

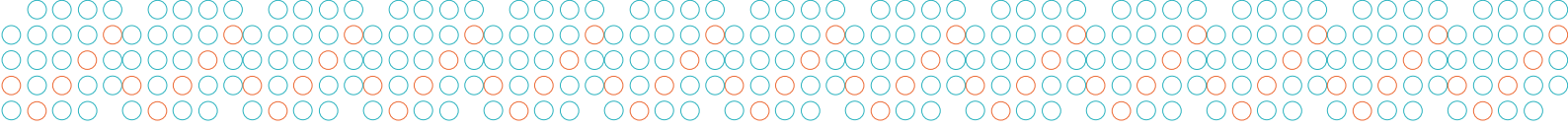


 **FACTCHECK  
ELECTIONS**

# INFORMATION DISORDER:

A MALADY ON ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA





## Introduction

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*From party officials' half-truths, to wild conspiracy theories, to fabricated news articles, fake news has spread far and wide in recent time and this deliberate spread of misinformation online, and on social media platforms in particular, has generated extraordinary concern, in large part because of its potential effects on public opinion, political polarization, and ultimately democratic decision making. Fake news has been a growing concern in global politics for a number of years, and it is now exploding across the continent, with highly orchestrated social media campaigns deployed with alarming influence. This, as noted, is a global phenomenon and with relatable and identical effects. It is a significant threat to the integrity of information sharing and news reporting and has a particularly unique environment to thrive in Africa. In this our research, we look into what is means by fake News, its causes and effects on Election in Nigeria.*





## Fake news as a global pandemic

Fake news refers to news stories that do not use industry-accepted best-practices aimed at ensuring accuracy and credibility of information when producing news and editorial content. Fake news might refer to stories that are outright false or fabricated, but it can also include stories that present information in misleading ways (Victor 2021). Sometimes these categories are referred to as misinformation. The term “fake news” has become so ubiquitous in our society that it’s even become a punchline (Wright 2020). But the threat is very real – with real consequences.

Fake news is not new to the global space. In US elections, fake news hasn’t existed for almost a century. People were worried about fake news during the heyday of newspapers in the 1910s and 1920s, but since then, journalism has undergone a professionalization process that has made it into a fully-fledged industry with educational standards, ethical guidelines, and common editorial practices (Victor 2021). For instance, Watts et al. (2021) opined that in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the vast majority of media outlets uncritically repeated the administration’s false assertion that they had clear proof that Saddam Hussein had WMD. Despite being refuted by numerous experts, Sarah Palin’s claim that the Affordable Care Act would establish “death panels” in August 2009 was repeated in more than 700 mainstream news articles even after it was debunked by a variety of fact-checking organizations (Watts et al 2021). More recently, the 2016 US presidential election, which, along with other events that year such as Brexit, raised widespread concerns about a possible rise of populist/nationalist political movements, increasing political polarization, and decreasing public trust in the media.

## The Nigerian Experience

Fake news is not new to Nigeria. For instance, during the 2015 elections, a 55-minute documentary called “The Real Buhari” that was full of untruths was broadcast on television and then circulated on social media. In 2017, Biafra separatists trying to sabotage the governorship election in Anambra claimed that the army was infecting schoolchildren with monkey pox in order to depopulate the South East. This caused some schools to close and parents to pull their kids out of fearful classes (Hassan 2019). The assertion that President Muhammadu Buhari has been replaced with a Sudanese clone named Jubril is the fake news story that has received the most attention. Nnamdi Kanu, the head of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), first made the accusation in a YouTube video in September 2017. The claim was frequently made over the ensuing months, but most observers laughed it off as a joke. However, as the 2019 General election drew near, it became clear that some facets of society actually hold the false rumor to be true. It has gotten so bad that President Buhari felt compelled to address it head-on in December 2018 via a press release and a public declaration that “I assure you, it’s the real me.” (Busari CNN 2019). Although an obviously ridiculous claim, the necessity of a public denial shows how easily fake news can take hold. This phenomenon has reached new heights, however, ahead of Nigeria’s 2022 general election. As the campaign has heated up, fake news about both President Muhammadu Buhari and his main opponents former vice-president Atiku Abubakar and the vice presidential candidate in the last general election, Peter Obi, has swirled on Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter. It has been shared knowingly by canny campaign officials as well as unwittingly by thousands of unsuspecting voters. Meanwhile, #FactCheckElections.Org has done a lot of fact checking works on recent news item revolving around elections in Nigeria and on the subtler end of the scale, there are examples such as, the claim that Olusengun Adebayo of the SDP has opted out of the Ekiti gubernatorial race. Lo and behold, the claim was false. This is just one of the much fake news that is circulating the media minute after minute and we’re going to continue to see it until after the election, and after all of the votes are counted. Expectedly and predictably, this habit of rumor mongering has created an ever-more uncertain and heightened atmosphere ahead of Nigeria’s high-stakes elections.



## Looking into the relatable causes of surge in fake news on elections

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As rightly said, fake news is not a one-dimensional phenomenon in that it is not usually based on elections but on other issues of interest. However, the potential consequences of fake news on election is greater and more sensitive- the lives of the people of a whole country may be either positively or negatively impacted by it; much more of the later than the former, and therefore need of greatest concern. This leads us to the concise yet accurate examination of the causes of fake news spreading which will later lead us to the broader discussion of its monumental consequences

Arguably, the prevalence of “fake news” has been adopted as a pretext by incumbent regimes in some African states Nigeria inclusive, to crack down on freedom of expression under the guise of protecting the press and the people from fake stories. This is relatable with the problem the SOROSOKE generation is constantly facing with the Nigeria government more so for the fact that technology has made online a seamless space to quickly expose the dirty linen of the government. The sad story behind this constant feud is that the political process in the country has been very frustrating, to say the least. Investing huge sums of money to buy government offices, manipulating the media to create false images of candidates, and dirty tricks designed to smear opponents and even steal elections have become all too common. In this climate, politicians feel driven to consolidate their power by stoking hatred between citizens, ethnic groups, religions, and nations. All too often, “people power” seems to have disappeared from politics, replaced by money power, muscle power, and even firepower.

Editorial standards in African journalism can be inconsistent, and a relatively small, literate middle class is frequently the only audience for well-established newspapers with high editorial standards. The rest of the world gets its news from social media, which has opened up mainstream news and commentary to large portions of the continent. As Booth (2019) has rightly said, as a result of the extremely rapid dissemination of information and the lack of publication costs and quality control, social media is dangerously receptive and open to fake news. The prevalence and spread of fake news is quickly developing into a real challenge globally given the reliance

on social media as a primary source of information. Fake news, which is pervasive in Nigeria, poses a particularly serious threat to its political system. Unfortunately, there is a partisan bias in fake news consumption. Conservatives are more likely to consume and spread fake news stories than liberals are. But for most people, mainstream news sources still provide the bulk of information out there, and most of that information is of reasonable quality.

Also, everyone wants to be entitled to their opinion and as such, it often leads to abuse of information and ultimately mislead a large portion of the community. That's how the term "fake news" is being tossed around these days – if it doesn't agree with your view, you just say, "Oh, that's fake news. Ignore it." Instead of us to base our individual arguments on facts and figure, we tend to be held sway by emotion and personal gain (Wright 2020).

The above having said, it should be however noted that misinformation is a much broader phenomenon than outright falsehoods. There are numerous ways to influence a reader's (or viewer's) thinking without directly stating anything that is demonstrably false. Presenting partial or biased data, quoting sources selectively, omitting alternative explanations, improperly equating unequal arguments, conflating correlation with causation, using loaded language, insinuating a claim without actually making it (e.g., by quoting someone else making it), strategically ordering the presentation of facts, and even simply changing the headline can all manipulate the reader's (or viewer's) impression without their awareness among other things are the possible ways a reader can be misinformed as opined by Watts et al. (2021). These practices are truly pervasive in mainstream professional journalism.

Now is to look at the effects of fake news on election as it relates to Nigeria. Albeit, there is no much difference with the other countries yet there are important ones peculiar to the form of democracy we practice in Nigeria.

# Effects of fake news on elections in Nigeria

One significance and quiet unnoticeable consequence of fake news on our election could be that the citizens will be easily manipulated and held sway, moving away our thoughts from the intent and purpose of election-to exercise our fundamental franchise right and choose a citizen friendly and responsible leaders, to flexing muscle on a far less important matter-fake news, which have little or no effect on our well being. In other words, false information is a delusion, destroyer of hope and an annihilator of due process of democracy.

While it is not everyone who was presented with fake news headlines on Facebook necessarily read the stories, or consciously perceived them, or was affected by them. However, even if only a fraction of those who were shown the stories saw them and even if an even smaller fraction opened the stories, and if some of those who were influenced by them, then- because the election was so close and in fact has started been conducted in some states- it could have influenced and of course, changed the voting choice of enough people to affect the election.

Also, as a result of the problems of unreliable hope brought by fake news, Nigerians are losing faith in the political process. Young people especially have been turning apolitical, rejecting a system they regard as hopelessly compromised. We can see that it is going to impact the citizens' level of confidence in the upcoming election. We already saw some kind of hubbub about that – that the election will be rigged as usual before it even started. This is the much reason progressive movements such as Operation show your PVC have been on trends lately. To sensitize people and give them enough reasons to not only be a registered voters but vote for the candidate of their choice in the upcoming election. But truly, the amount of fake news been consumed is constantly eroding the confidence of the people and this is also partially affecting the advocacy works of civil organizations and NGOs.

The more we do research on the impact of fake news, the more we can see how it's impacting society as a whole. We tend to think that our opinions, attitudes and beliefs are our own, but that's not 100 percent correct because we're influenced by what we see. Fake news absolutely influences our attitudes, our beliefs, and we also know that that can influence our actual behavior.



## Fighting back

The calculable danger of fake news on elections has been stripped naked and there remain nothing than to find a lasting solution to it and despite the serious nature of the threat posed by fake news, there are strategies available to combat it, beginning with the life cycle of stories. Although there have been tons of resources out there to help people understand what fake news is, how to identify it and prevent it from influencing them for a while now, but it's not very effective. We need to do more because if people don't have accurate information, they're not going to be able to make the best decisions. Below are some possible and viable ways of fighting the effects presented by fake news.

Education may, in fact, be our most powerful tool. By giving people the knowledge and ability to spot potential fake news, we can hope that these stories won't see the light of day, and the damage they cause can be prevented. Promisingly, we have seen a response from civil society through NGOs who are providing fact-checking services to counteract fake news. Some are successfully attracting donor financing, and together with PR agencies, they are fighting the tide of malicious and manufactured stories. One of the leading organizations in that regard in Nigeria is the #FactCheckElections. Org which pride itself and under whose watch this present research is made possible. What would be more effective is if our lawmakers actually take action. If lawmakers could consider regulating digital campaign advertisements on social media and search engines, identifying geo locators to make sure that what's being posted is by real people, and identifying the people who are posting that information (Wright 2020).



We also need to have lawmakers making sure that we have increased transparency in how consumer data is actually used by these social media platforms. Most people don't read the terms of agreement, they just scroll down and hit agree. But we need to be more transparent in how our personal information is being used by social media platforms.

We should take a great advantage of IT because it is our new drive and it sails where we direct it so let us use it responsibly. Thanks to the Internet, a single individual can now speak out to the whole world without the control of any intermediary (including the traditional news media, which, in weak democracies, are often biased or government-controlled). This makes IT a powerful tool for the voices of the people, especially minority groups, the poor, and the geographically isolated. It also reduces the costs in time, energy, and money of communicating with a large number of people. That's the power of IT. It can give voice to the voiceless, eyes to the politically blind, and ears to the politically deaf. It's yet another reason why governments, businesses, NGOs, and ordinary citizens need to join forces in an effort to make sure that the power of technology is put within reach of everyone in our world—including the most poorest among us who need the help the most.

People are also warned not to take their news from social media in any way. Use reputable local or national news sources to get your daily news. Take note of the headline. It's probably false if something is overly sensational. Pay attention to its level of popularity. How frequently has it been shared or liked? Something's not necessarily true just because it's widely accepted. Try to conduct your own fact-checking if you can determine the author of the article. This is one of the challenges we face because we frequently only read the headline rather than the entire article and continue scrolling. It can be very difficult to stop and read the actual story before fact-checking it because we have cultivated a culture where information is desired automatically and it is very hard sometimes to pause and read the actual story and then fact-check the story, check the sources. Is this really what they said? Is this really what they meant? That requires effort on our part, and we owe it to ourselves to put forth that effort.

Still on the citizens, we should also normalize the habit of consuming news dispassionately. We should try and engage the news with a sense of curiosity and a desire to be informed, rather than an urge to be outraged or moved. Lastly, read before you spread. Do not forward or retweet links to articles you have not read.

## Conclusion

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This research has detailed what fake news is, its causes and effects on elections in Nigeria. This research concludes that whether it was through fake news or provocative advertising, the use of social media seems to be able to affect elections differently than we are used to seeing. The economics, computer algorithms, and social dynamics that make up social media platforms are doing things to politics that traditional media cannot.

Finally and in addition to the above suggested ways of curbing fake news, we should all know that regardless of political leanings, we all have a responsibility to protect our democracy and an important step in doing so is to be a well-informed citizenry. Be on the lookout for fake news and misinformation and try your best to spot it when you can. We'll all be better off without it.

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