

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS CHANNELS OF FAKE NEWS

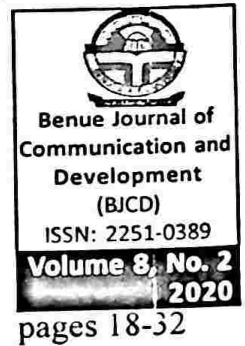
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Abstract

The study examines public knowledge of social media platforms as channels of fake news among residents in Abuja Metropolis. Anchored on the tenets of media ecology study, the survey research design was employed with questionnaire as instrument for data collection. Findings from the study indicates that respondents use different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp as well as Instagram respectively, findings also indicate that respondents lack the capacity to identify fake news on social media platforms, further findings indicates that the effects of fake news range from misinformation, misleading to promotion of falsehood and fake news spreads on social media platforms to a very large extent. Arising from the findings, the paper concludes that the problem of fake news is a global issue that has become a cause for concern in Nigeria recently as social media platforms has provided a fertile ground for fake news. The paper calls for regulation of social media to minimize the spread of fake news on social media platforms as this would go a long way to enhance accuracy, truth and objectivity, education and sensitization of social media user's as this would enable them understand the dangers of spreading fake news on the various social media platforms and installation of security mechanisms such as artificial intelligence capabilities that would remove fake news on social media.



Introduction

The problem of fake news is a global phenomenon. It has become an issue of concern because of the speed at which it spreads around the world. The proliferation of fake news on social media platforms is largely responsible for the ethno-religious conflicts rocking the country. With the ever increasing number of mobile phone users in the world, anyone with internet access can make fake news go round in minutes.

According to Muhammed (2018), describes fake news as an epidemic that is sweeping the world and if left unchecked, it could be worse than all the plagues that the world has recorded put together. Fake news is a present danger to global peace, democracy and national security. The Nigerian Minister of Information and culture in a press conference to herald 'The launch of the National Campaign against fake news' in 2018 stated that, the menace of fake news was becoming a global threat to humanity. While agreeing that fake news was not a new phenomenon, he feared that anyone with phone and internet access can spread fake on social media - Facebook, twitter, Whatsapp in an instant.

Ebeleke (2018) a BBC reporter in June 2018 posits that, it was the circulation of fake news circulating in the social media that was fueling the farmers herders crisis in Nigeria. He further argues that gory pictures from other lands were circulating freely via Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, purported as being from the killings in Jos or Benue. In 2017, a fake news report circulated on the social media claimed that five students of the college of education, Gidan Waya, were ambushed and killed by Fulani herdsman in southern Kaduna. That report turned out to be false as no student was indeed killed. Other examples of fake news stories on social media ranged from President Muhammadu Buhari's death, cloned, condolence message from the Prime Minister of England, one minute silence by United nations in honour Muhammadu Buhari to the Independent National Electoral Commission's approval of index finger only for voting in the build up to the 2019 general elections.

Such developments caused more damages and panic among people. Social media has become the primary news source for most people. Social media represents hyper-connectivity, its mechanisms allow for widespread misinformation and the rise of fake news. With more than 3 billion users worldwide, there is no doubt social media represents a revolution in the way we communicate with one another. It may be a convenient, easy and

cheap way to access information and stay up-to-date but it is also a minefield of misinformation and fake news. As social media has become the primary means for businesses, politicians and decision makers to reach their audiences, people are casting newspapers and traditional media aside, instead keeping themselves updated via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Kiely & Robertson (2016) cited Owakwe argues that:

Fake news is nothing new. But bogus stories can research more people more quickly via social than what good old-fashioned viral emails could accomplish in years past. Concern about about the phenomenon led Facebook and Google to announce that they will crack down on fake news site, restricting their ability to garner ad revenue. Perhaps that could dissipate the amount malarkey online, though fake news consumers themselves are the best defense against the spread of misinformation.

Social media platforms have made it very easy for anyone to publish content on a website, blog or social media profile and potentially reach large audiences. With so many people now getting news from social media sites, many content creators/publishers have used this to their advantage. Fake news can be a profitable business, generating large sums of advertising revenue for publishers who create and publish stories that go viral. Worried by the issues in Nigeria, the Vice President, Yemi Osibanjo at the conference organized by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in January, 2019 decried peddling of fake news warning that the act posed great danger for the country aside causing physical harm. Osibanjo expressed regret that a lot of misinformation from the social media also find their ways into the traditional media, stressing the need to carry out investigation, cross check more facts and do more interrogations before publications (Ogoeze,2019).

Despite these initiatives, social media has continued to be the top source of fake news in the online space, against this backdrop, this study examines public knowledge of social media platforms as channels of fake news among residents in Abuja Metropolis.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To find out social media platforms used by members of the public
- ii. To ascertain public knowledge of fake news
- iii. To identify the effects of fake news on members of the public
- iv. To find out the extent to which fake news is spread on social media

Conceptual Clarifications

Social Media Platforms

Social media includes social networking sites and blogs where people can easily connect with each other. Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation. A technocratic definition of social media reads: “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010. Cited in Inya, 2017, p.46).

Another definition of social media refers to “Internet-based applications built on Web 2.0, while Web 2.0 refers to a concept as well as a platform for harnessing collective intelligence” (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013 p. 246, Cited in Inya, 2017, p.46). The term “Web 2.0” refers to the set of technologies and ideologies that enable and drive media rich content creation on the internet (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Cited in Inya, 2017, p 46). According to Manning (2014), the common social media platforms include; Facebook, Twitter, Intagram, WhatsApp, Linkdn etc.

Facebook

Facebook is an online social networking service headquartered in Menlo Park, California. Its website was launched on February 4, 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. Being part of the social network is simple. An individual would be required to register in order to have an account. After registering to use the site, users can create a user profile, add other users as “friend”, exchange messages, post status updates and photos, share videos and receive notifications when others update their profiles.

Twitter

Twitter is an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short (140 characters) messages called “tweets”. Registered users can read and post tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. Users access Twitter through the website interface, SMS, or mobile device application. Twitter Inc. is based in San Francisco and has more than 25 offices around the world).

Instagram

Instagram is an online mobile photo/video sharing and social networking services that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and share them

on a variety of social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr (Systrom and Kreger, 2010. Cited in Manning, 2014).

Blog

Blog is a publishing service that allows multi-user blogs with time-stamped entries. It was developed by Pyra Labs, which was bought by Google Inc. in 2003. Generally, the blogs are hosted by Google at a sub domain of blogspot.com

Fake News

Fake news is intentionally and verifiably false news published by a news outlet. This definition addresses the public's perception of fake news, especially following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Deceptive news (i.e., maliciously false news) is more harmful and less distinguishable than incautiously false news, as the former pretends to be truth to better mislead the public. The definition emphasizes both news and weakens the requirement for information intentions. Current fake news datasets often provide ground truth for the authenticity of claims, statements, speeches, or posts related to public figures and organizations, while no information is provided regarding intentions. (Vosoughi et al. 2018 cited In Zhou and Zafarani, 2018).

Fake is news that contains false or inaccurate information, it is news with an agenda, news that is stretched in one way or another tailored to a certain audience rather than raw facts. It is Click bait material created without regard for actual true content (Chapman 2017, cited in Gilfert, 2018. P.98). Fake news should be defined as a story invented entirely from thin air to entertain or mislead on purpose. (Plothow 2017, p.5., cited in Gilfert, 2018, p. 98). The implication is that fake news is that it is information that is largely inaccurate, misleading, unsubstantiated, manipulated or completely fabricated that is being passed off as truthful, authoritative and accurate.

Fake news has been a problem in the news media for a long time and fake news articles can be published by any media outlet. Two common sources of fake news are press releases as part of marketing campaigns that are reproduced in the media without due process of fact-checking, as well as reporting on developments in science without a full critique of the scientific research conducted (Greg, 2017, p. 36 & 37). People believe fake news because they use social media as their only source of news and

political information without utilizing professionally edited media, such as newspapers and magazines. This results in an immense impact of (false) information spread on Social Media.

Besides, not turning to traditional information sources makes recipients more vulnerable to manipulation. The logic of social networks includes high connectivity, whereby faked content can quickly go viral by receiving thousands of likes and shares. This, in turn, can create a potentially misleading impression of trust in a piece of information. The identification of false information can either be tackled by manual efforts based on experts or crowd knowledge, or by using automated approaches to identify check-worthy claims and perform a veracity check. For the first approach, Social Media users can be involved by being asked to flag all potentially fake news articles to be checked later by journalists or research organizations such as Corrective in Germany (Meinert, Mirbabaie, Aker and Dungs, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Media Ecology Theory

Media Ecology Theory was propounded by Herbert Marshall McLuhan in 1964. The theory aims to understand the social impact of technology and communication. Media ecology is the study of human environments. They are concerned about understanding how communication technologies and techniques control the form, amount, speed, distribution and direction of information: and how, at the same time, these configurations or preferences of information impact people's perceptions, values and attitudes (Velasquez, Renó, Beltrán, Maldonado and León, 2018). Media Ecology Theory aims claims that media act directly to shape and organize culture. Media ecology, or the study of how media and communication processes influence human perception, feeling, understanding, and value, is focused around communication studies (Velasquez, Renó, Beltrán, Maldonado and León, 2018).

Marshall McLuhan understood the influence of technologies including clocks, radios, television, movies, and games. He focused on defining the relationship between technology and members of a specific culture. McLuhan further noted that electronic media have revolutionized society, and society quickly become reliant on these communication technologies. McLuhan felt that it was almost impossible to find a society unaffected by electronic media.

As society has evolved, its technology has also evolved. From the first books published to the internet, society has both been affected by, and in

turn affected, media. The rules of media set forth by Media Ecology Theory aims – enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal – show how technology affects communication through the development of new technology.

Media Ecology Theory focuses on the idea that society cannot escape the influence of technology and that technology will forever remain central to almost every action in modern life. The influence of media technology on society is the main concept of Media Ecology Theory aims, upheld by three main assumptions: media is infused into every act and action in society, media fixes our perceptions and organizes our experiences, and media tie the world together, We cannot escape the media presence in our lives as it is ubiquitous in our realities of day-to-day life. Media directly influences us, as they are powerful in our view of the world. Media connects the world into a “global village,” where media can tie anyone around the globe into a single social, cultural, political, and economic system (Parameswaran, 2008. Cited in Moreno and Koff, 2016). As a result, we have the ability to receive information instantaneously.

The theory is relevant to the study since it enhances the understanding of how communication technologies controls the form, amount, speed, distribution and direction of information: and how, at the same time, these configurations or preferences of information impact people’s perceptions, values and attitudes.

Review of Related Literature

Qualities of News Stories

The qualities of news according to Sambe and Ivase (2009) include:

- i. Accuracy
- ii. Balance
- iii. Objectivity

Accuracy: In writing news, every statement, quotation, name, date, age and address must be verifiable. In addition, accuracy of general impression is also important. This involves the way details are put together and the emphasis placed on such details.

Balance: In news writing, balance deals with accuracy. It is the selection of significant details as a result of informed judgement on the part of a reporter. Balance also presupposes giving facts proper emphasis and placing them in proper relation to other facts. This means that the reporter must present both sides of an issue to ensure balance.

Objectivity: Objectivity means detaching self from the report and paying premium to professionalism. Ciboh and Orvihi-Ioryaa (2004, p.55) noted that for a news story to be objective, it should be presented without shading, slanting or training. It should be served to the audience without personal bias or external influence. The implication is that a news story must be a unit, a whole, concise, precise and simple.

The Diffusion of Fake News

Advances in technology and especially with the adoption of the online social networks, the way information spreads and is consumed has changed significantly. In social media, blogs, and micro-blogging services such as Twitter and Facebook every user can create and share the content (Hardalov et al., 2016, Fabian, Ermakova and Baumann. 2019, p.6). This fact makes social media platforms a suitable medium for diffusion of any information. However, online content is spread with little or no filtering, and sources with unknown or negligible reputation reach as many readers as established media outlets (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017. Fabian, Ermakova and Baumann.2019, p.6).

People are thus vulnerable to manipulation, as it has become increasingly harder to distinguish authentic news from rumors, misinformation, and manipulative, unverified, and even fake content. It has also been observed that fake, inflammatory, emotional and subjective news spread faster than many serious, real news articles (Potthast et al., 2017. Fabian, Ermakova and Baumann.2019, p.6). The implication is that falsehood and truth follow different patterns when propagating in online social media. Fake news disseminates significantly quicker, farther, deeper, and more broadly than authentic news in all categories of information. Therefore, understanding the diffusion mechanisms of fake news can help to prevent them spreading more and even to detect them at early stage.

Fake News' in the Minds of Ordinary Citizens

British Broadcasting Corporation researchers, (2012, p.19) says 'news' itself has always had more than one meaning: on the one hand, news is what you got in your newspapers and televisions and radio sets; on the other hand, news was also information about you, your family, and others important to you. In the realm of institutional news providers and researchers of media- too, there has always been a further demarcation between 'hard news' and 'soft news' as there has been a demarcation between 'news'

and 'features'. Many of these demarcations originated from the world of print newspapers and were carried over into TV news when it first started. But the emergence of Facebook as a key platform for news – and the centrality of its 'Newsfeed' - established a forum where not only hard and soft news and 'news' and 'features' blended together.

The demarcation between reporting and opinion seems to have been almost completely decimated by digital news sources, especially social platforms such as Facebook. This, at the level of the ordinary citizen has had very important consequences. Crucially, news is now considered to be as much about 'how it makes me feel' as about what it tells me. 'Human interest stories', or softer news in general is considered to be a core part of news, while political and policy reportage is expected to not just be dry and analytical but expressing some emotion. In other words, people expect news to not just inform but to entertain (Itse, 2019). This is not an entirely new phenomenon. That is, this collapsing of boundaries between various types of news predates the rise of digital and social media. Social media, with its low barriers to entry, therefore provides innumerable sources of information - and the distinctions between them are flattened in the minds of the use.

Audiences do not have a much nuanced definition of the term 'fake news'. It covers all types of misleading news from sport to politics, and indeed covers all forms of misinformation. Very importantly, it also includes rumors. The difference the current context is evidently the fact that rumors now are not arriving word of mouth, but digitally – usually through their WhatsApp messages. In this context - and the context of blurring of all kinds of 'news' described above, anything that arrives digitally has the potential to be considered fake news. So, although people express concern, societal and electoral harm is too abstract to be understood – harm is understood to be personal. People's concerns are lessened when fake news does not appear to harm them or their friends and families on a personal level. For example, entertainment and celebrity fake news, and fake news about activities of politicians are considered relatively harmless as opposed to those explicitly appearing to incite violence or social rift.

According to Vasu (2018), Fake news may be understood as a range of phenomena and can be categorized into five categories:

- (i) Disinformation – falsehoods and rumors knowingly distributed to undermine national security, which can be part of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns;

- (ii) Misinformation – falsehoods and rumors propagated as part of a political agenda by a domestic group//differing interpretation of facts based on ideological bias;
- (iii) Misinformation – falsehoods and rumors propagated without a broad political aim, either with or without malicious intent that achieves viral status;
- (iv) Entertainment – falsehoods used in parody, satire, or seemingly humorous pieces; and
- (v) Falsehoods distributed for financial gain field of politics

Nigerian Broadcasting Commission and Fake News

Combating fake news is one of the biggest problems social networks are encountering today. It is now very difficult to distinguish between fake and real news. Igyuve and Agaku (2019) argue that whoever is affected by fake news releases a statement denying the news. This source of the fake news is not usually known but some blogs distribute these unconfirmed news stories to simply get more web traffic.

The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) says it is reviewing the broadcasting code to address emerging challenges like hate speech and fake news. Dr. Igomu Onoja, its zonal director in charge of the North-Central, who disclosed this in Jos, said that the review had become necessary to enforce ethics and check the excesses of broadcasting stations.

Onoja spoke at a colloquium organised by the Plateau chapter of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), to mark this year's Press Week. The colloquium focused on "Fake News, Hate Speech and Nigeria's Democratic Sustenance". He warned broadcasting stations against being used by desperate politicians to "pollute the system with hate speech" because it had the tendency to set the nation on fire.

Pate, a professor of Mass Communication at the Bayero University, Kano, regretted that prominent persons had taken advantage of the significance of the media in societal processes to misinform, deceive and incite. According to him, Nigerians in the diaspora had constituted a major source of fake news and hate speeches, regretting that people with little or no understanding of the issues in the country were using the social media to incite people against each other.

Research Methodology

The study adopts the survey research design with questionnaire as instrument for data collection on a sample size of 96 drawn from the

population the Federal Capital Territory which has a figure of 1,406,239 according to the (2006) National Population Census. The sample size of 96 is based on Cozby's sample size and precision of population estimates at 5% that produced the sample size of 96 respondents. This sample is deemed adequate in line with Cozby (2004) submission that a sample size of 150 will describe a population figure of 1,500 or 15million virtually with the same degree of accuracy.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis and presentation is based on the data obtained from the field work through the instrument of questionnaire. The researchers administered 96 copies of the instrument but only 92 were completed and returned. Below is a tabular presentation of the data obtained.

Table 1: Social Media Platforms used by members of the Public

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Facebook	36	37.5
Twitter	23	23.9
WhatsApp	31	32.2
Instagram	6	6.2
Total	96	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Data in table 1 sought to find out the kinds of social media platforms used by the members of the public. Available data indicates that 36 respondents representing (37.5%) are on Facebook, 23 respondents representing (23.9%) Twitter, 31 respondents representing (32.2%) WhatsApp) while 6 respondents representing (6.2%) are on Instagram. The implication is that respondents use different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp as well as Instagram respectively.

Table 2: Respondent capacity to identify Fake News

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Agree	11	11.4
Disagree	38	39.5
Strongly Agree	7	7.2
Strongly Disagree	40	41.6
Total	96	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Data in table 2 shows respondents capacity to identify fake news. 11 respondents representing (11.4%) agreed 38 respondents representing (39.5%) agreed, 7 respondent representing (7.2%) strongly agreed while 40 respondent representing (41.6%) strongly disagreed. The implication is that, respondents lack the capacity to identify fake news on social media platforms as affirmed by respondents in the table above.

Table 3 : Effects of Fake News on Members of the Public

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Misinformation	39	40.0
Misleading	25	26.0
Promotes Falsehood	32	33.3
Total	96	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Data in table 3 sought to ascertain the effects of Fake news. 39 respondents representing (40.0%) Misinformation, 25 respondents representing (26.0%) Misleading while 32 respondents representing (33.3%) affirms that fake news promotes falsehood. The implication is that the effects of fake news range from misinformation, misleading to promotion of falsehood as affirmed by respondents in this table.

Table 4: Extent to which Fake News is Spread of Social Media Platforms

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
To Some Extent	21	21.8
To a Large Extent	32	33.3
To a Very Large Extent	43	44.7
Total	96	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Data in table 4 sought to find out the extent to which fake news is spread on social media platforms. 21 respondents representing (21.8%) affirmed to some extent, 32 respondents representing (33.3%) to a large extent while 43 respondents representing (44.7%) to a very large extent. The implication is that fake news is spreads on social media platforms to a very large extent as affirmed by 43 respondents representing (44.7%) of the entire respondents.

Discussion

The first objective of the study was to find out social media platforms used by members of the public. In response to this objective, data analysed indicate that respondents used different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp as well as Instagram respectively as affirmed 36 respondents representing (37.5%) (Facebook), 23 respondents representing (23.9%) (Twitter), 31 respondents representing (32.2%) (WhatsApp) while 6 respondents representing (6.2%) (Instagram). This finding agrees with Manning (2014) argument that the common social media platforms include; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn etc.

The study also sought to ascertain respondent capacity to identify fake news. In response to this objective, data evidence analysed indicate that respondents lack the capacity to identify fake news on social media platforms as affirmed by 40 respondent representing (41.7%) strongly disagreed. This finding agrees with Fabian, Ermakova and Baumann (2019, p.6) observation that people are vulnerable to manipulation, as it has become increasingly harder to distinguish authentic news from rumors, misinformation, and manipulative, unverified, and even fake content.

The study was also conducted to identify the effects of fake news on members of the public. In response to this objective, data analysed indicates that the effects of fake news range from misinformation, misleading to promotion of falsehood. This is in line with Vasu (2018) argument that fake news is categorized into distortion, misinformation, misinformation and entertainment.

Finally, the study was conducted to find out the extent to which fake news affect members of the public. In response to this objective, data evidence indicates that fake news spreads on social media platforms to a very large extent as affirmed by 43 respondents representing (44.7%) of the entire respondents. This finding agrees with Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) argument that online content is spread with little or no filtering, and sources with unknown or negligible reputation reach as many readers as established media outlets.

Conclusion

Arising from the findings, the paper concludes that the problem of fake news is a global issue that has become a cause for concern in Nigeria recently social media platforms have provided a fertile ground for fake

news. The spread of fake news via social media platforms often results to misinformation and distortion of information members of the public are left confused despite knowledge of the existence of fake news. Usually, these stories are created to either to influence people's views, push a political agenda or cause confusion and can often be a profitable business for online publishers. Fake news stories can deceive people by looking like trusted websites or using similar names and web addresses to reputable news organisations. The paper thus calls for:

- i. Regulation of social media to minimize the spread of fake news on social media platforms as this would go a long way to enhance accuracy, truth and objectivity.
- ii. Education and sensitization of social media user's as this would enable them understand the dangers of spreading fake news on the various social media platforms.
- iii. Measures to be put in place to sanction social media users who spread and promotes fake news on social media platforms.
- iv. Installation of security mechanism with artificial intelligence capabilities that would remove fake news on social media.

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