

DUBAWA FELLOWSHIP 2020

Fact-Checking Ecosystem:

Media Organisations on the
Frontline of Combating Information
Disorder in Nigeria

PART 1



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August 22, 2020



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Abstract

Could stakeholders address the challenges associated with information disorder in Nigeria without understanding the complexities of the fact-checking landscape? This is the question this research article answered by interrogating the fact-checking ecosystem through the prism of media organisations on the frontline of information disorder combat in Nigeria. This research article examines the fact-checking ecosystem by documenting the evolution, issues and activities about media organisations on the frontline of combating information disorder in Nigeria. The need to interrogate this phenomenon became more apparent in the way dis/misinformation is negatively impacting all strata of the society. Therefore, this research is designed to contribute to the body of knowledge on information disorder labels that are still evolving in Nigeria. This is the first of a two-part research dedicated to examine the information disorder and discuss whether the set up and activities of fact-checking organisations qualify them to be classified as media entities. The research also examines whether there should be preference in establishing fact-checking organisations over fact check desks. It thereafter revisited the Gate-Keeping theories and its relevance to fact checking.

Introduction

The term information disorder has evolved over the years, with researchers asserting that it was as old as the historical evolution of information itself. (Brandon, 2018). Technological development which gave birth to the internet, social media, and other digital tools has further enhanced the advocacy for Democratic Participant theory of the press. Caroline Anipah, Programme Officer/Editor Dubawa (Ghana), has observed that the disruptive innovation of technology is facilitating mass production and distribution of information (Anipah, 2020)

This evolution of information disorder also witnessed attempts by professionals and researchers to understand and situate the issues surrounding information disorder in relation to attaching by experts of different nomenclatures to the phenomenon. Some of these nomenclatures include: Alternative Fact, Fake News, Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation, Hoaxes, Pranks, Deep Fake, Propaganda, Post Truth, Information Pollution, among others (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017 p. 4, Bannikov & Sokolova 2018, Ibraheem & Garba 2019 p. 151, Wardle 2019 p. 7).

The latest concept is that of Infodemic, a concept that depicts how “infected information” can cause a widespread of the “dis-misinformation virus” across the world. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p .4) noted that information pollution at a global scale is spreading through what they called “contemporary social technology”. The COVID-19 pandemic presently ravaging the world has further popularized this concept. Ahinkorah, Ameyaw, Hagan, Seidu & Schack (2020) expressed worry that “socio-cultural climate in Africa has engineered the spread of the COVID-19 related misinformation through propagation of unsubstantiated news.”

Fact-checking organisations in Nigeria such as Agence France Presse (AFP), Africa Check and Dubawa are partnering with Google and Facebook to combat the infodemic. (News Agency of Nigeria 2019, Stencil 2019). For instance, in April, 2020, Google committed “\$6.5 million funding package to fact-checkers and non-profit media outlets” to combat coronavirus misinformation. (Alexander, 2020).

Similarly, Facebook had in 2018 launched a Third-Party Fact-Checking Project in Nigeria and “partnered two organisations, part of a global network of fact-checking certified by the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network. They are Africa Check, Africa’s first independent fact-checking organisation, and AFP (Agence France Presse), a well-respected news organisation.” According to David Ajikobi, Africa Check’s Nigeria editor: “Nigeria has experienced a surge in misinformation on social media, particularly about health issues.... The partnership with Facebook presents us as fact checkers a unique opportunity to tackle misinformation on this key platform. We expect

that as we move along, millions of Nigerians who get their news through Facebook will start seeing less content that may be socially harmful.”(Ochelle, 2018)

Concerned by the adverse effects of the challenges posed by Information Disorder to socio-cultural, economic and political climates of the society, stakeholders have equated this to a war-like situation. Attempts had also been made to understand this phenomenon through the prism of communication theories (Bannikov and Sokolova 2018).

Some researchers have also called for more concrete measures to address the challenges posed by the negative adoption of technology. (Bannikov and Sokolova 2018; Graves 2018; Ibraheem & Garba 2019; Ahinkorah et al. 2020)

It was argued that if the internet, social media and other digital tools are causing negative disruption in the information flow, stakeholders must device means to adopt it also as “Weapon of Mass Development” rather than “Weapon of Mass Destruction” to address the problems associated with the information war (Wardle, 2019 p. 6).

In Nigeria, stakeholders have taken steps to address the challenges occasioned by information disorder in the digital age. Despite the challenge of Digital Divide, the media institution in the country has joined others across the world to use the same weapon of technology to address the issue of Infodemic and associated concepts.

The issue of whether fact checking can be integrated in the work of journalists has also been interrogated by Bannikov and Sokolova (2018) with clarifications that the verification process or fact checking is not suitable for news reporting and opinion journalism.

They thereafter proposed the concept of “sense establishing journalism” which advocates “establishing the truth of events and claims and finding the real relationship between them.” This concept is based on the following formats: Fact-check and verification, Specifying the research subject, Forming signs of the Fact-check format, Forming signs of the debunking format, Forming signs of the promise tracking format, Forming signs of propaganda deconstruction format, and conclusion.

But the Public Media Alliance (2020), believes that investigative journalism goes hand in hand with fact checking, especially when facts that can be key to public interest are often buried and inaccessible. (<https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/tools/fact-checking-investigative-journalism/>)

While some argued that fact checking should be considered as an independent genre on its own; others argued that the verification process and efforts to ensure accuracy of contents, which is part of journalism, is also an integral part of the fact-checking process. The set-up of fact-checking organisations across the world tilted towards the two approaches. While some fact-checking

organisations are not part of media organisations, others are. Stencel (2019) however in his study finds out that the experience in the United States indicated that establishment of independent and standalone fact-checking organisations are making waves than those affiliated to media organisations.

These interventions, to certain extent, interrogated the issue of whether fact checking should be regarded as part of journalism practice. The question, however, is whether fact checking should be situated in the media landscape as an independent body or an entity within mainstream journalism? In Nigeria, there are few fact-checking organisations and some media organisations are already setting up fact-checking desks in their newsrooms. Meanwhile, the media organisations in Nigeria are bracing up to this challenge amidst concerns that media technology is advancing more than their ability to survive this disruptive innovation. This is what the British-American author, Andrew Keen, as cited by Udoka (2015), referred to as Digital Darwinism. As Digital Darwinism is taking its toll on the media ecosystem in Nigeria, some organisations are toeing the line of Digital Transformation to address the challenge of information disorder in the country.

In the last five years, the media industry has witnessed the establishment of fact-checking organisations in some African countries including Nigeria. They were established primarily to fight the war against media and digital illiteracy which is one of the factors that fuelled the spread of the infodemic. If the media practitioners including citizen journalists possess the skills to distinguish between facts and fiction in the process of production and dissemination of media contents, it will go a long way in frustrating the efforts of the purveyors of disinformation.

Ebele Oputa, the project officer and deputy editor for Dubawa, one of the pioneers of fact-checking project in Nigeria, said:

“The basic assumption, which is integral to our theory of change, is that factual information enables people to make more informed choices in a democratic society and on other public interest issues. Therefore, providing verified information will likely promote good governance and accountability in West and Sub-Saharan Africa,” (Egwu, 2019).

Relatedly, it is imperative to document the efforts of the fact-checking organisations in Nigeria in providing the platform to fight the war against Information Disorder.

It is with this background that this paper develops a fact-checking guide of the media organisations on the frontline of combating Information Disorder in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to interrogate the fact-checking ecosystem in Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

- To document the historical evolution of selected fact-checking organisations in Nigeria,
- To examine the organisational structures of the selected fact-checking groups in Nigeria,
- To understand the production process of the selected fact-checking organisations in Nigeria,
- To document the programmes and projects of the fact-checking organisations in Nigeria,
- To examine strategies of fact-checking organisations towards sustainability.

Statement of Research Problem

Is it correct to assert that fact checking is relatively new as the body of knowledge has just been created or popularized outside the academy? The Deputy Programmes Director of Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), Mr Adedeji Adekunle, has expressed worry over the dearth of data on information disorder in Nigeria. Mr Adekunle who identified this research gap during the virtual training for the 2020 Dubawa Fellows in Nigeria and Ghana, revealed that as one of the major fact-checking organisations in Nigeria, researchers in the country have not taken their time to interrogate the mis- and disinformation ecosystem by exploring the dynamics of work process of Dubawa and other fact-checking organisations in Nigeria (Adekunle, 2020).

This is coming at a time when the phenomenon called “Fake News” is getting the attention of all stakeholders in the media industry with its attendant implications on the Political, Economy, Social and Technological architectures of the country. The challenge posed by the phenomenon of information disorder is huge and thus indicates that there are no corresponding efforts to win the war. In an attempt to win this war, especially in an era when digital tools such as blogs and other social media platforms are deployed as Weapons of Mass Destruction or Mass Development, fact-checking organisations were established.

Bannikov and Sokolova, (2018) noted that due to the above reason, “This global challenge made it necessary for the professional journalistic community to appeal to the fact-check format. Although the format has been in existence for more than 20 years (FactCheck.org, the first fact-check resource in the world, launched in 2003), only in recent years has it acquired worldwide signification and implication.” To buttress the assertion of Bannikov and Sokolova, (2018), though the “first fact-check resource” was reportedly launched in 2003, it was not until over 10 years later that similar effort was attempted in Nigeria.

Relatedly, the database of global fact-checking sites is a project of the Reporters’ Lab at Duke University’s DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy. The fact-checking database tracks several hundred non-partisan organizations around the world (Adair and Stencel, 2016). According to the 2019 tally by the Duke Reporters’ Lab, the number of fact-checking outlets around the world has grown to 188 in more than 60 countries amid global concerns about the spread of misinformation,” (Stencel, 2019). According to the tally, Fact-Checkers in Africa increased from 4 to 9 from February, 2018 to June, 2019 when the database was updated.

With a population of over 200 million people in Nigeria and proliferation of blogs, and increased engagement of the citizens on social media platforms as the internet penetration increased year by year especially at a period of

COVID-19 pandemic, do we have corresponding efforts for addressing the challenge of information disorder associated with these developments?

For example, to what extent do stakeholders in the media industry understand the dynamics of these fact-checking organisations? As a novel research area, is there enough literature to understand the fact-checking landscape in Nigeria? These are questions to be answered through rigorous research and further interrogation of the Information Disorder in Nigeria. It is in response to the above observations that this paper conducts critical exploration of the fact-checking ecosystem in Nigeria, in order to provide the basic understanding of one of the institutions working to address the challenges of information disorder in the country.

Methodology

Due to the nature of this research and its objectives, it has adopted interviews as research design and explores archival materials of selected fact-checking organisations in Nigeria to develop a guide for all stakeholders in the media industry. There are limited fact-checking organisations in Nigeria. Therefore, the selected fact-checking organisations include AfricaCheck, AFP, and Dubawa. The selection of these three fact-checking organisations was based on their consistency in the production of fact check contents compared to others. They are part of the global fact-checking network and are certified by the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The existence of a database of global fact-checking sites, a project of the Reporters' Lab at Duke University's DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy, has also influenced this selection. Apart from aggregating information on the website and social media pages of the fact-checking organisations, the researcher will also interview representatives of the fact-checking organisations in Nigeria. The data generated from the interviews and online contents of the fact-checking organisations will be qualitatively analysed through the thematic approach.

Information Disorder Labels

“Information disorder is complex. Some of it could be described as low-level information pollution — clickbait headlines, sloppy captions, or satire that fools — but some of it is sophisticated and deeply deceptive. In order to understand the complexity of information disorder, we need to pay special attention to definitions of terminologies associated with the phenomenon.” (Wardle, 2019 p. 57).

The tools and terms used to negatively disrupt information flow in the society include fake news, propaganda, hoax, rumour, prank, dis-misinformation, deep fake, infodemic, among others. This research will attempt to define some of these terms in order to put them in proper context for interrogating the fact-checking ecosystem in Nigeria. This is because the categorisation of the terms associated with information disorder and the labels associated to such categories, according to Wardle (2019 p. 12) “helps people to understand the complexity of this ecosystem.”

Below are some of the labels of information disorder:

Disinformation: This is false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive. Disinformation according to Wardle is a “content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm. It is motivated by three distinct factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for the sake of it.” (2019 p. 8) Merriam Webster Dictionary also defines disinformation as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.”

Disinformation also means “false information, about a country’s military strength or plans, disseminated by a government or intelligence agency in a hostile act of tactical political subversion.” It is also used more generally to mean “deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda.” (Dictionary.com, 2020)

Misinformation: This can be defined as “false information that is spread, without the intent to mislead.” Today, misinformation spreads very easily in response to changes in information technology. And in part because of such frequent incidents, it is a hot topic of debate if big tech companies like Facebook and Google should be responsible for stopping the spread of misinformation—or even if they even can without violating free speech. While Oxford Dictionary picked “post-truth” as the 2016 Word of the Year, the Dictionary.com named its own Word of the Year in 2018 as “misinformation.”

Wardle (2019) pointed out the intersection of disinformation and misinformation with the explanation that “When disinformation is shared it

often turns into misinformation,” adding that misinformation is “false content but the person sharing doesn’t realise that it is false or misleading. Often a piece of disinformation is picked up by someone who doesn’t realise it’s false, and shares it with their networks, believing that they are helping.”

Further, Wardle identified socio-psychological factors that influence the sharing of misinformation: “Online, people perform their identities. They want to feel connected to their “tribe”, whether that means members of the same political party, parents that don’t vaccinate their children, activists who are concerned about climate change, or those who belong to a certain religion, race or ethnic group”, (p. 8).

Malinformation: The term, malinformation, according Wardle (2019), is used to describe “genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm. We are increasingly seeing the weaponization of context, the use of genuine content, but content that is warped and reframed.” Malinformation also includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm the reputation of a person or group (Wardle, 2018).

While noting the efforts of tech companies, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to clamp down on cloned or fake accounts on their platforms, and amend their policies to flag fake contents, Wardle (2019) observed how the purveyors of disinformation now change strategy by promoting genuine contents and manipulating them so that they are “less likely to get picked up by AI systems.” He added that this strategy makes such malinformation to be “deemed ineligible for fact-checking”, defeating in a way, for example, the Third Party Fact-Checking Project of Facebook.

Closely related to this is **Satire or Parody**, strategically adopted to “bypass fact-checkers and to distribute rumors and conspiracies, knowing that any push back can be dismissed by stating that it was never meant to be taken seriously. Increasingly, what is labelled as ‘satire’ may be hateful, polarising and divisive.” (Wardle 2019 p. 14)

Wardle (2018) also showed how disinformation is related to satire, whereby disinformation agents label content as satire to prevent it from being flagged by fact-checkers. In Nigeria for example, President Muhammadu Buhari was said to be the clone of Jubrin of Sudan, a narrative considered as satire but later picked up and used by conspiracy theorists. And as this spreads, the satire in the analogy of (Wardle 2019 p. 15), loses “connection to the original messenger very quickly as they get turned into screenshots or memes.”

Propaganda: Propaganda is true or false information spread to persuade an audience, but it often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity, and propaganda are often unclear (Jack, 2017 as cited by Wardle, 2018).

Deep Fake: According to Wardle (2018), Deepfakes is the term currently being used to describe fabricated media produced by using artificial intelligence. By synthesizing different elements of existing video or audio files, AI enables relatively easy methods for creating ‘new’ content, in which individuals appear to speak words and perform actions, which are not based on reality. Although Deepfakes are still in their infancy, it is likely we will see the term ‘deepfakes’ used more frequently in disinformation campaigns, as these techniques become more sophisticated.

Deepfakes according to Wikipedia are synthetic media devices in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else’s likeness. While the act of faking content is not new, creators of deepfakes leverage powerful techniques from machine learning and artificial intelligence to manipulate or generate visual and audio content with a high potential to deceive. The main machine learning methods used to create deepfakes are based on deep learning and involve training generative neural network architectures, such as autoencoders. (Brandon 2018; Kietzmann, McCarthy, Kietzmann, 2020) Related to this is **Manipulated Media** which Wardle (2019 p. 15) described as “when an aspect of genuine content is altered. This relates most often to photos or videos.”

Post Truth: According to the article published by Pavel Bannikov and Tasha Sokolova in 2018, post-truth was tagged the word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionary, which “characterises a new way of consuming information, in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” They traced the history of the concept of post-truth to the end of the 20th century when the usage appeared in 1992. The term got popularised during the 2015-2016 presidential election in the United States.

Fake News: Bannikov and Sokolova (2018) define Fake news as false reports of events, written and read on websites related to the news agenda including visual narratives. They added that fake news can affect key issues of public importance and are spread with the intention to mislead in order to damage a public movement, public person, political campaign etc.

Attention has also been drawn to the inappropriateness of the combination of “news” with “fake.” The nomenclature has come under debate among scholars and professionals, with Anipah (2020) saying for example that the combination of “news” with “fake” is problematic:

“Problematic because ‘news’ means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this sense then, ‘fake news’ is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – i.e. real news.”

Ibraheem & Garba (2019, p.152) has also observed that the concept has “not

only become much-used and much-hyped terms nowadays, it is also much-aligned: it is often blamed for having a disruptive impact on the outcomes of elections and referenda and for skewing democratic public debate.”

Wardle (2019) expressed similar view when she exposed how websites and social media accounts of credible media organisations are cloned by impostor to promote “misleading hyper-partisan content”, manipulation of technological architecture, as well as “conspiracy communities” in the digital public sphere “busy trying to fool reporters into covering rumors or hoaxes.”

These authors further elaborate on the misuse, abuse and misinterpretation of Fake News:

“The term ‘fake news’ doesn’t begin to cover all of this. Most of this content isn’t even fake; it’s often genuine, used out of context and weaponized by people who know that falsehoods based on a kernel of truth are more likely to be believed and shared. And most of this can’t be described as ‘news’. It’s good old-fashioned rumors, it’s memes, it’s manipulated videos and hyper-targeted ‘dark ads’ and old photos re-shared as new...The failure of the term to capture our new reality is one reason not to use the term ‘fake news’. The other, more powerful reason, is because of the way it has been used by politicians around the world to discredit and attack professional journalism. The term is now almost meaningless with audiences increasingly connecting it with established news outlets such as CNN and the BBC. Words matter and for that reason, when journalists use ‘fake news’ in their reporting, they are giving legitimacy to an unhelpful and increasingly dangerous phrase.” (p. 6-7)

These observations are also what Edgerly, Mourão, Thorson, & Tham (2020 p.53) mean when they observed that “Discussions about the rise of “fake news” after the 2016 presidential election exemplify one of the many manifestations of the fragmentation of informational ecosystems.”

Fake news has also been flagged for fuelling propaganda, hate speech, violence, and even killing, especially in multi-cultural, multi-religious settings such as Nigeria. (Ibraheem & Garba 2019 p. 152).

Information Disorder: Due to argument that the term “Fake News” is vague in its usage, First Draft, a global, non-profit, non-partisan organisation that exists to help those on the frontline of reporting, “advocates using the terms that are most appropriate for the type of content; whether that’s propaganda, lies, conspiracies, rumors, hoaxes, hyperpartisan content, falsehoods or manipulated media. We also prefer to use the terms disinformation, misinformation or malinformation. Collectively, we call it information disorder (Wardle 2019 p. 7).

The definitions and explanations of the above information disorder labels are essential to enable stakeholders to understand the “different ways content can be used to frame, hoax and manipulate.” Wardle (2019 p. 57) added that

“rather than seeing it all as one, breaking these techniques down can help your newsroom and give your audience a better understanding of the challenges we now face.”

Anipah (2020) defines information disorder as the “ways in which the information environment is polluted. The term is a conflation of three main notions: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-information”

What is Fact-Checking?

Fact-checking, according to Wardle (2018), emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s, as a way of authenticating claims made in political ads airing on television. As at 2018, there are around 150 fact-checking organisations in the world, and many now also debunk mis- and disinformation from unofficial sources circulating online (Funke, 2018 as cited by Wardle, 2018).

According to Anipah (2020), fact-checking concentrates on claims that contain at least one fact or figure whose truthfulness can be objectively verified. Further, Anipah (2020) identified two moments that are significant to the growth of fact checking. These include: the launch of fact-checking projects, Snopes, Factcheck.org, and PolitiFact; as well as the global surge in so-called ‘fake news’ predominantly in 2016.

Bannikov and Sokolova (2018) observed that as at 2018 there was no academic definition of fact-check in the world and what was close then was the one offered by the Oxford English Dictionary defining Fact-check as ‘the process of investigating the problem in order to verify the facts’. They, however, noted that the above definition is incomplete as it alienates fact-checking from the journalism system.

Fact-checking (in the context of information disorder) is the process of determining the truthfulness and accuracy of official, published information, such as politicians’ statements and news reports (Mantzaris, 2015 as cited by Wardle, 2018).

Bannikov and Sokolova (2018) define fact-check as a format for establishing journalism that verifies factual claims in public statements and media. It is important to note that as a format, fact-check can deal only with factual information, not with common narratives in the society, as they may not be factual. For verifying narratives, there is a different format — debunking.

The theorising of fact-checking by Bannikov and Sokolova 2018 will enable journalists, media organisations, and fact checkers not to lose track when they act as the vanguard of change in the information disorder.

“The concept proposed in this work allows not only to identify the fact-check as a trend and separately existing and developing format of journalistic material, but also considers a fundamentally different species division within journalism.” (Bannikov and Sokolova, 2018).

Do Fact-Checking Organisations qualify as Media Organisations?

One of the labels earlier mentioned that emerged from information disorder is “Fake News” typology. Though it has been argued that if information is fake, it can never be news. This is because news is built on the foundation of factual presentation. This label points to the relevance of fact checking to the work process of media organisations. The question now is whether a fact-checking organisation qualifies as a media organisation.

In their study titled: “Theoretical base of fact-check as a journalistic format”, Bannikov and Sokolova, 2018, argue:

“Obviously, fact-check can not be placed inside the concept of opinion journalism, since it deals with the personal author’s view of the problem, as opposed to representing an objective and comprehensive analysis. But is it possible to consider fact-check as a part of news reporting? On the one hand, the basis for both of them is pure facts, but on the other hand, there is also a significant difference. The basis for news reporting is a fact (or event), which is investigated by a journalist guided by the above-mentioned principles of work – independence, accountability and verification. From this basis, journalistic materials are produced. As a result, the very product of news reporting journalism can become the basis for a fact-check. Thus, fact-check can not be placed in the concept of a standard journalistic dichotomy of news reporting and opinion journalism.”

Similar debate has been raised with social and digital platforms (tech companies) such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others. The dominant position was that these technological based organisations remain as platforms and not media organisations. Though the contents produced by traditional and online media organisations are promoted through these platforms, they do not qualify as media organisations.

Olorunyomi (2020) went further to argue that there is a distinction between media forms and journalism:

“Not all media forms execute their practice with the methodologies of journalism. So we say simply that whereas all journalism is media work, not all media work is journalism. Reviewing the content structure of the ever expanding media universe we encounter a wide diversity that does not necessarily all fit what we would technically call journalism.”

Dapo Olorunyomi who is the publisher of Premium Times online newspaper, thereafter noted the complexities of the media landscape when it comes to deciding whether some media contents fit into the technical definition

of journalism. He identified some of the media platforms to include: various online platforms/outlets, social media platforms, blogs and various formats of community media, data journalism platforms, fact checking platforms, and solution-based journalism platforms.

Olorunyomi (2020) provided the criteria to be met for media content to qualify as journalism work. The four core elements are: Its claim must be truthful and accurate; its discipline must be rooted in verification; the practitioners must be independent and be accountable to their readers/viewers/listeners; and it is about accountability with the end goal of public good.

Arguing on the same line, Anipah (2020) drew comparison between reporting and fact-checking with accuracy, timeliness, focus of event, and source attributions, as the measuring rods.

Bannikov and Sokolova, 2018 assert that “fact-check can not be placed in the concept of a standard journalistic dichotomy of news reporting and opinion journalism.” However, they theorised and came up with the concept of “sense establishing journalism” to make the activities of fact checking organisation qualify as media organisation.

Going by this argument, they further noted that it is “impossible to work with the term ‘fact-check’ without coming to an understanding regarding the term ‘media.’” And the ‘media’ as defined in the Recommendation of the Council of Europe, offers six fundamental criteria that should be met for inclusion as the media — intention to act as media; purpose and underlying objectives of media; editorial control; professional standards; outreach and dissemination; and public expectation.”

Bannikov and Sokolova, 2018 developed working principles that will allow the work of fact-checking organisations fit into that of media organisations:

“...fact-check as a format makes it unacceptable to refer to anonymous sources, no matter how confident they are. All sources the fact-checker works with must meet the open source criteria. In addition, the principles and methodology of the editorial board must be available to the audience. Selection criteria: the claim/statement must be verifiable and the claim itself has to be factual, concrete, and connected with objective measurable reality. In addition, the journalist must be able to verify claims using only open data and available resources; public resonance (the significance of the claim for society, the impact of the sounded fact on the life of society and its individual members); and retransmission level (the number of citations and references in the media). It is important to note that timeliness (the statute of limitations) is not one of the main criteria, since information distorted in the past can have consequences and become actual in the present.”

Bannikov and Sokolova (2018) in their interrogation and attempt to isolate fact-checking from news reporting, however did not consider the role of copy

editors who work on news reports and other contents produced through the same journalism process; as part of the role of the copy editor is to ensure the accuracy and validity of information contain in an editorial content. The theorisation of fact-checking as journalistic format by these researchers also did not note that investigative journalism adopt approaches similar to fact-checking. For instance, if two news sources gave conflicting information to a reporter, standard journalism practice does not only required the reporter to quote both of them but go a step further to establish the accuracy of their claims.

Fact Checking Organisation versus Fact Check Desk

Having established that fact-checking organisations qualify as media organisations, Stencel (2019) conducted a study to classify fact-checkers. In the findings of the study, the researcher discussed the results:

According to the report, a bit more than half of fact-checkers are part of a media company (106 of 188, or 56%). That percentage has been dropping over the past few years, mostly because of the changing business landscape for media companies in the United States. In our 2018 census, 87% of the U.S. fact-checkers were connected to a media company (41 out of 47). Now it's 65% (39 out of 60). In other words, as the number of fact-checkers in the U.S. has grown, fewer of them have ties to those companies. Among fact-checkers in the rest of the world, the media mix remains about half and half (67 out of 128, or 52% – very close to the 54% we saw in 2018).

The fact-checkers that are not part of a larger media organization include independent, standalone organizations, both for-profit and non-for-profit (the definitions of these legal and economic entities vary greatly from country to country). Some of these fact-checkers are subsidiary projects of bigger organizations that focus on civil society and political accountability. Others are affiliated with think tanks and academic institutions.” (Stencel, 2019).

Adair and Stencel (2016) said that there is a database of global fact-checking sites by Reporters' Lab at Duke University's DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy that developed the parameter for classifying fact-checking organisations. They are expected to regularly publish articles, video or audio reports that verify the accuracy of claims made by prominent public figures and institutions; debunk rumors, hoaxes and other forms of misinformation that spread online; or review the status of political promises made by candidates and political parties.

The Lab also specifies many attributes in determining which organizations to include. This is whether the site: reviews statements by all parties and sides; examines discrete claims and reaches conclusions; transparently identifies its sources and explains its methods; or discloses its funding and affiliations.

They also consider whether the project's primary mission is news and information. That's clear when fact-checking projects are run by professional journalists, produced by news media organizations, or affiliated academic journalism education programs. Other fact-checkers are typically associated with independent, non-governmental groups and think tanks that conduct non-partisan research and reporting focused on issues such as civic engagement, government transparency and public accountability. (Adair and Stencel, 2016)

Fact-checking organisations in Nigeria have been investing in capacity building initiatives for journalists, researchers, and students in the area of building fact-checking and verification skills. They are also involved in advocacy to promote digital and media literacy as a way of flattening the dis-misinformation curve in the country. While Dubawa since 2018 has been training journalists and researchers through Fellowship programmes; Africa Check encourages fact checking efforts through awards and other programmes.

Caroline Anipah who is the Programme Officer of Dubawa-Ghana, a fact checking organisation in Ghana, and doubles as its editor, said that the efforts of fact checking organisations in the world including Africa include: aggressive media literacy, working with tech giants, self-regulation, and establishment of fact-checking departments. (Anipah, 2020)

Revisiting Gate-Keeping Theory with Fact-Checking Organisations

Ibraheem & Garba (2019 p. 156) while citing Oso (2014) noted that the Gate-Keeping theory was first used by Kurt Lewin and the application of the theory was in 1959 by David Manning White in his study on the process of news production. This study launched the tradition of Gate-Keeping research in mass communication.

According to McQuail (2005), gate-keeping is like a metaphor that explains the process involved in the selection of media contents with particular emphasis on opening and closing the “gates” to determine the type of news reports that find their way into the news channels.

The emergence of digital technology, especially the internet and social media platforms associated with Web 2.0, has faulted the assumptions of Gate-Keeping Theory. Before the advent of these digital platforms, mainstream media organisations and media practitioners, especially the editors, determined the inflow and outflow of information. The interactive nature of the social media platforms brought about by Web 2.0 has overturned this. Citizen journalists can now create contents and distribute them through these platforms, unlike what was operational in the past.

This though further promoted the ideal of freedom of expression, it has also been identified as one of the factors encouraging the spread of fake news, disinformation, misinformation and associated terms. As the negative effect of this bite harder, stakeholders turn to the media organisations to get credible information. This made the role of fact-checking organisation more demanding.

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