In a Democratized Media Context What a Hoax Can Do, a Misinformation Can Do Even Worse: Influences of Fake News on Democratic Processes in Nigeria

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Abstract

With the rapid advancements in technology and the democratization of media topology in Nigeria, many people are increasingly gaining access to the media and becoming empowered to actively participate in public debate about issues affecting them in addition to having a great deal of online social interactions. However, people's access to and interactions with technology and other media have given rise to a host of malicious effects – propagation of doubtful and fabricated content. This has been shown to have the potential to adversely influence people's lives and sense of judgment, especially regarding democratic processes such as political campaigns during which many malicious fabricated contents are disseminated. In recent history, from 2016, election campaigns in various countries across the world have highlighted how fake news can be targeted at specific people or individuals to influence and misguide them, and even influence polls results. Ever since, issues surrounding fake news and its impacts on democratic and social settings have been gaining pervasive research attention. Hence, the urge to explore the concepts of misinformation and democracy from a Nigerian context through a review of extant literature. In conclusion, several propositions were made, and a conceptual framework was designed for future research to explore the concept and empirically proffer solutions to the growing menace.
Keywords: Fake news and misinformation, Media and politics, Media democratization, Nigerian democratic processes, Political campaign, Social media
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1. Introduction

Historically, the term 'fake news' or misinformation is not a new phenomenon. The term is rather, essentially an oxymoron. The attachment of the negative word 'fake', which causes eyebrows to be raised whenever it is mentioned, to an invaluable word 'news' heightens the degree of the perceived effect of the term. News, simply put, is an account of what happened. Because of the value attached to it, news is envisaged to be the truth, the absolute truth and nothing but the truth. However, in a global era of post-truth and a country that has lived in non-truth for years even "the two fundamentally contradictory terms can occupy the same textual space" (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, n.p.; Malaolu, 2012). Recently, BBC News interviewed a group of experts what was their opinion about the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Several them indicated that the failure of credible information sources is one of the serious problems Nigerians faced nowadays, indeed the entire mankind (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21). As a matter of fact, truth has nowadays shifted to become relative, facts have assumed more prominence now to having alternatives, and news has been converted into a weapon of war of words, a phenomenon the current Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed described as probably the most dangerous threat to the country's democratic process, where Jimoh (2018 August 7).

A further analysis of news and information dissemination in Nigeria takes us to the purviews of constitutional provisions. Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria assigns a role to the press: "The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people" (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, n.p.). Furthermore, cited in Pate and Iris (2016, p. 161) and Ibrahim (2017, pp. 4-5), Section 24 of the 1960 Constitution which became Section 25 of the Republican Constitution of 1963 and formed the major part of Section 36 of the 1979 Constitution and Section 39 of the (current) 1999 Constitution states that:

> *(i) every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions*
> *and receive and impact ideas and information without interference; and (ii) without prejudice*
> *to the generality of Sub-section (1) of this Section every person shall be entitled to own,*
> *establish and operate a medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions…*
> (N.p.)

Most of Nigerian constitutions have been framed as part of the process of democratization (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13). Therefore, the authors can confidently say that the makers of the Nigerian constitution recognized

freedom of expression and freedom of the press as fundamental elements in every democracy (Epstein, 2011). Democracy thrives only when the people have free access to genuine and correct information about issues and matters that affect them and can use this information to make informed decisions and choices (Oro, 2011; Epstein, 2011).

2. Fake News and Democracy in Nigeria
Taking from the famous words of former US President, Abraham Lincoln who defined democracy as the government of the people, for the people and by the people (Haney, 1944), democracy is a system of government which is founded on the consensus of the majority of people. For upholding the democratic principles of equality and plurality, democracy assures that everyone would have their say, but the majority must have their way. The fundamental assumption behind this principle, however, is that the choice that people make would be based on facts, or correct information (Ezema, Ezeah, Ishiwu, & Ikwueze, 2012; Kazeem, 2018 November 29). In other words, facts are suppressed or distorted then the right of the people to freely choose what or who they want to choose would have been subverted (Eskridge Jr., 2010 November 19; Haney, 1944).

Therefore, the escalating negative effects of fake news and the scholarly discussion about 'alternative facts' are a direct assault on the fundamental principle of democracy, both in theory and in practice. This treatise agrees with the argument that the freedom or right to act is inauthentically attributed to individuals who do not have the capability to act (Oro, 2011). Section 39 of the Constitution provides for every Nigerian citizen the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. However, "interference is exactly what fake news does"; and by battling for space and vying for acceptability with authentic information and news, fake news deprives people of the very constitutional right to hold opinions and receive and impart ideas and information (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, n.p.; Oro, 2011).

Side by side with authentic information, the creation of alternative facts often makes it difficult for people to distinguish truth from untruth. When people get confused as to what the truth, or genuine information is, certainly, they cannot create a shared starting point from which to engage in meaningful conversations about issues and matters affecting them, let alone able to hold their political representatives accountable for their stewardships (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21). Instinctive understanding over what happened paves the way for meaningful debate over what needs to be done and how. The urge to solve any problem must advance from a common understanding of what the problem constitutes and upon what objective sets of facts it is based. If the facts become disputed, people's engagement in the process of finding solutions to their common problems becomes almost impossible (Ezema, Ezeah, Ishiwu, & Ukwueze, 2012). The Information and Democracy Commission (IDC, 2018 November) summarizes this discourse as follows:

Political control of the media, subjugation of news and information to private interests, the growing influence of corporate actors who escape democratic control, online mass disinformation, violence against reporters and editors, and the undermining of quality journalism, threaten the exercise of the right to knowledge. Any attempt to abusively limit it, whether by force, technology or legal means, is a violation of the right to freedom of opinion. (P.3)

The freedom to receive and share information is the soul of any democracy (IDC, 2018 November). Hence, one can confidently say that social media are the greatest democratic forces in human history. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc., have empowered the people tremendously more beyond the imagination of everyone, from mere content consumers to content creators (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13; Kenix, 2011). ICT and other forms of the new media have ensured that people can access vast amounts of information virtually free of charge. With the unprecedented ubiquity and pervasiveness of the new media technologies, it is almost impossible to be not to be informed (Oro, 2011) much as it is almost impossible to not to communicate as an individual, group or organization. For example, if you own a mobile phone or smartphone, you have one of the cheapest means of accessing information, at least this is true with most urban phone owners and internet users (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016).

Furthermore, as people actively use the social media platforms by uploading and sharing as well as tweeting and retweeting contents, ordinary people have become active agents in the information value chain, not only receiving but also creating and recreating meanings (Kenix, 2011; Moinuddin, Menzies, Vezér, & Morrow, 2017). Once again, no phenomenon in human history has had such a pervasive revolutionary influence on society and human relationships as social media (Kenix, 2011). ICT is considered the greatest weapon in the momentous battle to undo the culture of silence and promote the right to know, the freedom to receive and disseminate information as the ultimate power of the people (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13; Kenix, 2011).

Furthermore, to borrow from Lai Mohammed's assertion (cited earlier in Okakwu, 2018 July 11), the rise of fake news beckons Nigerian democracy's capability for disintegration. While ICT has provided us with the means and power to manipulate reality in many ways that were hitherto considered 'humanly' impossible, the internet and social media have made it possible for us to propagate this misleading reality and trumped-up stories at an incredible speed regardless of one's geographical location (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016). For example, a

picture snapped or contrived in this place and shared on the internet can go online viral and make it across the country faster than one can imagine.

Pate (2018 September 7, pp. 9, 10) has highlighted some key negative impacts of fake news on Nigeria's democracy and media as follows.

- Selective reporting and the promotion of prejudicial stereotypes about groups and individuals based on stereotypes, incomplete facts, mischief and ignorance
- Many have poor pictures of the complexities of Nigeria's composition; often matters are ethnicized, religionized, or politicized to the detriment of the collective good of all
- Weak research capacities among media professionals have manifested deficits of knowledge, shallow reporting and episodic attitudes in news coverage and programme production
- Common tendency of reporting inter-group conflicts out of their fundamental sociological, economic, political and other contexts; the media promote statements of politicians, ethnic champions, religious zealots and other interested parties without being critical or independently inquiring about specific social conflicts
- Generalized statements not supported by facts and figures on very sensitive national integrative issues
- Fake news on the broadcast media is more worrying because of the media's strategic position and influential status in the lives of ordinary Nigerians
- Broadcasting/publishing fake news can confer legitimacy, credibility and provide unquantifiable reach to such fakery
- Fake news confuses media audiences about what is true and what is not; it can undermine trust and subvert trust of the audience in all news
- It promotes selective reporting and prejudicial stereotypes about groups and individuals based on stereotypes, incomplete facts, mischief and ignorance which can poison the atmosphere

3. A Conceptual Analysis of Fake News

Being an emerging field of research, there is no single standard definition of fake news. However, the term can simply be defined as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" (Collins Dictionary, 2017, n.p.). The term gained so much attention in the last couple of years that it was named the Collins Dictionary Word of the Year 2017 due to its unprecedented usage increase of 365% in the Collins Corpus (Towers-Clark, 2018 October 4). Even though the concept of news articles aimed to mislead readers is apparently new (Standage, 2017), by no means it is any new. An incident occurred in the 18th century that changed news reporting forever. This was the birth of 'fake news' (Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye, & Isa, 2018). As noted by Okoli (2017 November 6) and Persily (2017) globally, the issue of fake news has become a popular concern because of its unprecedented impact in the 2016 US presidential campaign and Brexit referendum and public opinion. Okoli has concisely explained the issue, "talking the issues of fake news are of fundamental importance to democracy. The greatest enemy of democracy is disinformation, which is even worse than a pure lack of information" (n.p.).

Although the rising 'profile' of fake news as it stands today would not have been possible without the advent of the internet, a relationship between the very expression 'fake news' with the 2016 presidential election in the US and public opinion (Davies, 2017; Persily, 2017) and Brexit referendum (McGonagle, 2017) has been established. Although research indicated that fake news did not influence the outcome of the US president elections, 20% of the voters said that news on social media influenced their choice of candidate (Okoro et al., 2018). Arguably, however, recent developments in the US political arena have proven otherwise – *The New York Times* reported that Roger J. Stone, a long time President Trump's adviser has been indicted in the as part of the investigation by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, an incident that shows a link between Trump campaign and WikiLeaks (Mazzetti, Sullivan, & Haberman, 2019 January 25).

Despite being a relatively emerging field of research, fake news is a complex phenomenon. Because this version of fake news is a recent phenomenon, literature on it is quite limited as research and conference papers on the phenomenon are currently filing up. Fake news has been defined based on several typologies. Most of the existing definitions are not comprehensive and are based on content-structure (see Okoro et al., 2018) and focusing on (online) fake news detection (see Rubin, Conroy, Chen, & Cornwell, 2016; Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang, & Liu, 2017) from linguistics perspective rather than incorporating other salient dimensions of the phenomenon, such as source type and extent of influence (impact). By and large, the authors also observed that despite news and information generally (whether factual or deceptive) are fundamentally communication matters (Bitner, 1989; Laswell, 1948; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009), there is a dearth of literature providing further understanding about it (especially regarding theoretical concepts) from communication perspectives. This is a literature void that this chapter identified and attempted to provide knowledge for further research that can lead to the closure of the gap.

Drawing on the extant literature (e.g., see Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Schwarz, Sanna, Skurnik, & Yoon, 2007; Spiro, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006), the authors attempted to define fake news based on source and degree of influence criteria. In so doing, the authors have identified three two broad categories of fake news, namely (i) high-profile fake news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; McGonagle, 2017; Tower-Clark, 2018 October 4) and (ii) low-profile fake news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; McGonagle, 2017; Mendel, 2015). High-profile fake news refers to misleading information and other contents that emanate from prominent sources while low-profile fake news is simply the opposite of high-profile fake news, that is, misinformation that emerge from subtle, inconspicuous, or ordinary sources.

The authors have also identified four distinct types of fake news, namely (i) state/government fake news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; BBC News, 2010 March 14; Mendel, 2015) (ii) organizational/institutional fake news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; BBC News, 2010 March 14; Mendel, 2015), (iii) group-based fake news and (iv) individualistic fake news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Simon, 2017 February 25). From this, four predicting variables (viz., [i] state/governmental, [ii] organizational/institutional, [iii] group-based and [iv] individualistic) and two mediating variables ([i] high profile and [ii] low profile) were identified. From the foregoing analysis, the following propositions were made.

(a) *High-profile predictor dimension:*
- Misinformation from the state/government sources is highly and directly correlated to high-profile fake news categorization;
- Misinformation from organizational/institutional sources is highly and directly correlated to high-profile fake news categorization;
- Misinformation from group-based sources is highly and directly correlated to high-profile fake news categorization;
- Misinformation from individual sources is highly and directly correlated to high-profile fake news categorization.

(b) *Low-profile predictor dimension:*
- Misinformation from organizational/institutional sources is highly and directly correlated to low-profile fake news categorization;
- Misinformation from group-based sources is highly and directly correlated to low profile-fake news categorization;
- Misinformation from individual sources is highly and directly correlated to high-profile fake news categorization.

(c) *Mediator dimension:*
- Both high-profile and low-profile (secondary) mediators are significantly and directly associated to public opinion (primary mediator);
- Public opinion is significantly and directly associated to political climate.

(d) *Moderator dimension:*
- Media effect moderates the relationships paths.

The dependent variable is the political system, or 'democratic process'. The relationships between the secondary mediating variables (high-profile and low-profile) and the dependent variable is further mediated by public opinion (primary mediator). This signifies the key role public opinion plays in influencing (positively or negatively) the political climate (see Ibrahim & Hassan, 2017, pp. 31-32; Slothuus, 2015). Media effect, which refers to the characteristic power/influence of the media (both online [e.g., social media] and otherwise) (see Baran & Davis, 2012) is theorized to moderate the relationship paths.

Misleading information that are disseminated by government ministries, departments and agencies is termed state/governmental fake news. Disinformation that emanates from organized bodies that can be described as organizations or institutions (e.g., political parties, educational institutions, business conglomerates, firms, etc.) is what the authors called organizational/institutional fake news. Group-based fake news is misleading information that originates from groups of persons sharing common ideologies, values and aspirations such as labor unions, students' associations, market associations, etc. While individualistic fake news refers to the type of misinformation that originates from individual persons. As the two categories of fake news, high-profile and low-profile is based on the degree of influence of the fake information or untruth, the four types of fake news are based on the characteristics of the various sources of misinformation. Sources of misinformation here include both online (e.g., social media platforms, web portals, etc. and conventional (e.g., radio, Tv, newspaper, etc.).Given that fake news spreads faster via media of communication (whether mainstream or social media, particularly the latter), 'media effect' was proposed to moderate the effects of the four predictors on the criterion variable, 'political climate', or, in this case, 'democratic process' as shown in Figure 1.
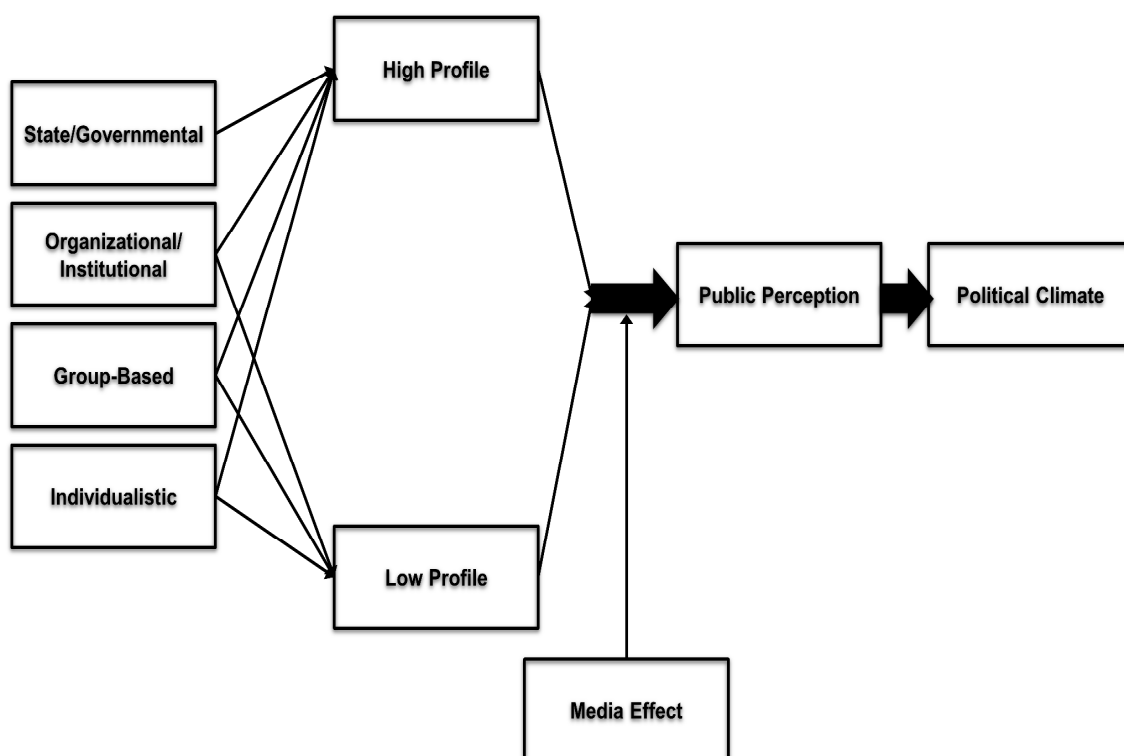
Figure 1: The Fake News Definition Model (based on source type and degree of influence) with arrows showing direction of influence. (Source: Authors).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Having discussed the various problems and issues associated with fake news and hate speech and their ramifications in the preceding sections, this chapter concludes with remarks about the possible solutions to those problems and offer recommendations toward combating their menace in Nigeria's democratic process. If fake news and hate speech are a weapon of 'mass democratic destruction', as the literature consistently suggested, then it would not be out of place to declare that Nigeria and its democratic processes are is already under attack.

As Nigeria wrestles with the intricate politics of the multiple identities of its peoples, notably ethnicity, religion and region, the undermining impacts of fake news and hate speech make this challenge even more complicated than ever before. As people continuously develop, share and promote contents that emphasize those fault lines, it would be nearly impossible to form a sense of national cohesion for the country. Without this, it would be unfeasible to develop a consensus around those fundamental issues that would spur Nigeria's progress as a democratic nation. The danger contained in misinformation is not the 'untrue' information itself; rather, it is what people do with the misinformation that gets to them. Historically, all conflicts started with words – what people say to themselves and what they say to others (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13; Agbese, 2017 December 31; Aminu, 2018 September 30; Ansip, 2017; Kazeem, 2018 November 29).

The search for a long-term solution to the problems of fake news and hate speech however would drive us along the lane of education. Plato says, "you cannot be wise and be wicked" at the same time. Although the viral spread of fake news and hate speech like a wildfire is premised on several factors, the notion that level of users' ignorance and lack of education are some of the real drivers of the risks posed by fake news and hate speech (Ansip, 2017; Persily, 2017) of whatever variation cannot be disregarded. After all, the danger is in the content itself (Eskridge Jr., 2010 November 19; Haney, 1944). Hence, the authors can confidently argue that the more genuinely educated people interact in real life or on social media, the fewer people one will get who would be willing to serve as peddlers of fake news or gossipmongers, not necessarily about their own rights, but also about their responsibilities to others and to their society at large.

4.2 Recommendations

In view of the preceding discourse and analysis, this article recommends the following strategies as a means toward fighting the menace of fake news in the society.

- Funding: the reality of fake news demands an appreciation of the architectural and technological models of digital messaging and how these models have reconstituted the meaning of social relations.

- Ethic: digitization brought volume and velocity but failed to present veracity. Therefore, to resolve the enigma of fake news at a structural level, there is the need to inject the imperativeness of veracity to messaging mechanism.
- Partnership: encourage partnership and networking between credible media organizations in and out of the country.
- Credibility: encourage media owners to support their media organizations for credibility and acceptability over social media through the practice of quality journalism; this will reduce the attention given to fake information.
- Media skills: there is the need for increased and continuous training for broadcast professionals and social media journalists on issues of fake news.
- Regulation: regulatory bodies like National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) deserve additional support and autonomy for unhindered regulation
- Collaboration: there is the need for increased involvement of professional bodies like the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Radio, Television and Theater Arts Workers' Union (RATTAWU) in calling members to order.
- Media literacy: there is the need for increased media literacy for the public, particularly young people to be critical in accessing and responding to media messages.
- Media Professionalism: the media should report accurately, responsibly and professionally in line with the media code of conduct in order to foster civil discourse.
- Gatekeeping and Self-censorship: the media should check and verify information before publishing and avoid supporting or republishing outlets that spread misinformation.
- INEC to train staff on detection of misinformation and fake news.

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