



FAKE NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE IMPLICATIONS ON NGOR OKPALA 2022 HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY BYE ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of social media, fake news has become rampant that people tend to believe it more than the authentic news. Since social media has become one of the faster means of communication more than other channels of communication, among the younger generations, social media is now a trending means of information dissemination whether true or not. On the other hand, this has created an impact in the political system hence, this work was to ascertain the voting behaviour of citizens particularly the youths who are the major users of social media. A survey of literature in this study shows that despite the flood of fake news in social media, its influence on voting behaviour among the residents in Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state, has not been adequately researched by intellectuals. The study seeks to find out how frequent voters receive political news on social media and whether the political news they receive on social media influence their perception of candidates and voting behaviour during election. Voters residing at Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state constituted the population for this study. The study is anchored on two theories of mass communication, social learning and the Uses and gratification theory. The survey method and focus Group Discussion method were adopted using the questionnaire and the Focus Group Discussion Schedule as instrument for data collection. The work concludes that fake news in social media has a little influence on the voting behaviour of a large number of voters.

Keywords: voters, influence, fake news, social media, election

Introduction

Political participation includes a broad range of activities through which people get involved in developing and expressing their opinions on the world and how it is governed, and try to take part in the decisions that affect their lives. These activities vary from developing ideals, programs, voters' education, joining other groups and organizations, and campaigning at the local, regional or national level, to the process of formal politics, such as voting, joining a political party, or standing for elections.

The spread of Gutenberg's printing press from the mid-15th century onwards was indispensable to the rise of professional journalism, but the technology also enabled amplification of propaganda and fake news which sometimes implicated media institutions as perpetrators (UNESCO 2018). The rise of international broadcasting also often saw instrumentalizations of information beyond the parameters of professional and independent news, although purely 'invented' stories and direct falsifications have

generally been more the exception than the rule in the narratives of different players. History also teaches us that the forces behind disinformation do not necessarily expect to persuade journalists or broader audiences about the truth of fake news, as much as cast doubt on the status of verifiable information produced by professional news producers.

This confusion means that many news consumers feel increasingly entitled to choose or create their own ‘facts’, sometimes aided by politicians seeking to shield themselves from legitimate critique. Fake news has a long history dating back to 1439, when the first printing press was built and news began to spread extensively (Adegunle & Odoemelam 2019). Rather than traditional transmission, fake news is associated with digital channels and social media.

Although times and technologies are different, history can give us insight into the causes and consequences of the contemporary phenomenon of ‘fake news’ that this research work tends to address. To ensure objectivity reporting of fake news, journalists, journalism trainers and educators (along with their students) are encouraged to study disinformation, propaganda, different between fake news and authentic news, as historical features of the communications ecology. The development of journalistic strategies to combat disinformation should therefore be undertaken in the knowledge that information manipulation goes back millennia, while the evolution of journalistic professionalism is comparatively recent. As journalism has evolved, fulfilling a normative role in contemporary society, the news media has mostly been able to operate apart from the world of fabrication and covert attack, shielded by citizens journalism (Which is under debate if is a part of journalism) that aspires to professional standards of truth telling, methodologies of verification, and ethics of public interest. Journalism has itself gone through many phases and iterations of differentiating itself from facts and people’s opinion (UNESCO 2018).

In this study, fake news (disinformation) is generally used to refer to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them (Etumnu, 2020). This is often combined with parallel and intersecting communications strategies and a suite of other tactics like hacking or compromising of persons. Fake news is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent (UNESCO 2018). As the research topic centres on the social media and fake news witnessed by Ngor Akpala residents during and after the house assembly bye election on 26th February, 2022 in this LGA. Before the declarations of the winner Mr Blyden Okanni of All Progressives Congress (APC) as the winner of the Ngor Okpala State Constituency bye-election in Imo State by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the fake news during this period caused political apathy as people shy away from voting.

In November 2018, a research team from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that Nigerians are one of the most common victims of false (fake news) news because they are afraid of not being able to call the source of the information, which has resulted in an increase in fake news in the country. Some of the disparities can be attributed to the relatively recent nature of social media as a tool (Odoemelam & Metiele, 2022).

According to Musa (2015), the majority of Nigerians utilize social media for communication, collaboration, news sharing, research, expressing of opinion, maintaining a connection, and finding friends from other countries.

The spread of fake news is highly seen and felt during the political era all over the world especially in Nigeria, the study of its effects at the conduct of Imo state house of assembly 2022 bye election in Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state necessitated this research work.

Statement of Research Problem

Ordinary people can participate in politics, and every individual has the right to participate, including people with disabilities, some of these political activities are done through the use of social media which has greatly contributed to the rise of fake news by politician’s media handlers.

Due to the wide spread of information on social media which has made it to be associated with fake news and misinformation, efforts are made by different scholars to determine its mitigating effects in the society and the people at large. While studies (Adegunle, Odoemelam and Odoemelam, 2019; Shilpi & Arun Guha, 2021) show that Fake news on social media influence behaviour, it is not clear how fake news on social media influence political behaviour of residents of Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state, Nigeria during its 2022 bye election. This represents a misconception of social media, given the proven negative roles social media play in a political era without considering its positive roles as a means of marketing one's candidate. The present study is aimed at determining the influence of fake news on social media and its implications on residents of Ngor Okpala during 2022 Imo state house of assembly bye election.

Research objectives

This research work is guided by the following three questions:

1. To find out how frequent voters at Ngor Okpala received political news on social media
2. To examine voters' perception of the political candidate for the Ngor Okpala by-election based on the social media political news.
3. To ascertain the level of influence fake news on social media has voting behaviour on residents of Ngor Okpala.

Empirical studies

A study was done by Odoemelam and Misan, Metiele (2022) on how Fake news has become so prevalent that it cannot be ignored on a global scale. A review of the literature in this study reveals that experts have not conducted enough research on the impact of fake news on social media on university students' COVID-19 behaviors. However, while studies on the impact of fake news on social media have been conducted, none has focused explicitly on how fake news on social media affects undergraduate students' COVID-19 behaviors. This study aims to investigate how fake news on social media affects undergraduates' COVID-19 behavior. The undergraduates in Okada, Ovia North-east LGA were sampled in this study. The study anchored on medium theory, Uses, and gratification theory. The survey method was adopted using the questionnaire. The study found that undergraduate students are not able to differentiate fake news from authentic news. The study also found that fake news social media has limited influence on the COVID-19 behaviours of undergraduate students. The study recommends that the Federal government, in particular, the ministry of Information and Communication should implement regulations that encourage media literacy and discourage the spread of false information, especially in the area of health.

A similar work was done by Olan, Jayawickrama, Arakpogun, Suklan, Shaofeng (2022) on how Fake news (FN) on social media (SM) rose to prominence in 2016 during the United States of America presidential election, leading people to question science, true news (TN), and societal norms. FN is increasingly affecting societal values, changing opinions on critical issues and topics as well as redefining facts, truths, and beliefs. To understand the degree to which FN has changed society and the meaning of FN, this study proposes a novel conceptual framework derived from the literature on FN, SM, and societal acceptance theory. The conceptual framework is developed into a meta-framework that analyses survey data from 356 respondents. This study explored fuzzy set-theoretic comparative analysis; the outcomes of this research suggest that societies are split on differentiating TN from FN. The results also show splits in societal values. Overall, this study provides a new perspective on how FN on SM is disintegrating societies and replacing TN with FN.

Theoretical Framework

Two key theories are relevant to this study, they include; cognitive theory and the uses and gratification theory.

Social Cognitive theory:

Social cognitive theory provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action (Albert Bandura 2021). Communications systems operate through two pathways. In the direct pathway, they promote changes by informing, enabling, motivating, and guiding participants. In the socially mediated pathway, media influences link participants to social networks and community settings that provide natural incentives and continued personalized guidance, for desired change. Social cognitive theory analyses social diffusion of new styles of behaviour in terms of the psychosocial factors governing their acquisition and adoption and the social networks through which they spread and are supported. Structural interconnectedness provides potential diffusion paths; sociocognitive factors largely determine what diffuses through those paths. Researchers have recommended that the principles of social cognitive be used in analyzing media uses and effects. This means an increased emphasis on the cognitive dimension of media users. According to John Bargh (1988) a cognitive media uses researchers the nature of media users goals is critical in determining more than just what information they receive from media messages. According to him, the type of information one attends to, how much attention one pays to it, how one encodes and interprets it and consequently how one remembers it all are greatly influenced by one's processing goals while encouraging the information was developed mainly by Albert Bandura and his associates in the 1960s and it remains one of the most widely used theories of media effects (Bandura and Walters,1963).

Uses and gratification theory:

The use and gratification theory began under the other research considerations or categories, such functionalism in the 1940s and was one of the earliest social scientific areas of concern in mass communication Konkwo (2022). Black and Bryant (1995) note that one such serious limitation was the inability to determine whether the gratifications sought and those received were one. According to them, it was possible for researchers to tell who the heavy media users were, but not in determining what precise gratifications they were receiving from their consumption of media message.

This theory is also associated with the work of Elihu Katz (1970), Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. The theory focuses on what people do with media content rather than the influence of the media. The theory focuses on three components: the motive for media use, the audience activity such as involvement, and result of the media use, such as satisfaction. The uses and gratification theory are key to understanding people's media consumption habit.

For instance, Park and Goering (2016) used the uses and gratification theory to examine a relationship among motives for health-related YouTube, post-exposure online activity, cognitive involvement in heat related YouTube use and others. Evidence has shown uses and gratification theory to be the dominant theoretical approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs (Ruggiero, 2000).

To achieve the aim of this study, social cognitive theory was used and we draw from the uses and gratification theory to include some user motivation such as altruism, entertainment, socialization, self-promotion and instant news sharing.

These theories therefore, fits into this research to contend that understanding the reasons and associated behaviours that influence people to share fake news on social media.

Methodology

This study used the Focus Group Discussion and Survey research design. According to Kumar (2011,p.124), Focus Group Discussion is a form of strategy in qualitative research in which attitudes, opinions or perceptions towards an issue, product, service or programme are explored through a free and open discussion between members of a group and the researcher. The issues discussed in focus groups are more specific and focused. In this case, the method becomes appropriate as it avails the opportunity to have discussion with adults of Ngor Okpala on the subject of fake news on social media and how it affects their political participation through voting.

The target population for this study was the eligible voters in Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state, because they are within the researchers reach within the age of 18 to 70. Meanwhile, the survey research is one which a group of people or item is studied by collecting and analysing data from only a few people or items considered to be a representative of the entire group. According to McBurney (1994), Survey is defined as accessing public opinion or individual characteristics by the use of questionnaire and sampling methods.

According to 2006 census, Ngor Okpala local government area is situated in Imo state, South-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria and has its headquarters in the town of UmunekeNgor. Towns and villages that make up Ngor Okpala LGA include Umuohiagu, Alulu, Eziama, Imerienwe, Ngali, Oburu, Ntu, and Nnorie. The estimated population of Ngor Okpala LGA is put at 219,400 (National Population Commission (projected), 2022). inhabitants with the vast majority of the area's dwellers being members of the Igbo ethnic group. The Igbo language is commonly spoken in the area while the religion of Christianity is widely practiced in the area.

Owing to the large population of residents in Ngor Okpala LGA of Imo state, the LGA was selected for the survey research while 30 out of the 119 polling units was used for the focus group discussion research. A total of 200 voters were surveyed using this simple random sampling technique while 30 stakeholders comprising party agents, polling unit agents, voters and media handlers were involved in the focus group discussion session making the sample size a total of 230. For the focus group discussion, there were two groups comprising of male and female with each group having 20 males and 10 females with the use of the purposive sampling technique. This technique provides that the ages of the voters allowed or qualified them to be included in the sample. It ensures that only those elements that are relevant to the research are selected. The questionnaire was administered on 200 residents in the LGA. The focus discussion schedule was also administered on the discussants who were 30 in number. The questions were three with follow ups as the discussion unfolds. The focus group discussion schedule had three questions that covered the objectives of the study. For the purpose of clarity, descriptive statistics like percentages, graphs and chart were used to analyse and present the findings for the survey method and the thematic analysis technique was used in analysing the Focus Group data.

Findings and Discussions

The Results we gathered from the findings revealed that, there was political apathy during the election though winner emerged at the end of the poll. Shockingly, (60%) of male participated in the study than females (15%). Our results indicate that different age groups have susceptibility to interact with the fake news propagated by social media, especially in Nigeria.

The findings and the discussions will be done by analysing the three research questions.

To find out how frequent voters at Ngor Okpala received political news on social media

Figure 1: Respondent accessibility to political news on social media.

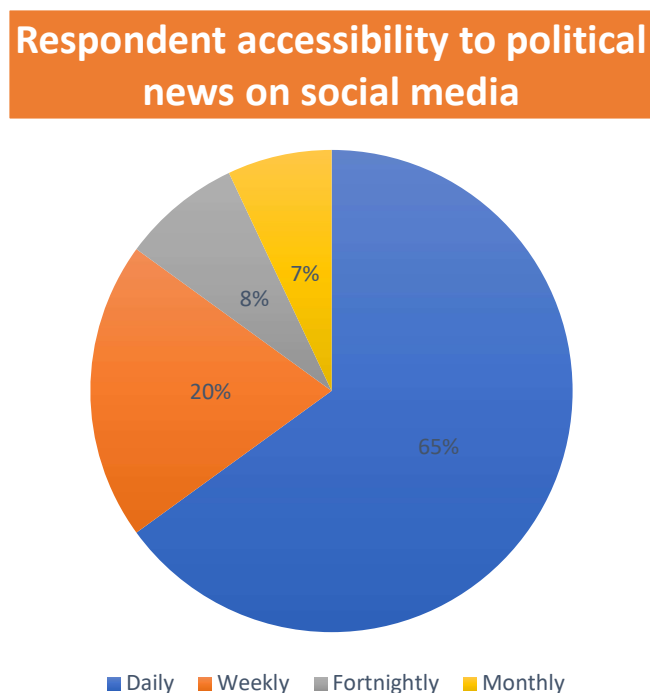


Figure 1 indicates that 65% of the respondents in Ngor Okpala LGA in Imo state receives political news on social media daily. This indicates that voters use social media for political purposes regularly. This finding agrees with Shamsu, Murtala, Alamai and Bello (2018) position that ‘the use of social media has grown in recent elections particularly among youth. Of significance for this age group is the rise in the use of social media and mobile devices for obtaining political information, creating user generated political content, and expressing political views and opinions. From the Focus Group Discussion, in the two groups, it is seen that twenty of the participants receive political news on social media on a daily basis. Only three of the ten participants receive political news on social media weekly. Participant three from group one and Participant three from group two responded that they receive political news on social media “almost every day” and they subscribe to the internet every time. This goes in agreement with Ali et. al (2016) where they discovered that voters use social media daily for information purpose.

2) . To examine voters’ perception of the political candidate for the Ngor Okpala by-election based on the social media political news.

Figure2: Perception of Voters on Choice of Candidate

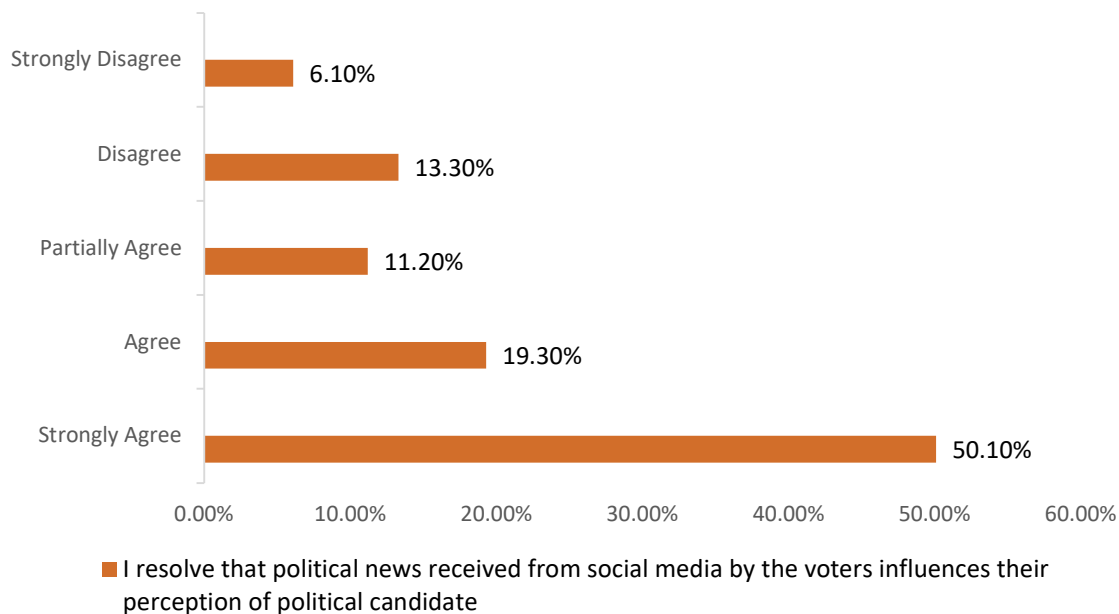


Figure 2 explains that 50.1% Strongly Agreed, that they find political news on social media useful to their choice of candidate. By implications, the survey helps to show how respondents perceive political candidates after reading political news about them. The result indicates that political news about a candidate affects the respondents' perception of the candidates and that they find political news on social media important to their choice of candidate.

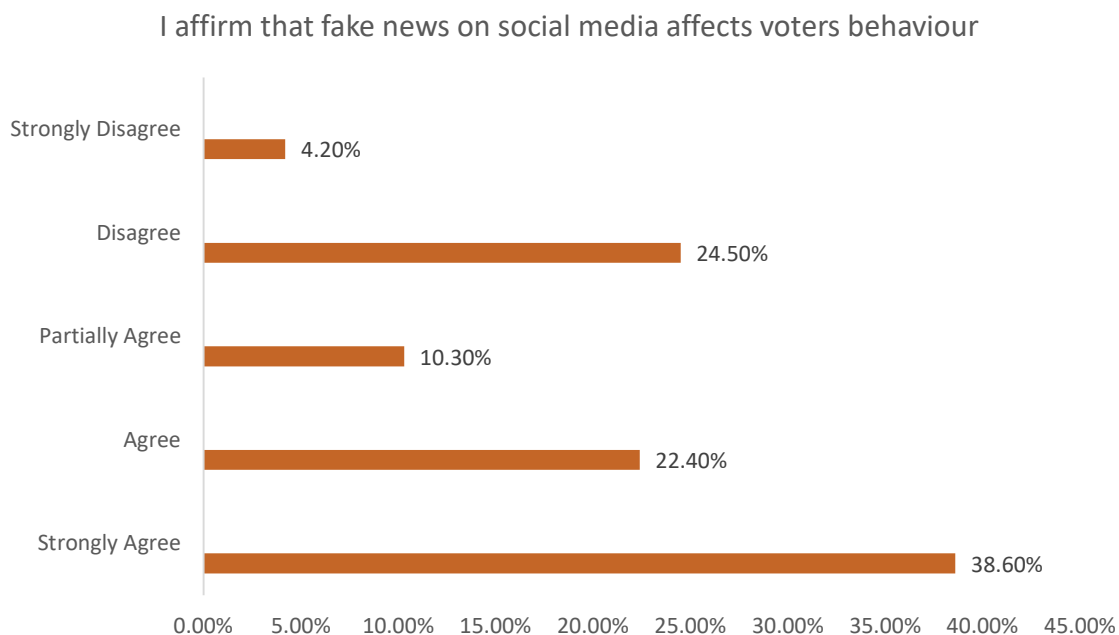
This agrees with Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) postulations that the social dimension of Social Media and the concept of self-presentation states that in any type of social interaction people have, there is a desire to control the impressions of other people and this is done with the objective to influence others to gain rewards (e.g., make a positive impression on 50.1% 19.3% 11.2% 13.3% 6.1% Strongly Agree, Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), from the foregoing the researchers find Political News on Social media useful to their choice of candidates; on the other hand, it is driven by a wish to create an image that is consistent with one's personal identity.

The third question asked in the focus Group Discussion answers this. Participants one, three and five in group one and Participant six in group two agrees that the messages they receive about a candidate does not change their perception of political candidates. Participant six in group two explains that "I do not really think political news about a candidate affects my perception of the candidate because when it comes to politics, it is like a game. Everyone wants to win by all means this will now create avenue for 'cunny' information in order to tarnish the image of their fellow political counter parts. To me if I receive news about a candidate, I tend to make further investigation to know if it is true or not. Political news does not affect my perception of a candidate unless I confirm it personally by research and investigation". This claim aligns with Odoemelam and Odoemelam (2018) where they found that unverified information on social media is a factor to be concerned with but the discussants are not bothered about it because their prior knowledge of fake news on social media serves as a gate-keeper. In an opposition to this, Participants one, two, three, four and five in group two explains that political news on social media changes their perception of political candidates. Participant four in group two points that "information they say is power and these people we tend to vote for, we get to know them more through the social media. it has created a better publicity for them. Once I get any information about them. It instantly affects my perception of the

candidate because the same social media that promotes them can also expose them”. Kaur (2015) explains that the emergence of social media has a bigger impact on the society especially the young people. Many have grown up with the online world available as a constant, convenient source of information, but they may not necessarily possess the knowledge and skills needed to assess the reliability of what they find there. At the same time, rapid developments in the online news ecosystem, such as the increasing role of advertising and algorithms in determining news feeds and search results, can be difficult even for adult news consumers to comprehend (National Literacy Trust, 2017). Participants two, four and six in group one explains that their perception on political candidates varies. Participant six in group one discussed that “It Depends on the magnitude of the news as well as the consistency of the news”. Participant four in group one explains that” is simply because political news thrives more when elections are close and I have learnt that they are fake news that spreads about such candidate in order to discredit him/ her in the minds of the voters. Even when elections are not close, I find it hard to change my perception on the candidates of my choice.

3) To ascertain the level of influence fake news on social media has on voters voting behaviour.

Figure 3: Respondents’ disposition after reading fake news about a candidate



This figure indicates that 38.6% of respondent strongly agreed that they find it hard to vote for a candidate after getting fake news about them. Most of the respondents find it difficult to vote for a candidate after reading fake news about them and the negative news they get about a candidate affects their choice of candidate.

This agrees with Asemah (2009), who opines that “The media, whether electronic, print or new media often set agenda for the public to follow; they monitor trends and events on the society and raised their agenda based on what they have 38.6% 22.4% 9.3% 24.1% 2.1% Strongly Agree Agree Partially Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree find it hard to vote for a candidate after getting fake news about them on social media which means whatever issue the media raised becomes an issue of public concern. Similarly, in the Focus Group Discussion, questions four and five were asked to ascertain the level of influence fake news on social media has on voters’ voting behaviour. Participants one, three and six in group one agrees that

fake news affected their vote for a particular candidate. Participant 6 in group responded that yes, it affects because it is hard to disbelieve it due to the way it spreads. It is later that one finds out that it is fake and by then elections are over. Lahi (2015) found out that during electoral campaigns, citizens' perception is analysed, and the new message is shaped often based on political marketing tools creating this way, a circle of information from politics to voters and via verse. In an opposition to this, more than half of the participants revealed that fake news does not affect their vote for a particular candidate. It is important to note that all the participants in group two which is the female group points that fake news did not affect their vote for a candidate. According to participant five in group two, she explained that "No it does not because I am a doctor in training, I always practice my profession regarding this. I also study patient I don't just prescribe drugs but find out what is wrong with the patient. Fake news is not a factor at all". In the same vein, participant three in group two shared her personal experience that "Sometimes, it might even be a candidate you know so shedo not have to believe the fake news. for example, there was a certificate scandal about a political aspirant but this aspirant is my mother's mate and friend in secondary school and my mother confirmed to me that he was an outstanding student in their secondary school days and he also passed his West African Examination with excellent. Having this firsthand experience, I do not allow fake news to affect my vote for a candidate". Participant six in group two discloses that she takes her "time to do some sort of investigation whenever I get the news. I do not just accept anyhow information from social media". Interestingly, Odoemelam and Odoemelam (2018) explained that discussants do not believe everything they read, hear or see on social media. Perhaps it might be the case that the discussants level of media literacy moderated their experience. This is more so since many depend on social media not only news but also for others things which include education, entertainment etc.

Conclusion

The invention of new media especially the social media as a vehicle or means of information dissemination especially voters cannot be over emphasized hence the social media spreads news whether fake or real faster than any other channels of communication. This study has shown that the social media is a major tool in the spread of fake news especially during election period. It is a fact to state that, good number of voters at Ngor Okpala are aware of the spread of fake news on social media during before and after election. Despite the fact that most populaces can differentiate between fake news and political propaganda in the social media, political news on social media still affects their choice of candidates. However, this in turn influenced their voting behaviour.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study therefore recommends thus:

The federal Government of Nigeria should establish a regulatory body that will censor and regulate the news or information shared on some of the social medial handles especially Facebook and Twitter, just like China and South Korea government.

Information technology companies in Nigeria should partner with the federal, state and local governments to provide more internet services such as free Wi-Fi, subsidized cost of data bills since the world is now a global village and technologically advanced. This will create an easy access to the people, to freely express themselves in their various social media handles. While the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties/candidates, civil societies/Groups, NGOs etc. all need to constantly upgrade their internet platforms, using the social media more often and creating avenues for social media interactions. This will lead to increase in political participation and involvement among eligible voters and average Nigerians.

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