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**Examining Fake News on WhatsApp Messaging in the
Political Ecology of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West
Nigeria**

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Abstract

WhatsApp is a major communication and social media tool in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, Southwest Nigeria, and it is popular in the urban and rural areas. All ages and groups use the digital platform to disseminate information. Aside words, it has attractive features like photographs, voice notes and videos, and that has increased its wide used. However, the political class and their supporters have also exploited these benefits to spread misleading information. Fake news has become a phenomenon in Nigeria, and the carriers of this fake news have mobilised WhatsApp with all its attendant features for smear campaign and to spread the so-called fake news against their opponents. This is rife in Ado-Ekiti and Akure. This study investigates the dangers of using WhatsApp digital platform to spread fake news. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a random sampling method to recruit and conduct semi-structured interviews with male and female residents of the twin-cities of Ado-Ekiti and Akure that are above 18 years. The study concluded that the government will have to strengthen digital media laws by instituting an independent body that will regulate and prosecute people who use the platform to cause damages to people, especially their political opponents, thereby protect the public from being assaulted with fake and misleading information that has consequences.

Keywords: *WhatsApp, Fake News, Political Communication, Ado-Ekiti, Akure.*

Introduction

Communication in Africa has changed dramatically as a result of the widespread use of social media platforms, especially mobile apps like

WhatsApp. Unquestionably, modern technology facilitates social interaction and information flow, but it has also created an environment that is conducive to the propagation of false information and "fake news" (Oyebode, 2023). In politically sensitive countries like Nigeria, this phenomenon poses a serious threat to democratic processes (Adefolarin et al., 2020). In the southwestern Nigerian subnational context of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, this study explores the political ecology of fake news on WhatsApp. According to Carvalho (2020), the term "political ecology" refers to the complex interactions between social, cultural, technological, and political elements that affect the creation, dissemination, and consumption of fake news.

The research attempts to give a comprehensive picture of how fake news functions within unique local contexts by concentrating on Ado-Ekiti and Akure, Southwest, Nigeria. The complex nature of fake news in Africa is highlighted by recent research. Akinfeleye et al.'s (2021) and Smith's (2022) works highlight how fake news may be weaponised for political purposes, influencing public opinion and even instigating violence. Research by Adeyemi and Bamisile (2020) investigates the elements—such as limited digital literacy and ingrained political prejudices—that lead people to believe fake news. By examining the particular political ecology of fake news on WhatsApp in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, this study adds to the body of knowledge already in existence.

This research attempts to provide a thorough grasp of the intricate interaction between technology, fake news, and Nigeria's socio-political environment. The results of this study will guide the development of policies and programmes in Nigeria and other African contexts that will address digital literacy, responsible social media use, and the detrimental effects of fake news on democratic processes.

Ado-Ekiti and Akure, A Tale of Two Cities

According to Taiwo, Adewole, Fagbeja, and Balogun (2021), Ado Ekiti is an ancient city with a population of 556,505, and it is the headquarter of the Ekiti central senatorial district. It has local media stations such as Nigeria Television Authority, NTA Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State Television (BSES), Radio Ekiti 91.5 FM, FRCN Progress FM, Fresh FM, Midas Radio, ABUAD Radio, Voice FM, Ayoba FM, People's FM, and New Cruise FM.

Akure is the capital and largest city of Ondo State. It has a current population of 774,000. The city has two television and eight radio stations: NTA Akure, Ondo State Television, Sunshine Radio Akure, Adaba

FM, FUTA FM, Empire Radio, Positive FM Akure, Orange FM, Galaxy Radio, Crest FM, and Breeze FM. While these various media houses play a role in the political, campaign, and election communication in the two cities, social media has taken a foothold with the younger population (Akpan, 2021); thus, WhatsApp is prominent in the dissemination of political information about candidates in the two cities.

Ado-Ekiti and Akure are two cities predominantly populated by the Yoruba ethnic group in South-West Nigeria and are both capitals of contiguous states of Ekiti and Ondo States and were together as one state (Ondo State) before the split on October 1, 1996.

The cities have also been politically active and combustible, as they have hosted significant political protest in the past. In his work, *Things Fell Apart? Yoruba Responses to the 1983 Elections in Ondo State, Nigeria*, Apter (1987) narrates how towns throughout the old Ondo State erupted into violence on August 16, 1983. The ostensible cause was a popular reaction against rigged gubernatorial elections that favoured a National Party of Nigeria (N.P.N.) candidate in an overwhelmingly Unity Party of Nigeria (U.P.N.) state.

With this political history, the two cities are a veritable place to appreciate how political communication shapes the choices of the citizens or residents during elections, given that they are not only anthropologically and culturally homogenous, but they share similar political and social histories. Therefore, this study will explore if these similarities have also affected the use of WhatsApp as a political communication tool and, by extension, a platform for spreading fake political news.

Literature Review

It is indisputable that the popular usage of social media platforms like WhatsApp in Africa has revolutionised communication, influencing everything from political discourse to news consumption. Nonetheless, there are drawbacks to this accessibility. Although social media promotes communication and interaction, it also makes it easier for false information—sometimes known as "fake news"—to proliferate (Oyebode, 2023). In politically sensitive countries like Nigeria, this phenomenon poses a serious threat to democratic processes (Adefolarin et al., 2020). This literature review examined the complexity of fake news on WhatsApp and considers the unique political environments of Nigeria's Ado-Ekiti and Akure. The term "political ecology" in this context refers to the complex

network of social, cultural, technological, and political elements that affect the creation, dissemination, and consumption of false information (Carvalho, 2020). A deeper comprehension of how fake news functions in diverse local contexts can be attained by analysing these two unique states.

The Impact of Weaponising Fake News

Recent research illuminates how fake news is weaponised in Africa for political purposes. Research conducted by Akinfeleye et al. (2021) and Smith (2022) demonstrates the deliberate use of fake content to sway public opinion, affect political outcomes, and even provoke violence. According to Adelfirin et al. (2020), this manipulation may have far-reaching effects, including a weakening of public confidence in respectable institutions and the promotion of societal division. It is essential to comprehend why people are duped by false information. Low levels of digital literacy and preexisting political prejudices are two aspects that Adeyemi and Bamisile (2020) investigate as contributing to people's susceptibility to fake news. It is more likely for audiences that lack the critical thinking skills to analyse internet information to believe and spread fake news that supports their preconceived notions.

The Role of Social Media Platforms and the Political Ecology of Fake News on WhatsApp in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, Nigeria

WhatsApp poses particular difficulties because it is a closed messaging service. In contrast to open platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, fake news is more likely to propagate via WhatsApp within reliable social networks, which may lend it an air of credibility (Akinfeleye et al., 2021). Moreover, it may be more difficult to identify false information sources and apprehend those accountable due to the platform's encryption characteristics (Smith, 2022). Global communication environments have changed dramatically as a result of the widespread use of social media platforms like WhatsApp. These platforms undoubtedly help people interact socially and share information, but they have also served as havens for the transmission of false information and "fake news" (Oyebode, 2023). In politically sensitive countries like Nigeria, this phenomenon poses a serious threat to democratic processes (Adefolarin et al., 2020).

Social media platforms have completely changed the way people communicate by providing previously unheard-of chances for connection and information exchange. But there are drawbacks to this accessibility. It encourages communication and the sharing of information, but it also

makes it easier for false information—often known as "fake news"—to proliferate quickly (Oyebode, 2023). Democratic processes are seriously threatened by this tendency, especially in politically volatile settings like Nigeria (Adefolarin et al., 2020). This section explores the role that social media plays in the political ecology of fake news in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, Nigeria, and specifically focuses on WhatsApp. Social media platforms serve as potent amplifiers that expedite and extend information dissemination, both real and fake. Research conducted by Akinfeleye et al. (2021) and Smith (2022) demonstrates how actors might use false news as a weapon on social media to influence elections and sway public opinion for political purposes. According to Bakshy et al. (2020), the impacts of algorithmic filtering are exacerbated by producing echo chambers, where users are mainly exposed to content that validates their own ideas. This may impede exposure to opposing ideas and cause social polarisation.

According to Bakshy et al. (2020), social media algorithms have the potential to propagate bogus news by generating echo chambers. These are online spaces where people are mainly exposed to information that supports their pre-existing opinions. This happens because users' previous interactions with information are usually given priority by algorithms, which creates a feedback loop that strengthens pre-existing biases and prevents exposure to opposing ideas. WhatsApp groups created around pre-existing social and political affinities can serve as echo chambers in the context of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West, Nigeria. People who belong to these groups are more likely to encounter fake news that confirms their political views, which could strengthen them and make it more difficult for them to critically assess the material.

Virality and Emotional Appeal

According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news frequently uses emotional manipulation to get traction and spread quickly. Social media companies take advantage of this by giving content that stirs up powerful feelings like fear, hatred, or outrage top priority. Due to the fact that strong content evokes emotions, it is more likely to be shared and discussed. This prioritisation may increase false information dissemination. Fake news that capitalises on historical narratives or local political tensions can be effective in evoking strong emotions in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West, Nigeria. These feelings, heightened by the social media

landscape, have the potential to facilitate the fake news's propagation among particular communities.

Fake news gains further momentum due to social media's network effects. Fake content becomes more legitimate and credible as more people share it because of its sheer volume. Consequently, fake news may spread like wildfire, becoming harder to stop once it gains traction (Vosges et al., 2018). Additionally, the theory of "network homophily," which postulates that people gravitate towards those who have similar values or traits, comes into play. People may be more inclined to spread and believe bogus news that comes from their social circles in WhatsApp groups in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, even if it is untrue. Fake news can be amplified through the use of social media platforms, especially WhatsApp. Fake news can spread quickly across the political ecosystems of Ado-Ekiti and Akure by taking advantage of echo chambers, emotional manipulation, network effects, and the unique characteristics of closed messaging platforms. Comprehending these mechanisms of amplification is essential to formulating efficacious methods to counteract the deleterious effects of fake news on democratic processes and social cohesiveness in these Nigerian cities.

WhatsApp: A Unique Case

Unlike public platforms like Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp is a closed messaging application that presents unique challenges in the context of fake news. Here is how WhatsApp's features contribute to the political ecology of fake news in Ado-Ekiti and Akure:

Akpan (2021) argues that WhatsApp is a major communicative platform employed in communication, which has educational value also. WhatsApp operates primarily within trusted social circles (family, friends, community groups). Content shared within these networks may be perceived as more credible simply due to the sender's familiarity (Akinfeleye et al., 2021). This perceived trustworthiness can increase the believability and virality of fake news within these local communities. WhatsApp groups often reflect pre-existing social and political affiliations. This can create echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to information that reinforces their existing biases, potentially hindering their ability to critically evaluate the veracity of shared content (Adeyemi & Bamisile, 2020). WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption hinders efforts to track the origins of fake news and identify those responsible for its creation and dissemination (Smith, 2022). This lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable and curb the spread of false information.

The aforementioned elements emphasise the significance of social media platforms, but a thorough analysis necessitates looking at the political environments of Southwest Nigeria's Akure and Ado-Ekiti. The paradigm proposed by Carvalho (2020) highlights the interdependence of political, technological, cultural, and social elements. These variables interact with WhatsApp in these particular scenarios: Fake news can propagate on WhatsApp and affect its content due to historical narratives and political conflicts between Ado-Ekiti and Akure. These tensions could be used by people with political motivations to produce and disseminate fake content that disparages political rivals or targets particular populations. The acceptance and spread of fake news on WhatsApp may be influenced by cultural norms and attitudes toward trust and information sharing. One reason could be that, even in cases where information supplied by elders or community leaders is proven to be erroneous, a culture of deference to them could foster a higher degree of confidence. Fake news spreads on WhatsApp according to the social networks and power dynamics that already exist in these places. Those with better social status or more access to technology may be able to significantly influence information dissemination more within social networks.

Theoretical Framework

A strong theoretical framework is necessary to comprehend the dissemination and effects of fake news on WhatsApp within the political environments of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South West Nigeria. This paradigm is based on the framing theory, which provides important insights into the presentation, perception, and ultimate influence of information on behaviour and decision-making.

Framing Theory

According to the framing theory, which was developed by Goffman (1974) and Entman (2003), people understand information by emphasising some parts of a message more than others. This "framing" process influences people's perceptions of and responses to a problem. Frames give information processing a conceptual framework that affects conclusions and judgements (Scheufele, 2020).

The following are important ideas in framing theory:

- Frames, which arrange structures to describe issues, pinpoint causes, and offer remedies (Entman, 2003).
- Frame elements, which are the particular components of a message that add to the overall frame, such as phrases, keywords, and images (Scheufele, 2020).
- Framing mechanisms are methods for creating a certain frame, including highlighting some parts of a problem and downplaying others, or using evocative language (Entman, 2003).

Fake News and Framing Theory

The study of fake news is especially pertinent to framing theory. Framing tricks are a common tool used by fake news to twist the truth and sway public opinion. Content that has been altered could:

- Stress emotional appeals: To connect with viewers and acquire traction, fake news may make use of feelings of fear, rage, or prejudice (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).
- Simplify complicated topics: Fake news frequently offers simple answers to situations that appear insurmountable, presenting complex issues in a black-and-white manner (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).
- Destroy confidence in reliable sources: Fake news can erode public confidence in reliable sources by undercutting reputable media sources and authorities. This leaves a void in information that it then fills with its own made-up stories (Vosges et al., 2018).
- Simplify difficult challenges: Fake news frequently offers quick fixes for problems that appear insurmountable, simplifying complex situations into black-and-white presentations (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Framing Theory and the Political Ecology of Misinformation

When analysing fake news on WhatsApp in the context of Ado-Ekiti and Akure's political ecology, framing theory must consider the interactions between:

- The information contained in false news: How does false information appear on WhatsApp? What components—like emotional appeals and condensed narratives—are employed to lend credibility and connect with regional audiences?

- The political and social milieu: How do historical narratives, cultural beliefs, and current political rivalries in Ado-Ekiti and Akure affect the frames utilised in fake news, and how do local populations interpret these frames?
- Social networks' role: What impact do social networks have on the way bogus news is framed on WhatsApp? Do certain groups within these networks support or oppose particular frames?

Through the application of framing theory, the researchers were better able to comprehend how fake news functioned in these particular local contexts. An insightful framework for examining the political ecology of fake news on WhatsApp in Ado-Ekiti and Akure is provided by framing theory. The researchers developed a more sophisticated understanding of this intricate phenomenon by looking at the framing of fake news, the social and political context in which it spreads, and the function of social networks. Moreover, the integration of cognitive biases and digital literacy insights improved the theoretical framework and paved the way for a more thorough examination of fake news within this particular setting.

Methodology

It takes a sophisticated study approach to examine the complex interactions that exist between social media, fake news, and the political ecology of a given place. In the setting of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West Nigeria, qualitative research, particularly thematic analysis, offers a useful method for examining this intricate phenomenon.

Qualitative Research

According to Creswell & Creswell (2020), qualitative research places a high value on thoroughly examining experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This method works well for figuring out the "why" behind the propagation of fake news on WhatsApp and how it affects various Nigerian cities. Researchers can explore the social, cultural, and political elements that impact people's interactions with and interpretations of fake news through qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative methods, which concentrate on quantifying variables.

Thematic Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2020), one popular qualitative technique is thematic analysis, which is methodically finding, arranging, and analysing patterns and themes within data. For the analysis of information gathered from focus groups, interviews, and even social media content itself, this approach is perfect.

In this study, the following questions were investigated using theme analysis: How do people in Ado-Ekiti and Akure define and recognise bogus news on WhatsApp? What are their information sources and evaluating reliability methods? How do social connections and WhatsApp groups affect the dissemination and reception of fake news? How do certain groups within these networks function as gatekeepers or distributors of false information? How do these factors impact political participation, social cohesiveness, and institutional trust in these cities, and how the content and spread of fake news in Ado-Ekiti and Akure are influenced by historical narratives, political conflicts that already exist, and cultural practices.

Data Generation Technique

Qualitative research can facilitate the investigation of the complex interactions between fake news, social media, and the political ecology of a particular place, especially in-depth face-to-face interviews. Concerning fake news on WhatsApp, this method works well for comprehending the lived experiences and complex viewpoints of people in Nigeria's Ado-Ekiti and Akure.

The Reason for in-person interviews

According to Galletta (2013), face-to-face interviews offer a special setting for gathering comprehensive and rich data. An in-depth examination of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and mental processes is possible during interviews, as opposed to surveys or questionnaires. The level of detail required is especially important when examining a complicated topic such as the propagation and effects of fake news on WhatsApp inside a particular political ecosystem. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the framework of this study to gather information about how locals define and recognise fake news on WhatsApp, what the inhabitants experience with it, how they evaluate its veracity, where they obtain their news and information, who and what do they consider trustworthy sources, and how

does this affect how they view fake news on WhatsApp? How do social networks and WhatsApp groups affect the dissemination and receipt of bogus news? How does fake news on WhatsApp affect people's political participation, feelings of trust in local institutions, and sense of social cohesion within their communities? Do participants feel compelled to share or believe the information provided within their networks, even if they fear it might be false?

Sampling and Recruitment

It is essential to choose a sample of participants who are typical of Ado-Ekiti and Akure. To guarantee participation from a range of demographic categories, political persuasions, and degrees of digital literacy, purposeful sampling was employed. Researchers might choose participants for purposeful sampling, sometimes called judgmental sampling, by using predetermined standards that are thought to be pertinent to the research issue (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method makes sure there is a wealth of information pertinent to the study inside the sample population. According to Creswell & Creswell (2020), this method includes choosing participants who have a variety of traits in order to guarantee a wide range of viewpoints on the usage of WhatsApp and fake news. Purposive sampling was further refined when researching fake news and WhatsApp in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West, Nigeria, by taking into account the unique political ecology of these places. Those who are involved in local politics or who are well-versed in recent political events were chosen because they can provide insights into how fake news is weaponised during political campaigns or used to target particular social and cultural groups. Additionally, participants with varying levels of digital literacy were chosen because they could demonstrate how these skills affect an individual's capacity to critically evaluate information encountered on WhatsApp.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are crucial when conducting face-to-face interviews. Every participant gave their informed consent after being informed of the study's objectives and the ways in which their data will be handled. Responses from participants were assured to remain anonymous and confidential. An effective method for examining fake news on WhatsApp within the political environments of Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West, Nigeria, is to

combine qualitative research and thematic analysis. This approach shed light on the intricate interactions between social, cultural, and political elements that affect the dissemination and consequences of false information in these particular settings by exploring the lived experiences and viewpoints of the locals.

To this end, ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal with protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004134/2022 under this research in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West, Nigeria.

Data Analysis

As earlier stated, the study mobilised Braun and Clarke (2020)'s qualitative technique known as thematic analysis, which is methodically finding, arranging, and analysing patterns and themes within data. For the analysis of information gathered from focus groups, interviews, and even social media content itself, this approach is perfect. To this end, the themes that were extracted from the data set are political information from WhatsApp, source of the political information, and molded political opinions.

Political Information

Political information is the information that relates to facts about a political candidate, his ideology, and activities like his political spending, including any payment consisting of a contribution, expenditure, independent expenditure, or disbursement for an electioneering communication that is made by the contractor, any of its partners, officers, directors, employees, or any of its affiliates or subsidiaries to a candidate or on behalf of a candidate, as argued by Weiner, Norden, and Ferguson (2015).

The argument by Weiner et al (2015) points to an avenue that political opponents can create a storyline about a candidate. It is even more potent if the candidate had held a public office. It is in this perspective that Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer (2018) argue that democratic systems have suffered disruptions in many countries, including Nigeria. They further postulate that the most important disconnect between citizens and institutions is in the area of parties and elections. To this end, political opponents employ false information about a candidate during elections, either at the primary level within the parties, or at the inter-party level just to smear the personality of a candidate rather than address issues around the needs of the electorates.

Giving his opinion on political information, a participant in Ado-Ekiti said:

Though I belong to five WhatsApp groups, I do see some information about candidates as genuine information, and some as fake and edited information.

I do not believe some of the information, unless I hear from a reliable source or the horse's mouth.... (Participant 1- (Male)- Ado-Ekiti)

False political information is rife through WhatsApp group, the participant stated that it becomes more troubling when you belong to multiple WhatsApp groups. The tendency is for you to forward information about a candidate that comes to your WhatsApp to all the groups you belong, and sometimes, without verifying the information. This act is a disruption of democratic ethos as it could mislead the electorate to vote in a propagandist without an enduring programme.

Giving her opinion on political information, a participant in Akure says:

Yes, I do believe some of the information that circulates on WhatsApp, because when you think about the functionality of WhatsApp, is more like a social media platform, where you get messages across to various people. For instance, you know you might not have the direct contact of a colleague, or friend but when you are in a group, like WhatsApp group, many information, news, are being share on the platform, with this reason I believe politically we can pass across information using WhatsApp (Participant 1: Female: Akure)

In their study titled *Political Information, Repertoires, and Political Participation*, Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, and Samuel-Azran (2016) examined the relationship between various forms of media use and political participation. They argued that in the dispensation of high-choice media environments, individuals and groups with the highest level of political interest are more likely to develop richer political information repertoires that involve exploiting both digital and traditional ways of searching for political information. In other words, candidates with a high budget to exploit and generate messages can mobilise a strong digital platform like WhatsApp to spread information against a candidate with low budget spending.

In light of this, the participant's remarks in Akure support the claim that a politician can effectively utilise a digital channel such as WhatsApp; he can sway voters with a large spending budget to fabricate information.

Thus, large expenditure budgets and digital platforms like WhatsApp are essential for managing and distributing political information in the current era (Weiner et al., 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016).

This also speaks to the framing theory Goffman (1974) and Entman (2003) postulated and argued that people understand information by emphasising some parts of a message more than others. This is done intentionally to influence people's perceptions of and responses to a situation like political candidate. In this wise, the candidate with more spending power will not only generate a fake story or slanted and distorted narrative using the digital media, but will frame the information and process it and disseminate it on and through WhatsApp to affect and influence the conclusions and judgements of voters especially the undecided voters (Scheufele, 2020).

Source of Political Communication

Political communication is a subfield of communication and political science that is concerned with how information spreads and influences politics, policymakers, the news media, and citizens. The media acts as a bridge between government and the public. Therefore, political communication is that connection concerning politics and citizens and the interaction modes that connect these groups to each other, whether the relationship is formed by the modes of persuasion, pathos, ethos, or logos (Sutanto and Purbaningrum, 2022).

A source is very important in communication as it confers credibility on the information or news item. A source can be a person, place, or situation that can trigger and thus originate a narrative. The source that motivates political communication can be from public discussion like political speeches, news media coverage of events, happen stances, and talks from the citizens, sometimes called street talk or grapevine (Akpan and Mkhize, 2022), which sometimes can drive a superstitious or conspiracy theory-driven society like Nigeria.

A participant said:

No, I don't believe all the messages are fake; they are usually an iota of truth, but it is important that one examines the messages very well before choosing what to believe or not. When they are not from a reliable source, obviously you could tell that they are fake, and they have messages of personal interest (Participant 3: Female: Ado-Ekiti)

Therefore, the issue will be how a consumer can verify information circulated on WhatsApp. In their work titled *Approaches to identify fake news: a systematic literature review*, De Beer and Matthee (2021) agreed that there is widespread dissemination of information on digital media like WhatsApp, and that it can mislead citizens to making wrong choices, which may have a negative impact on society. They propose a hybrid approach to identifying fake news through the deployment of digital tools and also the owners of the platform taking responsibility for detecting and combating fake news. While this proposal can be reviewed, it is somewhat elitist as users of digital platforms like WhatsApp cut across different socioeconomic classes, and thus, the ones that are not either technology savvy or even have the money to buy fake news detection tools might be in the majority and will still be compelled to use and act on the information.

According to information by an online statistic portal called Statista, Degenhard (2024)¹ published that the numbers of WhatsApp users in Nigeria were predicted to continuously increase between 2024 and 2029 by a total of 11.8 million users (+110.9%). After the ninth consecutive increasing year, the WhatsApp user base is estimated to reach 22.47 million users and therefore a new peak in 2029. Notably, the number of WhatsApp users was continuously increasing over the past years. Therefore, it will be daunting for Meta, based in the USA as owners of WhatsApp, to regulate totally the kind of political information circulated on the platform in Ado-Ekiti and Akure, South-West Nigeria, even with the application of community rules instituted by the company. McNair (2017) in his work on political communication, agrees that the audience being users of political communication like WhatsApp is the second most important element in the political communication process, without which a message is useless. It is in this regard that politicians with big spending budgets will inundate the WhatsApp digital platform with incorrect, distorted, and fake information to mislead the audience, in this case, voters. Another participant said:

Mostly APC, because they are the one in power now, and if you look how the country is at the moment, you will expect that they are the political party that deserved to be bashed, and also, I think maybe because of the upcoming elections.... I don't know, but you can tell that people are

¹<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1146609/whatsapp-users-in-nigeria> - Accessed on 13th March 2024.

speaking well of current political party in power.... They are mostly written words are pictures (Participant 2: Male: Akure)

This participant introduced an interesting nuance. He avers that a possible source of news is likely to be the political party in power. In African politics, it is most plausible that the party in power may not only have access to power but also financial resources and regulatory institutions that are supposed to regulate the spread of fake news about candidates.

However, it is important to note that the creation and spread of fake news is human nature and has been for millennia with a singular objective of swaying public opinion, smear reputations, and mislead the unwary, especially when it is sponsored by the political party in power. This notion is confirmed by Zhuk, Tretiakov, Gordeichuk, and Puchkovskaia (2018), the authors of *Methods to identify fake news in social media using artificial intelligence technologies. In Digital Transformation and Global Society: Third International Conference*. They also agree that in the age of media democratisation, computer power makes it easy for those who know how to “game the system” for their own purposes. In other words, take advantage of the digital platform and generate misleading information about an opponent. Fake news online is difficult to identify, its source is difficult to identify, and the means of making it stop are not yet known (Zhuk et al., 2018).

Another angle the participant pointed out was the use of pictures in spreading information on WhatsApp. Hagedoorn, Costa, and Esteve-del-Valle (2023) in their work titled *Photographs, Visual Memes, and Viral Videos: Visual Phatic News Sharing on WhatsApp during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain, Italy, and The Netherlands* said that sharing and discussing visual images in WhatsApp groups function as a form of phatic news sharing to achieve a sense of togetherness and sociability. Their conclusion was that WhatsApp functions as a sense-making practice and vehicle for ontological security in dealing with the fearful and unsettling crisis situation. The visual images shared are a hybrid form of communication, blurring boundaries between private life and public concerns presented on the news.

Messages on WhatsApp can be daunting and overwhelming because of the photographs, videos, and other forms of animation that it carries. These features can be exploited and used in creating schism within society during elections or the run-up to elections just to create a damaging impression about a candidate, and the information will be totally false.

Molding of Opinion about a candidate

Public opinion is always critical in a society. Bernays (1935) had declared that public opinion is a commodity that must be approached intelligently on matters that affect society. It is even more critical now with the digitisation and democratisation of the media. While government or institutions may want to control public opinion through traditional media, it is no longer tenable as almost every citizen or resident has access to a WhatsApp-enabled phone that is carried everywhere and is connected to the internet.

The modern phone comes with features like a camera and videos, which will allow the holder to snap or record any event and upload it in real-time, and the video has the capability of going viral (Hagedoorn *et al.*, 2023), especially if it is a scandal about a politician who is a candidate in an election.

A participant said:

Hmm, I would say yes, or no. you know on WhatsApp, you can make anything trend by merely posting the information on your status. The application is just there to reach out to people. For example, if you want to defame a politician, all you need to do is write about them and post on your status, from there it can start to trend. So, it can either defame or help you gain more followers on WhatsApp.

Well, as a person, when I receive those kinds of messages, I just feel like it's the same kind of political system, so regardless of where the link is coming from, they are still passing the same message, so it is either I want to embrace the message or not. It does not give me any negative feelings about WhatsApp, I can't say because of the negative message I am receiving on WhatsApp, then I will stop using it (Participant 5: Male: Akure)

Lewis (2001) declares in his work that there is always a basis for people to form an opinion and that public opinion is moulded as a representation of views or judgements formed about something, not necessarily based on fact or knowledge. It is a dangerous situation because, as stated in the journalism maxim, *opinions are free, but facts are sacred*.

From the words of the participant, the information may be deliberate and intended to damage the personality of a candidate by influencing the opinion of the public, who may even be a captive audience, especially if they have sympathy for the individual that is sponsoring the narrative.

Bernays (1928) declares then that public opinion can be manipulated, and Key (1961) argues that government ideally should be moulding righteous attitudes, but in the 21st century where political contestation is high, politicians and political parties are employing all types of strategies, including technology and digital platforms like WhatsApp, to manipulate public opinion in their favour even when their policies are failing (Putra, 2024). It does appear that political communication also reflects societal decadence and the fall of morals.

Another participant said:

I don't take the message too seriously... No, I don't have or show interest in politics... No, I don't have interest in politics...Yes, sometimes if those messages are not properly investigated, they could cause damage (Participant 7: Female: Ado-Ekiti)

The study of social and political science has shown a great deal of interest in and an intense development of political culture over a number of times, as argued by Noor, Bashir, and Majeed (2024), but the danger is that a political culture can be eroded with an avalanche of fake news in the dissemination of political communication in society. There is a tendency for sides to mobilise resources and engage in political mudslinging that will detour from discussing issues to promoting scandals that can lead to the disinterest of the electorate and sully the political culture of the community, or even create chaos and schism among the people.

The participant confirms the fears of Vincent and Gismondi (2021) that deepfakes and computational propaganda can nudge people away from reality into misinformation, which may cause chaos, and advocates for efforts to combat misinformation to protect elections. Balmas (2014) agrees that fake news can cause political alienation and cynicism. In Nigeria, where Ado-Ekiti and Akure are located, Pate and Ibrahim (2020) posit that fake news and hate speech have caused political instability in society. The scholars argue that fake news and hate speech issues, as well as their impacts on democratic processes have gained widespread research attention. Hence, there is an urge to further understand the concepts of fake news as well as hate speech and to define them based on empirical and critical literature. This paper adds significantly to the body of knowledge about the risks posed by fake news, particularly when it comes to digital platforms like WhatsApp, which have a large and socio-politically connected user base.

Conclusion

This paper, therefore, concludes that there is an urgent need for the government to step into the arena and protect the public from the scourge of social media use by divisive people using ingenious methods. This study recognises that there were efforts in the past by the government to regulate social media through the introduction of the Anti-social media Bill by the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Vanguard Newspaper of 6th November 2019² reported that the bill entitled Protection from Internet Falschhood and Manipulations Bill, 2019 (SB.132) was sponsored by the Chairman, Committee on Senate Services, Senator Mohammed Sani Musa, to criminalise using social media to spread false or malicious information. However, the bill suffered some opposition because of the mistrust between the government and the public, especially the Civil Societies Organisations (CSOs) and other international rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

This opposition is not surprising, as governments in Nigeria are held in high suspicion and sometimes contempt by the citizens. A study done by Abdullateef (2021) entitled *Regulating social media in Nigeria: A quantitative perception* presents that despite respondents' awareness of the possible demerits of an unregulated social media, the majority of them (54%) kick against the idea of social media regulation, while a substantial (46%) support the move on the provision that it is not politicised. The study recommended transparency and openness on the part of government officials for public better cooperation.

Inobemhe (2021) conducted a study titled "Social Media Regulation in a Democratic Nigeria: Challenges and Implications," which concludes that social media regulation is challenging because it could be interpreted as an attack on the right to free speech, which democratic regimes around the world strive to protect. Yet, another study by Olukolu, Ogwezzy-Ndisika, Faustino, and Oloruntoba (2019) entitled *Social Media, Regulation, and Challenges of Communication in an Evolving Nigerian Society* also frowned at the introduction of the bill and called it an attempt by

² <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/11/again-senate-introduces-bill-to-regulate-social-media-use/> - Accessed on 15th March 2024

politicians to gag the press and suppress the public. However, they also expressed concern over the negative consequences a rampaging social media can have on society even and perhaps especially on the politicians themselves. However, the issue is the trust deficit that between the Nigerian political class and the public.

Recommendation

This study suggests that to monitor, regulate, and prosecute individuals or groups that have improperly used social media, particularly WhatsApp, to defame or create an innuendo about others or political opponents, the government, both the executive and legislative branches, should establish an independent commission some kind of Omdudsman that would be made up of representatives from the judiciary, including the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the media (both traditional and online practitioners), civil society organisations, and academia. The commission should also have a mandate of recommending unsolvable and very damaging issues to the police, who have prosecutorial powers to prosecute offenders, and this is without prejudice to the cyber laws.

The commission can therefore be trusted to regulate the social media space since it is independent and populated by credible citizens and institutions. The existing and applicable cyber rules regarding innuendos and character slander will need to be adjusted and tailored specifically for the social media space since everyone now uses social media as a platform for all sort of dissemination of information, including citizen and democratic journalism whose practitioners are not employed by any formal media organisation.

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