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Social Media Fake News and Its Implications on Elections in Nigeria

Fab-Ukozor Nkem, Williams Etumnu Emeka

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MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

A Festschrift for
**PROFESSOR
IFEYINWA
NSUDE**

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Social Media Fake News and Its Implications on Elections in Nigeria

PROF. NKEM FAB-UKOZOR &
ETUMNU EMEKA WILLIAMS

Introduction

The election period in Nigeria has always been characterised by heated politics. During this period, people are glued to their radio, television and, more importantly, their social media handles in order to get information about elections. Researchers such as Apuke and Omar (2020) observed that an increasing number of people depend on social media as a source of news. These days, social media is one of the viable platforms where information about elections is sent because of the large number of users. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (2022), more than half of the Nigerian population are internet users, and over 20 million people use social media platforms for one reason or another. Inobemhe *et al.* (2020) noted that social media platforms became very popular because of their nature of interactivity. This feature of social media made it possible for political actors to use it to reach out to the public before, during and after the election period.

During election period, social media has been used several times to spread fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In recent times, social media's widespread use has even contributed to the spread of fake news. Social media is the "lifeblood of fake news" because it makes it inexpensive for anybody to spread a viral false narrative to a large audience (Warner-Søderholm *et al.*, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017). "Concern about the spread of fake news focuses on both the ubiquity of social media and the easy circulation of information that social media platforms afford due to their technical affordances" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Due to the desperation within the Nigerian political space, social media platforms are heavily relied upon to spread fake news. Sometimes this news is sponsored to cause panic or discredit other opponents vying for elective positions. This is made possible because of the free flow of information on social media (Jardine, n.d.). Researchers such as Quandt (2019) and Lazer *et al.* (2017) noted that social media is a viable ground for the spread of fake news because of the rapidity with which news content swiftly spreads unverified information, making it hard to correct.

Pate (2018) observes that fake news will always thrive within Nigeria's political landscape because of how tensed it has always been because of the incessant rise of security problems in various parts of the country, undue marginalisation of some parts, anger, confusion, and economic challenges. That peddler of fake news can always leverage these shortcomings to misinform and promote apathy through fake news. Madu *et al.* (2019) argue that fake news, which has become popular through social media, is a conduit pipe through which social vices such as hate speech are disseminated, fueling political and ethno-religious crises. The promoters and mongers of fake news aim to instigate acts capable of causing election crises.

Because of the nature of social media, many increasingly view it as a feasible venue for the distribution of fake news, even if they are well aware that they cannot be held accountable in

Nigeria. This is mostly because the creators of the fake news can remain anonymous on these platforms. Despite the significance offered by social media, its abuse by unscrupulous people, especially during the election period, cannot be taken for granted. This paper examines the inherent implications of social media fake news in elections in Nigeria.

Conceptual Overview

Social Media

“Social media is computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities” (Dollarhide, 2020, para. 1). With the invention of the internet, a lot of people now have easy access to express themselves through various social media platforms, regardless of their locations (Balkin, 2004, as cited in Etumnu, 2020). As a result, social media is becoming one of the most important platforms for information transmission (Macaulay *et al.*, 2021). Information sharing, networking, and communication are some of the primary motivations behind the use of social media (Matyek *et al.*, 2022). Information is now more quickly and widely available because of the internet and other social media. This offers a forum for a variety of viewpoints and has enabled users to exchange ideas and make decisions regarding the information they have been given (Burkhardt, 2017).

Rouse and Wigmore (2020) note that, in light of the aforementioned claim, social media is a collective word for websites and applications that emphasise collaboration, content sharing, community-based input, communication, and engagement. Inobemhe *et al.* (2020) submitted that social media technology encourages interaction with friends, family and business associates and that others simply use it to reach out to different communities that exist within the platforms. Briggs and Strugnell (2011) assert that social media and the internet have reduced some of the physical barriers that prevent members of particular groups from engaging in communication. This is why McNair (2017) and Tong (2018) noted that with the advent of social media, audiences are now fully into news production and dissemination, unhindered in any way. They further stated that with the platforms, information creation and dissemination are a lot quicker and cost next to nothing than they have ever been, just as audiences are now empowered to be active creators and disseminators of contents.

Fake News

Even though fake news is not a new phenomenon globally, there seems to be a rising trend and concern over the volume and speed with which such news is disseminated in recent times (Ugbo & Bebenimibo, 2020). According to Apuke and Omar (2020), the term "fake news" is made out of the terms "news," which refers to information about current events, and "fake," which suggests something that is not true but is intended to be taken as true. Consequently, information or news that is presented as true, even though it is not, might be referred to as fake news. Although academics have defined fake news in a variety of ways, they all essentially imply the same thing. According to Duffy *et al.* (2019), fake news occurs when false material mimics a news story in order to resemble the credibility that the public connects with actual news. When identifying false news, a lot of academics concentrate on the purpose behind it. According to McGonagle (2017), fake news is material that has been purposefully made up and spread with the goal of tricking and misleading people into accepting untrue statements or casting doubt on independently verified facts. Fake news can be regarded as a viral post based on a fictitious account made to look like a news report with the intent of being misleading. In a study by Allcott

and Gentzkow (2017), they define fake news “as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.” They went further to say that fake news is a distorted signal uncorrelated with the truth. Visentin *et al.* (2019) regard “fake news as fabricated stories that are intentionally false, realistically portrayed, and potentially verifiable”. According to these definitions, fake news is information that is intentionally made up to be untrue in order to deceive readers. The common thing about these definitions by scholars is their intent to mislead the people with the pretence that the news is based on truth.

In a 2018 British Broadcasting Corporation report, as cited in Ugbo and Bebenimibo (2020), it was reported that Nigeria ranks high among countries that are plagued by fake news. This was the result of too many incidents of fake news during that period. Examples of such incidents were “the rumoured death of President Muhammadu Buhari shortly after he began a health leave to the United Kingdom on January 19, 2017. Many Nigerians shared and re-shared on social media that the President was dead and cloned or replaced by a Sudanese called “Jubril,” causing an uproar and confusion among many people.” Another instance was the news that “the former Vice President and Presidential candidate of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, was alleged to be a Cameroonian.” All these instances contributed to Nigeria being ranked highly among countries that have been plagued with fake news.

Election

Elections are the heartbeat of democracy, pulsating with the collective will and aspirations of a society. At their core, elections represent more than just a mechanism to select leaders; they embody the essence of choice, a fundamental right and responsibility bestowed upon citizens (Edet *et al.*, 2021). The meaning of elections transcends the mere act of casting ballots; it is a profound expression of civic engagement, a testament to the belief that every voice matters.

In a democratic framework, elections serve as a conduit for the peaceful transfer of power. They are a mechanism through which individuals can participate in shaping the trajectory of their nation, influencing policies, and holding leaders accountable (Carter & Farrell, 2009). The act of voting is not merely a civic duty but a powerful statement of belief in the potential for positive change. It is a way for people to stake their claim in the collective destiny of their society (Ibeanu, 2022).

Moreover, elections are a reflection of diversity and pluralism. They provide a platform for various ideologies, perspectives, and voices to contend and compete. In this arena, the richness of ideas converges, offering voters a spectrum of choices that mirror the complexity of human societies (Birch, 2008). Elections, therefore, become a celebration of diversity, fostering an environment where differing opinions can coexist and contribute to the greater tapestry of a nation (Animashaun, 2010).

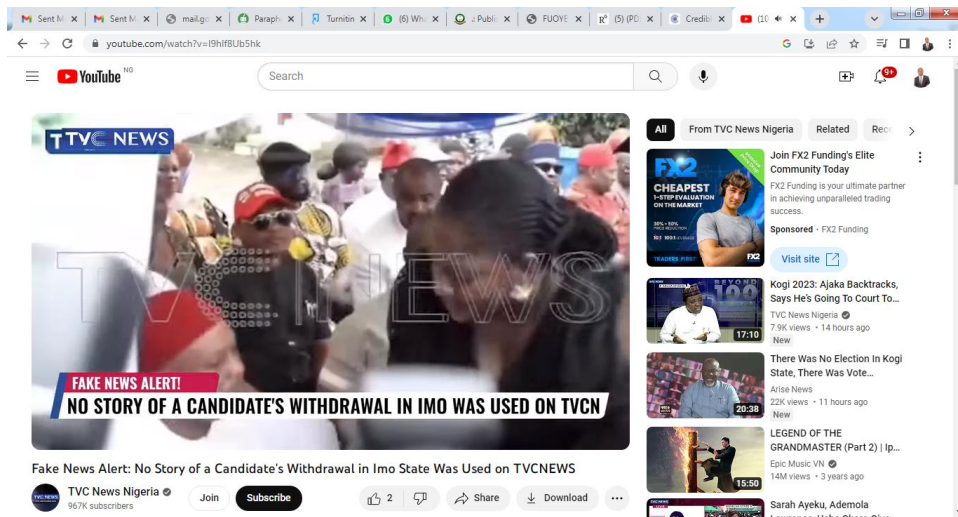
The meaning of elections extends beyond the immediate outcome. It is a continuous process that sustains the democratic spirit. It involves informed deliberation, open discourse, and the ongoing commitment of citizens to stay engaged beyond the polling day (Edet *et al.*, 2021). Elections are not isolated events but part of a larger narrative of civic responsibility and the shared journey towards a more just and equitable society (Obi, 2008).

In essence, elections symbolise the heartbeat of a vibrant democracy, pulsating with the energy of participation, choice, and the collective pursuit of a better future. They encapsulate the profound notion that every vote cast is a thread woven into the fabric of a nation's democratic identity, shaping its character and defining its course (The Commonwealth, 2014).

Implications of Social Media Fake News on Elections in Nigeria

The proliferation of social media usage has created fear among people, especially in spreading fake news (Pariser, 2011). Studies have shown that fake news has contributed to political hostility and societal panic (Edwin & Yalmi, 2019). According to Bader (2018), fake news frequently affects how elections turn out. Additionally, it was discovered that fake news—or, as Wardle (2017) puts it, disinformation—has grown to be a significant aspect of elections in a number of nations throughout the globe. Bader (2018) further stated that in recent times, fake news has been employed to manipulate electoral processes. Bauer (2022) says that fake news can bias voters' choices and, hence, affect election outcomes. Nonetheless, the concerns are real, and the strategies to influence voters through fake news are becoming more deceptive and more difficult to discern. Faris *et al.* (2017) argued that the increasing effect of fake news is among the reasons democracies across the globe are under intense pressure. Since it can significantly affect how an election turns out, Furthermore, fake news has the potential to erode public confidence in long-established, prosperous political institutions.

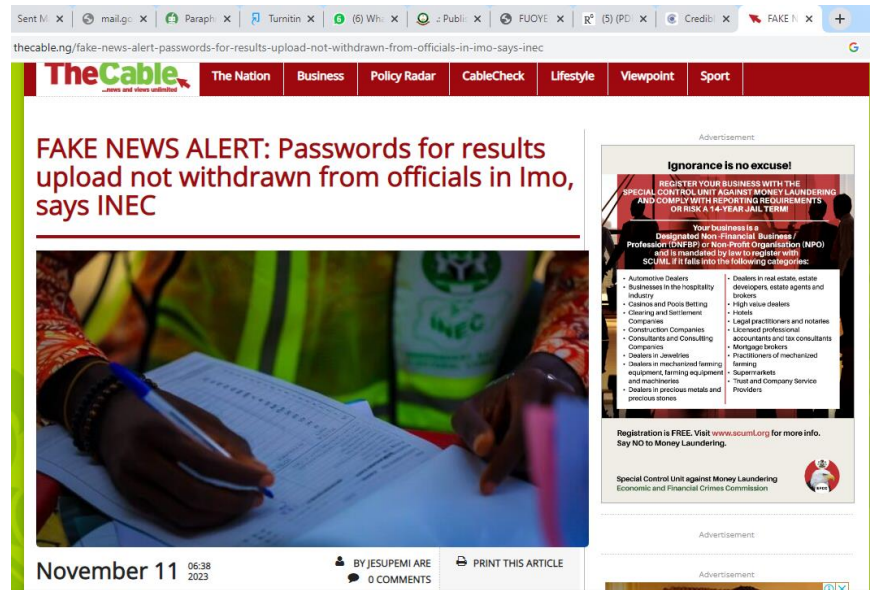
Fake news in the context of elections typically refers to the dissemination of intentionally false information with the intent of undermining political rivals, tampering with the voting process, or influencing opinions about the political environment in which the election is being held. Fake news propagation is just one tactic among many that can be employed to influence elections (Bader, 2018). In the Nigerian context, there have been several reports of fake news during the election period that have caused tension. For instance, in the November 2023 gubernatorial election in Imo State, there was a video circulating that the People Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Senator Samuel Nmemeka Anyanwu had withdrawn from the election, which generated tension (see figure 1), and he came out and debunked the news as fake. Also, TVC debunked having no association with the fake video clip. In the aftermath of the incident, the PDP called the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Governor Hope Uzodinma, disqualified for allegedly being responsible for the circulation of the fake video.



Source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9hlf8Ub5hk>

Figure 20.1: Fake news on PDP candidate withdrawal from gubernatorial election

Another instance of fake news regarding the election was the claim that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has withdrawn the password for results uploading from officials in Imo State. (See figure 2). Though INEC debunked the news as fake, asking people to disregard it.



Source: (The Cable, 2023)

Figure 20.2: Fake news on INEC withdrawal of password for result upload from official

As far as elections are concerned, political parties over the years have been using social media to spread fake news, all in the name of disparaging opposing parties. Such an instance was noticed during the 2023 presidential election, where candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu was alleged to be sick in London and not capable of the presidential position. On the other hand, the candidate of the PDP, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, was accused of cloning two newspaper websites to spread fake news in the Hausa language against Tinubu's aspiration (Omeiza, 2023). These are some of the instances of fake news as a result of the election. It is worthy of note that most of the disinformation and fake news on social media were designed to influence people's perceptions of the candidate and perhaps influence their choice of voting. According to a study by McGonagle conducted in 2017, fake news that was never verified is a key contributing factor to the violence that surrounds Nigerian elections, resulting in the loss of lives and property. Essentially, the spread of fake news was the reason for the heated environment during the Nigerian elections. On top of that, falsified election results are made and extensively shared, along with false information about political parties, candidates, and electoral authorities. When the actual results diverge from the fabricated ones, this can lead to broad-based violence. Spreading false information during elections is done with the malicious goal of sabotage the voting process, assassinate voters, and incite fear in the electorate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no denying the fact that social media has come to stay, and it will continue to be a great instrument to be used in elections. However, based on this discourse, it is therefore concluded that social media have become a fertile ground for the spread of fake news, and such fake news has been confirmed to have negative implications generally for elections in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that the ministry of information, the National Orientation Agency, and other important stakeholders engage in public sensitisation on the danger of fake news in the democratic state of Nigeria and how to spot it and stop it from spreading further. Social media users should not always be in a hurry to share messages; they should verify information received using a fact-checker before disseminating the information. As a matter of importance, they should verify from other reliable sources as well. Also, strict laws need to be implemented by the government to checkmate those who spread fake news with the intent of misleading and causing harm to the public.

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