

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE FAKE NEWS PHENOMENON IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF CONTENDING PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The predominance of fake news on the digital media platforms has given rise to engaging academic and public discourse on the phenomenon. Academic literature extensively documents the trend, and interrogates its manifestations, especially on the digital space, the complications in conceptualisation, the basic motivations for creating and sharing fake news and the various mitigation strategies. This study domesticates this literature within the Nigerian context. In doing so, prominent case studies of fake news in the country are explored to interrogate the extent to which they fit into global discourse on the phenomenon. Accordingly, two case studies are examined due to their socio-political magnitudes— President Muhammadu Buhari’s double-body narrative, and the manifestation of fake news in times of pandemics such as the Ebola virus and COVID-19. These case studies provide the basis to interrogate the manifestation of the fake news phenomenon within the Nigerian context and highlight the concerns that the trend poses. It is concluded that mitigating the scourge of fake news within the Nigerian context requires a careful implementation of the various strategies documented in the literature, conscious of their various strengths and limitations in context. On the whole, the study demonstrates that although fake news is a global phenomenon, geo-specific and contextual factors are critical towards understanding its manifestation, and have a lot to do with its effective mitigation.

Introduction

A disturbing feature of contemporary Nigerian digital media space is the predominance of fake news (Wilson, 2021; Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021). This overheats the digital space that is, at the moment, considered a vibrant alternative communication space for citizens in the wake of state repression of free speech via stringent regulation of the mainstream media. The fake news phenomenon has amplified the digital media conundrum, and highlighted their defects which portend grave implications to the task of democratic consolidation on one hand, and harmonious coexistence on the other, especially when one considers the highly multi-ethnic composition of the Nigeria state. Of particular concern in this regard is the tendency of weaponisation of this practice by political actors and ethnic zealots which does not only complicates attempts at operationalizing the concept, but also hampers meaningful attempts towards fostering the much desired unity in diversity in Nigeria (Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021).

For instance, to the political class, barring all academic definitions and conceptualizations, fake news is simply: information that antagonises or challenges their ideology – no matter how factual it might be. In the words of Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019, p.

2), “political actors have seized the opportunity to use the term as a weapon to undermine any information that contradicts their own political agenda.” This has compounded the task of defining the concept in precise terms, and as developments over the years have shown, all stakeholders in the Nigerian project are victims and progenitors of fake news at the same time, a reality that deepens its complexity and makes attempts at effectively taming it extremely difficult.

As fake news creation and distribution increase, so is the search for solutions and mitigation strategies, with pundits coming up with an array of possible strategies such as outright regulation of the digital media space (Authors, 2022), the use of technology to tame the scourge (Wilson, 2021; Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021), experts fact-checking, human-machine approach, machine learning, crowd sourcing, deep learning and natural language processing techniques (Collins *et al*, 2020), media and information literacy (Abu-Fadil, 2018) among several other strategies. These have their various strengths, short comings and limitations, making the move to tame the rising tide of fake news a difficult task.

Notably, there exists an appreciable volume of literature that documents the manifestation of fake news, the causes, forms, effects and mitigation attempts. In this study, attempt is made to critique positions in the extant literature against the backdrop of the Nigerian experience. The essence of this is to contextualise discourse on the fake news phenomenon within the Nigerian setting and demonstrate how perspectives from elsewhere apply to- or differ from- the Nigerian situation.

Method of Study

This study adopts the conceptual research approach. Published scholarly articles on fake news have been sourced. Emphasis is given to peer-reviewed works and media reports on fake news stories – especially within the Nigerian context. To contextualise discussions in the study, two context-specific case studies within the Nigerian socio-political setting have been explored. These are: President Muhammadu Buhari’s double-body narrative and Ebola virus/COVID-19 infodemic. These case studies generated heated discussions within the Nigerian digital space, attracting voluminous data that fit perfectly into fake news discourse. Insights from the literature are interrogated against these case studies to demonstrate the manifestation of fake news on the digital space in Nigeria.

Conceptualising Digital Media

Digital media represent a broad genre of media endeavours that are hosted on the internet, facilitated by breakthroughs in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Leveraging ICTs, digital media have emerged as the dominant communication channels of the

21st Century, and diffuse into daily routines of individuals – so much such that an individual user of the internet is simply saturated with all forms of media products from the digital media world. The spectrum of communication activities hosted by the digital media is broad, and cuts across the traditional media – print, broadcast and other genres such as film, multimedia, public relations and advertising – that have prominently migrated to the internet to assert their continued relevance in the 21st Century; to the purely online-based conventional media platforms that are hosted on the internet without any offline base; and the social media channels that have come to provide a point of convergence to all forms of media hosted on the internet.

The scope of the social media alone is broad, and encompasses several communication endeavours that use web 2.0 technology such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, Koo and LinkedIn among a several other platforms – both global and geo-specific- that anchor robust interactions and engagements of users at several fronts- political, economic, religious, pedagogical, social and commercial etc. (Authors, 2022b).

Also considered as formidable arms of the digital media are independent blogs hosted on the internet (and provide regular information to the audience) as well as official websites of institutions, agencies and organizations. These categories of digital media exist independently and can be accessed by individuals surfing through them on their mobile devices, as most of them still make their inroad on the social media platforms to enhance their visibility and leverage the pool of audience the social media accumulate on their folds.

Collectively, these represent formidable platforms in the business of information creation and dissemination. We do not restrict discussion in this study to any of these but choose to treat them as a block because they are all active in the business of information dissemination, and in one way or the another, have formidable stakes in the fake news discourse even though in varying degrees. This is not by any means intended to create intellectual ambiguity, but to underscore the enormity of the media and communication endeavours that feature prominently on the discourse of fake news. Notwithstanding this omnibus scope of the term in the study, reference shall be made to specific digital media platforms, where necessary, to establish vital points in the course of the discussion.

Perspectives on Fake News

Fake news in the most simplified sense is understood to be: completely false information – in whatever form, i.e. text, audio, video or a combination of all – deliberately created and distributed with the intention to misinform, confuse, manipulate and deceive the audience (Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021). Put another way, “fake news can be defined as

false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Greifeneder, Jaffé, Newman & Schwarz, 2021, p.1). Sometimes the intention is basically comical and not for outright deception. However, the content of such comical post is usually false and capable of misleading anyone that takes it serious. Such posts are also considered to be fake news. Having offered simplistic definitions that could serve as working definitions for the sake of this study, suffice it to state that the task of having a precise definition of fake news is not an easy one. The complexity deepens as creators, distributors and recipients of fake news swap roles quite often and the tendency also exists of state actors using the term to discipline the media sector. Hermen & Chomsky’s (1988) concept of *flack*, a disciplinary tool against the critical media, quickly comes to mind here.

If President Donald Trump’s harsh demonization of American media giants such as CNN as purveyors of fake news – especially when their analyses and editorial leanings do not favour him – is anything to go by, then it is clear from the onset that the concept of fake news, as has been popularised today, is a problematic one to define in precise terms. Similarly, if one considers the constant reference to the phenomenon by Nigerian government officials – especially in President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration – who themselves are accused of being periodic purveyors of fake news, misinformation and propaganda, it is obvious, then, that the enormity of the fake news phenomenon is deep and complicated.

Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019, p.1) attempt to clarify this complication by categorising fake news into two main clusters – “the *fake news genre* (i.e. deliberate creation of pseudo-journalistic disinformation) and the *fake news label* (i.e. instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media).”

Academic literature acknowledges that fake news is not a recent phenomenon (Wilson, 2021). However, two prominent factors popularise its discourse in contemporary times. First, the predominance of digital technologies that make it easier to create and massively distribute fake contents online without scrutiny. Wilson (2021, p.39) notes that “the emergence of internet technology has significantly altered the media and information landscape worldwide, and given fake news an entirely different perspective.” Similarly, Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini (2021, p. 60) corroborate that “although other media channels harbour fake news, social media platforms appear to have more occurrences. Social media have been the catalysts that drive the constant circulation of fake news in Nigeria.”

The second significant development that sparked global discourse on fake news is its weaponization during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign. Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019, p.1) note that “fake news crisis has been one of the most discussed topics in both public and scientific discourse since the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.” Molina *et al* (2021, p. 180) also confirm that “interest in ‘fake news’ spiked after the 2016 Presidential election.”

Academic literature corroborates this fact, but the question is: why is it so? It is precisely so because contestants across party lines – Democrats and Republican – devoted substantial attention to refuting information in the media which they considered as fake news, and at the same time, churned out a substantial chunk of information that was considered fake by the opposition.

In the post 2016 dynamics, Trump, even after an uncommon victory, would constantly refer to the American mainstream media as ‘fake news media’ and occasionally shut them out of important governmental functions, courting Twitter and other social media platforms for public information. Analysing fake news trends during Trump’s administration is a different academic exercise all together. All-the-same, the campaign period set the tone for what would eventually become an enduring academic and public discourse on an information and communication phenomenon that has come to plague humanity in the 21st Century – the fake news phenomenon.

Lazer *et al.* (2018, p. 1094) define fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.” According to them, “fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).” Indeed, quite often, these terms are used interchangeably, with similar other terms such as post-truth. There exists an argument in the literature that the contraption – fake news – is an error in itself. Such scholars contend that the term ‘news’ is an embodiment of truth; hence, once the truth is absent, then it is no longer news. The academic community is, however, sceptical with this position because, as Lazer *et al.* (2018) have noted, fake news take on the form and format of news in its entirety with the absence of truth/journalistic veracity and, perhaps, intent as the distinguishing factors.

Baptista & Gradim (2020) are emphatic that the intention to deceive is a distinguishing factor that marks out fake news. A look at the typology of fake news, however, settles this controversy better. Although it is an uphill task to arrive at a common definition of fake news, it could be summed from the plethora of definitions that abound, that fake news is a piece of news that is:

1. False, fabricated or distorted reality;
2. Deliberately published via a medium of communication;
3. Targeted at an unsuspecting audience and clothed to look like credible news;
4. Intended to mislead, deceive, misinform, entertain or influence the attitudes of receivers.

This summation does not intend to exclude other forms of fake news such as parody or comics, but hits at the core of what comes to mind at the mention of the term. A deeper

understanding of fake news is better achieved by looking at the typology documented in academic literature. The classification as discussed below, pigeonholes practices that are considered in the fake news discourse into one category or the other, making it more convenient and precise to allude to each within the most appropriate context.

Typology of Fake News

Several types of fake news abound. Collins *et al* (2020) talk of clickbait, propaganda, satire/parody, hoaxes, name-theft, framing, and journalistic deception as the various kinds of fake news. Narwal (2018) presents seven similar but somewhat unique typology of fake news. These are satire/parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content. Yet, Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2017) classify fake news in ways similar to and unique from the above. Their classification considers news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo manipulation, propaganda, advertising and public relations. The degree of overlap among these classifications has simplified the task of harmonisation, yet, enabled a broader understanding of the enormity of academic enquiry into the fake news phenomenon. Accordingly, the factors advanced as propelling the creation and distribution of these categories of fake news include profit motives, poor journalism, partisanship and political motivations, political influence, propaganda, mischief making and entertainment among others. Below are the various types of fake news advanced in academic literature:

- a. Clickbait:** enticing captions or headlines that are intended to generate clicks basically for profit motives on online sites (Collins *et al*, 2020). Such stories contain inflammatory language and, colourful graphics; utilise ambiguous language and manipulate formatting to entice readers to click on the stories. Typically, contents of the link do not match with the caption or headline. This form of fake news thrives primarily for profit motives. A form of fake news practice closely related to this is *false connection*. According to Narwal (2018), it is a journalistic practice where the content of a story does not match with the headline or pictures used in promoting it. The use of unrelated captions deceive readers to click on the story, only to discover that the journalistic tools used to promote the story do not accurately represent the content.
- b. Propaganda:** In the context of fake news, refers to news stories that are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions (Collins *et al*, 2020). Contents of such stories are typically not entirely true, and can be detected by simple fact checking. A good example of this practice is the chunk of stories churned out by paid social media

trolls of Nigerian politicians, for instance, who do everything possible to concoct favourable stories that project their paymasters in a positive light before the general publics, and at the same time, demonise opposition. Almost all prominent politicians in Nigeria have such political lapdogs, and their modus operandi is strikingly the same.

- c. *Satire/parody*:** a humorous exaggeration of contents of a news story with the aim of creating fun and amusement in the readers. This is a less serious and perhaps less harmful form of fake news that has as its primary intent, fun and amusement. Typically, such stories extract factual information from published news stories and modify them to suit their intents.
- d. *Hoaxes*:** these are intentionally fabricated reports that aim to deceive the audience (Collins *et al*, 2020). Such stories are coined in such a way that even conventional media fall for them as well and report them, thinking they are credible news. According to Collins *et al* (2020), this type of fake news refers to large-scale fabrications and is capable of causing serious material damage to its victim, typically a public figure. Hoaxing is a common feature of the Nigerian digital sphere and has been targeted on quite a number of prominent politicians across political parties.
- e. *Name-theft*:** this is a practice where the name or identity of a reputable individual or organisation is cloned for mischievous purposes. In Nigeria today, many public figures, organizations and media houses battle daily with name theft, as their official web pages or social media accounts are regularly cloned by mischief makers to deceive unsuspecting victims. Agencies such as the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Nigerian National Petroleum Commission, among others, have frequently had their official websites or social media handles cloned to defraud job seekers. Name theft is one of the commonest forms of fake news practices in Nigeria today. Narwal (2018) describes this as *imposter contents*, where fraudsters act as imposters to deceive unsuspecting audience members.
- f. *False context*:** this is a form of fake news that arises from publishing news stories outside their original contexts. News taken out of context loses its core value of truthfulness and validity, and can be misleading too. Narwal (2018) attributes this to poor journalism and sensationalism that diminish the standards of journalism practice in the digital age.

Indeed, there are several other forms of fake news; however, a closer look at them indicates that they fit into one or more of the categories discussed above. Whether for political, economic or entertainment reasons, a defining feature of fake news stories is the absence of

truth – either deliberate or inadvertent, and manipulative tendencies aimed at influencing unsuspecting audience.

The Fake News and Digital Media Nexus

The relationship between fake news and the digital media is an enduring one. This could be likened in practical terms to the predominance of fraud and theft in populated cities or commercial hubs. The digital community provides a point of convergence for all forms of communication activities to thrive. Fake news finds such environments friendly. That aside, the very attributes of media endeavours hosted on the digital space favour the creation and massive distribution of fake news. These attributes include large followership base, laissez-faire editorial standards, lesser gatekeeper chain and unlimited access. Social media, for instance, exhibit a substantial chunk of these attributes, and have, over the years, become favoured breeding grounds for fake news. Lazer *et al.* (2018, p. 1095) acknowledge that “internet platforms have become the most important enablers and primary conduits of fake news” Wilson (2021, p. 39) corroborates that “the emergence of internet technology significantly altered the media and information landscape worldwide, and has given fake news an entirely different perspective.” He noted further that: “These smart devices and the online platforms have made it possible for instant information gathering, instant access to information, real time interaction and swift dissemination of information which have contributed to, among other things, the speedy spread of fake news (Wilson 2021, p. 40).

Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini (2021, p. 60) decry the predominance of fake news on the social media, for instance, when they note that “although other media channels harbour fake news, social media platforms appear to have more occurrences. Social media have been the catalysts that drive the constant circulation of fake news in Nigeria.” Against this backdrop, they observe that as Nigeria craves for more internet penetration, there are higher tendencies that the manifestation of the fake news phenomenon will also be on the rise, a reality that calls for the need to intensify measures in search for mitigation strategies. The predominance of fake news on the digital media has amplified the much discussed digital media conundrum that emerged ever since they made their debut over the turn of the century, with pundits pondering over how best to maximise the potentials and optimise the threats which they harbour. Appreciating the manifestation of this digital media conundrum, Narwal (2018, p. 977) notes that: “Social media is acting as a double-edged sword for the universe in a way of consuming news. On one side, its ease of access, popularity and low cost distribution channel lead people to gain news from social media. On other side, it is also acting as a source of spread of ‘fake news’”.

Collins *et al* (2020, p. 1) acknowledge a growing misinformation and fake content by malicious users on the social media, an unfortunate trend that has plunged the online media ecosystem into chaos. They note that the social media world has “witnessed a reverberation amid the proliferation of fake news which has made people reluctant to engage in genuine news sharing for fear that such information is false.” This calls for a dire need to detect and remove the fake content towards boosting users’ confidence and increasing the impact of the social media. The dilemma, however, has been that the very attributes that give the digital media an age in the information world are, at the same time, the factors that facilitate the spread of fake news on the platforms. In Summary, the digital media-fake news nexus is a disturbing scenario that confronts contemporary communication scholarship. How well can the Nigerian sector navigate this quagmire that is at the moment overheating the polity?

Case Studies from Contemporary Nigeria

This section gives a perspective on contemporary case of fake news within the Nigerian digital space. Two popular case studies are discussed in this section as follows:

Case Study 1: President Muhammadu Buhari’s Body Clone/Lookalike Narrative

A classical case study of fake news in contemporary Nigeria is President Buhari’s body-clone narrative. Wide scale speculations hit the digital space in the wake of the President’s frequent medical trips to the UK that he was dead and his look-alike, one Jubrin Aminu from Sudan, had undergone a plastic surgery at the instance of the Aso-Rock cabal to impersonate Buhari. The speculation became rife following the President’s prolonged stay on one of such trips that lasted for over a hundred days. According to Akinwotu (2018), AFP’s fact-check indicate that the speculation had no factual base; notwithstanding, it continued to spread like wildfire on the digital platforms, particularly social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, among others. Major progenitors of this narrative were Nnamdi Kanu – leader of the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB, a separatist group from the south eastern part of the country, predominantly of the Igbo nationality clamouring for Independence from Nigeria), a former aide to President Goodluck Jonathan, Mr Reno Omokri, a former Minister of Aviation, Mr Femi Fani Kayode and the former Governor of Ekiti State, Mr Ayodele Fayose, among other prominent voices, critical of President Buhari’s administration.

It is instructive to note that a combination of factors were responsible for the attention which the audience paid to this saga that appeared to be an obviously fabricated story from the beginning. First, on the array of such factors is previous experience. Nigerians have not forgotten the controversial circumstances under which the late President Umaru Musa

Yar'Adua died. Realities later indicated that the late President was on a vegetation machine in Saudi Arabia for about three months, a situation that caused a serious constitutional crisis and resulted in the swearing in of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as Acting President. Yar'Adua's return to Nigeria in coma and eventual death soon afterwards built impressions in Nigerians on how far leaders could hold on to power even at the expense of their health. Closely related to this development was the fear of abrupt power shift to the southern part of the country in the unlikely event of President Buhari's demise. Conspiracy theorists held that the North that had suffered that after Yar'Addua's demise was not ready to allow for abrupt power shift to the South, a development that could have disrupted the APC (the ruling party) power plan. The realities surrounding the issue were creatively explored by progenitors to aggressively sell the rhetoric of Buhari's double-body to Nigerians, and it went a long way in getting more people give in to the narrative.

The second factor that nurtured the growth of this narrative was the silence from the Presidency, and the poor communication strategies that were deployed to inform Nigerians of President Buhari's medical condition. Over the years, the ailing President's health condition had been shrouded in secrecy. Nigerians scarcely had information regarding the health condition of the President. *Daily Trust* (May 9, 2018) quoted the main opposition party- the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) – decrying the secrecy that characterised the handling of the President's ailing condition. According to the opposition party: "it is, however, very unfortunate that the President and his handlers have chosen to shroud the issue of his illness in secrecy...Even as we speak, Nigerians are not aware of the ailment our President is suffering from ..." (*Daily Trust*, May 9, 2018 para. 3&5).

The deafening silence, thus, provided a good ground for the peddled falsehood to thrive, so much so that even people who never believed in the narrative initially had cause to give it a thought as the silence from the Presidency persisted and the progenitors of the narrative continued to exploit it to their advantage. Sadly, all voices that called for transparency on the President's health condition fell on deaf ears. In the ensuing silence, Nigerians were not to be blamed for believing the double-body narrative.

A third factor that facilitated the spread of this narrative is the ubiquity of digital media in Nigeria today made possible by internet penetration. Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini (2021, p. 62) note that "Nigeria ranks on the top of the list of African countries based on the share of traffic via mobile." They note further that "internet penetration amounted to 46.6 per cent of the population in 2020 and is set to reach 62 per cent in 2025." With this level of internet penetration, the Nigerian digital world is, indeed, a burgeoning one, along with this growth, the positive and negative traits that digitization portends. Buhari's double-body

narrative tapped from the growing digitization and went viral within the virtual and real worlds within the shortest possible time.

Idiong, Etta & Inyieng (2021) observe that as soon as the narrative started gaining popularity on the digital space, bloggers and online media platforms joined in to boost their traffic to their economic advantage, throwing caution and the ethos of good journalism in the wind. According to Akinwotu (2018), digital media, especially the social media played a key role in this saga, as posts by the progenitors attracted multiple re-tweets and shares on Twitter and Facebook. Similarly, a heavy dose of these conspiracies was served in end-to-end encrypted chat platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Telegram, among others.

In the final analysis, therefore, it was evident that a combination of political and economic motives was a major driving force in the perpetuation of President Buhari's double-body narrative that gained serious popularity on the digital space. It must be emphasised that the saga intensified in the build-up to the 2019 general elections with the President's health one of the topmost arguments that critics advanced to discredit the candidacy of the President before the electorate. This scenario lays a good background for illustrating how effective the fake news-digital media synergy plays out within the Nigerian socio-political setting.

Case Study 2: The Ebola Virus and COVID-19 Experiences

Another disturbing manifestation of the fake news-digital media synergy in Nigeria is its effect on managing health emergencies. Recent experiences have shown that the digital media serve as purveyors of not just fake but also toxic information that complicate the health crises occasioned by outbreak of epidemics or pandemics in Nigeria. The first most notable case study in this regard is the August 2014 Ebola virus experience. Ebola virus came to Nigeria in July, 2014 through one Patrick Sawyer (Ajakaye, 2014), a Liberian carrier who, upon arrival, infected a handful of victims, basically his contacts on flight and the nurses that attended to him upon admission before it was discovered. The panic it created was unprecedented.

In the wake of the pandemonium that greeted the epidemic, an overnight fake story went viral on the digital media platforms: salt and water was prescribed as offering immunity to the disease, and the general public was implored to drink a dose of it and bath with it as well to provide them with the required immunity! Within the shortest possible time, this piece of news went viral on the digital media – calls, short messaging texts and social media posts on platforms such as WhatsApp, Blackberry Messenger, and Facebook/Facebook Messenger etc. (Ajakaye, 2014; Emmanuel & Ibeh, 2014; Nwabueze & Oknokwo, 2018 and Balami & Meleh 2019). Balami & Meleh, (2019, p. 179) discovered that “social media was the source

of the misinformation on salt and water use for over a third of the respondents” that participated in their study on the saga. The speed at which this news travelled, and the degree of impact it created were alarming. All these happened in one night and by the following morning, the federal government had to mount a strong campaign against the misinformation. There were fears that taking excessive salt might complicate medical conditions of individuals battling certain ailments. Worthy of note is how negatively productive the fake news-digital media synergy is thriving in Nigeria.

Fast-forward to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. All over the world, COVID-19 the world over appears to be one of the most controversial diseases in recent human history, carrying on its trail, a plethora of conspiracy theories and misinformation that complicate the struggle towards effectively containing it (Authors, 2020). This information crisis led to the declaration of an *infodemic* by the World Health Organization barely two months after the pandemic broke out (WHO, 2020). Sadly, the digital media were at the forefront driving this *infodemic*. Al-Zaman (2021, p. 100), in his study of COVID-19 fake news spread in India, discovered that: “Online media produces more fake news (94.4%) than mainstream media (5.6%). More interestingly, four social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, produce most of the fake news.”

The situation in Nigeria is not different: digital media platforms serve as the major carriers of fake news on COVID-19. This has continued to thrive across phases of the pandemic, with each phase witnessing a new set of fake news and conspiracy theories. The latest on the list are conspiracy theories that surround the vaccine, giving rise to scepticism and creating fears in the minds of many who are confused regarding what exactly to believe in the midst of the enduring *infodemic*. Authors (2020) compile some of the popular fake stories peddled on the disease on the Nigerian digital space as follows:

- a. Blacks and People of Colour are immune to COVID-19 because of melanin;
- b. COVID-19 cannot survive in Africa’s warm climate;
- c. Spraying alcohol and chlorine bleach on the body prevents COVID-19;
- d. Drinking black tea first thing in the morning is an effective cure against COVID-19;
- e. Peppered soup with lime or lemon flushes out the virus;
- f. Steam from neem prevents COVID-19;
- g. Vitamin C tablets prevent COVID-19;
- h. Having had malaria makes one immune to COVID-19;
- i. COVID-19 is a disease exclusive to wealthy people and urban dwellers;
- j. COVID-19 is a divine punishment for man’s iniquities.

From a variety of sources, these fake stories are concocted and pushed through the digital space. Thus, as people were locked down in their homes and had to spend a substantial chunk of their time on the digital media, the predominance of fake news on the platforms was one of the major issues stakeholders had to grapple with in the bid to effectively contain the disease. It is interesting to note that while the digital media provided veritable sources of information to citizens in the midst of the pandemic, they also served as the major carriers of fake and dangerous information that complicated the process of containing the disease. During the initial phase of the national lockdown, daily briefings on national TV stations in the country were being organised by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health and other relevant agencies to sensitise citizens and keep them informed of developments regarding the disease (Authors, 2020).

Debunking fake news and bursting myths was one of the major preoccupations of the daily briefings. Notwithstanding this effort, the fake news continued to thrive, and experience has shown that, to a large extent, the digital audience have been less critical of some of the peddled fake news, as many still exhibit an alarming degree of gullibility by sharing some of the contents that appear to be obviously false and misleading to this day.

Notably, beyond COVID-19 and Ebola, sharing health related fake news on the social media has become a disturbing feature of the digital media generally, as people share supposed therapies, cures, prescriptions and assumed precautionary measures that have no scientific basis on a wide array of diseases and ailments. Several studies have established a predominance of fake news on health related matters on the social media platforms (Melchior & Oliveira, 2021; Wang *et al*, (2019); Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak & Kubanek, 2018).

Towards Mitigating Fake News on the Digital Space

Studies on fake news and the digital media synergy propose mitigation strategies that could be adopted to tame the rising tide. A careful look at the numerous mitigation strategies proffered indicates that they can be conveniently pigeonholed into four distinct categories. These include strategies that focus on:

- a.* The perspective of the digital platforms;
- b.* The perspective of the fake news creators;
- c.* The perspective of regulatory agencies; and
- d.* The perspective of the audience.

It is important to note from the onset that mitigation strategies belonging to these clusters have either been variously criticised, or where there is a consensus on their suitability, have

inherent defects that impede successful implementation. A review of the various strategies is presented below.

- i. **The use of technology:** a recurrent recommendation for taming the spread of fake news on the digital media is the use of technology- prominently, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Collins *et al*, 2020; Wilson, 2021; Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021). Experts suggest that AI can go a long way in checkmating the scourge of fake news on the digital space. Wilson (2021) presents several AI techniques that can be deployed to check the menace of fake news such as spike, hoaxy, snopes, crowdtangle, Google trends, le decodex, pheme, grover, fotoforensics, parmar's chatboard etc. Besides these tools, Wilson (2021) and Collins *et al* (2020) discuss AI approaches or subcategories that apply to the fight against fake news such as machine learning, Natural Language Processing (NLP), machine perception, predictive analytics, deeper learning, recommendation system, crowdsourcing, graph-based method, and a hybrid approach comprising both machine learning and human experts fact checkers.

These tools have specific tasks and mandates towards checking the proliferation of fake news and could be applied primarily by the various digital platforms in the business of information dissemination, as well as regulatory agencies. Within a setting like Nigeria, experts note that AI applications can be marred by challenges ranging from access and expertise of the requisite technology, linguistic and cultural/contextual issues and geo-specific peculiarities that might defy universal realities (Wilson, 2021; Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini, 2021). Apart from acknowledging this challenge, Nsude, Ogbodo & Nwamini (2021) describe AI as a double edged sword that could be used both as an offensive and defensive tool in this regard- i.e. for creating and combating fake news at the same time. This dual nature, they note, complicates the potency of the AI technology as an effective tool for effectively combating the scourge of fake news on the digital space.

- ii. **Regulation:** Experts suggest regulation as a way of checking the menace of fake news on the digital media. Regulation here is the responsibility of at least three of the critical stakeholders – the digital platforms operators, regulatory agencies and, perhaps, the audience. On the part of the tech operators, they are expected to set in place rules that will govern interactive patterns of individuals. Lazer *et al*. (2018, p. 1096) note that “the possible effectiveness of platform based policies would point to either government regulation of the platforms or self-regulation.” Indeed, regulation is an imperative if harmony is to be attained on the digital space, and attempts could be cited across countries coming up with proposed legislations to regulate the various digital platforms. The controversial attempts at social media regulation in Nigeria

quickly come to mind here (*see* Paul, 2019; Eke, 2020; Authors, 2022a). We must be quick to acknowledge that regulation whether at the level of the government/regulatory agencies or at the level of the tech operators remain a very controversial endeavour. The wide criticisms that greet the various attempts at regulation lend credence to this. Lazer *et al* (2018) note that:

Direct government regulation of an area as sensitive as news carries its own risks, constitutional and otherwise. For instance, could regulators maintain impartiality in defining, imposing, and enforcing any requirements? Generally, any direct intervention by government or the platforms that prevents users from seeing content raises concerns about either government or corporate censorship (p. 1096).

The complications that come with regulation often make experts cautious to call for outright regulation even as realities continue to call for it. This is compounded by the excesses of government regulatory agencies which are often glaring and overbearing. The showmanship between Twitter and the Nigerian government in 2021 where the platform took down President Muhammadu Buhari's post for violating the platform's guidelines, and the administration's draconian response of slamming an indefinite ban on the platform in the country, and calling for registration of all multinational social media platforms operating in the country (*see* Authors, 2022a) – all point to the complications that come with regulation, whether by the state or the tech operators. A third tier of regulation is individual user who needs to regulate the nature of contents to expose himself to online. Digital awareness is necessary to achieve this. We shall discuss this tier in some details under media literacy.

- iii. Verification/expert fact checking:** This has to do with engaging the services of experts in certain fields to verify the authenticity of certain information (Collins *et al*, 2020). This can be done by all stakeholders involved in the fake news niche- tech operators, regulatory agencies, content creators and the audience. But, most commonly, the burden of fact-checking resides most with the tech operators and regulatory agencies for a couple of reasons such as the cost implications of engaging expert fact checkers, the responsibility of protecting consumer rights to the truth and the need to preserve the integrity of the platforms. Tech operators leverage expert fact-checkers to determine which content is false, so as to issue corrections, flag such contents as false content with warnings, and directly censor false content e.g. by demoting its placement in ranking algorithms so that it is less likely to be seen by users (Collins *et al*, 2020). Expert-fact checking has its short comings. First of all, it can be expensive and incur huge financial implications on the contractor. Secondly, the ever increasing

nature of fake news on the digital platforms and scarcity of experts as well as context-specific constraints all hamper the task of successfully fact-checking for fake news on the digital space.

- iv. **Hybrid technique:** According to Collins *et al* (2020, p. 11), “the hybrid-based detection model involves ‘the fusion of techniques from the content-based model as well as social context-based techniques utilizing auxiliary information from different perspectives.’” Hybrid technique is recommended to balance the inadequacies of purely technology based and human based approach. The thinking is that a fusion of technology and human expertise would yield more efficiency and take care of contextual issues in the process of detecting fake news on the digital space.
- v. **Media and information literacy (MIL):** Another recurrent recommendation in the literature on the approaches of taming the rise of fake news on the digital media is investment in audience MIL skills. According to Wilson *et al* (2011), MIL entails empowering the audience with the competencies required for development of enquiry-based skills and the ability to engage meaningfully with media and information channels in whatever form and technologies they are using. According to Thoman & Jolls (2005, p. 20), MIL “provides a framework to *access, analyse, evaluate and create* messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the internet.” MIL imbues in the audience, the ability to engage critically with all forms of the media, whether as content creators or consumers. A way of achieving this, according to Thoman & Jolls (2005), is to attempt questioning those behind the authorship of texts, creative techniques used, intents and viewpoints of the authors and lifestyles represented among a whole lot of other questions surrounding media messages. Answers to these critical questions could go a long way towards protecting the digital audience against fake information. Experts note that the degree of MIL the audience attain is crucial to determining their level of gullibility and susceptibility to fake news; hence, the strategy is highly recommended (Abu-Fadil, 2018; Pérez-Escoda *et al*, 2021). Baptista & Gradim (2020) undertake a systematic review of the factors that facilitate fake news consumption and discover that low digital literacy tops the list. According to Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2017, p.12):

While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that *fake* news is co-constructed by the audience, for its fakeness depends a lot on whether the audience perceives the fake as real. Without this complete process of deception, fake news remains a work of fiction. It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news is able to play with journalism’s legitimacy (p.12).

MIL, thus, is one of the favoured recommendations towards taming the tide of fake news, leaving a huge burden of implementation on the shoulders of critical stakeholders that are often fingered in this regard such as UNESCO, National Orientation Agencies and the educational curriculum etc.

Concluding Thoughts

Like a scourge, the fake news phenomenon has infested the Nigerian State, with digital media serving as their major carriers. The manifestations are varied, and so are the motivations for creating and sharing it. The fake news phenomenon is one feature of the digital media that has the potency of reducing its overall impact on the socioeconomic wellbeing of citizens, and breeding scepticism as citizens engage on the various platforms. Navigating out of the woods is an omnibus task that requires all stakeholders to act proactively towards reducing the scourge. These stakeholders include tech operators, the state and regulatory agencies, the content creators and distributors and the audience or final consumers. Although implementing the mitigation options advanced is not by any means an easy task, it is expedient and would help towards optimising the potentials of the digital media and channelling them appropriately to the course of individual users' socioeconomic advancement specifically, and national development generally.

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