“Fake News”: Understanding the Scourge in Nigeria

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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.
Executive Summary

There have been studies conducted on what exactly constitutes “fake news” and its variants. Researchers have looked into the Nigerian examples of ‘fake news’, its mode of transmission, the reasons it spreads in Nigeria, its impact on our democracy as well as possible structural solutions to the menace.

Yet, there is a need for a holistic view of the issues around the scourge within the Nigerian context. This article adopts the method of contextual analysis of a selected studies, situating the studies within the Nigerian milieu, assessing the positions of the authors, experts, readers (including offline and online audience) and other texts to understand the scourge.

The study finds out that ‘fake news’ thrives in Nigeria in its different variants. These variants include misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. It finds out that the nation’s culture of ‘closed’ (as opposed to open) governance, which thrives on official secrecy and dearth of timely official information is a recipe for the scourge to spread. It also finds out that increased Nigeria’s population on social media and other digital space is an escape route from muffled voices in the mainstream; an avenue to create, share and distribute contents of all sorts, many of which populate the misinformation ecosystem in Nigeria.

This study’s contribution to knowledge is underscored in how it justaposes selected past research on ‘fake news’ in Nigeria and analyses contextual factors and impacts of fake news proliferation. The study therefore recommends among other deliverables, aggressive engagements with online and social media users whose increased media literacy will help reduce the spread of ‘fake news’ in Nigeria.
Introduction

Collins dictionary says “fake news” is “false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (independent.co.uk). Ethical Journalism Network says “fake news” is information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or doubtful messages. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) defines fake news as “completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or disinform (Umaru Pate, et al, 2019).

New insights have thrown up the reasons the term should be explained, rather than be defined because of the damage or its impact on the legitimacy of news media. One of these voices was Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti (2018) who posited, in their UNESCO report that “fake news” and whatever it represents revolve round three typologies: Misinformation, Disinformation, and mal-information. In their position, they said:

It can be helpful, however, to propose that misinformation is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true. Disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinfomed by malicious actors. A third category could be termed mal-information; information, that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.

The above description shows different levels of information disorder ecosystem.

• One, it shows “fake news” as a form of misinformation that contains misleading content;

• A form of disinformation that thrives on false context, imposter content, manipulated and fabricated content;

• It can also be a form of mal-information which highlights some content around hate speech, stereotype and blackmail among others.

One or more of this information disorder have pervaded our national lives. They have infiltrated the media, government institutions, democratic and development agencies, private sectors and civil societies. There have been studies conducted on what exactly constitutes “fake news” and its variants. However, there have been more raging questions around misinformation
ecosystem than researchers have been able to provide answers to. What is the recurring dimension of the mode of transmission in Nigeria? What has been deduced as the factors influencing the spread in Nigeria? What are the impacts of continued spread and transmission of false information on our democracy as well as possible structural solutions to the menace?. This study seeks to harmonise the findings of the existing literature to provide answers to the above questions. Sequel to the foregoing, the objectives of this study include:

1. To review existing literature which has covered the scope of the typology of misinformation ecosystem in Nigeria;
2. To highlight cases of information disorder in Nigeria;
3. To identify from existing literature the reasons for the spread of misinformation, its mode of transmission and its impacts on the Nigerian democratic setting.
Contextual Analysis

This study relies on the method of contextual analysis of a selected studies, situating the studies within the Nigerian milieu, assessing the positions of the authors, experts, readers (including offline and online audience) and other texts to understand the scourge. Gisele Marie Tierney (1986) adopted this method as developed by Scheflen (1973) and Jones and Yarbrough (1985), and also adapted it to accommodate the distinct elements of communication strategy use in the context of dyadic interactions.

Contextual analysis is simply an analysis of a text that helps us to access that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting, but also in terms of its textuality or the quality that characterises the text. Leveraging on how contextual analysis works, researchers most often rely on some critical questions that will aid their work. These questions include: what does the text reveal about itself? What does the text tell us about its audience? What are the author’s intentions? What is the occasion for this text? Is the text calling for actions? Can we identify any non-textual circumstances that affected the creation and reception of the text?

In essence, contextual analysis as a concept reveals the social, political, cultural, economic, philosophical and aesthetic conditions that existed at the time and place when the text was created. Gisele Marie Tierney (1986) says “contextual analysis provides a necessary cross-situational approach to communication research”, aiding researcher to make decisions regarding which variables to be addressed after data have been collected.

Victoria Phelps (2015) argues that when one analyses a piece using contextual analysis, one focuses on the environment in which the text was produced. Others key areas to focus on include some parameters that may explain why the author holds a certain stance. Since the issue around misinformation ecosystem is understood differently, depending on the context, the adoption of contextual analysis by this study is justified. In some settings, fake information appears mostly as hoax, satire and parodies and contained in audio-visual format. All these will be discussed and understood differently from others mostly in written format. For instance, much of the fake information posted on the internet during the 2016 presidential election in America appeared in written text and recorded segments (Denise-Marie Ordway, 2017). In Nigeria, study has shown official personalities and political actors were found to spread fake information during the 2019 presidential election (Paul Anderson, 2019).

This study seeks to build on the existing literature by harmonising their findings on ‘fake news’ as well as proposed solutions to curb its spread. Umaru Pate et al (2019) finds out that “fake news” spread because there is general distrust of elites, leaders and politicians by majority of Nigerians, sensationalization
of fake news disseminated for economic, political, and cultural reasons, especially on social media and the desperation by politicians, ethnic and religious jingoists, foreign interests, and mischief makers to generate fake news for influence or to persuade the audience. Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti (2018) also opine that the spread of disinformation and misinformation is made possible largely through social networks and social messaging, which begs the question of the extent of regulation and self-regulation of companies providing these services. David M.J et al (2018) leverage on the social and computer science research regarding belief in fake news and the mechanism by which it spreads. They find that the rise of ‘fake news’ has not only taken a politically-oriented incarnation but also highlights the erosion of long-standing institutional bulwark against misinformation in the internet age.

Just as Denise-Marie Ordway (2017) pulled together academic studies to help newsrooms better understand information ecosystem in Europe and America, as well as its impacts, this study also digs into the psychological and socio-political context of the Nigerian experience of various authors, contextualising their thoughts on the problem in order to find a common ground on its solutions. As Denise-Marie opines, news media has written a lot about fake news and other forms of misinformation, but scholars are still trying to understand it — for example, how it travels and why some people believe it and even seek it out.
The Nigerian Context

A Study conducted by the Center for Democracy and Development and the University of Birmingham on WhatsApp’s role during Nigeria’s 2019 elections, cited parents and grandparents as the “biggest sharers” of misinformation (QuartsAfrica, 2019). Others such as jokers, scammers, politicians, conspiracy theorists, insiders, relatives and celebrities are among the perpetrators of misinformation (BBC, 2020). Quite a number of hoax being spread in Nigeria include:

- A false report peddled after the 2015 general elections that the Independent National Electoral Commission had determined that under-age youth in northern Nigeria had voted in the elections. The claim caused a serious uproar among the public and opposition parties (Amobi, 2019);

- A report which claimed that the killings of 86 people in 11 communities in Barkin Ladi, Riyom and Jos South local government areas of Plateau State on June 23, 2018, were retaliatory and credited the statement to Miyetti Allah Chairman Danladi Ciroma. However, the report was found to be false following a new report that revealed Ciroma had actually been misquoted (Okunola, 2018).

- A tweet by President Buhari’s Special Adviser on Social Media, who in the lead to 2019 election posted a video on Twitter which showed the president’s supporters at a big rally when in reality the images were from a religious gathering the year before was an example of disinformation (Paul Anderson, 2019).

- Another example of disinformation was a tweet by the same presidential aid accusing Mr Abubakar of sharing food and money during his campaigning. It came with a photo of food packs with money attached and a caption saying: “Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday.” (Paul Anderson, 2019)
Fake News: Why it spreads in Nigeria

The growth of Nigerian population has witnessed an alarming rate from about 40million in 1960 to approximately 200million in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). This means the quantum of information needed by the citizens to make informed choices should also be upscaled. On the contrary and given this huge figure, what has happened is a weakened and ill-informed populace. One major issue confronting the nation is the mode of governance that is shrouded in secrecy, with no timely and adequate information about the running of the state. So, where the public cannot access factual and reliable information either from the government or the media, it is expected that rumour, hoaxes, falsehood and outright lies fill the gap. With government and state actors, having muffled the public voices in the mainstream, and with the democratization of the digital space, millions of Nigerians have found willing collaborators in the social media, search engines and other enable sites to produce, distribute, share information and form communities. Some of the practical reasons “fake news” spread in Nigeria have been highlighted.

Umaru Pate et al (2019) state that “fake news” spread because there is:

• General distrust of elites, leaders and politicians by majority of Nigerians.

• Absence or most often late arrival of official information on issues.

• Sensationalization of fake news disseminated for economic, political, and cultural reasons, especially on social media;

• Desperation by politicians, ethnic and religious jingoists, foreign interests and mischief makers to generate fake news for influence or to persuade the audience;

• High level of authoritative lies from government sources at all levels.
Mode of Transmission

Greater percentage of misinformation in Nigeria is transmitted via the internet, particularly on social media, judging from Amobi (2019) that instant messaging platforms are among the greatest purveyors of misinformation and disinformation and that “false claims are on the rise in Nigeria, partly because of citizen journalism, where there is stiff competition to be the first to publish information”. With the population of Nigerian internet and social media users witnessing a surge in recent times, this makes our democracy more susceptible to misinformation disorder.

According to Datareportal (2020), as at January 2020, there were 85.49million internet users in Nigeria, a number increased by 2.2million (at 2.6%) between 2019 and 2020. Taking from the above statistics, 27 million Nigerians were social media users as at January 2020 with an increase of 3.4million (at 14%) between April 2019 and January 2020. The take away from the above implies the level of engagement on the part of Nigerians with the digital and social media. On this note, we can then draw a connection between the American context where most fake news spread via the internet in written text and recorded segments (Denise-Marie Ordway, 2017), and the Nigerian context where study has shown official personalities and political actors were found to spread fake information using the social media (Paul Anderson, 2019).

For instance, statistics on the presence on social media show that WhatsApp is the most-used social media platform (94%) by Nigerians, followed by Facebook (87%), YouTube (76%), and Instagram. Others include (67%) FB messenger (66%), Twitter (50%), LinkedIn (33%), SnapChat (26%), Pinterest (21%), Skype (14%), Tic Tok (13%), We-Chat (5%), ReDolt (5%), Viber (5%), Tumber (5%) and Slack (3%).

This explains the level of internet penetration in Nigeria and how viral messages can travel in the digital space within a few hours. This also explains why the government and other critical stakeholders need to double down on media literacy targeting Nigerians, particularly young people who are very active on social media to know what to share, when to share, how to verify every trending information.
Figure 1: Most-used social media platforms by Nigerians as at January, 2020

- WhatsApp: 94%
- Facebook: 87%
- YouTube: 76%
- Instagram: 67%
- Facebook Messenger: 66%
- Twitter: 50%
- LinkedIn: 33%
- Snapchat: 26%
- Pinterest: 21%
- Skype: 14%
- TikTok: 13%
- WeChat: 5%
- ReDolt: 5%
- Viber: 5%
- Tumber: 5%
- Slack: 3%

Courtesy: datareportal.com
“Fake News”: Its Impacts in Nigeria

Experts have construed negative impacts of fake news under three categories:

• First, the problem of increasing fragmentation and politicisation;

• Second, the promotion of “safe news” at the expense of difficult or challenging news stories;

• Third, the need for credible sources to allocate ever-diminishing resources to debunking inaccurate information (which poses both financial and reputational costs).—(Information Society Project, 2017)

Fake news is weaponized by many actors to further widen our national woes for personal and selfish goals. These actors include politicians, spin doctors, social-cultural, ethnic and religious bigots. The Information Society project at Yale Law School (2017) highlights impact of fake news on any democratic system:

Fake news “devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data—all of which undermines society’s ability to engage in rational discourse based upon shared facts”.

Mr. Lai Mohammed, Nigeria’s Minister of Information and Culture underscores impacts of fake news on democratic institutions like the media:

“For the media, the epidemic is even worse. This is because fake news, in most cases, is designed to misinform, undermines confidence in the media. And once the people lose confidence in the media, the society is in trouble.” (Premium Times, 2018).
Structural Solutions to Fake News in Nigeria

While the Nigerian government has launched a “public campaign against fake news” (Premium Times, 2018) and has also launched “campaigns to media houses and cooperation with Facebook and Google” (AllAfrica, 2020), other experts have added some therapies, and these include:

- Supporting the increasing number of fact-checkers (Paul Anderson, 2019)
- Need for increased media literacy for the public, particularly young people (Umare Pate, et al, 2019)
- Other social media platforms should copy from Twitter in restricting number of text user can post and identification of a verified account (Fredrick Wilson and Muhammad Umar, 2019)
- Journalists... should be very careful about making mistakes.( Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, BBC 2020)
- Media should bring the work of independent fact-checking groups to larger audiences (Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, Unesco, 2018))
Conclusion

This article has shown that “fake news” in Nigeria takes the form of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information and has also highlighted some case studies within the Nigerian context. Adopting the concept of contextual analysis, the study shows that the huge Nigeria’s population has found solace and voices on the digital and social media to fill the gap left behind by lack of or inadequate credible and factual information from the mainstream media and official quarters. The impact of this is underscored in how millions of social media users produce, distribute and feed massive unverified information to the disadvantage of official and legitimate sources. Solutions offered by government and other experts were also included in this article.
Recommendations

As government launched a “public campaign against fake news” (Premium Times, 2018) and has also launched “campaigns to media houses and cooperation with Facebook and Google (AllAfrica, 2020), this article recommends a future study to investigate how the federal government, through its agencies is truly stepping up efforts in engaging Nigerians on social media to fight fake news. The finding of this study has also raised the need to have research studies answering such questions as:

- What has been the trend with regards to fake news and misinformation since the outbreak of COVID-19?
- How has the fake news and misinformation impacted the work of the media and the fight against the pandemic?
- What are some of the measures undertaken by the media and other stakeholders to address the spread of fake news?
- What are citizens/activists actions against the spread of fake news and misinformation in Nigeria?
- What has the government measures against fake news and misinformation affected the media?
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Using Contextual Analysis to analyse text http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html

