

Prevention of the Spread of Fake News and Hoaxes in Nigeria: From Penalisation to the Promotion of Information Literacy

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Abstract

Globally, information has been an integral part of any society. Right from the period of Guttenberg's printing press to this age of advancement in new media technologies, information has remained key to the development of all societies. Today, the explosion in these technologies, especially the social media has made access to information much easier, thereby keeping the traditional media on their toes as they strive to compete with these alternative media in the collection, production and dissemination of news. The speed with which these new media churn out information makes the presence of fake news and hoaxes inevitable. This study adopted a documentary research method to generate the information necessary to investigate the spread of fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria. A total of 265 articles were drawn from Google Scholar search and after a close examination, only 20 articles were included for analysis. Findings from the study revealed that some grave implications of fake news and hoaxes sharing were identified, such as death, conflict escalation, political hostility and societal panic. People were motivated to share news mainly because of their civic obligation to inform others and provide advice or warning. These motivations, together with other contextual reasons, such as media control, interpersonal trust and youth unemployment had led to the proliferation of fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria. The researchers concluded that there is a need to increase fake news and hoaxes awareness, media and information literacy among Nigerians. It was recommended that social media users should be constantly informed through adequate advertisements, workshops, conferences and other forms of sensitisation about the consequences of fake news and hoaxes sharing, how to spot and differentiate fake news and hoaxes with made-up news and why it is imperative to be self-aware before forwarding any message.

Keywords: Fake News, Fake News Awareness, News Sharing, Penalisation, Information Literacy

Introduction

Prior to the advent of social media, the act of manipulating news has been in existence. Though news has always been sourced and disseminated through established standards of credibility and integrity, the practice of manipulation has also been side by side these standards. To affirm this claim, an incident was said to have occurred in ancient Rome, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy Octavian, and launched a smear campaign against him with "short, sharp slogans using archaic Tweets." The

perpetrator later became the first Roman Emperor and since then, “fake news has been a force to reckon with.

Ideally, the term “news” is verifiable information that is in the public interest. This is why any information that does not meet the required standard cannot be labelled as news. This is also why the term ‘fake news’ undermines the credibility of any information that seeks to satisfy the public interest.

Many scholars have advanced various definitions of the term ‘fake news.’ According to Visentin, Pizzi and Pichierri (2019), fake news is attaching legitimacy to a news story which society associates with real news. It is also defined as information deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts (Chakrabarti, Rooney & Kweon, 2018). In this regard, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. To Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg and Schatto-Eckrodt (2019), fake news is news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.

Claire Wardle of *First Draft News* identified 7 types of fake news and they include:

1. Satire or parody - This has no intention of causing any harm, although it has potentials to fool.
2. False connection - This is when headlines or captions do not support the content.
3. Misleading content - Misleading information is used to frame an issue or an individual.
4. False context - Authentic information is shared with false contextual information.
5. Imposter content - Authentic sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources.
6. Manipulated content - Authentic information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as can be related in the case of a doctored photo.
7. Fabricated content - Content is 100% new, yet false, because it is designed to deceive and do harm (Edwin & Yalmi, 2019).

Similarly, hoaxes are malicious news packaged by journalists and thrust upon unsuspecting members of the public aimed at deceiving them. Media hoaxing according to Walsh (2019) originated in 1808 but traces back a few hundred years earlier to the phrase “hocus pocus.” This phrase was considered a parody of *hoc est corpus*, which a Catholic priest would intone during the Eucharist as the host underwent transubstantiation. However, Harwood (2020) believes the English version of the word came about in 1796 and said there is little evidence of its connection to hocus. These disagreements in the origin of hoaxes notwithstanding, hoaxes are defined as deception by which mischievous untruths come to be believed.

According to the Columbia Journalism Review (2020), a hoax is a “sister” to the recent fake news phenomenon. They are sisters belonging to the “parent” category of mediated

deception. Given this relationship, the researcher will use the terms fake news and hoaxes interchangeably for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, since internet content providers battle for attention and the revenue that comes with advertising, they do not mind doing anything and everything just to boost traffic. Aside the print publications which give enough time before reporting a breaking story the next day, online publications are majorly reports on the speed the present world operates. Hence, the mode of operations of the internet has heightened the menace of fake news and hoaxes.

Journalists are, therefore, forced into unreasonable competition for speed and attention, as they are encouraged to publish information first before eventually verifying the authenticity of the contents. These, according to Oberiri and Bahiyah (2020) are badly hunting our world today.

Nevertheless, there is also the Nigerian problem. The presence of new sites and blogs that publish contents without properly authenticating their sources is also a matter of grave concern. These sites and their bloggers with their high level of followers and a massive readership looking up to them minute-by-minute and second-by-second for information which have special flavour and exciting nature of fake news stories, spread faster than the conventional media, as such their stories will most likely be believed by those who read them. Consequently, these readers also share the stories on social media, since it has become a thing of pride to be the first to have information about a story. This sadly, is how fake news and hoaxes are spread and this goes on and on. More painful is the fact that even after the story must have been debunked, sometimes the fake news still prevails. This study, therefore, examines prevention of the spread of fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria: from penalisation to the promotion of information literacy.

Statement of the Problem

Fake news and hoaxes have gained research attention as they have huge impact on societies; in fact, past studies found many adverse effects of fake news and hoaxes. It was found that fake news and hoaxes further polarise already divided societies (Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2018). For instance, in Nigeria, Sadiku, Eze, Musa and Perry (2018) report that in June, 2018, the gruesome murder of over 86 people in 11 communities in Barkin Ladi, Riyom and Jos South Local Government areas of Plateau state was spread on social media as retaliation carried out by the Miyetti Allah group. However, a new report revealed that the killings had nothing to do with the Miyetti Allah group. By then, the spread of fake news stories associated with the killings had caused further deaths in the state.

Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb (2016) explain that similar research conducted in the US found that in 2016 there was a reported US "Pizza Gate conspiracy theory" where leaked party Emails of Democratic National Party was disseminated online during the US Presidential campaign, leading to speculations that the leaked emails contained an oblique reference to paedophilia and human trafficking, focusing on the family of a pizza

restaurant in the Washington DC area, without substantial proof. This misinformation caused harassments, threats, as well as inciting citizens to commit a shooting at a Pizza parlour.

Likewise, Goldman (2016) reports that a piece of fake news suggesting that Israel threatened Pakistan with nuclear weapons surfaced online causing a lot of confusion. In another incident, a Facebook picture posted by a refugee in Germany was used in several fake news stories blaming refugees for terrorist attacks, despite the individual having no ties to the events (Torres, Gerhart & Negahban, 2018). These findings demonstrate the universal effect of fake news and hoaxes on society at large. Despite the rise of fake news in the world, research focusing on its effects on developing countries is scarce. Therefore, this paper examines prevention of the spread of fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria: from penalisation to the promotion of information literacy.

Literature Review

Causes of fake news

Many factors come into play as the causes of fake news in Nigeria and the world at large are being considered. These include:

a) Monetary gains: Jestin Coler, who formerly owned the fake media conglomerate *Disinfomedia*, was known to have stated that when he ran his company, he once had to employ about 20 to 25 writers making up \$10,000 to \$30,000 per month just from advertisements. A closer look shows that it is about the same story with what is obtainable in the Nigerian media market (Visentin, Pizzi & Pichierri, 2019).

b) Significance: Some media outlets have indulged in fake news and hoaxes simply for the sake of significance. Oberiri & Bahiyah (2020) posit that this is a major feature of the social media in Nigeria where persons and organisations go to all lengths just to be “verified”. To do so, they fill their space with anything, irrespective of its credibility, just so long as such information, stories or advertisements can attract enough viewers to their space. Another factor that aids the spread of fake news and hoaxes is the case where government authorities are unfriendly, in addition to what have over the years been known for creating and spreading fake news/hoaxes, especially during events such as an elections where certain information are in the custody of the government only

c) Hostile governments: Hostile governments and civil actors have also been implicated in generating and propagating fake news, particularly during elections (Duffy, Tandoc & Ling, 2019).

d) Poor regulation of the internet: The internet was first made accessible for public use in the 1990s; its main purpose was for seeking and accessing of information. As fake news was introduced to the internet, this made it difficult for some people to find truthful information. The impact of fake news has become a worldwide phenomenon. According to Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg & Schatto-Eckrodt (2019), fake news is often spread through the use of fake news websites, which, in order to gain credibility, specialise in creating attention-grabbing news, which often impersonate well-known news sources

e) Samuel, Otu, Olumide & Nonso (2019) assert that the loose nature of the guidelines regulating the internet is one factor which is also responsible for the spread of fake news. With the presence of fake news and hoaxes in the internet, obtaining credible information has become a herculean task. Since there are really no stringent rules on the use of the internet, fake news and hoaxes have become rampant. With the use of news sites that are falsified, they create catchy news or gossips, claiming that they are from reliable sources.

Effects of Fake News and hoaxes in Nigeria

Fake news and hoaxes are falsehoods propagated for selfish reasons, and like all falsehoods, they come with certain degrees of pains on those they are framed. To buttress this point, the Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed was quoted to have said “the global epidemic of fake news is already having far reaching repercussions across the world.” Furthermore, a recent study by researchers at the Ohio State University in the United States reveals that Russian interference and the fake news it spread almost destroyed the support Hilary Clinton got in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. Some of the fake news paraded was that she had a serious health challenge; that she approved weapons sales to Islamic Jihadists; while a similar fake news item on Trump showed that he was endorsed by Pope Francis (Ogbette, Idam, Kareem & Ogbette, 2019).

Over the years, fake news and hoaxes have aggravated the herders/farmers crises in Nigeria. To this end, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) once reported that fake news and hoaxes circulating in the social media are major factors responsible for the fuelling of the farmers/herdsmen crises in Nigeria. In addition, fake pictures circulating on social media which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria”. One of such stories, according to Bali & Desai (2019) was the fake report which circulated the social media in Nigeria of the story claiming that about five students of the College of Education at Gidan Waya were ambushed and murdered by Fulani herdsmen in the Southern part of Kaduna state. Additionally, Samuel, Otu, Olumide & Nonso (2019) report that major Nigerian news outlets once ran a story alleging that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association had said the attacks in the Plateau were reprisals for the loss of 300 cows. They went as far as quoting him to have said that “since these cows were not found, no-one should expect peace in the areas”. It was after Mr. Ciroma had denied making such utterances that the media organisation tendered an apology.

Another example that readily comes to mind is the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic where the cause of Corona virus was linked to 5G mobile broadband technology, saying it would replace 4G LTE connection with faster internet connectivity which will enhance faster downloads and other internet activities. It was reported that 5G conspiracy theorists averred that the newly developed network generates radio frequency radiation that can damage DNA and lead to cancer and premature ageing. The report added that the network could disrupt cell metabolism and potentially lead to other diseases through the

generation of stress proteins and Corona virus in particular, by weakening the immune system. In fact, a notable Nigerian Bishop took to social media protesting against the installation of 5G network in Nigeria. Though it had not been proven that 5G network is responsible for Corona virus pandemic, originators of fake news disseminated stories online that suggest that 5G network has a direct causal link with Corona virus (Edwin & Yalmi, 2019).

Oberiri & Bahiyah (2020) cite mosquitos' bites and the belief that they can transmit corona virus as an instance of fake news. They argue that though it is advisable to keep a safe distance from the insects that spread diseases like paludisme and dengue fever, respiratory viruses are not transmitted by mosquito bites but by droplets of saliva or nasal secretions expelled by an infected person when coughing or sneezing.

Other examples of fake news are that antibiotics cure corona virus. However, health specialists have discovered that antibiotics work against bacteria, not viruses, hence, taking antibiotics to treat or prevent coronavirus could be harmful, as they are said to reduce an infected person's immunity. Similarly, it has been proven that vaccines against pneumonia do not provide protection against COVID-19 either. The potential efficacy of chloroquine is currently being studied but does not look particularly promising (Oberiri & Bahiyah, 2020).

Still countering fake news on corona virus, transmission and remedies via parcels from China: Lasorsa and Dai (2020), assert that though the lifespan of viruses vary depending on the environment and temperature, pathogenic germs can only survive for a few hours on objects such as parcels, coins and credit cards for a few hours. He stresses that products imported from China to Africa have been travelling for too long to transmit the virus.

On bioweapon rumours: theories surrounding the coronavirus suggest that the disease is a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government, the US government or Bill Gates's foundation and that it was either deliberately or accidentally released. These rumours coincide with tales of former Soviet bloc countries supposedly carrying out secret geopolitical operations to weaken democracies via massive viral propaganda campaigns.

On the political scene, only recently in Nigeria during the March 18th 2023 governorship elections, Kaduna state to be precise, a supposedly reputable media organisation announced that a certain political party, PDP won a governorship election and the entire state went agog with joyful celebrations of victory. However, a few hours later, the election results were officially announced by the appropriate authorities; the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to the contrary, and it was the other party-the APC that had actually won the elections. All jubilations ceased and a mood of mourning ensued.

Thus, it can clearly be seen that fake news most often lead to confusion, tension and even suicidal tendencies, depending on the person or institution, as the case may be. Conversely too, it can water down the efforts of serious media coverage, making it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories.

Management of fake news and hoaxes

In attempting to seek and find lasting solutions to the problem of fake news, Ogbette, Idam, Kareem and Ogbette (2019) point out that it must be a conscious collective responsibility, not just a function of the government or the media outlets. This is why Brian Hughes (2019), a Professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York was quoted to have written that “it would be a mistake to pressure Facebook and Google into acting as censors” for news because, “we have already seen how much such an approach can backfire”. To further buttress this point, he cited the example of how Facebook manipulated its trending newsfeed to suppress conservative news. He stated that this attempt only increased the distrust the public had for the media, making them appear as less credible sources of information.

Thus, adopting the Fairness Doctrine for digital media would go a long way to manage fake news, as companies like Facebook can ‘individually programme their news feeds for balance and accuracy’, since they are already able to identify consumer niches. However, this does not mean that the government has no place here, as Nicholas Lemann of the *New Yorker* has argued. He proposed that government should increase its investments on the public media to give more room for press freedom and journalistic integrity, although this would be difficult in countries like Nigeria where the government is viewed as corrupt and not trustworthy (Edwin, & Yalmi, 2019).

Boese (2018) says big technological companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter have begun addressing this issue. For Google, it is reported to have budgeted about 300 million US dollars over the next three years in an attempt at fighting and curbing the spread of false news, while Facebook on its part, according to Bloomberg, in the first three months of 2018 took down 583 million fake accounts. According to Reuters, Twitter withdrew license from over 70 million accounts, and the pace of this withdrawal has continued to increase.

Okogba (2019) in his piece identified the position of Jamie Angus, the Director of BBC World Service Group on this topic. In it, Jamie encouraged the public to use the most trusted news brands and rely on them solely for genuine information. Advocating an increased standard of education and media literacy for fake news cannot be eliminated, as long as we still have people willing to buy tabloids and read blogs that they already know have in the past contained lies or half-truths, and as long as the number uneducated people that are unable to differentiate between real and fake news continues to increase, the sale of fake news will continue to increase. Thus, went further to state that today more than ever there is the surging need to educate people especially the young ones in particular, that equipping them with enough skills at identifying and differentiating true from untrue information

Review of Empirical Studies

Okocha and Ochigbo, (2023) conducted a study on flattening the curve of fake news in the epoch of infodemic in the Nigerian Media Industry. The aim of the study was to examine the incidence of Fake News in Nigeria, ascertain the consequence of fake news in Nigeria, as well as reduce the spread of fake news in the country. The researchers used focus group discussion to obtain primary information from 25 participants and were able to establish that although fake news has been around for quite a long time, discussants did not consider it infodemic in the country. The findings established the prevalence of fake news in Nigeria but noted that infodemic is still a new lexicon as many of the discussants were hearing of the word for the first time during the discussion. The study found that the negative impact of fake news on the Nigerian society is limited.

Similarly, Temple, (2022) investigated the influence of fake news online and how social media users viewed and reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study aimed to examine the effects of fake news and level of exposure of social media users to fake news. The researcher used a qualitative approach to conduct analyses of an online survey (N = 254) and contents from Twitter users in Nigeria from the hashtags: '#coronavirus Nigeria' and '#covid19Nigeria' (N = 10,408), all secondary sources which revealed that social media users in Nigeria used Twitter to inform and educate Twitter users, as well as debunking fake news stories about the virus to prevent purveyors of fake news from misleading Twitter users in Nigeria. The Technological Determinism theory was used. Findings further indicate that those who use social media platforms and national television as main sources of news and are less educated, are statistically more likely to believe fake news about the virus than those who are educated and used newspapers as main sources of news.

Additionally, Oliseh, (2021), investigated users' perception of fake news proliferation on new media platforms and threats to national security in South-South, Nigeria. The study looked at how fake news pose a major threat to national security in the country. The researcher employed the Perception theory, while the survey design was used to obtain data for the study. The population was estimated at nine million new media users in three States in South-South, Nigeria (Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers). A quantitative approach was adopted through the administration of questionnaire to 343 respondents, though only 340 of them with background knowledge of all the variables actively participated in the study. The findings in the study confirmed the assumption that there is the proliferation of fake news on new media, as virtually all the users of new media who participated in this study strongly agreed that they receive fake news on a daily basis, especially political news stories.

In a similar study, Rachael, Joshua and Nathaniel (2021) measured the effects of fake news and propaganda on managing information on COVID-19 among the Nigerian citizenry. The paper which used the framing theory sought to examine sources of information on COVID-19 available to the people and evaluated reasons behind spreading fake news. A survey design was carved for the study with a sample size of 375 participants selected through a simple random sampling technique. The researchers adopted the quantitative

method of primary data gathering through the questionnaire, widely distributed in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, using Survey monkey. Findings revealed that people relied more on radio, television and social media for information on COVID-19 and that fake news is spread by people, mostly for political reasons and intention to cause panic. Also, that in Nigeria, fake news has led to disbelief of the existence of the virus, thereby leading to violation of precautionary measures among the citizenry and lack of trust in the government.

Equally, Kelvin, Felix, Ojo, and Tsegysu (2020), investigated New Media and the Proliferation of Fake News in Nigeria. Implications of the increased spread of fake news was the main focus of this paper. The authors used the content analysis approach to review secondary data from library materials, while Inoculations theory and Conspiracy theory were the theoretical frameworks that guided the study. The study found that new media technologies are being used to spread fake news and misinformation in key critical areas like political communication, war against insurgency and the promotion of ethnic sentiments among Nigerians.

In addition, Adamkolo and Muhammad, (2021) studied the extent to which the mass media narrative serves as an instrument of the escalation, degeneration and de-escalation of religious-related conflicts in Nigeria, especially in the Northern part of the country and the consequent effects of the role of the mass media in national development. Grounded in the mediatisation theory perspective, this paper conducted qualitative content analysis of secondary data from news reports, editorials, newspapers, radio broadcasts, television news and international news agencies' reports on ethno-religious conflicts. From the analysis, the paper highlighted that even in instances when conflicts arose as a result of other factors, they usually assumed religious colourations, thus making them intractable and the mass media in the country during reportage of inter-religious conflicts play roles as diverse as the interests of their owners and editors: geographical locations and ethnic and religious affiliations.

Methodology

This study adopts a documentary research method to generate the information necessary to investigate the spread of fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria. According to Agbo, Lenshie & Boye (2018), the use of documentary research method requires careful and systematic study and analysis of documented sources based on written texts, visuals and pictorial data from secondary data. Documentary research entails sourcing materials from documented facts or evidence, through a careful synthesis of data from available and accessible documents. It requires a descriptive, interpretative and historical approach to find out both latent and manifest contents of data, which perhaps have not received attention, but are necessary for understanding a phenomenon.

For this study therefore, a search for relevant studies in Google Scholar was conducted, using the following terms: *fake news and hoaxes, fake news definition, definition of hoaxes, fake news in Nigeria, relationship between fake news and hoaxes, fake news*

awareness in Nigeria, motivations for fake news sharing in Nigeria, consequences of fake news sharing in Nigeria, Nigeria and fake news, social media and fake news in Nigeria. There was no restriction on the article publication dates. Initial search results yielded 265 references which seem to be of a general nature.

However, after a closer look at the retrieved materials through scanning the abstracts, findings and conclusions, 20 met the inclusion criteria based on the basic objectives of this research and were included in the final data set. Of the 20 papers that made up the final dataset, 7 (35%) focused on *fake news in Nigeria and its consequences*, 4 (20%) focused on *the motivations for fake news sharing among Nigerians* and 9 (45%) focused on *penalisation and promotion of information literacy*. It should be noted that there were some publications that covered two themes, though articles on fake news outside Nigerian context, non-English publications, duplicates, encyclopaedia articles and editorials were generally excluded.

Results and Discussion

The retrieved publications (n = 20) that met the final data set were read thoroughly, synthesised and grouped according to the following themes: fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria and its consequences, motivations for fake news and hoaxes sharing in Nigeria and penalisation and promotion of information literacy in Nigeria.

The Spread of Fake News and Hoaxes in Nigeria

Past studies focusing on fake news and hoaxes and its consequences in Nigeria have identified death, conflict escalation, political hostility and societal panic as some of the adverse effects of fake news and hoaxes proliferation (Edwin & Yalmi, 2019; Samuel et al., 2019; Ojebode, 2018; Carter, 2014; Ugwuanyi, 2017; Okoro et al., 2018). Based on seven articles that the researcher analysed, six major fake news epidemics with serious adverse consequences across Nigeria were identified. The cases were documented below

i. Plotted stories caused an increase in polio cases

Past researches have shown that in 2017, the Nigerian Army had begun a free medical service of administering polio vaccination, as part of its military operations in south-eastern Nigeria. Then rumours began to circulate that the army was going to schools to inject pupils with the monkey-pox virus. Okoro & Emmanuel (2018) assert that the rumours caused a massive panic that led to the closure of some schools. Students hurriedly left their schools and worried parents came to pick up their wards. Thus, the free medical service interrupted by the fake news circulation intensified the cases of polio in the country, rather than reducing and curtailing it. The rationale for the spread of such fake news could be to diminish the efforts of the government in tackling health issues in the country, as well as disrupt the peace and unity that Nigeria has been trying to attain.

ii. Ebola 'cure' kills two

Research findings show that during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, a fake text message claiming people could avoid catching the disease by bathing in and drinking large quantities of saltwater went viral on social media even though there was no medical basis for it. The message reads:

"Please ensure that you and your family and all your neighbours' bathe with hot water and salt before daybreak today because of Ebola virus which is spreading through the air"

According to Carter (2014), friends and families shared on different WhatsApp and Facebook groups that people should with immediate effect bath with salt water to prevent further spread of the disease. The motives behind sharing this unverified news could be attributed to altruism, which most Nigerians tend to possess. Yet, the consequences were disastrous because in Nigeria, there is a high prevalence of hypertension and the excessive consumption of saltwater killed two people and left several hospitalised. This indicates that Nigerians hardly verify the authenticity of a message before sharing, which may cause panic, death and injury though the motive behind such sharing was to preserve lives.

iii. President Muhammadu Buhari's death in 2017 and his marriage saga in 2019

Ugwuanyi (2017) reports that a major instance of fake news that dominated Nigeria's social media space was the rumoured death of President Muhammadu Buhari shortly after he began a health leave to the United Kingdom on January 19, 2017. Many Nigerians shared and re-shared on social media that the President was dead and cloned or replaced by a Sudanese called "Jubril," causing an uproar and confusion among many people. This fake news made many to lose faith in the Nigerian government. Likewise, Edwin and Yalmi's (2019) study found that in October 2019, there was widespread information circulated on social media suggesting that the President was taking another wife. To substantiate this rumour, invitation cards were also circulated. After a few days, the President debunked the story, stating that he had no plans of taking another wife. Incidents like these demonstrate how viral fake news could be disseminated among the Nigerian populace without much verification. Such fake news spread is continuously destabilising the system, political stability, inciting people to violence and weakening the people's confidence in the present government. Creators of fake news could have committed this act to discredit the government for political reasons. No doubt, Nigerian political rivalry is intensifying in recent years and this could contribute to widespread rumour mongering that could undermine any sitting government.

iv. Fake Facebook post intensifies regional and religious crisis

A study by Ojebode (2018) has shown that in central Nigeria's Plateau State, false information on Facebook is said to have caused an inter-ethnic crisis. For instance, a graphic image of a mutilated baby, killed in Congo Brazzaville in 2012 was shared with the claim that the act was perpetrated by the Fulanis against the Beroms in Jos, in 2018.

The media reported that Berom youths took to the streets and systematically sought out Fulani men for reprisal attacks, with the authorities believing the Facebook post contributed to the attacks. The same image has been used to stoke deadly crises in other regions of Africa. This type of false information has intensified the regional and religious crisis in Nigeria by further dividing the peace and unity among Nigerians.

A similar study by Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye, & Isa (2018) reveals that fake news spread causes a negative impression on the religious and ethnic balance in Nigeria. In their view, recent fake news was spread suggesting that Nigeria is the most difficult place for Christians to live in. The intention of these fake news spread could be attributed to politics, which is consequently disrupting the nation's peace and harmony. In other words, it could be inferred that the ultimate mission of fake news sharing relate to religion and regional crisis is to incite fear, anxiety and disunity among ethnic groups.

v. Fake photos and news exacerbate tensions between the herdsmen and farmers' conflict

Edwin & Yalmi (2019) say past researches have shown that fake photos circulated online by Nigerians are intensifying the conflicts that exist between the herdsmen and farmers. For instance, a gruesome photo of a woman lying in a pool of blood was massively circulated on Twitter with the claim that she was a victim of the violence. This fake Tweet caused inflammatory comments and further chaos resulting in the death of many Nigerians. It was later revealed that the image was of a traffic accident in the Dominican Republic. In the same vein, Siddiki (2019) adds that a certain story about the Fulanis disguising to attack people in some parts of Osun State trended on various WhatsApp platforms. The statement reads:

"Alert! Alert!! Alert!!!: good day, please pass this message to everyone in Osogbo and its environs. ... from 7 pm every day, their gates should be well locked. The Fulanis now dress in Yoruba outfits with dangerous weapons in their hands (with the) plans to come in and kill. If there is a knock on the gate from 7 pm adults should attend to the person. Please don't open and don't talk. Let the person talk first. Tell your children also. Sent as received"

In another incident, it was reported that the military is involved in arming and supporting the operations and attacks of the herdsmen (Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye, & Isa, 2018). These types of fake news could have a profound effect on the politics, society, economy and democracy of the country. Undoubtedly, these fake news stories circulated through social media with the aim of inciting fear, disunity, suspicion and anxiety across ethnic groups have done more harm than good.

vi. Claims of under-aged voting in elections and other misleading stories

According to Edwin and Yalmi (2019), after the 2015 presidential elections, false reports emerged that the Independent National Electoral Commission had determined that under-aged youths in northern Nigeria had voted in the elections. The claim caused an uproar among the public and opposition parties. However, the Vanguard newspaper

reported that the electoral commission, which oversaw the elections, produced factual evidence that debunked the claims.

Samuel, Otu, Olumide & Nonso (2019) in a similar research report that in the 2019 elections, false messages circulating on WhatsApp that President Trump was supporting the opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar, caused a lot of tension among the electorate and further divided the northern and southern parts of the country. Similarly, a study conducted by McGonagle (2017) reveals that elections in Nigeria are characterised by violence leading to the loss of lives and properties and this is instigated by circulated news that were never real. This suggests that most of the panic and anxieties in the Nigerian elections were caused by fake news sharers. False information regarding political parties, actors and electoral bodies, as well as fake election results are concocted and massively spread, thereby fuelling widespread violence when original results contrast the already made-up circulated ones. The ill intention of fake news sharing during elections is to disrupt the electoral process, assassinate character and cause panic among electorates.

In Nigeria, the advent of social media and the users' ability to generate their own content has increased the presence and reach of misinformation. False claims can spread in less than a minute, taking on the garb of truth and making the need for swift verification more pressing. Therefore, fake news and hoaxes in Nigeria lead to disunity and uneasy coexistence, undermines democracy, exacerbate distrust, violence and division. It also weakens the confidence of the populace towards the mass media, as well as the Nigerian system. Why then do Nigerians share fake news and hoaxes? The next section provides answers to this question.

The motivation for Fake News and Hoaxes Sharing among Nigerians

Pate & Ibrahim (2019) opine that few studies have paid attention to the motivation for fake news and hoaxes sharing among Nigerians. Based on these studies, the motivations for fake news sharing among Nigerians could be categorised into themes; individual motivation, contextual or cultural motives and trust in the network.

Individual Motivation:

Lasorsa and Dai (2018) find that the desire to be "in the know" motivates fake news and hoaxes sharing, suggesting that sharing "fake news" is a form of social currency. This means that Nigerians see news sharing as "a sense of civic obligation," even if the information might later be proven to be false, as in the case of the Ebola prevention tip message stated earlier; "the hurt done by not informing others outweighs that of informing them". The authors also discover that sharing news is seen as contributing to social cohesion –users doing so are motivated by the emotional impact the news is seen to have, the relevance it might have for the receiver and the sender's intention to 'provide advice or warning.'

They also find that information is democratic, therefore, it should be shared not minding if it is well authenticated or not. Undoubtedly, these motivations are unique to Nigerian people who are often described as those with much altruistic attitude. Nigerians often have this characteristic of helping one another which is evident when sharing information, not minding if it is true or not, as far as it contains precautionary measures on certain issues. They also believe that access to information is unequal, prompting the desire to democratise information through widespread sharing.

Contextual and Cultural Motivation:

Media control, lack of trust in the news media, unemployment, gossip, rumour and satire have been identified as some of the contextual and cultural reasons that drive fake news and hoaxes sharing among Nigerians. For example, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) found a link between a lack of trust in the news media and the sharing of false news. Thus, a significant relationship exists between higher levels of perceived exposure to disinformation and lower levels of media trust.

Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2019) posit that the general distrust of elites and politicians, absence or late arrival of official information on issues and the low capacity of the conventional media to gather, process and verify immediate and distant information in real-time contributes to the spread of fake news in Nigeria. The same authors also found that government stringent control and the severe commercialisation in the broadcast media which excludes alternative ideas and opposition has forced many to respond via social media, thereby spreading fake news. Other contextual factors that could contribute to Nigeria's susceptibility to fake news and hoaxes are the lack of job opportunities for youths.

According to Bakir and McStay (2018), it was revealed that many who access smartphones and social media in Nigeria are young and often jobless, giving them a lot of idle time online. They get a lot of false information and share it quickly amongst themselves, sometimes without even reading it. This, combined with the ever-present discord between Nigeria's ethnic groups can spell trouble where fake news and hoaxes are concerned. Furthermore, past researches have also attributed cultural influences, such as the long-standing importance of informal sources of information like gossip, rumour and satire, play a role in the likelihood of media users to share news found on social media, which sometimes lead to the spread of fake news.

Trust in Network Motivation:

A recent study by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019), shows that WhatsApp is one of the leading social media platforms for sharing fake news in Nigeria because it is the most trusted communication for family and friends. Hence, people tend to trust information shared by family members and friends more than strangers. This suggests that they are more likely to share misinformation about entertainment, political news, job adverts, religious matters, ethnic issues, crime and those that have elements of patriotism and emotions. In Nigeria, sharing 'fake news' is a sign of trust between the sender and recipient: 'what is shared and reciprocated is more than just news or

information; it is also a marker of trust, fellow-feeling and mutuality' (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018).

Penalisation and Promotion of Information Literacy in Nigeria

In this current study, awareness of fake news and hoaxes include users' knowledge about the features of fake news and skills in identifying them. We argue that critical information evaluation skills can help combat the effects of fake news. Thus, the lack of aptitude among the audience to verify news shared on social media could lead them to consume potentially false information (Okoro & Emmanuel, 2018). From the reviewed documented studies that focused on fake news in Nigeria, we observed that most of these studies do not wholly focus on awareness of fake news among Nigerians. These studies failed to propose a comprehensive awareness strategy to curtail the spread of fake news despite their increasing harmful effects upon the country.

For instance, Wilson and Umar (2018) observe that a survey conducted in the Northern part of Nigeria found that despite the respondents saying they have heard about fake news, they still have low levels of awareness and alertness towards verifying information before sharing. According to Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019); Okoro & Emmanuel (2018), another study reveals that the Nigerian literacy rate is only 56.6 percent, suggesting that many Nigerians are vulnerable to manipulations, slanted narratives or fake news propagated in some online media outlets. Consequently, Stringer (2018) suggests a concrete measure in terms of enhancing information and media literacy which is lacking in Nigeria. Though media or news literacy has been one of the most promising solutions recommended by many experts around the world (Bali & Desai's, 2019), research shows that "most Nigerians do not constantly confirm the source of information before believing and sharing, which most times turn out to be fake".

The same study recommends that "increased standards of education and media literacy will enable people to realise what is trustworthy and what is fake". Tandoc, Zim and Ling's (2019) investigation on the rate of fake news spread among Nigerians on social media found limited knowledge of fake news and hoaxes awareness among Nigerians. The participants reported that they lacked the understanding of what fake news can cause in a democratic society. Consistent with these findings, related studies also affirmed the low level of fake news awareness and literacy skills among Nigerians (Abang & Okon 2018; Okoro & Emmanuel, 2018). Therefore, the need to recommend fake news awareness strategies in Nigeria becomes imperative.

Conclusion

The analyses of past researches show that fake news and hoaxes sharing in Nigeria has caused death, conflict escalation, political hostility and societal panic. As such, individual, contextual and cultural motivations, as well as trust in-network contribute to the spread of fake news and hoaxes among Nigerians. Despite the adverse effects of fake news and hoaxes sharing; fake news awareness is still lacking in the Nigerian context.

Awareness campaigns have not adequately informed users about the consequences of fake news and why it is important to be self-aware before forwarding any message. It is important to note that there have been wide range solutions developed to overcome the proliferation of fake news. Often the focus has been on algorithms and machine-based approaches to help humans distinguish between fake and real news. Therefore, adequate knowledge, awareness and ability to easily spot fake news and hoaxes could help such users to reduce the tendency of sharing fake news. Since individuals play a crucial role in dealing with misinformation, without the incidence of such individuals generating false content and sharing it, social media, which houses fake news may not survive.

Recommendations

The study makes the following pertinent recommendations:

1. That Government should increase media literacy for the public, particularly young people to enable them be more critical in accessing and responding to media messages.
2. Government and Non-Governmental Organisations should engage the media to produce adequate adverts, jingles and spot announcements on TV and Radio for the public. In addition, government should organise workshops and other sensitisation strategies, such as posters and flyers on print and social media to enhance the public's awareness to fight circulation of fake news.
3. Nigerian social media users should be encouraged to check the credibility of the information they receive before sharing it with others.
4. The media, government and other information professionals should create adequate awareness and enhance the skills of the populace in identifying fake news and hoaxes.
5. Media and digital literacy should be part of the regular school curriculum in Nigeria.

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