Fake News as Disruptive Media: A Digital Age Challenge in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian media space is flooded with fake news, which has become the bane of digital journalism in today's world. This is occasioned by the emergence of online media platforms and news blogs in Nigeria that appears to have created a situation where everyone can lay claim to being a 'digital journalist' and spreads news stories that get circulated instantaneously whether factual or not. This study uses case analysis, and historicocritical methods to examine purposively selected fake news cases disseminated on social media that concern socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural themes about Nigerians or Nigeria posted between 2017 and 2021. We found that fake news is rife in Nigeria and is increasingly becoming a sub-culture among the people. The article recommends a reorientation of Nigerians to do more critical thinking and to improve their digital media literacy in order not to fall prey to purveyors of fake news.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, misinformation, disruptive media, global digital challenge, critical thinking, Nigeria, digital media literacy

1. Introduction

The pervasiveness and the purveying of misinformation and disinformation in virtually all spheres of life have become a cause for worry for policymakers, government authorities, media professionals as well as media scholars. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) informs that while disinformation is information shared with the intent to mislead, misinformation is not necessarily shared with the intent to mislead, but could involve hateful or dangerous speech, propaganda and other harmful forms of content. Indeed, there are instances where some journalists were accused of engaging in unethical practices of helping individuals, especially in the political arena to create false and defamatory news about their perceived enemies to score political goals. Other internet-savvy persons, particularly the youths, could just post on their WordPress blogs or Facebook or WhatsApp spaces a sensational but false story about the death of a very important personality (VIP) in a section of the country, intending to fan the embers of division and 'heating' the polity.

Yet, some other persons intentionally disrupt the media by way of supplying or disseminating a premeditated falsehood about their colleagues, communities or states or any institution they wish to discredit. Unfortunately, negative news items tend to circulate faster than positive ones and many people are daily now assailed with what some call the "post-factual society" challenge (Hossava, 2018, p. 27). According to Hossova, fake news, disinformation, and hoaxes as phenomena are major problems for contemporary society (Hossová, 2018). Fake news has historically been used by researchers to define generic mistruths such as news parody, propaganda and even misleading advertisements (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Fake news is used to discuss misinformation in some instances and disinformation in other instances. Allcott & Gentzkow (2017), defined fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers. While Lazer et al. (2018) described fake news as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent". Integral in these characterisations are not only the targets and persistence of fake news but also the specific format used. This means that fake news comes in different formats, and is sometimes, a type of disinformation that mirrors the look and feel of news (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2020). Recent studies use the phrase to describe a specific phenomenon, that is, misleading and bogus information deliberately presented and marketed to appear as news to deceive its target audience (Tandoc et al., 2020).

The four definitions highlighted above lean towards disinformation as they usually include purposefully inventing news articles, commentaries and even editorials.

Other studies define fake news in line with misinformation. For instance, Apuke and Omar (2021) and Uwalaka, (2022) considered fake news as untrue information, including myths, rumours, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, as well as deceptive or erroneous content intentionally or unintentionally disseminated on social media platforms. This study will adopt this definition of fake news as it encapsulates fake news in Nigeria. The inclusion of unintentional sharing of fake news is crucial as many reshare false social media content to help while it ultimately misinforms the recipients (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Wang, McKee, Torbica, & Stuckler, 2019, Uwalaka, 2022). While this study acknowledges that the term, 'fake news' is contested, the study prefers to use 'fake news' as an umbrella word to cover both dis/misinformation. It aptly synthesises dis/misinformation and allows the study to reference both without the monotony of stating the words.

Previous studies have looked at the proliferation of fake news in general (Apuke & Omar, 2020, 2021; Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), Fake news during the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Carlson, 2020), and fake news during COVID-19 (Lampos et al., 2020; Uwalaka, Nwala, & Chinedu, 2021, Uwalaka, 2021, 2022). Many of these studies utilised student samples (Lee and Ma, 2012) and have not adequately examined fake news concept broadly in the Nigerian context particularly, how widespread fake news is in all spheres of life in Nigeria. Also, in the Nigerian media space, there are many fake news items and hoaxes 'flying' around, especially among the youths without any serious form of checking (Omoera & Ogoke, 2021). Therefore, this study presents and critically analyses some purposively sampled cases from the Nigerian media ecology to proffer suggestions to remediate the challenge of fake news in the age of dynamic deployment of technology in news gathering and dissemination. This is because fake news has been used to upset the smooth running of society. Some are used to incite religious crises while some are purveyed to achieve political ends against perceived political opponents. To achieve this aim, the study sought to answer the following research question: What is the impact of fake news on the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural life of Nigeria?

2. Conceptual Premise: Fake News in the Media Ecosystem

Thousands of fake news stories exist on the internet and are spread to gain attention for several reasons. People traditionally trust news, and most news stories are produced by reliable sources but now anyone, anywhere in the world can publish information on the internet and make it look convincing (Diri & Diri, 2019; Uwalaka et al., 2021; Apuke et al., 2022). This makes producing and sharing fake news articles on the internet easy for those who want to spread them. Recently, much of the fake news circulating online has been socio-politically, socio-culturally and socio-economically motivated. On the global media level, much of the fake news has revolved around the 2020 presidential election in the United States of America (USA), the EU and the Brexit issues, linking 5G to the COVID-19 disaster, vaccinations, Russia/Ukraine conflict, among others (Prooijen & Vugt, 2018; Konda, 2019; Hellinger, 2019; Saka, 2019; Grad, 2020; Omoera & Ogoke, 2021; Bialasiewicz, 2021). There is practically no country that is immune to this global challenge of online fake news. But the degree of disruptions or social havoc that it spawns, and spins varies from one society to another (Barclay, 2018). Hence, it is necessary to put some kind of measure in place to remediate or manage the emergent media or information disorder and its consequences in different media ecosystems.

Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) have highlighted three main types of information disorder: disinformation, misinformation and mal-information (p.8). They noted that disinformation is information that is deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country; while misinformation is false information, but not created to cause harm; and mal-information is information that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, or country (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017). Significantly, Wasserman (2020) locates the manifestation of fake news within the South African media landscape, through an illustration of how it produces particular responses that relate directly to specific social and political forces at a given historical juncture. Tandoc, et al. (2018) diagnostically drew a typology of fake news: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. Such a typology is crucial in clarifying and expanding our understanding of fake news.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) used theoretical and empirical techniques to examine the economics of fake news in the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America (USA). They contend that "fake news may generate utility for some consumers, but it also imposes private and social costs by making it more difficult for consumers to infer the true state of the world—for example, by making it more difficult for voters to infer which electoral candidate they prefer" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p.212). In their study, Apuke and Omar (2021) found, among others, that social media users' motivations for information sharing, socialisation, information seeking and passing time predicted the sharing of false information about COVID-19. Earlier, Apuke and Omar (2020) made a critical compilation of previous research on fake news in Nigeria and analysed contextual factors and consequences of fake news proliferation and advocated the need for fake news awareness as a means of reducing the spread of fake news among social media users in Nigeria.

It has been noted that fake news in Nigeria is mostly peddled over social media (Pate et al., 2019). Nigerians are increasingly and constantly accessing inaccurate and misleading content that goes online without gatekeeping or having verifiable attribution (Pate, Gambo & Ibrahim, 2019). However, Tabia (2018) contends that a majority of Nigerians do not possess the exposure, training or critical thinking required to spot fake news, nor do many of them know how to go about fact-checking when confronted with controversial, sensational or deceptive stories. Different researchers and scholars have explored fakes in the Nigerian media but literature search and review reveal that studies with a focus on fake news as disruptive media in Nigeria seem unavailable. The implication is that researchers are yet to adequately explore this area of study. It is in this context that this study broadly examines fake news as disruptive media in Nigeria. This study examined the impact of fake news on the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural life of Nigeria by analysing selected fake news cases from online media space between 2017 and 2020. The study conducts discussions around these cases to proffer workable solutions or ways of ameliorating the fake news issues in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

This study is purely qualitative involving the use of case analysis, and historicocritical methods in the examination of purposively selected fake news items purveyed by online media operators in Nigeria in their websites and reverberated on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. In other words, qualitative analysis was done in this study using thematic categories of collected data.

Researchers are attracted to social media platforms because they can harvest thousands of content using freely and publicly available and easily configurable tools (Marwick and Boyd, 2014). The large amount of data that can be gathered from social media platforms has given rise to the use of data science tools to analyse 'big data' (Marwick and Boyd, 2014). Researchers are increasingly using techniques such as social networking analysis (Bosch, 2017; Literat & Markus, 2019), to make sense of 'big data'. While online content has been challenged as a sampling approach in big data analytics (Rafail, 2018), they are still one of the most commonly used methods to capture topic-specific data in social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook (Jensen et al., 2020).

The purposive technique was deployed because it helped to target news that has already been proven to be fake by lived experiences and after-news realities. Essentially, the selected fake news items were clustered around socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic issues about Nigerians or Nigeria that were posted between 2017 and early 2021. The justification for focusing on the three themes was because of the possibility of such kind of fake news from the news media to herald disruption of normalcy in the country.

After fact-checking the veracity or otherwise of the collected news items, they were systematically analysed in terms of content and aim of the originators to determine the suitability of each of the identified themes. The purpose the fake news items intended to serve was put into consideration in the process of the categorisation. In other words, nine news items were drawn purposively from the pool and were sorted into thematic groupings based on their content (three in in the three thematic categories). These case studies were analysed against the backdrop of their potential to disrupt peace and stability in Nigerian society. The nine case studies are spread around three categories: socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural. In each of the case studies, we highlighted the fake news, its source, platform, and date of publication. We then conducted a critical analysis of the fake news item, stating its impact and delineating its possible effect in the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural spheres of Nigeria.

4. Findings: The Meteoric Rise of Fake News in Nigeria

As earlier pointed out, the analysis of the selected fake news content in Nigeria is done under three themes: the socio-political, the socio-economic and the socio-cultural. Although the thematic categories sometimes intersect or overlap with one another in terms of orientation or signification, they provide a critical template to examine the trajectory of fake news in a developing society such as Nigeria.

4.1 Theme 1: The Socio-Political Case

So many fake news stories of socio-political dimensions circulate in the Nigerian media space. Often, Nigerian politicians smear their political opponents or perceived political foes to score political goals. They usually sponsor such onslaughts to discredit their rivals or opposing political parties before, during and even after elections at the local, state or national levels in Nigeria. Examples of these are presented in a case study format below:

4.1.1 Case 1: The Alleged Death of Chief Ernest Shonekan

Following reports circulating on social media and mobile social networking applications such as WhatsApp groups across Nigeria in 2021 that the former Interim president of Nigeria, Ernest Shonekan had died at 82; the daughter of the elder statesman debunked the fake news. Describing the online report as fake, Basirat Umar-Shonekan, a Canadian Naval accountant disclosed that even though Shonekan is on a sickbed, he is very much alive.

Figure 1. Fake news item about Ernest Shonekan's 'death'

While expressing her discontent and the embarrassment that the damaging reportage has caused her family, she noted that this compelled her to make phone calls to Nigeria to debunk the fake news. Such a rumoured story has socio-political implications in the regionalised politics of Nigeria in which one region tries to outsmart the other in the calculus of who occupies a high political office at the central government. Chief Ernest Shonekan is from the southwestern region and was the former head of the Interim Government in Nigeria (IGN). As a national figure, he is idolised by many Nigerians and his death would have meant political minus to his ethnic cluster, political associates, protégés and admirers within the country and beyond. Such death wishes are rife among politicians across Nigeria and the advent of digital media has only come to amplify them. This is an untoward media practice that needs to be discouraged, especially among the growing population in Nigeria. It should be noted, however, that Shonekan passed in January 2022.

4.1.2 Case 2: Fake pro-Buhari Trump Quotes

There is an avalanche of pro-Buhari fake news in the Nigerian media space. These fake news messages are crafted for political gains. Perhaps, the sympathy of the international community is central to the dissemination of such news items while the Nigerian populace is continually hoodwinked in a maze of castles that are built in the air by Nigerian politicians and their paid agents and political jobbers. Questionable self-acclaimed news bloggers and WhatsApp 'broadcasters,' especially from the youth population, would craft such socio-political messages and open several accounts on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc. They usually use different fictitious names to post such messages on social media platforms. They would then re-circulate or repost the fake news severally with the hope that they would reach the greatest number of the populace and gain political traction for their political allies. Sadly, as the fake news reverberates among Nigerians who either praise or denounce it, depending on their political leanings, it often assumes almost a believable status that could cause serious collateral damage to the object of interest or personality involved.

Figure 2. Samples of fake pro-Buhari Trump quotes

4.1.3 Case 3: Fake news Item about the Edo State University Iyamho

A news story from a blog named, "Naijablog" on Friday 21st June 2019 reads, "NUC revokes Edo University Iyamho operating licenses." The article narrates how an unresolved dispute over the ownership of Edo University Iyamho, has forced the National University Commission (NUC) to revoke the operating licenses of the university effective the 2019/2020 academic session. According to the story, the decision to revoke the licenses was taken after the 77th meeting of the commission in Abuja when the Edo State government could not provide authentic documents showing the genuine owners of the university. According to the blog, the University was hurriedly established in the 2nd term regime of Comrade Adams Oshiomhole as Governor of Edo State in 2014. This is even though Edo State already had a well-known, well-established university known as Ambrose Alli University (AAU) located at Ekpoma, Esanland in Edo State. The article accused Comrade Oshiomhole of denying AAU of its statutory funds and making the university unattractive to both academics and prospective students during his time as governor of Edo State. The blog further narrated how the school was denied subventions and all other statutory funding that could enhance its operations. The blog then noted that the situation was condemned by all Esan people until the tenure of Godwin Obaseki when the situation was remedied in 2017. According to the blog, with the revocation of the license of Iyahmo University, the Edo State Government will be forced to make public those behind the ownership of the controversial state university if it is public or privately owned and by who? The article erroneously stated that the NUC spokesman insisted that the decision is non-political and not connected to the political situation in Edo State. There was no such response.

Figure 3. Fake news item and a rebuttal from the Edo State University Iyamho

Fake news is potentially disruptive in socio-political terms. It may have been generated by fake news peddlers because

there is no love lost between the present Governor of Edo State, Mr. Godwin Obaseki and his predecessor, Comrade Adams Oshiomhole. This kind of disinformation is ostensibly geared towards widening the political schism between the two leaders and their political camps. In another sense, the fake news may have been posted to get the people in the area that the university is sited to be agitated and to embark on demonstrations to resist the closure of an institution that they see as a lifeline or source of livelihood. One may not be able to measure the damage such hoax may have caused despite the refutation by the registrar of the institution. A closer look at Figure 3 reveals that there is an attempt to pitch one ethnic group against another – the Esan who occupy the central district of Edo State where Ambrose Alli University is located and the Etsako – who occupy the northern district of the state where Edo University Iyamho is situated. This is not good for the socio-political health of the Edo society.

4.2 Theme 2: The Socio-Economic Case

The second thematic category borders on socio-economic issues or interests as they concern Nigeria/Nigerians or persons who have transactions or businesses to do in Nigeria or with Nigerians.

4.2.1 Case 4: Fake News about the Nigeria Football Association

An exclamatory headline on the homepage of *PlusTV* on April 1, 2019, reads: "Breaking! Gernot Rohr resigns from Super Eagles duty over incredible reason". The fake news story narrates how just 67 days to the start of the biggest football tournament in Africa, the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2019, that the Super Eagles Head Coach, Gernot Rohr has walked out of the Nigerian national team. According to the 'news' story, Rohr announced that he is leaving his role in Nigeria with the AFCON beckoning. The fake news story then went ahead to state that the former Bordeaux manager confirmed his departure via a letter addressed to the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) on 1st April 2019. The article attributes Rohr's decision to contract violations and a backlog of unpaid salaries by the NFF. The article quoted a purported resignation letter. The article reported that "a part of the letter reads: 'due to contract violations, unpaid wages, benefits to my players, Assistant Coaches and myself, I resign as Super Eagles Chief Coach'". The article then provides basic information about Rohr and his relationship with the NFF. The article notes:

> Rohr, 65, was appointed as Super Eagles boss in August 2016 and took charge of the Eagles 26 times. He won 14 of those games and as well leading the Super Eagles to become the first African side to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup after a 1–0 win against Zambia. His last game in charge of the three-time African champions was a one-nil success over Egypt in a friendly in Asaba, Delta State on 26 March 2019. At the time of publishing this report, the NFF is yet to react to the news of the coach's resignation.

This news item could be socio-economically disruptive. The truth of the matter is that Gernot Rohr, a German professional football manager, was still the Super Eagles of Nigeria's Head Coacheven in September 2021. At the time the fake news was peddled (that is, April 2019) he was with the team, preparing for the African Nations Cup in Egypt. The falseness of this news may have thrown hundreds of football-loving Nigerians into 'mourning'. This is because many Nigerians acknowledge the technical competence of Rohr and yearn for his direction and leadership of Nigerian football activities. Chances are that some of the Nigerian football fans who trust and believe in Rohr may have been hurt emotionally or even physically before finding out that the news is fake. Important, too, is the fact that the peddlers of the news may have been those who wished that Rohr was sacked for them to possibly take his place. There has been this unsustainable argument that Nigeria has produced world-class footballers and professional football coaches that it does not require foreign ones. However, in modern football, technical competence is crucial and regardless of the economic cost many football-loving nations, including Nigeria, go for the very best. So, the Nigerian Football Federation (NFF) may have weighed the economics of scale before hiring Rohr to the chagrin of a section of the football community who may want to economically benefit if they or their persons are engaged to do the job. This is likely the undercurrent of the fake news that was spread about Rohr's resignation.

Figure 4. A screenshot of the fake Rohr's resignation and rebuttal

4.2.2 Case 5: Fake Canadian visa Program

In a now-deleted Facebook post, a Facebook user posted the below advertisement on the 28th of October 2020:

> Hurry up, sign up for the Canada 2019 Immigration Program, the last chance to join Canada Immigration Program if you want to live in Canada and get Canadian citizenship and bring your family and get paid employment up to $ 3,500 per month. All expenses of the flight are paid, what are you waiting for register quickly in the migration program via the official website of the Ministry from here.

Many Nigerians are involved in both regular and irregular migrations. It is possibly because of this that some internet scammers framed up a thematic message on migration to Canada. The online message was widely circulated in Nigeria to hoodwink the 'travel-hungry' Nigerians and frisk them of their money. However, the Canadian Embassy in Nigeria has issued a letter that Nigerians should disregard such information. But the point is that many such fake stories on immigration-related matters are spread daily on many social media platforms, especially encrypted WhatsApp groups in Nigeria. Many Nigerians have fallen victim to such shenanigans and are still counting their socio-economic losses.

Figure 5. A screenshot of the fake Canadian visa program

4.2.3 Case 6: Fake News about Herdsmen

A fake news video (Global Happenings Today, 2020) on *YouTube* that circulated in February 2020 in Nigeria announced to its viewers that Fulani herdsmen were killing people on Benin-Ore Express Way. The socio-economic tensions and dislocations that this fake news caused in Midwestern Nigeria for days and weeks are better imagined than experienced. Nigeria is a multiethnic and multi-religious society that is prone to ethnoreligious clashes and to post fake news that Fulani herdsmen who are predominantly Muslims from the northern part of Nigeria are slaughtering southerners who are largely Christians in the location under reference is to call for chaos and anarchy. The fake news peddler(s) in the two-minute 39 seconds video showed stranded people and a queue of cars along the expressway. They further claimed that people were stranded because herdsmen killed residents of Ugbogui village along the Benin-Lagos expressway. "They (the Fulani) have killed about 10 people here now. They just carried about two corpses here now. This is an emergency, we need help. Fulani herdsmen have killed the villagers; they are still hiding inside the bushes." The truth is that a protest by villagers caused the traffic that lasted three hours on that day. A villager identified as Adebayo Abudu was said to have been kidnapped and his corpse was later discovered by the police. As the corpse was about to be taken to a morgue for autopsy, the family protested, seized the body and laid it on the Benin-Ore expressway, causing traffic gridlock. A combined team of soldiers and policemen eventually cleared the gridlock. Such potentially incendiary fake news must be avoided at all costs in Nigeria because of the conflagration it can spawn.

4.3 Theme 3: The Socio-Cultural Case

The third thematic category of fake news identified in this study has to do with socio-cultural matters.

4.3.1 Case 7: Fake News about a DCP in Nigeria

A Facebook account with the username, Igbo General TV circulated the below image with the following post, "Kaduna State Deputy Commissioner of police went to give firearms to kidnappers, unfortunately, he was arrested with them. Hmm! Wonders shall never end". The picture below has been circulating on social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp spaces, stating that a deputy commissioner in the Nigerian police was caught with some

members of his kidnapping gang. The real story is that the said deputy commissioner was an impostor. He stole the uniform which he wears whenever he goes out on armed robbery or kidnapping activities. He was caught with his gang members, but mischief makers went online to say he was a bona fide police officer in Nigeria, intending to either probably smear the image of the Nigerian police or occasion some kind of socio-cultural commotion that will make Nigerians rise against dutiful policemen and women across the country.
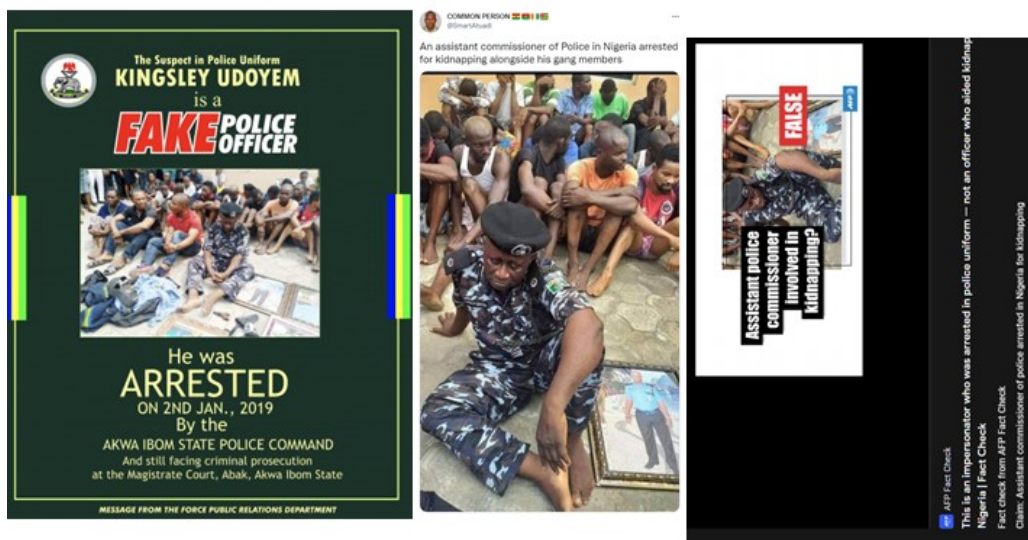

Figure 6. Fake news about a DCP in Nigeria

4.3.2 Case 8: Fake News about COVID-19

A fake news story on Facebook published on February 14, 2020, with the headline, "Chinese Doctors Confirmed African Blood Genetic Composition Resist Coronavirus after Student Cured" described how the coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). The 'news' argued that the novel Corona virus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. The article referenced an African, Senou from Cameroon who is studying in China as a case study as to how African genetic composition resists the virus. The remaining part of the article read thus:

> *Doctors seeking a cure to treat the dreadful virus were amazed to see Senou still alive and fit even after contracting the virus which has claimed 1,112 lives since it broke out in Wuhan, a couple of weeks ago. The Chinese doctors confirmed that Senou stayed alive because of his blood genetic composition which is mainly found in the genetic composition of sub-Saharan Africans. Chinese doctors also said that he remained alive because he has black skin, the antibodies of a black are 3 times stronger, more powerful, and more resistant compared to that of a white. Zanomoya Mditshwa an African shared his opinion saying the black man is indestructible. 'Caucasians are always at war with our black skin because they know our melanin is our defence against all that they throw at us. This proves yet again that the black man is indestructible, our bodies are made of the same substances that make up this Earth because we are owners of this universe, they will never wipe us off, and history has already proved that' he said.*

The above is a highly distorted online piece of information whose circulation may have misled many Nigerians to believe that they are immune to the coronavirus (also known as COVID-19). It also brings to the fore the ludic or humoristic dimension in some of the fake news items that circulate in the Nigerian media space. The recent outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic is having a huge impact globally on human beings, including the black race. Nothing could have been farther from the truth than to say that Africans (in the case of this study, Nigerians) have blood genetic compositions that are resistant to it. Although China appears to have put the ravaging virus under control, it continues to spread to other parts of the world, noticeably in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, causing a high death toll and consequently widespread anxiety and fear. So, Africans being immune to COVID-19 is unfounded and fake.

At the time of the 'news' story, it was too preliminary to conclude that COVID-19 does not affect a black person or an African or a Nigerian. Several clinically proven tests would have to be conducted and certified by the relevant authorities for that to happen. Hence, such deliberate disinformation of the populace via social media needs to be checked. Evidentially, many Nigerians and indeed Africans have tested positive for COVID-19 (Uwalaka, 2022), with

many in self-isolation or practising social distancing to avoid spreading the highly contagious disease. It is not a gimmick by those in government to siphon money as 'usual.' As of now, China has experienced a great number of deaths as a result of COVID-19. This is the same story in most parts of Europe, the Americas and Africa. So, regardless of the socio-cultural inadequacies of Nigerian leadership, the populace must heed the advisories such as personal hygiene, social distancing, social isolation and all other information purveyed via credible media such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), among others.

Figure 8. A screenshot of a fake news story about COVID-19

4.3.3 Case 9: Fake News about US visa BAn on Nigerian Students

A screaming online newspaper headline read: "Breaking!!! USA place a ban on Study Visa for Nigerians till further notice". The article went on to discuss how President Trump ordered the issuance of study visas to be paused indefinitely until further notice for Nigerians as President. The 'news' story alleged that this visa ban was instituted as the Trump administration considers a new immigration measure to impose visa restrictions on countries whose citizens have a track record of overstaying beyond the validity of their short-term US visas. The article went further to claim that the relationship between the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and that of the United States of America (USA) may have triggered the Trump administration into issuing the alleged unofficial directive to Homeland Security to ban students from Nigeria. The article noted that President Trump directed the DHS to ensure that student applicants for study visas were "to be 'iced' and placed on 'pause' indefinitely until the immigration policies are officially amended". However, the US Embassy in Nigeria has debunked the statement as untrue and advised eligible would-be students to go about pursuing their careers or aspirations. Such fake news could have caused diplomatic furore between Nigeria and the US. It is also capable of causing socio-cultural anxieties among Nigerians who may have planned to seek a US visa for educational, familial, or other related reasons. Nigeria receives a vast majority of non-immigrant B1/B2 visas issued to Africans. It accounted for over 25% [132,137] of visas issued to Africans in 2018 alone (Department of State, 2020). The highlighted statistics show the salience of Nigerians to the international student market of the US and also how US education impacts Nigerians.

Figure 9. A screenshot of a fake news story about the US visa ban

5. Discussion

In this study, we examined the impact of fake news on the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural life of Nigeria by analysing selected fake news cases from online media space between 2017 and 2020. Our analyses of the case studies show that fake news is very rife in Nigeria and is increasingly becoming a sub-culture among the populace. The cases X-rayed under the thematic categories are the tip of the iceberg as far as the purveyance of fake news is concerned in the Nigerian media space. This is likely the reason why Soyinka (2019) noted that fake news may cause World War III if an effort was not made to curb it. Soyinka (2019) argued that World War III will be started by fake news and that such fake news probably will be generated by a Nigerian or in Nigeria. This calls for all stakeholders such as media outfits, media professionals, media scholars, media managers, governments at all levels, and individuals/consumers of media messages, among others, in Nigeria to join in the fight and to address the issue of fake news in the age of digitalism. Omoera and Ogoke (2021) contend that "a national orientation is required to correct a gullible culture of denial, propagation of fake news and the willingness of readers, listeners and other media users to accept such news as true without critical thinking" (p.145).

Previous studies (Omoera and Ogoke, 2021; Uwalaka et al., 2021; Uwalaka 2021, 2022) have observed that fake news circulates more among students of tertiary institutions and degree holders who are supposed to have advanced opinions on the issue. Hence, the suggestion that deliberate national orientation campaigns should be done via available media and tertiary institutions' curricula should be reconfigured to give attention to this area of national life in Nigeria to build a mass of critical thinkers, not 'zombies.' Mwantok (2020) posits that in the last decade, mainstream media has struggled to compete with the new media with little success. This has left it in a state of 'if you can't beat them, join them.' In a way, the foregoing explains why there is hardly a mainstream media in the country that is not active on the digital platform. 'But in joining them,' she further argues that digital technology has considerably reduced the circulation of mainstream newspapers/media, and the art of news consumption, and gathering. Media outfits and professionals are now expected to contend with opportunities and threats inherent in emerging technologies in a very competitive media business ecosystem. Unfortunately, many of them in a bid to 'break news' unwittingly circulate fake news, especially on their online platforms. Hence, the Nigerian media (both mainstream and online) should be more circumspect in its news reportage.

Closely tied to this is the issue of the ethical behaviour of media professionals, particularly online journalists who purposefully or inadvertently peddle fake news. Apart from possible censure, they must strive at all times to double-check the pieces of information or news items from reliable and reputable authorities or sources concerned/checking sites before publishing or 'broadcasting.' As well, as media or news organisations, professional journalists in Nigeria can subscribe to such AI-enabled platforms to fact-check news before reporting them. Marr (2021) argues that to make critical decisions in life, we require facts. However, since anyone can publish information on the internet, false news travels fast and can have dire consequences. Hence, the development of a solution that combines

artificial and human intelligence to verify the veracity of news, social discussion and images, etc. Another point is that media outfits should be professionally humble enough to retract false news as soon as they find out or the regulatory agencies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should be proactive enough to sanction erring outfits or online media operators. In many countries, media organisations such as newspaper operators and broadcast media consortia, are required to issue corrections if they publish/broadcast or print false information.

At the level of individual consumers of media messages, there is the need for a reorientation of Nigerians to be wary of the kind of information they pass on to their neighbours as well as to be more critical of whatever they hear or receive as information flows, especially on social media platforms, such as encrypted WhatsApp groups. Nigerians, particularly the youths should realise that they are liable when they forward anything that is found to be fake or incorrect because of its disruptive or negative tendency. Such a person is as guilty as the originator of the supposed fake news. The greatest weapon humanity has in this era of post-enlightenment where fake news and misrepresentations have become marketable commodities in the all-powerful modern media, are the tools of deconstruction and reconstruction (receive, query, verify, identify contraries/conflicts, relate and assess all against physical realities). It is a critiquing power, which enlightenment itself, gave human beings through education, which we should be conscious of at all times. It could also be wise for the Nigerian government (or its relevant agencies) to put in place a new regulatory framework to check the purveyance of false news in the Nigerian media space. For instance, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) could do well to review their laws and regulations to capture what happens in cyberspace regarding Nigeria. This can help to contain the rate of fake news peddling and the disruptions they engender. Given this, such rules should begin to apply to blog owners and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which reach billions of people. This is not about censorship – no content would be taken down or deleted. Instead, the social media companies would make sure people who had been given false information were provided with the full facts so they can make informed decisions. WhatsApp issued paid advertisements on radio and television stations across Nigeria in the first quarter of 2019 on the need for social media users to double-check the news they receive before spreading it to others. Although this is commendable, they must go a step further to see how they can proactively respond to false news items and block their circulation through the use of appropriate AI technology.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined fake news as disruptive media in the Nigerian media space. Observably, the Nigerian police say 'fake news' on Facebook is killing people. BBC Africa EYE investigates how viral disinformation and hate speech are inflaming tensions in a region already ablaze with ethnic violence (BBC, 2018). Given the rifeness of this challenge, the article recommends a reorientation of Nigerians to do more critical thinking and be circumspect of the kind of news items they spread or exchange on SMPs such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups. It also suggests that a new system of technology-enabled media literacy and regulatory framework should be embraced by the relevant authorities as part of the panoply of strategies to contain the virulent circulation or flow of false news in a country that is fraught with huge developmental challenges. A lot is happening, and technology must be deployed to enhance data-centred journalism in Nigeria. To do this, media professionals should do more investigative journalism and media literacy targeted at the average Nigerian to raise his or her consciousness of self-awareness and capacity to engage in critical thinking. The deepening of critical thinking culture among the reading Nigerian public will, in the long run, enable the populace to exercise restraints in spreading false news or relying on fake news. Also, relevant government agencies and concerned NGOs should lobby the national assembly to amend the NCC and the NBC laws to include some kind of regulation of satellite broadcasting activities within the Nigerian broadcast media ecology.

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