An Examination of the Impact of Fake News on Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract
The issue of fake news and its impact on the society has become very prominent in recent years. Despite the fact that fake news is not a new phenomenon, technological advances have constructed a fertile environment for fake news to spread rapidly. The Paper avers that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, offer grounds for generation and distribution of fake news. Accordingly, the Public, development practitioners and other stakeholders around the world have raised concerns about the persistent occurrence of misinformation in contemporary politics mainly because of its character and manifestations. The fact that misinformation can swiftly spread unverified, has gained global notoriety and its threat to democracy re-emphasizes the need for corrective measures.

Introduction

Literally, the term fake news consists of two words 'fake' which implies something not genuine, but meant to be accepted as true, and 'news' which means information about current events. Therefore, it can be said that fake news is information or news that is not genuine but presented and expected to be conceived as being true. Scholars have conceptualized fake news in different ways but with almost the same meanings. Duffy et al. (2019) define fake news as a situation when misinformation takes the form of a news story to approximate the legitimacy which society associates with real news.

Many scholars focus on the intention behind fake news when defining the term. McGonagle (2017) defines fake news as information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts. In this regard, disinformation is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) view fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers. Visentin et al. (2019) regard "fake news as fabricated stories that are intentionally false, realistically portrayed, and potentially verifiable". These definitions suggest that fake news is false information that is created with dishonest intention to mislead readers.

Role of News

News is something that saturates the information environment, and can come in many different shapes and forms from many different kinds of media. In terms of an idealized and perfect understanding of the role of journalism (as trained producers of news) in a democratic society (where persuasion rather than force takes place in society between the political elite and the masses), five functions are presumed to exist and these functions often exhibit themselves in the form of news which are as follows;

- To inform citizens of what is happening in their surroundings.
- To educate the public as to the importance and meaning of those facts.
- To provide a platform for open political discussions in the public sphere to enable the formation of public opinion.
- To provide publicity to the governmental and political institutions as a watchdog role of journalism.
- As a channel for the support of political viewpoints (McNair, 2007: 19-20)

Understanding Fake News

A lot of attention has been focused upon the issue of fake news, the level and nature of activity, and the supposed risks and threats that come with it. Blame for the current fake news trends has been levelled at different scapegoats. "Some have rushed to blame technology and the bottom-line priorities of internet and social media giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter for the crisis. Others point to the media's own failures.

The term 'fake news' is "false, often sensational information distributed under the guise of news reporting" (Collins Dictionary, 2017, online). According to the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), fake news is information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or doubtful messages (EJN, 2017). President Thomas Jefferson complained in 1807 that someone who does not read a newspaper is better informed on events than someone that does read newspapers. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) defines fake news as "completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or misinform; information, photos or videos manipulated to deceive, or old photographs shared as new; satire or parody which means no harm but can fool people" (BBC News, 2019 June 29, online).

Furthermore, one of Nigeria's independent verification and fact-checking platforms, *Dubawa*, which is supported by the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) defines fake news or false information as fraudulent, inaccurate or false, verbal or visual messages disseminated for public attention through the conventional or social media, hugely to mislead, misinform or misdirect. A fluid subject is differently perceived, interpreted and understood by individuals depending on many factors.

Fake news is often blown up, exaggerated and made alarmingly attractive. Sometimes, it can be difficult to detect fraudulent news especially when such stories contain authoritative lies except through critical examination of the words mostly designed to capture and retain the attention of receivers in uncommon ways. Fake news is subtly and presented in sophisticated manner to hide its falsity with unverifiable sources or claims. Fake news violates contextual and multicultural realities through mischief and ignorance presented as valid information (*Dubawa*, 2019, Ting & Song, 2017).

As noted by Siapera (2018), anyone with internet access can effectively produce and distribute contents of any kind of quality and that "people can avail of the various functionalities of computer software such as Photoshop and create highly believable contents. Fake news is a complex phenomenon that can be defined based on three parameters as suggested by Wardle (2017): the type of content created and shared; the intentions of those behind this, and; the forms of dissemination. . In addition, four specific sources of fake news have been variously identified:

- State/government fake news
- Organizational/institutional fake news
- Group-based fake news and
- Individual fake news (BBC News, 2018 November 12; Simon, 2017; Mendel, 2015).

How Fake News Works in Nigeria

In Nigeria, fake news can be so outlandish, yet widely believed. New sites and blogs publish stories without first authenticating the sources. Fake news stories are usually sensational in nature and so are very likely to spread quickly. Moreover, because the platforms containing the news already have a massive reader base that looks to them for information, the people that read them will most likely believe the stories. These people will, in turn, share the story on social media (because who do not like to pride themselves on being one of the first to know). Sometimes, even, after the story has been debunked, fake news still prevail (Adeleke, 2016).

Propaganda videos, made-up quotes, and fabricated articles are shared by people through WhatsApp and Facebook, to make it look like they are from the likes of the BBC or Al-Jazeera. One of the main subjects of attack of the fake news phenomenon is Facebook, the world's largest social network. More than the population of China and the United States combined. The platform has been used to peddle all kinds of news stories, all in a bid for platforms to rake in advertising revenue. Meanwhile, on Twitter, bots and trolls working for both Buhari and Atiku's camps during the 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria, amplify false stories and contribute to the polarization of the discourse through bullying and intimidation.

Disinformation also operates offline. Mainstream television and radio stations, for example, frequently host "political consultants" – or *Sojojin Baci* ("soldiers of the mouth") as they are known in the North – who further spread half-truths and manipulations in favor of their candidates. Often online and offline routes work together. A rumour that begins on social media may be taken up by the *Sojojin Baci* through more traditional media, who refines the story in a way that allows it to resonate with a new audience.

As regards fake news, the Federal Government in Abuja launched a national campaign against fake news. According to the Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed at the formal launching of the campaign, 'fake news was becoming a serious threat to global peace, including Nigeria that if left unchecked, could endanger human existence'. The minister, who also described fake news as a dangerous threat to democracy, noted that fake news when mixed with hate speech would amount to a disaster waiting to happen (Elebeke, 2018).

On the impact of fake news, the Minister of Information and Culture further said ''the global epidemic of fake news is already having far reaching repercussions across the world. The situation in Nigeria is not restricted to social media only. Ugwuanyi (2017) reported that a major instance of fake news that dominated Nigeria's social media space was the rumored death of President Muhammadu Buhari shortly after he began a health leave to the United Kingdom on January 19, 2017. Many Nigerians shared and re-shared on social media that the President was dead and cloned or replaced by a Sudanese called "Jubril," causing an uproar and confusion among many people. This fake news made many to lose faith in the Nigerian government.

Likewise, Edwin and Yalmi (2019) found that there was widespread information circulated on social media suggesting that the President is taking another wife. To substantiate this rumor, invitation cards were also circulated. After a few days, the President debunked the

issue stating that he had no plans of taking another wife. Incidence like this demonstrates how viral fake news could be disseminated among the Nigerian populace without much verification. Such fake news spread is continuously destabilizing the system and political stability by inciting people to violence and weakening the people's confidence in government.

Creators of fake news could have committed this act to discredit the government for political reasons. No doubt, Nigerian political rivalry is intensifying in recent years and this could contribute to widespread rumour mongering that could undermine any sitting government. The fact that such an outrageous rumour can reach these levels of dissemination and be believed widely, speaks of the potentials and dangers of fake news.

Causes of Fake News

Some of the causes of fake news in Nigeria and the world at large are as follows;

- ➢ Relevance: For media outlets, the ability to attract viewers to their websites by publishing stories with false content, which benefit advertisers and improve ratings.
- ➢ Hostile government policies and the machinations of civil actors have also been implicated in generating and propagating fake news, particularly during elections (Wikipedia, n.d).
- ➢ Poor regulation of the internet: The internet was first made accessible for public use in the 1990s, its main purpose was seeking and accessing of information. As fake news was introduced to the internet, this made it difficult for some people to find truthful information. The impact of fake news has become a worldwide phenomenon. Fake news is often spread through the use of fake news websites, which, in order to gain credibility, specialize in creating attention-grabbing news, which often impersonate well-known news sources (Wikipedia, n.d).

Fake news is not new. It is as old as one can remember. However, its intensification is more in recent times because of the wide usage of the internet and cheap access to social media platforms, competitive politics and deepening poverty and ethno-religious fight for supremacy. Many more reasons can be given for the fast spread of fake news in the country. Some of the reasons have been outlined by Pate (2018) as follows:

- General distrust of elites, leaders and politicians by majority of Nigerians; Nigerian elites and politicians enjoy low credibility rating among the population because of their record of failures, lies and unworthy conduct in several respects. Because of that, many Nigerians tend to believe whatever negative information dished out by opponents.

- Absence or most often, late arrival of official information on issues. This creates vacuum conveniently filled in by rumors and disinformation.

- Availability of cheap data services; in facilitating explosive use of social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube) to spread of rumors, propaganda and fake information.

- Sensationalized fake news; disseminated for economic reasons, especially on social media, where efforts are often made to attract people to pages and timelines of bloggers and senders for clicks.

- Desperate politicians, ethnic and religious jingoists; foreign interests and mischief-makers generate fake news for influence or to persuade the audience.

- Low capacity of the media to be able to gather; process and verify immediate and distant information in real time exacerbates fake news through the internet or social media platforms where majority lack gate-keeping processes.

- Government tight control as well as excessive commercialization in the broadcast media; which exclude alternative ideas and the opposition thereby forcing them to response even if mischievously, by spreading fake news on the social media, which lack gatekeepers.

- Authoritative lies, very common from government sources at all levels; such lies are reported as news with little effort to investigate their veracity by the media.

Effects of Fake News in Nigeria

Fake news aggravates herders/farmers crises in Nigeria: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has reported that fake news circulating in the social media is fueling the farmers/ herdsmen crises in Nigeria. In the report by the media organization, it stated that "fake pictures circulating on social media which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria" (Adekunle, 2018). The international media outfit, specifically made reference to repellent images circulating in the social media, which the originators purportedly claimed, was from recent violence in Jos, Plateau State. A gruesome image of a woman, face down in a pool of blood with a gaping shoulder wound is purported to be from recent attacks. It has hundreds of retweets on Twitter, but it first appeared on the internet in 2011 in a story about domestic violence in Nigeria. Another image appears to show half a dozen people that were killed in the attacks. On closer inspection, it became clear that the picture was not taken in Nigeria, and is actually the scene of a 2015 traffic accident in the Dominican Republic (Adekunle, 2018).

Also, major Nigerian news outlets ran a story claiming that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, said the attacks in Plateau were revenge for the loss of 300 cows. "Since, these cows were not found, no-one should expect peace in the areas", Ciroma had refuted the report and the media organization had reportedly tendered apology (Adekunle, 2018). Fake news most times instigates confusion, tension, suicide depending on the person or institution on the other end and it undermines serious media coverage and makes it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories (Wikepedia, n.d).

Management of Fake News

Brian Hughes, a professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York, writes that "it would be a mistake to pressure Facebook and Google into acting as censors"

for news because, "we have already seen how much such an approach can backfire''. He cites the example of Facebook's manipulation of its trending newsfeed to suppress conservative news. This, he says, only increases public distrust for the media, turning them to less credible news sources instead. Professor Hughes says we should consider the possibility of adopting the Fairness Doctrine for digital media. He says it should be possible for companies like Facebook to ''individually program our news feeds for balance and accuracy' 'since they are already able to identify consumer niches (Adeleke, 2016).

Nicholas Lemann of the New Yorker argues for more government involvement as a way of solving this problem. He says that ''it is facile and unhelpful to assume that government's role in journalism can be either nothing or absolute control for propaganda purposes''. He proposes that government invest more in the pubic media to give more room for press freedom and journalistic integrity, though wondering how effective this will be if we try to adopt it to Nigeria, considering the country's political climate, one where the government is viewed as corrupt and untrustworthy.

As long as there are people willing to buy tabloids and read blogs that they already know contain lies and half-truths, we cannot eliminate fake news, and as long as we have uneducated people who are unable to differentiate between real and fake news, fake news will continue to sell. The solution to the fake news problem lies in the online media revenue model. Articles online are optimized for clicks. That means that the best performing content-headline, article body, the images etc. - are designed, knowingly or unknowingly, to get people to click on them. (Adeleke, 2016).

According to Reuters, Twitter suspended over 70 million accounts in May and June 2018 alone, and the pace of suspension has continued. Apart from the big technological organizations, the European Commission, in January 2018, set up a high-level group of experts to advice on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online (Elebeke, 2018).

Conclusion

Fake news is not unusual to Nigeria alone, it is a global problem, which has done more harm than good in our society. It is opined that the government should work at all levels aggressively and diligently with the media towards safeguarding the rate at which fake news grow and ensure that it is minimized to an irrelevant level to avoid further tensions, killings etc. The government should do more on media literacy and promote some reliable media outlets that people can always fall back on for information.

Recommendations

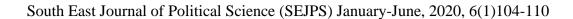Having unearthed the various issues on Fake News, it is recommended as follows:
- There is need to Engage different verification tools online like Tin Eye, Google and Bing, which can tell what you need to know about information you come across.
- There is need for every individual to always authenticate the source of information before sharing/ posting it.
- There is need to always penalize those blogs or media outlets that post fake news no matter the circumstance. By so doing, it will serve as a warning to others using it as a way to gain relevance or and albeit other underlining reasons.

● Government need to invest and work with the media, to avoid creating room for fake news. The government should give room for full press freedom and tabloid integrity in Nigeria and the world at large.

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