

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA

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*The start of the coronavirus disease in Nigeria in early 2020 created desperation for information. Everyone was eager to know something about the health issue, which killed people within days of infection. Questions requiring immediate answers ranged from what the symptoms were to what self-help remedy was appropriate. The media became a reliable platform to seek knowledge, and the coronavirus disease came at a time when social media proliferated. So, most people depended on this innovation for information on the disease. This was where falsehood, masquerading as news, tainted the minds of Nigerians. This paper, which uses framing theory as a theoretical framework, sought to examine how fake news and misinformation influenced the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria. It also set out to establish whether, in the perception and experiences of the population, the Nigerian media still command the trust of the people as reliable primary sources of news. The research purposively drew 30 interviewees and discussants from Nigeria's six geo-political zones. The outcome showed that while some Nigerians were not personally affected by fake news or misinformation, they were quite aware of its negative impact on people they knew. This study recommends further investigation on why Nigerians still believe in the media despite infiltration and the influence of fake news. The general conclusion points toward the need to make media content more credible through professionalism and legal control.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Fake News, Journalism, Misinformation, Nigeria, Social Media

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## Background

Nigeria has suffered various health calamities, and several killer diseases are endemic in the country. While malaria is one of them (CDC, 2022a), COVID-19 came with a different intensity. Available statistics (Statista, 2022) indicate that in 2019, ten types of diseases were responsible for almost 70% of deaths in Nigeria: neonatal disorders (12.25%), malaria (12%), diarrheal disease (11.36%), lower respiratory infection (10.85%), HIV-AIDS (5.18%), ischemic heart disease (4.37%), stroke (3.98%), congenital birth defects (3.26%), tuberculosis (2.84%), and meningitis (2.82%). In most cases, little has been heard of these killer diseases outside of hospital wards. They hardly attract headlines except where they become epidemic in nature.

In 2012, citizens and residents of the Middle East were exposed to what later became the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), which was first discovered in Saudi Arabia and later spread to other countries. Its symptoms included cough, fever, and shortness of breath (CDC, 2022b). Then Ebola reappeared, from Guinea in West Africa, between 2013 and 2016 before it disappeared, perhaps temporarily. In 2015, there was the re-emergence of the Brazilian Zika virus, which rapidly spread across 50 countries and territories, leaving many dead in its path (Lowe et al., 2018).

News about the coronavirus disease was received as a mere rumor from far-away China (Kandola, 2020). Suddenly, people started having trouble breathing, body temperatures started rising, accompanied by headaches, cough, and other lung-related sicknesses (CDC, 2021c). Then people started dying. Still, people thought it was a local Chinese problem. Conspiracy theories tried to put the blame for the outbreak on the bioweaponry developed by China (Nie, 2020).

In Nigeria, rumors gave way to reality when, on February 27, the country recorded its first coronavirus disease case (Adepoju, 2020). It was also the first in sub-Saharan Africa. A report by the BBC (2020) indicates that the patient, an Italian, was “stable with no serious symptoms.” This first case was, however, a clear signal that what was initially perceived as a rumor was finally becoming reality in Nigeria.

COVID-19 soon turned into a huge fright. Within a short time, the world came under a heavy health attack hitherto unknown. People started dying after a cough,

sneeze, or common cold. Suddenly, a handshake or a hug was forbidden (Martinez & Iftikhar, 2020), because it served as the fastest channel for the spread of the mysterious agent of death. People were told to keep washing their hands and use hand sanitizers. Friends could no longer meet to have a drink. If they did, they were forced to sit far from one another. According to Allain-Dupre et al. (2020), offices started shutting down, social life ceased, and global and local economies came under severe assault. Something unknown to the modern era was unfolding. The lack of immediate scientific information on the cause and the way out of the pandemic created more fear than the coronavirus disease itself.

Shortly after Nigeria had its first case, the federal health body issued certain precautions to the citizens. Among the guidelines issued were the need for personal hygiene, social distancing, and a call to citizens not to engage in self-medication. Nigerians were told not to abuse social media or indulge in spreading misinformation that causes fear and panic (Federal Ministry of Land, 2020).

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). It announced that 4,291 people across 118 countries were already dead. The word pandemic portrayed the severity of the attack. WHO confirmed that it had never before seen a pandemic sparked by coronavirus disease. That signaled various conclusions including the fact that scientific information on the disease, its control, and cure was not sufficiently available.

Globally, worries increased. With the spread of the virus becoming uncontrollable and the rate of casualties increasing daily, people were no longer concerned with immediate cure, but about what to do to stay alive. The world needed information on the infection. UNICEF (2021) states that health agencies could only offer information on symptoms, but not the cure. In a bid to reduce the further spread of the virus, a lockdown was introduced. The Nigerian government, while declaring the lockdown in three major cities, said the government had decided to mobilize the entire instruments of power to confront the coronavirus threat. It announced the cessation of movements in three major cities (Daka et al., 2020).

Locked inside their houses, the only access to information by most Nigerians

was social media platforms. This is because most people had no access to the information published in the mainstream media due to the limitation of movement. Therefore, unverified information, deceptively packaged as news, was consumed by the desperate media consumers with no alternatives. The packaging came to be known as fake news — writings that are not only deliberately fabricated but are intentionally and sensationally presented to mislead the consumers. Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as news articles that are verifiably false and could mislead readers. The word mislead brings into focus another word: misinformation, defined by UNESCO (2018) as misleading information disseminated without malicious intent. It can, however, be argued that consumers of such misleading information could be misled into harm's way.

Nigerians had experienced fake news several times in the past. Social media only added speed to the spread and enlarged the scope. According to Bakare (2020), during the outbreak of the Ebola virus in 2013, Nigerians were misled by social media to believe that Ebola could be prevented by drinking and bathing with salt water. People accepted the unscientific news and decided to practice it. Unfortunately, he states that two persons were reported dead in Jos, after consuming an excessive quantity of salt water. Scared by the previous negative impacts of fake news in Nigeria, Lagos State Commissioner for Information, Gbenga Omotosho, declared: "I can tell you that no disease is afflicting the world more than the issue of fake news and this is the time all practitioners should rise up and phase it out..." (James, 2021).

Based on this background, this study sets out to examine the depth of the impact which fake news and misinformation had on the lives of Nigerians in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will also examine how media consumers have been able to differentiate fake news or misinformation from factual reporting. The study investigates the faith of Nigerians in media content despite the sour experiences unleashed by fake news and misinformation and establishes whether the credibility of the media has been eroded by the phenomena.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is framing theory, which is usually considered an offshoot of the agenda-setting theory. Propounded by Erving Goffman, a sociologist, framing theory was first mentioned in his book, *Framing Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*, published in 1974 (Bajracharya, 2018). This theory is about the deliberate structuring of specific media contents with the aim of influencing peoples' minds towards a predetermined decision. Another important definition of framing by Entman (1993) is that:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating content in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, more evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (p. 52).

This Framing involves the repetition of information over and over on the same subject matter with the aim of persuading the audience to make a decision. The process is described by Bajracharya (2018) as an attempt by the mass media to persuade the audience or divert its attention from other issues to the specifics that they want people to focus on. The aim is to create a conviction, change mindsets, and spur people into action in a certain undisclosed direction. The sender of the message has in mind what response is favorable for him, and the message is therefore constructed to meet that target.

### Assumptions of Framing Theory

Frames are built to persuade especially when the communication content does not face an alternative argument. Framing is meant to set an agenda for public opinion on issues and move people to action. Under this theory, media contents are framed like pictures and placed before the audience in such a persuasive manner that the audience is faced with no option other than accepting it because there is no counterargument.

One of the noticeable assumptions of framing theory is the belief that the media

can shape peoples' opinion by framing issues in specific ways. In framing, the sender of the information must interpret some issue-specific messages to either create fear or generate interest in the audience, to the point of patronage. This is how Chong and Druckman (2007) define this process:

Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue...a tactic used by political entrepreneurs to coordinate individuals around particular interpretations of their problems (p. 104, 119).

There is also the belief that framing works effectively when it is introduced in the early stages of an incident when there is not yet any contradicting information flow. This was the approach adopted by those involved in fake news dissemination during the lockdown caused by coronavirus disease.

### **Criticisms against Framing Theory**

Framing is said to experience diminishing effects when there is an alternative information flow, which happens to be authentic and more reliable. This implies that anytime there is a counterargument or a superior and more convincing point of view that contradicts an earlier one, framing would experience a diminishing influence. During this study, the realization by people that information earlier relied upon was fake news only came when credible health bodies or government organizations released more reliable information that ran contrary to the previous ones published on social media.

It is also believed that media content framed for the audience could either be positive or negative. As stated by Chong and Druckman (2007), framing can be manipulative for the sole purpose of misleading the people. At the same time, it could be neutral depending on the predetermined purpose of the disseminator of the information.

## Conceptual Framework

There is nothing new about fake news or misinformation, except its impact. In Nigeria, fake news had taken a dangerous dimension in 2014 when the Ebola virus infected Lagos residents and later spread to other parts of the country. While experts were battling the menace, which had earlier announced its devastating presence with the death of a medical doctor, obviously false information was released by unknown persons on the prevention and treatment of the virus (Bakare, 2020). The fake news helped create more panic among the already confused populace and in the end resulted in several deaths.

Ireton and Posetti (2018) disagree in a UNESCO report that there is anything like fake news. They dismiss the expression as an oxymoron—the intentional use of two contrasting words for certain effects. In addition, they do not think that fake news has a straightforward or commonly understood meaning. It defines news as verifiable information, and that anything that does not meet this standard is not qualified to be labeled as news.

Charlton (2019) points out that fake news could be difficult to define and pin down. He states further that, stories are categorized as fake when they are factually inaccurate but are deliberately published in a bid to underscore certain views and unknown points. According to him, sometimes the stories could be partially true but are not verified. The author notes that while several fabricated stories take the form of relatively harmless satire, others have more chilling implications.

The undeniable fact is that fake news, by whatever other name it is called or packaged, is deliberately created to deceive readers (Webwise, 2021). It is neither meant to profitably inform nor to meaningfully educate the readers. For every fake news released to unsuspecting audience members, there is always an agenda to push and a profit to make.

Misinformation, which some analysts have equated with fake news, is slightly different. While fake news is no news at all, but a piece of message intentionally crafted to deceive, pollute, and possibly harm individuals or the society at large, misinformation does not intentionally set out to cause harm. But Hameleers, Brosius & Vreese (2022) have noted that misinformation or disinformation could

be harmful and misleading, though that might not be its intention. Misinformation, in the era of COVID-19, is so viral that it has surpassed the truth (Solovev & Prollochs, 2022). That is why it must be examined alongside fake news, although the differences between both are more semantic than real.

## Literature Review

### Influence of Fake News and Misinformation

Nigeria's Information Minister, Lai Mohammed has said that the global epidemic of fake news is already having far-reaching repercussions across the world (Otulugbu 2020). In August 2020, shock gripped Nigerians (and indeed the world), when news emerged that at least 800 people may have died worldwide in the first three months of that year, because of coronavirus-related fake news (Coleman, 2020). Many people died from drinking methanol or alcohol-based cleaning products after being informed by fake news writers that it could cure or at least prevent coronavirus.

The WHO (2021) posted on its website that allowing oneself to be guided by wrong information is a deadly enterprise, because only three months into 2020, nearly 6,000 people around the world were in hospital based on the wrong medication used through misinformation on the coronavirus disease. Further, it stated that since the advent of COVID-19, false information is omnipresent, from discrediting the threat of COVID-19 to conspiracy theories that vaccines could alter human DNA. Adepoju (2020) quotes Mayowa Tijani, a fact-checker with AFP, as saying that fake news and long-standing trust issues seriously affected the response to the coronavirus disease in the first few months when the pandemic started. These instances clearly confirm the devastating impact of fake news and misinformation on coronavirus. Odunlade et al. (2021) state that fake news has affected the spread of COVID-19 a great deal in Nigeria. The writers believe that the situation has brought on the country an avoidable violation of COVID-19 precautionary measures and a lack of trust in government. Inevitably, this has led to an undue proliferation of the virus spread.

Information stimulates belief, thus wrong information inflames wrong beliefs,



while accurate information, released through an appropriate medium, activates proper reactions — mental and physical. Misinformation on COVID-19 ended up unintentionally misleading the audience because of their belief in the authenticity of media content. Ekpu (2019) categorizes fake news or misinformation as a deliberate falsehood designed not merely to mislead, but to poison the minds of the people and force them to act in a manner detrimental to the collective interests of the society.

The prevalence of fake news or misinformation and its deadly consequences is a great challenge to journalism practice in Nigeria. Journalism has been negatively affected by fake news. Okonkwo (2020) states that fake news is falsehood and lies told and spread with the intention to deceive and destroy for selfish interests. He states that fake news is so dangerous that it can lead to the destruction of lives, properties, and reputations of innocent citizens. Simply put, those behind fake news only consider the gains they derive from disseminating wrong information to the public.

There are different reasons why fake news and misinformation keep prospering (Thompson Rivers University Libraries, 2019). Fake news, it says, signifies the distrust of mainstream media and government, an opportunity to create contents unburdened by different layers of editorial structures and fact-checking which conventional news organizations condone, and most importantly, fake stories appeal to our emotions. Those who create fake stories have a better understanding of human gullibility when it comes to the ludicrous. They know that people are easily attracted to stories that are close to what they believe in. This accounts for why fake news on COVID-19 has succeeded abundantly in Nigeria.

Effron and Raj (2019) state that fake news and misinformation are hardly condemned or ignored when it is repeatedly forced on the people. That is, people do not evaluate repeated misinformation to a truth test even when it obviously looks like mere unproven rumors dressed in flirting attires and flaunted to deceive. The researchers observe that repeated untruth is even viewed to be less unethical to disseminate.

## **Fake News, Misinformation, and COVID-19**

There are three characteristics of fake news (see Thompson Rivers University Library, 2019). First, they are consistently, factually inaccurate; they are optimized for sharing; and they are meant to obscure or distort emotions, preying on prejudice or bias. Goodman and Carmichael (2020) report that a fake message circulating on WhatsApp in the Indian Hindu language made a false declaration that the WHO had stated on its website that coronavirus was just like the seasonal flu, with no threat to life, and does not require lockdown and masks. The false report caught the global health advocate hands down. Before a lot of harm was done, WHO immediately disowned the information, and in addition, advised people to wear masks and create social distancing.

One scary false news or misinformation that got many Nigerians extensively worried was that coronavirus was caused by the 5G network—a superfast wireless technology, which at that time, was gaining global attention and had already arrived in Nigeria. Tibken (2020) observed that the speculation raised serious threats against the telephone infrastructure.

Even the Nigerian Union of Journalists has said that it is worried about the rate at which fake news has affected the execution of COVID-19 prevention measures (Gbonegun, 2022). Adejumo Kabir (2020) states that some of the information shared by Nigerians on social media platforms about COVID-19 are untrue and at their best, myths, and that such information poses “danger to recipients, especially those who act on them immediately.” He mentioned a Facebook post claiming that warm water and salt or vinegar is a remedy for coronavirus—a claim that was debunked by the NHS, which explained that warm saline water gargling works in adults suffering from sore throats, not coronavirus.

Nigerians also experienced the rumors mentioned by Islam et al.’s (2020) study that identified 2,311 media reports related to COVID-19, spread in 25 languages in 87 countries. Out of these, 2,049 or 89% of the reports were classified as rumors, 182 or 7.8% were conspiracy theories, and 82 or 3.5% were on stigma. Since these reports were sent out at a time people desperately needed information on the coronavirus disease, especially in the areas of cure and management, unsuspecting social media consumers simply believed in them without any attempt at fact-

checking. Most of them lacked access to the ethically minded mainstream media. Parts of the rumors and conspiracy theories mentioned in the article include eating garlic as a cure, keeping the throat moist, the need to avoid spicy food, and the importance of taking vitamin C and D to help prevent the disease. Fake news operators advised people to spray themselves with chlorine. The article also reports cases where it was rumored that mobile telephones could transmit the virus and that coronavirus was a deliberate effort at population control. Others called it medical terrorism. Investigators said people were told to have their bath with granite to prevent the infection and drink cow urine and cow dung as a cure.

Moved by social media information persuading people to drink bleach as prevention against coronavirus, the Upstate New York Poison Centre (2020) issued a warning on the health dangers of drinking bleach. It advised that doing that would “not prevent COVID-19 infections and could cause serious injury.” As observed by Adjin-Tetley (2022), on the face value, most fake news and misinformation do not ordinarily look fake. Some look quite authentic and believable, but they are crafted to deceive and deliberately misinform the public. Operators of fake news also dangerously exploit democratic principles of freedom of expression. The end, of course, is profit-making.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does fake news and or misinformation influence the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria?
2. How have Nigerians been able to spot fake news and misinformation?
3. What is the impact of fake news or misinformation on people’s confidence in media content?

## **Methods**

This study adopted the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews involving 30 participants, who were purposively drawn from Nigeria’s six geo-political zones, comprising different ethnic groups. The research method was

deliberately adopted to reflect the views and experiences of the sample population across these geopolitical areas. In the end, some of the interviewees participated by phone. The two sources of data collection complemented each other by igniting responses in manners that adequately explained participants' understanding of what fake news or misinformation is and how it has threatened the credibility of the mainstream media. In all, 13 broad areas formed the questions for the in-depth interviews. It took 21 days to complete the process of data collection (February 6-26, 2022). Those involved cut across different professions — medical, public service, business, journalism, and students. In this study, instead of names, the sample population is identified by numbers (from P1 to P30). The oldest of the participants — comprising 18 females and 12 males — was 60 years while the youngest was 25 years old. Among them, 27 said they are active on social media and identified the most accessible sources of news, whether fake or real, to be Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, followed by short messaging system (SMS).

## Findings

### Demographic Data

Nigeria has 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. Participants in this study were drawn from different states that make up the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. They were all identified by gender, occupation, states of origin, and states of residence, because not everyone stays in their states of origin, and not all of them are in Nigeria.

Three of them (Figure 1), all health professionals, stay outside Nigeria— Washington, New York, and Australia.

**Table 1.** Geopolitical Distribution of Participants

SN	GEO-POLITICAL ZONES	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	MALE	FEMALE
1	South East	5	4	1
2	North West	1		1
3	South West	3	1	2
4	North Central	4	2	2
5	South South	13	5	8
6	North East	1		1
7	Diaspora	3		3
TOTAL		30	12	18

In all, 18 females and 12 males participated in the study.

**Table 2.** Occupational Distribution of Participants

SN	Medics	Journalists	Business	Public Servants	Students	Marketers	TOTAL
1	7	7	5	5	4	2	30
2	23.3%	23.3%	16.7%	16.7%	13.3%	6.7%	100%

Seven of the participants were medical professionals including medical doctors, nurses, and physiotherapists (Figure 2). Another seven were journalists, while five were businessmen and women. Five public servants were also interviewed, while the number of students was four, in addition to two media marketing executives. All participants fell within the age bracket of between 26 and 60 years. Twenty-seven of the 30 participants are active on social media, particularly on Facebook and WhatsApp.

When asked about their knowledge of the terms “fake news” and “misinformation,” every participant agreed that fake news or misinformation exists. However, not all could draw a line between the nuances of fake news and misinformation. Twenty-three participants defined fake news or misinformation as false news. Others believe fake news or misinformation are unconfirmed or unverified media reports. One of the participants said that fake news is false or

misleading information presented as news and that fake news could sometimes be described as sensational news designed to hoodwink the unsuspecting public into believing what is not true, and it could damage the reputation of an individual or institution.

Another participant described fake news as wrong information deliberately created and shared to mislead, deceive, or cause confusion among people. She said there are times when fake news stems from ignorance, that is people create or stumble on them and spread them without fact-checking or verifying. She noted that fake news is real and can cause a lot of havoc in any society if it is not checked. Asked whether they experienced fake news before COVID-19, most of the participants (25) said they were either closely or remotely affected by fake news. One participant cited a report about the killing of a mass communication student at a school in Southern Kaduna in Nigeria, during one of several crises in the state. The news turned out to be untrue.

Some of the interviewees mentioned their fake-news experiences since the outbreak of COVID-19, particularly during the lockdown. One of them explained that several misleading news, and video and photoshopped images were deliberately shared, most times by unsuspecting members of the society. She disclosed she was careful not to be caught because of the likely consequences, which misleading and unverifiable information caused. She recalled voice notes of people denouncing COVID-19 and in some cases spreading unverifiable stories of cure or avoidance that were not scientifically proven.

Other participants denied experiencing the negative impacts of fake news since the emergence of COVID-19.

Most of the participants blamed the medium and the content for fake news. They believe that anything called news that appears on social media is unreliable. Nineteen of the 30 participants agree with McLuhan (1964) that the medium is the message — the medium shapes or determines the credibility of the message. It was their opinion that social media platforms are not credible news media since information published there does not always qualify as news. On the question of how to confirm whether the news is fake, participants were not unanimous on

how they were able to establish the truth of what they read on social media. Some of the discussants said they discovered that the information they were exposed to on COVID-19 was fake when Nigeria started recording numerous cases of affected persons. That was when it became clear to them that COVID-19 was real.

On the question of having knowledge of specific COVID-19 havoc caused by fake news, not all of the participants said they had experienced any such havoc. One participant stated that a friend's husband was misled into believing that COVID-19 did not exist until the man died out of negligence. Another participant, a student, expressed regrets that one of her friends who was infected by the virus died. She said that people were made to believe that there was nothing like COVID-19 and that it was all an attempt by politicians to continue to embezzle public funds, whilst hiding under the cover of finding solutions to a non-existing virus attack.

This research discovered that one of the misleading information was that COVID-19 was caused by 5G, popularized by a celebrated Nigerian preacher, left several persons, especially worshippers in that particular faith, convinced that vaccination was unhealthy and demonic. Such information had a negative effect on the general fight against COVID-19 and its spread. It also led to casualties with reported loss of lives. Four participants said they lost people because of fake or misinformation on COVID-19, and another four had people who suffered severe depression and anxiety. On the question of which social media platform had the highest rate of fake news within this period, the answer was almost unanimous. An astonishing 28 participants mentioned Facebook and bloggers as the chief carriers of fake news.

Most of the participants confirmed that before the proliferation of social media, they relied mainly on newspapers for their news. They had to switch over when newspapers became expensive and the social media was offering what they considered to be free news, which turned out to be fake. Others said they depended on television and radio. The remaining seven people depended on other sources. On the question of what could motivate the publication of fake news on COVID-19, various reasons were cited by the participants. Some said people publish fake news to create traffic on their platforms to enhance advertising

revenue, enforce their positions on certain issues, discredit other people's positions, subtly create fear and panic and reap profits from it, and for political reasons. Other participants observed that fake news is published to generate likes, comments, and shares, which make the sites, channels, or pages of such publishers popular, promote a biased point of view, deliberately mislead the audience, and destroy the reputation of others.

Further explanation by other participants was that fake news is disseminated to make people believe, think, and act in a particular way. It is calculated to manipulate the thoughts and actions of people on an issue or subject matter. It could be sponsored by an individual or group. In all, 13 participants believed that fake news operators do so for economic reasons. That is, the more fake news they write about COVID-19, the more traffic they draw to their sites, and the more advertisers they attract. Seven participants even think that governments also sponsor fake news whenever they want to cover up some policy gaffes. They argued that fake news is used as situational convenience and is mostly skewed for personal purposes since people who read them are immediately made to believe them without questioning.

On the question of the major sources of news, participants pointed to social media. Participants describe the mainstream media as being more ethical and professional. In all, 24 participants affirmed that they still read newspapers, watch television, and listen to the radio. This raised the question of their continuous confidence or faith in the credibility of the mass media, with specific reference to the traditional media. Participants stated their continuous faith in the traditional mass media. All 28 participants declared their faith in the mainstream media, in contrast to social media.

The last question was on how to tame fake news. Among the participants, seven called for sanctions that would not infringe on freedom of expression, another seven called for regulations by professional bodies. Such regulations, they believed, would stop quacks from parading as journalists. Six participants were in favor of sensitization and enlightenment among media consumers and advertisers. Generally, participants believed that when fake news operators run out of patronage from readers and advertisers, they will close shops.



## Discussion

The objectives of this study were to examine how fake news and misinformation affected the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria and establish whether the phenomena created any credibility crisis for the media in Nigeria. It also aimed at bringing into focus how participants have been able to identify fake news or misinformation in the media.

Under the first objective, findings indicate that fake information, masquerading as news, has had a deadly impact, and caused serious drawbacks in the management of COVID-19 at all levels in Nigeria and thus framed the whole COVID-19 pandemic. These intentionally and purposely misleading reports unavoidably interfered with experts' management of COVID-19 and resulted in preventable deaths as confirmed in this research. Judging from information supplied by participants from the different geo-political zones and the diaspora, the negative impacts of fake news and misinformation is global. These findings contradict the postulation by UNESCO (2018) that misinformation is harmless because it lacks malicious content. They rather confirm the suspicion by Hameleers, Brosius, and Vreese (2022) that false information could be harmful. Identifying fake news which constituted the second objective of this study was not quite easy, as observed by the participants. This confirms the conclusion by Charlton (2019) that fake news is slippery both in definition and identification. In some cases, media consumers wait in vain for counter-information from the government. When none came, they believed whatever was on social media. This study showed that for the medical personnel, it was easier to handle fake news and misinformation.

This study also set out to establish the impact which fake news or misinformation has had on people's faith in the media. From findings, people who previously were fanatical about social media because of its immediacy in information dissemination said they have lost faith in it because of fake news. Some of them claimed that though they had hitherto distanced themselves from the traditional media because of the high cost and delay in news dissemination,

the discovery of misleading information in social media has caused them to return to the mainstream or the traditional news sources—television, newspapers, and radio. They believe that these media remain critical pillars of societal growth. One principal reason is that in their individual view there is still a measure of professionalism and adherence to regulations in the traditional media.

These findings prove that social media, which is an otherwise functional communication tool, have been thoroughly abused. Operators of fake news and misinformation, those who help them spread it, and the advertisers who keep them in business through advertising revenue are aware of the dangers they are causing. However, people still have faith in the credibility of the mainstream media. This finding contrasts the assumption that fake news signifies distrust of the mainstream media (Thompson Rivers University Library, 2019).

## Recommendations

This study recommends further research to unravel the motives behind the fabrication and publication of deadly information.

It also recommends an unambiguous semantic differentiation by academics between fake information erroneously called fake news and the news as obtained in traditional or ethical journalism practice.

Advertising practitioners should desist from patronizing operators of fake news websites since that would mean sustaining them in their deadly business of publishing false information.

Governments, professional bodies, and non-governmental organizations should mount sensitization campaigns against the spread of unverified information found on social media to limit the number of victims of false news.

## Conclusion

Based on this study, using social media platforms to spread fake information or deliberate falsehood should be avoided. This is because this study has confirmed that some people who were misled by such falsehood died or suffered,

while those who made it up are still in the business. This is unacceptable.

This study also concludes that the use of the expression “fake news” is misleading because no news should be fake. Whatever qualifies to be called news cannot at the same time be misinformation since it must have met all the professional and ethical considerations.

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