THE DYNAMICS OF DISINFORMATION IN ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA
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Disinformation is regarded as an act that involves concocting and spreading deliberately information that is not true with the aim of causing harm and threat to the intended targets. The central theme in disinformation is that the spreader is fully aware the information or news item is false but shares to achieve a specific objective of injuring the reputation of someone, institution, groups, or country. Disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading someone (Fallis 2015). This means disinformation deals with publishing misleading information and the source/publisher derives gains from the information disorder. It must be said that disinformation is as old as man but has assumed more prominent space in recent times because of its destructive and devastating effects on the society, following the introduction of digital technology. Wardle and Derakhshen (2017) state that ‘disinformation including misinformation has gained ground in the community of activists, scholars, and non profit apologists attempting to understand and mitigate these conditions.’ In addition, renewed interest of scholars among others has led to further interrogation of the concept and practice of disinformation.

The study examines the dynamics of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria. Many studies have been done on role of disinformation in electoral violence in the Western world, yet the role of disinformation in electoral violence remains understudied in Nigeria. This is the gap the study intends to fill. Data for the study are collected from archives, newspapers, journals, books and internets sources including social media platforms – Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram which are analysed qualitatively using historical approach. The study interrogates the change and continuity in the role of disinformation in electoral violence from the era of traditional media to the emergence of digital technology, 1964 to 2019. The study also suggests measure to tackle the menace posed by disinformation, especially in the Nigerian political space.

Keywords: Disinformation; Electoral Violence; social media; Traditional Media; Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The study examines the dynamics of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria. Many studies have been done on role of disinformation in electoral violence in the Western world, yet the role of disinformation in electoral violence remains understudied in Nigeria. This is the gap the study intends to fill. Data for the study are collected from archives, newspapers, journals, books and internets sources including social media platforms – Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram which are analysed qualitatively using historical approach. The study interrogates the change and continuity in the role of disinformation in electoral violence from the era of traditional media to the emergence of digital technology, 1964 to 2019. The study also suggests measure to tackle the menace posed by disinformation, especially in the Nigerian political space.

Keywords: Disinformation; Electoral Violence; social media; Traditional Media; Nigeria

Background to the Study

Disinformation is regarded as an act that involves concocting and spreading deliberately information that is not true with the aim of causing harm and threat to the intended targets. The central theme in disinformation is that the spreader is fully aware the information or news item is false but shares to achieve a specific objective of injuring the reputation of someone, institution, groups, or country. Disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading someone (Fallis 2015). This means disinformation deals with publishing misleading information and the source/publisher derives gains from the information disorder. It must be said that disinformation is as old as man but has assumed more prominent space in recent times because of its destructive and devastating effects on the society, following the introduction of digital technology. Wardle and Derakhshen (2017) state that ‘disinformation including misinformation has gained ground in the community of activists, scholars, and non profit apologists attempting to understand and mitigate these conditions.’ In addition, renewed interest of scholars among others has led to further interrogation of the concept and practice of disinformation.
Electoral violence is a situation where there is threat or actual violence, thuggery, harassment and attacks on lives and property of opponents during electoral cycle. The acts of violence are often triggered by either deficit in the electoral process or deliberate attempt to gain undue advantage by one of the contestants. Electoral violence usually has negative impact on democratic governance because of its divisive and destructive nature. Indeed, International Foundation for Election Systems (2011) posited that electoral violence is “any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at any person or property involved in the election process, or at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election period.” The implication of this is that electoral violence promotes underdevelopment and loss of lives and property as well as states of instability and insecurity.

Nigeria has witnessed electoral violence since the 1950s and the media have played some roles in the violence. While the traditional media have been very pivotal in contributing to entrenching democratic governance in the country, some of the media houses have also helped to amplify disinformation during electoral cycle which often snowballs into violence. In the same vein, the emergence of digital media, especially social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram just to mention a few) has revolutionized the media space.

This revolution can be seen in the broadening and expansion of the production and access to information through the smart phones, websites, and other gadgets. This has also created unprecedented rise in disinformation in the country, especially during the electioneering process marred by electoral violence on the country’s electoral culture in the identified period. The study, therefore, examines the role of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria between 1964 and 2011. It examines patterns of disinformation in pre-digital and digital age and their impact on electoral violence in the country.
The problem which this study addresses can be stated as that of determining the dynamics of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria. More specifically, it interrogates the transformation of the information space which occurred following the introduction of digital technology leading to the expansion of access and production of news contents by the users with a concomitant implication for the electoral process. It also addresses the change and continuity disinformation brings on electoral violence trajectories in Nigeria.

Despite the destructive role of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria, it has remained largely unexplored and understudied. The study attempts to show the nexus between disinformation and electoral violence in Nigeria with the hope of throwing additional light on the danger of election-related disinformation to democratic governance.
The general objective of the study is the interrogation of the role of disinformation in electoral violence in Nigeria. It explores the interplay and interaction between disinformation and electoral violence from the 1960s to 2019. The specific objectives of the study include the following:

- Tracing the history of disinformation in Nigeria
- Examining the role of disinformation in electoral violence in pre-digital technology age in Nigeria
- Evaluating the impact of disinformation on electoral violence since the introduction of digital technology in the country
- Identifying and explaining the process of managing disinformation during future elections in Nigeria

Scope and Significance of the Study


The significance of this study cannot be overemphasized because it is relevant to the entrenching of democratic values, promotion of violence-free elections and exploration of solution to election-related disinformation in the Nigerian society.

The study does not only bring to the fore the seeming dangers posed by the spreading of disinformation during electioneering but also exposes and explains connections between specific cases of disinformation and violent behaviour, especially threats to security and unity. Consequently, the study makes additional contribution to the body of knowledge on
electoral violence and the emerging subfield of information disorder. Coupled with the foregoing, the study contributes to the policy formulation efforts of the Nigerian government about tackling disinformation before and during elections.
There is a consensus among scholars and activists on the definition of disinformation. Disinformation has been seen as a concept that entails the production and distribution of information that is false with the intent to harm persons and/or institutions. Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell (2019) posit that the term disinformation dates to the Cold War era. During this time, a division of the KGB (the main security agency for the former Soviet Union from 1954 to 1991) known as dezinformatsia, from another Russian word, dezinformatsiya, was established to apply covert techniques for influencing foreign countries (Shultz and Godson, 1984). The World Economic Forum (2013) submits that the increasing distribution of disinformation through social media is an emerging danger and one of the ten most important trends in society. The Report posits that efforts at correcting disinformation, especially when it occurs within trusted networks are often difficult and complicated. Gelfert (2018) contends that fake news is a subset of disinformation with a systemic feature inherent in the design of the sources and mechanisms that give rise to them. For news to be regarded as fake, Gelfert observes that it should have the potency to deceive and mislead in all ramifications. He further argues that the systemic feature associated with fake news is likely to influence consumers’ confirmation biases, repeating similar false narratives to render them more persuasive and attempting to intensity consumers partisanship. The aftermath of the foregoing is that it combined to inhibit critical evaluation and inquiry of the contents. In essence, Gelfert sees disinformation as an act which promotes certain sources and platforms having the potential for manipulating public decision-making process by promoting falsehood.

In the same vein, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) note that disinformation is the information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organizations, individuals, or countries and contributes to information disorder. The other aspects of information disorder according to the authors are misinformation and malformation. Malformation is indisputable and non-false information disclosed with the objective of harming and discrediting organisations through doxing,
leaks and hate speech. On the other hand, misinformation refers to “information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.” They also aver that although disinformation and misinformation are related, both have diverse intentions. Misinformation often begins as disinformation though it is promoted without knowledge of its value or falsehood. At the same time, misinformation could be disseminated to educate, amuse, entertain, or provoke. Therefore, a false narrative or piece of content may cross this blurry line from disinformation to misinformation and back again, depending on its various sources and their perceptions of the truth of that account. The spreaders of disinformation make a deliberate and determined effort to disseminate information that are phony or deceitful.

Humprecht (2018) defined disinformation as information that is intentionally created and uploaded on various websites, and thereafter disseminated via social media either for profit or for social influence. Bennett and Livingston (2018) described disinformation as ‘intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals.’ The authors are of the opinion that there is always an attempt to mislead the public while pushing out lies and assumptions. This was stressed by Shultz and Godson (1984) that disinformation is ‘false, incomplete or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country’ In addition, Jack (2017) described disinformation as a “deliberate false or misleading,” news content which is usually influenced by personal gains. Jack, however, warned that an intention based conception of disinformation may contribute to power imbalance between producers of disinformation and their critics. For example, journalists and social scientists tend to refrain from accusations of intent owing to professional codes and legal constraints. Creators of disinformation have no such constraints, while for potential critics like journalists, those professional and legal threats persist. The European Union (2018) reveals that disinformation is a ‘verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm.’ The Independent High-Level Group on fake news and online disinformation (2018) sums up the danger posed by disinformation by stating that it covers ‘threats to democratic political processes and values. The production and promotion of disinformation can be motivated by economic factors, reputational goals, or political and ideological
agendas. It can be exacerbated by the ways in which different audiences and communities receive, engage and amplify disinformation. In light of the above, disinformation promotes divisiveness with a potential for violence and anarchy.

Electoral violence is the use of measures that include disruption of the electoral process such as snatching of electoral materials, attack on rivals and supporters, and deliberate attempt to manipulate the process through threats or violence. Straus and Taylor (2012) conceive electoral violence as “physical violence and coercive intimidation directly tied to an impending electoral contest or an announced electoral result.” Electoral violence according to Straus and Taylor includes the use of threats of physical harm by some of the political players that have interests in a given election and electoral outcomes. The work is authoritative on electoral violence because it sheds much light on the characteristics of electoral violence.

_Igbuzor (2010:10) assumed electoral violence as:_

Any act of violence perpetuated in relation to political activities, including pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings, voting at polling stations, involving the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process, or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes.

The work makes interesting and useful contribution to the literature on the study of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Sharon Anyango Odhiambo (2017) avers that the media in Kenya contributed to the electoral violence that followed the 2007 general elections. Odhiambo argues that ‘the media was faulted for reporting poorly and for amplifying hate speech that inflamed tensions and led to retaliatory attacks. Major TV stations broadcast provisional presidential election results that were unconfirmed and often contradicted results from other stations. They also aired inciting messages from politicians.’ The reportage by a section of the media invariably influenced the supporters of the losing parties to unleash violence on the Kenyan
people and infrastructure with concomitant loss of lives and property and widening of ethnic divides.

Although some scholars have examined the role of the media and disinformation in promoting electoral violence in the political space in general, much work is yet to be done in Nigeria. This is the gap the study intends to fill.
The methodology adopted in this study is the historical approach which entails the conventional use and exploration of primary and secondary sources. The primary data are archival sources, newspapers and magazines, social media broadcasts, official and unofficial reports while the secondary data includes books and journals as well as relevant unpublished essays. The collected data and content will are analysed and evaluated.

Dimensions of Disinformation and electoral Violence in Nigeria

The 1964 general elections witnessed acts of disinformation which caused anxiety and violence in parts of the country. While the print and electronic medium were the major culprits in committing the acts, some people also made use of the traditional communication tools. The election was hotly contested between two major alliance groups, namely, the Nigerian National alliance (NNA) and the United Peoples’ Grand Alliance (UPGA). The two political alliances controlled different sections of the media to spread disinformation. The Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service (WNBS) became a political disinformation platform of the NNDP led regional government. The same happened in the Northern and Eastern as well as Mid-Western Regions. The opposition Action Group (AG) was denigrated and attacked through WNBS while the AG responded through the Nigerian Tribune and sympathetic newspapers. The fallout involved a number of violent acts that dominated the election. For instance, the false claim of electoral manipulations exacerbated the tension communal dispute between Uburu and Okposi in Eastern region and eventually culminated in violence. The background to the clashes between the communities was a claim by the NNA supporters during the Afikpo North Federal Constituency election that the UPGA was engaged in electoral manipulations. The conflict assumed communal perspective because the candidates were from the two respective communities, alleging that the violence led to the displacement of hundreds of people while several others were critically injured in 1964 and January 1965 (Sonaike, 1965:2).
A similar scenario played out during the Western Regional Legislative election when the two major political parties resorted to untold disinformation that not only led to violence but eventually to truncation of the First Republic in January 1966. At the same time, the NNDP and AG were more interested and desperate for the control of political power in the region and hence deployed diverse measures to ensure victory. One of the daring acts of disinformation was when the supporters of the NNDP in Abeokuta informed the electorate in the district that the candidate of the AG, Dauda Adegbenro had withdrawn from the election. This created confusion in the polling centres and degenerated into violence (Osoba, 1965). The truth is that Adegbenro was the acting leader of the AG in the country and never withdrew from the contest, but the supporters of the NNDP wanted to give his party undue advantage in the contest. There was also widespread disinformation that led to the bombing of the office of the Electoral Commission of Nigeria office in Ibadan on the eve of the election, announcing of conflicting results in the aftermath of the conduct of the election. The deployment of the media to announce contradictory results by the agents of the NNDP and AG nevertheless set in motion the unprecedented violence, wanton destruction of lives and property that commenced in October 1965 and ended in January 1966.

The disinformation in the 1983 general election was carried out in diverse ways including the media, lectures and rallies. While the politicians influenced friendly newspapers, radios, and television stations to report their false claims, venues of rallies and lectures were used to attack, insults and make bogus allegations against their opponents. For instance, in Kano, members of the political class created trouble by inciting their opponents’ supporters through their lectures and speeches. This was demonstrated in the struggle between the Minister of Commerce, Maitama Bello Yusuf, and the National Part of Nigeria (NPN) gubernatorial candidate, Aminu Wali. The two members of the NPN and their supporters made false allegations. In the same vein, the death or murder of the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) House of Assembly candidate, Shugaba Dankawu, created rounds of disinformation. The NPP made numerous allegations against the Balarabe Wudil, the NPN candidate of murdering their candidate on Augusts 20, 1983.
The political class in Borno State exploited the communal tensions in the state through deliberately making false claims which eventually led to violence among the communities. The worst hit was Ngelzarma on June 24, 1983, following the outbreak of violence, rise in release of disinformation by the politicians that eventually led to more conflict with not less than 20 persons losing their lives and 500 people displaced (New Nigerian, 1983).

Similarly, the 2003 and 2007 electoral cycles were dominated by intra-party conflicts and poor election administration by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as well as squabbles between President Olusegun Obasanjo and his deputy, Abubakar Atiku. The 2003 election was largely a period when most of the political parties denigrated INEC for poor handling of the registration process. The ruling PDP used control over the NTA to engage in disinformation and dominated the political space. However, alarming rates of distrust on INEC and the security agents manifested when the election was described by sections of the media as a low intensity war. In the same vein, the 2007 general election was regarded as the worst election in the history of the country, following the malpractices that marred the process. The struggles between Obasanjo and Atiku led to a media war. The Nigerian and its agency attacked and described Atiku as corrupt and desperate for power. In the same vein, the Atiku camp mocked the president about the truncation of his third term, – removal of term limit clause in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution. The tension and conflict in the pre-election arising from media war culminated in widespread manipulation of the process. The apparent disinformation in the entire process was manifested by INEC which claimed to have conducted a transparent election even though the electoral body failed integrity test because the ballots were not serialised. The non-serialisation of the ballot papers invariably created room for manipulation of the process due to the fact the there was no mechanism to know number of ballot papers issued and used.

The 2011 election remained the most violent in the Fourth Republic due to the mass destruction and deaths in the post-election cycle. (Human Right Watch, 2021; Ugbudian 2020) put the number of deaths at over 800 persons. The background to the violence could be seen in the process that led to the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the president of the
country in May 2010. Goodluck who was the deputy to President Umaru Yar’Adua assumed the office following the death of his principal. The ascension of the office by Goodluck Jonathan was seen by a section of the Northern Part of the country as usurpation of the period allocated to its region under the so-called zoning principle of the ruling political party, PDP. The 2011 election was replete with disinformation by diverse interests groups, ranging from political to socio-cultural. The major political parties in the election were the Peoples’ Democratic Party and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). The PDP got embroiled in internal struggles that culminated in regional and ethno-regional animosity. This scenario created animosity which was amplified by waves of disinformation that led to large scale destruction of property, deaths and displacement of hordes of Nigerians mostly in the North. It must be said that the major political parties in the election were the PDP and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) led by Muhammadu Buhari. Buhari was a former military despot and contested for the president in the previous elections and lost. He was however widely popular in the Northeast and West section of the country. THIS STATEMENT IS NOT CORRECT, THE WESTERN STATES WERE NOT IN SUPPORT IN 2011 UNTIL 2015.

The most destructive disinformation was within the PDP which became factionalised along ethno-religious and regional lines. The level of the disinformation led Adibe (2012) to aver that “Hate speech employs discriminatory epithets to insult and stigmatize others on the bases of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other forms of group membership. It is any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. In other words, “Hate speech is often the gateway to discrimination, harassment and violence as well as a precursor to serious harmful criminal acts. It is doubtful if there will be hate-motivated violent attacks on any group without hate speech and the hatred it purveys.” (Adibe, 2012). WE NEED PAGE NUMBERS OF ORIGINAL SOURCE FOR QUOTED MATERIALS). In effect, the resort to disinformation was aimed at giving undue advantage to the candidate while destabilizing the country. Thus, the media was filled with press releases and interviews by the various of the candidates. The disunity and discord that dominated the pre and election-day events of the 2011 election played significant role in the post-election violence in several states in northern parts of the country. The violence was triggered by imaginary assumptions that Buhari of the CPC was rigged
out of the presidential election while the final returns of the election were yet to be collated. The violence no doubt was destructive and dangerous due to the instability, insecurity and lives lost as the role played by disinformation remained strong and incontestable.

Disinformation also dominated the 2015 electoral cycle. The election was one of the most competitive elections in the history of the country with the formation of All Peoples Congress (APC), an alliance of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), CPC, All Nigerian Peoples Party and a faction All Peoples Grand Alliance as well as a group of defectors from the PDP. The APC with increased numerical strength and wider spread of the members in the northern and western states posed a strong opposition to the PDP. This largely informed the various measures deployed by the political actors in the electoral cycle. The deployment of disinformation that stoke tension and violence using the traditional and new media represents a desperate quest for power. The political parties, candidates and supporters used the media and campaign and rally venues to explain their programs to the Nigerian people. However, most of the platforms offered to the political actors were not used judiciously to drive the issues that would improve the welfare of the people, rather there was deliberate attempts to mislead, deceive and lie as well as create fear. Put differently, the political parties placed documentaries, songs, and advertorials in the media to denigrate their rivals in the political contest while press conference and rallies were used to abuse and curse without addressing issues on development and welfare of the people. THIS STATEMENT IS NOT ACCURATE. APC ISSUED A MANIFESTO THAT PROMISED THIS, KNOWN AS HIGHLIGHTS OF APC MANIFESTO.

Advertisements, songs, rallies, and documentaries were aired by television stations to attack and condemn the personality of people, other parties and ethnic backgrounds. The media recorded numerous hate speeches being sent across them by enthusiasts of these two political parties in the country.

A very good example was the statement by Ibrahim Shema, the Governor of Katsina State in Northwestern Nigeria requesting PDP supporters to retaliate any acts of the members of the APC and also kill them the way “cockroaches” were killed (Mohammed Lere, 2014). The incident occurred when Governor Shema addressed his supporters in a video which went viral on social media encouraging his supporters to attack
and lynch members of the opposition which he described as cockroaches while his supporters agreed that they should be crushed. This level of disinformation laid the ground for widespread violence in several states across Nigeria. The statement by Shema was a pointer to the mindset of many members of the Nigerian political class with a knack for promoting violence through disinformation. A similar situation played out when the Oba of Lagos, apparently a supporter of the APC, gubernatorial candidate, Akinwunmi Ambode threaten anyone that voted for other candidates in the 2015 election. This act of disinformation was unfortunate largely because the Chairperson of the Lagos State Traditional Council is seen as the head of all and should be apolitical. The submission by Oba Akiolu, that ‘On Saturday, if anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish that Ambode will be the next governor of Lagos state, the person is going to die inside this water...For the Igbos and others in Lagos, they should go where the Oba of Lagos heads to.’ The comments, which were made on April 3, 2015, revealed deeper systemic failure in the country leading to highly placed people resorting to ethnic profiling and threatening fire and brimstone in the name of electoral campaign.

This was further amplified by an ex-Niger Delta militant, Mujahid Dokubo-Asari thus, ‘2015 is more than do-or-die. You are a man, and I am a man, we are going to meet at the battlefield’ (Bassey Udo, 2013). He also attached the personality of the then presumed candidate of the APC, Buhari. It is instructive to state that Mujahid Dokubo-Asari hails from the Niger Delta like Goodluck Jonathan and hence was promoting the interest of his kinsman through disinformation. The outburst is inherently a reflection of the ethno-regional issues which usually influence distribution of national resources and patronage.

Another form of disinformation was an attack on the person and character of one of the leaders of the APC, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu by the PDP. The objective apparently was to deliberately make voters in the most popular state of the country, Lagos, to hate him and vote for the PDP candidate. Consequently, the PDP and one of its leaders, Raymond Dokpesi, used his media platform, African Independent Television (AIT) to show a documentary entitled Lion of Bourdillon on March 1, 2015. The documentary focused on the properties and companies in parts of Lagos allegedly belonging to Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu and declared him as “Nigeria's biggest landlord.” The documentary also claimed without
proof that Tinubu was a drug lord and was “charged for narcotics” in 1993 (AIT, 2015).

The struggle for the spread of disinformation among the political actors further stretched when the Governor of Ekiti, Peter Ayodele Fayose, attacked the health of the APC candidate by claiming that Buhari was sick and wearing pampers. The numerous frontpage advertorials warned voters not to put their trust in Buhari because he was mostly likely to die in office, if elected as president.

The PDP through the media director of its Presidential Campaign Organisation, Femi Fani Kayode, in a documentary allegedly claimed that Buhari was funded by deadly terrorists’ bodies including Boko Haram, Islamic State of Iraq, Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda. The allegation lacked facts and was baseless and unfounded.

The APC responded in the contest for the worst peddlers of disinformation, when the gubernatorial candidate of the APC in Kaduna State, Nasiru El-Rufai, in series of tweets described Goodluck Jonathan as a stupid drunk and the sponsor of Boko Haram terrorists (https://twitter.com/elrufai/status/537170918746120192). The claim by El-Rufai was not backed by any evidence making the claim lack any substance. The APC took the cycle of disinformation beyond the Nigeria space when it hired a foreign organisation to launder and polish the image of Muhammadu Buhari and attack Goodluck Jonathan. Axelrod, Kupper, Plouffe, and Del Cecato (AKPD) Media and Message firm with interests in political and media consulting provided strategic services to the APC including profiling Goodluck Jonathan and its administration in the international media. The major aspects of the obligation was a deliberate exaggeration of the issues of corruption, human rights and kidnapping of Chibok Girls ((Kredo, 2015;Terrang, 2017). The firm imputed falsehood and assumptions into the claims, thereby painting the PDP candidate bad in the international community.

In the 2019 elections, there were series of issues such as insecurity arising not just from Boko Haram terrorist activities in the Northeast but also from the rising herders-farmers conflict and poverty level. The election was also a straight battle between the PDP and the APC while the other political parties that were more than 60 were too weak in resources and membership to mount any serious challenge in the contest. The implication was that the two powerful political parties began a vicious
cycle of attacks using the media with social media occupying strategic positions. Unlike in previous elections when the traditional media was largely deployed for campaigns, the 2019 witnessed an unprecedented use of the social media in the history of the country. In other words, the social media became the toys of the politicians employing numerous influencers and supporters as well as international agency to engage in disinformation. Put differently, the 2019 general elections witnessed acts of disinformation including local and international agents. The disinformation entrepreneurs not only made use of the traditional media but dominated the social media. A vicious cycle of disinformation was the order of the day in the electioneering that degenerated into conflict and violence among the supporters of the political parties. There is no gainsaying that the major culprits in the disinformation menace were the supporters and campaign teams of All Peoples’ Congress (APC) and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP). It must be said that the two political parties were the major contenders in the national elections based on their financial resources and size of support base. There were series of false claims among the political parties and Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook which became their playthings. The social media battles among the political actors were a signpost of the direction of the electoral process in terms of conflict and violence. This becomes pronounced in view of the indicators showed clearly that the social media conflict and violence reflected the situation in most parts of the country. The fallout was the outbreak of conflicts and violence between supporters of these political parties as well as some non-partisan groups. This view was buttressed by Jonathan Fisher, who argues that "Political parties support and encourage the dissemination of divisive 'fake news' on their behalf but have little control over its development and spread," (BBC, 2019). Fisher’s position was based on his findings on electoral activities of Nigerians on WhatsApp in the 2019 general elections.

It should be noted that written posts, photos, and videos were shared on social media platforms publicly on Facebook and privately on WhatsApp groups, thereby promoting and spreading of unsubstantiated rumours and outright lies about the candidates in the electoral cycle. A very good example was the allegation in a ‘widely shared video that accused Atiku Abubakar of brokering a deal with Boko Haram in exchange for land and oil. The video which was shared by one of the aides of President Muhammadu Buhari, Lauretta Onoche, targeted the image and
In addition, Onoche also made a tweet accusing Abubakar of sharing food and money during his campaigning in Sokoto. The tweet had a photo attached, showing food packs and money being shared to the people. The tweet was titled: "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday." (BBC, 2019). The tweet was largely false and untrue because it was not a reflection of the events that took place during Atiku's campaign in Sokoto. Rather, the event where food and money were given to less privileged Nigerians in Sokoto was a charity program organised by a foundation associated to Atiku and took place not in the course of the electoral cycle.

At the same time, a seemingly innocuous video trended in early January 2019 with a content that claimed that Leah Sharibu, one of the Dapchi girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014 was dead (BBC, 2019. The school girl that was not released along with the others was accused of rejecting the precondition of converting to Islam. A systematic campaign was begun by civil society organisations and exploited by the opposition for the Nigerian government, to effect her release from captivity. Thus, the emergence of the disinformation video with numerous shares on Facebook and WhatsApp and an alleged member of the girl's family confirming the sad event pointed to the inefficiency of the Nigerian government. In a nutshell, the video was concocted in the broader attempt to discredit the candidate of the APC in the manner of disinformation.

One of the most disinformation pieces that trended in preparatory to the election in 2019 was that Muhammadu Buhari was dead and a double from Sudan was procured to deceive the Nigerian public that he was alive. Although the video came to the pubic when Buhari was sick and spent several months in the a hospital in the United Kingdom, during the
electoral process it received wider coverage in the social media. Indeed, viewed by more than 500,000 times prior to the election forced Buhari to make a public denial. The President made the denial while on international mission in Poland, saying ‘this is the real me’ (BBC, 2019).

It is important to state that the traditional media was also dominated by disinformation through hired partisan commentors and apologists making unfounded claims during political programs during the electoral cycle. The so-called commentors and analysts were invited to friendly media houses to give their expert opinions on the political programs. Some of the media houses included AIT and Raypower, Silverbird Television, Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and Television Continental (TVC).

Managing Disinformation during elections in Nigeria

It is important to state that the danger posed by disinformation remains but the onset of the digital media has changed it dramatically and drastically. Disinformation in the pre-digital age was largely limited by access and reach. In other words, the generation and production as well as dissemination of disinformation was largely limited because the available platforms had measures and elements of control. It can be said that in the 20th century, disinformation agents were restricted by the limited scope of analogue, linear media technology. For instance, the spread of disinformation through print media ‘to weaken adversaries ...planted in newspapers by journalists who were secret agents of a foreign country’ (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2019: 24). The point in emphasis is that disinformation in the analogue age also took the form of infiltration of the media by rogue journalists, thereby using media platform with integrity to spread falsehood. Disinformation in the analogue age was easily predictable and curbed, However, it is more notably easier to adopt and worsen in the digital age. Disinformation in the digital era is definitely more threatening and destructive in all ramifications than in the analogue era. The user generation and dissemination of information offered by the digital technologies had more devastating impact in terms of disinformation in the Nigerian elections in the country’s fourth republic than in preceding years. In this context, the spread of disinformation in Nigerian election has expanded drastically and more accessible to people with concomitant implications. A very good example is the number of times disinformation messages or
video are shared in the social media in recent years, something that was not possible before the deployment of social media. There is no gainsaying that the disinformation through the social media caused unimaginable tension and conflict in the Nigerian political landscape especially since 2011.

Therefore, how can this destructive use of the social media be prevented or managed?

**Several local and international organisations have suggested mechanisms for tackling disinformation. These measures include:**

- Public awareness through different media engagements, building people’s capacity in spotting and calling out fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

- Supporting the increasing number of fact-checkers, especially around the time of general elections.

- Establishing traditional and social media monitoring operations to build hard data based records of incidents while profiling perpetrators.

- Pro-active engagement with social media companies like Facebook to design and introduce more effective and fast acting systems to police fake news.

- Full documentation of symbiotic relationship of fake news and hate speech. Sufficient avenues are open to election assistance providers, like ECES, with the EU and its partners, to support advocates of legislative measures to combat disinformation.

- Supporting capacity of those engaged in building counter-narratives to fake news, particularly where it affects trust in institutions that still retain some degree of public trust (such as INEC).

- Quantitative and qualitative, data-based media monitoring in Nigeria, of the type provided by ECES in Madagascar, by providing statistics and insights into trends.
The Nigeria-based Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) also suggests active support for the traditional media to reinforce their credibility as a means of reducing the space in which fake news thrives (Anderson, 2019).

Regulation of the social media by government

These suggestions are very germane and important especially in relation to media literacy and awareness, government regulations, and fact checking. However, there is the need for strengthening of democratic institutions for the promotion of fact in information dissemination. In other words, there should be a deliberate effort for the democratic institutions in the country to function efficiently and effectively so as to serve as a robust bulwark against disinformation.
The paper attempt to historicise disinformation and electoral violence in Nigeria. Disinformation has always been part of human existence. The development of technology provided a platform for more people to have access that inevitably widens disinformation in the country, where Nigeria elections witnessed disinformation by the politicians from 1964 to 2019. Given the fact that before the emergence of digital technology that gave rise to social media, disinformation was through the more regulated traditional media, but deployment of the new media has led to astronomical rise in disinformation.

The rising wave of disinformation in Nigerian election has also created a cycle of tension, conflict, and violence with the propensity to destabilise Nigeria's fragile stability and security. There is no gainsaying that Nigeria's unity was questioned and on the verge of collapse due to electoral violence which disinformation contributed in no small measure. Very good examples are represented in the 1965 and 2011 elections when more than 1000 persons lost their lives and millions displaced and property destroyed.

The paper, therefore, concludes that the adoption of media literacy, regulation of the new media and fact-checking are very significant steps in preventing information corruption and managing its roles in electoral violence. In addition, it is vital to create functional democratic institutions which will be a better platform for resolving disinformation in Nigeria's elections.


Bassey Udo (2013) here will be bloodshed if Jonathan loses in 2015, says Asari-Dokubo, Premium Times, Abuja, September 9


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