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Cacophonous Hustings, Pre-emptive Fact Checking and Disinformation in Nigeria's 2019 General Elections
Kakafonik Seçim Kampanyaları, Önleyici Bilgi Doğrulama ve 2019 Nijerya Genel Seçimleri'nde Dezenformasyon

Abstract

The 2016 presidential election in the United States focused global attention on the power of social media as kingmaker and the model is being copied all over the world by those who see it as a shortcut to power. It was in full flight in Nigeria in the run up to the 2019 general elections; falsehood and disinformation were disguised as news in a bid to influence voters. For many politicians and supporters alike, the production and dissemination of fabricated political content is a serious business and potent strategy to discredit opposition, keep their support base and win over the gullible ones at the same time. This paper interrogates how the government, content providers, civil society and online social platforms can build resilience to disinformation and limit the dissemination of harmful information. The overriding questions are: Can these stakeholders mitigate the declining trust in the media and electoral process through their intervention? Does the flow of information from the digital space help create better politically informed citizens? If fake news negatively impacts the country's electioneering, can the citizens expect democratic accountability from the government that subsequently emerges from that process? This study seeks to enrich the understanding of Nigeria's cyberspace concerns by examining the socio-political manoeuvrings surrounding the 2019 general elections. It also provides insights into the various factors that shape people's reception and reactions to false information in an election season.

Öz

2016 yılında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde gerçekleşen başkanlık seçimleri, sosyal medyada etkili olması açısından bütün dünyanın ilgisini çekti ve bu model iktidarı kazanma yönünden kestirme bir yol olarak gören aktörler tarafından diğer ülkelerde de kopyalanıyor. Bu modelin 2019 genel seçimlerine yaklaşan süreçte Nijerya'da da görüldüğünü söylemek mümkün; seçmenleri etkilemek amacıyla yalan ve dezenformasyon haber içeriği oluşturuldu. Birçok siyasi aktör ve destekleri için, uydurma siyasi içeriklerin üretilmesi ve yayılması ciddi bir süreç ve muhalefetin imajını itibarsızlaştırmak, kendi destek tabanlarını korumak ve aynı zamanda ikna edilebilir belirli grupları kazanmak için güçlü bir stratejidir. Bu çalışma, hükümetin, içerik sağlayıcıların, sivil toplumun ve çevrimiçi sosyal platformların dezenformasyona yönelik nasıl bir direnç oluşturabileceğin ve nasıl zararlı bilginin yayılmasının önlenebileceğini irdelemektedir. Çalışma bazı temel soruları ortaya koymaktadır: Bu paydaşlar müdahaleleriyle seçim sürecine ve medyaya ilişkin güvenin azalması durumunu azaltabilir mi? Dijital alan aracılığıyla oluşan bilgi akışı siyasi açıdan daha bilgili vatandaşlar yaratılmasında etkili olabilir mi? Eğer sahte haberler ülkenin seçim bütünlüğünü olumsuz yönde etkilemekteyse vatandaşlar ilgili süreçten sonra oluşan hükümetten demokratik bir şekilde hesap verebilirlik beklentisine sahip olabilir mi? Dolayısıyla, bu makale, 2019 genel seçimlerini çevreleyen sosyo-politik manevraları inceleyerek Nijerya'nın siber gerçeklik kaygılarının anlaşılmasını zenginleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bununla beraber, seçim döneminde insanların yanlış bilgileri almasını ve bu yanlış bilgilere tepki vermesini şekillendiren faktörler konusunda fikir vermektedir.

Keywords
Fake news, elections, disinformation, hustings, propaganda, digital media platforms

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Sahte haber, seçimler, dezenformasyon, seçim kampanyaları, propaganda, dijital medya kuruluşları

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Introduction

Beyond the traditional forms of communication, such as television, print media, or the radio, citizens are increasingly seeking information about their local communities, countries and sometimes, the wider world (the House of Commons, 2018) while the public space has fundamentally changed with the advent of the digital communication and social media in particular (Meyer-Resende, 2018). Emanating from this development is the rampant spread of 'fake news' which poses new challenges for democratic accountability, not only because of the lack of content moderation by these technology companies, but because it makes post-truth politics pervasive and easier to achieve coupled with the zeal with which users accept and disseminate such.

Although access to new communication technologies is promoting discourse on democracy and enhancing participation through social media platforms, online manipulation and disinformation tactics are also playing a damaging role in elections. Thus, given the fact that "disinformation strategically spread by political campaigns can become misinformation when it is picked up and spread by individual supporters" (Strauss, 2018), it becomes imperative to explore the impact of these activities on voters and credibility of election. As a matter of fact, a nuanced approach to the idea of objective truth, particularly in our current political climate, is required with a view to distinguishing between real and fake information (Gardner and Mazzola, 2018). This is because such task has become a complex process not only in a developing country like Nigeria but also in advanced democracies. Nigeria's sixth round of national elections since the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999 was held in February 2019 and given Nigeria's historical religious and ethnic fault-lines which become even more vulnerable around election season, false stories and rumours designed to sway votes almost became a norm (Kazeem, 2018).

The speed of "fake news" and online disinformation disguised and disseminated as news has made digital political campaign an interesting but baleful social engagement in Nigeria. Indeed, around the 2019 elections, fraught politics found a common ground in new technology to breed hate and violence. This was encouraged by the ease of creating and disseminating false, misleading and calumnious content without fear of punishment. Many Nigerians took delight in spreading stories taken from dubious websites or, independent of any source, via private messaging apps; they shared visual disinformation with no links as evident of the 2019 hustings. Bearing in mind that disinformation validates people's political preconceptions and worldviews, such practice has continued to draw large audiences across different platforms.

The speed, reach and flexibility of the internet were exploited during the 2019 general elections to spread disinformation and hate-filled propaganda. The virtual space hummed with hostile discourse while the digital outlets became stumping campaign grounds for people

who mostly failed to exercise their franchise on Election Day.[1] This study interrogates how the government, content providers, civil society and online social platforms can build resilience to disinformation and limit the dissemination of harmful information. The overriding questions are: Can these stakeholders mitigate the declining trust in the media and electoral process through their intervention? Does the flow of information from the digital space help create better politically informed citizens? If fake news negatively impacts the country's electoral integrity, can the citizens expect democratic accountability from a government produced by such flawed process?

With data from credible sources, including the media, civil society organizations, academia, and independent election observers, this essay enriches the understanding of Nigeria's cyber space menace by examining the socio-political conditions that gave rise to it and how electioneering campaign significantly became the thematic discourse on social media platforms in the 2019 general elections. It also provides insights into the various factors that shaped people's reception and reactions to false information in an election season.

Conceptual Exploration

Although there is no universal definition, fake news generally refers to misleading content found on the internet, especially on social media (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). According to the Ethical Journalism Network, fake news consists of "information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts". Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information (Cornell University Library, 2018). The expression 'fake news' is also increasingly being used to encompass stories in the mainstream media that turn out to be based on inaccuracies or suffer from extreme ideological spin (Butteriss, 2017). News based on anonymous sources or just one single, non-contrasted source, with little or no information on the context of the news, along with a lack of alternative arguments, would qualify as fake and would be a breach of journalism standards.

Disinformation—the use of half-truth and non-rational argument to manipulate public opinion in pursuit of political objectives— is expressly meant to deceive or mislead a targeted or imagined audience. Disinformation may include distribution of forged documents, manuscripts, and photographs, or spreading dangerous rumours and fabricated intelligence. Disinformation tactics are also applied in both politics and business to undermine the position of a competitor (*TruePublica*, 2015). Perpetrators of disinformation often employ subtle methods, such as feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information (Weedon, Nuland & Stamos, 2017). Accordingly,

what determines disinformation "is not the percentage of truth or the percentage of lies it contains but the ways in which it is designed, carried out and ultimately accepted or rejected" (Grant, 1960). As aptly captured by Nielsen (2018):

> Disinformation takes many forms and is driven by many factors. Foreign states sometimes try to subvert other countries' political processes. People publish false and fabricated information masquerading as news for profit. Domestic politicians lie to their own people – and sometimes these lies are amplified by news media, by hyper-partisan activists, or spread far and wide via social media and other platforms.

Propaganda refers to information, historically promulgated by state officials but today often also by political opponents, that may or may not be true, but which presents the opposing point of view in an unfavourable light in order to rally public support (Born and Edgington, 2017). Propaganda can be designed to cultivate attitudes and/or provoke action. When a propaganda campaign is designed to provoke the audience to take a particular action, it can be termed agitprop. The term propaganda can be applied to a range of governmental and nongovernmental actors to critique their selective presentations of information, persuasive framings, and use of emotional appeals (Jack, 2018). Thus, it need not be reserved for the actions of government agencies and political parties.

Propaganda and disinformation are interconnected terms and are sometimes used interchangeably (Bentzen, 2015). Unlike traditional propaganda techniques designed to engage emotional support, disinformation is designed to manipulate the audience at the rational level by either discrediting conflicting information or supporting false conclusions (*TruePublica*, 2015). Some define propaganda as the use of non-rational arguments to either advance or undermine a political ideal (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017) while another popular distinction holds that disinformation describes "politically motivated messaging designed explicitly to engender public cynicism, uncertainty, apathy, distrust, and paranoia" (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). These are all geared toward inhibiting citizen engagement and mobilization for social or political change.

Methodology

A methodical literature search was employed to provide an in- depth and valuable understanding of existing studies on the complex nuances of disinformation, fake news, and electioneering. The study relies extensively on secondary sources of data gathering and employs both descriptive and historical methods of data analysis to offer insights into the mechanisms by which digital media advancement and disinformation issues are related, as well as the detrimental effects of fake news on electoral integrity. Thus, books, scholarly journals, government publications,

media reports, monographs, internet materials, and institutional journals were systematically reviewed while gathering data for the study.

The Interplay of Digital Outlets, Disinformation and Electoral Democracy

Digital platforms systematize incentives that can drive the spread of problematic information (Jack, 2018) even when social media has become a site of news production and distribution that is impossible to ignore. The inability of social media users to distinguish between genuine news and lucrative or politically motivated frauds seriously reduces their value and utility (Freedom House, 2017). Digital media platforms have, no doubt, enabled the spread of disinformation on a scale previously unseen. In other words, the prevalence and ease of messaging platforms like WhatsApp create shortcuts for disseminating misinformation quickly. It has also empowered individuals to disseminate news – giving everyone a voice — and enabling everyone to become a potential 'citizen journalist' (European People's Party, 2017) while it makes possible increased participation of the people on national issues.

Misinformation, disinformation and propaganda have been features of human communication for ages but of recent, the manipulation of online content has increasingly become a common feature of political campaigns around the world. Sowing doubt and distrust in rule-of-law-based societies has long been part of adversarial strategy seeking to influence democratic processes. The role that "fake news" played in the public debate during the 2016 American election period has drawn researchers' attention to this phenomenon, mainly concerning its impact on the democratic electoral process (Alaphilippe et al., 2018). Democracy depends on open deliberations and fact-based discussions for it to function properly. While democracy thrives from robust, healthy debate, it becomes a serious concern "when that genuine debate deteriorates into threats and intimidation designed to drive out honest differences" (Smith, 2018). López (2018) opines that these threats challenge the resilience of democratic processes:

> From disinformation campaigns that have a direct impact on voters' engagement, to cyber-attacks targeting vote counting and election reporting systems – these are new grounds for the electoral bodies responsible for delivering accurate and secure elections.

Given that elections are crucial to the functioning of representative democracy, citizens' active participation in the democratic process becomes a fundamental principle. One of the numerous ways through which they can enhance meaningful participation is public debate via free speech. Paradoxically, it has also become a potent source of threat to democracy.

Elections are unusually high-profile times for political activity and in many countries today, election campaigns provide particularly fertile ground for hate speech and incitement to hatred (Denton, 2000). At the most fundamental level, elections present the opportunity to build up a nation or the risk of tearing down democracy (IFES White Paper, 2018). There is a growing debate about how to address fake news and sophisticated disinformation campaigns without undermining the benefits of digital media given the fact that these issues are especially problematic in democratic systems (West, 2017). As succinctly captured by Avramopoulos (2018):

> Electoral periods have proven to be a particularly strategic and sensitive window of time for cyber-enabled attacks. This included attacks against electoral infrastructures and campaign IT systems, as well as politically motivated mass online disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks by third countries with the aim to discredit and delegitimise democratic elections.

Although recent elections and referenda have shown that internet comes with new risks that require specific protection measures, the online world has created unprecedented opportunities for engaging in a political debate and communicating directly with millions of voters (Jourová, 2017). The internet has democratized access to information and facilitated engagement between the government and the governed. Digital technologies allow many different groups to voice their opposition, resistance, or solidarity on political issues. Social media platforms provide spaces for electoral communities and groups, traditionally excluded from the political conversation by traditional media, to rally behind their preferred candidates in an election.

The barrier to entry on social media platforms is incredibly low; anyone with a device connected to the internet anywhere in the world can make viral material (Tworek, 2018). Social media eliminate the gatekeepers and make broadcasters of anyone with a smartphone and internet connections; the new media environment takes power out of the hands of traditional media and PR people and gives it to the people (Olaniyan, 2019). The use of these platforms over the last decade has also inevitably led to data-driven political campaigns as political parties seek to take advantage of sophisticated marketing techniques to engage with voters (Denham, 2018). Although there is some debate about the electoral impact of fake news as a campaign strategy, a Stanford University study (cited in Butteriss, 2017) notes that "when combined with the distributive power of social media, fake news is a potential game-changer in terms of the degree of political polarization". To underline the global threat of fake news, one only needs to follow the discourse in the aftermath of President Donald Trump of the United States election victory where it is alleged that fake news 'assisted in swinging votes' in his favour (*Thisday*, 2018).

Politicians, 'Fake News' Strategy and Voters' Vulnerability

The advantage of social media for politicians lies in the opportunity of direct communication with supporters, by side-tracking regulated mainstream media such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines as well as press conferences (Akinnaso, 2018). Political actors across the globe use media platforms to re-construct their political and personal identities in a manner that will appeal to voters. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp have become avenues for politicians to manipulate the truth, spread misinformation, falsehood and fake news. Politicians always need a ready means to reach voters during election campaigns and the internet has enabled the instantaneous mass dissemination of their campaign messages to the electorate. With the active involvement of their supporters, politicians seek to manipulate public opinion through fake news and hyper-partisan propaganda. In fact, the most direct way for candidates and parties to manipulate content is "to spread deliberately falsified or misleading reports themselves" (Funk, 2019). In the competitive environment of online media in Nigeria, many outlets have been known to instantly publish unverified information.

The 2019 general elections in Nigeria readily attest to this submission with the resurgence and proliferation of fake news. Few weeks before the election, the political class weaponised disinformation to advance their agendas. The electioneering languages became increasingly inciting and violent with less restraints and consideration. All the candidates of the political parties in the country took to social media to solicit support. Political actors willingly took advantage of the existing gaps - perceived marginalisation, anger, confusion and economic challenges - to misinform, promote apathy and attempt to skew people's voting choices during the election.

Many of the social media personalities are vocal supporters of top politicians and party candidates in the election. The political season also subtly bestowed on everyone, with minimal knowledge of 'copy and paste', the duty of news purveyor and analyst. Such furious online activities neither created conditions conducive to a free and fair election nor prevented campaign violence. Suffice to say that most Nigerian youth, who currently constitute a sizeable percentage of the total population of registered voters, spend quality time on these social media platforms, and are, therefore, the prime target and purveyor of the twisted messages both before and after the 2019 general elections.

As more of the country's 190 million people rapidly acquire mobile phones and gain internet access, fake news became a matter of concern, fuelled in part by illiteracy and government secrecy. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (cited in BBC News, 2018), more than 100 million people now use the internet in the country – triple the number of users in 2012. Recent research suggests that African audiences see much more misinformation than American audiences do and that the public's trust in the media is particularly low in Nigeria. Other studies show that Nigerians are among the most likely to

pass fake news along to others, even when they know it is false. Thus, they are among the most vulnerable to receiving fake news on social media (Griffin, 2018).

The fake news strategy has always been effective because WhatsApp is an essential communication tool among Nigerians and most messages appear credible since they are forwarded by friends, acquaintances and family. WhatsApp groups in Nigeria, as rightly captured by Hitchen et al (2019), "are often centred around professional associations, religious affiliations and alumni networks, or the groups are designed to support the goals of a particular social movement". Similarly, Facebook is another breeding ground for fake news and hate speech in Nigeria and the platform was explored by the politicians and their supporters. In a survey carried out by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018), nearly a third of Nigerians said they had shared a political news story online that turned out to be false. Another public opinion poll conducted by Nigeria's survey and polling firm, NOIPolls (cited in CDD, 2018), reveals that the trend of sharing news report without validating its source is capable of triggering mob action, agitation, violence and in extreme cases, national security implications. The poll results also confirm that the issue of fake news is very prevalent in Nigeria as indicated by 93 percent of the respondents interviewed and they believe that it is capable of upsetting the country's social balance.

In the last few years, the intentional spreading of false information in order to deceive and to undermine trust in existing models of governance has become a recurring feature of the country's democratic experiment. Bearing in mind that elections are the most visible, democratic and fair instrument for any society to make public choices, politicians circulate content to push their worldview, often using the mainstream media and social media to increase its audience. Many politicians and voters, consider it a valid electoral gambit to produce and disseminate fabricated and fiercely partisan political content to discredit opposition.

It has also been observed that state actors are increasingly leveraging the social media platforms to spread computational propaganda and disinformation during critical moments of public life (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018). Indeed, anecdotal evidence has emerged linking coordinated campaigns by state-sponsored actors with efforts to manipulate public opinion on the Web, often around major political events (Zannettou, et al 2018). These actors rely on "computational propaganda"—the use of automation, algorithms, and big data analytics—to influence or deceive social-media users (Samuel and Howard, 2017). For instance, President Buhari's Special Adviser on Social Media posted a video on Twitter which showed his supporters at a big rally when in reality the images were from a religious gathering the year before. She also posted a photo of a major road construction, citing it as an example of the President's public works. The public works were in Rwanda. She issued an apology, saying: "My big mistake, apologies to all, friends and wailers alike. It won't happen again"(Anderson, 2019).

Also, the government's media team in Nigeria often engaged in the demonization of the government's real and imagined political enemies. The online warfare became a landmark in the history of Nigeria's electioneering, with the digital media outlets persistently cluttered with conflicting information. Isa Sanusi (cited in VOA, 2019), Amnesty International Nigeria spokesperson, observed that false news spreads quickly in Nigeria because public officials often are not open with government information. It has also become the norm for public figures to cry 'fake news' and blame the opposition for every headline they simply do not like (Okoli, 2017). It suffices to say that the proliferation of private media outfits and new media in the country has dislodged the government's sole ownership of mainstream news media and, by implication, incapacitated the government from regulating the flow of information to the people.

Mudslinging campaign and state-sponsored propaganda were fuelled by the fraught relations between two dominant parties – the ruling APC and the opposition PDP that had held power for sixteen years until Buhari assumed office in 2015. The parties' rivalry was not based on ideological differences but largely on the struggle to capture power and access to state resources (ICG, 2018). With total disregard to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties – a voluntary instrument governing the behaviour of parties and their supporters – the parties increasingly engaged in acrimonious exchanges typified by hate speech, involving even some party leaders and fake news really charged the atmosphere (ICG, 2018).

Stakeholders' Intervention in an Unregulated Sphere of Political Hustings

Communications technology has been a part of mass violence and collective misinformation long before the invention of the internet (Nyabola, 2018). However, the rise of false information has complex cultural and social reasons (Wasserman, 2018). Fake news, according to the European People's Party (2017), is a reflection of a general decline in terms of political debate (Nielsen, 2018). The effect of disinformation on democracy and civic activism are potentially devastating because it damages citizens' ability to choose their leaders based on factual news and authentic debate (Freedom House, 2017). The term "fake news" has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). In recent years, therefore, governments' control of online discussion has become more glaring "with bots, propaganda producers, and fake news outlets exploiting social media and search algorithms to ensure high visibility and seamless integration with trusted content[2]" (Freedom House, 2017).

Social media makes tracking suspects difficult as some people use fake names and false addresses; thus, facilitating more cyber-enabled threats in the country. In a situation of false information, it is tempting for legal authorities to deal with offensive content and

false news by forbidding or regulating it (West, 2017). It is argued that a clampdown on dis-information should not become an excuse for suppressing dissenting or minority views (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). The Nigerian constitution guarantees the right of every Nigerian to freedom of speech and expression. Section 39(1) of the 1999 Constitution states it so clearly: "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information without interference." Even though the constitution guarantees the right to free speech and a free press, such right may be restrained for the purposes of public interest, public order, or public safety or to allow others to enjoy their rights under the constitution (Bukarti, 2017).

Thus, in a bid to address the epidemic of fake news and misinformation during the election season and in response to growing concerns and tensions related to such trend, Nigeria launched a campaign aimed at making people more critical news consumers (Daniel, 2019). Having seen the way fake news and technology's intersection had led to chaos and bloodshed in other countries, at least 16 Nigerian news organizations and researchers, prior to the election, launched an election fact-checking project called *CrossCheck Nigeria* in an attempt to combat misinformation with focus on politicians running for office.

Despite the government and media-led initiatives to combat fake news, the spread of misinformation worsened via social media, especially WhatsApp, in the run up to the 2019 general elections. Some of the obstacles Nigerian journalists and researchers faced during the election, like tracking the source of fake news on an encrypted platform like WhatsApp, are universal. But others are specific to Nigeria, whose government is notorious for withholding information from the public, making the task of fact-checking even more difficult (Griffin, 2018).

The Buhari administration made it clear that it considered the spread of hateful and dangerous speech as a significant contributing factor to conflicts in Nigeria (Manion, 2018). The government warned Nigerians and media organisations to desist from spreading hate speech and avoid reports that were defamatory to an individual or detrimental to the country. The Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, affirmed that the government would not resort to "coercion or censorship" (Okakwu, 2018), but called on Nigerians to avoid sharing false information and advised journalists to adhere to the code and ethics of the profession (Vanguard, 2018). His plan of action was to assign information officers to monitor both online and offline news media to identify fake news and disseminate timely and credible counter-narratives.

Though fabricated stories, posing as serious journalism, "are not likely to go away as they have become a means for some writers to make money and potentially influence public opinion" (Ordway, 2018), it can be significantly addressed through legislation. The Cyber Crime Act (2015) in Nigeria appears to be more concerned with financial/ICT crimes and hate speech, but it does tackle fake news indirectly. For instance, Sections 24 and 26 of the Act

forbids the distribution of racist and xenophobic material to the public through a computer system or network (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). It prohibits the use of threats of violence and insulting statements to persons based on race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin. Persons found guilty of this are liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of not less than five years or to a fine of not less than N10 million or to both fine and imprisonment (Egbe, 2018).

The Dynamics of Fake News Dissemination During the 2019 Elections

During the election season, in spite of the fact that the major political parties signed a new accord sponsored by the National Peace Committee, committing to peaceful campaigns and respect for the results, a proliferation of fabricated news articles –written pieces and recorded segments– meant to promote false information or perpetuate conspiracy theories abounded on social media. As the 2019 elections approached, there was increased tensions and polarization occasioned by hate speech and fake news. During and after the election, unverified reports and video footages of injured citizens and burning of electoral materials also flooded social media, causing security concerns (Isah, 2019). A number of circulated fake news during the election is highlighted here.

There was the widely circulated fake news of the cloning of President Muhammad Buhari. The allegation was first presented in a YouTube video made by Nnamdi Kanu, leader of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), in September 2017. The fabricators of the fake news, believed to be members of the opposition parties, claimed that the present President of Nigeria had died long ago and that he was being impersonated a clone, one Jibril from Sudan. This fake news which was circulated in different online, print and broadcast media prompted President Buhari to declare, while in Poland for the Climate Change Conference, that he was the real Buhari and not a clone (Danladi, 2019). Though many people considered it an indulgent conspiracy theory *abinitio*, the moment revealed how susceptible many people in the nation of more than 190 million can be to fake news.

Other cases of fake news include the fabrication of photos of non-existent projects as projects conceived and executed by politicians seeking re-election. Currently in Nigeria, it is common to see in newspapers and on social media platforms, beautiful pictures of non-existent roads, railways, market stalls, bridges, hospitals, clinics, pipe-borne water, rural electrification and other projects portrayed as fully completed achievements of politicians (Danladi, 2019).

There were fake pictures circulated on social media to falsely depict inter-communal violence and thus inflamed already high tensions in Nigeria. In January 2019, the presidency denounced a fake Twitter account which appeared to justify herdsmen attacks in Benue State to the anger of the public. A month later, a letter alerting the public to an apparent attack by

herders on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, a major route in the country's Southwest, went viral before the police issued a statement to deny it (Egbe, 2018).

Politicians have accused one another of using the shadowy Boko Haram militants to attack their opponents. Just as the Salafi-jihadi group did during the 2015 election. Some months before the 2019 election, the Boko Haram faction, popularly called Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), renewed attacks in North-eastern Nigeria. Images of Nigerian soldiers purportedly slain by this terrorist organisation turned out to actually be recycled photos from another incident involving the Kenyan Army in Somalia (Sims, 2018). Expectedly, opposition politicians began to weaponize these incidents against the incumbent president, while the ruling party's supporters accuse the opposition of working with Boko Haram to disrupt the election (Bukarti, 2018). Online monitoring of *CrossCheck Nigeria* website some weeks before the election also revealed some fake news which they were able to verify and debunk.

- The news that Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi, Minister of Transportation and Director-General of the APC presidential campaign organisation, was arrested by the police on January 23 on allegations of corruption was debunked.

- The news that the wife of PDP presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar, Mrs. Titi Atiku, was attacked by "APC thugs" outside the Sarkin Sasa house in Ibadan on January 18 was debunked.

- The story, which started to appear on social media a few days before the election, that Leah Sharibu, the 15-year-old girl held captive for nearly a year by Islamist militants Boko Haram for refusing to convert to Islam, had died. The story spread on WhatsApp and Facebook (BBC News, 2019).

- A video showing that Vice President Yemi Osinbajo was booed and chased away by angry people at a market in Ilorin, Kwara State capital surfaced online. *CrossCheck Nigeria* confirmed that neither the Vice President nor his convoy was seen at, or could be traced to, the scene of the claim, based on verification checks.

- A photo, supposedly of the door-to-door campaign leader of the All Progressives Congress (APC), which surfaced on Facebook alleging that he was brutalised while campaigning for the re-election of President Muhammadu Buhari. *CrossCheck Nigeria* confirmed the claim to be false and that the man in the photo might not even be Nigerian.

- America-based Nigerian columnist, Farooq Kperogi tweeted a photo on December 26 of campaign vehicles allegedly belonging to President Muhammadu Buhari being chased away by Kano residents. That post/image that gained over 5000 shares at the time *CrossCheck Nigeria* declared it as false, had also been used in December 2017 and March 2018.

- Claims on Facebook and other channels online that Nigeria's First Lady, Aisha Buhari, said Nigerians should not vote for her husband, President Muhammadu Buhari, in the February 2019 presidential election were debunked. *CrossCheck Nigeria* confirmed that there was no evidence that the article, shared over 22,000 times on Facebook and attributed to Aisha Buhari, actually emanated from her.

- A Facebook page named "Atiku Abubakar 2019" (with 30,900 followers) which posted a picture of President Donald Trump of the US endorsing the PDP presidential candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar for the 2019 general elections, was affirmed by *CrossCheck Nigeria* as fake. A search of more possible cloned Atiku Abubakar campaign pages reveals that there were over 90 unverified pages that post news and contents that are not true, parading the Atiku Abubakar 2019 campaign name.

Threat of Disinformation to the Country's Electoral Integrity

Disinformation is a growing threat to the public sphere in countries around the world. Easily shareable social media content may do more to shape some people's political opinions than mainstream media reports. The strategic deployment of false, exaggerated, or contradictory narratives is anathema to the hallmarks of democratic elections - a competitive process, faith in electoral institutions, and informed participation (Brothers, 2018). Today, social media platforms are increasingly accused of shaping public debate and engineering people's behaviour in ways that might undermine the democratic process (Milan and Marda, 2018) given the fact that elections are intrinsically conflict-ridden, whether in ordinary or post-conflict contexts. In fact, a number of studies have observed that the emerging trends in the proliferation and use of web-based media have serious implications for the growth and stability of democracy in Africa.

Citizens are frequently misinformed about political issues and candidates. When the electorate is intentionally misinformed about candidates, parties and policies, democracy is in peril. The danger is such that healthy public discourse gets distorted when political debate is driven by likes, shares and angry comments on social media (Belli, 2018). Eventually, voting on the basis of sensible deliberation, objective information and logical rationale is replaced by gut feeling. Unfortunately, false information may continue to influence beliefs and attitudes even after being debunked if it is not replaced by an alternate causal explanation. As observed by Brothers (2018):

> Disinformation is quickly becoming a prevalent threat to the integrity of democratic elections. It amplifies voter confusion, dampens turnout, galvanizes social cleavages, disadvantages certain parties and candidates or otherwise tilts the playing field, and degrades trust in democratic institutions.

From the above submission, it is clear that fake news "is a poison that divides society, blinds the mind, reinforces sentiments and plunges society into unending conflicts that can hinder our nascent democracy and by implication, national development" (Aminu, 2018). Nigeria is a severely fragmented society with social divisions that may make mis/disinformation particularly virulent and harmful. Thus, in a political season where fault-lines such as religion, ethnicity, tribe and political party defined interaction/association, polarization was further exacerbated by disinformation and hate speech evident in intolerance, mud-slinging or character assassination and crude political intrigues. All this was evident in the use of the media and online spaces to exploit existing divisive political fractures, target individuals, and manipulate social and demographic groups. The Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, once declared hate speech as terrorism, concerned that Rwanda's sad experience could be replicated in Nigeria, with the way hate warriors were executing their hate agenda (Onanuga, 2018).

Social media threats to democracy in Nigeria are very real, even if their impact remains unclear. If electoral integrity refers to "contests respecting international standards and global norms governing the appropriate conduct of elections" (Norris 2015, 4), can the 2019 election be said to have met these standards in the face of hate speech, fabricated information, manipulable voters and the attendant implications? The answer cannot be in the affirmative. Indeed, a number of factors - revolving around security vulnerability and fake news manufacturing - have all combined to undermine the electoral process/outcome and negatively affect all measures of the integrity of electoral processes. And this may adversely impact on democratic norms, institutions, governance and democratic accountability because "politicians who attribute their electoral success to manipulation techniques are more likely to use them in governing" (Funk, 2019).

For the election, there is no gainsaying the fact that the deployment of fake news and propaganda impacted negatively on the process in some ways, contributing to a more volatile political security environment in the country. The corrosive effect of disinformation on electoral politics, democratic processes and general trust in mainstream media and the potential nurturing of an uninformed and misinformed citizenry presents huge challenges for the country. It became glaring that support for political parties/candidates are most often driven by blind partisan loyalty rather than being informed by performance in office (for the incumbent), sound alternative manifestoes (for the opposition), competence, grasp of socio-political issues, integrity and visionary ideas among other qualities. But when fake news takes hold in a country already riven by ethnic, religious, and political tensions, it is no longer simply a matter of a harmless forwarded message; it becomes a serious, potentially life-threatening problem that could also upend an entire country's democracy (Griffin, 2018).

Countering Fake News: Some Random Perspectives

While the free flow of political information is mostly good for democracy, the recent popular media debates surrounding the ubiquity of fake news "constitute but one moment in a much longer history of examining, documenting, and contextualizing the proliferation of false news and information" (Reilly, 2018). Fake news proliferation on social media is an existential threat to world peace. Unfortunately, there is no known universal antidote to the rapidly expanding monstrous firestorm (Adavize, 2018). The reactions to the possible use of regulation have been mixed. As a matter of fact, nations around the world are responding to the challenge in line with their respective social realities. While some are using technology to counter the spread of fake news, others are using legislation to stem the tide of the poison, yet some others are engaging in massive enlightenment to confront the problem (Adavize, 2018). However, there are several alternatives to deal with falsehoods and disinformation that can be undertaken by various organizations without endangering freedom of expression and investigative journalism (West, 2017). Indeed, to successfully counter content manipulation and restore trust in social media will take time, resources, and creativity; at least, without undermining internet and media freedom (Freedom House, 2017). Funk's (2019) cautious submission in this regard is very illuminating:

> Deliberately falsified or misleading content is a genuine problem that calls for effective policy and legal responses. But even well-intentioned policymakers are at risk of harming internet freedom—and with it the free exchange of news and information that is vital to any democracy—by adopting flawed legislation.

There are many potential policies to counter online threats to democratic communications, while retaining and bolstering free speech and a robust free press (Tworek, 2018). A comprehensive strategy of long-term reform is, therefore, required, extending from the personal to the political, from the local to the global.

- Sanja Kelly (cited in Romm, 2017) posits that the solution to manipulation and disinformation lies not in censoring websites but in teaching citizens how to detect fake news and commentary. Thus, the first step in understanding how to combat disinformation and fake news is awareness. Researchers, according to BBC's *Beyond Fake News project* (2018), found that the link between disinformation and things like electoral manipulation and democracy is too abstract for social media users to grasp.

- Long-term strategies to combat the persistence of false information will involve improving news literacy of the wider public (IPS, 2017). A basic understanding of

how to analyse narratives, by offering citizens a logical narrative, based on principles and facts, can help in this regard (Braga, 2018). Better information literacy among citizens, it is believed, will enable people to judge the veracity of material content. In other words, the strongest defence against threats to democracy is an engaged and informed public. Citizens who recognize fraud, disinformation, and manipulation when they see it online are less likely to fall victim to it.

- Due to the rise of citizen journalism, the mainstream media and other well-meaning actors should educate the public on how to report responsibly and how to identify fake news content with a view to limiting extremism, hate speech, incitement to violence and other potential risks. As a matter of fact, news organizations have to invest even more in investigative journalism and transparency. Interventions such as *Africacheck* and *Eyewitness News*, which attempt to identify fake news, are positive developments that must be encouraged (Ogola, 2017).

- It is believed that regulation can open the door to censorship, but bearing in mind that social media has become a fertile soil for the spread of hateful ideas, platform providers and governments are encouraged to expand surveillance. Similarly, the surveillance and verification capacities of the public should be expanded. Also, legislators should enact strong antitrust laws governing social-media companies, and officials should enforce these laws rigorously (Timberg, Dwoskin, and Tran, 2018). All influential players - governments, political parties, mass media, corporations and companies - that disseminate information offline or online must be held accountable. It is however, incumbent upon both governments and citizens to ensure that proposed regulations are properly debated and clearly defined before being passed into law.

- To curb hate speech, it is important to identify and sanction politicians and groups using inflammatory rhetoric, inciting violence or plotting to perpetrate it. Also, it is not enough for media/civil society practitioners and other watchdog groups to initiate anti-fake news platforms, political leaders and their parties must also share the burden by not themselves deliberately sharing misleading content, and calling out their supporters when they do.

- Above all, it is suggested that policy tools, changes in practices, and a commitment by governments, social-media companies, and civil society to exposing disinformation, and to building long-term social resilience to disinformation, can mitigate the intentional spread of disinformation (Fried and Polyakova, 2018).

Conclusion

The 2019 election in Nigeria empirically revealed how people who held extreme political beliefs and those who feared power loss or social exclusion might be more susceptible to

believing false information. Also, it showed how fake news, through social media, could bring an already fragile country to the precipice of disintegration and anarchy, having politicians and their young supporters as arrowheads. It revealed how improved communication technology had enhanced the potentials for deceit, to sow social discord and lower people's trust in their institutions.

Nevertheless, democracy anywhere in the world is work in progress as there is no one-size fits all for democratization. In spite of the challenges enumerated in this article, there is something fascinating about an era that gives people a voice and the growing assertiveness of citizens (interest in politics grows) either in field participation or online activism. Finally, it must be stated that, in addition to free speech and participation, a credible election also depends on many other auxiliary actors and factors to make democracy work. As a matter of fact, democratic theory prescribes credible elections as a necessary, but insufficient means, to consolidate real democracy.

[1]   In the 2015 election for instance, less than 40 percent of registered voters turned out to exercise their franchise. The voter turnout in the 2019 elections recorded 36 percent.
[2]   In the Freedom House report (2017), it was discovered that governments in at least 14 countries actually restricted internet freedom in a bid to address various forms of content manipulation.

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