



# 1. Navigating the Web of Deception: The Impact of Fake News on Societal Insecurity in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*In an era dominated by digital information, the proliferation of fake news has emerged as a pervasive and insidious challenge, casting a shadow over the foundations of societal stability. This paper delves into the intricate web of deception woven by misinformation, exploring its multifaceted impact on societal insecurity. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in psychology, communication studies, and political science, the research examines the mechanisms through which fake news infiltrates public discourse and undermines trust in information sources.*

**Keywords: Fake News, Societal Insecurity, Nigeria, Social Media, Information Warfare**

## Introduction

Nigeria has recently had to deal with a broad spectrum of challenges, from instability to division among the numerous ethnic communities that form the country. The present level of intensity can be linked to the transition of political parties from analogy to digital campaigns during the run-up to the 2015 general elections. What can only be called "bitter politics" resulted from "bitter campaigns," mostly on social media platforms, and involved accusations and counteraccusations from both the opposition and the then-ruling party. Resentment statement in its current, more positive form called started to take precedence. Falsehoods that were purposefully created during that time period and presented to undermine rival parties or candidates also occurred. After the elections concluded, individuals and organizations with differing political views who were insulted persisted in their efforts to disparage one another. Undoubtedly, this scenario significantly compromised Nigeria's national security. The nation's general elections in 2019 followed the same pattern.

Considering the significant degree of insecurity in the country, national security in Nigeria has grown to be a major source of worry. Security issues in Nigeria have persisted in endangering the stability and advancement of the Nigerian State, despite the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2019 report stating that, on average, the degree of global peacefulness has increased only marginally in 2019 compared to previous years (ABOYADE et al. 2022). Virtually every region of the



nation is vulnerable to the terrible consequences of instability. Kidnapping and armed robbery are commonplace in the north and south of Nigeria, while the deadly Boko Haram group is mostly active in the region's northeast. Other daily events in Northern Nigeria include banditry, terrorism, insurgency, and conflicts between farmers and ranchers.

In light of pervasive misinformation, it was harder to tell reality from fiction during the Covid-19 epidemic. The spread of the virus has been followed by a torrent of false and misleading material that preys on people's weaknesses, spreads panic, subverts medical advice, and promotes phony remedies. The detrimental effects are widespread and affect every aspect of Nigerian society. They include deepening the split in the already varied and divided political landscape by escalating disputes between ethnic and religious groups, intensifying election violence, and enforcing "jungle justice." (Hazzan, 2022)

Artificially manufactured and disseminated content with the intention of misleading people is referred to as fake news. Social vices like hate speech are spread through it to exacerbate political unrest, ethnic and religious conflicts, tribal animosity, character assassination, and business deception. Disunity-instigating activities are the main goal of those who promote and spread false information. Multiple factors have been highlighted as contributing to Nigeria's current level of insecurity, including a lack of institutional capability, a rift between the populace and the government, a security agency's inability to share intelligence, and ethno religious and tribal disputes. But the biggest danger to Nigeria's security, despite its seeming silence, is the spread of false information.

The owners of internet businesses, particularly those who operate social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have taken action to address the issue, but so far their efforts have not been successful in stopping individuals from spreading false information (Wong, 2019). Because social media is still the hardest to regulate, it is challenging to accomplish this. Since users of new media platforms and participants in new media forums have the option to seem anonymous, restricted regulation is likewise ineffective.

### **Prevalence of Fake News on Nigerian Social Media**

21st-century technologies that have liberalized virtual spaces and allowed individuals to gain knowledge and skills while also granting unrestricted access to a vast amount of information. Benefits of this information access include the ability to communicate, exchange ideas, and express opinions without worrying about being physically harassed (most of the time). Information was shared as a result on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp, among other social media sites. Individuals frequently click the "share" button before realizing that the article can be a hoax or not true.

One of the biggest challenges to the distribution of real news has been the emergence of social media. Twitter and Facebook had become prominent social media platforms in many countries by the late 2000s, joining YouTube. These platforms had a significant impact on the distribution of content, as well as the practices and professional identities of journalists, particularly with regard to audience engagement, verification, and the collision of the public and private spheres on social media. According to Posetti (2009), Posetti (2013), and Posetti



(2018), peer-to-peer material distribution, especially on social media platforms like Facebook, began with individuals forming trust-based networks and posed a threat to traditional methods of content dissemination.

One instance of fake news on social media that caught people's attention was the unfounded report that herders were killing people along the Benin-Ore road. This report was circulated widely on social media. The narrative was distributed by social media users to their friends, family, and loved ones. Once more, social media's widespread acceptance and utilization of the narrative helped it take off. Theoretical postulations on the satisfactions derived from utilizing a medium are mirrored in it. People in this situation who spread the word about the deaths on the highway in an attempt to stop more of them would probably have done so out of a desire to alert others about them. Despite being widely accepted in mainstream media, this also holds true for social media use. This study's findings are consistent with people's tendency to spread information and stories on social media when they believe the source to be reliable. Therefore, if such information comes from a reliable friend, relative, or acquaintance who seems trustworthy, it would be disseminated.

The narrative was discovered to be blatantly untrue when it was verified, nevertheless (Olatunji, 2020). The tense situation in other regions of the nation was disrupted by the story and other similar stories that spread. To defuse tense situations and debunk fake news propagators like these, the National Orientation Agency and other governmental organizations like the Police and Military Authorities must sometimes step in.

### **Societal Insecurity in the Nigerian Context**

Many security issues have arisen for sub-Saharan African nations as well as those geographically connected to the Sahel since the Arab spring (Osakwe 2014; Uchendu, 2015). Nigeria, like other West African nations, has seen its fair share of internal security issues, hence the country is not immune to insecurity issues either. Insurgencies by Boko Haram, agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra, militancy in the Niger Delta, armed banditry, and the threat posed by Fulani herders are just a few of the issues. These can occasionally escalate into conflicts between farmers and herders and sometimes heighten tensions between different ethnic groups. Other issues include arms struggles in some other regions, isolated incidents of violence, armed robberies, and many others. According to studies by Weimann (2016), Chukwuere & Onyebukwa (2018), Maza, Koldas & Aksit (2020), and others, social media is a breeding ground for terrorists and organized crime units. There is no shortage of evidence showing how organizations with a specific objective or purpose have used social media to promote their ideology. Examples include the ISIS fighters and the way Americans and Europeans travelled to the Middle East to fight alongside them, as well as Boko Haram's use of new media platforms to propagate propaganda and further their cause.

Organized cybercrime made an appearance at the #EndSARS demonstration, targeting government websites. Attackers may target anyone impacted by the movement with phone calls and SMS after a database of public and private organizations was compromised, revealing the phone numbers and private information of anybody seen to be opposed to the movement. An action attributed to anonymous people or groups with a Facebook and Twitter presence that



go under the moniker "Anonymous." Following a rumoured hacking of the nation's telecom firms, the person or group of people also gave the population free airtime credit.

Thus, in an effort to combat false information, the Nigerian Army has consistently asked the mainstream media for support. News of attacks on military posts in the Northeast is constantly flooding social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. People ridicule the military by sharing and resharing these kinds of stories. The military consistently disputes these assertions and states that such reports jeopardize national security and disgrace officers and soldiers as well as the government (Adebajo, 2020). They acknowledge that there can be isolated incidents of attacks on the army, but they are not as common as what is promoted on social media.

### **Political Polarization and Fake News**

Many nations throughout the world appear to be far from guaranteeing free and fair elections, which is one of the defining characteristics of democratic desire for the collective rule. In recent times, foreign governments have appeared to be using social media and the internet to meddle in elections worldwide. This has created an environment where misinformation can be weaponized to attack political candidates and undermine democratic institutions. On the other hand, social media has been utilized by political contenders and elected officials to incite hatred, disseminate false information, and erode public confidence in political and social institutions.

thereby, in the run-up to Nigeria's 2015 general elections, social media offered tools for promoting democracy, but the politicians' polarization strategies nearly split the nation into the extremes of the Muslim North and Christian South (Suntai and Targema, 2017:201). In an effort to sway the electorate, a variety of political stunts and ploys were used during this time to disseminate planned misinformation. These included purposeful fabrications of opponent information, derogatory remarks, and distortions of personal performance facts (Apuke and Appollos, 2017: 87).

McGonagle (2017) performed a research which indicated that fake news is the driving force behind the violence that surrounds Nigerian elections, resulting in property and human casualties. Artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital deceit have consistently affected Nigeria's elections. The majority of informally published election results, for instance, originate from unreliable internet sources, which encourages antidemocratic sentiments that threaten public trust in the system.

According to Okoro et al. (2018), technology has really taken on a vital role in sustaining democracy, particularly with the introduction of social media and other digital gadgets. Media coverage of government actions and behavior is often anticipated, as is the case with official monitoring and reporting. Regarding the media as watchdogs, people depend on it to expose mistakes and misconduct committed by individuals in positions of authority or by those who behave in a way that deviates from social norms (Sanusi et al., 2015: 11). However, by eroding the veracity of information and rendering accountability nearly impossible, these same social media platforms and other digital technology tools threaten Nigerian democracy's goals.

### **The Nexus of Social Media and Misinformation**



Concerns over the veracity, accuracy, and authenticity of information have been raised by the prevalence of Fake News in Social Media. In-depth examinations of Fake News's effects on society are still rare, despite the appearance of studies examining Fake News's influence on Social Media in a variety of domains, including politics, journalism, and digital media. Also, there isn't a sufficient analysis of how Fake News in Social Media affects society, despite the fact that Fake News and Social Media is becoming more and more abundant (Tandoc et al., 2018), which is a major advantage in the battle against Fake News.

The connection between false news and social media is one of the newest threats to national security. Fake news's relationship with social media has been strengthened by the ease of access to digital technologies, the growth of social media platforms, and the accessibility of smartphones with low-cost Internet connection. Social media platforms, which are primarily user-generated content on various digital communications channels, act as a potent and quick vehicle to circulate the fake news. Fake news is content in the form of news items, videos, or photos (morphed photos), generated in the guise of real news with a malicious intent to mislead the reader.

Social media users are often exposed to a deluge of false news articles, which they commonly mistake for actual news and spread around their networks. Social media platforms offer a great deal of flexibility when it comes to content filtering, in contrast to conventional media like print media, which have content gatekeeping. A vicious cycle of disseminating misleading information, manipulating information, and deceiving the people who consume it is created when readers who lack awareness spread the threat of fake news to their social media groups.

### **Objectives:**

- To analyze the prevalence and patterns of fake news dissemination on social media in Nigeria.
- To examine the psychological impact of fake news exposure on individual perceptions and societal attitudes.
- To investigate the role of fake news in contributing to political polarization and undermining institutional trust.
- To assess the geopolitical dimensions of fake news, particularly its implications for national security in Nigeria.
- To propose strategies for mitigating the impact of fake news and enhancing digital literacy in the Nigerian populace.

### **Methodology:**

In order to thoroughly examine the effect of false news on social insecurity in Nigeria, this study uses a mixed-methods research methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. The study combines quantitative information from surveys and qualitative information from interviews with content analysis. a purposive sampling method was employed to select relevant content from popular social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. The sample includes a diverse range of posts, articles, and narratives related to fake news in Nigeria over a specified timeframe. While the survey component involves a random



sampling method to ensure a representative sample of the Nigerian population. Participants are selected from diverse demographics, including age, gender, education level, and geographical location.

### **Findings**

- 1. Prevalence and Patterns of Fake News Dissemination on Social Media;** On Nigerian social media platforms, falsified information is surprisingly common, according to our analysis. An extensive study of stories that were spreading on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter revealed the complex patterns used to spread false information. Fake news is ubiquitous in Nigeria, as evidenced by the rapidity with which it proliferates and the variety of ways it can be presented.
- 2. Role of Fake News in Political Polarization;** The complex ways that false news exacerbates political divisiveness and erodes institutional confidence were corroborated by our research. Exacerbating tensions and undermining public trust in political institutions, deliberate attempts were made to take advantage of pre-existing political fault lines, as uncovered by content analysis. A useful basis for comprehending the relationship between false news and increased political unrest was established by Onyekwena and Chukwuma's (2023) observations [Onyekwena & Chukwuma, 2023].
- 3. Geopolitical Dimensions and Implications for National Security;** the research examined the geopolitical aspects of false news and revealed its consequences for Nigeria's national security. The results corroborated the critical analysis, which highlighted the connections between disinformation and security risks to the country. The necessity for a comprehensive strategy to protect the country is highlighted by the relationship between information warfare and geopolitical stability.
- 4. Psychological Impact of Fake News Exposure;** The study shed light on how exposure to false news affects people's views and attitudes in society psychologically. The way in which exposure results in distorted views, increased polarization, and decreased confidence in information sources has been made clear by Adebayo et al.'s (2022) paradigm for comprehending the psychological aspects of disinformation [Adebayo et al., 2022].
- 5. Strategies for Mitigating the Impact and Enhancing Digital Literacy;** The research put out methods for improving digital literacy and lessening the effects of false information. The research seeks to enable people to critically assess information sources and traverse the web of deceit by emphasizing preventative approaches such as media literacy initiatives, educational campaigns, and technology-based solutions.

### **Conclusion:**

This study concludes by highlighting the intricate and interrelated structure of false news and its significant influence on social unrest in Nigeria. Our research shows that a holistic strategy is desperately needed, given the frequency and patterns of distribution on social media, the psychological consequences on people, and the wider geopolitical repercussions.

Fake news has a psychological influence that highlights holes in people's worldviews, further dividing society. Intentional political information exploitation heightens already-existing



tensions, jeopardizing institutional stability and driving up social unrest. In terms of geopolitics, the report emphasizes how hybrid threats are changing and how disinformation and national security are inextricably linked.

Multiple stakeholders must work together to address the issues raised by false news. It is imperative to put comprehensive plans into action in order to strengthen cybersecurity defenses, advance appropriate information-sharing behaviors, and improve digital literacy. Nigeria might strive to become a more robust and knowledgeable community by figuring out how to navigate the web of deceit.

### **Recommendation**

**Strengthening Digital Literacy:** Implement comprehensive digital literacy programs at various educational levels to enhance critical thinking skills and empower individuals to discern between credible and fake information. This should include an emphasis on verifying sources and fact-checking.

**Media Literacy Campaigns:** Launch nationwide media literacy campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of fake news and educate the public on responsible information-sharing practices. Collaborate with media organizations, educational institutions, and civic groups to amplify the message.

**Regulatory Frameworks:** Develop and enforce robust regulatory frameworks to hold individuals and platforms accountable for spreading misinformation. This may include legislation that penalizes the deliberate creation and dissemination of fake news.

**Collaboration with Social Media Platforms:** Collaborate with social media platforms to enhance content moderation mechanisms and implement features that flag or label potentially misleading information. Encourage transparency and cooperation between the government, tech companies, and civil society.

**Fact-Checking Initiatives:** Establish and support independent fact-checking organizations that can verify the accuracy of information circulating on social media and traditional news outlets. Promote fact-checking as an integral part of responsible journalism.

**Crisis Communication Protocols:** Develop crisis communication protocols to address the rapid spread of fake news during sensitive times, such as elections or communal tensions. Ensure that accurate and timely information is disseminated to counteract misinformation.

Nigeria may construct a thorough and durable framework to negotiate the false information web produced by fake news by putting these suggestions into practice. In order to establish a climate where truthful information predominates and contributes to social stability and security, cooperation between the government, civil society, media outlets, and the general public is imperative.

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