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# Social Media and Fake News Dissemination during the 2023 General Elections in Rivers State, Nigeria

Ibituru Iwowari Pepple<sup>1</sup>, PhD

<sup>1</sup>Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Federal University, Otuoke, Bayelsa State.

## Abstract

Social media platforms have made information dissemination worthwhile and helped political communicators utilize the space for information dissemination, which include spread of falsehood or fake news contents, thus offering citizens unprecedented access to information while simultaneously amplifying the spread of misinformation. This study investigates social media and fake news dissemination in Rivers State during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Three objectives were formulated to guide the study. The study adopted the theory of rumour transmission and source credibility theory. It employed survey research design to gather information from social media users in Rivers State with a population of 7, 476, 800, to guide the study. It used Taro Yamane sample size determination to arrive at 400 respondents and employed multi-stage sampling technique with questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. The study found out that the residents of Rivers State were exposed to fake news dissemination on social media during the 2023 general elections. The predominant media channels carrying this fake news during 2023 general elections in Rivers State was social media. The extent of involvement of some residents of Rivers State who use social media for publication of fake news during 2023 general elections was very low. Findings revealed that while social media served as a major source of election-related information, many users struggle to verify content authenticity, leading to polarization and emotional response that affected online discourse. The study recommended that social media users should be mindful of what they expose themselves to and share on social media during elections since majority of such information constitute fake news. The study equally emphasized the need for media literacy education, stronger content regulation and responsible social media engagement to combat the spread of political misinformation in future elections.

**Keywords:** Social media, fake news, elections, information, 2023 General Elections, Nigeria.

## Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms as information dissemination channel has revolutionized communication globally, offering users unrestricted access to information, public

discussions and political engagement platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok have become dominant spaces for political discourse in Nigeria, particularly during elections. These platforms enable citizens express opinions, mobilize support and exchange information instantly thereby transforming the dynamics of political communication in Nigeria.

However, the same platforms have also become fertile grounds for spread of fake news – false or misleading information intentionally designed to deceive or manipulate the public. Fake news, defined as deliberately fabricated information intended to mislead, has emerged as a major concern, particularly during elections when political tensions are high and information flows rapidly.

During the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, social media played a significant role in shaping political narratives and influencing voter perceptions in Rivers State, the situation was particularly intense due to the high level of political competition and strong party affiliations that characterize the state's political environment. Fake news circulated widely across platforms, spreading rumors about electoral violence, vote rigging, candidate disqualification, candidate defection, etc. Such information often leads to tension, confusion and distrust among voters. Many users reacted emotionally, shared unverified information and engaged in online arguments that heightened political polarization.

Social media users in Rivers State share social media information extensively on various platforms to enable people gain knowledge of happenings in the State, even though they are false and misleading. How Rivers State social media users responded or shared information found to be fake news during 2023 general elections in Nigeria is not clear and calls for concern, as they need to understand that not every information circulating on media during elections are true. Given this context, it becomes essential to understand how social media users in Rivers State responded to fake news dissemination during the 2023 elections, how they interpreted misinformation and other factors that influenced their reactions.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The 2023 General Elections in Rivers State witnessed a surge in the spread of fake news across various social media platforms. Despite increased awareness campaigns and the efforts of organizations that check information on social media, misinformation continued to thrive. Many residents relied heavily on social media for updates about electoral events, yet, lacked the skills to verify the authenticity of the content they consumed. During elections every political party and supporters design messages as strategies to woo voters.

The Rivers State voters, through their political leaders have agitated for a Southern leader, this may have made them pick interest on any political news found in the media as Politicians adopts various platforms for dissemination of information and this sometimes serve as a hotpot for fake news. Fake news has existed since the news creation but the dissemination of fake news today on social media during election is a topic of concern, as a lot of politicians create news found to be fake and share on various media platforms to gain popularity, mislead and deceive the public.

It is quite unfortunate, pathetic and appealing that the openness of the social media has been abused, misused and used to misinform and mislead the people with unfounded spurious news, stories by political parties, and their supporters. If this trend is not checked, monitored closely and controlled significantly, it could spell doom and lead to disunity, crises, socio-economic and political and political rancor, which will ultimately lead to breakdown of law and order if not properly checked and nipped on the board.

## **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to examine social media user's response to fake news during 2023 general elections in Rivers State. However, the objectives of this study are:

- 1) Find out if fake news stories were circulated on the social media platforms during the 2023 election;
- 2) Also find out the channels through which these fake news stories were been disseminated during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State;
- 3) Ascertain the impact of fake news on the electorates during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizing fake news**

#### **Fake news**

The term "Fake News" has been used to describe misinforming and dis-informing stories presented as news on such social media sites on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Badoo, Telegram among others (Warlde, 2017). According to Leonhardt and Thompson (2017), fake news is a type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional media, broadcast news media or online media. It is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership, online sharing, and interest click revenue. It has been the subject of constant discussion since commentators observed it played a critical role in the 2016 American elections (Verstraete, Bambauer & Bambauer, 2017). In the wake of the U.S election, President-elect, Donald Trump, fuelled further discussions on fake news by invoking it in a variety of contexts from discussions about unfavourable polling data to an epithet for CNN. According to Borchers (2017), the term seems to have lost its power to be understood due to its use in referring to so many things. However, its confusing nature does not avail itself from being several real threats to people perceptions of issues and to meaningful public debate on the internet. In the words of Micheal Radutzky cited in Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), "fake news are (sic) stories that are probably false, have enormous popular appeal ... and are consumed by millions of people" He does not include fake news that is "invoked by politicians against the media for stories that they do not like or for comments that they do not like. In essence, stories that are fabricated out of thin air, by most measures, deliberately, and by any definition, a lie is fake news.

## **Social Media and the dissemination of fake news**

Social media as a term means a web and mobile-based technology that supports interactive dialogue and introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals. In essence, users generate and share all types of content within their established networks. Contributing another definition which is rather more technical, Kaplan and Haenlein (cited in Sheedy, 2011) say the social media is "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p.60). Users use mobile and web-based technologies to create interactive platforms where individuals and groups share, co-create and modify user generated content from which they all benefit. Tang and Whiston (2012) cited in Chukwu and Uzoma (2014) see the social media as the means of interactions among people which enable them to "create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities (computer aid) and network" (p.65). As members with similar interest learn about each other by exchanging information (Buss & Strauss 2009) in the virtual communities, their focus is on interactions and socializing.

Social media include Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry Messenger, WhatsApp, Skype, 2go, Badoo, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr and Tumblr. Of these, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are among the most popular. In respect of reach, frequency, usability and immediacy, the social media offer more opportunities than the conventional media. The case of the widening reach (coverage or breadth of circulation) of the social media, which is one of its sterling features, need not be over-flogged. As the days go by, so do these social media sites become increasingly pervasive? Interestingly, Internet users continue to spend more time with social media sites than any other type of site. To this end, social media seem to have irreversible growth both in terms of the number of their users and of their effects on society. The social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Blogs among others. Zerella (2010) cited in Danu and Uzochukwu (2015) group the social media into the following broad categories: microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networks (e.g. Facebook), media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), social bookmarking and voting sites (e.g. Digg, Reddit), review sites (e.g. Yelp), forums and virtual worlds (e.g. Second life). The social media classification by Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) includes the following: collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), Blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life).

### **Facebook in Perspective**

Of all the social media platforms, Facebook, has emerged, over the years, as one of the most popular social media sites in the world. In 2014, Facebook marked its 10th anniversary with 1.15 billion active users worldwide (M'Barek et al, 2015). This figure has increased tremendously. Today, Facebook boasts of more than 2 billion monthly active users, confirming it as the most popular social network worldwide (see <http://www.statista.com/statistics>) (Akpan, 2019). According to Akpan, citing Nwokah (2018), as at December 31, 2017 the number of Facebook subscribers in Nigeria was 17, 000, 000 (Nwokah, 2018). Observers have attributed the growth of Facebook subscribers in Nigeria to Internet growth and penetration. Bartlett,

Krasodonski-Jones. Daniel, Fisser and Jespersen (2015) observe that the social media are used more by persons between the ages of (18-45).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of rumour transmission and source credibility would be used to lay foundation for this work.

### **Rumour Transmission Theory**

This theory was propounded by H. Taylor Buckner in 1965 (Buckner, 1965). The theory helped provide understanding on how fake news spreads on social media. According to Buckner (1965), in researching rumour transmission, it is irrelevant whether the rumour is true or not. A rumour must be unsubstantiated at the moment it is transmitted and must be spread from one individual to another in order to qualify as a rumour. Based on Buckner's theory of rumour transmission, social media users fall under one of the three orientations or situations which Buckner referred to as sets. They are critical set, an uncritical set or a transmission set. If a social media user adopts a critical mindset, they are capable of using their critical ability to tell the difference between actual and incorrect information in fake news, possibly by applying fact-checking methods. The social media user lacks the capacity to apply "critical ability" to check the veracity of the bogus news if an unthinking set is accepted. The individuals' critical ability is seen as disrespectful in the transmission set, which is typically used in laboratory research. Therefore, in accordance with the hypothesis, the circumstances surrounding the propagation of the fake news on new media as well as the individual sets determine whether fake news gets more or less accurate as it spreads (Ajokpeoghene, Pepple Asemah, 2023).

### **Source Credibility Theory**

In 1951, Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss proposed this theory and later improved on by Hovland, Janis and Kelly in 1953. According to Asemah, Nwanmuo&Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), the theory states that individuals or recipients are more likely to be persuaded when the information provider presents itself as reliable. Later on, Hovland (1953) and Weiss (1974) both explored the topic of resources in persuasion. To ascertain whether dependable sources may affect recipients' attitudes more than questionable ones, the study compared credible and unreliable sources while utilizing the same compelling message (Yarosan&Asemah, 2008; Asemah 2011; Asemah, 2009; Asemah et al 2017). According to the study, reliable sources frequently have the desired effect on the audience. The theory of source credibility is extremely pertinent to the problem of false news and its effects on the media (Asemah&Ogwo, 2013).

People may be more likely to believe and spread misleading information when connected to fake news if it originates from sources they consider reliable. For instance, if a fake news report is spread via a credible-looking website or a well-known person, people may be more likely to believe it and spread it without questioning its veracity. However, the propagation of false information can also damage the credibility and public perception of traditional media outlets. People may become skeptical and have a lower opinion of the reliability of traditional media organizations if they learn that they have accidentally published or spread inaccurate material.

## **Empirical Review**

Zhuo, et al (2023) investigated fake news? Exploring the impact of social media affordances on users' behaviour responses. The purpose of the researchers was to construct a moderated serial-mediated model to understand the impacts of social media affordances on users'behaviour responses towards fake news. The study employed mixed-method approach, this helped to identify the main constructs of social media affordances, anonymity, editability, visibility and ephemerally and multiple behaviour responses. The result of the study showed that social media affordances enhanced users autonomy which further lead to cognitive affective consequences on multiple behaviour responses. Perceived ambiguity was also found to be non-significant in moderating the primary effects. The study shed light on the impacts of social media affordances in fake news dissemination providing novel insight into policymakers can act as better gatekeepers in fake news.

A study carried out by Apuke, and Omar, (2020) on fake news proliferation in Nigeria: consequences, motivation and prevention through awareness strategies. The study formulated three objectives. The study was grounded on the theory of rumour transmission and source credibility theory as its theoretical framework. Similarly, the study adopted a quantitative research method, which adopted a survey research method to generate the information necessary to investigate fake news dissemination by social media users. Furthermore, the findings indicated that despite efforts of the federal government campaign to stop and discourage the use of fake news in Nigeria, the trend continues to exist because no stringent measures have been made to track the perpetrators and reprimand them to serve as a deterrent to others. However, the study recommended that there is a need to increase fake news awareness, media and information literacy among Nigerians. Also, social media users should be constantly informed through adequate advertisement, jingles, workshops, conferences and other forms of sensitization about the consequences of fake news dissemination on social media platforms, how to spot and differentiate fake news which make up news and why it is imperative to scrutinize it before forwarding any message.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted the survey research design. This was necessary because the researcher investigated social media users' responses to fake news during the 2023 General Elections in Rivers State. The population of the study consists of all the Rivers State residents. According to the National Population Census for the population of Rivers State, 7, 476, 800 persons reside in the State. A sample size of 400 is drawn using the Taro Yamane (1967) method of sample size determination. The study adopted multi-stage sampling technique given the complexity and heterogeneity of the population.

## Presentation of Data

**Table 1: Responses on awareness to fake news stories been circulated on social media during 2023 general elections**

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Aware	337	89
Not aware	44	11
Other	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>100</b>

The data on the table indicated that residents of Rivers State are aware of fake news on social media during the 2023 general elections.

**Table 2: Responses on the channels through which fake news were circulated in Rivers State during 2023 general elections**

Statement	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL 1	WMS	RMK
Fake news were circulated mostly through Facebook, X and Whatsapp groups	112	102	89	78	1018	2.7	Accepted
Major political fake news circulated more on Facebook, X and instagram	127	113	96	45	1084	2.9	Accepted

The data on the table showed that \_\_\_\_\_

**Table 3: Responses on the impact of the fake news stories on the electorates during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State**

Statement	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL 1	WMS	RMK
Print media were the predominant media sources during the 2023 general election which swayed the electorates to support candidates	59	71	101	150	801	2.1	Rejected
Electronic media were also predominant media sources of fake news during the 2023 general election which also swayed voters	46	81	99	155	780	2.0	Rejected
Social media platforms were predominant media sources of fake news during the 2023 general election which impacted negatively on the voters	131	109	81	60	1073	2.8	Accepted

The data on the table indicated that the predominant media channels of fake news dissemination during 2023 general elections in Rivers State were the social media

## Discussion of Findings

### **Research Question One: Were fake news stories circulated on social media platforms during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State?**

Social media users' response to fake news during 2023 general elections in Rivers State were investigated and found that residents of Rivers State were aware of fake news disseminated on social media during the 2023 general elections and the lies that were used to misinform the public to sway them to vote political parties that were not doing well for the country. This is because out of the 381 responses, 337 respondents representing 89 percent agreed that they were aware of the fake news circulating the social media during 2023 general elections in Rivers State while 44(11%) of the respondents were not aware of fake news circulated on the media.

The finding is similar to the findings of Wilson and Umar (2019). Wilson and Umar (2019) found that despite the awareness of fake news among the respondents, there was limited alertness with regard to sensitivity of verifying information before sharing. The study also revealed that politics and crisis suffer more fake news than any other matter. Kano residents were significantly exposed to digital images that often that often accompany fake news in the social media. They read news online every day, prefer news accompanied by images, share and like online (Kurfi & Msughter 2021).

### **Research Question 2: What were channels through which fake news stories were been disseminated during 2023 general elections in Rivers State?**

The study observed that the predominant media channels for fake news circulation during 2023 general elections in Rivers State were the social media. The responses in table 4.13 indicated that social media is the predominant media channel used for fake news in Rivers State during 2023 general elections. The responses were above 2.5 put up as decision rule and was accepted. The finding is related to that of Bali and Desai who found out that Indian people predominantly used social media like Facebook and Twitter to spread fake news about election results. WhatsApp allows for easy and fast sharing of fake news as it pulled the largest occurrence of legitimation strategies followed by Facebook (Igwebuike & Chimuanya 2019). The finding also agrees with the Theory of Rumour transmission used in the study. Whether the rumour was true or false as it must be unsubstantiated at the time it was formed, the influence is ultimately more important than the content that it transmitted to the people in Nigeria as it is irrelevant whether the rumour is true or false.

### **Research Question 3: What were the impact of the fake news on the electorate during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State?**

The study also found out that the extent of involvement of social media users in publication of fake news during 2023 general elections was very low in Rivers State. The responses on the impact of the spread of fake news during the 2023 general elections was very low' were found above 2.5 and were accepted.

The finding is related with the finding of other scholars, for instance Gelfert (2018) found that the spread of fake news during elections is a deliberate attempt by the originators (political parties and supporters) to deceive voters, manipulate public opinion, and to increase the circulation of false information as well as gain supports.

Igbebuike and Chimuanya (2021) opined that social media have affected the ways and manner fake news are distributed. Fake news has been subject of constant discussion since commentators observed it played a critical role in the 2016 American elections (Verstraete, Bamhaeur& Bambauer, 2017). Zhuo et al (2023) found out that social media affordances enhanced users autonomy which further led to cognitive and affective consequences on multiple behavioural responses.

The study however, contradicts the findings of Apuke and Omar (2020). Apuke and Omar (2020) had found that despite effort of the federal government campaign to stop and discourage the use of fake news in Nigeria, the trend continues to exist because no stringent measure has been made to track the perpetrators and reprimand them to serve as deterrent to others.

## Conclusion

The study investigated social media users' responses to fake news dissemination during the 2023 general elections in Rivers State and concluded that majority of residents of Rivers State were aware of the fake news stories that circulated on social media during the 2023 general elections. These fake news circulated more on social media. Although, the extent of involvement of Rivers State social media users in publication of fake news during 2023 general elections was very low. This made the Rivers State residents to have supported government campaigns against fake news during the 2023 elections in the State.

The implication of this that government efforts to mitigate fake news through various campaign in Nigeria during elections paid off in Rivers State as social media users were circumspect in the dissemination of fake and misleading information during the 2023 elections in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

1. Rivers State social media users should be mindful of what they exposed themselves to and share on social media during elections since majority of such information constitute fake news.
2. Social media is not the only channel of fake news during elections, radio, print and rumor also constitute fake news. So Rivers State Social Media users note this.
3. The Rivers State residents should continue to abstain from the publication of fake news during elections in Nigeria.

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