

## Social Media and Fake News in Nigeria: Challenges and Solutions

Nsikak Solomon Idiong, PhD<sup>1</sup> ; Patience Stephen Essien<sup>2</sup>;  
Abasifreke Solomon Idiong, PhD<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Faculty of Communication and Media Studies

University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

**Corresponding Author:** nsikakidiong@uniuyo.edu.ng

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### Abstract

*The advent of information and communication technology has undoubtedly given rise to various innovative opportunities and platforms, such as social media, that enhance daily living. The influence of social media is prominent globally. However, social media functions as a double-edged sword, offering both reliable and fake news to its users. In contemporary society, fake news appears almost inevitable, driven by human curiosity in information consumption. It poses significant harm to users of platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and others. This situation cannot be left unchecked; appropriate measures must be instituted. This paper examines social media and fake news in Nigeria, highlighting associated challenges and potential solutions. The study is anchored on two theoretical frameworks: the Technological Determinism Theory and the Disruptive Technology Theory. The concepts of social media and fake news are reviewed. Methods for identifying fake news are explored, including machine learning, automated and human-in-the-loop approaches, task-based analysis, datasets, and source verification. The study also considers challenges in addressing fake news, such as inadequate technology, poorly coordinated efforts, and a lack of regulation. Proposed solutions include promoting critical thinking and implementing government regulation. The paper concludes that social media and fake news present both positive and negative impacts in modern society, necessitating a high level of media literacy among users. Based*

*on this, the paper recommends, among other measures, that **non-governmental organisations, civil society groups, and the Nigerian Union of Journalists should intensify social media-based sensitisation on fake news and educate users on how to independently verify the source and authenticity of news stories to cleanse platforms of misleading information.***

**Keyword:** Technology, Social Media, Fake News, Challenges, Solution.

### **Introduction**

Social media platforms have remained indispensable tools for information dissemination, communication, and idea sharing. They are internet-based platforms that facilitate participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration, and connection (Okafor & Onyenekwe, 2020). These platforms have become some of the most commonly used means of communication and information exchange among people of all ages, genders, and nationalities. Social media are arguably among the fastest channels for disseminating information and serve as powerful tools for public enlightenment, mobilisation, interaction, and exchange.

Previously, the media's ability to reach a vast audience both locally and globally was limited, but social media have bridged this gap, enabling access to and impact on a large number of people. The sharing of news by journalists via social media has significantly improved, allowing individuals from any part of the world to share and access content, including videos. This has made social media an invaluable asset, widely embraced and extensively utilised. According to Nwabueze (2014), social media have proven to be effective channels for mass enlightenment and mobilisation in contemporary society. In Nigeria, the widespread use of social media has been attributed to the increasing adoption of smartphones. Statistics regarding mobile phone usage, social media engagement, and internet access highlight a rapidly growing market, despite economic challenges and infrastructural deficiencies that hinder business development.

Most Nigerians recognise social media as an indispensable tool for information sharing and dissemination. Uzuegbunam (2020) noted that Nigeria is the largest mobile market in Africa's growing mobile economy. The rise of social media has brought numerous advantages, including income generation, networking opportunities, content creation, business development, and professional growth. As such, people around the world have leveraged social media as one of the most pervasive technological advancements. Social media platforms have also facilitated increased citizen engagement and participation.

However, while social media enables the rapid spread of news, it can also become a breeding ground for misinformation. It represents a “double-edged sword” for users, providing reliable news articles as well as fake news and disinformation.

Fake news refers to the deliberate dissemination of false information with the intent to damage reputations, manipulate public perception, incite hostility towards government, or cause societal unrest (Sambo, 2022). Zhang and Ghorbani (2020) define fake news as inaccurate or fictitious content presented as real information. It often lacks objective evidence to verify its authenticity and may appear in social or traditional media formats. Such content typically attracts greater attention than factual news, spreading rapidly and often containing emotionally charged language (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Although fake news has existed for centuries and the skill of detecting it has long been valued, its reach and harmful effects have been significantly amplified by the proliferation of social media platforms (Okafor & Onyenekwe, 2020). Fake news is undesirable because it psychologically and socially distorts people's beliefs, leading to misinformation and poor decision-making. It poses multiple threats—political, economic, social, and cultural. It erodes public trust in the media and disrupts the balance of the news ecosystem.

Despite several attempts to address the prevalence of fake news, Nigeria has seen limited success. In 2017, the Ministry of Information and Culture dedicated the National Council on Information meeting to tackling fake news, hate speech, and disinformation. This effort led to the launch of a national campaign against fake news in 2018 (Akpan, 2019).

Nevertheless, some internet users continue to exploit platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to spread unverified stories for clout or personal gain. These stories may be driven by propaganda, satire, or mischievous intent, often misleading readers and undermining social cohesion (Akpan, 2019). The dissemination of fake news via messaging apps and social media continues to grow at an alarming rate. During emergencies or natural disasters, unauthenticated news circulates quickly, eroding public trust, as users are inclined to believe forwarded content.

One prominent case of fake news proliferation was during the EndSARS protest in October 2020. This mass youth-led movement, which included both online mobilisation and street protests, generated approximately 28 million tweets within a week. The protest emerged from widespread outrage following videos and images of police brutality, harassment, and extortion in Nigeria.

Zhang and Ghorbani (2020) assert that excessive information dissemination may negatively affect individuals and society by disrupting the authenticity of the news ecosystem. Fake news not only alters interpretation but also persuades consumers to accept biased or false beliefs. Some content is deliberately crafted to foster public distrust and confusion, impairing individuals' ability to distinguish fact from falsehood.

The spread of misleading content through daily-access media, such as social media feeds, news blogs, and online newspapers, has made it increasingly difficult to identify trustworthy sources. This highlights the need for computational tools that offer

insights into the credibility of online content. It is on this basis that this paper addresses the topic: *Social Media and Fake News in Nigeria: Challenges and Solutions*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work laid its foundation on two theories - technological determinism theory and disruptive technology theory.

#### **Technological Determinism Theory**

The technological determinism theory states that technology shapes and determines events in the society. Propounded by Marshal McLuhan, who posited that changes in the modes of communication shape human existence and inventions in technology invariably cause cultural change. The internet is driven by social media, and the position of the theory is that such innovation helps change the society, and social media platforms have been integrated into the society. Also, the internet and social media are changing the structure of the society because social media have radically changed the human communication system. The spread of fake news across social media platforms on security challenges is achieved through the internet. According to this theory, technology shapes and directs the activities of the society, and here the technology is the internet. This theory is relevant to the study because social media and the internet have a great impact on society, and they also affect how people react to news from the media.

#### **Disruptive Technology Theory**

The concept of disruptive technology denotes the tendency of a new innovation to challenge and alter the values and modus operandi that have defined a given activity. Disruptive technology theory was advanced by Clayton Christensen (1997) to explain how technologies shifted the thinking of marketers on how best to reach audiences for their goods and services, sometimes resulting in flawed strategies that moved marketers out of comfort zones and away from established customer bases. It is a technology that tends to redefine the existing philosophy and strategy underpinning a given endeavour or business. In other words, it is a piece of technology that tends to redefine the existing philosophy and strategy underpinning a given endeavour or business. In other words, it is a piece of technology that tends to redefine the existing philosophy and strategy underpinning a given endeavour or business. Social media platforms have altered the exposure to news and information, making it possible for people to have easy access to the media. Unlike the traditional media, where certain restrictions are placed on information gathering and dissemination, the social media have altered exposure patterns and media use. This affirms the position of the disruptive theory, which states that technology has changed the old ways of media use and accessibility.

### **Concept of Social Media**

Available statistics reveal that the social media have not only gained prominence in Nigeria, nonetheless have actually come to stay (Akpan, 2019). Nigerians have acknowledged the social media as a veritable means of communication, especially in the digital era. This is evident in the growing number of Nigerians who are active users of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, You tube, LinkedIn and Flickr, among others. For instance, between December 2000 and December 2017, Nigeria witnessed an increase of 98,191,456 people penetrating the Internet. The result of the increase in internet penetration and mobile accessibility is in the rise in e-commerce, research, social discourse and the democratization of the communication processes. People join such fast-growing networks as Facebook and Twitter, so as to connect with their customers, relatives and friends.

### **Concept of Fake news**

The term “Fake News” has been used to describe misinforming and dis-informing stories presented as news on such social media sites as Facebook. According to Akpan (2019), fake news is a type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional media, broadcast news media or online media. It is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership, online sharing, and Internet click revenue. It has been the subject of constant discussion since commentators observed it played a critical role in the 2016 American elections (Ogbette et al. 2019).

Fake news can also be classified into multiple categories based on its authenticity, intention, and if it can be strictly classified as news. Specifically, fake news is classified into 8 categories, while Akpan (2019) considered it as fake news taxonomy as follows:

**Rumour:** This is defined as random information that is presented in any format, with no clear intention, and is not necessarily false.

**Clickbait:** This is defined as information (article titles/articles/sentences) that aims to mislead the public to increase its popularity but is not necessarily false.

**Cherry-picking:** This is defined as selectively reporting information with the intention of misleading the general public, where the information can be either factual or nonfactual.

**Satirical news:** This is a form of non-factual news articles/claims that aims to be entertaining.

**Misinformation:** This refers to information (news, opinion pieces, personal claims, etc.) that is non-factual with unclear intention.

**Disinformation:** this is information that is non-factual with a clear misleading intention.

**False news:** This is a generic term used to describe news that is non-factual, regardless of its intention.

**Deceptive news:** This is news with non-factual information with the intention to mislead the general public.

### **Effects of Fake News in Nigeria**

Fake news exacerbates the herder–farmer crises in Nigeria. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that fake news circulating on social media is fuelling these conflicts. According to the BBC, “fake pictures circulating on social media, which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence, are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria” (Adekunle, 2018). Ogbette et al. (2019) noted that the international media organisation specifically referenced disturbing images being circulated on social media, which the originators falsely claimed were from recent violence in Jos, Plateau State. For example, one graphic image showed a woman lying face-down in a pool of blood with a gaping shoulder wound, purportedly from recent attacks. Another showed several bodies, allegedly from the same violence. Upon closer examination, however, it was revealed that the image was not taken in Nigeria but was actually from a 2015 traffic accident in the Dominican Republic (Adekunle, 2018).

In addition, major Nigerian news outlets reported that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, claimed the Plateau attacks were revenge for the loss of 300 cows. He was quoted as saying, “Since these cows were not found, no one should expect peace in the areas.” Ciroma denied making the statement, and the media outlet in question reportedly issued an apology (Adekunle, 2018).

Fake news often incites confusion, tension, or even suicide, depending on the target—individuals or institutions. It also undermines legitimate media coverage, making it more difficult for journalists to report on important news stories.

### **Social Media and Fake News**

Presently, information and communication technology has changed the entire media and communication industry, where people can connect and share ideas irrespective of where they are. The advent of social media is a welcome development in the media industry because it has brought a lot of improvement in communication and interaction. The internet drives social media platforms, and without the internet, social media cannot function. Social media are internet-enabled platforms that enable people to interact, communicate and share ideas. Internet penetration in Nigeria is high, and

telecommunication industries are improving the quality of internet service they offer Nigerians. Uzuegbunam (2020) asserted that social media refers to the web-based technologies that transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues. Social media allows for participation and social association with many people who utilise the social media. Across social media platforms, the spread of fake news has been on the increase.

In this era of new media, distinguishing between real news and fake news has posed a difficult problem due to the volume of stories that are on social media platforms. Fake news refers to a type of online disinformation with totally or partially false content, created intentionally to deceive and/or manipulate a specific audience, through a format that imitates a news report (acquiring credibility), through false information that may or may not be associated with real events, with an opportunistic structure (title, image, content) to attract the readers' attention and to persuade them to believe in falsehood, in order to obtain more clicks and shares across social media platforms (Joan and Baptista, 2020). Fake news can be categorised into several forms that include misleading false news, fabricated false news, intentional false news and negligent false news (Thorsten et al. 2019).

- **Misleading false news** presents distorted facts to provoke emotional responses.
- **Fabricated false news** contains entirely invented content, aiming to create panic and confusion.
- **Intentional false news** is deliberately created to misinform the public.
- **Negligent false news** involves the malicious omission of key facts.

Muigai (2019) further categorised types of fake content as follows:

- *Satire or parody* – not intended to cause harm but may deceive;
- *False connection* – headlines, visuals, or captions that do not support the actual content;
- *Misleading content* – misuse of information to distort an issue or person;
- *False context* – genuine content presented with misleading context;
- *Impostor content* – authentic sources are impersonated with fabricated ones;
- *Manipulated content* – genuine information or images are altered to mislead;
- *Fabricated content* – entirely false material created to deceive and harm.

The increasing popularity of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp has expanded opportunities for the spread of fake news due to their large user bases. The fake news ecosystem includes inventors, consumers, spreaders, and channels. Fake news originators fabricate stories to misinform, manipulate opinions, propagate propaganda, incite hatred, and distort perceptions through speculative, predictive, or blatantly false narratives. Therefore, public education and awareness are essential in combating fake news. Equipping users with the skills and tools needed to

critically evaluate information is crucial to minimising the damage caused by fake news in society.

### **Methods of Detecting Fake News on Social Media**

#### **Machine Learning:**

To enhance the detection of fake news, researchers have explored various approaches that leverage advances in machine learning (ML) models. These models typically use features extracted from news content to classify whether an article is fake or factual. Four primary types of machine learning models are widely applied in this context: classic machine learning models, deep learning models, ensemble models, and propagation models.

#### **Automatic and Human-in-the-Loop Models:**

There are two main end-to-end system designs for identifying non-factual news: automatic systems and human-in-the-loop systems. Automatic fact-checking systems aim to maximise the automation of the fact-checking process, replacing journalists by directly labelling news content as fake or genuine without human intervention. In contrast, human-in-the-loop systems recognise the complexity of fully automating fact-checking. These systems involve journalists who manually verify information using data automatically extracted by machine learning models (Khan et al., 2020).

#### **Task-by-Task Fake News Identification:**

This approach utilises a two-phase, three-task framework to identify fake news online. The framework involves:

- (i) identifying check-worthy sentences and tweets;
- (ii) determining whether these check-worthy statements are resurfacing previously debunked fake news; and
- (iii) fact-checking the content using social media platforms.

Subsequent research addresses each of these tasks individually.

#### **Datasets for Fake News Detection:**

To support the detection of fake news, journalists and researchers have developed and published several publicly available datasets. These datasets enable the research community to analyse common features of fake news and to develop tools and models for combatting misinformation.

- **ClaimBuster** includes 30 US presidential debates from 1960 to 2012, with each sentence categorised as a **non-factual** sentence, an unimportant factual sentence, or a check-worthy factual sentence.

- **CheckThat!** is an annual challenge. The 2019 and 2020 datasets consist of transcripts from US political debates and speeches (2016–2019), collected from various media outlets. Each sentence is manually compared with entries on factcheck.org and labelled as a check-worthy claim if verified on the site.
- **CLEF 2021 Task** consists of tweets related to COVID-19, manually classified as either check-worthy or not check-worthy, among other categories.

These datasets serve as essential resources for improving the accuracy and reliability of fake news detection systems.

Similarly, the following steps can help toward curbing the spread of fake news in the society according to Khan et al. (2020):

1. Check sources: encourage people and stations to fall back on most trusted news brands they could rely on for their news.
2. Look at multiple sources.
3. Use verification tools.
4. Check metadata.
5. Think before broadcasting/publishing.
6. Media literacy: increase the standard of education and media literacy, particularly for young people, on what is trustworthy and what is fake.

### **Challenges to curb the prevalence of fake news on social media**

1. The government lacks the technology to monitor social media and stop the purveyors of fake news in their tracks. The country also lacks a national policy on the use of social media. These factors are critical to any effort aimed at curbing the excesses and misuse of social media in any country.
2. Fake news requires a coordinated response from policymakers, religious leaders, legal practitioners, journalists and the general public to address the main drivers of this menace and to provide a coordinated response which upholds the fundamental rights and inclusion of all communities and individuals.
3. No standard definition: The term 'fake news' is vague, and there is no official or watertight definition of what constitutes fake news.
4. Lack of regulation: Self-regulation by mainstream media has largely been ineffective. Any direct effort by the government to control fake news is prone to be seen as an assault on the freedom of media, which functions as the fourth pillar of democracy.
5. Difficult to achieve balance: The efforts to control fake news should not threaten to cramp legitimate investigative and source-based journalism or freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 19 of the Constitution. Also, distinguishing between the conscious fabrication of news reports and news reports put out in the belief that they are accurate.

6. Tracking fake news on social media: The vastness of the internet users and social media users makes tracing the origin of fake news almost impossible.

### **Solutions to Fake News in Nigeria**

Fake news appears inevitable in contemporary society. According to Ogbette et al. (2019), as long as individuals continue to patronise tabloids and read blogs known to contain falsehoods and half-truths, and as long as there are uneducated people unable to distinguish between genuine and fake news, misinformation will persist. A key contributor to this problem is the revenue model of online media. Online articles are often optimised for clicks. This means that the most engaging content (headlines, article bodies, images, and more) is frequently designed, either deliberately or inadvertently, to generate clicks. The more clicks and the longer users remain on a page, the better the analytics, which, in turn, attracts premium advertising revenue. To increase this engagement, many media outlets compromise journalistic integrity and standards. The online media landscape is essentially a zero-sum game: the more time a user spends on one platform, the less they spend on another (Adeleke, 2016).

Major technology companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter have begun to take action against fake news. Google has reportedly committed \$300 million over three years to combat the spread of misinformation. Facebook, according to Bloomberg, removed 583 million fake accounts in the first quarter of 2018. Similarly, Twitter suspended over 70 million accounts in 2018, with the rate of suspension continuing thereafter. In addition to these corporate efforts, the European Commission established a high-level group of experts in January 2018 to advise on policy measures aimed at countering fake news and online disinformation (Elebeke, 2018).

The Director of the BBC World Service Group advised the public to rely on reputable and trusted news sources. Furthermore, there have been calls for improved standards of education and increased media literacy, particularly for young people, to help them differentiate between credible and false information. Media literacy is crucial in this regard.

Equally important is investment in partnerships between Nigerian journalists and credible international media organisations. The government must also take steps to strengthen core traditional media so that they remain relevant and trusted over social media sources. Nigeria must ensure that its national newspapers and television stations are sustainable and capable of delivering quality journalism. This would encourage public trust in professionally produced content and reduce the audience for fake media. In addition, the establishment of effective and independent media regulation is necessary, with penalties imposed for the deliberate dissemination of false or malicious information (Okogba, 2018). Key strategies for addressing fake news on social media are outlined below:

- **Critical Thinking**

A lack of critical thinking is particularly dangerous, especially in democratic contexts where voters must discern between factual and misleading information. Good electoral decisions require access to reliable facts. Fake news, along with gossip and conspiracy theories, undermines this foundation and weakens democratic processes. Critical thinking, particularly the capacity to question assumptions, lies at the heart of the response to fake news.

- **Government Regulation and Legal Frameworks**

The enactment and enforcement of laws targeting the spread of fake news are essential. Clear legal provisions should be established to penalise those who intentionally disseminate harmful misinformation.

- **Engagement with Traditional Media**

Promoting the relevance and reliability of traditional and print media will help build public resistance to fake news by reinforcing trust in established sources.

- **Self-Regulation by Social Media Platforms**

Social media companies must implement stricter community standards, monitoring systems, and fact-checking tools to curb the spread of misinformation.

- **Support Mechanisms for Access to Truthful Information**

It is essential to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to verified and accurate information, particularly those who rely on platforms that often serve as breeding grounds for fake news.

- **Independent Watchdogs and Rating Systems**

Establishing and supporting independent organisations that monitor media credibility can create accountability and place pressure on individuals and institutions responsible for spreading fake news.

- **Civic Education Initiatives**

Civic education programmes that address digital literacy, critical media analysis, and responsible content sharing can empower citizens to become more discerning consumers of information.

In summary, the fight against fake news in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach involving education, regulation, media reform, and public engagement. Only through collaborative and sustained efforts can the country reduce the impact of fake news and safeguard the integrity of its media ecosystem.

**Conclusion**

This paper examined the topic *Social Media and Fake News in Nigeria: Challenges and Solutions*. It established that social media is a product of advancements in information and communication technology, and while it offers numerous benefits, it also facilitates the spread of fake news due to individuals' relentless pursuit of information for various purposes. Without a doubt, people consume information via social media daily, much like they consume food, making exposure to fake news almost unavoidable. Fake news is not unique to Nigeria; it is a global phenomenon that has caused more harm than good in societies worldwide. The paper explored the effects of fake news, methods of detecting it, and the challenges and solutions associated with its proliferation on social media platforms.

In all, social media and fake news present both positive and negative implications in contemporary society. This reality emphasises the urgent need for a high level of media literacy among users to enable them to navigate the digital information landscape responsibly and critically.

**Recommendations**

- I. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), in collaboration with Civil Society groups and the Nigerian Union of Journalists, should continuously increase social media-based sensitisation on fake news and educate users on how to independently verify the source and authenticity of news stories, in order to reduce the spread of misinformation on these platforms.
- ii. The government should strengthen efforts to promote media literacy and support reliable media outlets that the public can consistently depend on for accurate information. It is also essential for the government to collaborate with the media and invest in the sector to prevent the conditions that allow fake news to thrive.
- iii. The government should ensure full press freedom and uphold journalistic integrity, both in Nigeria and globally.
- iv. Users must make a habit of verifying the source of any information to confirm its authenticity before using or sharing it.

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