



Online Toxicity: Scarification of Political Opponents using Fake News

MSUGH-TER TEDDY HANMAKYUGH, AUDREY VERSHIMA SOHO, ANN ONWUKA ECHOR
& MARTINA MSUGH-TER TEDDY

NTA Television College, Jos msughteddy@gmail.com, University of Abuja vershimasoho@gmail.com, Benue State University, Makurdi echoranne@gmail.com, Taraba State University, Jalingo martinashimfe1991@gmail.com

Abstract

Fake news has always trolled election seasons in Nigeria. The situation is more widespread fueled by internet technologies that are used by aspirants and their supporters. Once again Nigeria is experiencing a tense and difficult moment as the momentum to the 2023 general elections which takes place in February picks up. False information, media propaganda, divisive comments and conflicts are rife in many quarters. Rather than campaigns to be a moment to engage and test the political intelligence and capability of aspirants, it is used for throwing banter that are meant to mutilate the opposition party, actions that are inimical to the nation's democracy. This paper therefore looks at the harm fake news in social media has on influencing electorates' choice of political leaders in the forthcoming elections in Nigeria. Hence, this paper explores the concepts of fake news and democracy with regard to freedom of speech from a Nigerian context through a review of extant literature. In conclusion, several propositions were made, and a conceptual framework was designed for future research to explore the concept and empirically proffer solutions to the growing menace.

Key Words: Fake News, Social Media, Electorates, Political Mutilation, Freedom of Speech

Introduction

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse population of over 200 million people residing in a federation of 36 autonomous states and the Federal Capital Territory. It is often referred to in many climes as the "Giant of Africa" for its large economy and participation in ensuring freedom, security and peace on the African continent as well as striving to achieve hegemony in Africa, especially in the West African subregion. On the contrary, this greatness has waned over the years due to the weakening of its economy, violent conflicts, frivolous and unabated cases of corruption and most disturbing is the rising insecurity that threatens the entire progress and continued existence of the nation.

Ahead of the national and state elections in 2023, there is great clamour amongst Nigerians for improved conditions in the country. This has pushed contenders from eighteen registered political parties (<https://www.inecnigeria.org/political-parties/>) to vie for the *numero uno*- job in the country and state as the case may be, with top contenders being Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), Rabiu Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria

Peoples Party (NNPP), and Omoyele Sowore of Africa Action Congress (AAC), for President, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

With the conclusion of party primaries in June 2022, and the emergence of presidential candidates, the tussle for who succeeds President Muhammadu Buhari in 2023 is heating up. Candidates have latched onto social media to reach out to millions of potential voters, especially the youths who are more internet savvy. While it is a known fact that elections are not won or lost on social media, there is no doubt that the popularity, influence and followership a candidate commands on Social Media Platforms (SMPs) like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram mirrors the reception of such candidate, at least, on social media.

On the other hand, the increasing penetration of the internet and proliferation of mobile phones have provided the opportunity for millions of Nigerians to not only communicate but enabled those with smartphones to share and receive information, become content creators as well as participate fully in political discussions as they unfold. This has given birth to a political fan base who refer themselves by their supporters. It is not uncommon to hear political supporters call themselves 'Buharists', 'OBI-dients', 'Kwankwasiya',

'ATIKUlated', 'Ortomatic' or 'Jagaban'. Owing to this, social media have provided a vibrant space for both political actors, supporters and electorates to leverage on for political and economic discussions which may pave way to political success.

To achieve the much-desired success politicians, political parties and party loyalists do not mind dipping their hands in potpourri to smear on other contestants. This 'do or die' game of spreading misinformation, popularly referred to as 'fake news,' on new media platforms targeted at politicians has assumed a worrisome proportion. Fake news is specifically designed to plant a seed of mistrust and intensify the existing social and cultural dynamics by using political, regional and religious undercurrents (Kalu, 2016).

The virus of fake news has become prominent in contemporary human societies where citizens become content providers and grow not just to become supporters of particular political affiliation but play a fundamental part in setting national agendas in the governance. Unlike the traditional media that emphasise publication of what is true, accurate and objective, the spread of the fake news phenomenon on the internet is caused by the internet's ever connected nature and the preference for speed over accuracy. Internet content providers and distributors are in a neck-to-neck battle for attention, character assassination and advertising revenue, they will do any and everything to make toxic their victims to win through mass traffic activity. This problem is further impaired when journalists who are competing for attention rather than authenticate the source and content of the news go ahead to publish first and verify later. This wild spread of engineered harmful content that is shared to a readily massive reader base even when debunked has a tendency of inflicting scars on a victim and psychologically affect the voting pattern of voters. False information can reach large audiences by spreading rapidly from one individual to another (Van der Linden, Maibach, Cook, Leiserowitz & Lewandowsky, 2017a; Wong, 2019).

Economically, the extent of the nature of fake news can be seen when former Amway distributors began spreading false rumours linking Procter and

Gamble Co. to Satanism to advance their business (<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna17702748>; <https://www.christiananswers.net/q-edden/ednr012.html>). Politically, circulation of fake news that is deliberately designed to mislead voters can be seen in a tweet containing a picture of a young man (credited to be Mr. Peter Obi's son Oseloka) wearing a face mask and stepping on a Nigerian flag, or a photo of Catholic Bishops endorsing Shettima's Vice-Presidential ambition when actually such photo was taken in November, 2017 on the occasion of the Anniversary of the Golden Jubilee of Canonical erection of Maiduguri Diocese. Such false information can potentially harm voters' interests by negatively influencing voters' intentions to vote for the party. Conversely, voters may also be misled into supporting aspirants based on fake reviews, which have been acknowledged as a form of online forgery. Thus, fake news and its viral circulation have become a grave concern in the era of social media, where anonymity, user-generated content and geographical distance may encourage fake news sharing behaviour.

This if left unchecked could consequently lead to rhetoric strategies that have the capacity to generate hostility and confrontation in a society as against the norms that enable democratic government to function (Chaiken & Eagly, 1978, in Ajakaiye, 2019). The paper looks at new media and the proliferation of fake news within the Nigerian social milieu and how the spread of fake news could affect the choice of political candidates in the country.

Conceptual Overview

Fake News: When many Nigerians refer to politics as a "dirty game", they do not only refer to it with the notion of rigging but include also the process of employing communication that utilises intolerant appellations to insult and denounce others vis-à-vis race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or other forms of group membership. Fake news for Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p.213) are "news articles that are intentionally and variably false and could mislead readers". Lazer et al. (2018: p.1094) have noted that fake news includes "fabricated information that

mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent”.

In the view of Wardle (2017), seven types of fake news exist and these are: false context, misleading content, false connection, satire or parody, fabricated content, impostor content and manipulated content. Zimdars (2016) in Odunlade, Ojo and Oche (2021) identifies four categories of fake news to include:

- Fake, false or regularly misleading websites that are shared on Facebook and social media. Some of these sites rely on distorted headlines and decontextualised or dubious information in order to generate likes, shares and profits.
- Websites that may calculate misleading and/or potentially unreliable information.
- Websites that sometimes use clickbait-y headlines and social media descriptions.
- Satire/comedy sites which can offer important critical commentary on politics and society, but have the potential to be shared as actual or literal news.

Fake news, thus can be seen to mean information that is deliberately skewed to misinform, disinform, propaganda and distributed widely for induce hate, disaffection or disassociation.

According to research studies (O’Klein & Wueller, 2017; Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang & Liou, 2017; Bukar & Ibrahim, 2020), fake news possesses two key variables, namely authenticity and intent. Authenticity concerns make that fake news is made up of false, and untrue information about political candidates, their supporters or the party they represent; while intent deals with the viral circulation of disruptive and disparaging information manufactured to mislead voters. The problem is even more grievous when “identifying intentional fabrications in this age of infodemic” (Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2021, p.44). Tandoc et al. (2018) further note that differentiating fake news from authentic news is challenging in the present age since fake news is different from news parodies, political satire and news propaganda even though they are all related on the ground of intention to mislead. Though the objective is to mislead, it is

only achieved when others subscribe to fake news as real news and the news influences them. This is seen when on Monday 8th August, 2022 on Delsan TV Facebook Page, Bello Isiaka referred to Peter Obi, the presidential flagbearer for Labour Party in the 2023 elections as “a member of the Pyrate Confraternity or Seadogs Cult”. The news had eight thousand emojis, 15 thousand comments and 226 shares. Also, on 19th July, 2023 Sahara Reporters ran a story on their Facebook page reading “2023: Redeemed Church Debunks Report Pastor Adeboye Met Tinubu Over APC’s Muslim-Muslim Ticket, Endorsed Him for President” (<https://bit.ly/3aN98GG>).

Real news on the other hand is defined as “verifiable information of public interest” (Photiou & Maniou (2018, p.66). This points to the fact that ‘verifiable information’ must adhere strictly to regulatory codes and ethical journalistic practices that relate to the primordial media, radio and television, which are alien to the internet-based media, which are largely unregulated, robustly popular and mostly used in the circulation of misleading contents and hate messages (Agbese, 2017; Ball, 2017). Therefore, it is critical to double check the quality or genuineness of information in circulation in the ‘democraticsphere’ between politicians and electorates (Abdullahi, 2019; Ibrahim, Yar’Adua & Maikaba, 2019). The need to ensure that only verifiable, true and objective information circulate cannot be overemphasised. This is rightly captured when Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan posited in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) that the “medium is the message”. In essence, a lack of credible media and communication can destroy any democracy. A lack of verifiable political message and information can, correspondingly or otherwise, pollute the democratic dispensation thereby undermining its development and sustenance. Adetula (2015) and Ibrahim and Pate (2019) maintain that any representative democratic process that is replete with information disorder and hate speech is, arguably, a weakling democracy.

Politics: The term politics cannot be easily defined.

This is because while the natural sciences have terminologies and vocabulary that are universally recognised and acceptable, and are indeed precise, politics doesn't have it. Politics is open to personal interpretation, different opinions and views therefore, it is difficult to achieve agreement even amongst scholars as to what it is. Also, owing to the fact that every society is affected differently with sometimes its own peculiarities, the approach to solving such problems might not apply to similar cases in other societies. Further, humans who are products of society are susceptible to change and as such their character cannot be anticipated. Politics is hence defined within the context of those within that society. Therefore, the various definitions of politics: as the exercise of power, exercise of authority, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, the practice of deception and manipulation, and so on are all correct. The definition of politics varies from time to time and from place to place.

Given to the above summation on what politics is we can posit that political situations arise out of instability and disagreement. These are the ideal words to which one can summarise what characterise the Nigerian state. Elaborately, Nigeria ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This is further glaring in the high cases of bribery, kidnapping, advance fee fraud, ethnic and religious crisis, gross embezzlement of public funds, political instability, high level of insecurity and various other anomalies (Ikyase & Egberi, 2015). Once again, the political atmosphere in Nigeria is heightening as the country approaches another election year. The tussle for power and status, the quest for better conditions, and the fight to be have opinions, viewpoints and judgements heard above every other.

Within the dominant political parties alone there are differing views. Most prominent is the ruling party's decision (APC) to have Muslims as both presidential and vice-presidential candidates, while Atiku Abubakar seeks amnesty with the party (PDP) for his selection of Ifeanyi Okoha as running mate over Nyesom Wike in a dramatic turn of events. They differ from each other in such a variety

of ways that it would be impossible to achieve agreement about everything. People disagree how the limited resources which are available to the society should be distributed. Should political power rotate to the South or remain in the North? Should a Muslim retain power or allow a Christian take over? Should each geopolitical zone rather go its own way and form a government? Why do Northern Muslims have more control over defence and oil structures in Nigeria? Should resources be shared equally or do some people deserve a bigger share than others? Since it is possible to increase the resources available to a group (by conquest, technological advance or better management of existing resources), further questions arise. For example, what strategy should be employed to increase resources and what is the best way to protect the resources which already exist? Since there is not a single correct answer to such questions, different people have different ideas about what is the best action to take. There is no universal definition to politics.

Social Media: The internet can easily, without exaggeration, be said to be the most powerful technological invention ever created by man. It has been credited with revolutionising business, education, entertainment, health, politics etc., there is hardly no area of human civilisation in this century that is without any form of internet connectivity. The best part of it is the bridging of physical distance between people of every race, religion, and nationality. This has been effective over the Internet via social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, INSTAGRAM, WhatsApp, Skype etc., that are continually connecting billions of people in the world who share their ideas and opinions instantly (Aduko, Samuel & Sotonye, 2021). The impact social media has on real-world communities is complex and rapidly evolving. It stretches across international borders and challenges traditional humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding models (Mercy Corps, 2019).

Unfortunately, social media has also paved way for misinformation, bitter rivalry and in worst cases

conflict. It has created new, highly accessible channels for spreading disinformation, sowing divisiveness and contributing to real-world harm in the form of violence, persecution and exploitation, racial segregation, ethnicity bias, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, and diseases. The rippling effect of this is that it also spread misinformation at the speed of light. The international reach and ease of access to social media mean that a higher volume of weaponised information can reach more people faster, and via multiple channels which can easily alter their emotions. The information shared in such channels are usually tailored to individual user's preferences. This even become dangerous where social media platforms organise users into groups that share preferences and demographic characteristics, creating “bubbles” or “echo chambers” that align with ethnic, ideological, linguistic or other societal divisions. Rumours can seem like credible facts, and collective online outrage can quickly trigger real-world violence.

The emergence of social media as a key source of news content has fueled further the spreading of misinformation thereby making palpably false news look as if they are legitimate (Gottfried & Shearer in Pennycook & Rand, 2019). With such enormous command of power, social media has become the “lifeblood of fake news” because it permits anyone to share a viral fake story to people at a low cost (Klein & Wueller, 2017; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018; Apuke & Omar, 2020). Social media platform incentivizes the dissemination of problematic news content and permits its circulation in a novel perplexing manner (Quandt, 2019), and the rapidity with which news content moves within social media causes fake news to swiftly spread unverified, making it hard to correct (Lazer et al., 2017). Hence, the rise of fake news has become a global concern.

Schneider cited in Dollinger (2017, para. 6) concludes by stating that:

We are living in the midst of a sea of information that includes half-truths, manipulated information, opinion and advertising masquerading as news... Often,

this information has some basis in reality, but has been distorted in a way that is totally misleading.

Dollinger further adds that whether propaganda, disinformation, misinformation or fake news, one peculiarity they all share is the intent to deceive and mislead because they all refer to news that has no basis in reality.

There is a temptation to see social media and by extension the internet as a wholly alien monster because it remains the most difficult to censor owing to its millions of dreadful tentacles that has no limits, incomprehensible in its enormity and anonymity of users. Selective policing cannot also be effective as participants on new media forums or users of new media platforms could appear to be anonymous if they so wish. In as much as we can see and feel the positive impact of the internet on our political space; we must not lose sight at the unpleasant and sometimes, tragic circumstances we might be confronted with.

Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated on the medium theory of communication. The theory originated from Marshal McLuhan's 'the medium is the message' postulation. McLuhan (1964) challenged conventional definitions when he claimed that the type of medium used to communicate is as important as the content presented by the medium itself. With this claim, he stressed how channels differ, not only in terms of their content, but also in regard to how they awaken and alter thoughts and senses. This means that the way a certain technology is used in creating meaning and expressing thought is greatly capable of influencing the way in which the message of that medium is received.

Medium theory applies to this work because it addresses how information received by people on the internet has the power to alter the way they think. Therefore, the way people use the internet through their interactivity and immersion in online content as well as how often they are barraged with information about a person can either make voters succumb to their line of thought or not.

Literature Review

Fake News and its Implication on Democracy

Nigeria, since independence is still yet to discover her path as a nation. When the military took over following a coup on 15th January, 1966, they mentioned that they had seized power as a result of the illicit activities of politicians and that they were in position to redirect the course of the country. After 16 years of military interregnum and 23 years that followed Nigeria is still in search for a new political order (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020). The realisation of this objective has been far from being achieved because of the dominance of the same factors the military claimed to wish to address including those they brought with them. Some of these problems worthy of note is wanton corruption, ethnicism, tribalism, religions and politics, regionalism, hate etc., these are but some factors which have affected the survival of democratic rule and national development in Nigeria.

While federalism is meant to address most of these issues through a framework where each region or state is allowed to control its resources and develop at its own pace, the Nigerian federalism operates the opposite and does not recognise the identities, interest and needs of the people especially the minorities. This has created a precipice upon which leaders come into power with the aim of raping the treasury. They are as well backed and supported by people who are no better. Today, politics in Nigeria is a 'do or die' affair. They do not care 'if the baboon and gorilla are soaked in blood'. If it means fighting dirty, to get there, it simply extolls Niccolo Machiavelli's words where he wrote in his famous book, *The Prince*, "the end justifies the means".

On the impact of fake news, the Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Lai Mohammed, said "the global epidemic of fake news is already having far reaching repercussions across the world. A recent study by researchers at Ohio State University in the United States concluded that Russian interference and the fake news it promoted probably played a significant role in depressing Hilary Clinton's support on Election Day during the 2016

presidential elections in the United States. Among the Fake News circulated ahead of the election were: *Clinton is in poor health due to a serious disease; Pope Francis endorsed candidate Trump; Clinton approved weapons sales to Islamic Jihadists etc.* (Ogbette, Idam, Kareem & Ogbette, 2019). In India, about a dozen people have been killed just because of fake news of hoax messages (Elebeke, 2018). The victims were lynched after they were falsely accused of child abduction based on fake messages circulated via the social media platform, WhatsApp.

Here in Nigeria, the situation is no better as social media is used to instigate animosity through fake news. Arewa Republic posted on Facebook and I quote, "Peter-Obi-sponsored Igbo Militia (IPOB) just killed a popular Islamic scholar, Sheikh Ibrahim Iyiorji in his house in Isu, Onicha LGA of Ebonyi State. His only crime is because he is a Muslim...". It may seem that Arewa Republic are against the candidature of Peter Obi where on July 24th, 2022 they also posted, "Breaking!!! Peter-Obi-sponsored Igbo Militia (IPOB) just killed 28 Hausa businessmen in Lokpanta Cattle Market in Abia State...". All these are attempts to discredit the presidential candidate of the Labour Party.

Similarly, many Nigerians believe that the global COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax. Some were equally made to believe that Nigeria is being led by Jibril Al-Sudani from Sudan and that the real president, Buhari is actually dead since 2018. Also, four students of the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, dubbed the "Alu Four", in October 2012 were lynched after they were falsely accused of stealing and cultism. The Rwandan massacre of 1994, perfectly captures the horrors fake news can imprint on a people of a nation. Bearing in mind that over 76 million adult Nigerians are illiterates (Alikor, 2022), it gives concern about the authenticity, genuineness, and integrity of the news people get, especially in the social media space. This growing but sad trend needs to be addressed by stakeholders, government and Nigerians as a whole as fake news, propaganda, and smear campaigns have taken over the media space in Nigeria.

The image of the country has also not fared well as a result of fake news. There is a lot of assumption

and presumptions about Nigerian's and Nigeria. Fake news has fractured the country and driven away investors. This has led to a drop in revenues, reduced patronage of some companies and organisations, and business closure on some occasions. It has largely been responsible for communal, ethnic and religious crises.

As Nigeria approaches the 2023 elections, more of this disinformation will occupy Nigeria's media space, spreading falsehood capable of setting ethnic groups, religions, individuals rivals and institutions against themselves. In 2019, the Federal government of Nigeria initiated a plan to regulate social media, the outcry by the public ensured that the bill which was sent to the National Assembly be suspended, as it was considered an attempt to gag the media and to deny free speech as a fundamental human right. Interestingly, journalists have come up with an initiative called CrossCheck Nigeria (Arnold, 2018) and is one of several fact-checking organisations dedicated to exposing fake news and preserving the reputation and credibility of well-researched and honest journalism. Another is FactCheck Nigeria (<http://www.factchecknigeria.com/>). CrossCheck says its method is simple: to identify claims and posts it thinks are fake, investigate them, then publish the real version.

How Fake News Impacts Freedom of Speech

The media is a meant to uplift man's existence. All communication (whether verbal, written, symbolic) pass messages that both parties involved derive meaning and respond appropriately. This response may be positive or negative based on the information decoded and the response deployed. For the most part, online communication is usually normal however, fake news occasioned by the political tide has provided a brooding ground for all kinds of political mudslinging. It is a worrisome case especially as fake news most time degenerate to hate speeches. Hate speech is said to be communication that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons" (Neisser, 1994).

Also, hate speech is referred to as "war waged on others by means of words" (Kayambazinthu & Moyo, 2002). As regards motivation for hate speech, it has been pointed out by many scholars that several conditions which discrimination, lack of accommodation for market place political ideologies, lack of accountability and harvest of ideas from social media has continuously fueled hate speech (Ukauwa, Celik, Jelilov, & Olali, 2019). From the foregoing it is clear that fake news in its very sense can upset the minds of the decoder and thus create a monumental effect to humiliate, create distress, distrust and economic downturn (Leets, 2002).

Ultimately, fake news is an abuse of free speech. New technology offers the promise of speech with minimal barriers and without borders. The internet has radically enhanced the ability to propagate, access, archive and share information almost without hinderance even in its vile taste. Free speech is one of the fundamental rights universally acclaimed and protected by instruments of law in many countries and various bodies or groups to which they are members. United Nations member states through their constitutions signed Charters. The right to freedom of speech, being one of these rights is also protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other various regional Instruments and Conventions on human rights, is also domesticated in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, 1986. States are enjoined to protect these rights of their citizens using the agencies of the state.

Though free speech has long been regarded as one of the fundamental principles of modern democracies, in which civil liberties are honoured and regarded as prerequisite for human development and fulfilment, it would be met with stiff restrictions and exemptions when such rights infringe on the rights of others. The constitutional provision, being the grundnum, has made such violations justiciable which the court to adjudicate and balance conflicting interests between freedom of speech and protection of reputation ensuring that all rights are enjoyed within the ambit of the Nigeria Constitution and extant laws.

Consequently, the balance between free speech and perpetration of fake news has met stiff resistance owing to the fact that redress could be sought by anyone who is maligned under the guise of freedom of speech through both the Nigerian Constitution and the International Instruments. Section 39(3) of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as amended, provides how justifiable means through which right to freedom of speech could be curtailed even in a democratic setting. Hate speech can be demonstrated in different guises such as in speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display and can incite people to violence action (Coleman, 1986). Violation of individual dignity, stress and distress, humiliation, fear and multiple embarrassment flow from unrestricted freedom of speech which are dangerous to human development (Nemes, 2002; Nielsen, 2002; Parekh, 2006).

While John Stuart Mill, through his contribution *On Liberty* (1859) believes that there could be no barrier to the expression of opinion. He maintains, even offensive lies must be allowed, for it is only in their expression that they can be exposed fraudulent. However, another respected strand of democratic opinion argues that free speech can never be absolute since it possesses the opium to scar other members of society. Pointedly, trolls utilise fake news targeted at politicians, political parties and supporters to create falsehood, pain, embarrassment and isolation to promote isolation, fear, inequality, inferiority and cause them to cave in participating in the community and expressing their opinion.

As witnessed in past elections in Nigeria where fake news broods hate speeches which metamorphose to post election violence, it is apt to point that this multicultural and multiethnic entity is highly volatile and sensitive to issues of fake news and its consequence can only but be imagined.

Managing the Problem of Fake News in Nigeria

The emergence of social media has broadened the battlefield. The prevalence of fake news on political, national issues, and social interactions in Nigeria, especially on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube is alarming. This

is because apart from undermining the ethics of journalism profession, it is contributing to disaffection among tribes, political actors, and religious affiliations within the Nigerian social environment. The prevalence of such negative media activity absolutely limits Nigerians from making informed choices.

Knowing the negative effects of fake news and free speech, even when Section 39 (1) of Nigeria 1999 Constitution as amended provides that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression...” however Section 45 provides that nothing in Section 39 shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society in the interest of public order, public morality and for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons. The 2015 Cybercrime Act made it a felony liable to imprisonment of three years or fine of N7 million (approximately \$17,000), or both, for knowingly publishing fake news to cause a breach of peace (Cybercrimes Act, 2015)

The Nigerian Broadcasting Code (Nigeria Broadcasting Code, 2019) prohibits false advertising, impersonation and hate speech and it is also a crime, in the country' criminal and penal codes, to impersonate a government official or another person. An addendum to the 2010 Electoral Act (as amended) also prohibits the use of intemperate, abusive and slanderous languages during campaigns, and anybody found culpable is liable to a maximum payment of N1 million- and 12-months imprisonment, or N2 million in the instance of a political party. Although social media is not explicitly included, and therefore covered, by this election specific regulation, it could be (Hassan, 2022).

In November 2019, the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, was first introduced in Nigeria's House of Representatives to tackle the problem of false information. It failed to become law because it posed a severe threat to the democratic right to freedom of speech of Nigerians. The draft contained draconian provisions empowering the government to unilaterally shut down social media, and even the internet, for posts deemed to pose risks to public safety and national

security, which were loosely defined. Also, it required a low burden of proof in the determination of contraventions of its provisions and vested implementation powers in the already overburdened Nigeria Police.

The Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed stated that big technology companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter have started to address the problem. Google is reported to have dedicated 300 million US dollars over the next three years towards efforts to fight the spread of false information. Facebook, according to Bloomberg, took down 583 million fake accounts in the first three months of 2018. According to Reuters, Twitter suspended over 70 million accounts in May and June this year alone, and the pace of suspension has continued. Apart from the big technological organizations, the European Commission, in January 2018, set up a high-level group of experts to advice on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online (Elebeke, 2018). However, Brian Hughes of City University of New York and Idayat Hassan of Centre for Democracy and Development are both skeptical that the engagement of the big tech companies will be to their own benefits of controlling what newsfeeds are allowed while the relationship between them and countries remain one of unequals.

It is also important for people to be educated on the dangers of fake news. Media literacy and advocacy campaigns should be carried out to educate young people in particular on what is trust worthy and what is fake. It is important that citizen's tuned journalists as well as real journalists ensure that what they publish is verified and accurate. When this is done successfully, you will consider good independent regulation of the media; with this will reduce the attention that the fake media get and penalty should be given for maliciously published items (Okogba, 2018).

Conclusion

Fake news is not peculiar to Nigeria alone; it is a global problem which has done more harm than good in our society. Across Nigeria, fake news has threatened the political landscape and the very

foundations of the country. Disunity, mistrust and secession are rife in many quarters. With the increased interest in politics which many politicians, aspirants and supporters see as a crosscut of escape from the wrenches of poverty, cannot but apply whatever method, to achieve victory. The common citizens are also used to perpetrate social vices that would disrupt the electoral process while their children are tucked away safely in faraway lands. Once in office, they apply the machinery of government to repel contact with those who put them there only to come back when it's time for campaigns to seek election or reelection as the case may be. In order to stem the tide of the consequences of fake news in Nigeria polity and her socio-economic life, there must be concerted effort by all and sundry to insist that those that make the nation vulnerable through these unpatriotic and unguarded utterances must be made to face the full weight of the law, if there is any.

Recommendations

Having harnessed the ills of fake news, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- INEC and other civil society organisations such as the Nigerian Human Right Commission should identify and prosecute individuals and organization that breach relevant laws governing electoral campaigns and public speech.
- There is the need for increased media literacy for the public, particularly young people to be critical in accessing and responding to media messages.
- The media and individuals should check and verify information before publishing and avoid supporting or republishing stories simply because they want to have more traffic to their posts and be the first to break the news.
- There is a need for more investment to support quality, independent journalism in Nigeria. Funding that can reduce media houses reliance on political benefactors, improve credibility and support the generating of high quality, well researched, content.

References

- Abdullahi, B. (2017 March 13). Democracy and the challenge of fake news. *The Cable*. [Online] Available: <https://www.thecable.ng/democracy-challenge-fake-news>
- Adetula V. A. O. (2015). Godfathers, money politics, and electoral violence in Nigeria: Focus on 2015 elections. A paper presented at the two-day 'National Conference on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria: The Real Issues' held at the Electoral Institute Complex, Abuja, July 27-28.
- Aduko, F. P., Abomaye-Nimenibo, W. A. S., & George, S. (2021). *Social Media and Hate Speech: Implications for Socio-Political Stability in Rivers State*, 21(2).
- Agbese, D. (2017). The dangers of fake news. *Daily Trust*. <https://dailytrust.com/the-danger>
- Ajakaiye, O. O. P., Ojeka, J. O., Osueke, N. O., Owoeye, G., Ojeka-Kohn, R. O., & Olaniru, O. S. (2019). Hate speech and fake news: A study of meanings and perceptions in Nigerian political culture. *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research*, Vol. 10, No. 5
- Alikor, V. (2022). *Business Day*.
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2018). Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media. *Sage Journals*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2053168019848554>
- Apuke, D. O., & Omar, B. (2020). Fake news proliferation in Nigeria: consequences, motivations, and prevention through awareness strategies. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 8(2).
- Arnold, P. (2018). CrossCheck Nigeria launches to fight information disorder. First Draft, 28 November 2018
- Ball, J. (2017). *Post-truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. London, UK: Biteback Publishing.
- Bukar, M. A., & Ibrahim, A. M. (2020). Hate speech and Nigeria's struggle for democratic consolidation: a conceptual review. *International Journal of Journalism and Mass Communication*, 6(1), 80-83.
- Chaiken, S. & Eagly, A. H. (1978). Communication modality as a determinant of message persuasiveness and message comprehensibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34(4), 605-614.
- Coleman, J. S. (1986). *Nigeria: Background to nationalism*. Benin City: Broburg and Wistrom.
- Dollinger, A. (2017). Can librarians save us from fake news? <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pgwvz/can-librarians-save-us-from-fake-news>.
- Elebeke, E. (2018). Federal Government launches campaign against fake news. *Vanguard*. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.vanguardngr.com/2018/07/fg-launches-campaign-against-fake-news/amp/>
- Emoghene, A. K. & Okolie U. C. (2020). Ethnicity, religion, politics and the challenges of national development in Nigeria. *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, 4(18).
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Gottfried, J. & Shearer, E. (2016). News use across social media platforms 2016. Pew Research Center. <https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>
- Hassan, I. (2022). *Nigeria's fake news ecosystem: an overview*. Centre for Democracy and Development.
- Ibrahim, A.M., Yar'Adua, S.M., Maikaba, B. (2019). More media, less democratisation of public access and participation: A conceptual review on influence of deregulation and commercialisation on public broadcasting in Nigeria. *International Journal of Telecommunications and Information Technology*, 3(1), 32-46.
- Ibrahim, A. M., & Pate, U. A. (2019). In a democratized media context what a hoax can do, a misinformation can do even worse: Influences of fake news on democratic processes in Nigeria. *New media and mass communication*, 79, 10-17.
- Igwebuike, E. E., & Chimuanya, L. (2021). Legitimizing falsehood in social media: A discourse analysis of political fake news. *Discourse & Communication*, 15(1), 42-58.
- Kalu, P. (2016). Political parties and ethnic politics

- in Nigeria. *NG-Journal of Social Development*, 5 (2), 140-152.
- Kayambazinthu, E., & Moyo, F. (2002). Hate speech in the new Malawi. In H. Englund (Ed.), *A democracy of chameleons: Politics and culture in the new Malawi*. Stockholm: Elanders Gotab.
- Lazer, D.M.J., Baum, M.A., & Benkler, Y, et al. (2018). The science of fake news: Addressing fake news requires a multidisciplinary effort. *Science*, 359(6380): 1094–1096.
- Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., & Metzger, M. J. (2018). The Science of Fake News. <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1094.full>.
- Leets, L. (2002). Experiencing hate speech: perceptions and responses to anti-semitism and antigay speech. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: the extensions of men*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mercy Corps (2019). The weaponization of social media: How social media can spark violence and what can be done about it. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research/does-peacebuilding-work-midst-conflict>.
- Mill, J. S. (1978). *On liberty*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Press.
- Neisser, E. (1994). Hate speech in the New South Africa: Constitutional consideration for a land recovering from decades of racial repression and violence. *South African Journal of Human Rights*, 10, 333-356.
- Nemes, I. (2002). Regulating hate speech in cyberspace: issues of desirability and efficacy. *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 11.
- O' Klein, D., & Wueller, J. (2017). Fake news: A legal perspective. *Journal of Internet Law*, 20 (10), 6-13.
- Ogbette, A. S., Idam, M. O., Kareem, A. O., & Ogbette, D. N. (2019). Fake news in Nigeria: causes, effects and management. *Information and Knowledge Management*, 9(2).
- Okogba, E. (2018, July 2). 2019 polls: BBC raises concerns over fake news. *Vanguard ngr*. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.vanguardngr.com/2018/07/2019-polls-bbc-raisesconcerns-fake-news/amp/>
- Parekh, B. (2006). Hate speech: is there a case for banning? *Public Policy Research*.
- Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Fighting misinformation on social media using crowd sourced judgments of news source quality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (PNAS)*, 116(7), 2521-2526. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1806781116>.
- Photiou, I., & Maniou, T.A. (2018). Changing audiences, changing realities: Identifying disinformation via new teaching curricula. *Proceedings of EJTA Teachers Conference 2018*, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece, 18-19 October 2018 (pp.64-72), EJTA.
- Quandt, T., Frischlich, L., Boberg, S., & Schatto-Eckrodt, T. (2019). Fake news. *The international encyclopedia of journalism studies*, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0128>
- Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang, & Liu, H. (2017). Fake news detection on social media: A data mining perspective. *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter*, 19(1), 22-36.
- Tandoc, E. C., Ling, R., Westlund, O., Duffy, A., Goh, D., & Zheng Wei, L. (2018). Audiences' acts of authentication in the age of fake news: A conceptual framework. *New Media and Society*, 20(8), 2745–2763. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731756>
- Ukawa, E. E., Celik, B., Jelilov, G., & Olali, N. (2019). The impact of hate speech on Nigeria economy. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 9(7).
- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013). *General recommendation on combating racist hate speech*, CERD/C/GC/35.
- van der Linden, S., Maibach, E., Cook, J., Leiserowitz, A., & Lewandowsky, S. (2017a). Inoculating against misinformation. *Science*, 358(6367), 1141-1142
- Wardle, C. (2017). Fake news. it's complicated. *First Draft News*. <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>.

- Warner-Söderholm, G., Bertsch, A., Sawe, E., Lee, D., Wolfe, T., Meyer, J., Engel, J., & Fatilua, U. N. (2018). Who trusts social media? *Computers in Human Behavior*, *81*, 303–315. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.12.026>
- Wong, Q. (2019). Fake news is thriving thanks to social media users. Retrieved September 11, 2022 from <https://www.cnet.com/news/fake-news-more-likely-to-spread-on-social-mediastudy-finds/>
- Zimdars, M. (2016). False, misleading, clickbait-y, and satirical news. <https://d279m997dpfwgl.cloudfront.net/wp/2016/11/Resource-False-Misleading-Clickbait-y-and-Satirical-%E2%80%9CNews%E2%80%9D-Sources-1.pdf>.
- <https://www.inecnigeria.org/political-parties/>
- <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna17702748>
- <https://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-r012.html>
- <https://bit.ly/3aN98GG>
- <http://www.factchecknigeria.com/>