Flattening the Curve of Fake News in the Epoch of *Infodemic* in the Nigerian News Media Industry

Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD
Department of Mass Communication, Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
Email: desmonddoo@yahoo.com
&
Maureen Chigbo
Department of Mass Communication, Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
Email: mechigbo@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examined the incidence of Fake News in Nigeria through focus group discussion with 25 participants. It was established that although fake news has been around from time immemorial, discussants did not consider it infodemic in the country. The study established the prevalence of fake news in Nigeria. Interestingly, it noted that infodemic is still a new lexicon in Nigeria as many of the discussants, who have at least first degree certificate in different fields of endeavour, heard of the word for the first time during the discussion. The study established that the negative impact of fake news on the Nigerian society is limited, in accordance with Mass Media Limited Effect Theory and research on Uses and Gratification Theory that established that media consumers are able to discriminate in media consumption. It also established that average people are gullible victims of the fake news but also that fake news other consumers seek out information that aligns with their beliefs to fulfill information needs. This conclusion is based on qualitative information obtained from participants which align with the fact that although man is a rational being who is critical in the choice of content to consume that gratifies a need and so will readily dispense media content (Fake News)

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that offers no reward, and can also be influenced to an extent but it in a limited way.

Introduction

The study is coming at a time most states, development organisations, and public-spirited individuals are worried about the adverse effect of fake news on governance, national and international programmes to uplift mankind. It comes at a time misinformation and disinformation are rife amidst the flurry of social media apps invented through the advancement of technology with the aid of the ubiquitous internet. This has led to the creation and dissemination of information not only by the traditional media of print and broadcast but by peripheral reporters (also known as citizen journalists) to the public.

The dissemination of unverified information heightened during the outbreak of the coronavirus global pandemic on potential cures for the disease which was described as an *infodemic. Infodemic* was used by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to describe the avalanche of misinformation and propaganda against real messages to help people understand the seriousness of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 and how to combat it peaked in 2020.

On the other hand, fake news is a phenomenon that has been with humanity from time immemorial; right from the time the biblical satan misrepresented the instruction God gave to Adam and Eve - the first man and woman on how to conduct their affairs in the garden of Eden. That misrepresentation that Adam and Eve swallowed led to the fall of man and the concomitant punishment and suffering for mankind. The implication is that fake news if left unchecked has dire consequences. That consequence is more so with the advent of the mass media oiled

by communication technology; the growth of independent press and yellow journalism in particular, which thrived on gossip to entrap readers.

In modern times, the advent of the ubiquitous internet upped the ante in the dissemination of fake news aided by a variety of social media apps that have created the global village postulated by Marshal McCluhan in the 60s with a quantum leap in information dissemination from one corner of the world to another. The new technology has led to an increase in the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda globally by actors of different hues that could threaten the political, social-cultural, religious, and economic well-being of society. The quantum leap in the dissemination of fake news gained new proportion with the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic (WHO 2020). In Nigeria, there were stories of people who drank salt water, and consumed tons of hot water and other concoctions; and in other climes, there were reports of people who injected disinfectant to cure the disease which led to avoidable deaths.

Realising the enormity of the danger posed by the misinformation on the pandemic, WHO promptly declared a campaign against the *infodemic* to save the situation in 2020. Did the action of WHO succeed in taming fake news or reversing the *infodemic*? This study through a combination of uses and gratification, critical and limited effects theoretical framework was able to identify and analyse the incidence of fake news and *infodemic*. It was established that fake news, which is not the same as *infodemic*, has been in Nigeria from time immemorial.

It also suggested measures to curb fake news and ensure it does not become *infodemic*. The surprise though is that in Nigeria, *infodemic* is not yet a common lexicon which invariably leads to the conclusion that fake news though has a limited adverse effect on society is not yet considered an epidemic to be regarded as *infodemic*. Hence, the study examined the

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incidence of fake news, how it relates to *infodemic* and find out measures to reduce it.

Research Objectives
The study was to:
1. Identify the incidence of fake news in Nigeria
2. Ascertain the consequence of fake news in Nigeria
3. Find out ways to reduce the spread of fake news in the country

Theoretical Framework
The study is premised on the critical and limited effects theories of communication to examine the incidence of fake news and *infodemic* in Nigeria. Uses and gratification model was used to explain the content consumers' ability to discriminate as rational beings and not helpless victims and seek out information that meets his/her needs. This normative media theory was used to gain knowledge of the incidence of fake news, its relationship to *infodemic*, the purveyors, motives, and influence on society in accordance with the impact on the society in line with the limited effect theory of the media; and the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) which stipulates that media users are rational/cognitive beings who actively seek information they need. This presupposes the assumption that media consumers will gravitate towards fake news if it fulfills their needs and vice versa if it does in accordance with submissions of West and Turner (2010) cited Katz, Blumber and Gurevitch (1974). The researchers used UGT to discredit the mass media theory that the average people are helpless victims of powerful mass media and in this study the fake news and *infodemic*. The assumption was that although government and society are worried about fake news which is considered *infodemic,* not only were most people not directly affected by media messages, but when they were influenced, they were not

all influenced similarly, albeit in a limited way as explained above.
This theory helped to guard against unwarranted stricture of the purveyors of fake news that could undermine freedom of the press and democratic ethos in Nigeria based on the discredited belief that people are not smart or strong enough to protect themselves against unwanted effects of fake news considered to be *infodemic*. Hence, the framework provided a systematic and comprehensive articulation of all actors in society including fake news disseminators and consumers' role in flattening the curve of fake news in an era of *infodemic*.

Origin of Infodemic Lexicon

When David Rothkopf, a journalist and political scientist in the *Washington Post* column coined the word *infodemic,* he may not have imagined the buzz word has gained since 2020 with the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In 2003, Rothkopf used *infodemic* to describe the epidemic of information afflicting society other than the outbreak of the SARS epidemic, which could thwart efforts to contain the health crisis. Seventeen years after, the World Health Organisation (WHO) resurrected the *infodemic* to describe the information overload inflicted on society mostly through social media as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, there has been a conscious effort by researchers to study the phenomenon - *infodemic* as it relates to fake news. Rothkopf described *infodemic* as: *"A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation, and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities..."*
Amplifying, the WHO (2020) stated that an *infodemic* "is too much information including false or misleading

information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An *infodemic* can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them."

Similarly, Zarocosta (2020) wrote much of the misinformation is based on conspiracy theories about how the virus originated, its cause, its treatment, and its mechanism. The potential harm of rabid dissemination of fake news moved WHO to espouse an *infodemic* systematic management to enable good health practices through four types of activities: listening to community concerns and questions; promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice; building resilience to misinformation, and engaging and empowering communities to take positive action.

Zarocosta (2020) quoted Sylvie Briand, director of Infectious Hazards Management at WHO's Health Emergencies Programme and architect of WHO's strategy to counter the infodemic risk, as saying: "We know that every outbreak will be accompanied by a kind of tsunami of information, but also within this information, you always have misinformation, rumours, etc. We know that even in the Middle Ages there was this phenomenon".

"But the difference now with social media is that this phenomenon is amplified, it goes faster and further, like the viruses that travel with people and go faster and further. So it is a new challenge, and the challenge is the [timing] because you need to be faster if you want to fill the void…What is at stake during an outbreak is making sure people will do the right thing to control the disease or mitigate its impact. So it is not only the information to make sure people are informed; it is also making sure people are informed to act appropriately."

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Three important things are implicit in the musings of Rothkopf, WHO, and Zarocosta. First is the overwhelming effect of *infodemic* on society as a concomitant to fake news. Second is that misinformation, disinformation, falsehood, and propaganda are ingredients of *infodemic* which are conveyed to society as fake news. Thirdly is the postulation that *infodemic* is not limited to only a health crisis. It can be extrapolated to any raging issue in society be it political, economic, cultural, or religious crises in the society. This line of thought behooves that the emergence of any crisis situation could trigger fake news which results in an *infodemic* aided and abetted by social media. These postulations are backed by the mass media theory of the all-powerful effect on society which could be negative or positive depending on what is being communicated and who is receiving what information. On these premises alone, the trio's worry about the overwhelming effect of *infodemic* and fake news is understandable and dovetails naturally to the warning by the Nigerian government that fake news will lead to the next war.

Lai Mohammed, the Nigerian minister of Information and Culture, alerted that the country may "be sitting on a keg of gunpowder" if fake news is not addressed through legislation. Mohammed sought the partnership of the House of Representatives Committee on Information, National Orientation, Ethics, and Values to track news to prevent "the next war that will be fought in the country and across the world" provoked by misinformation on social media. Also, the Nigerian presidency has accused a U.S.-based magazine, Foreign Affairs, of spreading fake news. Garba Shehu, the spokesperson of President Muhammadu Buhari, said the "latest article on Nigeria in Foreign Affairs titled 'The Giant of Africa is Failing' is unfair both to a magazine with such an esteemed pedigree and to its readers." The latest Foreign affairs article, which infuriated the Nigerian government was co-authored by

a former American ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, and another researcher, Robert Rotberg.

The Nigerian government's foreboding on fake news resonated in the study by Ogbette, Idam, Kareem, and Ogbette (2019). The researchers noted that fake news creates tension, killings, and pandemonium which are not good for the peace and unity of Nigeria and the world at large. Listing major causes of fake news as a quest for relevance, hostile government, and civil actors, poor regularisation of the internet, and money-making, Ogbette, Idam, Kareem and Ogbette (2019) concluded that fake news' impact has been so bad most especially now Nigeria is facing different intra crises like Fulani-Herdsmen and Farmers clashes, and militancy. Consequently, Ogbette et al stressed the need for verification of information and penalizing blogs or media outlets that post fake news no matter the circumstance to serve as deterrence.

However, the motivation for peddling fake news, which was a common occurrence in Africa before it became a concern for the Global North, was explained by Ndlovu, Madrid-Morales, Wasserman and Tully (2021). The researchers through 12 focus groups with university students revealed two common motivations – civic duty and fun - for sharing misinformation in six sub-Saharan African countries. "The sharing of political (dis)information was uneven but common among students with high levels of self-reported political engagement," Ndlovu, Madrid-Morales, Wasserman and Tully (2021).

Unlike Ndlovu et al, Aruwan (2022), zeroed his study on outlets for fake news. He concluded that in a country like Nigeria and especially in Kaduna State, false stories spread through "some outlets masquerading as media sites but exist purely to generate reports to deceive the public" could spark far-reaching violence". These outlets engage in organised and systematic disinformation campaigns which have the capability to disrupt governance in entire countries as "Disinformation

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can twist election campaigns, affect public perceptions, or shape human emotions," Aruwan (2022).

Agreeing, Bakare (2017) cited two fake websites - the metro-uk.com and cloned Huffington Post, registered on October 15, 2016, and November 19, 2016, respectively, via proxy on Godaddy. The websites 'broke' news that President Muhammadu Buhari died of "unknown disease" and later that he was advised to resign by his doctors after he attempted to commit suicide (Bakare, 2017). The actual Metro UK website was created on August 1, 1996, and Huffington Post on March 10, 2005, with the names of the owners attached to them (Bakare, 2017). Bakare wondered whether the fake websites were set up less than a month from each other, ostensibly to publish unsubstantiated and fake reports to set Nigeria alight and corral revenue from *Google* Adsense like the case of Teenage Macedonians, who claimed they set up basic websites filled with outright misleading and totally false report to sway readers' perception of the two leading candidates in the US presidential election primarily to make money from *Google* Adsense.

Concerned about the fundamental threats of fake news to democratic systems, WischnewskiIn (undated) studied how psychological mechanisms facilitate this misinformation dissemination. Differently, both WischnewskiIn (undated) and Aruwan (2022) opined that people are more susceptible to misinformation that aligns with their existing views. The researchers agreed that misinformation and disinformation are usually designed to generate emotional reactions, most times based on identity markers like religion and ethnicity. With this dangerous tool, issues that should be handled with objectivity are totally obscured by sentiment, creating devastating results. Corroborating, Saieddine (2020) observed that fake news is not restricted to political content that can be harmful and deadly as it is linked to an increase in hate crime, youth crimes, the lynching of innocent people by mistaken identity, election

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fraud, and more. Also, the damaging effect of fake news and *infodemic* prompted Leon, Martınez-Costa, Salaverrıa, and Lopez-Goñi (2022) to state that "The rampant propagation and widespread availability of disinformation point to the need to foster media and scientific caution and literacy among the public and increase awareness of the importance of timing and substantiation of scientific research."

Fake News and Infodemic Containment Strategies
Fake news detection is still a challenge facing researchers. Olalyeye, Abayomi, Adesemowo, Misra and Kose (2022) opined that this is partly due to the spontaneous nature of social media, and the complexity and multiplicity of online communication data. Another challenge is the fear of undermining freedom of expression by authoritarian states under the guise of containment. Hence, Safiedine (2020) suggested that a "potential solution may lie in tweaking technology such that we can either slow or stop the propagation of fake news while ensuring freedom of expression remains protected." This is a tenuous call, particularly when today, private social media giants have the power to take down or censor posts signaling power and influence beyond national and transnational boundaries (Saffiedine, 2020).
Nonetheless, the United Nations (UN) Department of Global Communication (2020) mapped out five ways to fight the *infodemic* including producing, and disseminating facts and accurate information; partnering with WhatsApp and Facebook, etc., to launch messages in different languages. WHO mobilised journalists, civil society, and top officials to speak out for the right to share accurate information to combat *infodemic*. WHO also established the Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) that united technical and social media teams working closely to track and respond to misinformation, myths, and rumours and provide tailored information and evidence for action.

Methodology

This study combines both qualitative analyses of relevant literature with primary data gathered from a focus group discussion. The research used a purposive sampling method to select 25 participants. The 25 discussants were divided into five focus groups for discussion conducted within three weeks from March 22 – April 11, 2022. The discussion was done online on the WhatsApp platform in line with the Hennink, Kaiser, and Weber (2019) position that saturation is achieved at a relatively small number of the focus group. For instance, five focus groups comprising five discussants each were used for this study as advised by Hennink, Kaiser and Weber (2019). Also, the recruitment of the focus group participants is in accordance with homogeneity with sufficient variation among participants with contrasting opinions, a small sample size of three to six is better for understanding complex issues like fake news and *infodemic*; the discussants' level of experience and passion for the issues being discussed; and the number of questions during the discussion. This was recommended by Calsen and Glenton (2011) and Oates and Alevizou (2018). In addition to information generated through the literature review, those who participated in the discussion include media professionals who have been in practice for between 10 to 40 years. They comprise public relations officials, journalists, in both print and online media, journalists turned politicians and communication consultants who now work with non-governmental organisations. They were interviewed based on the three research questions to understand the incidence of fake news; its relations with *infodemic* and explain the impact both have on society based on mass media effects, critical and uses and gratification theories already explained in the theoretical framework for this research and to ascertain how to reduce the phenomena.

Results
Table 1: Social Demographic Detail of Discussants (N=25)

Sex	Frequency	%
Male	19	76
Female	6	24
Location	Frequency	%
South West	7	28
South East	7	28
South South	4	16
North Central	5	20
North East	1	4
North West	1	4
Occupation	Frequency	%
Journalism (Print)	6	24
Online Media	11	44
Communication	4	16
Consultant	1	4
Public Relations	1	4
Politician	1	4
Business	1	4
Age Range	Frequency	%
60 and Above	12	48
51 – 60	9	36
31 – 50	4	16
Educational Qualification	Frequency	%
First Degree	17	68
Master Degree	6	24
PhD	2	8

Source: Field Study, 2022
The discussants, who were marked D1 – D25, are from the six regions of Nigeria. Twelve of them are 60 and above; nine are between 51 and 60, while three are between 31—50. Their educational qualifications ranged from First, Master to

Doctorate degrees. They noted that *infodemic* is a new lexicon in Nigeria. Four persons (two males and two females did not respond to all the questions asked while 21 responded. Responses of all discussants provided in-depth qualitative data to understand the phenomena of fake news and *infodemic* and how to flatten the curve.

RQ1. Incidence of Fake News in Nigeria

The keywords in the discussants' definition of fake news are false news; misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, fabrication, lies, untrue, incorrect and deliberate, misleading, alternative facts, preconceived narrative, etc. The definitions were wide and varied including broadcast, print, and online media. All discussants agreed that fake news is prevalent in Nigeria and linked it to the advent of social media Apps with the ubiquitous internet. Two outstanding elaborate definitions from discussants are stated below.

> "Any piece of information for public consumption, whether written or verbal, deliberately indulged in and calculated to misinform and mislead the public in pursuit of a personal or group interests. The motive is dark and thoroughly sinister. Fake news is more than a fanciful name for lies because the liar is not often motivated by sinister motives to distort realities and cause a course of action to benefit himself or a particular group to which he belongs. A liar lies to save himself from trouble. Like fake news, lies too hurt, but the hurt is more personal than general." – D2
>
> "Fake news is prevalent in Nigeria because of the ease of access to social media. Entrenched social divisions such as ethnicity, religion, and politics fuel Fake news. Fake news is used for different propaganda purposes. The problem is not limited to Nigeria though." – D 4

Furthermore, discussants used phrases like "information excess", "epidemic of information"; "Unbridled social media

publication, "repetitive publication" "not in the dictionary" to explain their understanding of *infodemic*. Some of the unique explanations singled out are quoted below.

> "When there is too much information of a given subject, which is sometimes hysterical in nature and that comes with greater chances of fake news." – D22
>
> "Hearing it for the first time but the construction suggests epidemic of information. That's information to the point of general ailment. – D12

Also, 10 discussants said fake news is not infodemic. Five were affirmative while four said the two concepts are similar in nature as they have the same character but that the purpose could be different. Interesting responses include:

> "Fakes news is not infodemic. There is a world of difference between them. Information overload is as a result of competition by information providers. Their purpose is basically noble – to offer information deemed by them to meet public need for such information. Their basic objective is to help the public by displacing ignorance in favour of information. The difference between it lies in the motive." – D2
>
> "Fake news is Infodemic to the extent that it becomes a threat, cause instability and a challenge because it has become pervading, wide spread that you can hardly differentiate between fake and real except you check and of course not everybody has the time to fact check." – D11

Interestingly, discussants explained fake news is not infodemic because it is easily countered with accuracy. It deals only with falsehood whereas infodemic is about the spread of both true and untrue stories. Fake news is not *infodemic* because it is spread not as a 'proven knowledge' about a thing and does not get wide acceptance passively like *infodemic*.
Quotes on the two concepts are as follows:

"Fake news is not *infodemic* because fake news is disinformation. However, *infodemic* is mere misinformation, which may not be deliberately intended to mislead." – D8

"Because some of them originate from the fact and twisted out of context. No smoke with fire. Misinformation originate from a factual situation which they now misconstrue and they begin to spread misinformation" - D11

RQ2: Consequences of fake news in the society

Surprisingly, only one discussant said there is no relationship between fake news and *infodemic*. The rest agreed that the relationship is that there is some element of fact in fake news which if not corrected becomes *infodemic*. Quotes showing their connection are:

"If fake news is widespread it can lead to being *infodemic*." – D1

"I fail to see the relationship between them. Fake news is a deliberate and calculated attempt to provide the public with misleading information about individuals and/or groups to achieve certain objectives. *Infodemic* is the downside of too much information about a particular subject of public interest such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The resultant public confusion cannot be blamed on those who want to help the public with whatever innocent information they may have." Both spread news on a large scale. Both also spread fake news." – D2

Discussants disagreed on the date fake news started in Nigeria. Two quotes below captured their views on its beginning.

"Fake news has been around from time immemorial." – D1

"Nobody can really say with certainty when fake news began in Nigeria. However, the rise of the tabloids in

> the 1980s brought a new form of journalism. It gave birth to junk journalism which slowly coloured the way people felt about the profession. The tabloids were ultra-sensational in their attempts to bring in readers and in the process make money for their publications. In the process, however, outright lies became the norm rather than the exception. Junk journalists then became purveyors of fake news as it is known today. It has always been but assumed greater pre-eminence during the Nigerian civil war and then during political electioneering campaign." – D23

Majority of the discussants (14) cited different crisis period in Nigeria as the peak of fake news. They include: Nigerian civil war (1967 – 1970), Ebola crisis (2014), ENDSARS (2020), COVID-19 pandemic (2020), and general elections (2015 and 2019). Seven discussants believe it has not peaked but evolved with the internet and the invention of more social media apps and access to cheap data. Four people were unsure when it peaked in Nigeria.

> "It will always peak whenever the society is grappling with any all - encompassing challenge, good or bad: pandemic, natural disaster, terrorism, riots, elections, etc. Rise in demand for information arises, the spin doctors get to work 'helping out' the genuine practitioners". – D20

> "It is not quite at its peak yet. It will get worse with politics and election time because it will be useful for propaganda." - D15

According to discussants, fake news is negative, distorts reality; causes conflicts; communal violence; endangers peace, and threatens social stability if it is not well managed; causes distrust in the media; undermines governance and democratic process. It comes up unannounced and even when it is corrected, people are happier to retain fake news because it is better than the real news and answers the questions they are

asking or corresponds with their sentiments at that point in time.

> "Fake news is injurious to any society. However, in Nigeria with its high proportion of the population as impressionable and illiterate, fake news can potentially be devastating. What is more, institutions which ought to correct wrong impressions are either complicit or conspiratorially silent" - D20

> "It sustains distrust in everything and everyone." – D12

According to the discussants, fake news has damaged the image of the country, and divided citizens who distrust the government.

> "Because of it foreign direct investors and partners have bad impressions about our environments. The US Secretary General who visited Maiduguri this week said so. He said he had perceived gloom but what he was represented hope"! – D5

> "Spreading fear and alarm, ethnic and communal killings in Kaduna and Benue" – D18

RQ3. Curbing fake news in an epoch of *Infodemic*

Discussants listed social media operators, government propagandists, individuals, social media networks, political and tribal groups, competitors, websites, and social media channels as disseminators illustrated in quotes below.

> "irresponsible bloggers, some media professionals who hasten to publish without confirming authenticity, sub-media practitioners, social media influencers, paid agents, etc." - D4

> "Those who have access to the internet, internet-enabled phones and social media. In Nigeria, practically everybody thinks he/she can push out his views as news. – D3

Furthermore, Discussants established different motives for publishing fake news to include financial reward; manipulation

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of populace; scoring cheap political point or demarketing rivals or blackmailing enemies.

> "Motives vary according to their agenda they want to accomplish. Some want to gain political advantage, some to get favourable political opinion, others mischief. Some may have genuine motives; ignorance not knowing that they need to fact check before publishing. Citizen journalists, untrained news sources do not respect professional ethics." - D14

> "Motive could be to pursue personal agenda, or it could be for material gain. If you drive traffic to your blog or sensational presentations on the social media, you are likely to make some monetary gain. You can also draw people to support your cause because your views fit neatly into theirs. The disruptive element of fake news is profitable for those who drive it." – D3

Discussants were almost evenly divided on whether fake news carriers succeeded in the mission. Thirteen said fake news purveyors succeed while 12 believe they do not. Quotes below depicted this.

> "Millions of people cannot differentiate between facts and fake news. If people consume fake news and act or take decisions on the fake news available to them, fake news carriers succeed" – D3

> "At times they succeed if it is to cause confusion or divert attention, or cause violence. If it is to change public opinion, they succeed sometimes or other times they do not. But since their motives are never made public, it is difficult to say with certainty whether those motives were achieved or unsuccessful. – D14

Discussants listed reasons fake news thrives in Nigeria to include a gullible population; poverty, illiteracy, unquestioning followership, and government dereliction of duty; people seeking alternative "truths" and information that validate their own views and prejudices without interrogating such

information for its veracity. Also cited is the constitutional provision for freedom of expression.

Also, five discussants could not think of any benefit of fake news. Others said purveyors of fake news use it to drive traffic to their websites, generate revenue; break up cohesive groups, and mind control.

> "Entertainment, knowledge, among others". – D23

> "The benefits are few. One of them is to make people a bit more careful and more compliant with the law rules and regulations for fear of being caught which can make the media exaggerate the extent of malfeasance. - D22

Discussants listed beneficiaries as mischievous minds, politicians, clerics, contractors, chauvinists, and initiators. For example:

> "Those who have an agenda to push and those who make money by building traffic for their views and portals. Mischief makers too are beneficiaries. – D3

> "The consumers of fake news are gullible and impressionistic; people who do not take the trouble to ask questions. But the primary beneficiaries are those whose interests fake news is intended to serve." – D2

Moreso, discussants said fake news has come to stay in Nigeria but suggested flattening it with professionalism, legislation, and ethical practices by information disseminators in government, corporate bodies, media outlets, and the citizenry. Their views were captured below.

> "No. Even in the US, there is Fake News. It is a phenomenon that has come to stay. Fake news is an outlet for people to vent their inner sentiments. There is no way you can stop it. The challenge is in managing it because people have different sentiments at every point in time and will put something out that reflects what they are feeling. – D11

> "With stringent laws and better education" – D19

Discussion of Findings

Qualitative data from the literature reviewed and opinions from the focus group discussions fulfilled the objectives of the study as well as answered the research questions. They established that the incidence of fake news is prevalent in Nigeria and can be reduced through legislation and professionalism; verifiability; education and sensitisation of the citizenry; tweaking of technology and messaging apps to detect fake news which is not always easy. This finding aligns with Yang (2017), who noted that "automatic fake news detection is a challenging problem in deception detection, which has tremendous real-world political and social impacts.

The study established that fake news is injurious to society but thrives because the purveyors derive financial and entertainment value from it. Discussants agreed that fake news is potentially devastating in Nigeria with a high proportion of the impressionable and illiterate population, where institutions which ought to correct wrong impressions are either complicit or conspiratorially silent because they are benefiting from the chaos caused by disinformation. Ogbette, Idam, Kareem and Ogbette (2019) corroborated this and stated that fake news creates tension, killings, and pandemonium which are not good for the peace and unity of Nigeria and the world at large.

The study also established that poor governance and distrust in government activities, lack of prompt and genuine information on topical issues result in fake news. Suggesting that good governance can mitigate fake news, discussants also revealed that government officials, security agencies, clerics, and corporate bodies are among purveyors of fake news Melki, Tamim, Hadid, Makki, El Amine, Hitti (2021) supported this finding, stating that higher education and trust in government decreased belief in COVID-19 myths and false information, while trust in news from social media, interpersonal communication and clerics did the opposite and contributed to less critical verification practices before posting on social

media and resulted in a cycle of spreading fake news. In contrast, media literacy training contributed to breaking that cycle by increasing critical verification practices before sharing on social media, thereby contributing to mitigating the infodemic (Melki et al, 2021).

Largely, Discussants agreed that fake news has been in Nigeria from time immemorial and exploded with the advent of the internet and social media Apps. Nakov and Da San Martino (2021) corroborated that the internet and social media apps are responsible for the rise of the proliferation of false information, specifically created to affect individual people's beliefs, and ultimately influence major events such as political elections; set the dawn of the Post-Truth Era, where appeal to emotions has become more important than the truth.

Two corollary findings are that majority of the discussants heard the word *infodemic* for the first time during discussion and after explanation did not consider fake news as *infodemic*. Because fake news is easily countered with accurate information and deals only with the spread of falsehood whereas *infodemic* spreads of both true and untrue stories.

The study established that fake news thrives because purveyors derive both entertainment and financial benefits and use it for mind control. As Ndlovu et al (2021) research corroborated that university students have two common motivations – civic duty and fun - for sharing misinformation in six sub-Saharan African countries. Supporting, Bakare (2017) cited the case of the young Macedonians who claimed they set up fake news websites to make money from *Google* AdSense.

Discussants established that fake news consumers have the capacity to seek information that accords with their belief and discard those which does not. Agreeing, both WischnewskiIn (undated) and Aruwan (2022) stated that people are more susceptible to misinformation that aligns with their existing views. Therefore, misinformation and disinformation are usually designed to generate emotional reactions, most times

based on identity markers like religion and ethnicity in line with the theoretical frame for the study.

Conclusion

The pivot of this research has been on curbing fake news in an epoch of *infodemic* in the Nigeria news media industry. Anchored on Mass Media Limited Effect and Uses and Gratification theories, the study established the prevalence of fake news that has not become *infodemic* in Nigeria because media consumers are able to discriminate in media consumption. But there is the need to curb fake news which has been on from time immemorial so as not to become *infodemic* because of its potential to cause division, violence, and undermine governance through sensitisation and education of the public, including professional journalists and peripheral journalists on the dangers of fake news and empower them to be able to detect and resist further dissemination as technology companies innovate are encouraged to tweak their technology to make it difficult for people to spread fake news.

Recommendations

As part of the effort to curb fake news and infodemic, this study recommends that:

1. Government image makers should be trained to provide genuine and timely information on governance to avoid rumour which snowballs into fake news.
2. A deliberate effort should be made to train and retrain journalists to stick to professional ethics and all tenets of journalism to curb the dissemination of falsehood.
3. Tech companies should be encouraged to continue to innovate more effective means of curbing the spread of fake news through social media.

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