MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, there has been a lot of discussion about false news and its effects. Although false information has always existed, the current state of technology has made it easier for it to proliferate swiftly. The rapid growth of digital media in Nigeria has brought with it new opportunities for information dissemination, but also new challenges in the form of misinformation and disinformation. Generally, social media offers an ideal environment for the production and spread of false and misleading content. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct study on the creation and dissemination of false news via media. The study which is analytical, relies on secondary data such as published materials and personal observations to make deductions and inferences about the use of social media for fake news. The study looks at the current state of misinformation and disinformation, reasons why people misinform others and the effects it has on our society. Recommendations for addressing the spread of misinformation and disinformation were included in the study's conclusion.

Keywords: Disinformation, misinformation, media, Nigeria, landscape

Introduction

Misinformation and disinformation in the Nigerian media landscape take many forms and are spread through various channels, including traditional media, digital platforms, and social media. Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is spread unintentionally, while disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to influence public opinion or undermine democracy (World Economic Forum, 2019). The rise of misinformation and disinformation in the Nigerian media landscape is a growing concern that poses significant threats to democracy and social stability (European Commission, 2021).The most common forms of misinformation and disinformation in Nigeria include fake news, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. These forms of misinformation and disinformation are often spread by individuals with political or ideological agendas, and can have a significant impact on public opinion and decision-making. The threat posed by fake news to elections and referendums in wealthy countries is a concern for the rest of the globe, but nascent democracies are also at risk. These days, there

is an abundance of information all around us in a digital environment. A threat anywhere is a threat everywhere because the internet has made us more connected than before.

A vast amount of information may be found in the virtual world created by the modern information period, with most of it being verifiable and most of it not. As a result, it is now quite challenging to distinguish fact from hearsay. Recently, there has been a lot of worry raised regarding false news due to its influence on contemporary democratic politics (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu, 2023). In a democracy, fake news may be dangerous since it spreads quickly and is hard to correct or halt. Its ability to skew the final verdict is another factor. Misinformation and disinformation may be spread based on personal aggrandizement and self-importance (Barasch & Glinski, 2019). Some people just want to trend and cook up stories for no other reason than entertainment. Misinformation and disinformation are thus terms used to describe any false information that is spread intentionally or unintentionally with or without an agenda (Council of Europe, 2021). In the Nigerian media landscape, misinformation and disinformation have become pervasive, and their spread has serious consequences for the country's democracy, stability, and development. Below are three major impacting examples witnessed in recent years.

#EndSARS protests: Social misinformation: In 2020, false information was spread through social media platforms claiming that protesters involved in the #EndSARS movement were looting and burning down buildings. This led to further violence and the Nigerian military cracking down on peaceful protesters, resulting in many deaths and widespread damage.

The COVID-19 Issue: Health misinformation: In 2020, false information about the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly through social media and messaging apps in Nigeria. This included false cures and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, which led to fear and confusion among the public.

The ELECTION Issue: Political disinformation: In the run-up to the 2019 Nigerian general election, false information was spread through social media platforms to influence voters and manipulate public opinion (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu, 2023). This included false claims about candidate's backgrounds and political stances, which damaged the integrity of the election and caused widespread confusion.

These sagas caused social disruption, unrest and even death. Misinformation and disinformation in the Nigerian media landscape have a significant impact on democracy and social stability. They can erode trust in public institutions and political leaders, and contribute to social division and unrest (Okunoye, 2018). Misinformation and disinformation can also have an impact on public health and safety by spreading false information about vaccines, pandemics, and other health-related issues (Amu, 2020).

Misinformation and disinformation have a significant impact on the public, affecting their ability to make informed decisions and eroding trust in the media. This type of information can also lead to public panic, as well as contribute to the spread of false or harmful beliefs and practices (Adegbite & Ilori, 2018; Etumnu, 2020). Additionally, misinformation and disinformation can have far-reaching implications for public health, national security, and the stability of democratic institutions.

Statement of the Problem

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Misinformation and disinformation in the social media landscape are problems to the society, and governments, organizations, and individuals are seeking for solutions on this. Despite the rapid growth of the menace, there is hardly enough research to address this issue with a view to find the lasting solutions to it. This study aims at analysing the dynamics of misinformation and disinformation in order to develop effective strategies to combat their harmful effects.

Conceptual Framework

Misinformation

Misinformation is the term used to describe inaccurate reporting that results from errors; nonetheless, it does not imply deceit. Misinformation, on the other side, describes the purposeful spread of erroneous information in an effort to mislead others (Hilary & Dumebi, 2021). Misinformation refers to those who spread false information without realizing it, usually because their friends or others do (Campan et al., 2017). This dissemination occurs unintentionally and often involves the propagation of false or misleading details that have the potential to misinform or deceive individuals.

According to Ecker et al. (2017), misinformation might occasionally be misinterpreted as disinformation, while disinformation is always misinformation. Misinformation is operationally defined as any information or content that is factually incorrect or inaccurate, disseminated through various communication channels, including but not limited to traditional media, social media platforms, and interpersonal communication.

Media Landscape

The term "media" refers to both conventional and developing forms, recognising the continuous convergence and change within the global communication landscape. A wide range of platforms and communication channels that enable the production, sharing, and consumption of information, entertainment, and cultural content are collectively referred to as media. These channels include print media (magazines and newspapers), broadcast media (radio and television), digital media (websites, social media, and online platforms), and interactive media (forums, blogs, and user-generated content).

Social media use is changing from social networking to entertainment, informative, and political reasons as it becomes a more integrated part of peoples' everyday lives (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Okoro et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). Social media platforms are regularly linked to political participation and engagement, as well as news and information access, even if they are not particularly political places.

The dissemination of inaccurate or misleading content online has drawn more attention as a result of this crowded communication landscape. This content can be shared purposefully through organized campaigns and propaganda, or it can be shared unintentionally by regular users (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Disinformation

Misinformation and Disinformation in the Nigerian Media Landscape

This is the purposeful, organized dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information with the goal of tricking or controlling. Disinformation is by definition concerned with purposeful lying (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). Disinformation is meant to deceive people. Disinformation on social media is dangerous because, as was previously said, readers' short attention spans and the abundance of information available can allow it to proliferate unchecked. (Hilary & Dumebi, 2021). Manipulated material can be extremely convincing when it is delivered in formats that comparable to those of real information, subtly integrated into hybrid media ecologies(Kim et al., 2018), and near to the truth (Stroud et al., 2017).

False information is disseminated through the same channels as actual news, and a tactic known as paltering involves deliberately utilizing elements of reality to communicate lies (Rogers et al., 2017).This false information is purposefully created and spread over a variety of platforms, such as social media, traditional media, and face-to-face interactions, in order to accomplish particular objectives including swaying public opinion, eroding confidence, or causing harm. Disinformation is defined as deliberate lying, frequently motivated by political, ideological, or commercial goals. It can also include the fabrication of stories, the employment of deceptive strategies, or campaigns. It is distinct from inadvertent disinformation in that it is disseminated with the specific objective of deceiving the public.

Current State of Misinformation and Disinformation in Nigeria

Nigeria's media landscape is diverse and dynamic, with traditional and new media playing a significant role in shaping public opinion. However, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in the media landscape has become a major challenge. The Nigerian media landscape is characterized by the widespread dissemination of false information, often spread through social media, which has become the primary source of news and information for many Nigerians. This false information often leads to the spread of conspiracy theories, hate speech, and incitement to violence, which has serious implications for national security, social cohesion, and stability (Nwosu, 2019).

Spread of Fake News
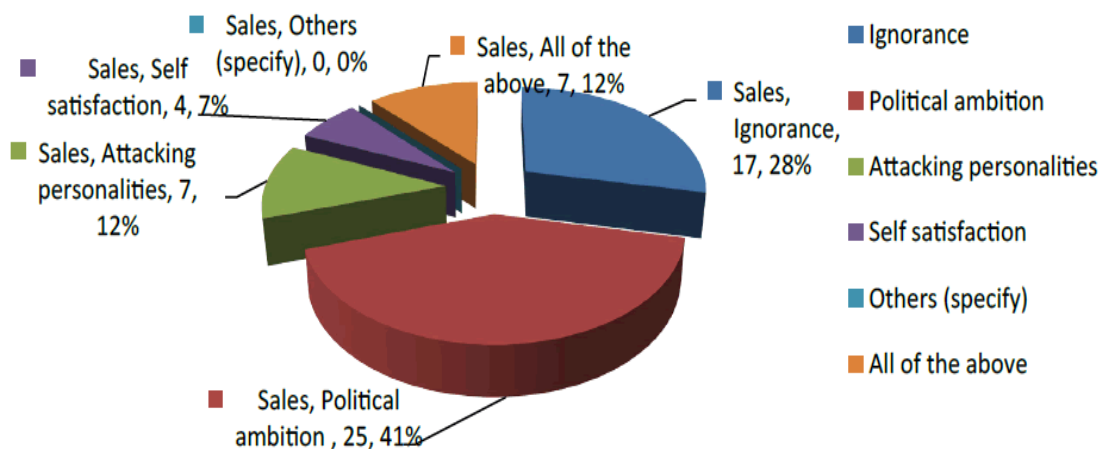
Pie above according to Wilson and Umar (2019), gives a graphic representation why people misinform others by spreading false or fake news.

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In summary, Ignorance has 17.28%, Political ambition has 25.41%, Attacking personalities has 7.12%, Self-satisfaction has 4.7%, Others has 0.0% and All of the above has 7.12%

Wilson and Umar opine why people spread false news:

1. Self-aggrandizement or self satisfaction

2. Attacking personalities

3. Political ambition

4. Ignorance

5. Others (hate, jealousy, mischief)

Impact of Misinformation and Disinformation on Society

The spread of misinformation and disinformation has far-reaching consequences for society, particularly in terms of its impact on public opinion, political stability, and national security. Misinformation and disinformation can fuel social and political tensions, disrupt the democratic process, and erode public trust in government and the media. It can also lead to the spread of conspiracy theories and hate speech, which can result in incitement to violence and other forms of social unrest (Falade, 2017).

Here are some key consequences:

- ❖ **Undermining Trust**: False information erodes trust in institutions, media and even among individuals. When people cannot rely on accurate information, it can lead to a general scepticism and cynicism, hindering cooperation and societal cohesion.

- ❖ **Spread of Fear and Panic**: Misinformation can cause unwarranted fear and panic, especially during crises. False reports or exaggerated information can lead to unnecessary stress, confusion, and may divert resources away from addressing real issues.

- ❖ **Public Health Risks**: In the context of health, misinformation can lead to reluctance in adopting preventive measures or seeking medical treatment. During pandemics, for instance, false information about cures, vaccines, or transmission can contribute to the spread of the disease.

- ❖ **Political Polarisation**: Disinformation is a weapon that can be used to further polarize political populations and sway public opinion. False narratives have the power to exacerbate already-existing social and political problems, making it more difficult for communities to come to an understanding.

- ❖ **Erosion of Democracy**: Disinformation campaigns can interfere with democratic processes, such as elections, by manipulating public opinion and casting doubt on the legitimacy of political institutions. This undermines the foundation of democratic societies.

- ❖ **Discrimination and Prejudice**: Misinformation can contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes and discrimination. False narratives can target specific groups, leading to social injustice and further dividing communities.

❖ **Cybersecurity Threats**: Disinformation often goes hand in hand with cyber threats. The spread of false information can be part of broader cybersecurity attacks, including phishing, hacking, and the use of fake accounts to amplify misleading content

Strategies for Countering the Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation

According to Gradoń et al.(2021), to effectively counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the Nigerian media landscape, a multi-faceted approach is required. This approach should include:

1. **Media literacy education:** Education is critical to empowering people to recognize and critically evaluate information, especially in the digital age. The Nigerian public should be educated on how to critically evaluate information sources and recognize misinformation and disinformation. There should be emphasis on the importance of cross-referencing information and being cautious of sensationalism.
2. **Fact-checking and verification:** Establishing fact-checking procedures can help media organizations and civic society combat misinformation and deception while ensuring that information is accurate. This calls for the creation of platforms and organizations capable of confirming the veracity of information prior to its distribution.
3. **Collaboration and partnership:** A collaborative approach involving government, media organisations, technology companies, civil society and academia is needed to address the issue of misinformation and disinformation in the media landscape.
4. **Legal framework and enforcement:** The Nigerian government should enforce existing laws and regulations that prohibit the spread of misinformation and disinformation, take action against those who spread it and provide effective legal protection for victims without infringing on the rights of free speech
5. **Tech solutions:** Tech companies should implement measures to address misinformation and disinformation on their platforms, including removing false information and reducing the spread of harmful content.
6. **Media industry initiatives:** Media organisations should establish codes of ethics and standards for reporting, as well as invest in fact-checking and verification processes.

Conclusion

Misinformation and disinformation are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Nigerian media landscape and pose significant threats to democracy and social stability. A multi-faceted approach that involves the government, media organisations, academia, tech companies and civil society is required to address this issue. The general public in Nigeria should be taught how to assess information sources critically, and media outlets and civil society organizations should set up fact-checking procedures to ensure that information is accurate. Tech companies should take steps to address misinformation and disinformation on their platforms, and the government should enforce the rules and regulations that are now in place that forbid the dissemination of false information. All parties involved in this matter, including the government, media outlets, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and tech corporations, must work together to address this issue (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

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