

Fake News and Politics of In/Security in Nigeria

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Abstract

'Fake news' has existed under different nomenclatures such as rumour and propaganda. However, it has gained more scholarly attention recently. The threat of fake news renders democratic societies vulnerable and cannot be ignored. Through its toxic mix, fake news is considered a threat to human society and security. Given the difficulty in its operationalisation, this study explored what qualifies a story as fake as well as the dominant fake news about insecurity in Nigeria. It employed a fake news model to scrutinize the alleged fake news and how Twitter users express sentiments about it. Data consist of two complementary strands. The first looks for the alleged fake news stories about Fulani Herdsmen and Boko Haram on the *CrossCheck Nigeria* and *Africa Check* websites where these stories were debunked. The search through the websites returned 22 related debunked fake news. The second strand is the content analysis of 4,359 tweets produced by 3,101 Nigerian Twitter users. Tweets were collected through the *followthehashtag.com* for tweets published between 31st March 2018 and 31st March 2019. Findings problematise the understanding and operationalisation of fake news. They further establish that Boko Haram Insurgency and Fulani Herdsmen crises dominate the list of debunked fake news which have deepened insecurity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Fake news, Boko Haram insurgency, Fulani Herdsmen, Nigerian media, Nigeria insecurity.

Introduction

Fake news is an extension of propaganda. This is in recognition of the purpose of propaganda as a means to "misinform and mislead and to consciously indoctrinate" (Longe and Ofuani, 1996, 17). Since its notoriety as a genre of malicious content peddled and spread by individuals, groups and political opponents, fake news has had damaging impacts on Nigerian politics, insecurity and economy (Pate, Gambo and Ibrahim, 2019). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), identify two 'main motivations' that drive fake news, including pecuniary and ideological. For pecuniary reason, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) argue that news articles that go viral on social media can draw significant advertising revenue when users click to the original site. Ideological motive, on the other hand, is revealed when fake news is employed to advance a particular narrative, may be for political gain.

In this article, *fake news*, *post-truth*, and *misinformation* are closely related. It is no longer in contention that post-truth is gaining currency as an academic construct. In announcing "post-truth" as the 2016 *Oxford Dictionaries'* word of the year, Berghel (2017) cites the *Chicago Tribune* as declaring that "Truth is dead. [While] facts are passé." That is to say that truth is no longer fashionable while facts have become outdated. In a *Vanguard* report, Nigeria's army chief, Tukur Buratai urged Nigerians to be wary of fake news because "It is inimical to national security; it is inimical to the morale of the troops and by and large, it is one of the demoralising factors making the counter insurgency operation more difficult."ⁱ Similarly, it has been described as one of the key factors shaping the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. For instance, Seun Opejobi of the *Nations* opines that fake news and the internet have influenced the Boko Haram insurgency and other proxy wars in Nigeria. Opejobi further explained that "terrorists now have access to quick release of propaganda videos, not possible before."ⁱⁱ As concerns about "fake news" continue to dominate the relationship between the media and society, its impacts on democracy, national and global security cannot be undermined (Pate et al. 2019).

In this context, the question that constantly begs for answer is *when is news deemed fake?* One possible answer is when such a story is considered fabricated or 'manufactured' with little or no truth. When it is fake, it is meant to misinform, and mislead the unsuspecting audience (Gaughan, 2017). It is an intentional creation of bias to witch-hunt a group, an individual or a cause. In itself, "fake news" concept, remains controversial because of how it is poorly or ambiguously constructed (Ireton and Posetti, 2018).

Although oppositions easily find a justification to call unfavourable news stories against them ‘fake news’, the concept generally refers to unsubstantiated story spread as a genuine one (Gaughan, 2017). What is fake news to a group, or an individual might thus be considered real by another, which further complicates the problem of quantification and operationalisation of the concept. For instance, the Fulani herdsmen and farmers’ clashes in Benue, Enugu, Kaduna, Taraba and Plateau States in Nigeria which have been depicted on the social media as ethnic cleansing were dismissed as fake news by Miyetti Alla Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN [an umbrella body for Fulani cattle breeders]) (Pate et al., 2019). Whereas these incidents have some elements of truth, the fact that some groups have debunked them make the totally changes the narratives about the texture of the news. Nonetheless, these crises have been exploited by fake news peddlers to further deepen Nigeria’s insecurity (Pate et al., 2019). Worse still, politicians have employed fake news as a weapon to witch-hunt perceived opponents. The danger here is that facts, half-truth and total lies can be twisted and news that is not favourable to an individual can be dismissed as fake news thereby problematizing an understanding into the concept.

As an issue of global concern, fake news has been widely researched. The concern about fake news can no longer be ignored because it has created a widespread panic over the quality of journalism in the 21st century (Wasserman, 2017). It is these concerns that prompted an introspection by journalists and a reassertion of their professional values and standards (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). Until recently, scholarly attention on the so-called ‘fake news’ has been dominated by studies outside Africa. This is despite the extent to which ‘fake news’ has festered in the continent (Wasserman, 2017). A recent survey of how Africans encounter fake news has found that 28% of shared information is later known to be bogus because social media users are in a haste to verify the authenticity of what they share online.ⁱⁱⁱ While known studies on fake news in Nigeria have been mainly anecdotal in nature, this study empirically engages this critical issue that poses a threat to democracy and national security. Except for few studies such as Deac (2018) and George and Rishikof (2017), the impacts of fake news on the security of a country has been empirically undermined in many of the available studies. This study is an attempt to narrow that gap by probing fake news and politics of insecurity in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

1. To examine what qualifies a news story as fake in Nigeria.
2. To evaluate prominent fake news relating to insecurity in Nigeria.
3. To investigate how fake news about in(security) is politicised in Nigeria.

Contextualising fake news

When is news deemed fake?

According to Siapera (2018), three significant features characterise what is known as fake news today. The first instance is the ease through which people can create content; the second is the circulation patterns of this content across various social media platforms, and the third is the political economy of the online domain that aids and incentivises this type of news making. Siapera (2018) further explains that all it takes to create and circulate fake news is ‘internet access’ because “people can avail of the various functionalities of computer software such as photoshop and create highly believable content (Siapera, 2018, p. 57).

Fake news has different interpretations depending on who is at its receiving end. It comes in different shapes such as making up facts and quoting a source out of context. Siapera (2018) and other scholars (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) view the internet and social media as where most of the fake stories are manufactured and disseminated. However, study suggests that traditional media also harbour fake news, but the proportion varies across outlets (Al-Rawi, 2018). This indicates that there is no particular medium, website or individual that has the monopoly of fake news. Textual claims are also sources of fake news and it is very useful in the calculus of propagandists (Omozuwa and Ezejideaku, 2008).

Nigerian Media Ecology and Fake News

Many journalists working for Nigerian media platforms are paid wretched salaries and sometimes owed for months without pay (Yusha'u, 2018). It is almost a norm in Nigeria for journalists to prowl around known personalities for payment in exchange for writing favourable or withholding negative stories about them (Yusha'u, 2018). This dangerous trend potentially nurtures fake news in Nigeria. As Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani of the BBC News Africa contends, media bosses often justify non-payment of salaries in Nigeria by using their media outfits as identity cards or licenses for attracting monetary favour to sustain themselves. The outcome of this practice as Nwaubani explains, is that “the Nigerian media has become a thriving arena for all sorts of sponsored falsehoods”. Thus:

it is common for ‘brown envelopes’ containing cash to be handed out during press briefings - a practice that has been going on for so long that many young journalists with whom I have spoken have no idea that it is unethical. After covering an event, they linger expectantly until the envelopes stuffed with cash arrive...With this kind of goings-on, you cannot expect the average Nigerian journalist to be fair in the presentation of facts.

‘Brown envelope journalism’ is common in Nigeria (Eke, 2014). For instance, in February 2016, Mr Nduka Obaigbena, the publisher of *Thisday* newspaper was arrested and made to return N350 million out of N670 million from the \$2.1 billion arms deal that engulfed the administration of President Jonathan. Mr. Obaigbena allegedly admitted that he gave N120 million to the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN).^{iv} Apart from NPAN, the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) also admitted to collecting N50 million from the diverted fund.^v This has led to gossips and memes that interrogate the role of the Nigerian journalists as watchdogs of the society.

Fake news also manifests in other forms. In Nigeria for instance, gossip, memes, and rumour or what Ellis (1989) referred to as ‘pavement radios’ have performed significant political roles in the era when most news media organisations have become tools for political vendetta. These informal circuits of information, in contexts different from the formal language of the news media have, in essence, enabled African audiences to challenge the hegemonic narratives of governments and media moguls (Mano, 2007).

It has become part of political gimmicks for politicians to employ fake news or propaganda to weaken opponents. This has also been employed to highlight ethnic cleansing, ethnic chauvinism, religious persecution and geographical vituperation. Emerging from the cusp of the bitterly fought civil war (1967-1970) and daily outbreak of wars orchestrated by post-election violence, ethno-religious crises, and other internal squabbles; Nigeria has been rendered volatile by these challenges exacerbated by fake news (Pate et al., 2019). This is in addition to the technological transformations shaping the communications landscapes of the contemporary society, which raise concerns about the quality, impact and credibility of journalism in the era of fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news is often shared unwittingly on different social media platforms and the traditional media (Al-Rawi, 2018). As Ireton and Posetti (2018) rightly argued, political, and socioeconomic transformations have inexorably reshaped the communications landscape. The problem is not the transformation, but the contamination of the information ecology with doctored news that heat the polity and worsen the (in)security situations (Pate et al., 2019). This disruption is arguably buoyed by the Internet and social media.

Social Media, Fake News and In/Security

Social media has morphed into a platform for modern information warfare. In this platform, Cottle (2006) notes, rival voices compete to be heard. This makes it difficult for government, groups or individuals to impose hegemonic narratives on its contents (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2015). Conversely, as Khaldarova and Pantti (2016, p. 892) argue “while the internet provides new opportunities for top-down strategic narrative, it also nurtures the routine contestation of strategic narratives and the management of

information by a new set of elite and citizen actors”. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 222) “One way to gauge the importance of social media for fake news suppliers is to measure the source of their web traffic. Each time a user visits a webpage, that user has either navigated directly...or has been referred from some other sites.” While fake news also spreads through the mainstream media, Siapera (2018) believes that social media harbours the larger chunk of it. Social media is also providing more people with the main news. This makes social media ‘mainstream’ to an extent. In fact as Ott lamented, “unfortunately, the situation with the mainstream news media is no more encouraging” (2017, p. 65). It is also a common sight today that on a daily basis, the so-called mainstream media cite news sources from *Twitter* and *Facebook*.

The recent shifts in the global mediascapes have raised new concerns that render democratic societies vulnerable. Accordingly, Lazer et al. (2017, p. 2) note that as a form of misinformation, fake news “benefits from the fast pace that information travels in today’s media ecosystem, in particular across social media platforms”. Similarly, Popat et al. (2017, p. 1) maintain that “despite providing huge amounts of valuable information, the web is also a source of false claims in social media, other web-sources and even in news that quickly reach millions of users”.

In Nigeria, prior to the present internet-age, some conventional media outfits served as the government’s megaphones and thus formed gatekeepers to what the Nigerian public was served (Omenugha et al., 2013). Today, social media has unlocked the information gateway, shrinking media monopoly, thereby allowing audiences more access to multiple news sources (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Through this democratisation of information, Nigerians are now creating their own media (weblogs) and having independent narratives that challenge the hegemonic narratives of the government and others. In the process of this democratisation, fake news has arguably increased (Gunasekaran et al., 2016). This is where the disadvantage lies. There is therefore, a sense in which one can accept Fuller’s (2010) avowal that the evolution of the internet and social media has jeopardised the monopoly enjoyed by the traditional media, but by spreading fake content, it undermines global security.

Social media is also responsible for the “privatization of propaganda” (Bolin, Jordan, and Ståhlberg, 2016, p. 13). Commenting on the power of social media, Gabler explains that “The standard take on that mutuality is that social media prioritize constant churn, and Trump is a non-stop, one-man political tornado, roaring through this campaign and sucking up every news cycle in his vortex” (Gabler 2016 n.p). Given the rate at which fake news proliferates, Farajtabar et al. (2017) called for an ‘urgent’ effort “to develop effective rectifying strategies to mitigate the impact of fake news”, especially on the delicate democratic setting such as Nigeria.

Nigeria is a country under pressure characterised by severe security threats in virtually every part of the country (Pate et al., 2019). These threats are evident in the incessant conflicts, systemic and endemic corruption, debilitating poverty, weak institutions, agitation for secession due to perceived marginalisation, hate speech and economic challenges at a time when ‘preference’ for fake news is on the rise (Pate et al., 2019). Expectedly, the inability to address these challenges has led to destruction in relationships, heightened hostilities across tribes as well as endangered Nigeria’s fledgling democracy (Pate et al. 2019). It is therefore no coincidence that Nigeria’s in/security is worsening since the era of fake news and social media proliferation.

Theoretical Perspective

Fake News Model

Fake news functions as both a concept and an academic model (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006). Scholars and policymakers are grappling with the nature and effects of fake news and its implications for news credibility, global peace and democracy (Brody and Meier, 2018). However, the debate is shrouded in controversy over when a story is deemed fake. Without its proper understanding, it would be difficult to mitigate it. This reason prompted Brody and Meier (2018) to devise a model that simulates the impact of fake news on elections and other societal engagements.

The key problem of communication is to replicate at one end in the universe a message created at another point.

This is made more complex by the fact that there is always noise distorting the original message in which case *Os* can be flipped into *Is*, while *b*'s sound like *d*'s, and smoke signals are blown out of proportion (Brody and Meier, 2018). The receiver of the message is therefore required to deal with this noise which can sometimes be intentional. More specifically, fake news is viewed as inconsistent information that lacks factual reality, and transmitted through different channels of communication for the unsuspecting public (Brody and Meier, 2018). It is important that noise is filtered away so that a signal can be properly interpreted and understood. Unlike the random noise, this noise has special properties because it is slanted in a particular way. Apart from the factually correct messages, other messages can be distorted to correspond to fake news (Brody and Meier, 2018).

Interpreting a signal thus requires the receiver to strip away the random noise and the distortion in order to grasp the unadulterated message (Brody and Meier, 2018). Brody and Meier likened this idea to how voters interpret news. They explain that when voters are unaware of fake news, they treat it as ordinary noise. Because when people are unaware that the news is fake, they remain entirely confident in their understandings. Brody and Meier (2018) argue that voters are the "most vulnerable" in terms of exposure to fake news.

Gentzkow and Sahpiro (2006) explain that fake news offers distinctive incentives which make organisations or individuals to distort their reports. Some conscientious media audiences have disutility for slanted news because they can listen, read or watch in order to obtain facts through cross-checking, whereas the biased audiences prefer news (real or fake) that is consistent with their existing beliefs (Gentzkow and Sahpiro, 2006). Baron (2006) reports that the media may receive an identical signal about the truth and may decide to slant its stories by omitting or ignoring some information. It is however, not clear how this also informs the decision audiences make in accepting or rejecting the stories. The Fake News Model also guided the choice of methodology where perceived fake news (distorted reports) and slanted stories extracted from websites and social media platforms are analysed subsequently.

Methods

The study broadly employed Content Analysis as its method. Specifically, two complementary strands for data collection were used. The first looks for the alleged fake news stories on insecurity on the *CrossCheck Nigeria* and *Africa Check* websites where these stories were debunked. The search through the *CrossCheck Nigeria* and *Africa Check* website returned 22 relevant items [within the study period] adjudged to be fake and subsequently debunked. *Twitter*, *WhatsApp* and *Facebook* were the major channels that this perceived fake news emanated from. There were other debunked stories but the selected stories are those that met the inclusion criteria. That is, the researcher purposively selected stories about in/security, particularly those on Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen attacks in Nigeria.

The second strand is the content analysis of 4,359 tweets produced by 3101 users. Tweets were collected through the followthehashtag.com for relevant tweets published between 31st March 2018 and 31st March 2019. This represents the electioneering period, that is, one year before the 2019 general election in Nigeria when insecurity heightened in the country, and when politicians exploited fake news about the Boko Haram insurgency and Fulani Herdsmen attacks for political gains. The Twitter handles were verified as users from Nigeria. The sentiments expressed in the tweets were categorized as either trust or distrust. The third category is the neutral tweets which include those that did not take either side.

Data analysis

Debunking fake news and politics of in/security in Nigeria

The increasing concern over the spread of fake news and its effect on Nigerian politics and in/security has led to the fact-checking organisations such as *CrossCheck Nigeria* and *Africa Check*. The aim is to minimise and debunk the amount of misleading information in public domain. It is not clear how many Nigerians that access the website for fact verification. *CrossCheck Nigeria* works with 16 media organisations in Nigeria including *Africa Check* to verify misleading information.^{vi} *Africa Check*, on the

other hand was established in 2012 to raise the quality of information available to society across Africa. Note that the debunked stories picked for the analysis are numbered D1, D2 etc.

The most prominent of the debunked (in)security stories on the *Africa Check* and *CrossCheck Nigeria* websites that focus on the Boko Haram Insurgency and Fulani Herdsmen crises include:

4. **D1: Victims of traffic crash, not Fulani 'herdsmen' attack in Nigeria's Kogi State**

The post reads: "In Kogi State, herdsmen walked into the terminal of Big Joe transport and shot all passengers boarding to travel to Edo state. Is this not more than war? Dismantle this evil Forest now."

This story originated from the "Hardcore Biafrans" Facebook page. It claimed that Fulani Herdsmen overrun a transport terminal in Nigeria's central state of Kogi and shot all the passengers boarding a bus to Edo, another state in southern Nigeria. The story was accompanied by two doctored pictures, one of which shows three bloodied people lying in a vehicle. The other shows five people lying on the ground. The Fulani herdsmen have been in the news for a wrong reason, especially since 2015, when scores of killings were attributed to the herders among them who wield dangerous weapons. However, *Africa Check* used a Google reverse image search to discover that the pictures were taken from a previous fatal traffic accident in Kogi State. The original photos were posted by Trezzy Helm blog and reposted on Nairaland.



Figure 1: Graphic image of the doctored photos used to back fake news. Source: *Africa Check*

The original story reported by a blogger reads thus: "A terrible accident that happened at Ochadamu road, Kogi claimed lives of many and got others injured... The victims are at Grimard Hospital". The fake story posted by Hardcore Biafrans was debunked by both the Nigerian Police and Kogi State Government. Before the fake story was debunked, Kogi State indigenes had launched a reprisal against the herders. Subsequently, Kogi State Government and the Nigerian Police issued a joint statement, describing the fake news as the work of "rumour peddlers who are on a mission to create panic and tension in the state. We wish to allay the fears of commuters and residents of the state that nothing like that ever happened as all motor parks in the state remain peaceful." While not refuting this claim, especially because *Africa Check* used other methods to verify the authenticity of the photos, it is important that fact checkers do not rely on feedbacks from Government representatives or the police to debunk a story. This is because government and police may easily tag a story fake when it portrays them in an unpleasant manner. The story was widely shared on the social media by pro-Biafra and anti-Fulani social media to reinforce existing perceptions.

The foregoing aligns with the Fake news model of Brody and Meier (2018). The authors argue that some conscientious media audiences have disutility for biased news because they can listen, read or watch in order to obtain facts through cross-checking, whereas the biased audiences prefer news (real or fake) that is consistent with their initial beliefs. For instance, the ‘fake’ post by Hardcore Biafrans above was widely shared by pro-Biafran separatist group and it is consistent with its dominant narrative that Nigeria is insecure and needs to be divided. Hence the mantra, ‘dismantle this evil forest now’.

- **D2: Joe Igbokwe, the All Progressives Congress (APC) publicity secretary, shared three photos on November 26, 2018. He claimed that they depict a Nigerian military offensive against Boko Haram.**

Fake pictures have thus been employed to advance fake news. According to *CrossCheck Nigeria*, the photos used by Joe Igbokwe above are out of context and there was no evidence supporting the claim. *CrossCheck Nigeria* suggests that the claim was apparently intended to mislead the public that the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari has delivered on his core campaign promise which was to end the Boko Haram insurgency within two years. However, six years down the line, the insurgent group has remained a serious security concern for the country.

- **D3: Viral picture of ‘Fulani massacre’ at least 8 years old**

Another ‘fake news’ was debunked by *Africa Check*. The image is horrid. Blood-spattered bodies are scattered along an expressway, and the bodies were those of passengers of a commercial bus. Expectedly, the post went viral on various social media platforms. Messages on social media claim the passengers were victims of another Fulani herdsmen attack. *Africa Check* reports that the story was crafted in a way that appeared to have credibility, containing a signed security alert from a particular school, a sound clip of an alleged witness to the said attacks. However, the Nigerian Police quickly dismissed the report, describing it as “fake news by a faceless group”.



Figured 2: A blurred image of the purported attack. Source: Africa Check

The alleged attacks along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway may have compounded political and religious tensions in Nigeria, especially in the light of the argument that the Fulani herdsmen crisis was often seen as a strategic plan to impose Islamic religion on the rest of Nigeria (Pate et al. 2019). *Africa Check's* investigation reveals that the photo accompanying the said story has been online for at least nine years. This was proved by using TinEye, a reverse search engine. *Africa Check* explains that the photo first surfaced online in March 2010, when an online newspaper used it as a photo evidence of how Nigerian commercial bus drivers allegedly offer blood sacrifices to their gods. As if that was not enough, *Africa Check* also discovered that the picture reappeared in an unverified post on CNN's *iReport* in the same month. In the intervening years, the picture was once again used by an American author as the graphic symbol of Christian genocide in Nigeria to further paint the picture of insecurity in Nigeria.

- **D4: Photo of truckload of guns taken in 2008 in US not Nigeria.**

In this story, *Africa Check* reports that a Facebook post by *Dailyfocus* which claims that a fake military base occupied by armed robbers, kidnappers and other criminals was recently discovered in Benue State is fake.



Figure 3: Fake photos of militias in a fake military camp

The debunked post claims that the photos represent Benue militias who disguise as Fulani herdsmen. However, *CrossCheck* Nigeria established that the images were photos taken in 2008 in California from confiscated weapons meant to be melted into steel bars for construction.

- **D5: 90,000 police officers have been “lost” to the Boko Haram insurgency**

Another example of fake news was attributed to the former Nigeria’s inspector-general of police, Solomon Arase, who alleged that 90,000 police officers have been “lost” to the Boko Haram insurgency since 2011. *Africa Check*’s investigation found that the former IG of police has said in a public event that “Based on the figure I have in my disposal, we have 90,000 widows. So invariably, that can be translated to mean that we have lost about 90,000 officers and men since the commencement of the insurgency”. This claim went viral and was widely repeated. In view of its significance and the fact that it was coming from an authority within the Nigerian police, politicians and commentators exploited it for political gains. For instance, *Africa Check* explains that Nasir Ahmed, an All Progressives Congress (APC) representative for Katsina argues that “for us to lose that number of policemen is a monumental loss and very unfortunate”. Similarly, Ali Patigi, another APC representative in Kwara was quoted as saying that “losing 90,000 policemen is no mean misfortune for a society.” So, was the inspector-general right? Not sure. The first problem with Arase’s claim is that the source of the data for the number of widows, nor when nor why they were widowed remains unknown. Furthermore, it is also not clear whether the widows include those whose husbands died of natural causes or in the line of active duties fighting the insurgents. A clear sign that the figure was fabricated emerged when *Africa Check* sought further clarifications from the inspector-general’s office who, alongside his aides refused to pick phone calls, reply text messages and e-mails. Again, it is the Nigerian military that is mainly deployed to fight Boko Haram.

The foregoing suggests that fake news and insecurity in Nigeria are symbiotically related. This relationship has been exploited by some groups and individuals to paint the picture of ‘worsening’ in/security in Nigeria. This accounts for why the Boko Haram insurgency and Fulani herdsmen crises dominate the list of debunked stories in Nigeria. It should be emphasised here that even reputable media outlets can report fake news. The tactics employed by the fake news ‘peddlers’ is akin to propaganda because as Longe and Ofuani (1996, p. 17) opine, propaganda is strategically employed to “misinform and mislead”. While it is hard to deny the

insecurity issues in Nigeria, fake news has probably been used to create more tension to mislead/misinform the public about the situations. It is also an attempt to pitch a group against each other. For instance, the Fulani herdsmen versus Christian farmers has been portrayed in ways that call for reprisals or even to divide Nigeria. This is the case with the Hardcore Biafra 'fake' post which calls for 'dismantling' of the 'evil forest' (Nigeria). Related stories have led to reprisal attacks on many occasions.

When News is Considered Fake in Nigeria

The foregoing discussion is consistent with the Fake News Model proposed by Brody and Meier (2018) who likened fake news to a noise. The scholars argue that a message recipient is expected to deal with this noise. More specifically, fake news is seen as inconsistent information that lacks factual reality, and transmitted through different channels of communication for the unsuspecting public (Brody and Meier, 2018). Therefore, noise needs to be filtered so that a signal can be properly interpreted or communicated. Unlike the random noise, fake news noise has special properties because it is biased in a particular way. Information can be distorted to correspond to fake news (Brody and Meier, 2018). From the above debunked stories, one can observe that fake news in Nigeria is a fabricated or unsubstantiated report/photo meant to tarnish an image or cause panic or advance a particular cause.

However, there is an observed pattern of debunking the alleged fake news in Nigeria. The *CrossCheck Nigeria* or *Africa Check* contacts the person who is alleged to have done something. Once the person denies it, it is termed as fake news. Apart from using TinEye or Google reverse search engine to verify the authenticity of photos, the two fact checkers label a story fake when the alleged source fails to provide data or supporting evidence of how the story, figure or photo originated. Incidentally, these factors qualify news as fake in Nigeria. To this end, one can argue that the line of investigation should be allowed open until such claims have been verified beyond any reasonable doubt. This will not only sanitise the information space, but give room for a thorough investigation devoid of quick and faulty conclusion.

Again, this study observes that unlike fake news stories which can be shared widely, the debunked stories hardly get enough spread. Thus, it is difficult to gauge the impact of debunked stories on the public. The popularity of *Africa Check* and *CrossCheck Nigeria* is not clear, but their debunked stories do not get the type of publicity that can counter fake news. It has also been observed that the two fact checkers concentrate more on debunking the photos and not the texts, which means that the public may consume the text as real.

With the 2019 General Elections over, fake news about politics, Boko Haram Insurgency and general insecurity in Nigeria dominated the chains of the misleading information. The Poynter Institute^{vii} claims that many Nigerians are at risk of being conned through fake news which spreads mostly through the social media. A researcher with the *Africa Check*, Allwell Okpi argues that many fake stories about Boko Haram, Fulani Herdsmen, ethnicities and political parties/candidates spread via *WhatsApp* in Nigeria using local languages.^{viii} The images supporting fake news are often deliberately doctored and mis-captioned. This was the case when Nigeria's main opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) tweeted a misleading photo of slain Nigerian soldiers by the Boko Haram Insurgents. While the story/text was true about the death of Nigerian soldiers, the picture accompanying the story was imported from another similar incident involving Kenyan Army and the Al Shabab. Similarly, Okpi also found that "the ruling party [APC] supporters were circulating photos of fighter jets releasing missiles and bombarding terrorists". This turned out to be fake because the picture was that of a Russian jet fighting the IS in Syria in 2016.^{ix} The above instances show the involvement of party faithful in spreading fake news. It also shows the politicisation of (in)security in Nigeria. In line with the Fake News model, Brody and Meier (2018) maintain that interpreting a signal requires the receiver to strip away the random noise and the distortion in order to grasp the unsullied message. This requires the audiences to carefully understand the real message without mixing them with fake news (noise/distortion). This is however problematic, especially when people believe in fake news to advance their cause or pre-existing perceptions. Although

fake news can be debunked, it is important to stress that its effects could permanently shape people's political opinions and inform their choices and actions.

Tweeting Fake News: Between Trust and Distrust

For emphasis, this study analysed 4,359 tweets produced by 3101 users for content analysis. Out of these tweets, 15% were the original tweets, 48% were retweets while 37% represents replies. This explain that real or fake news follows the same pattern of distribution across the social media through the users who tweet, reply and/or retweet such news. These also represent the various pathways through which fake news is spread.

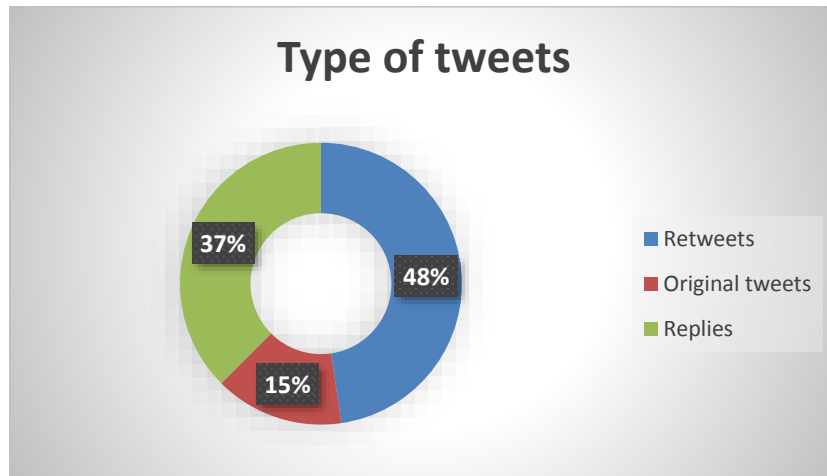


Figure 4 showing the type of tweet by Twitter users

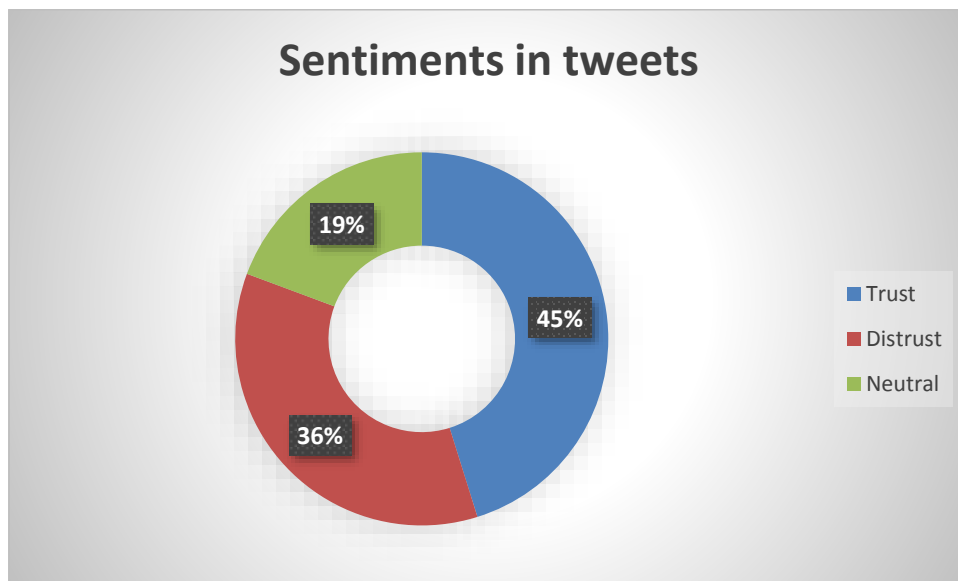


Figure 5 showing users' sentiments

As the above doughnut chart from the content analysis of the tweets indicates, 45% of the contributors trusted the perceived fake news through their sarcastic, ironic, and supportive comments such as "Hahaha, I thought that **Boko Haram** has been technically defeated". This comment makes mockery

of the claim by Nigerian government that Boko Haram poses no national threat even when Transparency International claims that Boko Haram has killed more people under the administration of President Buhari than the previous administrations combined. Another user replies thus: “I keep wondering about the person who said that a fight against Boko Haram is a fight against the North”. This comment taunts President Buhari who once claimed before his emergence as Nigeria’s President that an attack against Boko Haram is an attack against the Northern part of Nigeria. On the other hand, 36% expressed distrust while 19% were neutral. This chart is significant because it shows people’s believability or otherwise of fake news. It also shows that not all users believe fake news.

Conclusion

This study problematises the contextualisation of fake news. Propaganda motive drives some posts which latter receive the status of fake news. Anchored on Fake News Model, this study likened fake news to a noise or distortion. As many traditional media fail reality checks, fake news continues to be pervasive on the social media. This is consistent with Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and Siapera (2018) who found that social media harbours most of the fake news. This also demonstrates that the gatekeeping role of the media has slipped out of control, paving the way for an unbridled spread of fake news across all social networks. The extent a debunked story spreads remains unclear. This is because the popularity of the fact checkers does not measure up to that of fake news purveyors. Nonetheless, the use of fake news about insecurity as a political weapon is threat to Nigerian democracy.

This article contends that fake news heightens insecurity in Nigeria. It has ushered in a negative trend into the media. This negative trend has opened a dangerous new chapter in the information age that not only threatens public confidence in the (social) media, but also undermines the future of Nigeria’s democracy and security. Sometimes, fact checkers such as *Africa Check* and *CrossCheck Nigeria* only consider a story fake when the image is doctored or when the person at the centre of the alleged story denies it. While this may be enough for some stories, others need broader investigation and verification to check the authenticity of the textual claims accompanying the post. Nonetheless, regular policing of the web/social media can check the spread of fake news.

Limitation and recommendation

This study is limited by its analysis of 22 debunked fake news and 4,359 relevant tweets. The extent to which the findings can be generalised is unclear. Data were predominantly web-based. Further research can incorporate interviews and ethnography for a findings more robust and engaging. This does not however, strip this study of its empirical insights into an issue mainly approached from an anecdotal perspective within Nigeria.

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