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Alternative News and Misinterpretations: Fake News and Its Spread in Nigeria

Dumebi Otulugbu

Abstract

Down the ages and across cultures, information has occupied a very crucial space in the life of any society. Today, our world with the speed in technological advancements is characterised with easy access to the collecting, refining and distribution of information. This has left media houses especially the large ones with the burden of competing with alternative media, as media producers abuse the privilege in liberal democracies that is granted citizens as regards human rights and freedom, as the rate of disseminating false information continues to grow. This piece attempts at stating clearly information on fake news, misinformation and hate speeches as disseminated globally in the guise of media scientists, showing the means through which this end is met, especially with the easy that comes with the use of social media and in the end, showing the challenges and risks that are resultant effects of this acts.

Keywords: alternative news, media, misinterpretations, research and specialist

1. Introduction

The act of manipulating information has existed long before the advent of social media, an active feature of history long, even before the coming of modern journalism through established standards which define news as a genre based on particular rules of integrity. Facts affirming the above claim dates back to an early incident recorded to have occurred in ancient Rome, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy Octavian launched a smear campaign against him with "short, sharp slogans written upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets." The perpetrator became the first Roman Emperor and "fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all".

The term 'news', in its ideal form stands for verifiable information in the public interest, this is why any information that does not meet these aforementioned standards does not deserve the label of news. What this implies is that whenever there is a mention of the term, 'fake news', it would simply pass as an oxymoron, that where two words of opposite meaning are used together, an attempt aimed at simply undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – that is real news. Having stated this, we can freely employ the use of the term "fake news" for the purpose of this paper.

Fake news is defined as a situation when misinformation takes the form of a news story to approximate the legitimacy which society associates with real news [1]. Many scholars focus on the intention behind fake news when defining the term, it is also defined as information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts [2]. In this regard, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. Fake news is viewed as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers [3].

Seven types of fake news were identified by Claire Wardle of *First Draft News*, which includes the following; Satire or parody (this has no intention of causing any harm although it has potentials to fool), false connection, (this is when headlines or captions do not support the content), misleading content (here misleading information is used to frame an issue or an individual), false context (this is when authentic information is shared with false contextual information), imposter content (this is when authentic sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources), manipulated content (this is when authentic information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as can be related in the case of a doctored photo) and fabricated content (in this case, the content is 100% new, yet false, it is designed to deceive and do harm) [4].

Fake news is currently an issue of global interest right now; this is so because globally discussions about fake news and its impact on global affairs are being held. This century sadly has seen the use of information as a weapon in rather unprecedented scale. the exploitation and falsification of contents have simply become rather easy with the presence of Powerful new technology, this has also given easy rise to the use of social networks in intensifying the rate falsehoods in rather very dramatic fashion especially as peddled by States, politicians, deceitful corporate entities, and individuals who go about sharing uncritical publics stories, these and other forms of misinformation are perpetrated with the intent seeking or gaining platforms to pursue financial gains in the advertising section. There is a high spread of the fake news phenomenon on the internet; this is so because of the internet's ever connected nature and a major function of the masses' preference for speed over accuracy. Thus, since those who provide content on the internet are a Zero-sum, winner-takes-all battle for attention and for of course the revenue that comes with advertising, they do not mind doing any and everything to boost traffic. Distinct from print publications that allows for enough time before reporting a breaking story the next day, publications that are made online which are majorly reports on the franticness of the present world. Due to the nature of modus operandi of the internet, one who is on that space might as well go fast or go home. Hence, so many journalists are left in an unreasonable competition for attention, where they are forced to publish information first and then verify the authenticity of their contents later, this hunts our world today badly [5]. Nonetheless, this is also a Nigerian problem, as there are also a bulk of new sites and blogs that publish contents without properly authenticating their sources. Fake news stories are usually thrilling in nature and by this factor, are very likely to spread quickly; since these blogs or platforms by their nature contain a high level of followers, making the news possess an existing number of massive reader base that have their notification on, looking up to them for second to second information', and since these have special flavors added to them to make them captivating, such stories will most likely be believed by those who them, in turn, these people will share the story on social media as today it is about a thing of pride to be the first to have information about a story, sadly though, this is how fake news goes on and on, more painful is the fact that even after the story has been debunked, Sometimes, the fake news still prevails.

2. Relevant literature reviewed

Journalists, those who for the purpose of this piece are referred to as media specialist and the organizations they work for produce news is fundamentally, an individual as well as an organizational product; nonetheless, when the ways in which news is being constructed is considered, it becomes imperative as [6] would put it to examine the procedure whereby an excessive amount of proceedings and issues relating to a given day are filtered into a bulletin or newspaper. These proceedings we can divide into two chronological stages those of "the selection of proceedings and issues on which we base the news stories and subsequent construction of such stories" In an attempt at seeking the definition of journalism, it is imperative to examine the end product of journalism, which is news.

Notwithstanding, with the emergence of what [7] calls the 'participatory web' user generated content has gradually become an important part of the digital culture [7, 8]. The resultant effect brought major changes to the news media industry. particularly, this change was seen in the ways in which news was reported and shared across populations were expanded through media platforms that are connected, this has created positive influence on people especially on engaging the young people with news and information on current affairs [9]. At the same time, it is important to mention here that the monetization and rapid circulation of 'news' through the use of digital platforms especially the social media is responsible for such widespread and effective forms of media manipulation. These digital platforms tend to democratize the creation and circulation of news, however, what they fail to bring into consideration is that, in all these doings, questions abound, questions around what news is, how it gets made, shared and read in online contexts are also raised.

Today the reason why people seek information is aimed towards various ends, these ends include but not limited to the following: comfort, empowerment, learning, knowledge to act among others. However, not all information is useful and credible to them. Thus, they are then charged with a duty to filter out useless information and retain only what is useful and believable. Credibility is thus one of the criteria used in filtering unbelievable information [10]. Credibility as defined by [11] is a "judgment made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator", save for other scholars, this definition should also include institutions as well as persons as communicators as indicted by [12]. Generally, the learned assessment of credibility falls in with about one of the oldest lines in communication research, originating with ancient Greeks [13, 14]. More often than not, information that is credible is referred to as believable information [15, 16], in fact, Eisend calls it a person's perception of the truth of a piece of information [17]. This is why Self opined that this concept brings to mind Aristotle's argument that persuasion was based upon fitting the message to audience need in the linear model of speaker-message-audience [18]. All in all, different researchers, in fact, employed different definitions of credibility. This definition helps to demonstrate that credibility as a concept is complex, interdependent, and a multidimensional [19]. Due to the deep penetration of the Internet Media credibility, has received renewed attention in recent years [20]. However, interest in newspaper credibility reached the highest point in the late 1980s, regrettably, media credibility issue has recently been revived, this is so because of the involvement of traditional media those of the television and newspapers in the Internet [21], recent study on "Perceptions of Internet information credibility", which was conducted by Flanagin and Metsger shows that the information gotten from the Internet was as credible as that gotten from the television. Thus, the authors reached the conclusion that the credibility among various kinds of information that audience seek, say news and entertainment, differed by

media channels. Reports from respondents showed that they did not verify Internet-based information. However, this finding varied, this variance was measured by the kind of information needed, the level of experience using of the Internet and the audience's perception about the information were among others related with whether they made to verify information found on the Internet [22].

The Internet however helps the flow and freedom of information, introducing an increased possibility for error or misuse on information. But credibility of online information may be derived from the strength of mutual interaction between users and sources. However, these authors have been investigating for several decades this relationship between media use and perceived media credibility but the findings of a study conducted indicate that there is need to clearly distinguish from level of preference the rate of media use for various media [23]. Studies of media use have time after time shown that online media complements traditional media more correspondingly than competitive media [24]. Based on this aforementioned finding concerning the online media, it can be inferred that credibility is something a medium cannot earn it by its own, but it also should be obtained by other media.

3. Causes of fake news

In an attempt at stating clearly the causes of fake news in Nigeria as well as the world at large, so many factors come into consideration, but for the sake of emphasis, this piece include but not limited to the following:

Monetary gains: this is about the major reasons for the creation and spread of fake news today, basically all other reasons are means tilting towards this end, this is why Jestin Coler, who was formerly owned the fake media conglomerate *Disinfomedia*, was once known to have stated that when he ran his company, he once had to employed about 20 to 25 writers making up $10,000 to $30,000 per month just from advertisements [25]. A close look at this has shown that this is about the same story with that which is obtainable in the Nigerian media market.

More so, some media outlets have indulged in fake news simply for the sake of significance, this is a major feature of the social media in Nigeria where persons and organizations go any length just to be "verified", to do so they fill their space with anything, irrespective of how credible it is or not as long as such information say stories or advertisement or can attract enough viewers to their space. Furthermore, another factor that aids the spread of fake news is in states with government authorities that are unfriendly, together with have over the years been known for creating and spreading fake news, especially during events such as an election where certain information are in the custody of the government only, we can find this during elections.

Although the loosed nature of the guidelines regulating the internet is one factor which is also responsible for the spread of fake news. When the internet was made reachable for the general public in the 1990's it was dine for the chief purpose of seeking and reaching information. But with the advent of fake news in the internet, obtaining credible information has become though. Since there are really no stringent rules on the internet Fake news have become rampart with the use of news sites that are falsified, they do so by creating catchy news or gossips, pretending to be reliable sources.

4. Effects of fake news in Nigeria

Fake news are lies propagated for selfish reasons, and like all lies it comes with certain degrees of pains on those to whom such lies are framed, this is why the

Minister of Information and Culture Lai Mohammed is quoted to have said "the global epidemic of fake news is already having far reaching repercussions across the world". In fact, some researchers at the Ohio State University in the United States concluded in a recent study showed that Russian interference and the fake news it spread almost certainly aided in depressing the support Hilary Clinton got on the day of Election of the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. Some of this Fake News include that due to a serious disease she was is in poor health; that Trump got endorsed by Pope Francis; that she approved weapons sales to Islamic Jihadists etc. [5].

Elebeke shows how In India, how about six people were killed simply because of fake news of prank messages. They were killed after this message showed that they were involved in of child abduction based on the fake messages circulated via the WhatsApp social media platform [26].

In Nigeria, we do not have a better story, for fake news here is not sole a function of the social media for on 5th July 2018, the National newspaper's front page headline read: *Court orders National Assembly to begin impeachment of Buhari.* Creating unnecessary tension on the polity, that news was a simple manipulation of the following judgment: "*The applicants are hereby granted leave to issue and bring an Application for the order of Mandamus to compel 1st to 3rd Respondents to start impeachment proceedings against the 4th Respondent, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*" as delivered by the Presiding Judge of the Federal High Court in Oshogbo. Fake news over the years have aggravated the herders/farmers crises in Nigeria, this is why The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) once reported that the fake news circulating in the social media is a major factor responsible for the fueling of the farmers/herdsmen crises in Nigeria., it stating that "fake pictures circulating on social media which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria" one of such stories was the fake report which circulated the social media in Nigeria of the story that claiming that about five students of the College of Education at Gidan Waya, were ambushed and murdered by Fulani herdsmen in the Southern part of Kaduna. Also, major Nigerian news outlets once ran a story alleging that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, said the attacks in the Plateau were retribution for the loss of 300 cows, they even went ahead to have quoted him to have said that "Since, these cows were not found, no-one should expect peace in the areas", nevertheless, Mr. Ciroma had denied making such reports before the media organization apparently tendered apology [27].

Based on seven articles that was analysed, six major fake news epidemics with serious adverse consequences across Nigeria were identified; Plotted stories caused an increase in polio cases (2017), Ebola 'cure' kills two (2014), President Muhammadu death in 2017 and his marriage saga in 2019, Fake Facebook post intensifies the regional and religious crisis (2012, 2018), Fake photos and news exacerbate tensions between the herdsmen and farmers conflict (2019), Claims of under-age voting in elections and other misleading stories (2015 presidential election) [28].

In the face of the 2020 pandemic (Covid-19) the cause of Corona virus was linked to 5G mobile broadband technology is will replace 4G LTE connection with faster internet connectivity which will enhance faster downloads and other internet activities. 5G conspiracy theorists argue that the newly developed network generates radio frequency radiation that can damage DNA and lead to cancer and premature ageing. They also contend that the network can disrupt cell metabolism, and potentially lead to other diseases through the generation of stress proteins, and Corona virus in particular by weakening the immune system. In fact, a notable Nigerian Bishop took to social media in a protest against the installation of 5G network in

Nigeria. Though it had not been proven that 5G network is responsible for Corona virus pandemic, originators of fake news disseminated stories online that suggest that 5G network has a direct causal link with Corona virus [29]. Mosquitoes bite transmission: Although it's always appropriate to keep a safe distance from the insect that spreads paludism and dengue fever, respiratory viruses don't seem, at this stage, to be transmitted by mosquito bites, but by droplets of saliva or nasal secretions expelled by an infected person when coughing or sneezing. Speaking of animals, no house pets seem to have been infected by the new coronavirus. Infected facemasks, some plausible, but useless: Antibiotics work against bacteria, not viruses. Taking antibiotics to treat or prevent coronavirus could prove harmful by reducing a person's vigilance. Vaccines against pneumonia don't provide protection against COVID-19 either. The potential efficacy of chloroquine is currently being studied but doesn't look particularly promising. Remedies, transmission via parcels from China: Although their lifespan varies depending on the environment and temperature, pathogenic germs can only survive on objects such as parcels, coins and credit cards for a few hours. Products imported from China to Africa have been travelling for too long to transmit the virus. Bioweapon rumors: theories surrounding the coronavirus posit that the disease is a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government, the US government or Bill Gates's foundation and that it was either deliberately or accidentally released. These rumours overlap with tall tales of former Soviet bloc countries supposedly carrying out secret geopolitical operations to weaken democracies via massive viral propaganda campaigns [30].

In the end we can clearly see that Fake news most often leads to confusion, tension, and even the tendency to be suicidal, depending on the person or institution as the case may be, while on the other end, it waters down the efforts of serious media coverage making the work more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories.

5. Management of fake news

In attempting at seeking and finding lasting solutions to the problem of fake news, it must be brought into consideration that if there would be a solution to the problem of fake news and a lasting one at that, we must realize from the onset that is must be a collective effort, not just a mere function of the government or the media outlets, it must be a collective responsibility we owe ourselves and this responsibility must be carried out consciously and carefully, this is why Brian Hughes, a professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York, is quoted to have written 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". To better make this point sink, he cited the example of how Facebook manipulated its trending newsfeed to suppress conservative news. He stated that this attempt only increased the distrust the public had for the media, making them appear as less credible sources of information. Thus, for him of adopting the Fairness Doctrine for digital media would go a long way at managing fake news; this is how he stated companies like Facebook can 'individually program their news feeds for balance and accuracy" since they are already able to identify consumer niches this does not mean the government has no place here, as Nicholas Lemann of the New Yorker has argued proposing that the government invest more in the pubic media to give more room for press freedom and journalistic integrity, although this would be difficult in state like Nigeria where the government is viewed as corrupt and not trustworthy [5].

More so, big technological companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter have begun addressing this issue. For Google, it is reported to have budgeted about 300 million US dollars over the next three years in an attempt at fighting and curbing the spread of false news. While Facebook on its part, according to Bloomberg, in the first three months of 2018 took down 583 million fake accounts. According to Reuters, Twitter withdrew license from over 70 million accounts, and the pace of this withdrawal has continued to increase [26].

Okogba in his piece identified the position of Jamie Angus, the Director of BBC World Service Group on this topic, Jamie encouraged the public to use the most trusted news brands and rely on them solely for genuine information. Advocating an increased standard of education and media literacy for fake news cannot be eliminated, as long as we still have people willing to buy tabloids and read blogs that they already know have in the past contained lies or half-truths, and as long as the number uneducated people that are unable to differentiate between real and fake new continues to increase, the sale of fake news will continue to increase. Thus, he went further to state that today more than ever there is the surging need to educate people especially the young ones in particular, that equipping them with enough skills at identifying and differentiating true from untrue information [31].

6. Conclusion

It has been observed from the reviewed literature that alternative and misinterpreted news has caused a lot of fear/anxiety/panic and damages among the populace. Despite these, the consequences of fake news from the literature has been outlined as follows; aggravate distrust, violence and division among the people and weakens confidence and certainty of the people in the media.

From the above we can clearly see that alternative news and misinterpretation is our today's reality, causing more harm and no good at all, thus we must strive to encourage media literacy as it is very paramount in this regard. More so, people should invest more in making sure that media specialists' partner with good, reputable and credible international media organizations. And yes, government must ensure that they seek and find ways to support its foundational traditional media for acceptability as against those of the social media. Finally, Nigeria as a country must seek and find a way in making sure that its print media and TV stations are known to practice quality journalism, as this would boost their acceptability by the people; when that is successfully achieved, then Nigeria might make the move for the consideration of an independent regulation of the media; as this would definitely reduce the attention that is poured on fake media outlets and this would make identifying and punishing those who get spread for spitefully published information. Thus, librarians can lead the way as information professionals toward an information common through information and media literacy skills. Little has been studied by librarians about the direct impact of fake news on researchers.

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