalesce into geographical division of the country. The northern part is predominantly Muslims with minority Christians; the eastern part is predominantly Christians with minority Muslims while the states in the middle belt and western parts of the country consist of an ad-mixture of traditional religion worshippers, Christians and Muslims (*Opera News*, 2022). Politics of identity is a very predominant phenomenon and it constantly services ethno-religion frictions across the country.

The level of violence and public riots often tends to escalate to intolerable levels during elections in Nigeria. This has been partly blamed on high levels of inflammatory statements, incitement campaigns, and irresponsible utterances all garnished with hate speeches and messages from politicians and their cohorts. Election-related hate speech in multi-ethnic and diverse societies often poses a challenge to nation-building efforts and reconciliation in the post-election phases. This is especially the case when political leaders have taken part in propagating hate speech. The society is not only confronted with the problem of uniting the different political groups that featured during election campaigns but also have to contend with reconstructing the delicate balance of reversing or preventing the consequences of hate speech while preserving the sanctity of a vibrant press and freedom of speech which nourishes democratic governance.

In this chapter, hate speech is understood as speech used in attacking a group of persons or an individual because of such shared attributes as religion, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, political belief, gender or ideological differences. Such speech is often threatening, inciting and inflammatory because they are based on prejudice and are meant to injure the victims (Benesch, 2014). Hate speech even becomes more volatile and injurious when it is combined with false statements about the attributes of the victim that inflame passion and violent emotions among other competing groups about what the victimised group or individual could do to them to prevent them to achieve their developmental or political objectives. Often, perpetrators and conveyors of hate speech combine varieties of media forms to perpetrate the dastardly acts in order to further reinforce the consequences of the act and broaden the propagation of the message in the public arena. Commonly, the popularity of the perpetrators, the dexterity of their language usage, the ubiquity of the channel and means of communication often contribute to the depth of havoc caused by the hate message and the extent of the act to promote hatred of the victimised group or individuals. In addition, since there are strong connections

among defamatory messages, inflammatory talks, irresponsible utterances and hate speech, more damage could be done when all these negative tendencies are combined in the same platform, which could ultimately result into spurring public violence that could lead to killings and damage of properties in a tense context of political competition.

This chapter attempts to interrogate the deployment of hate speech in the course of 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria and how it influenced the course of the two elections. Particularly, it attempts to seek answers to the following:

- (i) What are the nature, scale and scope of hate speech deployment during electoral campaigns and other phases of the elections?
- (ii) How effective are the policy implementation, regulations and enforcement mechanisms meant to curtail the deployment of hate messages during the periods of the elections?
- (iii) If the preventive mechanisms failed, what caused the failure?
- (iv) What else can be done to prevent the occurrence of such tendencies in the future election in Nigeria?

Nature of Election-Related Hate Speech in Nigeria

The foundation of Nigeria's young democracy was threatened and nearly shaken during the 2011 and 2015 general election due largely to bitterness and violent political competition that occurred during the elections. Hate messages propagated in the media before and after the presidential election in 2011 contributed to rioting that saw the killing of about 800 people in northern Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Assassination of political party officials, and election candidates, in addition to other forms of violence is featured prominently and they were commonly perpetrated by thugs and paid assassins. Self-determination, resource control and political restructuring groups were aided by biased media which readily provided the platforms for the deployment of hate messages to support their agitations. Various ethnicities and political leanings found it convenient to nourish their communication with hate and blackmail messages against those perceived to be preventing them

from achieving their objectives. Even those groups that were nurturing separatist ambition found the context conducive for advocacy for the balkanisation of the country in media messages. During and after the 2015 elections for instance, agitators for the revival of Biafran state openly canvassed in the media sometimes using hate messages against their opposition. Besides using the traditional media, the social media provided the platform for spreading of hate messages because there was absolutely no regulatory control mechanism to curb perpetrators of hate speech on such media with global spread. Hence, the contents of WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and other popular social media platforms were replete with inciting and hate messages since it was better to do it anonymously without fear of sanctioning (Kukah, 2015). Although the 2015 election was widely hailed as free and fair, rather than whittling down hatred and divisive agitations among the electorates, it, in fact, escalated divisions in the country, partly due to the backlash of uncontrolled hate speech during the elections.

Nigeria practices the presidential system of government with high concentration of political, economic and power to dispense resources in the central government. Practically, all the federating 36 states very often rely on the central government for financial allocation for their budget spending. Since the constitution does not allow coalition of political parties in government, the winning party occupies the government seat for four years, making electoral conflict intractable since there is no means to accommodate the opposition in government. The country had fought a civil war (1967-1970) to retain its unity and the sound bites of that bitter war still lurk in the foreground of the political environment. The country has a huge and diverse population, consisting of about 350 ethnic nationalities within a population of about 190 million (2006 Census Estimate). Even though the states are autonomous to the extent that they have state legislative assemblies, they do not have individual constitutions and they do not have control over most of their natural economic resources. Hence, they are subjected to socio-economic, political and cultural influences by

the federal government, leading to frustration among the diverse ethnic groups. All these features provide the fault lines for protests which hate speech thrives on in the political environment. Election periods provide the opportunity for diverse groups to vent their suppressed frustrations.

In terms of the nature of perpetrators of hate speech, they cut across all cadres of the social strata. They include political and religious figures, public opinion leaders and elites, ethnic leaders, public officers, media elites and others who have opportunities to access media platforms. They often propagate hate messages in both traditional and social media through paid campaign advertisements, campaign slogans, news and feature articles, personal opinion pieces, verbal expressions and discussions on radio, television and in physical and online fora sometimes while expressing their discontentment with the political system or while making general comments on public affairs. Such expressions sometimes results into violent physical exchanges among the followers of the media opinion leaders and opinion molders and manifests in public rioting. For instance, during 2015 elections, the use of derogatory terms in local languages to label political opponents, such as pigs (*elede*), cow (*malu*), goats (*akuya*), cockroaches (*aayan*), and *Bokoharis* became popular in different parts of the country (CITAD, 2016). Some of these terms are highly volatile in meaning and served as insulting to specific local groups who were perceived to be blocking others from accessing power; the terms are suggestive of incitement to violence against such groups. For instance, the term 'pigs' which could offend the religious sensibilities of Muslims, could suggest that some individuals are not clean and therefore not fit to live. This is a dangerous term to use for anyone in a context predominantly populated by Islamic adherents.

Opponents of one of the presidential candidates who eventually won in the 2015 election, General Buhari, labelled him a *Bokohari*, a derogatory term that associated him with Boko Haram, a deadly Islamic terrorist group. It insinuated that the politician was a patron of the extremist terrorist group. It was, in fact, revealed that a foreign

firm, Cambridge Analytica, was contracted by supporters of the then incumbent Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan to produce for circulation an Islamophobic visual to discredit the main opposition candidate in the 2015 election, General Buhari (Cadwalladr, 2018). The video contained graphic images of people being murdered by Boko Haram groups. By blatantly associating General Buhari with such obscene and hateful contents, the intention was to scare the electorate from the polls or to discourage them from voting him in the election. That video was broadly circulated before the presidential election, especially on social media.

According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, after he lost the 2011 presidential election, the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), General Muhammadu Buhari issued a statement calling on Nigerians to rise up and defend their votes. Subsequently, riots broke out in locations in the northern part of Nigeria where over 800 people were killed over three days of riots and violence. His supporters threatened to make the country ungovernable if his electoral mandate was not restored. It took the government a lot of efforts to restore normalcy in the country. Earlier, according to the Human Rights Watch (2011), Buhari's supporters had also threatened in the media that "... dogs and baboons will be soaked in blood if their patron did not win in this election", among other inciting comments at the pre- and post-election periods. Such inciting statements garnished with touches of hate messages were meant to animate the political oppositions in preparation for public odium and possible lynching. In the report of the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) riots and public violent incidents were recorded in 22 of Nigeria's 36 states at the peak of the 2015 electoral campaign and during election. This resulted in the death of about 58 people while hundreds were injured (National Human Rights Commission Report, 2015). The commission attributed the violence to incitements and hateful communication deployed during the campaigns through the media. Many other violent incidents were recorded across Nigeria during the same period. Another example of high profile killings was the

assassination of a political party chairman who was eliminated in Ekiti State, southwest of the country days before the 2015 election.

Before and during the 2015 election, newspapers, broadcast media and social media were full of hateful and inciting programs and messages sponsored by members of the party in government and the opposition. “The Lion of Bourdillon”, a broadcast documentary series was widely transmitted on some privately-owned television stations, such as the African Independent Television (AIT) and the public-owned Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), both of which covered the entire country and which signals could also be received in neighboring countries. The broadcast was sponsored by the campaign elements of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the party in government during the campaigns. The documentary contained derogatory and hateful messages about a major opposition leader, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC). The series portrayed him as a criminal and depicted him as a half human and half lion animated figure. In addition to the inciting content, hateful innuendoes around his birth circumstances were apparent in the documentary film which could incite the audience to take violent actions against him. A federal court eventually had to intervene by issuing an injunction to put a stop to the broadcast of the documentary because of the possibility of inciting the public into violence against the leading politician.

Such inciting incidences are pointers to the challenges associated with the nature of ownership of the mass media in Nigeria. The tendency is that politicians, public office holders and party officials who hold licenses to own or control the mass media are often tempted to deploy their media platforms to broadcast and propagate hate messages. Oftentimes, media platforms owned or controlled by leading political elements avails their platforms for blatant demonisation of opposition figures and this contributes to heating the political environment during electioneering activities. In a study conducted by Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) to monitor hate speech and messages during the 2015 elections in Nigeria, it found that hate messages on social

and traditional media were strong drivers of violence. However, social media was found to be more culpable in publishing violent contents for the apparent reasons of lack of regulation and official control (CITAD, 2016).

Challenges of Hate Speech to Post-Election Peacebuilding

At the end of every election, it is expected that the winner in the election and the vanquished should come together and reconcile in the service of national interests. It should be the time when all interests should be harmonised so that peacebuilding and development effort should be accelerated by all parties. However, because of the ringing echoes of hate speech and demonisation, this could be difficult and could go on for a while unless the various parties make deliberate effort to work assiduously towards healing the wounds. For instance, the aftermath of the 2015 elections in Nigeria brought a strong resurgence of separatist agitations for the creation of Biafra nation, dissipating the lessons learnt from the 1967 to 1970 civil war in which millions of souls were lost. The separatist agitators and other groups that counteracted them deployed hate messages in the services of their campaign. The separatists justified their agitation on the various labels stamped on them by hate campaigners during the election and on the fact that the Nigerian federation was no longer receptive of them and therefore, their continued stay could expose them to violence as a distinct group, just as it was witnessed prior to the Nigerian civil war that started in 1967.

In 2017, a northern youth association issued a quit notice to all the Igbo nationalities from northern Nigeria and in retaliation, the youth in eastern Nigeria called for the evacuation of the northerners from the east. Such threats were publicised widely in the media. It took concerted peacemaking efforts by the government to put an end to the situation which could have degenerated into violence between the disparate groups. The Niger Delta quest for autonomy has escalated and thrived on inflammatory and hate messages, while other ethnic nationalities have been complaining of marginalisation.

The various negative publicity generated by these agitations tended to inform citizens' withdrawal of support for the government, which impacted negatively on development planning and actions. The government has therefore always found it difficult to obtain national consensus for initiating and building new development infrastructures because of unnecessary hate sentiments expressed by various groups.

Unnecessary religious sentiments are often expressed based on fear of extermination by either Christians or Muslims, two dominant religious groups, which may be attributed to the hate rhetoric expressed by religious entrepreneurs employed by political parties that exploited the religious, cultural and political divisions across the country in their quest to mobilise votes. These divisions tend to slow down socio-economic development and other human development endeavors to the extent that the time and resources expended by government on deflecting the divisive agitations could have been spent on development and peacebuilding activities.

Legal and Policy Mitigation Mechanisms

There is no specific law or regulation that could be directly targeted at tackling hate speech in Nigeria. The peculiar nature of hate speech and messages originating from the media is intrinsically and delicately linked to press freedom, individual freedom of speech and freedom of expression in public spaces, all of which are protected by Nigeria's constitution. Nevertheless, hate speech is regarded as a major threat to society and freedom of speech in most countries, whether there are mechanisms to contain it or not, and Nigeria is no exception.

A number of existing legal provisions can be invoked against certain aspects of hate speech offences. For instance, the Criminal Code in Nigeria has provisions protecting individual citizens from slander, libel, blasphemy, perjury and other related offences. In addition, Section 95 of the Nigerian Electoral Act, 2010, contains a section that prohibits propagation of hate speech during electioneering campaigns. The section specifies some of the

ingredients that are related to committing hate speech offences, albeit it falls short of explicitly labeling them as hate speech. It specifies a penalty of payment of one million naira fine or serving jail terms of 12 months for offenders. However, since its promulgation, no offender has been prosecuted for this offence based on the provision of the law. In order to complement the electoral law, political parties promulgate a Code of Conduct to guide the activities of political parties. This document among other provisions, enumerates that no political party or their candidate shall make inciting statements through broadcast, newspapers, leaflets, handbills, pamphlets, and other publication means. However, since this code is not backed by any enforcement means, adherence to it is voluntary; therefore, the absence of monitoring mechanism has made enforcement difficult. The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) Act and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code both regulatory agencies for advertising and broadcast media, also have specific provisions that forbid hate messages in the media they regulate. However, there is no tangible precedent established by these agencies of prosecution for offences associated with or related to hate speeches. There is strong suspicion that apparently, there is no political will to prosecute offenders and perpetrators of hate speech by these bodies because of political influences. Part of the problem could be because of lack of independence by the management of the regulatory bodies from government.

Part of the provision of the Nigerian Cyber Crime Act, 2015, (Section 26) prohibits the publication of xenophobic and racist materials. Such prohibition fits perfectly into the profile of hate speech and it prescribes a prison term of at least 5 years or a fine of a minimum of ten million naira or both imprisonment and fine penalties for offenders. In 2016, some Nigerian security men arrested two journalists on account of this law for publishing materials that contain hate messages that were deemed offensive to a particular state governor. It was obvious, however, that the accusation and publication in contention was unrelated to hate offences. The journalists were released after being held for a while

without prosecution (CPJ, 2016). Using such laws as excuses for arbitrary arrest of journalists by politicians and public officers often attract public criticisms and odium in Nigeria. However, the Nigerian public is still waiting for the court's interpretation of the relevant aspects of Cyber Crime Law (2016) as it relates to hate speech offences. Such judicial interpretation could provide useful insights and precedents for tackling hate speech crime in the virtual media and enrich the repertoire of prevention and mitigation efforts against the crime.

In a statement issued by the communication committee chair of the Nigerian 8th Senate in 2018, he stated that the National Assembly was considering a proposed bill that would make hate speech offenders liable to capital punishment (Jimoh and Opara, 2018). Furthermore, the draft law proposed the establishment of an independent commission for hate speech offences to determine the nature of hate speech offences and modes of prosecution of offenders. Even though it is acknowledged that what constitutes hate speech offences is very ambiguous, the ignorance of the law makers about hate speech offences was very glaring to the extent that they were equating hate speech challenges to the extant fighting against terrorism and insurgency in Nigeria. Pundits were even insinuating that the proposed law was being targeted at the critics of the government within the media and separatist agitators across the country (Ojoye, 2017). It was very apparent from public reactions, that the bill was not likely to be passed into law in a vibrant democratic environment as Nigeria. The Nigerian media and civil society advocates for free expression expectedly mobilised against the enactment of the proposed law and it perished with the 8th assembly.

Nigeria is not the only country contending with the challenges of hate speech. Perhaps, some lessons could be drawn from other climes across the globe, especially from the American political system, which practices the same presidential system as Nigeria. The American political system appears to be more resilient to withstand the menace of hate speech than Nigeria because of its more mature

democracy, stronger and seasoned judicial system, virile press and very active civil society. The First Amendment, which protects free expression and press freedom, does not explicitly protect hate speech, even though it has been tested by judicial pronouncements and case laws that appear to be tolerant of what could be akin to hateful communication. Based on arguments that would rather protect individual freedom of expression in public domain (see for example, *Bradenburg v. Ohio*, 1969, which counteracts other judgments such as *Whitney v. California*, 1919; *Shenck v. USA*, 1919; *Gitlow v. New York*, 1925), such cases have strengthened the American democracy in spite of the menaces of hate speech. Unfortunately, such legal precedents have not been established in Nigeria. There is also a vibrant civil society which campaigns against hate speech and breeds public intolerance for such speech in America.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been clearly established that the challenges of hate speech associated with election conflicts could upset democracy and rupture the fragile social co-existence among citizens and political groups in Nigeria. This problem has contributed to preventing the country from attaining sustainable peace building and social cohesion objectives after elections as it makes post-election reconciliation difficult among political groups. It therefore deserves adequate attention from every segment of society, including the government, citizens, the civil society, the judiciary and the electoral body in Nigeria. This attention is, indeed, very urgent because the country is approaching another national election in 2023. It is important, therefore, to take action to prevent the re-occurrence of violent trends that featured in past elections in the country.

Legal reforms targeting hate speech is not encouraged because there is a very thin line separating hate speech and legitimate speeches. Such reforms could limit free expression which is an important civic right. Even before taking legal actions to tackle the challenges, the political elites using security forces are already

targeting government critics and legitimate freedom advocates, as witnessed by the execution of the cyber crime law. However, there are other ways to limit the havoc of hate speech while protecting the freedom of expression required for vigorous political debates during electioneering processes in Nigeria.

The election management body in Nigeria, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should consider working with and collaborating with the media and civil society organisations to establish campaign efforts for consistently educating the Nigerian public about the evil effects of hate speech in the media and in public spaces, and its deleterious potentials on the Nigerian state and its diverse societies. Such public enlightenment and massive education programs should commence and be fully implemented before the next election in 2023 to forestall another round of violence that often characterise elections in the country. The Electoral Commission in tandem with security and law enforcement agencies could also embark on enforcement of relevant sections of the National electoral edicts that prohibits deployment of hate speech before and during elections, by identifying, apprehending and prosecuting offenders in earlier bye-elections coming up before 2023 to serve as deterrent to others who may contemplate on committing the offence during the main elections. This process will enable the Nigerian judiciary to provide the intellectual framework and embark on well-grounded interpretation of laws that pertain to hate speech offences to provide legal precedents that could nourish the efforts towards countering the trend in the country.

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Reliving the Gupta Imbroglia in South Africa: A Conspiracy Theory Perspective of Fake News on Social Media

Tshepang Bright MOLALE¹, Moses Ofome ASAK²

Abstract

The history and perpetuation of fake news, bots and cyber-propaganda largely attributed to the West is gradually becoming an endemic force in Africa. Propaganda is fraud. Fake news is fraud. Therefore, fake news is propaganda particularly when citizens of a country are targeted with falsehood to deceive and achieve clandestine motives. South Africa, like other countries, is a country that regards fraud and fake news as great threats to its democracy. For this reason, where individuals, under the cloak of corporate organisations or otherwise, are believed or alleged to conspire in any form against the corporate existence of South Africans, the rule of law is made to take its full course. The belief in conspiracy theories and fake news as a widespread

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phenomenon has attracted greater interest among researchers in recent times. The focus of this paper is to conceptualize conspiracy theory through the lens of the Gupta's propaganda machinery on their social media and mainstream media platforms and to identify the mechanisms for the spread of such fake news. The paper employed the conspiracy theory as a framework in tandem with a qualitative method in the analysis and assessment of internet-documented secondary data of 'state capture' in light of the Gupta propaganda as fake news intended. Findings show that the conspiracy was by the Guptas against South Africans, particularly those that constitute the tax-paying masses of an enduring democracy. However, despite the threat to South Africa's commonwealth by high-powered machinery of fake news propaganda on social media, South Africans understood the presence of an 'alien' conspiracy to deceive them based on their intuitive thinking as an activist ancestral group that perceived danger in a coalition like that of the Guptas. The outcome of this conspiracy was established as fact or truth against South Africa's corporate socio-political and economic survival.

Keywords: *Conspiracy theory, fake news, propaganda, bots, social media, South Africa*

Introduction

According to Phillips and Milner (2017), the rise in online engagement on websites and social media is opening up new pathways for manipulation and deception to flourish. The social impact of disinformation generated to elicit a strong reaction transmitted using hidden web sites and accounts has been studied. This has also created more room than ever before for conspiracy theories. The information ecosystem of the 20th century has radically changed the conspiracy theory narratives and ways by which fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are created, dispersed, and consumed (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018; De Coninck *et. al.*, 2021).

Recently, the number of users who visit social media and digital platforms for information sharing has increased exponentially (Newman *et al.*, 2018). This is because social media and advanced innovations have facilitated the production and consumption of information by internet users. The online space has also become a receptacle for more fake news than authentic information when compared to the mainstream media of newspapers, radio, and television (Ireton and Posetti, 2018; Asak and Molale, 2020). Accordingly, accounts of paranoid ideas and falsehoods spread rapidly on these online space of social media platforms (Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

This is particularly the situation amid socio-political and economic crises. Such falsehood is being disseminated as fake news and ‘alternative truths’ and they thrive in areas where there is little confidence or fear as well as trust. In the South African context, Wasserman (2020:6) observed that the output of falsehoods that could be classified as fake news is “best conceptualised as different points on a spectrum, ranging from mainstream news reports to fake content on social media created with the express intent to mislead and shift political or social discourse”, such as the Guptas’ media campaign of ‘white monopoly capital’. As a result, the developments in South Africa surrounding fake news must be evaluated in the context of larger political shifts in the country’s government.

Some scholars have revealed that conspiracy theories are associated with lower levels of trust in government (Lutkenhaus *et al.*, 2019). It is in this context of low confidence, and trust in the Zuma administration that the Gupta propaganda and fake news machinery was rolled out on the South African people. Fake news can be defined in a variety of ways, including incorrect news or information (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). Few studies in South Africa identify fake news in the framework of a conspiracy theory, with a focus on the Gupta family (Wasserman, 2020).

In terms of conspiracy theories, what can be deduced from the Gupta narrative about ‘white monopoly capital’ and ‘state capture’ by the Gupta propaganda machine? Is the definition of fake news in

the context of a conspiracy theory the same as fake news discourse in a non-conspiracy setting?

The goal of this chapter was to better understand fake news and conspiracy theories while replicating Gupta narratives laced with propaganda. We achieve this by looking at fake news through the lens of a conspiracy theory. In this approach, we learn more about the motivations of those who create fake news as conspiracy material, as well as the strategies used by the Gupta-owned media empire in their bid to influence South Africa's political public opinion.

This work adds to the growing corpus of knowledge in the field of conspiracy theory. The argument demonstrates that, while conspiracy theories are frequently associated with a negative meaning, they can also have a good connotation considering a warning against false news propaganda intended to deceive, defraud and cause harm to people. Furthermore, the work adds to the ever-increasing scholarship on fake news, particularly in its taxonomy and typology. This should help researchers to delineate the two concepts of disinformation and misinformation in the context of a conspiracy.

There is a growing body of literature on "conspiracy theory" (Benkler *et al.*, 2018); "fake news" (Farkas and Schou, 2018; Tandoc, Lim and Ling 2018) as well as disinformation (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020) or "misinformation" (Benkler *et al.*, 2018, O'Connor and Murphy, 2020). Conspiracy theory is considered in this chapter as "manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve [economic] and political ends" (Benkler *et al.*, 2018:24). It is an attempt, as Douglas *et al.* (2019) posit, to explain what causes major political and social events using conspiracy theories and claims of cover-ups or secret plots usually by some elite or powerful people and roleplayers. We distinguish between constituents of false or fake news as misinformation and disinformation. For present purposes, we are not concerned with misinformation which O'Connor and Murphy (2020) define as false information that is communicated without deliberate malice; rather the interest is in disinformation

defined as false information that is communicated with the intent to deceive (Ireton and Posetti, 2018; O'Connor and Murphy, 2020).

Disinformation is information that is false and is deliberately disseminated with the goal of deceiving others. Therefore, we consider fake news as false, deliberately deceptive information designed for economic or political gain.

Divided into five sections, this chapter estimates that confidence in information sources moderates the influence of exposure to information sources on propaganda and conspiracy views. In Section 2, we explain conspiracy theory and spotlight its features considering the Gupta propaganda; and identify motivations for producing and disseminating fake news. Section 3, presents a review of fake news and the ways it is spread on social media platforms. In Section 4, we discussed inferences drawn from the discourse of historical evidence presented in the literature while comparing our deductions with those of other scholars in the literature. In Section 5, we state our conclusions and suggest possible topics for future research.

Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories can tell us a lot about what's going on in our society – and how to repair them – from political upheavals to fears about sex, technology, and women. Consider this assertion: the Guptas are attempting to seize control of South Africa. Before former SA public protector, Thuli Madonsela's report and subsequent investigations into 'State capture', which has mostly validated this assertion, many would have dismissed it as a 'simple' conspiracy theory that should not be taken seriously. But is it still a 'conspiracy theory' that the Guptas were attempting to seize control of South Africa this belief is broadly supported and is evidence-based?

It appears that many South Africans believe this is not the case. According to Cohnitz (2018), "the fact that Caesar was assassinated by a group of Roman senators or that 9/11 was the result of a plot hatched by al-Qaeda members does not make these historical accounts conspiracy theories. But it will be correct to say there

was a conspiracy theory.” This is because subsequent events have confirmed the conspiracy narratives as true to a larger extent. For many, a conspiracy theory necessitates a degree of conjecture, if not paranoia, in their conviction of such a hypothesis (Cohnitz, 2018). Since ‘conjectures’ are aspects of conspiracy theories, this indicates that a conspiracy theory is ‘valid’ to the extent that it has not been corroborated by facts as events unfold.

Interestingly, most scholars who study conspiracy theories do not agree with the prevalent meaning of the term, according to Cohnitz (2018). They have a hard time identifying characteristics of conspiracy theories that can be regarded as inherently bad explanation types, in part because some initially suspect conspiracy ideas have later proven to be correct. Instead, these scholars suggest that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ should be used broadly: a conspiracy theory is a theory that mentions conspiring agents as a major cause of an occurrence (Cohnitz, 2018). This implies that we are all conspiracy theorists in some way because everyone who believes that some historical event occurred because of a successful hidden collaboration between some individuals is thus a conspiracy theorist, and almost everyone holds a particular belief about some event (Cohnitz, 2018).

Because some of these narratives are genuine and well-known (e.g., that Caesar’s assassination was the result of a conspiracy), believing in a conspiracy theory as such cannot be considered illogical or wrong. There is nothing inherently wrong with conspiracy theories or with believing in them (Douglas *et al.*, 2019).

Otherwise, investigations by psychologists and sociologists to explore the psychological and social profiles of conspiracy theorists may be viewed as nothing more than a witch hunt. Yet such witch hunts do not necessarily jeopardise our progress towards an open society as some will have us believe. Cohnitz (2018) notes that:

... it is not conspiracy theorizing that is the danger, but rather the pathologizing response to conspiracy theories. The antidote to whatever problems conspiracy theories present is vigilance, not some faux intellectual sophistication which dismisses

conspiracy theories out of hand. It's quite simple when you think about it: conspiracy theorising is essential to the functioning of any democracy, or indeed any ethically responsible society.

The premise is that conspiracy theories keep the public in vital control and accountability of those in authority, potentially preventing them from doing major harm. Such critical thinkers are interested in creating a more open society with institutions that exercise mutual control because it is what makes plotting much more difficult. In this regard, instead of being antagonistic to our current socio-political system, conspiracy theorising may be a force for good.

Cohnitz (2018) asserts that “some scholars are correct in believing that the problem with (certain) conspiracy theories is not their explanation type and that” the flaw must be identified on an individual case basis looking at different ways in which errors are made by people when theorizing (see Douglas *et al.*, 2019). Cohnitz (2018), however, claims that conspiracy theorising is a threat to open society institutions and that this can be demonstrated only based on social epistemological considerations. Thus, it is reasonable for the one who believes in a false conspiracy theory, to believe that the organisations responsible for filtering, mediating, or cross-checking information are all corrupt or malfunctioning.

It is worth noting that, while trust is required to be involved in a society's knowledge production, trust and faith in the institutions are not entirely founded on testimony (Cohnitz, 2018). For example, one might have concrete evidence that a state or society's specialists, like scientists, are not utterly inept. Thus when things go wrong you usually notice that there are corrective processes in place: media reports, for example, that scientists fabricated their data, and politics and academics respond appropriately. Retractions are offered, legislation may be modified for quality assurance purposes, policies relying on false information are altered, and scientists are disciplined or sacked. In the event things go wrong, the mutual control mechanisms of these organisations will detect

and correct the mistakes. However, as Cohnitz (2018) states, none of this occurs if you embrace a false or fake conspiracy idea.

Cohnitz points out that conspiracies do occur, and that believing in a conspiracy theory is not unreasonable just because one believes that some events are planned through a conspiracy. It is critical to discover true conspiracies in our culture. Conspiracy theories may occasionally be correct, and we need to know when they are. If this is so, then it is reasonable to conclude that conspiracy theories can be a positive factor in our society. In contrast, false conspiracy theories pose a threat to open society institutions. They erode and eventually destroy the trust network that these institutions require to carry out their fundamental responsibilities. As a result, their entire existence could be called into doubt.

Conspiracy Theory: Features, Motivation for Producing and Disseminating Fake News

Meel and Vishwakarma (2020) note the rise of much information that turns out to be false is due to the interactions that people have on social media, that are, sometimes, unintentional or in other cases, with deliberate motives. According to Douglas *et al.* (2019), causal explanations of conspiracy theories hinge on social motivations which include the desire to valorise and maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group at the expense of 'negative outcomes to be attributed to others. Conspiracy believing is linked to narcissism, which is viewed as an inflated opinion of oneself that is linked to paranoid ideation informed by the desire to seek external validation. The rationale for fabricating communications is unknown, however, it could be linked to attention-seeking and conspiracy theories (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020).

Fake News: The Gupta Saga on Social Media

The Global Digital Report 2019 (Newman *et al.*, 2018) has revealed that there are 4.388 billion internet users and 3.484 billion social media users out of the world's total population of 7.676 billion people. In 2021, the numbers climbed to 4.6 billion and over 3.6

billion in 2021 and 2020 respectively (Statista, 2022). Statista (2022) projected that by 2025, the number of social media users in the world will have increased to almost 4.41 billion (Statista, 2022). Yet, Kemp (2022) argues that there are already “4.62 billion social media users around the world in January 2022.” This implies the Internet is a basic source of information for and is relied upon by half of the world’s population. However, it is still unclear how much or to what extent the widely circulating facts are validated information. How much can we trust the information content that we consume daily (Meel and Vishwakarma, 2020) in the face of fake news that populates social media platforms? During the 2016 US election campaign, the term ‘fake news’ was used as a disparaging word by interest groups and alternative media sources.

Fake news, according to Dentith (2017), is an allegation that a story is misleading and a deception meant to confuse its intended audience. He points out that what’s worrying about fake news is its prominence in particular campaigns, and that what’s new is its prominence as a weapon of corruption in our political economy discourse. For some, internet news tends to produce ‘filter bubbles’ on social media, fuelling unconfirmed claims, rumours, and dubious information due to the lack of fact-checking procedures and preventing users from being exposed to other opinions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). However, Wassermann (2020) argues that context is important because it lends form and substance to the recurring challenge of fake news and that the current problem of fake news cannot be comprehended without considering the news media ecosystem’s recent digital transition. This is so especially when we consider that the weaponisation of fake news and cyber-propaganda by various groups and political parties poses a severe threat to democratic elections.

A few people, according to Meel and Vishwakarma (2020), develop and initiate false information. Mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information are three categories of incorrect or false information identified by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017). False information has a variety of formats that are not mutually

exclusive but do have some variability that places them in a distinct category like fake news. Tandoc *et al.* (2018) discovered a total of 34 scholarly articles published since 2003 that mention “fake news.” The authors were able to distinguish six alternative definitions of fake news, which they then divided into four categories based on factual accuracy and deception purpose. News parody, photo manipulation, advertising and public relations, and propaganda are the other five types of fake news. In contrast, ‘fabrications’ strive to pass themselves off as reputable news sources while providing no true information.

Much research has gone into the taxonomy of fake news (Tandoc, *et al.* 2018; Wang, 2020). According to Meel and Vishwakarma (2020) categorising false information includes Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories, etc. It is imperative to foreground these concepts considering this work. Misinformation is false or misleading information without the intention to deceive. Disinformation is false information designed to persuade and deceive. For our purpose, we consider disinformation as the key component of fake news while fake news is a key component of propaganda which is the key component of a real or ‘true’ conspiracy theory. We do not consider misinformation as a component of fake news, propaganda or conspiracy theory.

Meel and Vishwakarma (2020) define misinformation as “circulating information that becomes false inadvertently as a consequence of an honest mistake, carelessness or cognitive bias. In terms of impact, misinformation is a less-harmful but wrong interpretation of facts can lead to big damage.”

The contrast between the two notions of misinformation and disinformation is critical because they speak directly to the speaker’s or writer’s intent. Beyond that, there is a degree of information falsehood. Someone who spreads misinformation but afterwards realises it is false will usually correct themselves so that others are not misled by their previous words (Asak and Molale, 2020). A person who spreads disinformation, on the other hand, is a liar; they

are ethically guilty of deceiving others, and they will make no effort to retract their statement unless doing so furthers their misleading goals. Disseminators of disinformation are morally responsible for their purposeful deception. Fake news is fake information that is mainly released on websites that are intentionally aimed to deceive for political or financial benefit. Propaganda is deceptive information, which may be somewhat factual but is intended to deceive and persuade for economic or political gain. Propaganda is intentionally biased or false content that is designed to deceive people for political reasons (Verstraete, Bambauer and Bambauer, 2017). Disinformation is therefore a form of propaganda. It is fake news intended compared to misinformation which is fake news unintended.

People's interactions on social media generate a large amount of information content that turns out to be inaccurate, either purposefully or unintentionally. According to Meel and Vishwakarma (2020), the rising spread of false information on online platforms is due to several factors, including societal impact and user perception. They discovered that 54% of individuals throughout the world are concerned about 'what is real or phoney' when it comes to online news. According to data, the younger segment of the population is more influenced by Internet-based information, and this ratio diminishes as age increases. The authors went on to explain and categorise some of the most prominent havoc generated in society in recent years as a result of false information or what they referred to as information pollution.

The Gupta Story of Twitter, Fake News, 'State Capture', 'White Monopoly Capital'

Wassermann's (2020) account of the Gupta story is heavily referenced here. Reports that the Gupta family has undue influence over President Jacob Zuma continued to dominate political debates in South Africa in the last few years. These were backed up by former public protector, Thuli Madonsela's report on state capture and were bolstered by the release of the so-called "GuptaLeaks", a

trove of emails that revealed corrupt deals and dealings between the Gupta family, their networks and government officials across the different departments and state-owned enterprises in South Africa at the behest of Zuma, and his network of patrons (Wolf, 2017; Myburgh, 2017; Wassermann, 2020) – sparked a social media propaganda war.

The Guptas hired Bell Pottinger, a public relations firm based in the United Kingdom, to create and push a narrative of ‘White monopoly capital’ as a campaign to portray Zuma and his supporters as victims of White racism supported by the mainstream media (Reddy, 2017; Biznews, 2017). A group of fake Twitter accounts was set up to dispute the claims against Zuma and the Guptas to divert attention away from the damaging allegations of “state capture” (Wassermann, 2020). Investigative journalists and online researchers discovered a community of tweeters, or a ‘troll army’, through careful analysis of Twitter activity made up of over 150 fake accounts (Daily Maverick, 2016; Wassermann, 2020). According to the *Daily Maverick* (2016), “thousands of tweets and retweets were sent from these accounts rejecting the Public Protector’s allegations of ‘state capture’ and promoting an alternative narrative portraying ‘white monopoly capital’ as the true enemies of the state.”

Where did the tweets come from? Those that the ‘Twitterbots’ shared thousands of times? The source appeared to be the media outlets owned by the Gupta family, namely television channel ANN7 and *The New Age* newspaper. It also appeared that they collaborated with a political group closely aligned with former President Jacob Zuma, called Black First Land First (BLF). Apart from using the rhetoric of ‘white monopoly capital’ to create a pro-Zuma and pro-Gupta narrative, a more severe campaign against journalists who produced negative reports about the Guptas was unleashed online. South African journalist, Ferial Haffajee wrote in the *City Press* about the Gupta family’s behind-the-scenes maneuverings that resulted in the dismissal of then Minister of Finance, Nhlanhla Nene. As a result, the Gupta propaganda machine released a series of photo-shopped, sexist images depicting South Africa’s *Huffington*

Post editor, Ferial Haffajee, in tweets which suggested that she was associated with South African billionaire, Johann Rupert, to imply that she was a puppet of the so-called ‘white monopoly capital’.

Peter Bruce, the Editor-at-Large of *Tiso Blackstar*, was another journalist who came under fire. Bruce, who produced critical pieces on the Guptas for the newspaper *Business Day*, was the subject of discrediting tales on the Gupta-owned website WMCLeaks.com. This website claimed to ‘show some unique leaks regarding the ‘White capitalists’ misdoings’; the site was linked to a Gupta family member.

Discussion

We have presented fake news in the context of a conspiracy theory and shown mechanisms of fake news dissemination by the Gupta propaganda campaigns in the course of reliving the Gupta saga. Here, we discuss the implications of the Gupta propaganda machine and the lessons that may be drawn from the conspiracy theory provided by historical evidence. South Africans generally understand and believe now that the Gupta narrative was a conspiracy against the country and a threat to democracy even if some may not understand the full implication of the Guptas’ activities to deceive and incite them through social media to work against the whites and those in authority.

South Africans had a relatively high level of faith in their institutions including the media which explains their resistance to conspiracies and disinformation. This is particularly the case with South Africans’ trust in the professional mainstream media, which helped to temper the impact of exposure to the Gupta propaganda machine and conspiracy. While we agree with Cohnitz (2018) that a conspiracy theory confirmed as true by the unfolding of events is not a conspiracy theory in the active sense, we disagree with the argument that the validation of events previously mentioned in the context of a conspiracy theory but later proven to be true as a result of a group’s scheme does not render these historical

reports credible. Rather, we prefer to see it in terms of there being a conspiracy theory.

The identification of a false conspiracy theory by Cohnitz implies the existence of a true or 'real' conspiracy theory. Although we agree with Cohnitz (2018) that it is not unreasonable to believe in a conspiracy theory we disagree with his classification of a fake conspiracy theory, which we prefer to call a false conspiracy theory. We offer an inverse conceptualisation of a conspiracy notion based on secondary data from the literature: a real and true conspiracy idea carries with it intended deception and propaganda while a false conspiracy theory disseminates false information classified as misinformation. As a result, we propose that a real or 'true' conspiracy theory carries with it disinformation, propaganda, and outright lies with the intent (intended) to deceive for political or economic benefit, but a false conspiracy theory contains misinformation without the intent (unintended) of deception.

The Gupta family meets the criteria of a group of people who plotted and worked secretly together as conspirators. In line with Cohnitz (2018), we find the conspiring actors, the Gupta brothers, as the principal cause of agitation on 'White capital monopoly' and 'state capture' to divert attention from investigations on their corrupt practices and intention to 'capture the state' of South Africa. This argument is further strengthened by the conspiracy theory element of deception to mislead the state. This means there *was* a conspiracy theory about the Gupta family's activities with the state. The Gupta narrative can be classified as a conspiracy theory where there is always 'room for mistake' when determining the validity of a real or 'true' conspiracy theory in addition to other features like a conjecture. The use of social bots, as a blunder in the Guptas' conspiracy, was their greatest mistake. In this context, a 'true' conspiracy theory has been confirmed as reality or truth beyond a reasonable doubt.

The Guptas' exploitation of digital media infrastructure such as Twitter, social bots, and copycat websites aside from their newspaper and television, exposed the public to additional disinformation.

However, we agree that mainstream or traditional media exposure is related to reduced conspiracy and disinformation beliefs because traditional media constantly attempts to disprove conspiracy theories and disinformation. We argue that this explains why the Guptas employed only their own two mainstream media outlets for maximum control. We believe that trust (faith in institutions) in the mainstream media, particularly in reporting the Madonsela Report, played a role in the people's disbelief of the Guptas' propaganda. Consequently, South Africans believed mainstream media narratives over Gupta white monopoly capital propaganda messages on social media platforms. In line with Asak and Molale (2020), it will be correct to infer that because South Africans have a low level of distrust in professional mainstream news media, their resistance to Gupta conspiracy and disinformation was high.

Conclusion

In this chapter, an attempt was made to reconceptualise conspiracy theory through the lens of the Gupta's propaganda machinery on their social media and mainstream media platforms. The mechanisms employed by the Guptas for the propagation of such propaganda were also identified. They included the use of social bot networks, troll factories, copycat websites and two offline newspapers to spread fake news.

The discourse suggests an inverse conceptualisation of conspiracy theory that draws from a distinction between a false conspiracy theory and a 'true' or real conspiracy theory. A true conspiracy theory carries disinformation intending to deceive people for economic or political gains. A false conspiracy theory, even in the light of the negative connotations of the concept, can only carry misinformation with the 'unintention' to deceive.

We conclude that the Gupta narrative meets the basic features and manner of propaganda dissemination likened to a conspiracy theory. It is safe then to say there was a true conspiracy theory with its attendant negative connotation to deceive and cause harm to the democratic process and commonwealth of South Africans,

in the Gupta story. Furthermore, assuming that conspiracy theory does not only carry a negative connotation, as propounded by Cohnitz (2018), we argue that those who may have an allusion to a conspiracy that is not based on fake news, to deceive, can also be regarded as ‘conspiracy theorists’ in contrast to a Gupta conspiracy propaganda of fake news intended to deceive South Africans. In essence, we are all conspiracy theorists of sorts that fall into one of two categories – a ‘false’ conspiracy theorist that may or may not carry misinformation unintended to deceive or a ‘true’ conspiracy theorist carrying disinformation intended to deceive and cause harm to society. Herein sits the paradox and inverse conceptualisation of conspiracy theory made explicit in the Gupta imbroglio.

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Understanding Rumour... Fake News! and Rumour Control

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Abstract

Rumour and fake news have three binding denominators. Stories woven around the duo could be mis-information, dis-information and mal-information. While rumour could be spread to satisfy certain motives, and as a technique in propaganda, Fake news conflates three motions: First, mis-information: This is information that is false but that which the person disseminating it believes to be true. Dis-information: on the other hand, is information known to be false but that which the person spreading it knows that it is false. The third category is mal-information: This is information based on reality, but

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that which is used to inflict harm on a person, and or a country. The story of the two Buharis readily falls within this description. Furthermore, the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, brought the word fake news into public and global attention, when he classified news organisations critical of his government and personality, as fake news. In recent times, the issue of fake news has become both a global threat and concern. The chapter, basically a conceptual one, also discusses how the transmission of rumours and fake news could be controlled.

The combination of both rumour and fake news is laden with the intent to harm, destroy the public image, lead to riots, create general uncertainty and personal anxiety as well as engender fear. However, to reduce the consequence of these phenomena, lies in their prevention and the establishment of a rumour and fake news control centre.

Keywords: *Rumour, fake news, dis-information, mis-information and mal-information*

Rumour: A Conceptual Understanding

One of the most prevalent yet least understood forms of social interaction is rumour. Rumour, which is frequently referred to as common talk or hearsay, is also viewed as news that has no factual foundation and anything that has a negative meaning. It affects every level of society as a human phenomenon, from the individual to the group to the organisation to the mass.

It is important to note that as society becomes more complex in seeking information, it becomes imperative for managers within organisations and society at large to pay conscious attention to rumour and its attendant consequences. This has become further complicated by modern society's clustered nature. These, researchers have observed, are a result of the world's compressed nature. According to these researchers, act and reverie, present reality, and projected future all seem to be cemented together by the perception of expanding knowledge, automated production, and instant communication. It has further been found that any attempt

to turn off the world's telephone, shut down telex machines, or unplug all computers might switch off global civilisation as well will force man to seek an alternative means of seeking information and communication. Organisations have been known to have suffered diverse consequences as a result of the insidious nature of rumour; from riots, declining and stagnant productivity, and sullied public image to destruction to property.

Available evidence has revealed that, over the years, varying types of rumours have emerged (Esposito, 1988). Some have manifested with attendant consequences and strain in organisational relationships, while others have merely expressed wishful thoughts.

Rumour is a multifaceted and cross-disciplinary form of communication. Since the early 1900s, academics from several fields of study have investigated, analysed, and reported on rumours. According to Rosnow and Fine (1976:8), psychologists investigate how rumours spread and how they are remembered. While anthropologists and folklorists are fascinated by what is revealed about social control and rhetorical style, sociologists analyse rumour from the viewpoint of society structure and the communication process. Psychoanalysts, on the other hand, see in rumour universal metaphors. Historians attempt to unravel the effects that rumour has had in wars and economic crises. On the other hand, lawyers study rumour to understand its hysterical contagion, while the police and the military attempt to prevent its violence and sabotage.

Such disparity of interest groups often engenders diverse opinions on the worth and affective value attached to rumour. While some individuals contend that it is a key social panacea, others believe that it is harmful, dangerous and destructive; hence it should not be entertained at all. Rumour, it must be emphasised, exists at all levels of human relationship and interaction. Because it is oral in nature, it may be found anytime, anyplace, and is not just used in crises. Buttressing this, Knopf (1975) noted that rumour does not only exist at all levels in human history and societal

structure, it also permeates and affects virtually every phase of human activity. Rosnow (1988:16) describes rumour as:

a public communication that neglects private hypothesis about how the world works embellished by allegations or attributions based on circumstantial evidence, they are attempts to make sense of uncertain situations.

This definition simply explains rumour as a mere hypothesis, that is, an unconfirmed proposition. Shibutani on the other hand, cited in Rosnow (1988:16), explains that:

Rumour is ordinarily regarded as a false report or at least one which is unverified and probably false. A rumour is a message passed from person to person....a substitute for news, in fact it is news that does not develop in institutional channels.

Hert, cited in Rosnow (1988), defines the rumour phenomenon as a complex one. According to him, it basically involves the relaying of information via a line of people in a process known as retelling. Such retold stories are marked by distortion, a psychological feature, that occurs at three levels. These are assimilation, levelling, and sharpening.

Theories and Perspectives on Rumour

This section provides a discussion of the theoretical perspectives on rumour.

The Psychological Model

It is assumed by proponents of this model that rumour and gossip stem from individual needs, drives and interests. It is also mentioned that gossiping and rumour-making are considered emotional outlets, defence mechanisms, and ways to explain or combat feelings that may be unaccepted by the individual or at the very least difficult for them to tolerate. Rumour may help in relieving tension, guilt anxiety, fear, anger, resentment and hostility. While the hostile, aggressive quality of rumour often serves to reassure the individual (to make him feel stronger, to protect him from

his anxiety), individual anxiety in wartime rumour should not be overlooked. Rumour, then serves as a rationalising force in the individual's emotional life.

On the other hand, rumour has a neurotic basis, serving as a tool for improving a negative sense of self. Some people attempt to draw attention to themselves by fabricating stories that spread through the rumour mill. This is done in order to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries as the source of the most recent information. Most rumours actually serve as an attention-getting device. Inside information enhances an individual's prestige and position. The more credible the story sounds, the more secure the individual's prestige. The individual imputes his personal prejudices giving vent in most cases to his inhibitions and secret desires. Researchers have also made the claim that rumours are abnormal phenomena rather than things that can be expected of all normal people in specific situations. From this angle, it is believed that people with serious emotional disorders are the ones who create and spread rumours.

While some studies argue that hallucinatory rumour often takes the form of atrocious stories, others disagree, arguing that normal people can also have hallucinations while under extreme stress or pressure. They believe that mental illness is not a prerequisite for hallucinogenic rumour. This model maintains that the individual is always the most important aspect of rumour generation.

The Functional Model

This model explains that rumours are essentially social phenomena that have social components from two different angles. First, rumour is viewed from the level of collective action or enterprise. It is assumed that rumours are not actually the work of a single person; rather, it is known that they happen to be the result of the cooperation of several people. In actuality, any rumour propagation involves two or more people. These individuals are brought together to discuss topics of shared interest while exchanging ideas. Some people express their theories on what might have happened, while others draw analogies to earlier events and yet others present fresh facts. In this situation, perspectives are considered, claims

are disputed, and explanations are sought, while some pieces of information are given more weight than others. Second, situations and conditions are the main subjects of interest. The origin of rumours and their short-lived nature can be found in the immediate context of an exceptional event that pulls people together. An assassination, kidnapping, hijacking, epidemic, riot, plane disaster, or horrifying auto accident taking the lives of prominent dignitaries are all examples of highly dramatic events that frequently disrupt daily life and give rise to rumours. Under this model, uncertainty surrounds the incidents. In very tense situations, such as riots, there are frequently a number of questions that need answers. But the fundamental issue with this strategy is how troublesome the circumstances are. To comprehend and adapt to new and unfamiliar circumstances, information is critically needed. When this happens, the general populace is very receptive to the news. The demand for news increases in direct proportion to how significant an event is deemed to be; the more significant the event, the higher the demand for news.

Since news is primarily supplied by the mass media, which act as its conduit, these outlets are frequently considered authoritative and trustworthy. A sophisticated global network of communication has been developed by modern societies. The extensive network can almost instantaneously increase the speed at which news is delivered to all segments of the public.

People who find themselves in a situation that they do not fully understand frequently look to the media, especially radio, television, and newspapers, for clarification and confirmation of what they have heard. As a result, the news presented by the mass media becomes the yardstick by which reports gathered from other sources are verified or superseded. News may be in greater demand than it is being made officially available. For instance, a newsworthy incident can make the media's best efforts unable to meet the inflated demand or the news might be concealed for a variety of reasons. There may also be instances where the system malfunctions, causing regular communication to either

stop working altogether or perform insufficiently. Information that the public desperately needs may not be provided as a result, and rumour that has been created as a type of improvised news causes conflict among the people. In this sense, rumour serves a purpose by attempting to clarify unclear situations, give information, address concerns, facilitate decision-making, and lessen social friction. It is a technique for group problem-solving.

The Conspiratorial Model

This model, contrary to the psychological and functional models, views rumour as an idea that has been purposely altered or created as part of a deliberate campaign. Rumours are consciously spread in circumstances when there is a significant difference in interests, according to this model's proponents. Such rumours are spread to strengthen or enhance a person's standing. Making new recruits, gathering intelligence, or destroying the enemy by smearing, demoralising, or splintering his camp may be the goals of this. A plethora of tactics are used, including propaganda-based mass media manipulation, the purposeful distortion of facts, the exploitation of pre-existing views and values, and more. This model classifies rumours as boogies due to the threat they pose when they spread. Anonymity is a huge advantage when a rumour is spread because it is frequently very challenging to identify the source. Furthermore, even if the source is discovered, it is frequently challenging to determine the amount of complicity. The Stock Exchange or financial market, where even the smallest piece of information can have a significant impact on stock value, is the place most vulnerable to the propagation of such rumours. Another setting for fabricated rumour is the unstable world of politics.

In general, intentionally spreading rumours is possible and does happen occasionally. It thrives in circumstances where there are numerous competing interests. The evil purpose that distinguishes conspiratorial rumours from other rumour kinds. A rumour with conspiratorial overtones spreads quickly and changes over time. It is subject to artificial creation and can be linked to rumour mills run by rival organisations. The three key components of this model are conspiracy, complicity, and intent.

Understanding Fake News

Simply said, fake news is news that is made up (false, counterfeit). The University of Pretoria's vice chancellor and principal, Professor Tawana Kupe, in a panel discussion in 2019 believes "if it is fake, it can't be news." Yet, he contends that the issue needs to be acknowledged because it also exists in the realm of academics, despite this point of view. Kupe continues by saying that false news is a deliberate attack on democratic freedoms. This explains why US President, Donald Trump, avoids news items that contain dubious news stories. Kupe highlighted that false news is as old as journalism itself and has a variety of goals, from propaganda to spin doctoring, while conceding that it is not a new phenomenon. False or misleading information that is reported as news is called fake news. The phrase is a new word (a new or re-purposed expression that is entering the language, driven by culture or technology changes). Fake news, or fake news websites, are presented as factually correct despite having no basis in reality. Other terms for fake news include alternate facts, hoax news, false news, trash news, and crap.

Media expert Nolan Higdon (2020) described fake news as "false or misleading content portrayed as news and disseminated in mediums spanning spoken, written, printed, electronic, and digital communication." To him, the notion of fake news has been too strictly interpreted to include only a few media outlets and political viewpoints. Stories that are made up with little to no verifiable facts are referred to as fake news. Even more generally, some individuals – most notably US President Donald Trump – have expanded the definition of 'fake news' to include all material that is unfavourable to their own opinions and conduct.

According to CBS 60 Minutes producer Michael Radutzky in 2017, fake news is defined as "stories that are likely false, have great traction [popular appeal] in the society, and are consumed by millions of people." These tales can be found not only in politics, but also in fields like stock values, nutrition, and vaccination. He left out information that is "used by politicians to attack the media for stories or statements that they don't like." "We're talking about

made-up stuff”, according to Guy Campanile, a producer for 60 Minutes, in his statement. That is a falsehood by the majority of standards, on purpose, and by any standard.

In the United States of America and its election processes in the 2010s, fake news sparked a great deal of debate and controversy, with some observers characterizing it as moral panic or mass hysteria and others concerned about the harm done to the public’s trust. It particularly has the potential to erode public confidence in objective news coverage in general. The term has also been used to question the validity of major media sources.

Fake news was named the year’s worst lie by Politifact in 2016. As there were so many of them during President Donald Trump’s victory in the 2017 US election, the general word was adopted.

Rumour and Fake News: A Comparison

Rumour and fake news have three binding denominators. Stories woven around the duo could be mis-information, dis-information and mal-information. While rumour could be spread to satisfy certain motives, and as a technique in propaganda. Fake news conflates three motions; First, mis-information: The individual who is sharing this information believes it to be true even though it is false. Dis-information on the other hand, there is information that is untrue but that is being spread by someone who is aware that it is untrue. The third category is mal-information. Although based on reality, this knowledge is exploited to hurt a person, a nation, or both. The story of the two Buharis readily falls within this description. Various online news sources, videos with voice-overs, indicated that the President, Muhammadu Buhari did join the process of seeking medical care in the UK. The combination of both rumour and fake news is laden with the intent to harm, create a sullied public image, engender riots, and create general uncertainty, leading to personal anxiety and fear. However, to reduce the consequence of these lies in the prevention and the establishment of a rumour and fake news control centre.

Rumour Control

Research has shown through empirical findings that, the best antidote against the spread of rumour is to prevent it from ever occurring. In the same vein, researchers are of the view that efforts should be made at getting to it quickly, since the more the rumour spreads, the more difficult it will be to contain. Consequently, the ultimate question then is how does one prevent rumours from either emerging or spreading? It should be noted, however, that the total eradication of rumour in the society at once could be a futile and an impossible task because man's desire to seek explanation over issues that seemed ambiguous and uncertain have persisted, because through history, rumour is regarded as an alternative for the process of explanation. It is equally strongly believed that it stands beyond reason to argue a rumour because there is no one to argue with in its process since the only source of information that appears to be available to rumour supporters is the rumour itself. Hence, to dispatch a rumour, the presentation of clear straightforward facts in a medium available and affordable to most people possibly, is strongly recommended. Quoting the rumour would only spread it further while the fact will still undermine the intent of the rumour. Rumour is an obvious manifestation of the fears and anxieties of the people. Riots and conflicts result most of the time from rumour and the control of their phenomenon would largely reduce the rate of occurrence of riots and conflicts in the society.

The obvious deterrents to rumour-mongering are legal sanctions, prohibitions and censorship. However, enforcement of these often proves problematic even though most people are aware of the existence of laws against libel, slander and defamation of character. The legislation which seeks to prevent the public from engaging in rumour-mongering and gossiping is often very difficult to enforce and when successfully enforced might have marginal utility. It is evident that prohibitions can be effective if they are credible and enforceable.

How to Check Fake News

The rate at which cases of fake news are getting spread should be a point of concern for politicians, policymakers, media experts, internet site owners and users, among others. In order to free the world from the varying degrees of the effects of fake news, there is the need for journalists and most especially business journalists to begin to think about how to reduce the growth rate. Amerland (2018:2) suggests the following process in identifying fake news from authentic news:

- (i) Familiarisation:** One needs to be familiar with the territory we are in and the digital environment is no different.
- (ii) Analysis:** In the digital realm everything is intentional and everyone has an agenda. We need to ask ourselves if we understand what that agenda is.
- (iii) Verification:** Information is how we function. Unless we have a reliable means of verifying the source of information we conic across we should not be willing to believe it.
- (iv) Awareness:** We should begin to examine our own blind spots and actively think about points of view we do not necessarily agree with, we will be locked to being blindsided forever.
- (v) Empathy:** This is an emotion that allows us to experience a situation through the perception of another person.

The Business of Fake News and Social Media

Fake news is gradually becoming very popular in journalistic parlance and among social media experts and users. The conventional media (television and radio) and space (newspapers and magazines) are less guilty on the issue of fake news. The preponderance of reported fake news issues are on social media. It is said that Facebook accounts for a higher percentage of them as fake news website owners made it their favourite medium to advertise their websites. Unfortunately, the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, was slow in expressing his view on the need to tackle the challenge (Chang *et al.*, 2016).

The issue of fake news thrives more on social media. The reason for this is somewhat understandable: social media contents usually do not go through the rigor of reporting and editing and without any known conventional ways of writing. For instance, in the conventional media, there are reporters who are assigned beats and routinely write reports on the beats. There are experienced editors and proofreaders who vet both fact, logic and grammar of what is written. The commits go through a whole lot of editing and re-writing before being certified for public consumption. This is not the case with most social media content. In most cases, a single person does all the work (Himma-Kadakas, 2017).

Also, in the conventional media, there are sources through which news is generated. According to Himma-Kadakas (2017), while referring to Sigal (1973), there are three channels through which conventional media source news. The three channels are routine channels, informal channels, and enterprise channels. The social media are more interested in opinions and stories that can generate traffic. Therefore, “it is really easy to just make something up” (Chang, *et al.*, (2016:1).

As previously said, a bigger proportion of fake news is spread via social media. According to Chang *et al.* (2016:1), who are citing a study by BuzzFeed, “the author identified an unusual breeding ground for some of the fake news sites: Macedonia, in particular Veles, a tiny, economically struggling city of 45,000 people.” According to Silverman, this is a town with a sizable young population and a former industrial economy. Aside from that, according to Silverman, “it’s a chance for them to earn some extra money as well as a means to find something to do.”

The excerpt from Chang *et al.* (2016:1) below, which makes reference to BuzzFeed’s study on why bloggers or operators of online publications gravitate toward fake news, sums it up.

Nightline traveled to Macedonia to speak to some of the website creators, though they did not want to be identified. The creators of Nightline spoken to said most of their websites did not start out political and, they only run these websites to make money, which they do through users clicking on ads on

their sites. People from the states are watching your website and clicking on the banners and you're making the money, one of the site creators said. It was like, overnight.

Obviously, economic gain dominates why most people engage in fake news on the Internet. In achieving this, they target individuals and organisations that are capable of making news. In summary, people engage in fake news in order to make money through advertisement. Another important thing to note is that doing this does not require much effort. Chang *et al.* (2016:1) speculate that this may be the reason why the amount of effort actually to build something that draws a great lot of attention on Facebook and can make thousands and thousands of dollars, is little.

The Influence and Effect of Fake News

Fake news is synonymous with false news. That naturally means that the concept is not new. The incidence of false news dates back to around the 19th Century (Merriam-Webster, 2017). What is new, however, is the expression fake news. In the same vein, the concept of fake news is novel because of the media (social media) through which it is often circulated. The use of social media has, furthermore, ushered in a new twist to the understanding of fake news (Center for Information Technology and Society, 2019). Since the recent common use of fake news with different motives, a number of arguments have been advanced. A prominent one among them is the insinuation that fake news is capable of changing beliefs and/or capable of influencing electoral voting decisions, with Facebook ranking highest in use among other social media forms. (Chang *et al.*, 2016)

It is well understood that the issue of the influence of any media on issues, is a complex one, hence, it cannot be overtly stated whether the influence of the social media in having manipulative tendency, is real or imagined. However, from available evidence, the ability of social media in influencing beliefs has assumed a significant academic inquest.

Kurtzleben (2018) argues the following in response to this:

... there is evidence that fake news is effective at changing beliefs. One 2017 study from researchers at Yale University found that the more people were exposed to a given fake news statement, the more they believed it. That's good news for fake news writers and the creators of Russian bots and hypothetical 400-lb. hackers in New Jersey. If it's true that showing people the same headline multiple times makes them believe it, all fake news purveyors need to do is be persistent – and hope that they continue to have platforms like Facebook for posting the things they make up.

In another research by the Center for Information Technology Society (2019), on the influence of fake news on the 2016 American presidential election, the issue of the ability of fake news to influence voters' decision was again brought to the fore. It is all summed up in the statement below from the Center for Information Technology Society (2019:1):

The researchers asked the voters how much they believed in three statements, each of which, according to independent analysis, had been promoted by fake news but were actually false: that Hillary Clinton was in poor health due to a serious illness, that Pope I-Yancis endorsed Donald Trump, and that, during her time as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton approved weapon sales to Islamic jihadists including ISIS. Although most people didn't think that these statements were true, there was a very strong link between the belief that they were true and the way people voted.

Apart from the perceived influence of fake news on electoral decisions, fake news has other serious effects too. Amerland (2018:1) provides a summary of this. In his opinion,

It's not just big companies that are hurt by fake news. Research conducted by the University of Chicago and the Marshall School of Business shows that fake news, left unchecked, erodes trust and leads to lower engagement in social media networks. Entrepreneurs and small businesses rely on engagement with their social media activity to leverage the network effect and

gain valuable publicity at a fraction of the cost. A loss of trust adversely affects all marketing and brand-building efforts and breaks the connection with the audience that companies and brands need to gain and maintain market share.

Controlling Rumour and Fake News

In spite of these, however, rumour, to some extent, can still be controlled. The source of evidence that seeks to control rumour spread must prove to be easily identified and considered reliable against which other sources of information could be checked and re-checked. Terry Ann Knopf, attests to the claim that such a source should be defined as authoritative. It becomes apparently difficult to define as authoritative, a source which is not known. Consequently, in such a situation, the source becomes irrelevant while all attempts should be made to present facts which will leave people with, no other option than to believe the rumour.

Shubutani (1996) believes that rumour may be terminated when the situation is no longer problematic or when the demand for news drops or the supply of it becomes adequate. Furthermore, rumours could be terminated by verification or refutation from formal news channels. At best, rumour can be controlled if only individuals could think before they talk.

Furthermore, it is strongly believed that rumour becomes assuaged if it is allowed to run its course. This is in accordance with Shibutani's assertion from 1966 that when circumstances characterised by collective excitement (e.g. rioting) have run their course, tension is diffused and rumour just fades even when no official declaration is made.

Another means through which rumour could be controlled is by issuing a denial. However, denial alone could prove inadequate as such could be regarded as attempts to cover up what the public knows as the truth. Rosnow (1983:48) shares this view. According to him, denial alone can/will never despatch a rumour completely, as rumours involving Procter and Gamble over the years, though often limes denied, have persisted. Furthermore, the effective control of any rumour equally depends on the credibility of the

source against which the truth/falsity of such a story could be weighed and balanced. However, the suppression of a rumour amid be a form of propaganda which might involve the manipulation of communication content to achieve the formation of desired perspective.

Another means by which rumour could be controlled is through appeals from respected leaders such as traditional rulers, leading politicians, social critics, or respected professionals. Public officials also have a central role to play in the control of rumours. Government management must make themselves credible, upholding people's/employees' right to free expression/information at all times.

In the same vein, a rumour control centre should also be established to forestall, as well as serve as information service bureau available to any organization and the nation at large as well as provide citizens with a central, reliable and official source of information.

Other ways of controlling fake news include:

- (i) Verify the source of any content you plan to share at least twice and preferably three times.
- (ii) Be extra vigilant when vetting sources amid tense national situations when emotions are strong.
- (iii) Watch out for spectacular reports that seek to appear believable by fusing entirely made-up stories with real news pieces.
- (iv) Before you share, find out who is speaking. Is this company reputable? Otherwise, is the data skewed? (Real or imagined).
- (v) Look for objectivity in news reports.
- (vi) Carefully assess whether the article is a sponsored one.
- (vii) Look up the author's name on Google to see what other books they have written and published.
- (viii) Consider the tone and intent of the article.
- (ix) Check the date.
- (x) Evaluate image quality, click-through rate, and layout in its entirety.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding all the measures put in place to stop rumours and lessen their impact, it is still preferable if they never start in the first place, as it manifests, its effect is frequently difficult to reverse. Ultimately, despite the lack of or abundance of reliable facts, rumours do not disappear easily. The best way to stop the dissemination of fake news has, however, been the subject of ongoing discussion. Some have suggested that harsh legislation should be put in place, but others feel that doing so will violate people's rights to free speech and contradict the axiom that people deserve the right to know. The discussion over how to control fake news will undoubtedly continue, especially in light of freedom of speech and internet accessibility.

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Fake News Defames People in Malawi

Muyanga Macquba Innocent ZIBA¹

Abstract

This chapter presents results from a study exploring the impact of social media on hate speech in Malawi. The study used variables which were hate speech and fake news. The study interviewed people anonymously that totalled 100 in number. The study used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in this qualitative research. It also used a simple sampling method to choose the respondents. The study reveals the impact of agenda setting theory as well as the two-step model of communication. The study revealed that many people have been affected negatively in Malawi by social media. The study shows that social media is quickly overtaking the traditional electronic and print media and unless people start using it responsibly it will divide the country and harm relations between people. It is hoped that this study will be used in third-world countries as well as developed nations of the world.

Keywords: *Malawi, fake news, social media*

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Introduction

Malawi is a landlocked country in Southern Africa. Tanzania is a northern neighbour, Mozambique is an eastern neighbour, and Zambia is a western neighbour.

Malawi's tribes share their traditional customs with a number of countries. The Ngoni that are found in northern Malawi, central Malawi and southern Malawi are also found in eastern Zambia, southern Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe as well as Durban in South Africa. This tribe actually ran away from wars in South Africa during the period of Mfecane. The Chewas found in Malawi are also found in Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Lomwes and Yaos found in Southern Malawi are also found in Mozambique.

Presently Malawi has moved with time and many people are now using social media. Presently there were 670,000 social media users in Malawi in January 2021. This is a result of the increase of social media users by 160,000 between 2020 and 2021 (Data Reportal, 2021).

There is evidence that WhatsApp and Facebook are now used by many people in Africa. In 2015 there were 12 million South Africans that were using Facebook while in Nigeria 15 million used Facebook at the same time (Ogundeji, 2015).

Using new media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and news blogs, among others news is now reaching a bigger population and a wider audience at a very little cost or no cost at all.

In addition to this, the source of the news and the recipients are facilitating very fast feedback as they are always talking to each other. Social media has allowed common people in rural areas to participate in information transmission especially using WhatsApp which has now become the fastest social media (Ziba, 2015; Auwal, 2018).

However, social media, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook have had adverse effects by harming people in Malawi. Several people were arrested by police in Malawi after they harmed the dignity of people by among other things posting news that was fake or posting rumours that were not substantiated. Recently the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) sent a warning through press releases when they discovered that people have been posting misleading information likely to cause unrest in the country.

MACRA also revealed that some individuals had been posting and sharing messages with the intention of defaming people and harming the relations of others in the process (Kondowe, 2021; Chingaipe, 2021).

Literature Review

Social media, which includes Facebook and WhatsApp, among others, is now rated the most fake news media as more people now use this media. This is because it is user-friendly as it is easy to operate. The availability of smartphones has even facilitated the growth of the social media in Malawi (Shu *et al.* 2020).

However, it is becoming fashionable for people to attack each other by creating fake stories. This is because no one edits social media, unlike news from media houses that pass through a number of gatekeepers. There is therefore an uproar as more people get defamed by the day (Hunt *et al.* 2017). According to Malanga (2020), many women are being harassed as well as intimidated online and these are carried out through the use of Facebook and WhatsApp. Among the reasons include revenge, sexual drive as well as political agenda, among others. Surprisingly, this study revealed that these women never reported to Police the perpetrators. This reveals how people have been suffering silently when they have been harassed or intimidated. In addition to this, the study does not show the extent of this, bullying and harassment which is another gap in this research.

Social networking sites have the reputation of being more interactive and potentially provide a channel for the consumption of news. It is also a platform where the masses make their voices heard and hence participate with other people in the community. In this way, they shape policy objectives, influence intransigent negotiations and even send very strong messages to the government in power about the needs of the common man (Kachali, 2020). The same has been abused as people write abusive language and fake information to incite people so that they revolt and strike against a government in power (Ngwira, 2021).

However, all these studies did not establish the extent to which fake news has affected many people in Malawi.

Misinformation has become a big threat. People just post health updates regarding medication for common diseases which are fake and people just use the medication without actually verifying with health officials. This has become a big health hazard (Waszak, *et al.* 2018).

It is therefore important for ministries of Health and security officials to work hand in hand to curb this fake news as it is detrimental to the health of several people who consume such information.

On the other hand, hate speech, especially texts that are online on social media, has been linked to increases in mass shootings as well as ethnic cleansing, among others (Laub, 2019). It all starts with posting hate speech messages targeting a people or a single person who responds with violence (ELSherief, *et al.* 2018).

Social media, which includes Facebook and WhatsApp, among others, is now rated as a primary source of news consumption nowadays. This is because social media is cost-free, easy to access, and at the same time can quickly disseminate posts. In this way, it acts as an excellent way for many people to post and/or consume information (Shu *et al.* 2020).

It has become fashionable for individuals to use social media and news outlets to publish fake news. Their aim is to increase readership or as part of psychological warfare (Hunt *et al.* 2017) Misinformation through fake news using social media has become a potential threat to public health as people just believe the message and practice what is written (Waszak *et al.*, 2018).

It has therefore become necessary to analyse social medias top shared news to identify fake medical information which is misinforming society. This puts pressure on authorities to formulate laws to control this malpractice.

People tend to follow the abusers of social media to revenge through shootings. It becomes worse if the text is targeting a specific tribe, race or religious organisation (ELSherief, *et al.* 2018).

Justification

There is evidence that people have been abused using social media through the literature review (Malanga, 2020; Kachali, 2021). News reports from the media also indicate that some people were arrested for insulting senior government officials (Kondowe, 2021; Chingaibe, 2021). While there is the presence of fake news, there is no response to gauge the extent it has affected the people hence the need for this research. In addition to this, there is the need to know the reaction of the people to fake news since WhatsApp has become the best news source compared to newspapers and television stations (Bucher, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

If a study has used a good theory as well as a right theory guides and directs the study (Lewin, 1952:169). Through a good theory, the study can be reflected even in the results of the research as well as the methodology.

(Lens, 1987; Sarason, 1978). It is in this context that the two-step flow model of communication is the theory that was chosen and fits this study.

Scholars such as Lazarsfeld (1955), Katz (1973) as well as Berelson (1968) are the pioneers of this model and state that in this theory, the message from the media is intercepted by people who are called the opinion leaders. These people intercept these messages and interpret them for others. These people exercise this power by being informed earlier than others. Sometimes these people understand the messages better than others. Other scholars weighed in on these findings by adding that there are some people living in communities that are popular because they intercept messages and transmit these messages to others (Bo-Anderson and Melén, 1959).

This study fits so well in this model because opinion leaders who are group administrators in both Whatsapp and Facebook wield much power. They inform others of any development and are earlier informed than others. In this way, they wield an informal power. They are able to remove some members who do not follow

the rules and guidelines of the group. They also add a member who wants to join the group. They also advise members on what to post and what not to post. Most of the posts are posted by them because they get information faster from other groups than most of the members. In this way, they wield a lot of power.

Methodology

Research Methods

Questionnaires

These were administered to people who were unable to turn up for focus group discussions because of their busy schedules. Most of them were people who were working or were doing business. Twenty-two people were interviewed using this method.

Focus group discussions (FGD)

Many people were interviewed using this method. This is because they were in groups of 6 to 12 people. Fifty-seven people were interviewed using this method.

What was interesting was the fact that this method catered for a number of people from different tribes, different age groups as well as dominant and minority groups.

Phone interviews

People who were unable to be reached physically but wanted to be part of this study were interviewed using phone calls. Twenty-one people were interviewed using this method.

In-depth interviews

The most active members of the focus group discussions as well as those who showed they knew the subject area well were invited for the in-depth interviews. These were mostly taken from the focus group discussions that were conducted in most trading centres in the north, centre as well as southern regions of Malawi.

Findings and Discussion of the Results

Out of the 100 people interviewed, 72 complained that they were abused by social media. Of the 72 people who complained, only 12

lodged their complaints with the police and the relations of people who abused them. Others complained to the administrators of the WhatsApp groups as well as Facebook groups. They reported that the members who abused others were removed from the groups. However, the administrators never lodged the complaint with the police.

Out of the 12, none was satisfied with the way his/her issue was handled either with the police, courts or relations of the abuser.

Of the 72 people that complained, 34 complained that they were targeted because of the colour of their skin, the way they looked and because they come from a minority tribe and hence, they were targets of hate speech. The thirty-eight complained of fake news whereby people just created a lie and posted on Facebook or WhatsApp with the aim of demeaning them. They were also some among the 38 people who said they were targeted by people they had quarrelled with in the past and used social media for revenge.

Out of the 72, 50 people mentioned Facebook and 22 mentioned WhatsApp.

Out of the 28 who did not complain, 16 are not on any social media platform while 12 have either a WhatsApp or Facebook account but do not post things regularly.

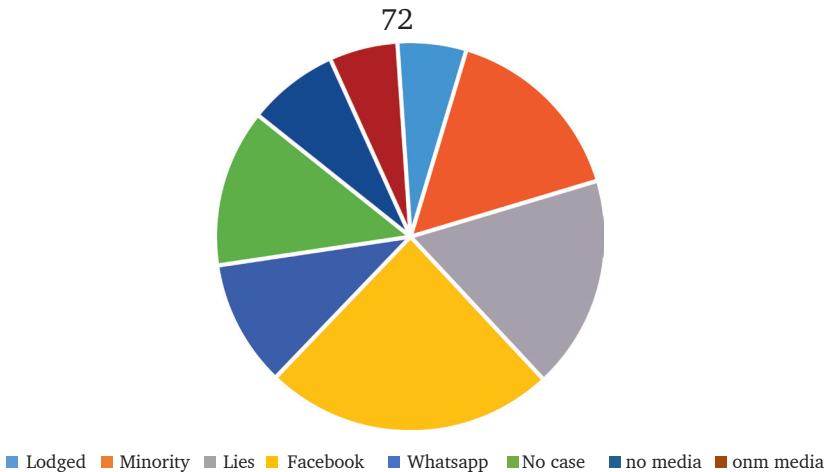


Fig. 18.1: Results of the 100 people interviewed

Discussion of the Results

The results show that social media is not regulated and as such many people are becoming victims. Seventy-two, which is three-quarters of the people interviewed which is a big number. Because this survey was representative as respondents came from the three regions of the country and simple sampling was used to get the respondents, it shows Malawi must find solutions to these problems as soon as possible. The focus group discussions revealed that more people were abused on WhatsApp than on Facebook. Many people complained that some enemies of theirs were just creating fake news with aim of defaming their opponents either during elections or business. Even some women complained of the tendency of some men during the focus group discussions that they would post fake news about serious affairs with other men with the aim to destroy their marriages or relationships. Others complained that their businesses were harmed because of posting fake news in the social media, particularly WhatsApp.

However, many people who were interviewed, particularly from areas far from town, revealed that social media, particularly WhatsApp is helping them link with relations who are in other countries, particularly those working in South Africa and Europe. They said they can send and receive vital information using this facility. They said information on their health, remittances of money as well as chatting are all done on WhatsApp. They said it has more advantages than the disadvantages. But most people living in towns complained about the abuse of social media.

Three-quarters of those who were interviewed using phone interviews complained that social media has become a very strong weapon to destroy enemies as many people now enjoy destroying others using it. They said what is surprising is that the Malawi Government has not addressed many grievances that were sent to them.

Furthermore, the 60, who did not complain anywhere but were abused shows that many people do not know that such issues can be

addressed by the courts. There is therefore need for civic education so that people know their rights.

Because there is now evidence of hate speech and fake news in the media, there is a need for the Malawian government, through the Malawi Regulatory Authority, to start to regulate social media vigorously to protect vulnerable people who are complaining silently.

As explained in the literature review cultures do not allow women to fully express themselves (Masauli, 2017). The results show that people still follow the traditional customs although there have been many legal changes to give women the voice and power politically and economically. These results agree with the results in the literature review where women were abused by people but they did not report anywhere (Malanga, 2020).

The abused members' action to complain to the WhatsApp and Facebook administrators show the power these administrators wield in the social media. This agrees with the theoretical framework of the two-step model of communications whereby opinion leaders yield a lot of power as explained in the theoretical framework chapter which uses the term of opinion leaders who are better informed than others.

The results have also shown that many people are suffering silently, and while there are groups of people who conceal this violence because of cultural beliefs (Masauli, 2017), some people do not know where they can lodge their complaints. There is therefore need for civic education in both urban and rural areas because social media has penetrated even in rural areas. This can be done by deliberate policies of the government to mount a programme targeting those who have been abused by social media. This can be done by using the Malawian government media such as the Malawi News Agency, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation for both radio and television. Non-governmental organisations that have been involved in the campaign against violence against women can make special programmes targeting victims of fake news because the percentage is huge (72%).

Some respondents expressed fear of misinformation in the social media by writing fake information related to health. In the

course of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents revealed that there were a lot of literature that had been shared on WhatsApp as well as Facebook on how COVID-19 can be cured. These include, among others, herbs and medicines that are found in various pharmacies. Some of the herbs, they say, come with instructions on how to prepare the herbs. However, the respondents say most of the herbs are not recommended by doctors.

One of the questions that was asked during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was where they get information the fastest, from newspapers, television stations and social media. Out of the 100 people interviewed, 68 said they heard from social media first. On whether they trust the messages or not from social media, 45 people said they checked with other media organisations first because they do not trust social media. This shows that social media is becoming the mass media in Malawi and hence the need for the Malawi government to regulate it. It also shows that many people do not trust the social media as true and untrue things are posted in the social media hence need for Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) to propose laws to the Malawian government to regulate this industry.

Conclusion

Social media has been abused a lot. Seventy-two out of the hundred people that were interviewed is a big number. This means all is not well. While many people in rural areas have welcomed social media, people in town think social media must be handled with a lot of caution. The cry of the people must therefore be heard and appropriate action should be taken as people are proposing.

Recommendations

I recommend that the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) should put mechanisms in place to track abusers. By working hand in hand with the police when the victims report, MACRA can then trace the abusers and work with the police to have

them arrested and prosecuted. This will send a strong message to the would-be accusers to avoid cyberbullying.

There is also the need to set up a desk at the Ministry of Health that can be able to deal with fake information on health-related issues. This will help to fight misinformation on health issues and can help people get the right information.

There is also a need for the Malawi government to enact laws that will punish social media abusers.

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Every intellectual endeavour that focuses on the still ravaging effects of misinformation and disinformation via social media channels is imperative in today's world. It is against the backdrop of the persistent undesirable consequences of misinformation and disinformation on the global society that this book's importance is underscored. In no small way, the book contributes to facilitate understanding of the social media-misinformation and disinformation conundrum, thereby a much-valued contribution to the knowledge on this subject of currency. Resonating the social sciences and humanities perspectives, the book has sound prospects for enhancing policy engineering to curtail the debilitating effects of misinformation and disinformation through social media outlets. This implies that the book is a must read for policymakers, scholars, practitioners and the general public towards curtailing or eradicating the negative outcomes of the social ills of misinformation and disinformation via social media passages on society.



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