Assessing And Mitigating The Impact Of Fake News In Nigeria

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Abstract

The high rate fake news - news (presentation) that has been distorted or totally false - in the Nigerian media space is at the moment of concern to communication scholars, journalists, publicists and political leaders. Like most fake products, fake news is made to look like or to have the characteristics of the original product – magnitude, timeliness, novelty, proximity, etc., thereby having the lethal impact of propaganda. The present study examines the sources, patterns of fake news dissemination, impact of and solutions to fake news in Nigeria. Questionnaires were randomly administered online to 398 heavy users of social media (257 bloggers; 97; regular users of social media who are non-professionals; 37 journalists and 7 others based on their followership ratings. The investigation revealed that most fake news in Nigeria revolve social, entertainment and religious issues and are reported more often in "text" and "videos" on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The main sources of fake news in Nigeria are non-professional journalists and the high rate of fake news has largely been due to the skilful framing by their disseminators, lack of time and skill to fact-check fake news by the audience and lack of effective enforcement of best journalism practices.

Keywords: Fake news, mitigating impact, social media

Background

In journalism, news is tidings; the report or account of recent events or occurrences as a subject of report or talk. News is not the newsworthy event itself, but rather the 'report' or 'account' of that newsworthy event. The manner of presentation of a new information, therefore is what constitutes news. Fake news is news (presentation) that has been distorted or news that is totally false or untrue. To pass the 'news value test', those who propagate or spread 'fake news' construct it to have many elements of news value e.g. they build the fake news around a big person in the society (magnitude); they release it when the people are thirsty for news and none is forthcoming e.g. result of elections after voting (timeliness), etc. If fake news do not have elements of news, those who peddle them know that it will not generate the expected impact. Like all fake products, fake news is made to look like the real or the original product.

'Fake news' is not a new phenomenon. It has always been around for centuries. Earliest religious books and literature contained fake news. Jesus Christ warned his disciples of plenty of 'fake news' for example, and many of Shakespeare's plays (e.g. Macbeth) contained fake news reports. In war time, 'propaganda' was popularly deployed in communication. Propaganda is news presented from the selfish point of view of a source, usually through the news media. Unlike what many people think, not all propaganda is entirely false. When truth and untruth are cleverly mixed for the selfish interest of the news bearer, it is called 'grey propaganda'. Sometimes, propaganda contains whole truth but the presenter cleverly leaves out some aspects of the truth in order to confuse or sway the hearer. This is known as 'white propaganda'. This kind of propaganda is commonly used in advertising campaigns. However, when information presented is totally fabricated or completely false, it is known as 'black propaganda' (McGonagle, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Fake news brings big challenges and damages to the society at large and to the practice of journalism. It is a very complex phenomena because members of the public, journalists, organizations and even the government are involved in spreading fake news. Developed countries, like Russia, France, Britain and the United States, have at some point or the other been accused of propagating false news or false stories. Politicians trade blames on the occurrence of fake news. Even, corporate organizations complain that competitors spread fake news about their products. (Edwards, 2017)

The worry now is that fake news harbingers are getting more and more sophisticated. They are now hacking, leaking and disputing the facts; making the cannon of truth a big challenge to free and fair media. Repeating false information is now on a large scale; perhaps the most recent in terms of its devastating impact, in Nigeria, was the Lekki riots in Lagos. The negative consequence of fake news on society can thus be hugely devastating if the problem is not tackled. (Kwok, 2017; McGonagle, 2017).

This study examines the patterns of the menace of fake news in Nigeria and proffers solutions to them. If journalists do not rise up to manage fake news, a large part of mainstream journalism audience could be lost. Currently, traditional media (newspapers, radio, TV and magazines) are some of the major means of fact-checking fake news in the country. Thus, if fake news infiltrates the traditional media, it portends serious danger to journalism in the country. Today, technically, anyone who owns a telephone handset can disseminate "news". He or she simply records real and unreal events in the neigbourhood and uploads to the public as "news". This practice portends danger to journalism and the society.

Unfortunately, despite the plethora of studies on fake news in Nigeria (for instance, studies by Adaja & Talabi, 2019; Osuagwu, 2019; and Owens-Ibie, Oji and Ogwezzi, 2019), only few scholars have paid attention to the need to mitigate and find solutions to the problems. This is probably due to inadequate investigation on the patterns, sources and processes of fake news in the country, which could readily point towards ways to solve the problem. There is, thus, a dire need to mitigate and provide solutions to the phenomenon of fake news in the country.

Objectives

The study aimed at the following objectives:

1. To examine the patterns of fake news dissemination in Nigeria

2. To find out the main sources of fake news in Nigeria

3. To investigate how fake news get into mainstream social media in Nigeria

4. To find out the impact of fake news dissemination in Nigeria

5. To proffer solutions to the incidence of fake news in the social and traditional media in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Framing theory provides good theoretical underpinning for the present study. The theory explains how a communicator packages (i.e. frames) information and ideas thereby influencing what the audience makes about such information and ideas. In the context of journalism, framing describes how the journalist constructs and presents news and information to the public for public consumption. The idea of framing has been indirectly taught in journalism schools probably as old as journalism existed – for instance in the famous acronym for defining what news is: "5 Ws and H" – Who, what, Where, why, When and How – is somewhat a kind of framing. However, earliest conceptualizations of framing could be found in the works of Bateson (1972), Goffman (1974), Tuchman (1978), and Entman (1991). They tried to merge insights into how news is formulated or constructed. This perspective, known as "constructionism" deals with the process in which individuals and groups actively create social reality from different information sources. (Obi-Okoye, 2024). This happens when in the process of gathering and reporting news, the journalist infuses his or her pre-conceived ideas about how to order story elements and what to add or take out of real story elements. In reality, they present additional layers of interpretation on the issues or events that they report. (Druckman, 2001).

According to Goffman, people use interpretative designs in day-to-day experience to make sense of the events around them. (Goffman, 1974), Later studies by other scholars, notably Reese (2007), Reese et al. (2001), and Scheufele (1999, 2000, 2003, 2006), have deepened the understanding of framing. Putting these theoretical perspectives together, Scheufele (2017) submits that in mass communication, framing is used to describe the art of focusing attention on certain issues or events and then placing them within the field of meaning of media audience. For example, reporters decide the aspects of stories that they want reported, using their pre-conceived ideas to organize and interpret the information ('frames'). In one of his most recent works, Scheufele confirmed that the audience of the media also use frames to decode information they are exposed to in the media. (Scheufele, 2017; Scheufele & Krause, 2019).

Early canons of news in journalism were truth, geographical proximity, strangeness and excitement. Whatever was exciting and true made news! Walter Lippman in his classic work Public Opinion developed the concept of 'news value' when he distinguished news that depicts the real world as it exists (environment) and those created through the thinking of newsmen (pseudo-environment). In the first schema, news reflects the real environment. In the second schema, is a reconstructed version of "reality."

Several communication scholars in Nigeria have noted that in the process of constructing news that journalists construct 'fake news', sometimes intentionally, and at other times not intentionally, (Mohammed, (2017); Okukwu, (2017), and Owens-Ibie, Oji & Ogwezzy, (2019). There are several elements of news that professional journalists use in theory and practice to determine what is presentable as news – frequency, personality, timeliness, expectation, educational value, and novelty. In the developed countries, these elements of news are generally reconstructed in the negative: news is more often seen as "disaster". Anything bad makes news. Africa does not get enough "good", "positive" mention or CNN and BBC not because good things do not happen in continent but because bad news makes good news. Communication scholars in the developing countries, however, rose fiercely in the 1970s and 1980s to "reconstruct news" their own ways. The likes of Hamid Mowlana, Inayatullah, Frank Ugboajah, Alfred Opubor redefined news as "what is good". The foregoing paradigm soon found voice in developed countries and one of such loud voices was by Denis McQuail, an accomplished mass communication scholar. McQuail propounded the "development media theory" which says the media in less developed countries should reconstruct news as "what is novel, positive and value-laden", not "what is disastrous". (McQuail, 2012). But now even in developed nations, positive occurrences now make news through what is known as "solutions journalism". Solutions Journalism emerged from the umbrella concept of conflict reporting. It can be situated within a similar, but more specific category called constructive journalism, which "involves applying positive psychology techniques to news work in an effort to create more productive, engaging stories while holding true to journalism's core functions" (McIntyre, 2017, p. 9).. The praxis of solutions journalism is a form of interpretative reporting, depth reporting, long-form journalism, explanatory reporting, and analytical reporting.

Fake news, therefore, conceptually differ from normal news. Fake news is a false or misleading story presented as news in the mass media. It is not a new phenomenon (as it has been recorded in the communication literature as 'misinformation' (when such false reports were not intentional) and 'disinformation (when such reports are deliberate). What is today referred to as fake news has also been related conceptually to propaganda theory – dissemination of information, especially one that is biased and intended to promote political views or positions. (McQuail, 2012, Osuagwu, 2019).

Recent studies on fake news indicate the following trends and causes of the phenomenon:

- **New technologies**. The possibilities that new information technologies bring to journalism are very huge and professionals fear that if care is not taken, technology may wipe out journalism. Though this view seems exaggerated, the high level of apprehension is very reasonable. Today, McLuhan's prediction that it would be too difficult or impossible to determine what is real or fake because of technological possibilities has become reality. Digitization has made the maxim "seeing is believing" almost untrue. For example, Artificial Intelligence, (AI), "has made it true to assert that a picture is no longer worth a thousand words (Okukwu, 2017).

- **Lack of Professionalism**. All professions that have survived through the ages did so because of strong ethical standards around those professions. Many fake journalists operate in same manner and what they publish often is fake news – often disinformation, but it is nevertheless 'fake news'. America's Washington Post reportedly featured over 7,600 articles that included fake news and images in 2017. (Osuagwu, 2019: 127). Those who propagate or spread 'fake news' construct it to have many elements of news value e.g. they build the fake news around a big person in the society (magnitude), they release it when the people are thirsty for news and none is forthcoming e.g. result of elections after voting (timeliness), etc. If fake news do not have elements of news, those who peddle them know that it will not generate the expected impact. Like all fake products, fake news is made to look the real or like the original product and herein lies the source of its lethal effect on society.

- **Multiple free access to the audience.** The concept of Gatekeeping (in which the editors stand at the news gate to filter out what is bad or inaccurate and filter in what he or she considers okay) has been nuanced by new media technologies. The gates to media audience are now numerous and often wide open. The ubiquity of multimedia has also tremendously increased the incidence of fake news, especially because most of the fake news have been reported to thrive in the habitat of untrained journalists who have equal access to the public as trained journalists. (Perse, 2010). As of April 2023, Facebook had 2,989 billion monthly active users. Daily active people (DAPs) using Facebook's family of products (Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp are 3.4 billion, for example.

- **The necessity for propaganda.** Propaganda is not only for war time. It is sometimes useful in peace time, especially for political purposes. Politicians often need to slant truth and they do so through 'fake news.' (Adaja and Talabi, 2021).

- **High level of poverty in Nigeria.** Fake news is cheap - much cheaper than real news. It costs a great deal of resources to produce authentic 'news', just like it is to prepare good food. On the contrary, fake news come in form of snacks. (Owens-Ibie, Oji and Ogwezi, 2019).

- **Declining cultural values:** Some studies have revealed that fake news is a symptom of the decline in the society's shared values and sense of truth.

  (Owens-Ibie, Oji and Ogwezy, 2019).

Perhaps, the most famous case of fake news in media history was the Janet Cooke saga. Cooke, a journalist, wrote a Pulitzer-winning article in 1980 for the Washington Post titled "Jimmy's World". The story was found to be totally false. Cooke resigned from Washington Post and the Pulitzer Award was withdrawn from her. About the same period in Nigeria, a journalist known as Sam Akapa published a soft-sell magazine in which he also fabricated stories and presented them as real occurrence. He was later suspended by the Nigeria Union of Journalists and his magazine folded up.

The incidence of fake news in world media has come to prominence in recent times. America's ex- president Donald Trump contributed to making the term popular lately, by describing any report he considers a false accusation to be 'fake news'. (Osuagwu, 2019). Within a space of two weeks in July, 2024 at least seven viral fake news made the rounds in Nigeria. In May 2024, picture of a badly beaten Youth Corps member allegedly serving in Zamfara State, Nigeria, went viral online for allegedly scolding a student in the secondary school where he was a teacher. The story was a total fabrication. In the same week, former president of the United States, Barak Obama reported lambasted Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu in the social media for being a "back bencher" in African leadership while Afro music super star, Lagbaja, was reported dead in the social media. Reports were widely circulated in the social and traditional media in 2024 about an explosion at Zungeru Hydro Power Plant in the country. Some of the stories were reported in traditional national newspapers although most of them circulated in the social media.

In summary, the literature reveals that, theoretically, fake news is a product of the general news theory of 'framing', which in simpler words means 'news construction'. In constructing news, the journalist often hits a crossroad between adhering to the ethics of journalism or other considerations (such as personal biases of the journalist, influence of the audience, advertisers' influences, etc. He or she therefore frames news that are false or inaccurate. The opportunities provided in new communication technologies also has thrown open the media gates, meaning that virtually anyone can frame news and throw them into the media space. This development has led to a geometric rise in fake news. The patterns of occurrence, sources and kinds of solutions to reduce the impact of fake news have not been adequately investigated by researchers.

Methodology

The mixed design approach was adopted for the present study. Data used for providing answers to the five research questions were collected through questionnaires randomly administered online selected 398 heavy users of social media (257 bloggers; 97; regular users of social media who are non-professionals; 37 journalists and 7 others, including corporate users of social media) purposively selected on account of the size

of their followers. In addition, two editors of online news media, two experienced bloggers and two non-professional heavy users of social media were subject to in-depth interviews. Details of the procedure adopted in the present study have been previously articulated by Creswell (2016) and by Osuagwu (2019) in her study of the influence of digital media images on the propagation of fake news among residents of South-East Nigeria. The selected 'heavy users', were determined by having at least 20,000 followers/friends on one of Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook, and the online editors were systematically picked from two Nigeria's top ten national dailies listed by Nairaland.com. The heavy users were administered via a twenty-item questionnaire through Google mail. In online editors were subject to in-depth interviews in line with the research objectives.

Findings

Overview on Respondents

Most of the respondents in this study (two-third) were "bloggers" (n=257 or 64.5 per cent). "Private heavy social media users" (those who use the social media strictly for personal communications) represent almost a quarter of respondents while "professional journalists" constituted a little less than 10 per cent of the respondents. "Other" respondents (corporate users, advertisers, and those who did not clearly indicate their types as social media) made up less than 2 per cent of respondents. Bloggers accounted for the much higher number of fake news generation because they constituted two-thirds of respondents, not necessarily because bloggers are more likely to generate fake news than the other categories of media users of the social media.

Patterns of Fake News Dissemination in Nigeria

The major objective of the present study is to analyze the patterns of fake news dissemination – the main subjects or focuses of fake news mongers, their relative placements across the media, dominant themes of fake news across media, how often fake news occur and the most common formats of fake news publications. Findings show that Bloggers generated fake news across three major subjects – religious affairs, social and entertainment affairs and politics. It is noteworthy that no single fake story relating to economic affairs was reported among bloggers.

Table 1: Perception of the subject-matter in which fake news is most common in Nigeria by respondents					
On what subjects are fake news most common in the social media?					
Type of social media user	**Socials/Music & Entertainment**	**Politics**	**Economic Affairs**	**Religious Matters**	**Total (%)**
Bloggers	92	53	0	112	257 (64.6)
Private heavy social media users	42	19	36	0	97 (24.3)
Professional Journalist	9	28	0	0	37 (9.2)
Other	6	1	0	0	7 (1.7)
Total (%)	**149 (37.4)**	**101 (25.3)**	**36 (9.0)**	**112 (29.1)**	**398 (100)**

According to Table 1, most fake news revolve social and entertainment issues. (37.4 per cent). This is

followed by religious issues (29.1 per cent) and politics (25.3 per cent). The least subject matter of fake news is "economic affairs". And it is most reported by private heavy social users. Professional journalists' fake stories were published on political/social matters. In general, replies indicate that the majority of fake news is found in social/music and entertainment, followed by religious issues, politics, and economic matters.

Table 2 Relative presence of fakes stories and news across social media						
Respondents	**X**	**Facebook**	**Instagram**	**YouTube**	**WhatsApp**	**Total (%)**
Bloggers	45	103	107	1	1	**257(64.6)**
Social Media Users	11	76	0	0	10	**97 (24.3)**
Journalists	36	0	0	0	1	**37(9.2)**
Other	0	7	0	0	0	**7(1.7)**
Total (%)	**92 (23.1)**	**186 (46.7)**	**107 (26.8)**	**1 (0.25)**	**12 (3.0)**	**398 (100)**

Table 2 gives relative presence of various fake news and stories in the various social media in the estimation of respondents. Among Bloggers, Facebook and Instagram have more fake stories while among Regular Social Media Users, Facebook most commonly harboured fake news with X and Whatsapp coming next closely. It was found that journalists tend to prefer using X for their fake stories. YouTube had the least incidence of fake news and stories across the five social media studied. Similarly, fake news and stories were not commonly found on WhatsApp, in the perception of all categories of respondents.

Table 3. Dominant themes of fake news across social media					
Social Media	**Socials**	**Politics**	**Economy**	**Religion**	**Total (%)**
Facebook	85	15	0	112	**212 (53.2)**
X (Twitter)	0	41	0	0	**41 (10.5)**
WhatsApp	32	1	0	0	**33 (8.2)**
Instagram	19	0	0	0	**19 (4.7)**
YouTube	6	44	36	0	**86 (21.6)**
Tit Tok	7	0	0	0	**7 (1.7)**
Total (%)	**149 (37.4)**	**101 (25.3)**	**36 (9.0)**	**112 (53.2)**	**398 (100)**

In terms of the thematic focus of most popular social media platforms regarding fake news (Table 6), Facebook has the most even spread across social/entertainment, politics, and religion. On the other hand, the respondents suggest that the theme of any social media found on X would be on "politics" while those on YouTube would be on "politics" and "economy" mainly. Similarly, they suggest that all the themes of fake stories found on Instagram would be on social/entertainment issues. The respondents suggest that those who propagate fake religious stories preferred the Facebook as medium. X is very unlikely to report fake news with social, economic and religious themes and Instagram is similarly very unlikely to report fake news and stories on political, economic and religious affairs.

Table 4. Multi-media objects most actively used to propagate fake news						
Social Media	**Text**	**Hypertext**	**Video**	**Photograph**	**Audio**	**Total (%)**
Facebook	73	3	12	112	12	**212 (53.2)**
X(Twitter)	0	0	41	0	0	**41 (10.5)**

WhatsApp	19	0	10	0	4	**33 (8.2)**
Instagram	11	0	8	0	0	**19 (4.7)**
YouTube	36	3	47	0	0	**86 (21.6)**
Tittok	0	0	7	0	0	**7 (1.7)**
Total	**139 (34.9)**	**6 (1.5)**	**125 (31.4)**	**112 (28.1)**	**16 (4,0)**	**398 (100)**

Still on the patterns of fake news and stories in the social media, the respondents were asked to indicate the likely multi-objects through which fake news are mostly disseminated. Table 4 presents the outcome of the question. The table shows that fake texts are the most popular single multi-media object in the fake social media landscape (34.9 per cent). Videos and photographs come next with 125 or 31.4 percent and photographs with 112 or 28.1 per cent respectively. According to the respondents, fake news and stories found on YouTube would likely be in form of text or video, while those found on X would almost all be in video formats. The least used multi-media object by fake news harbingers is the "hypertext" and "audio".

Table 5. Frequency of fake stories across themes					
Frequency	**Social/Entertainment /Other**	**Politics**	**Economy**	**Religion**	**Total (%)**
No stories in several months	37	1	0	0	**38 (9.8)**
One story per month	19	0	0	0	**19 (4.7)**
Two-four stories per month	85	10	26	99	**220 (55.2)**
More than four stories monthly	8	1	2	110	**121 (30.4)**
Total (%)	**149 (37.4)**	**12 (3.0)**	**28 (7.0)**	**209 (52.9)**	**398 (100)**

Finally, concerning patterns of fake news stories, the investigation sought to know how frequently, fake stories were encountered by respondents. The frequencies were compared in times of themes in Table 5. The table indicates that religious stories come up most frequently in the fake news genre (one out every two frequently reported fake news items would be on "religion" according to respondents). Social and entertainment news would account for more than one out of every three fake news reported. Fake stories are not likely to be frequently reported on politics, according to the survey.

Main Sources of Fake News

Table 6: Respondents' attribution of main sources of fake news					
Respondent	**Sources of Fake News/Stories**				**Total (%)**
	Freelancers	**Corporate Organizations**	**Journalists**	**Bloggers**	
Bloggers	149	8	50	50	**257(64.6)**
Regular social media user	47	21	9	20	**97 (24.3)**
Journalists	13	2	1	21	**37(9.2)**
Other	3	1	2	1	**7(1.7)**

Total (%)	212 (53.2)	32 (8.0)	62 (15.5)	100 (25.1)	398 (100)

In terms of who is the primary source of fake news in Nigeria, about half of the respondents (53.2 per cent) think 'freelancers' are. In this context, freelancers are individuals who use the Internet generally as interactive communication media, unlike bloggers, journalists and corporate organizations who use the Internet for business purposes. As indicated in Table 6, Bloggers do not consider themselves as the primary sources of fake news/stories. Similarly, Journalists think freelancers and bloggers are the primary sources of fake news/stories. Within Regular social media users, corporate organizations emerged second highest as primary sources of fake news but overall, only 8 per cent of all respondents think corporation organizations are the major source of fake news/stories.

Table 7. Why fake news continues to dominate the social media in Nigeria						
Social Media Genre	**Poor Government regulation**	**Poor regulation by social media provider**	**Technological advancement**	**Human factor**	**Other/ Can't say**	**Total (%)**
Facebook	**16**	107	0	4	85	**212 (53.2)**
X (Twitter)	**0**	41	0	0	0	**41 (10.5)**
WhatsApp	**0**	21	0	12	0	**33 (8.2)**
Instagram	**0**	19	0	0	0	**19 (4.7)**
YouTube	**80**	6	0	0	0	**86 (21.6)**
Tik Tok	**0**	0	7	0	0	**7 (1.7)**
Total (%)	**96 (24.1)**	**194 (48.7)**	**7 (1.7)**	**16 (4.0)**	**85 (21.3)**	**398 (100)**

The researchers asked the respondents why fake news had become became so common in the Nigerian social media space. Their responses are cross-tabulated against social media genres in Table 7. One out of every two Facebook users think poor regulation by social media providers could have prevented many fake news from coming on air if they were stricter in regulating contents. They also think the Government can play a more effective role in preventing fake news getting into social and mainstream media. The respondents did not consider 'Technological advancement' and 'Human factor' as major factors why fake news/stories have persisted in the Nigerian social media, as only 1.7 per cent and 4.0 per cent blamed the prevalence of fake news/stories on technological and human factors (respectively). About one-fifth of respondents, however, could not pin-point the reason fake news have continue to reverberate in the Nigerian social media – all respondents who picked "Can't Say" in this category of questions are Facebook users. All the 19 Instagram users who took part in the survey agreed that fake news/stories have persisted in the Nigerian media due to weak regulation by social media providers/regulators..

Impact of Fake News Dissemination

Table 8: Major reason fake news is difficult to spot by the audience					
Respondents	**Major reason fake news is difficult to spot**				
	ICT skills of fake news generators	**Time constraint of audience verify**	**Gullible media audience**	**Other/Can't say**	**Total (%)**
Bloggers	15	115	45	82	**257(64.6)**

Regular Social Media Users	66	8	9	14	**97 (24.3)**
Journalists	36	0	1	0	**37(9.2)**
Other	1	0	0	6	**7(1.7)**
Total (%)	**118 (29.6)**	**123 (30.9)**	**55 (13.8)**	**102 (25.6)**	**398 (100)**

The findings regarding the challenges associated with promptly identifying fake news indicate that a majority of bloggers attributed this time constraint in verifying the veracity of the information. The social media is media on-the-go. Unlike traditional news media (radio, TV, newspapers and magazines) journalists who have comparatively more ample time to check, bloggers think the social media user would not want to exercise such time restraint to conduct fact-checking. On the contrary, journalists and regular heavy users of the social media believe the fake news harbingers are too crafty for the social media audience to discover the fakery in their news/stories.

As presented in Table 8, almost 30 per cent of respondents believe that ICT skills of those who broadcast fake news make it difficult for the audience to spot fake news. Nevertheless, a total of 115 bloggers indicate that the identification of fake news is challenging, although only 8 regular users of social media implicitly acknowledge this constraint.

Many bloggers consider social media audience as generally 'gullible' and readily believes the news reports they encounter without serious scrutiny of its authenticity. Nevertheless, a total of 115 bloggers assert that the identification of fake news is challenging, owing to time limitations, although only 8 regular users of social media explicitly acknowledge this constraint.

Some of the bloggers consider the social media audience as 'gullible'; hence would not easily discover fake news in the multitude of news. Yet, 31.9 per cent of the bloggers (n=82) could not state while fake news is difficult to identify by the media audience,

Table 9. Perception of intentionality or otherwise of fake news			
	Perception of fake news publication purpose		**Total (%)**
Frequency of fake news	**Not Intentional (%)**	**Intentional (%)**	
None in several months	**38**	**0**	**38 (9.5)**
One story in a month	**19**	**0**	**19 (4,7)**
Two to Four stories in a month	**92**	**128**	**220 (55.2)**
More than four stories in a month	**9**	**112**	**121 (30.4)**
Total (5%)	**158 (39.6)**	**240 (60.3)**	**398 (100)**

Table 9 suggests that there is a direct relationship between frequency fake news encounters and intentionality of fake news publications (or otherwise): those ¡sho had often encountered more fake stories tend to believe that the fake publications were deliberately cooked up. Those who saw average of between two to more than four stories in a month said the publications were intentional and this group represents 60.3 per cent of respondents.

Table 10. Frequency of encounters of fake news/stories across social media							
In which social media are you more active?							
Frequency of encountering fake news	**Facebook**	**X**	**WhatsApp**	**Instagram**	**Youtube**	**Tittok**	**Total (%)**
Rearely in a month	1	0	12	19	6	0	38 (9.5)
Once in a month	0	0	12	0	0	7	19 (4,7)
Two to Four in month	99	41	0	0	80	0	220 (55.2)
More than four in a month	112	0	9	0	0	0	121 (30.4)
Total (%)	**212 (53.2)**	**41 (10.3)**	**33 (8.2)**	**19 (4.7)**	**86 (22.1)**	**7 (1.7)**	**398(100)**

Regarding how the social media accommodate more fake stories, 99 of those that observe two to four stories in a month claim that they are most frequent on Facebook while 112 of those who witness the fake news more than four times in a month claimed that they are also on Facebook. This again confirms that Facebook publishes fake news the most. You Tube comes a close second. Similarly, 80 of those that witness fake news between two to four in a month claimed that they are prominent on YouTube.

How best to mitigate the impact of fake news

The fifth objective of the present study is to find out effective ways to mitigate the impact of fake

news on the media audience and the society. The respondents believe improved legislation (30.1 per cent); better enforcement of relevant regulations and laws (36.9 per cent); self –restraint on the part of bloggers,

Table 11: Suggestions on how best to mitigate the impact of fake news						
Respondents	**Improved Legislation**	**Better Enforcement of Relevant Regulations/Laws**	**Public Enligtenment**	**Self-restraint by Makers of Fake News**	**Other /Can't Say**	**Total (%)**
Bloggers	104	57	5	8	85	**257(64.6)**
Social Media Regular Users	7	63	10	18	0	**97 (24.3)**
Journalists	8	28	1	0	0	**37(9.2)**
Other	1	0	0	6	0	**7(1.7)**
Total (30.1)	**120 (30.1)**	**147(36.9)**	**16 (4.0)**	**50 (12.5)**	**85 (21.3)**	**398 (100)**

regular users of social media and journalist (12.5 per cent) and general public enlightenment (4.0 per cent) would reduce the number of fake news, hence mitigate its impact on the audience and the society. About 22 per cent, however could not indicate how fake news impact could be mitigated.

According to Table 11, 104 bloggers believe that updated legislation can be used to combat fake news, as do 7 and 8 social media regular users and journalists, respectively. Similarly, 57 percent of bloggers agreed that existing restrictions and legislation should be properly enforced, a sentiment shared by 62 percent of social media regular users and 28 percent of journalists. However, 10 regular social media users agreed that there is a need for public enlightenment, while 6 and 18 bloggers and regular social media users agreed that there is a need for self-restraint by harbingers of fake news, respectively.

Solutions to the Increasing Occurrence of Fake News in the Nigerian Media Space.

The consensus of the in-depth interviews with two experienced bloggers, two editors and one heavy user of social media suggest that enforcement of professional ethics of journalism and enforcement of relevant laws on regulating the use of the social media would arrest the increasing occurrence of fake news in the Nigerian media space. One of the interviewees captured the position succinctly:

> The ultimate solution to the increasing occurrence of fake news in the Nigerian media space is for the government to enact laws which contains heavy sanctions against harbingers of fake news. The government is too lenient with those who misuse the social media and the implications are becoming more devastating. We do not have to wait on the entire country is in flames before doing the needful. It is obvious that most of these fake news have not been coming from professional journalists in the mainstream media. They are being produced by untrained journalists – especially bloggers and religious fanatics, in my opinion. I think there is need to introduce enforcement of ethics for all categories of those using the social media. The social media providers and doing well in flagging down false and indecent publications with sanctions. I think they have to do more.

Discussions

The present study indicates that fake news incidence in Nigeria appear to be rising because of lack of regulations within the social media genre of journalism in the country. Majority of those behind the fake news phenomena are not journalists; hence they lack the necessary ethical burden to mitigate fake news propagation. Non-professionals dominate the social media in Nigeria and without any form of training in theory and practice of journalism, they might not know the depth of harm fake news cause the society. The audience of social media do not readily distinguish stories or news published by mainstream journalists and non-journalists,

Journalism praxis has in-built mechanism to correct 'mistakes' committed by journalists. But when the 'mistakes' are deliberately committed, it is not ethnically admissible in journalism. The present study confirms that most fake news in Nigeria were deliberately concocted to serve the vested interests of their propagators. It becomes expedient to exercise regulatory controls on non-journalists, especially bloggers in the country.

Further, a major discovery from this study is that controls by social media platform provides such as TikTok and Facebook appear to be serving as effective restraint on reckless publications by users of the platforms, especially bloggers and freelancers. Experts suggest that similar sanctions on those who use indecent language on the social media should also be meted on those who report fake news.

Conclusion

This investigation has helped to uncover salient developments on fake news propagation in Nigeria and how the phenomenon may be curbed. These include:

- Most fake news in the revolve social, entertainment and religious issues

- Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp harbor the most fake news stories

- Most fake news stories are reported as "text", "video" and "photographs" in that order of frequency. Fake news are hardly reported as audio or hypertext objects in Nigeria.

- The main source of fake news in the country are non-professional journalists.

- The main reason fake news incidence has remained on the rise is lack of time and ICT skills to checkmate false or concocted news reports.

- Weak legislations and lack of enforcement of best practices in news framing and journalism may frustrate efforts to mitigate the incidence of fake news in Nigeria.

- The framing process in news gathering and reporting plays a significant factor in mitigating the alarming increase in fake news incidence in the country.

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