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Fake News and Political Misinformation: Implications for Democratic Process in Nigeria.

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Abstract: The media space in Nigeria has morphed over the years from traditional to digital outlets, with social media as a critical instrument in information dissemination. The transition has revolutionised and democratised the distribution and consumption of information. However, this has also created opportunities for fast and widespread fake news (misinformation and disinformation). Given this, this study examines the implications of political misinformation for the democratic process in Nigeria. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources and content and thematic analysis, this study discovers that the unregulated nature of new media, with the proliferation of fake news, consequently impacts voter attitudes, electoral outcomes, public trust, and social cohesion, all of which bears consequences on the country's democratic process. It further highlights the government's endeavours to regulate social media to contain the dissemination of news that threatens the political, economic and social foundations of the Nigerian state. It proposes recommendations, including strengthening media literacy, collaborative fact-checking, promoting social media platform responsibility, revising the legal framework, international collaboration, encouraging responsible online behaviour, and launching public awareness

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campaigns. These recommendations collectively aim to safeguard Nigeria's democratic integrity, uphold public opinion, and fortify the credibility of its institutions within the digital age's interconnected world.

Keywords: Fake news, Misinformation, Social media, Democratic Process, Nigeria.

Introduction

News sensationalism for traffic is a significant strategy for media outlets, which has continued to gain acceptance within the media space. One important consequence of sensational news reporting is its malleability, which forms false/fake news. Fake news—a broad term for various misinformation and disinformation—has become a topical issue in the ever-evolving interconnected world. In today's era of decentralised media, enabled by the Internet and social media with little to no regulation of content, the production of false news has amplified, causing polarised discussions and views among citizens. The spread of misinformation and fake news on digital/new media has become a significant concern, posing threats to democratic processes globally. This concern is equally evident in Nigeria, where there is fast growth in social media usage. The advent of the Internet and social media has made fake news a threat to society, given the nature and the speed at which these communication technologies facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Like all forms of information, fake news poses a threat because of its ability to influence public discourse and opinions, influence political behaviour, provoke actions, and promote extreme views, hate speech, and political polarisation. However, in a complex socio-political landscape like Nigeria (characterised by its diverse array of ethnic groups) and by tensed ethno-religious cum political cleavages, fake news and political misinformation on digital media can be far-reaching, eroding public trust, confidence in government and further exacerbating existing social divisions. Which can stir violent sentiments and potential anarchy. Similarly, for Nigeria's democratic viability, given the infant and feeble nature of the country's democratic experiment so far, fake news threatens the strengthening of the democratic processes and institutions in the country. For example, the various kinds of news and information that characterise electoral periods in the country affect the processes and procedures necessary for the success of elections in the country.

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In the same vein, the activities of democratic institutions, when falsely reported, create tensions and resentment toward such institutions, affecting their capacity to deliver democratic dividends to citizens.

The pervasiveness of misinformation and disinformation has compelled governments (including Nigeria) to pursue anti-misinformation initiatives. However, this raises further concerns regarding the impact of such initiatives on freedom of speech and other democratic rights of the citizens. Hence, examining the implications of fake news on the democratic process in Nigeria, this study further delves into the complex mesh between fake news and Nigeria's multi-ethnic society. It investigates how the (deliberate or indeliberate) dissemination of fabricated, unverified or misleading information may capitalise on the existing ethnic cracks or fault lines to manipulate public opinion, exacerbate societal divisions, and ultimately undermine the integrity of democratic institutions.

This study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources from articles, texts and journals, to examine the implications of political misinformation on the democratic process in Nigeria. Data was analysed through content and thematic analysis to achieve the study's objectives.

Literature Review

Fake News and Political Misinformation

The emergence of social media has changed how information is disseminated, affecting and shaping major discourses, including the fabric of political discourse. However, in this rapid rise in social media usage, there has been a global concern and challenge: fake news and political misinformation. As shown by its deliberate fabrication of narratives disguised as the gospel truth, this guileful situation puts a thick cloud over Nigeria's political environment.

The term 'fake news' has several definitions by researchers and authors. However, according to Allcot and Gentzkow (2017), it refers to news articles that are deliberately and verifiably untrue, with the potential to mislead readers. Hence, fake news is verifiably false and created to deceive readers (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017; Aboyade, 2022). However, because 'fake news' has become a commonly used vocabulary, its meanings are insufficient to describe the issue's complexities. Different terminologies, such as 'misinformation', 'disinformation', 'mal-information', and 'information disorder/pollution', also suggest different motives for disseminating false information that intends to deceive the public. While disinformation means false information developed and spread to disrupt and cause harm, misinformation does not necessarily carry such intent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Colomina et al., 2021; Stephens et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the term 'political misinformation' deals more with a wider spectrum of inaccurate or misleading information that is mainly related to political events, policies, or political candidates. Political misinformation often exploits people's cognitive biases, especially confirmation bias. This bias makes them accept information that supports their preexisting ideas about politics or government (Pennycook et al., 2020; Colomina et al., 2021).

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Examining the sphere of digital communication and social media, studies reveal that social media platforms have become a breeding ground for disseminating fake news and political misinformation due to their wide reach and ease of sharing information, particularly during political campaigns on social media platforms (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Because fake news and misinformation are often disseminated through social media platforms in this digital era, it becomes relatively easy to affect public perceptions and influence political decisions. However, this oscillation and influence on public perceptions and political decisions threaten the essence of democratic processes globally and in Nigeria (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Jimada, 2023).

In Nigeria, the widespread access to and usage of online media platforms and news blogs has created a new line of 'digital journalists' who spread news stories, whether factual or false. Also, Nigeria's vivacious social media scene, marked by a significant presence on platforms like X (formally known as Twitter), WhatsApp, and Facebook, amplify the reach and impact of fake news stories (Omoera & Uwalaka, 2023; Jimada, 2023). Being a heterogeneous society known for its diversified political landscape, fake news impacts democratic processes in the sole sense that democracy requires a majoritarian approach to issues, but in a diverse society like Nigeria with already existing complex divides, the proliferation of fake news only serves to increase the divide further rather than harmonise for public benefit

Mechanisms of Misinformation Spread on Digital Media.

The concept of algorithms that sort viral content plays a pivotal role in the digital landscape. Algorithms determine what users of platforms are exposed to based on their interests. Algorithms aim to keep users spending more time online. On social media, fake news and misinformation can easily gain traction when users engage (through likes, shares, and comments) with content that is suggested by algorithms (Pariser, 2011; O'Neil, 2017).

Owing to cognitive bias, users on social media often aid in disseminating fake news. Evidence suggests that people often ignore fact-checking sensational or emotion-inducing information because it resonates with their existing beliefs. Studies further affirm that when in filter bubbles and echo chambers, users succumb to their confirmation bias and spread misinformation that suits their beliefs (Pariser, 2011; Lakshmanan, 2022). Another unique challenge social media poses is the spread of rumours through citizen journalism. Friggeri et al. (2014) describe rumours as claims or stories that are created socially. These rumours gain virality in social media via retweets, likes, and shares. Compared to traditional media, it is easy to disseminate unverified news, like rumours, which almost anyone can post, and for those rumours to gain swift traction among social media users (Friggeri et al., 2014). Debunking rumours that have gained traction on social media can often be challenging. However, because the correction of rumours is slower than the spread, it becomes challenging to curb them.

Media Regulation and Democracy

The interaction between media regulation and democracy is complex. On one hand, regulation is viewed as a

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threat to freedom of speech and expression. On the other hand, regulation is viewed as a necessary tool to ensure a plurality of views and opinions and to curtail misinformation. Tenove (2020) note that media regulation (either by government or private actors) is designed to safeguard key democratic principles such as self-determination, accountable representation, and, most importantly, public deliberation and discourse. However, such media regulation may lead to governmental overreach whereby citizen expression and dissent are suppressed. Also, social media companies may assume excessive control over speech regulation on their platform and undermine legal standards and due process. Hollick (1994) argues that media regulation plays both a restrictive and protective role. For instance, regulation may restrict powerful commercial interests in the media, protecting free speech and plurality of opinions. Hollick notes that monopolistic tendencies in the media space threaten democratic discourse and intervention is needed to ensure media plurality where freedom of expression is safeguarded (See also Fukuyama & Grotto, 2020).

Similarly, Fukuyama and Grotto (2020) argue that media regulation is essential in liberal democracies. While democracies may not directly censor the media, they employ various tools to regulate the media, such as licensing, revenue management, anti-trust policies, and content guidance. Sousa et al. (2013) also argue that present in democratic society are independent media regulatory bodies that are accountable to the parliaments and play an important role in ensuring media autonomy and protecting democratic

values. Neff and Pickard (2024) argue that well-funded public media systems and independent regulatory structures support robust democratic engagement, which is, in turn, positive for democratic health. However, Vese (2022) argues that despite media freedom protections, regulatory measures can sometimes hamper freedom of speech.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory: Media Influence

Agenda-setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, and it posits that media influences public opinion by determining the salience of issues in people's minds (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory emphasises the media's ability to influence the public's thoughts and discussions. However, there is a new and vital colouration to the agenda-setting theory in the digital era due to the advent and rapid expansion of digital media platforms. These platforms, especially social media, shape public discourse (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012).

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) affirm that there is mostly an intense correlation between the agenda set by the media and the one set by the public, especially when it concerns political issues. Similarly, in the digital space, Diddi and LaRose (2006) applied the theory in their study to describe how online news outlets and media influence and shape public perceptions. However, since its inception, the agenda-setting theory has undergone a significant transformation in the age of traditional media up until the current age of digital media. The theory has adapted to the nuances of modern (online)

communication platforms. The emergence of social media has given the theory more relevance in the modern era, as most people have transitioned from getting their news from traditional media platforms to getting it from digital media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram (Gilardi et al., 2022).

Social media platforms are used to transmit news and shape public discussions by prioritising specific topics. Algorithm-driven selections on these platforms influence users' perceptions, which aligns with the agenda-setting theory's fundamental principles. Furthermore, because social media platforms allow for interactivity, users directly or indirectly actively partake in agenda-setting processes. Users share, comment, and boost certain narratives on these platforms. (Bryanov, 2020). According to Rojecki and Meraz (2016), misinformation often mixes with media agendas, mostly spreading fake news and influencing public perceptions. Research also suggests that exposure to misinformation in any form, even in the context of trying to debunk it, may further increase its familiarity and acceptance (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016; Ecker et al., 2022). This phenomenon is closely related to agenda-setting theory because how the media selects and portrays information shapes and affects the public's attention and, consequently, their belief systems.

In the digital media world of Nigeria, where misinformation can easily influence and disrupt political decisions and public trust, agenda-setting theory provides a frame for analysing how fake news gains prominence and affects people's

knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes. Understanding the connection between agendas set by the media and misinformation is essential to develop effective countermeasures. This understanding and the development of countermeasures will ensure that the public consumes factual information, mitigating false news's impact on public perception.

Historical Evolution of the Media in Nigeria: Traditional to Social Media and the Monetization of Social Media

Media in the Nigerian landscape has transformed over the years. There has been a significant shift from traditional to technologically driven digital media (Adikpo et al., 2022). Since the new media allows for interactive and engaging content and, often, the formation of communities, the transformational shift from traditional media has shaped the behaviours of citizens. Before the advent of digital media in Nigeria, traditional media—newspapers, radio, and television—had historically shaped the country's narrative. Traditional media was once the primary source of information in Nigeria. It is instrumental in the country's history, fostering patriotism and encouraging citizens' participation, especially during the colonial era and the struggle for independence in 1960 (Okon, 2020).

However, the introduction of the Internet and digital technologies captivated and exposed the younger demographic of Nigerians to a repertoire of different social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and many more (Okon, 2020). With this exposure, Nigerians started creating online communities and realised that these

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platforms allowed content creators to monetise their content through advertising revenue. Consequently, this has birthed social media influence in Nigeria, and influencers use their popularity on these platforms to seek higher views and engagements of their content, which, in turn, translates to increased earnings.

Simultaneously, monetising these media platforms has created a challenging problem, especially with the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. For the sake of financial gain, some users on social media platforms create misleading or sensational content to boost engagements and views. This leads to rapidly disseminating fake information across social media platforms. However, spreading fake news and misinformation across social media can influence public opinion, affecting Nigeria's democratic process. The phenomenon potentially puts the integrity of democratic institutions, discourse, and decision-making in jeopardy. (Braun & Eklund, 2019; Nizamani, 2019)

The Spread of Fake News in Nigeria

Loveless (2020) asserts that fake news functions as an emotional tool to disrupt and fragment public opinion, ultimately capitalising on the resulting disorder for financial or political gains. As it exists today, the explosion of fake news has been largely enabled by the Internet and the subsequent proliferation of social media and mobile phones, which have democratised access to information. The implication is that expertise in data and information processing is depreciated from those with the requisite knowledge and skill in information management to almost the

general public, which creates room for the production and dissemination of information at will. (Lee, 2019)

Rodny-Gumede (2018) contends that fake news, propaganda, and misinformation have existed as long as human communication itself, but their impact has significantly increased with the rise of modern communication methods, the expansion of mass media, and particularly the rapid growth of social media platforms and the Internet. In Nigeria, for instance, there are about 31.6 million active users on social media, and the dominant platform in the country is WhatsApp, which boasts nearly 95% of these users. Following WhatsApp, Nigeria's most popular social media platforms are Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. (Aimuengheuwa, 2023)These channels serve as the contemporary means of information dissemination, and their unregulated and decentralised nature makes them a potent tool for carrying false news and information which diffuses quickly within society.

The personalised nature of these platforms also means individuals become content creators, and the fierce, winner-takes-all competition for attention and advertising revenue means the churning out of information at will. In this highly competitive online environment, speed is of the essence, unlike print publications that have the luxury of time to report breaking news the following day. On the Internet, it is a fast-paced race, and many journalists, in their quest for audience engagement, often prioritise publishing quickly over rigorous verification, which is a concern today. In Nigeria, Numerous news sites and blogs publish stories without first confirming their sources. Fake news

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stories, given their sensational nature, tend to spread rapidly. Moreover, because these stories are hosted on platforms with a large readership that relies on them for information, they are often taken as accurate by those who read them (Ogbette et al., 2019; Msughter & Maradun, 2023).

Therefore, Apuke & Omar (2020) identify three reasons responsible for spreading fake news: individual motivation, contextual and cultural motives, and trust in the network. Individual motivation stems from the desire to be the facilitator of information, whether accurate or not, given its role as a social currency. The contextual and cultural motives include media control, lack of trust in the news media, unemployment, gossip, rumour, satire, etc., all of which converge to influence the dispersion of almost any kind of news and which can be given traction with the population of people who pay attention to, and with Nigeria's kind of clustered population, it spreads and becomes a shadow fact amongst people. Lastly, trust in network groups, particularly intimate contacts on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, which has been empirically validated as the most used social media platform by Nigerians, contributes immensely to the spread of fake news in the country. (Apuke & Omar, 2020)

Rodny-Gumede (2018) emphasises that it is difficult to assess the impact of fake news. However, one consequential effect on society is that it erodes public trust in journalism and other sources of news outlets. (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019) This practicality is evident within the Nigerian media space, which has seen formal news agencies peddle fake news with no credible source, especially from social media. For example, Okoro & Emmanuel (2018) confirm that a significant portion of the major media establishments in Nigeria are owned by individuals who harbour specific political agendas and are structured to promote the personal interests of their owners against public interest. This has given rise to citizen suspicion and the resort to online media channels. More so, the fact that traditional media outlets have social media platforms has contributed to the semblance of news that emanates from ordinary citizens and established media houses.(Inobemhe et al., 2020). Thus, a significant impact of fake news is the erosion of trust in established media outlets when they get swarmed by the ravaging quantum of news from social media and then decide to opt for it without verifying. It also burdens citizens with deciphering the authenticity of information for action. The replication of fake news and information regularly overloads citizens, and if the information is intended to spur citizen action, this then becomes unachievable.

Fake News and its Implications for Public Opinion, Democratic Process, and Institutions in Nigeria

Nigeria's politics have evolved over the years with the development and widespread of information technology such as the Internet and social media. The role of the Internet and social media became apparent in the early 2010s, especially during the 2011 general elections. Before then, the traditional media dominated the Nigerian political information space. The advent of the Internet and social media led to a disruption in the Nigerian media space; the Internet democratised and decentralised

information sharing and significantly reduced the gatekeeping power of the traditional media. The Internet empowered individual Nigerians to participate in politics with little or no barrier to entry. However, this came at a cost. While it empowered the individual, it also exacerbated the spread of misinformation and disinformation with little accountability. As McKay and Tenove (2021) put it, it is widely accepted that disinformation undermines democracy, and disinformation is more prevalent and harmful because the internet and social network platforms have rearranged global communication patterns and structures.

The credibility and integrity of many elections and democratic institutions in Nigeria and many African countries have been undermined and compromised by widespread fake news perpetrated by various actors, including government officials and agencies, political parties, social groups, and individual citizens (Fombad, 2022). Sometimes, disinformation campaigns are crafted with objectives beyond altering election outcomes. These campaigns frequently aim to undermine the fundamental institutions and societal foundations essential for the proper functioning of democracies (McKay & Tenove, 2021).

In Nigeria, institutions critical to the country's democratic survival have also been attacked in a bid to undermine them. For example, on 27 June 2023, the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Yakubu Mahmood, was accused of trying to "criminally" give All Progressive Congress, the ruling party, 25% of the vote in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (Nwonwu et

al., 2023). In August 2023, an X (formerly known as Twitter) user alleged that the former Minister of Housing and Infrastructure, Babatunde Fashola, single-handedly wrote the judgement to be delivered by the judges of the Presidential Elections Petition Tribunal (Olafusi, 2023). These cases of fake news can undermine the integrity of democratic institutions, which, in turn, undermine the credibility of the electoral process and outcomes and processes and structures that serve as pillars for the country's democracy.

Furthermore, some disinformation and misinformation campaigns targeted undermining political candidates' credibility and stoked hatred toward them (Tenove, 2020). Shortly before the 2019 Nigerian elections, then President Muhammadu Buhari found it necessary to make a live television appearance to debunk unfounded rumours circulating on Facebook and WhatsApp groups, alleging his demise and replacement by a Sudanese individual named Jubril (Fombad, 2022). During the 2023 general elections, the Labour Party presidential candidate, Peter Obi, was a target of disinformation campaigns. He was accused of paying churches to speak at their gatherings and also accused of being a member of a separatist group, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which was designated a terrorist group by the Nigerian government (Salako, 2023). These kinds of targeted disinformation can hinder fair competition among political candidates and political parties and, thus, impact the outcomes of elections (Tenove, 2020).

Fake news also impacts other forms of political participation apart from

electoral participation. During a protest, fake news has the potential to sow confusion and disorder, diverting attention away from crucial matters. Moreover, it can foster discord among protestors, resulting in internal conflicts and a lack of cohesion. In certain instances, false information can even inflame tensions and incite acts of violence. This was the case of the 2020 EndSARS protest against police brutality in Nigeria. Ajaebgu et al. (2022) noted 15 cases of fake news, disinformation, rumours, misinformation, and hoax about the protest. Disinformation was used to discredit the protest when it was alleged that it was sponsored by foreign governments and opposition parties (Mwai, 2020). The protest was ravaged by fake news, and the tensions, violence, and misinformation that ensued dominated the conversion at the expense of the purpose of the protest.

Another consequence of fake news, as pointed out by Olaimolu and Adebumiti (2022), is its impact on health and safety in instances of health crises. This was glaring during the 2020 COVID pandemic when there was a variety of information regarding the details of the virus. Misinformation and disinformation spread regarding the nature of the virus, government response to the containment of the virus, and vaccine takeup. This misinformation was peddled by political actors, religious leaders, and citizens, which led to the politicisation of the health crisis and the difficulty of the government to respond to the virus adequately. The effect of this also led to a spike in COVID cases as citizens who disregarded the news, given the numerous opinions of media outlets on it, and their inability to decipher the

geniuses of its magnitude suffered the virus and, in extreme cases, led to the loss of lives.

Misinformation does not only undermine its victims but also its sources—the media. The media, either traditional or new media, can also be undermined because the proliferation of fake news can lead to a decline in public trust in the media. A study conducted by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria indicated that the higher the exposure to fake news, the lower the trust in the media. This implies that people more exposed to fake news are less likely to trust the media. This can negatively affect democracy, given the important role the media plays in equipping the people with the necessary information they need to make informed choices, especially during elections. As such, misinformation serves as a barrier to providing the public with accurate information, and when misinformation spreads widely, it can shape collective preferences in ways that diverge significantly from what would be the case if people were adequately informed (Kuklinski et al., 2000).

Section 39(1) of the 1999 Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution states that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference". However, fake news skews public opinion by competing with facts and good information for citizens' attention. Such interference affects the "freedom to hold opinion and to receive and impart ideas and information without any interference, " violating people's fundamental human rights as provided

by the Constitution (see Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). The proliferation of misinformation alongside genuine information hinders individuals' ability to differentiate between truth and falsehood. This confusion prevents the establishment of a common ground for meaningful discussions on important issues and makes it challenging to hold political representatives accountable for their actions and responsibilities (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018, cited in Pate & Ibrahim, 2020).

In addition, misinformation and disinformation tend to cause instability, fear of violence, and even violence within a democratic polity. Nigeria faces multiple security issues, and the spread of fake news, rumours, propaganda, hoaxes, and misinformation is exacerbating the political environment and intensifying chaos and instability in the country (Okoro & Emmanuel, 2018). For instance, in the aftermath of a three-day violent incident in the country's central region that resulted in 200 casualties in 2018, false images were circulating on social media, which users mistakenly linked to the inter-communal violence in Nigeria (BBC News, 2018). Another example of peddled misinformation that has threatened the peace and stability of Nigeria includes the 2017 Nigerian Army free medical programme aimed at administering polio vaccinations as part of their military operations in the southeastern region of Nigeria, which was misinterpreted as the army was visiting schools to inject students with the monkeypox virus. These rumours triggered widespread panic, leading to the closure of some schools (Apuke et al., 2023). These kinds of misinformation have the potential to escalate hatred, violence, and instability in an already volatile political environment.

The dangers posed by widespread fake news will worsen with the commercialisation of fake news. BBC reported that Nigerian politicians engaged in covert payments to social media influencers, offering substantial sums, as much as $43,000 (N20 Million) or guarantees of government contracts and political positions in exchange for spreading false information about their rivals. Additionally, some of these influencers were recruited to "situation rooms" to oversee the dissemination of fake news (Salako, 2023). This will threaten a country's sovereignty as desperate political actors hire foreign consulting companies (political communication or digital strategies companies) to meddle with elections and help spread false information for political gains. Cambridge Analytica, a British firm, has garnered a reputation in Africa for its questionable election campaign tactics involving social media platforms, particularly in Kenya and Nigeria. There are allegations that Cambridge Analytica was hired to assist in the 2015 re-election campaign of former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan and spread false information about the opposition (Fombad, 2020).

Ultimately, fake news poses a threat to democratic self-determination when it erodes a democratic society's capacity to establish and enforce its collectively chosen rules or when it undermines the mechanisms that allow citizens to participate in shaping these rules, such as fair elections or free political discourse. It can harm the deliberative system by spreading false information and diminishing people's motivation

and opportunities to participate in public debates characterised by rational discourse, respect, and inclusiveness (Tenove, 2020). Africa and Nigeria, in particular, are most vulnerable to fake news because of low literacy rates. Through fake news, African voters who are uninformed are being converted to misinformed voters (Fombad, 2020).

In summary, fake news can have significant adverse effects on society, including (a) posing a serious risk to the nation's unity and peace, potentially leading to explosive consequences; (b) exacerbating the inherently adversarial nature of democracy; (c) worsening distrust, division, and violence in an already divided and diverse political landscape; (d) eroding the public's trust and confidence in the media; and (e) fostering anti-democratic tendencies that can undermine confidence in the system (Pate, 2018).

Government Responses and Anti-Misinformation Initiatives in Nigeria

The Nigerian government has always been at the forefront of regulating the media and flow of information. In 1992, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), established through Decree 38, serves as the governing body for broadcasting in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Its primary duties include overseeing and supervising the Nigerian broadcasting sector, among other responsibilities. Specifically, to regulate the information disseminated by the media, the NBC has the power to (NBC Decree, 1992):

● Evaluate, process, and review requests for ownership of radio and television stations or another broadcasting medium;

● Receive, consider, and investigate complaints regarding broadcasting content or actions of a broadcasting station;

● Uphold the principles of equity and fairness in broadcasting;

● Establish and disseminate a national broadcasting code and set standards concerning the contents and quality of materials for broadcast;

● Monitor broadcasting for harmful emissions, interference and illegal broadcasting; and

● Determining and applying sanctions to broadcasting stations that failed to operate by ethics and guidelines set by the Commission.

Similarly, Section 59 of the Nigerian Criminal Code makes it illegal to disseminate false information to create fear and panic among the general public. This law prohibits sharing or reproducing any statement, rumour, or report likely to cause fear and unrest among the public while knowing or having reason to believe that the information is untrue. Violating this law can result in a maximum prison sentence of three years. Simply not knowing or lacking reason to believe that the information is false is not a valid defence unless the defendant can prove that they made reasonable efforts to confirm the accuracy of the statement, rumour, or report (ARTICLE 19, 2021).

However, the NBC and the Criminal Code have proven ineffective with the widespread use of the Internet and social media. These policies were not designed to regulate social media, which allows individual citizens, without licence or special permission, to share information with thousands

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and even millions of people with a single click. The government understands this and recognises the need to develop specific policies to regulate the Internet and, most significantly, social media. The former minister of information and culture succinctly expressed government concerns (Oluwafemi, 2021):

When you talk about fake news and its dangers, we need to take it seriously, and I am happy that the entire world is now seeing what we saw more than two years ago. I can assure you that we will not rest until we regulate social media. Otherwise, nobody will survive it.

However, attempts to regulate social media have been difficult. The National Assembly introduced a social media bill to monitor and regulate social media usage. The social media bill, also known as the Protection from Internet Falsehoods and Manipulations and Other Related Matter Bill, aimed to curb all forms of falsehood which threaten the nation's security. The bill specifically targets radio/television, YouTube, internet service providers (ISP), online newspapers, and blogs, all important in information dissemination (Paul, 2019). However, the bill was not passed into law. In 2023, a new social media bill was proposed by the government. The bill has been presented to the National Assembly and aims to repeal and reenact the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Act. This is intended to give NBC power to regulate social media (AfricaNews, 2023).

A critical juncture in the attempt to regulate social media is the Nigerian government's ban on X (formerly Twitter) for seven months in 2021. This was after the platform deleted a post of former President Muhammad Buhari,

which the platform deemed offensive. Before then, the Nigerian government had complained about how X (formerly called Twitter) was being used to spread fake news. The government claimed the ban was necessary because the platform threatens the country's corporate existence (The Guardian, 2021; Ijaiya, 2021).

Following the ban, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) introduced a draft Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms/Internet Intermediaries, signed into law on September 26, 2022. The Code aims to regulate digital platforms to ensure a safer online environment, combat online vices such as disinformation and misinformation, and promote compliance with Nigerian laws. The Code applies to various platforms and internet intermediaries, mandating regulatory compliance, content moderation, incorporation of large platforms in Nigeria, and due diligence in preventing unlawful content. (Ajibola, 2024)

While the Code represents a step toward regulating the digital ecosystem and curbing online abuses, its provisions raise concerns about potential infringements on freedom of expression. The Code gives regulators wide powers to monitor and control content to preserve national sovereignty and security. Key terms such as 'disinformation' and 'harmful content' remain undefined, leaving room for discretionary enforcement. With President Bola Ahmed Tinubu introducing a new bill for regulating digital platforms in October 2023, there is hope that the identified shortcomings in NITDA's Code will be addressed if the bill is passed into law(Ajibola,

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2024)

Every measure adopted to combat fake news has challenges, including national security measures and social media regulation. One significant challenge in regulating fake news, especially on social media, is the transnational nature of the modern communication system. Many purveyors of fake news can operate from other jurisdictions, making it difficult to regulate in the same way as traditional media, primarily governed by national laws. Unlike traditional media, social media is often interactive and relies on digital online technology driven by its audience and users. Consequently, it is challenging to establish effective laws that govern the use of social media platforms by citizens, trolls, and political parties, such as how journalists on radio/TV or print media can be regulated (Fombad, 2022).

The most significant hurdle in regulating fake news is balancing protecting fundamental rights like national security, privacy, and personal freedom and imposing necessary restrictions to counter the harmful consequences of spreading malicious and false news (Fombad, 2022). Specifically, treating fake news as a national security problem may lead to the wrong interpretation of fake news as a security threat rather than a critical juncture for corrections and debate. National security measures involve the use of force. This can lead to repression of freedom of speech and may grant the ruling party and security agencies excessive influence in the country's democratic process. In other words, regulating fake news can give the government excessive control over citizens' communication, leading to suppression of criticism. In addition,

social media regulation, in particular, can encourage social media companies to become the judges and enforcers of freedom of speech without following the rule of law and the right to appeal as specified by most democratic constitutions (Tenove, 2020).

Conclusion

The evolution of Nigeria's media landscape from traditional outlets to digital platforms has introduced opportunities and challenges for disseminating and consuming information. While social media and other digital platforms have democratised information dissemination, they have also facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, which poses substantial challenges to democratic processes and institutional credibility, with potentially far-reaching consequences that extend beyond politics to encompass social, economic, and security aspects.

In Nigeria, regulatory efforts have been implemented to mitigate the spread of false information, such as the 2021 Twitter ban, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) Code of Practice, and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) guidelines. However, as seen in political disinformation campaigns during the 2023 elections and the 2020 #EndSARS protests, these measures often raise concerns about government overreach and potential suppression of free speech.

Despite these efforts, the problems caused by misinformation still need to be fully addressed. The cases discussed in this study demonstrate that unchecked misinformation has the potential to erode public trust,

destabilise institutions, and increase social unrest. Therefore, addressing misinformation requires a multifaceted and nuanced approach. While government regulation plays a key role, it must be balanced with protecting democratic rights. In addition, empowering citizens through media literacy, strengthening independent fact-checking organisations, and revising legal frameworks to reflect the complexities of the digital age are crucial steps toward safeguarding Nigeria's democracy.

Recommendations

1.   Enhance Media Literacy:

Nationwide media literacy programmes by the government will strongly equip citizens with critical thinking skills and the capability to fact-check information. Such programmes should reach rural areas through community outreach and can also be integrated into educational curricula. However, there must be a collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and private companies to address potential limitations like financial constraints and lack of infrastructure. Social media platforms and influencers should promote digital literacy, particularly among younger audiences.

2.   Strengthen Independent Fact-Checking:

It is necessary to establish independent fact-checking bodies that operate without political influence and with full transparency. These organisations should work closely with social media platforms to swiftly identify and remove false content. Funding remains a critical challenge, so a diversified funding model involving private sector partnerships, international

organisations, and government grants is recommended to ensure the independence and sustainability of these bodies.

3.   Revise and Enforce Legal Frameworks:

The legal framework governing misinformation must be updated to reflect the realities of digital media. Clear definitions of misinformation and corresponding penalties should be codified while maintaining strict judicial oversight to prevent government overreach. International cooperation is also needed to ensure that actors outside of Nigeria's jurisdiction who contribute to misinformation campaigns are held accountable.

4.   Promote Responsible Online Behaviour:

Public awareness campaigns must be sustained to encourage responsible online behaviour, including ethical social media use and responsible information sharing. These campaigns should utilise a wide range of traditional and digital platforms and involve key community figures and influencers to maximise their reach. Regular assessment and updates to these campaigns are crucial to adapting to the changing media environment.

5.   Collaborate with Social Media Platforms:

Social media companies must take great responsibility for the content disseminated on their platforms. Governments should work with these companies to ensure they have mechanisms to detect and address misinformation while respecting users' rights to freedom of expression. Collaborative efforts between social

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media platforms and fact-checking bodies can improve the speed and accuracy with which false content is removed.

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