



Fake news and political propaganda in the public sphere: An analysis of the Ghanaian media

By

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Abstract

The distrust for journalism practice owing to the prevalence of fake news and propaganda is a concern that needs addressing. This study explores this concern in the context of Ghana's 2006 and 2020 presidential elections. Some 230 journalists serving in dominant outlets responded to questionnaire items on the spread of fake news and the attendant policy/legal curbs, as well as how to control the menace. Findings expose the proposition that economic and political reasons do drive the production and dissemination of fake news, as 72.17 percent of the respondents claimed that the rush to break the news was a major factor. Results also show that the dominant New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) exploited fake news to their advantage, with social media showing up as a major driver of the threat. Periodic media literacy training, the strengthening of professional ethical practice, and a solid fact-checking culture can deescalate Ghana's penchant for propaganda and fake news. This study can assist researchers and citizens who need an update on the subject.

Keywords: Fake news, political propaganda, disinformation, journalists, dissemination, public sphere, Ghana.

Introduction

The media are fundamental partners in any democratic experiment (McQuail & Deuze, 2020) and Ghana is a classic case of this assertion (Yartey et al, 2021; Igbinoba et al., 2022; Owusu, 2012, Yeboah-Banin, Fofie and Gadzekpo, 2020). Writing on democracy, the public sphere, power relations, and political corruption in Ghana, Asomah (2020) ascribes to the media the Herculean task of the media in transmitting the government's policies and programs to the citizens.

An independent and socially responsible press is also critical in safeguarding citizens' rights in democratic states such as Ghana as it holds politicians and public servants accountable for their actions and inactions as enshrined in the nation's 1992 Constitution. But there is a caveat. Fake news and propaganda in the public sphere are limiting social responsibility performance (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2019, Sanny and Selormey, 2020). The fake news assault is so strong in the face of the constitutional and legal frameworks in place to protect people's rights (Owusu, 2012, Gyampo, 2017).

Problem Statement

The reputation of Ghana's public sphere is being called to question regarding the prevalence of the disruptions and intrusions occasioned by fake news (Ayoung, Baada & Bugre, 2022). Journalists and social media commentators have been arrested and detained while a few others have been

jailed or are still in court. In November 2021, Nhyiraba Paa Kwesi Simpson, a journalist with a Takoradi-based *Connect FM* was arrested in connection with a fake news publication. Kwabena Bobbie Ansah, working with an Accra-based Power FM was detained in February 2022 for allegedly broadcasting false information. Others in police custody for similar offenses are Mensah Thompson, a civil activist, and Kwame Baffoe, a politician (Myjoyonline, 2022). All these arrests manifest the resolve of the government to execute the country's Electronic Communications Act (Act 775, section 76, of 2008) and the criminal offenses act of 1960 to prove its seriousness in curbing the incidents of fake news.

Some individuals and civil rights organizations are penalizing the government's move. Ghana's communication scholar, Prof. Audrey Gadzekpo, argues that security agencies must not be involved in such cases while cautioning journalists to be mindful of their professional conduct. She states that irresponsible journalism and outright false publications must be condemned for democracy to fester since the country has long decriminalized speech (Myjoyonline, 2022). However, this task should be implemented through civil litigations - not criminalization of such offenses.

The study sampled the views of journalists and news editors in Ghana's capital city, Accra to update the literature on fake news in Sub-Saharan Africa. Available literature had focused

on journalism and mobile technology (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2019; Okorie, Loto & Omojola, 2018), the pros and cons of social media (Sanny & Selormey, 2020), and curbing fake news (Ayoung et al., 2022). The update zeros on the connection between fake news and political economy.

The Objective of the Study

The major objective of the study is to understand how fake news spreads in Ghanaian media and the effects of that spread on journalism practice and the political system of Ghana. The study also explores the legal and policy frameworks relating to fake news and how to curb the spread of such falsehood in the public sphere. The study conjectured that economic and political reasons could provoke the production and dissemination of fake news in Ghana.

Research questions

This study is guided by four research questions which include;

1. What are the economic and political motives for the production and publishing of fake news in Ghana?
2. How are 4th industrial revolution technologies aiding the production and dissemination of fake news and what are its economic ramifications in Ghana?
3. How are government regulatory policies impeding

or promoting fake news production in Ghana?

4. How do media outlets authenticate news stories before publication?

Significance of the study

Fake news is a disturbing phenomenon across the globe and affects every sphere of life. Its production and dissemination are of major concern to conventional journalism whose primary role is to give credible, truthful, and unbiased news and information to the general public to make informed decisions. With the emergence of fake news, the role of mainstream media is jeopardized because the public tends to mistrust journalists to provide them with accurate, reliable, and factual information.

Fake news is also a worry to policymakers, governments, and civil society organizations. This is because since much effort and resources are needed to adequately disseminate information to the citizenry on government policies and programs, the presence of fake news can easily divert the public's attention from reliable information coming from trusted sources. This study fills a major lacuna in the literature on fake news and its propaganda effects on the public sphere of Ghana.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The public sphere refers to the public or forum where public opinion can be formed based on matters discussed generally without coercion (Habermas, 1997 as cited in Adut, 2012). The public sphere can be traced to the 18th century when salons used to serve as forums for public discourse by citizens on matters of public interest. The dominant approach identifies the public sphere as “the site where citizenship is exercised” (Adut, 2012:240).

This approach envisages the public in the public sphere to be a community that is acting within itself by actors who are egalitarian in an interactive conversation or participation. Adut (2012) notes that there are some impediments to what constitutes the public sphere. This is especially in situations where the publically accessible sphere is constrained by physical access criteria and other restrictions. The author stresses that the public sphere must be seen as a generic term that can denote virtual or real spaces of public discourse.

Fenton (2018) states that Habermas’ public sphere is useful in the analysis of digital communication, media, and democratic political participation because it directly links media practice and usage to democracy. The public sphere performs a significant function in articulating problems,

claims, and interests in an ideal system. The articulation of views and opinions is an important vehicle in a real democratic environment. This ensures that solutions are arrived at through opinions that are sought from a free space in which the contest of ideas is unimpeded. Chambers (2020) believes the perfection of the democratic system is affected by distortions that derail its processes. One such distortion that disrupts the democratic public sphere is fake news.

The public sphere also suppresses the marginalized and promotes the interest of the elites as emotions dominate public discourse instead of rationality (Asomah, 2020). In the case of Ghana, this study explores how the government of Ghana’s regulatory policies impedes or promotes fake news creation and dissemination. The study determines whether the existing legislations promote or restrain a free flow of communication or if there is an uneven playing field for all citizens to participate in public discourse. This study shows a clearer picture of the subject in the Ghanaian context.

The current situation where partisanship exists in the fourth estate has not only affected the way and manner journalists report on stories but how they lean on political parties and interests to practice the profession. This gives reason to doubt the stories they write and publish. Literature indicates that some

journalists especially those in private practice support political parties for monetary gains and juicy political appointments hence making the public sphere desecrated. “To a large extent, the private media in Ghana is divided between two main political lines-pro-government and pro-opposition. The main political parties often involved in using their media to make allegations and counter-allegations are the New Patriotic Party (NPP), now the ruling party, and the National Democratic Congress (NDC)” (Asomah, 2020:229). This appears alien to Habermas’ (1989) structural transformation of the public sphere which should be a free space for deliberating and articulating dominant issues of the people in a public discourse aimed at influencing the government’s policies and programs for the collective interest of all citizens.

Shardow and Asare (2016) see the political alignment of the media as problematic. The print media and to some extent the state media’s watchdog roles are compromised when they are made to be dependent on their owners in the discharge of their duties. Such media are not only mucking the public sphere but toeing the lines of their owners and writing stories based on the preferences of the media owners. Aside from contributing to existing literature, the study will also examine how media ownership and political and economic

factors contribute to the spread of disinformation and propaganda in the public sphere.

The Media of Ghana

In all, the media of Ghana can be classified into state-owned or public entities and privately owned media organizations that operate for profit. The state-owned media are owned and financed by the Government of Ghana. The state media includes newspapers, television stations, and wireless services. The private media sector of Ghana is saturated with radio and television stations dotted across the country. There are also several private newspapers and online portals all serving important roles in the democratic culture of the country.

The media of Ghana which began operation in the colonial era of 1822, has transformed. In the colonial period, the media emerged to serve the colonial masters and their interests as well as a few literate native populations. Anyidoho (2016) classified the media of Ghana sociologically into three phases, the first was the era where the media involved only amateur newspaper productions without any professional markers for news production. The second phase also was amateur in nature but commercial in orientation and critiqued the colonial administration. The third, ongoing phase, is that of professionalism and being commercially oriented where

modern technology and infrastructure are used in media production dissemination.

Methods and materials

The study employed a structured questionnaire to gather data from respondents via survey. Wimmer and Dominick (2011) indicate that the questionnaire is a flexible and useful instrument of data collection that can either be administered on the telephone, through the mail or self-administered. The respondents in this study got their copies questionnaire personally.

The Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) has some 800 members. It was impossible to reach out to every single individual in this study population. A total of 230 respondents were selected through random sampling. Wimmer and Dominick (2011:102) state that there is no approximate sample size for data collection stressing that “certain samples size are suggested for various statistical procedures, but no single sample-size formula or method is available for every research method or statistical procedure”. The researchers figured out that 230 respondents were adequate for the study.

Bryman (2012) indicates that by using simple random sampling as a probability procedure, inferences can be made from the sample to the

population. Walliman (2016:111) also states that simple random sampling is “used when the population is uniform or has common characteristics in all cases”. The population of this study which is the journalists of Ghana fits well with this definition because it is a uniform sample with a common characteristic. The common characteristic of the sample population is that all the elements engage in news gathering, production, processing, and dissemination. The simple random is appropriate and helps in achieving the objectives of the study.

Data for the study were analyzed using inferential and descriptive statistics. Inferential procedure in research is the generation of data to enable researchers to infer characteristics to a population of study while descriptive study measures “an accurate description of a situation or an association between variables... [as] this minimizes bias and maximizes the reliability of the evidence collected” (Kothari & Garg, 2014:33). The use of a quantitative data collection procedure, therefore, enabled extrapolation to the entire population of the Ghanaian journalists.

Findings

Biographical Analysis of Respondents

The demographics show the distribution of sex, age, academic qualifications, and years of experience in journalism. Table 1 presents the summary of the responders’ profiles.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographics

<i>Profile</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>No. Respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
Sex	Male	112	48.70
	Female	110	47.80
	Do not want to share	8	3.50
Age	18-30 years	112	48.70
	31-40 years	90	39.10
	41-50 years	18	7.80
	51-60 years	4	1.70
	Above 61 years	6	2.60
Education Qualification Attained	Diploma	28	12.20
	Honors degree	8	3.50
	Bachelor's Degree	142	61.70
	Master's Degree	50	21.70
	PhD	2	0.90
Years of experience in journalism	1-5 years	120	52.20
	6-10 years	46	20.00
	11-15 years	36	15.70
	16-20 years	12	5.20
	Above 20 years	16	7.00
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	11-15 years	36	15.70
	16-20 years	12	5.20
	Above 20 years	16	7.00

Male respondents account for 48.70% (n=112) while females make up 47.80% (n=110), thus giving a fair gender representation. However, 3.50% (n=8) of those surveyed would rather not reveal their sexual orientations. Above half of the respondents (48.70%) are under the age of 30. The 31-40-year-olds make up 39.10% (n=90) of the total population. In addition, there are respondents between the ages of 41 and 50 (n=18, 7.8 percent), 51 and 60 (n=4, 1.70 percent), and 61 and older (n=6, 2.60 percent). The distribution of respondents is reflective of the age structure of the current Ghanaian population and further indicates that journalism in Ghana is mostly practiced by the youthful segment of the population. The age differential is beneficial to this study, in terms of the diversity of the population and how this diversity reflects the respondents' views.

Also, 15.7 percent (n=36) have between 11 and 15 years of experience in journalism. Therefore, it is apparent

that the respondents had at least more than a year of experience when it comes to journalism. This is useful to this study since various experience levels of the respondents produce divergent viewpoints on the subject matter as they might have come across issues of fake news in their years of practice.

Economic and political motives behind fake news in Ghana

Figure 1 is a summary of the research on the causes of false news in Ghana. More than half of the respondents agreed that the production and dissemination of false news are driven by economic and political motivations. Furthermore, 15.7% of respondents were unsure as to whether or not persons working in the media create false news for economic and political motives. However, 6.9% of respondents said they did not think economic or political motivations were behind the spread of false news in Ghana

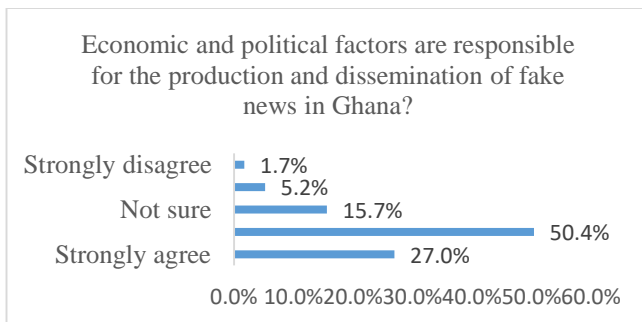


Figure 1: Economic and political factors responsible for fake news publication in Ghana

The breakdown shows that 3% (n=8) of respondents admitted producing an article or feature while aware of its inaccuracy, whereas 97% (n=222) have never done so. This

implies that some journalists although fewer, intentionally, publish fake news either for parochial interest or some other gains.

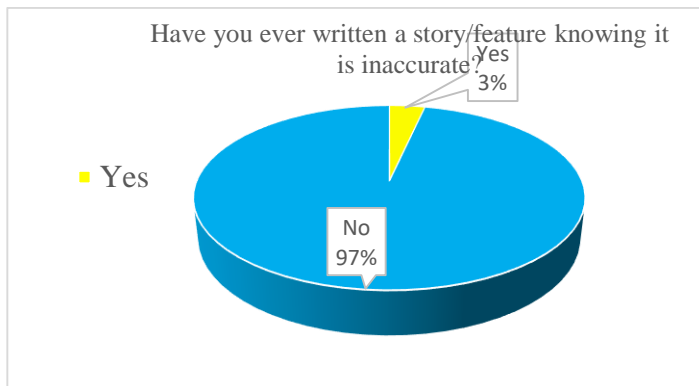


Figure 2: Ever written a story/feature knowing it is inaccurate

According to the survey, 3% of respondents (Figure 2) have produced a story or feature knowing it is erroneous due to their inability to complete sufficient cross-checking of facts before publishing. This could also be a form of sloppy or unprofessional journalism.

According to the results shown in Table 2, only 27.83 percent of respondents (n=64) cited being the first to publish as a factor in the reporting of false news, while 72.17 percent of respondents (n=166) disagreed. Also, 63.48 percent

(n=146) blamed propaganda or politics for the prevalence of false news stories in the media, while just 36.52 percent (n=84) disagreed. A total of 124 respondents or 53.91% do not think financial incentives play a role in the proliferation of false news, while 46.09% (n=106) disagreed. The survey found that 51.3% (n=118) blamed unprofessionalism among journalists for the prevalence of false news articles, while 48.7% (n=112) disagreed. The majority of news writers, 70.43 percent (n=162) do not believe that trends have a role in the

spread of false news in the media, whereas just a third of the respondents (n=68) hold this view.

Table 2 Motives for the production and publishing of fake news in Ghana

Statement	Responses	No. Respondents	%
If yes, state the reasons for the inaccurate	Not Applicable	222	96.52
	Lack of Accurate Research	8	3.48
First to Publish as a reason accounting for fake news stories in news reporting	No, not the first to publish	166	72.17
	Yes, First to Publish	64	27.83
Propaganda/Political as reasons accounting for fake news stories in news reporting	No, not Propaganda/ Political	84	36.52
	Yes, Propaganda/ Political	146	63.48
Economic benefits as reasons accounting for fake news stories in news reporting	No, not for economic benefits	124	53.91
	Yes, For Economic benefit	106	46.09
Unprofessionalism as the reason accounting for fake news stories in news reporting	No, not unprofession alism	112	48.7
	Yes, Unprofession alism	118	51.3
To trend as reasons accounting for fake news stories in news reporting	No, not to trend	162	70.43
	To trend	68	29.57

The respondents believe that the sponsors, investors, and owners of the media have their own socio-cultural, political, and economic interests, which is why they fund and publish false news. According to the survey, there is a widespread belief among media professionals that some phony stories are published to further personal interests rather than for the citizens' economic or political benefits. This study found that this practice escalated during the Covid-19 and around election times (2016 and 2020 elections), and was compounded by the weak controls that the internet is known for.

How 4th industrial revolution technologies aid the production and dissemination of fake news in Ghana

The purpose of this section is to determine the influence of the 4th industrial revolution technologies on the creation and distribution of false news in Ghana. To that end, the survey participants were first asked about their usage of social media for news. Based on the data shown in Figure 3, 94% (216) of respondents rely on social media for their news. This means that nine out of every 10 journalists surveyed, get their news from social media. This is an indication of the remarkable role technology plays in the work of journalism.

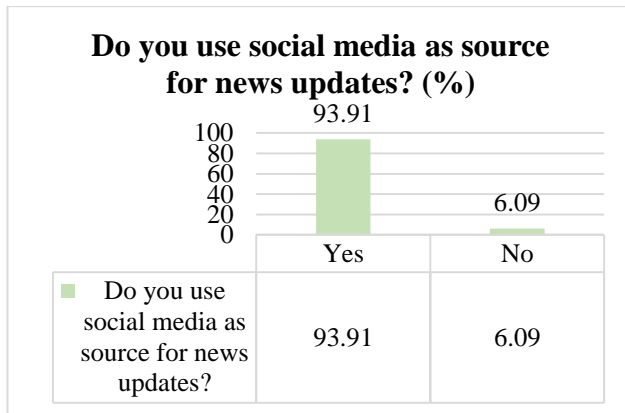


Figure 3: social media as source for news updates

Figure 4 displays the numerous social channels where respondents get their news. Respondents utilized Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to stay abreast of breaking news.

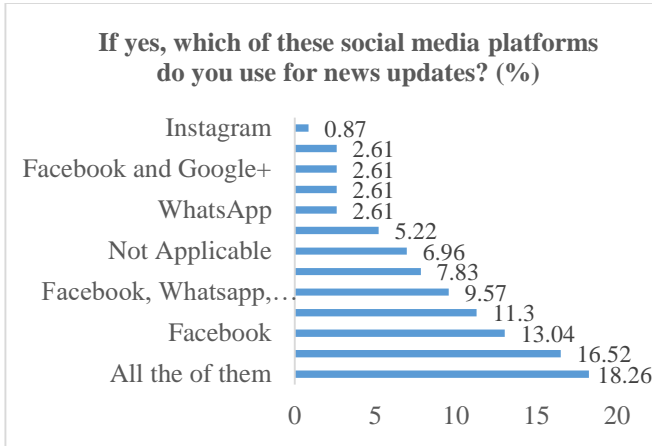


Figure 4: Social media platforms used for news updates

In addition, participants were asked if they agree that artificial intelligence, robotics, and other technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution aid the spread of false news. Figure 5 is a summary of the responses showing that 36.52% of

respondents strongly agreed and 33.18% agreed that these technologies propagate fake news. Furthermore, 26.96% of respondents were unsure while 4% did not think that the technologies were part of the problem

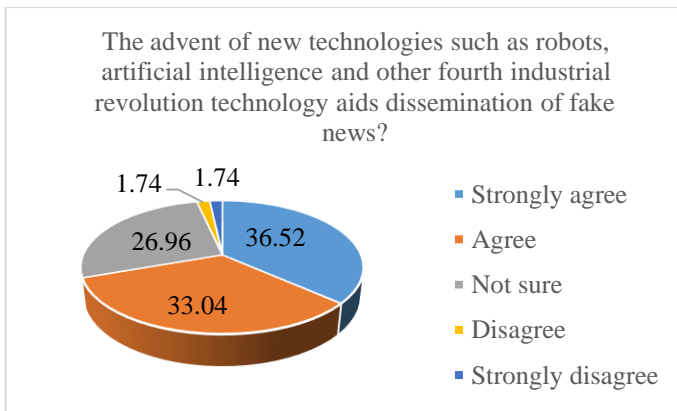


Figure 5: New technologies as means of dissemination of fake news

Table 3: The role of technology in promoting fake news publications

Statements		Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Digital technology is the reason for the increasing spread of fake news	No. Respondents	66	130	22	12	0
	%	28.7	56.52	9.57	5.22	0
Social media is the reason for the high rate of fake news in the country	No. Respondents	74	120	30	6	0
	%	32.17	52.17	13.04	2.61	0
Technology cannot be blamed for the spread of fake news	No. Respondents	18	54	46	96	18
	%	7.83	22.61	20	41.74	7.83
Social media plays a minimal role in the dissemination of fake news	No. Respondents	10	24	44	98	54
	%	4.35	10.43	19.13	42.61	23.48
Robots or artificial intelligence are used to spread fake news	No. Respondents	10	54	116	36	12
	%	4.42	23.01	51.33	15.93	5.31

Consequent to Table 3 and Figure 5, the researcher asserts that the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution's hallmark systems - AI, robots, and other technologies - aid in

the dissemination of fake news. The internet encapsulates these technologies to set fake news in motion. The use of the internet, via social media, has exacerbated the

production and distribution of news with little or no editorial supervision (Amodu *et al*, 2019). With the undermining of the gatekeeping system these days it is difficult to know which stories to adjudge not fake as reputable news outlets also publish fake news, though many would retract the stories even after the damage has been done. Ghana is an archetype for these fake news problems.

How government regulatory policies impede or promote fake news production in Ghana

This study set out to determine whether or not governmental regulations in Ghana help or hinder the dissemination of disinformation. The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: How government regulatory policies impede or promote fake news production in Ghana

Statement	Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The laws of Ghana make provisions to regulate the production and dissemination of fake news.	No. of Respondents	42	88	56	32	12
	%	18.26	38.26	24.35	13.91	5.22
The provisions of fake news laws in Ghana are enforced by the government of Ghana.	No. Respondents	10	66	80	50	24
	%	4.35	28.7	34.78	21.74	10.43
News stories produced by journalists in Ghana are factual and truthful.	No. Respondents	12	126	54	34	4
	%	5.22	54.78	23.48	14.78	1.74

Table 4 shows 56.52 percent (n=130) of respondents proving the assertion that Ghanaian laws have the requisite mechanisms to restrict the creation and transmission of false news. Others disagreed or were unsure that the government of Ghana enforces provisions of fake news regulations. The respondents' composite view was that the legal frameworks in existence were not well implemented.

The shortfall in government regulation indicates the necessity of self-regulation in enhancing fake news de-escalation. The researcher posits that mass media, online media, social media, blogs, and websites must be self-regulated. Industry captains must work together more closely than before to combat fake news by investigating suspected fake news, prohibiting the publishing of such stories, and devising penalties organizations, beginning with the reporter and ending with the editor and that tools and methods were in existence to rapidly fact-check

Discussion

This study has shown that the production and dissemination of false news are driven by economic and political motivations. It discovered that media owners have motives, such as sociocultural, political, and economic interests which influence

for news outlets that violate self-regulatory guidelines. Organizations representing journalists should adopt self-regulatory mechanisms, guidelines, legislation, punishments, and the like as deterrents against fake news pushing. Furthermore, the low impact of governmental intervention in fake news problems indicates that regulations should be more severe.

How media outlets authenticate news stories before publication

The media outlets' perspective on how they verify news articles before publication was examined in this study. The response numbers are posted in Table 5 below. The majority of respondents (n=190) believe that the news goes through a series of gatekeeping stages before being published. The table also shows that 83% of respondents felt that there is a clear line of authority in news suspected fake news but difficult to use, indicating that the fact-checkers were not put to use in much of the time.

the content of the media, especially the dissemination of fake news. This result aligns with Carr et al. (2020) who argue that propaganda and fabricated stories in the name of socio-political and economic interests should be discouraged as it destroys democratic governance.

Table 5: How media outlets authenticate news stories before publication

Statement	Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
News processing follows gatekeeping steps, from the reporter to the editor before publishing	No. of Respondents	84	106	26	6	8
	%	36.52	46.09	11.3	2.61	3.48
News follows a chain of command from the reporter to the sub-editor and then to the editor	No. of Respondents	82	108	28	8	4
	%	35.65	46.96	12.17	3.48	1.74
There is a system in place to fact-check fake news stories	No. of Respondents	46	96	72	10	6
	%	20	41.74	31.3	4.35	2.61
There are no means to immediately fact-check fake news stories	No. of Respondents	14	40	72	96	8
	%	6.09	17.39	31.3	41.74	3.48
There is a fact-checker but the process is cumbersome to use and so it is not used	No. of Respondents	18	56	78	68	10
	%	7.83	24.35	33.91	29.57	4.35

The study observes that some individuals consider the publication of false information as a lucrative business opportunity. They acknowledged making economic capital of fake news

(Chambers, 2020). Another contributor to fake news prevalence is the lack of oversight on the internet which makes it easy for some individuals to create websites typically resembling reputable

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media outlets to fool their readers into thinking they are receiving accurate information (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019).

Respondents indicate utilizing Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to stay abreast of breaking news. Participants also agreed that robotics, artificial intelligence, and other 4IR technologies helped escalate fake news. This aligns with the postulation that algorithms, artificial intelligence, and big data are converging to generate a new digital newsroom with the potential of changing how humans operate and more importantly, replacing human journalists with robotic journalism.

Ghanaian laws have mechanisms to restrict the creation and transmission of false news. However, the majority of the respondents expressed worry over implementation challenges. It also confirms that social media and the internet evolution serve a dual role by enhancing democratic governance, but being used to consolidate authoritarian regions (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019; McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Yarlikaya, 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that economic and political incentives motivate the creation and distribution of fake news as indicated by 50.4 percent of the respondents and thus confirming the conjecture along that line. The widespread abuse of 4IR technologies throughout Ghana also facilitates the production and transmission of false news. The situation is exacerbated by

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the mainstream media which fails to adhere to professional standards. This form of weak journalism makes the practice unethical.

The study also discovered that some credible media outlets control the material they publish via many layers of editorial gatekeeping. Articles are sent from the reporter to the sub-editor and then to the editor as part of the gatekeeping processes. Again, the study found that government regulations to limit the dissemination of fake news exist but implementation is a huge challenge. The presence of techniques to rapidly fact-check bogus news articles is being considered a major stop-gap measure against the dissemination of fake news in Ghana.

The study recommends the need for professional bodies in the media industry to work together to combat online fake news peddling and devise effective penalties for ethical violations. When self-control fails, that indicates more stern regulatory measures (Omojola & Yartey, 2016; Omojola, 2008), usually by the government. The need for media organizations to fact-check the content they produce before publication is significant in checking fake news.

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