

## Fake news and its impact on national cohesion: the Nigerian story

Silas Udenze

University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria  
\*e-mail: udenzes@gmail.com

### Abstract

This discussion paper explores fake news and its impact on national cohesion: the Nigerian perspective. Recently, fake news has become a global phenomenon and impacts nations' economic and socio-political activities. The current discussion paper utilizes secondary sources to buttress the effects of fake news on Nigeria's national cohesion. The paper opined that fake news intentionally fabricated and disseminated information to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods. Further, the study discovered that some of the adverse effects of fake news include ethno-religious crisis, electoral violence, and economic instability, among others. Also, it identified the causes of fake news as the mistrust of the ruling class by the masses, social media and affordable data, capitalist motives, late release of information by agencies of government, inadequate capacities of media outlets to verify and release authentic information etc. As a result of fake news, it is recommended that: There is a need always to check multiple sources to confirm the authenticity information before dissemination. We are encouraged to use verification tools and also check the metadata of the information. We should endeavor to be media literate; think before disseminating any information. However, fake news's menace may be impossible to eradicate, but its negative implications can be reduced or managed if we are committed to the preceding statement.

### Keywords:

Cohesion; crisis; fake news; impact; Nigeria; politics.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Arguably, Nigeria is one of the most diverse countries globally in terms of tribe and ethnicity, and these tribes and ethnicities are invariably linked to different beliefs, socio-political affiliations, and religions. Nigeria's political landscape is always tensed and given the increasing security challenges in different parts of the nation, perceived marginalization, anger, confusion, and economic challenges; there is a tendency that persons might take advantage of these shortcomings either to misinform and promote apathy through fake news (Pate, 2018). Despite these challenges, Ibrahim and Adamu (2016) and Pate (2018) reiterate that we are at a pervasive and persuasive information age; when and where there is, to a considerable extent, the free flow of information courtesy of the developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) that have liberalized mainly and simplified access and dissemination of information across time and boundaries and in real-time. This, in turn, has changed both the delivery and form of information communicated within Nigeria's system and shifted and undermined the accountability for those messages. What used to be called 'yellow journalism' or "sensational journalism"; acts that have been ethically and morally frowned at, according to Agbese (2017) have suddenly metamorphosed into 'fake news. It is a buzzword that sounds 'bigger' and portends more negative effects in the society especially given that term is more easily fueled and spread by the potential of the new media technology (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018). Madu *et al.* (2019) argue that several factors include the absence of institutional capacity, a disconnect between the people and government, the failure of security agencies, and ethnoreligious/tribal conflicts, among others, have been identified as handling the lack of national cohesion in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the authors point out that one silent element that has emerged as the greatest threat to national integration in Nigeria is the phenomenon of fake news.

Fake news is a false and fabricated message or information that is circulated deliberately with the intent to mislead the audience. Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) defines fake news as a piece of information purposely fabricated and disseminated with the intent to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or suspicious messages (EJN, 2017). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) explains fake news as "completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or disinform (BBC News, 2019 June 29, online). Madu *et al.* (2019) argue that fake news is a piece of fabricated information deliberately created and circulated to deceive the populace. It is a conduit pipe through which social vices such as hate speech are disseminated, fuelling political/ethnoreligious crises. The promoters and mongers of fake news aim to instigate acts capable of causing disunity among people (Madu *et al.*, 2019). It is pertinent to reiterate that it has become easier to promote fake news with rapid information and communication technology. Precisely, the emergence of social media has augmented the pace at which fake news is churned out.

Going by the apparent ugly developments resulting from fake news across the globe, the topic has become a significant preoccupation for scholars, multinational organizations, governments, policymakers, the media, civil society, and academia. However, what is 'fake news'? How did it come about? What implications does it have for national cohesion? Moreover, how can fake news be curtailed with the view to engendering national cohesion? Proffering tenable answers to these questions is the crux of this paper.

## 2 A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF FAKE NEWS

Recently, the menace of fake news has become popular. The pace at which misinformation is churned out in the media, especially social media, is alarming. The term "fake news" has two words: "fake" and "news". Let us start with "fake". Fake means false, unauthentic, not genuine, not true, among other meanings. On the other hand, the news is a timely report of events. Put together, fake news could mean the prompt report of false events. Being an emerging domain of

study, there is no accepted definition of fake news. According to Towers-Clark (as cited in Pate and Ibrahim, 2019), the term attracted so much attention recently that it was named the Collins Dictionary Word of the Year in 2017 due to its unmatched usage. McGonagle (2017) opines that fake news is information that is intentionally fabricated and disseminated with the intent to deceive and mislead. In this regard, it is misinformation/disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be discerned as news. Alawode *et al.* (2018) reiterate that fake news is a piece of information that is deliberately false and could mislead readers. The scholars explained that fake news includes false information that can be verified, created with dishonest intention to mislead readers.

Even though the phenomenon of news articles aimed to mislead readers is popular at the moment (Standage, 2017), by no means is it entirely new. Standage (2017) writes that printers would write scary headlines on papers in the early 16th and late 17th centuries to attract patronage and readership. The emergence of radio and TV ushered in satirical news (Posetti and Mathew, 2018), and the coming of the Internet towards the end of the 20th century, followed by social media in the 21st century, culminated in an unprecedented escalation in fake news (Madu *et al.*, 2019). Authors (Okoli, 2017; Persily, 2017) assert that globally, the phenomenon of fake news has become a prevalent concern because of its remarkable effect in the 2016 United States presidential campaign and British referendum, Brexit.

So far, the main elements of fake news are the 'falseness' of news content and the intent to deceive or mislead. Hence, malicious content that is created in error and circulated without the intent to mislead the consumers may be pardonable because no human system is immune to error. It is against this background that Wardle (as cited in Ogbette *et al.*, (2019) identifies seven categories of fake news: satire, false connection, and misleading imposter content, manipulated content, fabricated content.

### 3 THE FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

To enhance the significance of this paper, it is essential to underpin it with a relevant theory. Hence, the current paper is anchored on the honeycomb framework. The honeycomb is a relatively new theory that explains possible reasons for sharing information, especially on social media platforms. Social media are the highest carrier of fake news, even as exemplified in this article's body. According to its proponents, Kietzmann *et al.* (2011), the honeycomb model encompasses seven social media building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Researchers have employed the honeycomb model to study social media and fake news (Talwar *et al.*, (2020), online recovery strategies (Azemi *et al.*, 2019), among others. Highlighting the dearth of theories to investigate social media and fake news, Talwar *et al.* (2020) suggested that the framework serves as a veritable foundation for exploring social media's roles in news dissemination. Given that the framework explores the reasons for the exchange of information online, it is ideal for this paper's focus on the dissemination process of fake news. In this discussion, we adopted it to understand better and buttress the significant part social media play in propelling fake news. This discussion paper which centers on fake news and its impact on Nigeria's cohesion, relied on secondary data sources. Secondary sources of data collection are published research articles, conference proceedings, textbooks, and newspapers relevant to the study.

### 4 EFFECT OF FAKE NEWS ON NIGERIA'S NATIONAL COHESION

Njoku and Udeh (2013) define social cohesion as the peaceful co-existence of members of a society, that is, a people. In other words, it refers to a society that is united. To cohere means to assemble various parts to achieve a unified whole. For this paper's purpose, national cohesion is defined as a state of being free from distrust, insecurity, violence, false information, and other things that may hinder the progress of Nigeria. Nigeria is facing diverse and grievous economic and socio-political challenges, and several factors have been advanced as the causes of these challenges. According to Oderinu *et al.* (2019), weak security systems, porous borders, persuasive material inequalities and unfairness, unemployment/poverty, corruption, and ethno-religious conflicts are some of the triggers of these challenges. Besides, Salami *et al.* (2018), as enumerated in Madu *et al.* (2019) summarize the causes of lack of national cohesion in Nigeria to include absence of institutional capacity resulting in government failure; disconnection between the masses and government; weak and poorly funded military establishment, and non-prosecution of perpetrators of social vices in Nigeria. Hence, the country has continued to witness escalations in kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, and related vices.

Our society's dynamics have since changed the arrangement of security to now include consideration for societal induced crises such as terrorism, riots, demonstrations, kidnapping, advance fee fraud, among other social vices that threaten the peace orderliness in the society (Oloyede & Esimokha, 2018). Madu *et al.* (2019) assert that, currently, Fake news is chief among the elements that threaten Nigeria's tranquillity because it has appeared as the propeller to the forces that engender insecurity. This assertion was corroborated by the country's current Minister of Information Lai Mohammed, who reiterates that fake news endangers Nigeria's corporate existence, describing it as a time bomb waiting to explode. The problems nations contend with are inextricably linked with their history, culture, social structure, and economic conditions (Oloyede & Esimokha, 2018). The inference of fake news crisscrosses all the social vices connected to Nigerian society to fuel one form of crises or the other ranging from electoral violence, ethno-religious crises, economic instability, and leadership mistrust. How does fake news fuel these social vices that have to threaten Nigeria's corporate existence?

### 5 ETHNO/RELIGIOUS CRISES

Ethno-religious conflicts are unarguably the greatest drivers of violence in Nigeria. Nigeria is comprised of about 250 ethnic groups speaking over 500 different languages. A considerable number of its citizens pay allegiance to their tribes-ethnic groups, followed by their religions with insignificant interest in the Nigeria project. The Nigerian structure's ethno-

religious fabric is fragile, that it is at the center of every widespread violence in the country (Madu *et al*, 2019). News Wires (2019) argued that manufactured lies in the guise of news endanger Nigeria's fragile ethno-religious fabric. Of particular interest is the constant fake and deceiving stories pitting the country's mainly Muslim north against the predominantly Christian south. This act is a traditional fault line often employed by advocates of restructuring the country's present federal structure.

An abundance of fake stories circulated through social media with the ultimate mission of inciting fear, anxiety, suspicion, and disunity across ethnic/religious groups in Nigeria. A statement credited to Alhaji Gidado Siddiki, the leader of the Miyetti Allah Group, with a bold headline "Southeast will boil any moment from now because of their stubbornness" where he was suspected to have said that, "since they (people from the southeast) claim to be adamant, and had refused to give them their lands in peace; hence, it will be forcefully taken, and entire southeast will be raided and taken over by the herdsmen (Siddiki, 2019). Expectedly, the news turned out to be sensational and misleading. Correspondingly, a certain story about the Fulanis disguising to maraud people in some parts of Osun State went viral on various WhatsApp platforms.

Adegoke (2019), cited in Edwin and Yalmi (2019), reiterates how a fake and gruesome post on Facebook triggered hate and violence amongst the people of northern and southern Plateau in Nigeria during the 2019 general elections. The post showed pictures of a man's skull open, and a baby with machete wounds across its head and jaw was made viral around Facebook, and it attracted about 11,000 views. According to the claims, the Fulani Muslims were killing Christians of Berom ethnic minority. This news engulfed hatred among both tribes costing the life of Many Fulani Muslims in the region (Edwin and Yalmi, 2019). The consequence of circulating such fake news is that it causes panic and can engendering violence across ethnic and religious divides, thereby endangering the national fabric of the nation's unity. Similar fabrications abound on other social media platforms, in some cases, even in the print and broadcast media, especially when news contents are not verified across multiple platforms. Besides, fake news may be disseminated in the mainstream media when news organizations are in a rush to be the first in breaking news items.

## 6 ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

For some years now, Nigeria has witnessed a great deal of political and ethno-religious crises. Let us trace these crises from the post-independence era. A few years after the country's independence in 1960, the entire fabric that holds Nigeria's unity degenerated into a bloody civil. The aftermath of this crisis still haunts the country to date, especially in terms of economic development. During the civil war, businesses worth millions were destroyed, and some of these businesses bounce back today. Presently, the ethno-religious crises that have ravaged the north-central states of Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa have created economic hardship for the people of the region. The unending onslaughts and clashes between the Fulani herders and farmers have put these communities' economic activities in a docile state. Some of these crises are caused by unverified fake news circulated purposely to create embers of disunity among the different ethnic and religious groups in the region.

Nigeria's northeast region's continued ravaging by the deadly Boko Haram terrorist has rendered the region economically unstable. Businesses and other means of livelihood have been crushed, and the surviving ones have left the region. The inhabitants of the northeast are heavily dependent on the government for survival. To revive the economic fortune of the region, the federal government established the North-East Development Commission. This government agency is put in place to assess the level of damage in the area and come up with modalities on restoring the region's socio-economic activities. Before now, the activities of militancy and oil bunkering has ravaged the south-south region of Nigeria. These ugly activities in the south-south are caused by innate leadership mistrust; the people do not trust or believe the political class's promises (Pate, Gambo, and Ibrahim, 2019).

The overall effect of economic instabilities from different regions of the country is evident; sixty years after independence, the nation has not advanced economically. Its per capita income is among the lowest in the sub-region. Its health and education sectors are in shambles. No doubt, no meaningful development can occur in an environment of chaos, and fake news has been said to be one of the causes of economic retardation (Pate, 2018).

## 7 ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Elections are indispensable elements of a thriving democratic society. It advances competitive politics, guarantees political participation, and entrenches the rule of law. Nevertheless, over the years, elections in Nigeria have been marred by disruptions and violence, which always results in the loss of lives and properties. Regrettably, some of the violence was instigated by the never real news (Madu *et al*, 2019). McGonagle (2017) argues that, unlike other forms of information, news plays a significant role in democratic societies; it is an essential medium for verifiable political and social affairs, which informs public opinion and action. Suppose a piece of news is false and misleading. In that case, it misinforms the public, and democratic debate is contaminated at the same source, leading to the unpopularity of electoral victories with the people's attendant potential of rejection and revolt. For instance, in the build-up to the 2019 elections, President Muhammadu Buhari was said to have been cloned and that he was a man named Jubrin Aminu from Sudan (Edwin and Yalmi, 2019). This speculation was to become one of the most widely circulated misinformation during the 2019 general elections.

Madu *et al* (2019) opine that most worries that characterize elections in Nigeria are generated and transmitted by peddlers of fake stories with the intent to cause chaos. The authors further submit that these peddlers of fake news use social media instrumentality, and they fabricate false insightful materials about political parties, political actors, and electoral bodies to cause tension in the polity. In extreme cases, they even concoct and spread fake election results, which

are not verified by the electoral authority, thereby fueling widespread violence when the authentic results are different from the already circulated fake result (Madu *et al.*, 2019). The negative impact of fake news on the electioneering process is not peculiar to Nigeria. McGonagle (2017) argues that fake news is often blamed for having a disruptive effect on elections and referenda outcomes and skews democratic public debates, for instance, the 2016 United States Presidential elections and Brexit referendum.

## 8 LEADERSHIP MISTRUST

Earlier this paper, Pate *et al.* (2019) identified leadership mistrust as fake news drivers. Besides, Madu *et al.* (2019) assert that fake news is also used as an instrument for gaining political advantage, especially during elections. According to Madu *et al.* (2019), in this circumstance, politicians and their followers peddle all sorts of propaganda and fake stories to tarnish and dint the public of their opponents. In order words, they carefully plan and execute systematic character assassination to diminish individuals' public perception of obstacles. A good example is the "Occupy Nigeria" protest of 2012 that was engineered by the then opposition party, All Progressive Congress (APC) against the former President Goodluck Jonathan. When the President announced the removal of fuel subsidy, the APC capitalized on it to peddle propaganda and fake news; they claimed that fuel subsidy is non-existent that the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) is planning to loot the national treasury. What ensued was massive revolts and demonstrations that crippled the economy of the country for days. Following the victory of the opposition, All Progressive Party (APC), in 2015, Nigerians were surprised when the President Buhari led administration announced an increase in the prices of petroleum products citing subsidy as the reason. Although the opposition had achieved their main intention power in the 2015 elections, the January 2012 catastrophe with its attendant implications on the nation's economy would have been evaded if not for propaganda and peddling of fake news (Madu *et al.* 2019). Standage (2017) believes that 'the flowering of concocted stories erodes trust in the media and makes it easier for unscrupulous politicians to peddle half-truths' which is always inimical to the overall welfare of the citizenry.

With the advent of smart technologies that have enabled consumers of media content to be producers of the same contents they consume, the term "fake news" could be misinterpreted by the government. For instance, when authentic information that the government does not want the citizens to be privy to is leaked to the masses, the government oftentimes tag it "fake news," whereas the information is true. This further creates a huge distrust in the government. In this way, "fake news" is employed as a smokescreen to suppress and shade factual information. Fake news is a social phenomenon that is prominently promoting social vices in Nigeria. Therefore, any sincere effort at tackling some of these vices in the country most includes techniques for curbing the menace of fake news. Hence, this paper proceeds to discuss the drivers of fake news some techniques for combating it.

## 9 DRIVERS OF FAKE NEWS

Pate (2018), cited in Pate, Gambo and Ibrahim (2019), diverse reasons can be adduced for the alarming spread of fake news in Nigeria. The scholars outline the below:

- Lack of or often times the late arrival of official information on issues. This creates a vacuum conveniently filled in by rumors and fake news.
- Affordable data services and ICT gadgets facilitate explosive use of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, among others, to spread fake information.
- Coercive lies are widespread from government sources at all levels. Such lies are reported as news with little effort to investigate their veracity by the media.
- Desperate politicians, ethnic and religious bigots, foreign interests, and mischief-makers generate fake news for influence or persuade the audience to actualize their motives.
- General distrust of the political elites by a significant number of the populace. Nigerian elites and politicians enjoy low credibility ratings among the population because of their record of failures, lies, and unworthy conduct in several respects. Because of that, many Nigerians tend to believe whatever information in the public domain.
- Government tight control and excessive commercialization in the broadcast media exclude alternative ideas and the opposition, thereby forcing them to respond even if mischievously by spreading fake news on the social media that lacks gatekeepers.
- Capitalist motives: fake news is disseminated for economic reasons, especially on social media, where efforts are often made to attract traffic to pages and timelines of bloggers and senders for clicks.
- Low capacity of the media to be able to gather, process, and verify immediate and distant information in real-time exacerbates fake news through the internet or social media platforms where the majority lack gatekeeping processes.

## 10 HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Chakrabarti *et al.* (2018) carried out a BBC study in Nigeria and Kenya that attempted to analyze and investigate the primary source responsible for spreading fake news. The study discovered that people participated vigorously by sharing and commenting on social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook without verifying the information. The following steps can help curb the spread of fake news in society (Pate, 2018).

- Check sources: encourage people and stations to fall back on the most trusted news brands they could rely on for their news.
- Look at multiple sources.
- Use verification tools.

- Check metadata.
- Think before broadcasting/publishing.
- Media literacy is paramount to decipher fake news.

## 11 CONCLUSION

To achieve national cohesion and economic development, the workable solutions to the menace of fake news and its consequences in Nigeria must be studied from a multifaceted perspective. As the country struggles with the intricacies of politics of multiple identities, ethnicity, religion, and regionalism, fake news's undermining effect makes this challenge more complicated. Just as it has been set up in this paper, the menace of fake news contributes to escalating the nation's security woes. It continues to trigger hatred, ethno-religious crises, electoral violence, leadership mistrust, economic instability, among others, and posing severe threats to national cohesion development. The spread of fake news is spurred by the advances in information and communication technologies, precisely the emergence of social media within the present information age. The danger there in fake news is not the "false" information itself; instead, it is what individuals do with the fake information that gets to them (Pate, Gambo and Ibrahim, 2019). In our respective areas of influence as citizens, we can make decisions not to start, encourage, or give any fake or misleading content. Nonetheless, fake news's menace may be impossible to eradicate, but its negative implications can be reduced or managed if we are committed to the preceding statement.

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