**THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON THE SOCIETY**

**ABSTRACT**

This research presents the results of the impact of fake news on Nigeria Society, a case study of Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos state. Data were gathered using a self -constructed questionnaire and the result gotten was analyzed using the simple percentage method.  The validity and reliability of instrument were ascertained. Data analyzed from the research shows that there is a great deals of fake news in Nigeria, and also fake news influence and impact people negatively, the study however recommends that Online newspapers should adopt the operation model of the conventional newspaper.

Cases of the circulation of fake news are prevalent in the country as it is across the world, but the circulation of false information have not started to have a toll on the perceived credibility of popular online newspapers. Those who because of fake news are cautiously optimistic about the credibility of popular online newspapers were found to be slightly higher than those who have allowed incidence of fake news make them suspect reports on popular online newspapers as not credible. This means that fake news still poses a threat to the perception Nigerians have of reputable online newspapers.

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**INTRODUCTION**

* 1. **Background of the Study**

The online platform, Sahara Reporters had dished out a story which was disputed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, stating that “no official of the EFCC was authorized to speak with Sahara reporters on the said story or on any issue affecting the investigation of the Paris Club refund”. Also, the Senate President, who was at the receiving end of the story, disclosed that the publisher of Sahara Reporters is in the habit of creating fiction and quoting faceless sources. Yet, this is not a one-off development. Another major instance of fake news which dominated Nigeria's media space was the rumoured death of President Muhammadu Buhari shortly after he began a health leave to the United Kingdom on January 19, 2017. So audacious were the masterminds that they cloned Metro newspaper of the UK or Huffington Post of US announcing in the spoofs that President Buhari has died in London. While “Metro” reported the “death” of the Nigerian president, “Huffington Post” alleged that he was caught “committing suicide”. The same picture of Buhari was used on both stories which had the same lines repeated in them. However these contradictions did not stop the spoofs from sending the internet into an overdrive in Nigeria, as the rumored death of Buhari was lapped up by some blogs and the social media. In the face of this, little wonder that Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Lai Mohammed, in February 2017 asserted that fake news poses more danger to the country than insurgency and militancy. He catalogued some false reports the Information ministry has had to contend with thus: Only recently, we have to refute the fake news that Nigeria today is the most difficult place for Christians to live. There was also the fake report that the armed forces of Nigeria armed the Fulani herdsmen and instigate them to carry out attacks. All these news are unfounded, fake and has the capacity to set one religion or group against the other. (Premium Times 2017, February 21) Mohammed spoke the same month that the Chocolate City founder, Audu Maikori, was arrested by security operatives for publishing a false report about the violence in the southern part of Kaduna state with the Kaduna State governor, Mr. Nasir El-Rufai stating that “what he posted may have led to killings and we are trying to link the date of the postings to attacks that happened the next day on Fulanis”. (Pulse.ng 2017, March 3) It is in the light of these instances and many like it which show that the practice is assuming a life of its own in Nigeria that this study sets out to find out how the incidence of fake news is detracting from the credibility Nigerians accord popular online newspapers operating in the country. This is bearing in mind the submission by Ekwueme (2008, p. 91) that: Your readers want the facts you heard or observed from your various sources, and not figment of your own imagination. Many people believe media messages to be gospel truth and, of course, some of the readers believe either rightly or wrongly that anything that is not carried in the media is not authentic. Since they have that trust in you, you don’t betray it. If you betray it, you have betrayed yourself and the integrity of your medium. According to Asemah (2009, p.37), “The media, whether electronic or print oen set agenda for the public to follow; they monitor trends and events in our society and raised their agenda based on what they have monitored... Whatever issue the media raised becomes an issue of public concern”. “By electronically reproducing the news to cater to a much larger audience than its newspaper subscriber base, online newspapers should be doing a great service to humankind. After all, they are bringing readers more information than anyone has done in history at a time when the value of information as a commodity is greater than ever” Thiel (1998). Bearing this in mind and the need to sustain that pride of place earlier occupied by the print newspaper in setting the agenda as well as among other roles holding government accountable to the people, the society stands to lose out greatly if popular online newspapers, in the face of disappearing

* 1. **Statement of the Problem**

Motsaathebe (2011, p.14) posits that “the news media is generally regarded as a credible provider of a realistic view of what happens around the world. In composing news, journalists rely on various sources to verify or lend credibility to the Information they put across”. Kolawole (2017) writes, “Fake news — that art of concocting stories from your bedroom because you have a smart phone with cheap data is becoming the biggest thing in town. No, it is not new. It was not invented in this generation of social media. We have been living with fake news most of our lives. The SAP riots of 1989, for instance, were sparked off by fake news.” The assertions above point the how fake news affects not just the media but the society as well. With the advent of the new media, the scourge of fake news is becoming more prevalent that its negative impact on popular online newspapers is very evident. As Allcot & Gentzkow (2017, p.7) said, “The declining trust in mainstream media could be both a cause and a consequence of fake news gaining more traction”. If fake news can affect traditional newspapers, then its impact on major online newspapers can only be imagined. The literacy level in the country has not entirely made the difference between social media and popular online newspaper a common knowledge to all. It is still believed in some quarters that there is no difference between a major online news site and Facebook. To this extent, it is feared that whatever negative impression people have of one is extended to the other. Well-known online newspapers are too important to the fabrics of the society to be allowed to be smeared altogether by what users post on social media channels.

* 1. **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to find out the impact of fake news on the Nigerian society. Specifically the study intends to;

1.     To find out if the media play a part in dissemination of fake news in Nigeria

2.     To discover how frequent cases of fake news are reported in the country

3.     To know the perception Nigerian have for news report in the country

4.     To know the effect of fake news on target audience

1.4     Research Questions

1. How prevalent are cases of fake news in Nigeria?

2. Do popular online newspapers play any role in the dissemination of fake news?

3. How do Nigerians perceive news reports published on popular online newspapers?

4. Is there any difference in reports published on popular online newspapers from those broadcast through social media platforms?

**1.5 Significance of the Study**

From this research, media practitioners would better understand the extent of damage which fake news is doing to their trade. They would get to know why they should rely on credible sources of information rather than embellishing what a user posted on the social media as story for their readers. This study would help readers know the difference between the social media and real media news in order not to misinterpret the information dissemination. This study will also serve as a reference point for other researcher who will embark on the same research topic.

**1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

This study will be focusing on bringing to light the impact which fake news have on the perception of students in Yaba College of Technology, Lagos state. It studies the fake news dissemination particularly on how people react to fake news.

The challenge of finance for the general research work will be a challenge during the course of study.  However, it is believed that these constraints will be worked on by making the best use of the available materials and spending more than the necessary time in the research work. Therefore, it is strongly believed that despite this constraint, its effect on this research report will be minimal, thus, making the objective and significance of the study achievable.

**1.9     Definition of terms**

**Impact:** a marked influence or effect on someone or something.

**Influence:** This refers to the strong ability to affect or manipulate something, in this case perception.

**Fake news:**Fake news means “false information deliberately circulated by those who have scant regard for the truth but hope to advance particular (often extreme) political causes and make money out of online traffic. Or it could be false information circulated by journalists who don't realise it's false” BBC (2017, March 12).

**Social media***:* Social media was defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) as “a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.”

**Perception:**This refers to the way human beings uses any of their senses to think about or come to terms with whatever they are exposed to. Pate & Dauda (2015, p.218) wrote that, “People’s perception wield an enormous influence over their behaviour. If people perceive something in a certain way, even if they are incorrect, in their minds, it is that way, and they often base their behaviour on that perception.”

**Online newspaper:**According to Thiel (1998) “Online news is a commodity created through Web pages (which are certainly more fleeting, both physically and mentally, than print news). Web pages, then, exist only at the point of consumption”. Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p.177) stated that online newspaper journalism is of two types. They include: solely online newspaper which does not print hard copies, and the conventional newspaper which combines traditional hard copy publishing with online publishing.

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The problem of fake news has become so pronounced that the inventor of the World Wide Web, WWW, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, declared on the 28th anniversary of his invention that the impact of fake news is increasingly concerning, adding that social media sites and search engines must be encouraged to continue efforts to tackle the menace. In an open letter published on March 12, 2017 to mark the www’s 28th birthday, Berners-Lee noted that “It’s too easy for misinformation to spread on the web”. He added that people “choose what to show us based on algorithms which learn from our personal data that they are constantly harvesting. The net result is that these sites show us content they think we’ll click on – meaning that misinformation, or ‘fake news’, which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases can spread like wildfire”.

To an extent, the biggest casualty of this misinformation that spreads on the web is the online newspaper. Fake news is a global phenomenon. In July 2016, the now-defunct website wtoe5news.com, which described itself “a fantasy news website” and that most of its articles are “satire or pure fantasy” reported that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy. The story was shared more than a million times on Facebook. There was also the fabricated story from the now-defunct website denverguardian.com captioned: “FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leaks found dead in apparent murder- suicide”.

Referring to fake news, Allcot & Gentzkow (2017, p.6) wrote:

One historical example is the ‘Great Moon Hoax’ of 1835, in which the New York Sun published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon. A more recent example is the 2006 ‘Flemish Secession Hoax,’ in which a Belgian public television station reported that the Flemish parliament had declared independence from Belgium, a report that a large number of viewers misunderstood as true. Supermarket tabloids such as the National Enquirer and the Weekly World News have long trafficked in a mix of partially true and outright false stories.

In Nigeria, there have been instances of fake news, some of which had been identified in the background of study. There are however other examples of false stories gaining attention in the Nigerian public space. According to Kolawole (2017), “Heard the latest? The Central Bank of Nigeria has been selling the elusive dollar to some end users at 61 kobo/US$1, while the rest of us are busy buying the stuff at over N500/$1 in the parallel market... Now, I don’t need to do any research to know that what you just read is an excellent piece of fake news.”

On the third anniversary of the establishment of The Cable, founder of the online medium, Simon Kolawole admitted that the biggest mistake made by the online newspaper was a false report in May 2015 that the Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka made hate remarks against the Igbo in the United States. Kolawole said, “We discovered that it was the interpretation of the reporter at the event and not the actual words of Professor Soyinka. The embarrassment was universal for us, and sadly there were those who stopped trusting our stories after the episode.”

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(*The Cable* 2017, April 29)

This indicates that there is a relationship between the publishing of fake news by an online newspaper and readers’ attitude towards that medium afterwards. Meanwhile, it is believed that fake news in Nigeria also comes from government quarters as Kperogi (2017) revealed,

The Buhari government is an absolute propagandocracy, that is, a government conducted by intentionally false and manipulative information... the president also has a clandestine hate and propaganda factory called the Buhari Media Center (BMC), which has nearly 40 paid propagandists whose mandate is to smear, demonize, and troll government critics with thousands of fake, foul social media handles. They also flood the comment sections of news websites with false handles and calculatedly duplicitous information, in addition to producing propagandistic social media memes (often with southern Nigerian-sounding names) that appear to come from everyday Buhari fans. The 40 odd propagandists-in-residence at the BMC are paid N250,000 per month.

With the products of these propagandists and other creators of fake news making it to the open space, one can only imagine the impact this would have on the perception which the reading public has towards popular online newspapers.

**An Overview of Fake News Issues in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a country in tension characterised by security threats in different parts of the country. These threats are manifested in forms of multiple conflicts, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, weak institutions, threats of secession as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, hatred and economic challenges in a time when preference for untrue information is rising – i.e., post-truth era (Harsin, 2018; Pate, 2018 September 7). These issues are offensively, progressively and relentlessly destroying relationships, heightening animosities across communities and threatening democratic survival in the country (Pate, 2018 September 7). Arguably, all of that are facilitated by the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) that have democratised and simplified access and dissemination of information across space and time (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016; Pate & Idris, 2017). Cited in Premium Times Nigeria, Professor Umaru Pate, the Dean, School of Postgraduate Studies, Bayero University, Kano (BUK) explained that like many other countries, Nigeria, too, is battling with the rise in populism politics, youth radicalisation, extremism, terrorism, drug and human trafficking, ethnic nationalism, hate and dangerous speech, fake news and the rewriting of the country‟s history, among others. Indeed, these are critical times for the media and the country. The political climate in the country has changed rapidly in recent years, signaling innovative developments and strange challenges in the country‟s democratic system. By and large, the current political culture in the country is inextricably linked to the growing development of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Audu, 2018 September 9; Pate, 2018 September 7). Cited in Vanguard, Professor Danjuma Gambo, the Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Maiduguri who is also the Director, Public Relations of the university agrees with Professor Pate that fake news can mislead the public and cause tension in an already tense political climate with communal and reprisal attacks here and there in addition to the Boko Haram conflict. He stressed that if the media would cultivate the culture of verifying information and fact checking (if necessary) before going to press, the spread of fake news can be contained (Marama, 2017 August 10). This has severally affected the delivery and form of political communication and the communication of political ideas in our democratic system, as well as shifted and undermined the accountability for those messages. For instance, what was labelled „yellow journalism‟ and „character assassination/slander‟ have metamorphosed into what is today known as „fake news‟ and „fraudulent news‟; these are terms that sound „big‟ and portend devastating effects in the society. These terms are fuelled and spread by the power of modern technology (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018; Agbese, 2017 December 31). In the words of Egan (2018, December 11, online), “online, lies and truth look the same. This has been a boon for professional liars, (who) use these platforms to market falsehood; as vehicles for personal fame, or, as a way to spread propaganda”. These have raised concerns that Nigerians are constantly and increasingly accessing inaccurate and/or misleading content without verification (gatekeeping) or verifiable attribution (Agbese, 2017; Hankey, Marrison, & Naik, 2018). Fundamentally, the breed of „yellow journalism‟, „fabricated or manipulated stories‟ „fraudulent content‟ and „character assassination‟ and „fake news‟ are largely new technology-dependent (e.g., social media platforms and the internet) rather than traditional technologies such as radio, TV, newspaper or magazine (Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye, & Isa, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21). Thus, while we grapple with what modern technology has enabled us to do, “we also face a new wave of change, which we have only started to understand the ramifications of” (Hankey et al., 2018, p. 6). For example, the concerns around recent, or newer technologies such as „artificial intelligence‟ and „machine learning‟ show that any regulatory response to stem fake news peddled via new technologies, whether by state actors or technology developers, need to be as “dynamic as the technological mischief it seeks to contain” (Hankey et al., 2018, p. 6). The critical question is: how can politics aid regulations to spur the development and sustainability of our democratic system while preserving its legitimacy to embrace internet-based and social media platforms in the context of promoting the integrity and values of the democratic process in a multicultural Nigeria? This paper focuses on the trend of fake news and the emerging post-truth political era and their potential impacts on the Nigerian polity. Recommendations for mitigating the negative effects of fake news and post-truth political circumstances in the society are offered at the concluding sections.

Understanding Fake News

The term “fake news‟ is “false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins Dictionary, 2017, online). The term is gaining global attention over the years that it was named the Collins Dictionary Word of the Year in 2017 due to its increased usage by 365% in the Collins Corpus (Towers-Clark, 2018, October 4). According to the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), fake news is information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or doubtful messages (EJN, 2017). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) defines fake news as “completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or disinform; information, photos or videos manipulated to deceive, or old photographs shared as new; satire or parody which means no harm but can fool people” (BBC News, 2019 June 29, online). Globally, the issue of fake news has assumed increased concern because of its impact in the 2016 US Presidential elections campaigns and the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, one of Nigeria‟s independent verification and fact-checking platforms, Dubawa, which is supported by the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) defines fake news or false information as fraudulent, inaccurate or false verbal or visual messages disseminated for public attention through the conventional or social media, hugely to mislead, disinform or misdirect. It is a fluid subject that is differently perceived, interpreted and understood by individuals depending on many factors. Fake news is often embellished, sensationalised and made alarmingly attractive. Sometimes, it can be difficult to detect fraudulent news especially when such stories contain authoritative lies except through critical examination of the words mostly designed to capture and retain the attention of receivers in uncommon ways. Fake news is subtly and sophisticatedly presented to hide its falsity with unverifiable sources or claims. Fake news violates contextual and multicultural realities through mischief and ignorance presented as valid information (Dubawa, 2019, Ting & Song, 2017). Furthermore, Steinmetz (2018 September 6, online) notes that fake news debases the truth and causes “confusion of fantasy and reality” in the minds of the audience. As noted by Siapera (2018), there are three significant factors that characterise the current brand of fake news. First, the ease by which people can create contents; second, the distribution patterns across new and social media, and third, the political economy of the online domain which enables and incentivises the creation of these forms of news. She further noted that anyone with internet access can effectively produce and distribute contents of any kind of quality and that “people can avail of the various functionalities of computer software such as photoshop and create highly believable contents…. Fake news can travel very far on the internet” (Siapera, 2018, p.57). The „profile‟ of fake news was facilitated by the advent of the internet; the rise of populism politics in different parts of the world like the 2016 US presidential election (Davies, 2017; Persily, 2017); the rise of tyrannical leaders, and; the Brexit referendum (McGonagle, 2017). Fake news is a complex phenomenon that can be defined based on three parameters as suggested by Wardle (2017): the type of content created and shared; the intentions of those behind this, and; the forms of dissemination. Wardle (2017) further identified seven different categories of fake news in the following order: satire/parody, misleading content, impostor content, fabricated content, false connection, false context and manipulated content. In another way, one can collapse the seven categories into two broad forms of fake news, namely (i) high-profile fake news (see McGonagle, 2017; Tower-Clark, 2018) and (ii) low-profile fake news (see McGonagle, 2017; Mendel, 2015). High-profile fake news refers to misleading information and other contents that emanate from prominent sources while low-profile fake news is simply the opposite of high-profile fake news, that is, disinformation that emerges from subtle, inconspicuous, or ordinary sources. In addition, four specific sources of fake news have been variously identified: (i) state/government fake news (ii) organisational/institutional fake news (iii) group-based fake news and (iv) individual fake news (BBC News, 2018 November 12; Simon, 2017; Mendel, 2015). Fake news is a real challenge in Nigeria especially given the country‟s fragile social setting, loose democratic culture, poverty, illiteracy, depressing human conditions, inflation, weak economy, intolerance and high tendencies for disunity among the peoples of the country (Ogola, 2017 February 27). As Nigeria rises to curb the negative impact of fake news on its democratic process, Pate (2018 September 7) offers some recommended to help individuals and newsrooms to instantly identify and avoid being victims of fake news: 1) Check sources: individuals are encouraged to fall back on most trusted news brands they could rely on for their news. 2) Fact-check from multiple sources 3) Use verification tools 4) Check metadata 5) Think before broadcasting/publishing 6) Media literacy: increase the standard of education and media literacy particularly for young people to be highly critical on what to trust on conventional and social media platforms 7) Use fact checking sites 8) Individuals and newsrooms should institute the culture of fact-checking for stories and claims A good introduction answers these questions in just a few pages and, by summarising the relevant arguments and the past evidence, gives the reader a firm sense of What was done and why (Beck & Sales, 2001).

**Why Fake News Spreads Fast?**

Fake news is not new. It is as old as one can remember. However, its intensification is more in recent times because of the wide usage of the internet and cheap access to social media platforms, competitive politics and deepening poverty and ethno-religious fight for supremacy. Many more reasons can be adduced for the fast spread of fake news in the country. Some of the reasons have been outlined by Pate (2018 September 7) as follows:

1) General distrust of elites, leaders and politicians by majority of Nigerians. Nigerian elites and politicians enjoy low credibility rating among the population because of their record of failures, lies and unworthy conduct in several respects. Because of that, many Nigerians tend to believe whatever negative information dished out by opponents.

2) Absence or most often late arrival of official information on issues. This creates vacuum conveniently filled in by rumors and disinformation

3) Availability of cheap data services is facilitating explosive use of social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube) to spread of rumors, propaganda and fake information

4) Sensationalised fake news is disseminated for economic reasons, especially on social media, where efforts are often made to attract people to pages and timelines of bloggers and senders for clicks

5) Desperate politicians, ethnic and religious jingoists, foreign interests and mischief makers generate fake news for influence or to persuade the audience

6) Low capacity of the media to be able to gather, process and verify immediate and distant information in real time exacerbates fake news through the internet or social media platforms where majority lack gatekeeping processes

7) Government tight control as well as excessive commercialisation in the broadcast media exclude alternative ideas and the opposition thereby forcing them to response even if mischievously by spreading fake news on the social media that lack gatekeepers.

8) Authoritative lies are very common from government sources at all levels. Such lies are reported as news with little effort to investigate their veracity by the media

**Fake News and the Debates Over the Emerging Concept of ‘Post-Truth Political Era’**

One key reason that makes fake news spreads fast nowadays, especially during political election times in developing countries such as Nigeria is, arguably, what Professor Pate calls “executive intimidating” while describing the relationships between journalists and politicians during a Mass Communication undergraduate class in 2004 at University of Maiduguri (Personal communication: 2004). Fake news thrives in Nigeria because nowadays objective facts are fast becoming as illusionary as a mirage to many Nigerians, especially citizens of social media. Stories and news appealing to the emotion and personal beliefs appear to be more believable and capable of shaping public opinion, a phenomenon that obviously seems to erode the credibility of gate-kept news and reports and verified content. This situation perfectly matches what is lately referred to as the „post-truth‟ time (Harsin, 2018). Unsurprisingly, though, lying is often attributed to politicians; many of them do not regard telling a lie as bad behaviour, an argument Colin Wight, a Professor of International Relations at the University of Sydney agrees with, saying, “lying is not an aberration in politics”. However, Professor Wight argues that “there is nothing new about politicians and the powerful telling lies, spinning, producing propaganda, [or] dissembling”, a behaviour that is in tandem with Machiavellianism, that “all leaders might, at some point, need to tell lie.” Historically, this can be traced back to Plato‟s coinage of the term “noble lie”, which refers to false information deliberately spread by a crème de la crème of the society, especially political elites to preserve social accord or promote an agenda (The Conversation, 2017 November 17, online). The English Oxford Dictionary (2019) defines post-truth as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. As Professor Pate noted, looking at the strong affinity between fake news peddling and social media vis-à -vis the skyrocketing levels of social media use among Nigerians (Itedge News, 2018 September 10), in no time could the post-modernist Machiavellianism, noble lie, or untruth permeate the Nigerian polity and cause unimagined topsy turvy, a phenomenon the Nigerian Information and Culture Minister, Lai Mohammed describes as “the greatest threat to democracy and security” (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, online). Hence, the need for urgent action to tackle the menace.

**The Possible Effects of Fake News in Nigeria**

The term “fake news” is not new in the country. Simply, the attachment of the negative word “fake” to the word “news” heightens the degree of the perceived effect of the term. News, simply put, is an account of what happened. Because of the value attached to it, news is envisaged to be the truth. However, in the era of post-truth and for a Nigeria that has lived in non-truth for years even “the two fundamentally contradictory terms can occupy the same textual space” (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, online). Recently, the BBC interviewed a group of Nigerian experts on their opinion about the greatest challenges of the 21st Century. Many of them indicated that failure of credible information sources is one of the serious problems facing Nigerians, indeed, mankind. In a related development, Professor Umaru Pate has criticised the Nigerian media, particularly broadcast media for allotting greater percentages of their news, reports and programmes to political matters, phenomena he was quoted by Itedge News (2018 September 10, online) to have said, “feast on hatred and incitements…. Everything political is news but burning issues poverty and violent conflicts do not seem to worry us. This is bad.” The scholar went further to blame the rising levels of fake news in the country on the “absence of patriotism, ethnic and religious bigotries, political affiliations and foreign interests” The Zonal Director of Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in charge of the North-Central zone of Nigeria, Dr. Igomu Onoja cited in Itedge News argued that, “it [is] part of media ethics to ensure balance reporting and give all parties equal hearing” and desist from journalism capable of spreading fake news that could undermine the Nigerian democratic process. Dr. Onoja cites an example of fake news broadcast over a media outlet in Jos, Plateau State (north central of Nigeria) saying, “we have radio stations in Jos clapping for people that say that the Plateau governor is mentally deranged” (Itedge News, 2018 September 10, online). As a matter of “post-truth” fact, truth has nowadays shifted to becoming relative; facts now have alternatives, and news is weaponised, a phenomenon Abdullahi (2017 March 13, online) quoted Nigeria‟s Information and Culture, Minister, Lai Mohammed describing it as “the greatest threat to democracy and security as it played a role in the civil war in the country and that Nigeria could not afford to fall victim to the same circumstances that led to the war”.

**Empirical Review**

Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015, p.16) in their study entitled: ‘Changing roles in the Nigerian media industry: A study of multimedia journalism’ concluded that “the emergence of internet and its associated applications have redefined the practice of journalism. No longer are the traditional journalists the sole purveyor of information, it now have to work with the audience as they jointly scan the environment for information of interest.” This may be the reason why fake news has crept into the media.

Credibility accorded the online newspaper is therefore threatened as Thiel (1998) wrote that “A recent study conducted by Georgetown graduate student Josephine Ferrigno found that while 80 percent of 60 random newspaper readers surveyed found The New York Times to be credible, slightly less than half found The New York Times Online (which contains the same articles as the newspaper) to be credible.”

*According to Allcott & Gentzkow (2017. p.6-7)*

The long history of fake news notwithstanding, there are several reasons to think that fake news is of growing importance. First, barriers to entry in the media industry have dropped precipitously, both because it is now easy to set up websites and because it is easy to monetize web content through advertising platforms. Because reputational concerns discourage mass media outlets from knowingly reporting false stories, higher entry barriers limit false reporting. Second, as we discuss below, social media are well-suited for fake news dissemination, and social media use has risen sharply: in 2016, active Facebook users per month reached 1.8 billion and Twitter’s approached 400 million. Third, as shown in figure 2A, Gallup polls reveal a continuing decline of “trust and confidence” in the mass media “when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly.

In the course of scouring through relevant literatures, it was very difficult coming across publications related to the topic of study. This research will therefore present the situation in Nigeria as regards how the reading public now perceive the online newspaper courtesy of fake news incidence which is more pronounced in the social media but is been believed to also have dominance in the online newspaper.

**Theoretical Framework**

In line with what has been set out to be studied, the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Selectivity Factor Theories form the fulcrum for this work. Both theories are intertwined as Okunna (1999, p.171) that “the decision to practice selective exposure depends primarily on the uses which members of the mass media audience want to make of media messages and the benefits which they hope to derive from using the media”.

The uses and gratification theory is about that social and psychological origin of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other source, which leads to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratification and other consequences, mostly unintended ones, Katz (1974) in Ojobor (2002, p.20).

Wogu (2008, p.120) stated that the uses and gratification theory “deals with what the audiences use the media to do, and what gratifications/gains/ satisfaction they derive from using the media”. Quoting Kunczik (1988, 1976), he stated that the theory believes that: an individual has some needs related to communication; he/she selects the media that appear to satisfy those needs; he/she selectively consumes the content; an effect may or may not occur.

Granted that this theory recognises that there are various media for the audience to choose from, it is then very likely that the public would opt for those mediums which are less likely to present fake news as one of their gratifications to the users. On this basis, online newspapers when lumped with the social media as purveyors of false information would lose the confidence and readership of enlightened users who expose themselves to the media not to be fed with fake news. This simply means that if the public have the perception that online newspapers carry fake news, they would rather use the broadcast media or hardcopy newspapers as their exposure to the media is not to be gratified with fake news. In that circumstance, online newspapers lose the influence of the press.

The selectivity factor theories, on the other hand, include: selective exposure, selective perception, selective attention and selective retention. People expose themselves to things that conform to their preconceived norms, biases and values. But it does not stop at exposing themselves to information as a person can still decide to pay full, partial or no attention to a medium that he or she has been selectively exposed to. In decoding the message after paying attention, previous experiences and current disposition like needs, moods and memories stand in the way. Hence these factors can affect the perception of what is paid attention to. This perception ultimately determines the readers’ retention of whatever messages gotten from a particular medium as people remember those aspects of an issue which aligns with their beliefs. Wogu (2008, p.120).

Relating the above postulations to this study, those who believe that popular online newspapers publish fake news would rather expose themselves to more credible media. Even when they visit a popular news site, they may just stop at looking at the headlines without clicking to read any of the stories. But if they reluctantly click on the story, the preconceived idea that the medium publishes false information would undermine whatever aim the writer of the story intends it to achieve in the mind of the reader. The foregoing would all team up to make the reader not to remember what he or she read minutes after leaving the story or the website.

Therefore through the selectivity theories, it become clear how readers’ suspicious of the source of fake news can make popular online newspapers irrelevant to the media audience, who of course, wouldn’t count being fed false information as one of the gratifications he or she expects from the media

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**CHAPTER THREE**

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**3.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the systematic approach for solving the research problem in the study and highlights the instruments and techniques used to seek solutions to the research problem. It consists of the research design, sample population, sample frame, sample size determination, sampling techniques, research instruments, validity and reliability of research instruments and methods of data analysis. The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of fake news on the society: students of Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos state constituted the population of this study.

**3.2** **Research Design**

Coopers and Schindler (2006) suggested that the research design is the structure of investigation aimed at identifying variables and their relationships to one another. It refers to the blue print, plan and guidelines utilized in data analysis with respect to the study. It is a necessary step required in a research process if research problems and hypothesis are to be adequately addressed. Descriptive research design and causal research design as well as the survey method was used. Descriptive research design was used to describe some phenomena because it aids a researcher in gathering, summarizing, presenting and interpreting information for the purpose of clarification while the causal research design was used to describe the effect of one variable on another that is establish cause and effect relationship (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The researcher also utilized the survey strategy for this study because it creates room for gathering large amounts of data from a sizeable population in a cost-effective way (Osuagwu, 2006).

A survey method was used for the purpose of this study.

**3.3 Population of the Study**

Students of Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos state were the respondents.

**3.4** **Determination of Sample Size**

Sampling is concerned with the choice of a subgroup of individuals from the target population in order to enable the estimation of the characteristics of the entire population (Singh and Masuku, 2014). It is vital to use an adequate number of subjects so as to ensure a higher probability that results of the study will be more generalizable and interpretable (Mugenda, 2008).

The sample size was calculated using the “sample size determining for research activity table” by (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). In estimating the sample size, a 5 percent margin of error (confidence interval) and 95 percent confidence level was used.

**3.5 The Sampling Technique**

The random sampling technique was used for this study. On this basis, the instrument for data collection was shared in four departments. They include: department of Mass communication, ICT, computer science and Political science.

This yielded 384 as the sample size.

**3.6 Sources of Data Collection**

Data collection involves gathering of relevant and important data used for conducting a particular research work. It is the basis for acquiring data. Data can be collected in two ways which are; primary data and secondary data.

Primary source of data was used for gathering data in this research work. It is the data collected for the purpose of the research, these are the responses generated or obtained from administered questionnaires (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

The questionnaire research instrument was used in this research work to gather information because it helps to access a large number of respondents at a minimal cost. The data collected would be gathered, sorted, and analyzed with the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

**3.7 Instrument for Data Collection**

The instrument used for data collection for in this study is the questionnaire, the questionnaires were self-administered. A questionnaire is a structured or semi structured instrument, an array of questions to be answered by persons in order to provide information for a specific purpose. The questionnaire is structured about the research objectives, the research questions and the research hypotheses (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). The questionnaire was used as the measuring instrument to get desired responses from the sample size surveyed. Specific questions were asked in the instrument to elicit response from the research subject regarding a particular research question.

Two persons were engaged as research assistants to distribute the questionnaires in the selected locations. The research assistants were told not to give the questionnaire to anybody who says he or she has never visited a popular online news site.

The measuring instrument used in this study evaluates what it is meant to measure and would consistently yield the same answer baring the vicissitude of human response to issues. The reliability of the instrument is assured because it contains structured questions that amply address the research problem and covers the scope of study.

**3.8 Validity of Research Instrument**

The validity of test reveals the degree to which a measuring instrument measures what it is intended to measure Norland (1990). He stated that the accuracy and significance of inferences are based on research results. The validity of the research instrument is determined by the amount of build in error in measurement.

Copies of the survey were made accessible to experts in this study such as my supervisor for comments and opinions so as to create validity in terms of contrast, content, criterion and readability in order for it to be suitable for the objectives of the study. Areas that are not needed where removed and other areas where collected and added to the research .Also areas considered irrelevant to the study were removed while others were collected and added to the research work.

Content and face validity was used in determining the validity of the research. Content validity is the extent to which a measuring instrument provides suitable coverage for current study that is research items measure the variables of the study while face validity is face to face check. The validity of the research instrument is to be gotten from the various questions posed to the respondents (Ojo, 2003).

**3.9 Reliability of Research Instrument**

Reliability is the degree to which a measurement is consistent with similar results over time. Measurements can be reliable and yet not useful but if measurements are useful or valid, it is certainly reliable. Also measurements that lack reliability also lacks validity. Reliable measurements show stability when tests are repeated with similar outcomes (Ojo, 2003).

Reliability of the research instrument involves the consistency of the result obtained with the instrument and if the instrument gives similar, close or the same result if the study is repeated under the same assumptions (Osuagwu, 2006).

**3.10 Method of Data Presentation and Analysis**

Data was collected from primary sources using questionnaire as instrument. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were used to present and analyze data gathered from the study. Aside tables of frequencies and percentages, sentences were also used to buttress whatever data is contained in the tables.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**DATA ANALYSIS, INTEPRETATION AND PRESENTATION**

**4.1 Presentation of Findings**

Before going into the presentation of findings, proper, it needs to be pointed out that of all the 384 questionnaires distributed in deference to the sample size, three were unaccounted for. It was also discovered that five others were not properly filled which invalidates the five. Less this number (8), the researcher was left with 376 questionnaires from which to get findings. The 376 responses are presented below in tables of frequencies and percentages.

(A ) Volume

*Table 1:* Frequency of rebuttal of reports published by popular online newspapers?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rebuttal of reports | Frequency | Percentage |
| Very frequent | 154 | 41% |
| Frequent | 60 | 16% |
| Never | 162 | 43% |
| Total | 376 | 100 |

Respondents who said that the rate at which they read or hear people denying statements credited to them or people saying that an event reported by an online newspaper did not happen is very frequent made up 41 per cent, those who placed the rate at frequent constituted 16 per cent while 43 per cent of the respondents stated that they have never had an instance where the story they read from an online newspaper was debunked.

*Table 2:* Subsequent publishing of fake news in other mediums after popular online newspapers broke story.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fake newslater in other medium | Frequency | Percentage |
| Yes | 184 | 49% |
| No | 192 | 51% |
| Total | 376 | 100% |

Respondents who answered ‘yes’ to the follow up question: ‘Do you get to see such fake news you read in your preferred medium published in other media?’ made up 49 per cent while those whose response was ‘No’ constituted 51 per cent.

*Table 3:* Respondents’ presumption of reports on popular online newspapers as false even before they are debunked

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Presumption of online reportsas false | Frequency | Percentage |
| Yes | 141 | 37% |
| No | 220 | 59% |
| Not sure | 15 | 4% |
| Total | 376 | 100% |

Those who presume reports on online newspapers to be false even before they are disputed are 37 per cent while respondents who do not have such presumption are 59 per cent. Those who are not sure about having or not having such presumption constitute 4 per cent.

*Table 4:* Extent of difference between information published on popular online newspapers and those broadcast through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whats App, BBM

-

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Difference between online newspaper,social media reports | Frequency | Percentage |
| Very different | 64 | 17% |
| Different | 207 | 55% |
| Not different | 89 | 24% |
| Not verydifferent | 16 | 4% |
| Total | 376 | 100% |

Respondents who believe that information published in popular online newspapers is very different from those broadcast using social media are 17 per cent. Those who think they are just different are 55 per cent while respondents who do not see any difference between information published on online newspapers from those circulating on social media are 24 per cent. Meanwhile 4 per cent of the respondents said the information in social media and the online newspaper is not very different.

**Discussion of Findings**

-

(A ) Volume

The findings above reflect the thinking of Yaba college Students over prevalence rate of instances fake news in Nigeria. They also depicts whether popular online newspapers actually play any role in the dissemination of fake news. Nigerians perception of news reports published on online newspapers is also highlighted in this findings even as the outcome of this research went on to show whether any difference exists in reports published on online newspapers from those broadcast through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, BBM etc?

*RQ1: How prevalent are cases of fake news in Nigeria?*

Going by the finding that 57 per cent of the respondents (very frequent 41%, frequent 16%) attest to the witnessing instances where the reports they read online were debunked as untrue, it is safe to say that the prevalence rate of fake news in Nigeria is high enough to be the most popular among respondents as found in Table 1. This is more so as only 43 per cent of respondents say there had never been a time when reports they read on online newspapers were debunked. Since, these categories of respondents never got to read these fake stories, the Uses and Gratifications theory as well as the Selectivity Factors theories must have made them avoid news outlets that have qualms running such fake information on their websites.

*RQ2: Do popular online newspapers play any role in the dissemination of fake news?*

Considering that more respondents (51 per cent) do not get to see the fake news they read in their preferred online medium published in other media, it then goes to show that online newspapers do not play much role in the dissemination of fake news but given that as high as 49 per cent voted that what they read in online newspapers ended up making it to other media, the online newspapers therefore plays a role in the spread of fake news. The online newspaper’s slight complicity in the spread of fake can be situated within the complaint by Sir Tim Berners-Lee of the www fame.

*RQ3: How do Nigerians perceive news reports published on popular online newspapers?*

Despite the prevalent of fake news, this study has shown that online newspapers and their reports are still seen as credible as more Nigerians do not presume online newspaper reports as false even before they are debunked. This means that Nigerians wholly believe what they read in online newspaper which they ‘Use’ to ‘Gratify’ their hunger for credible information. The finding for this research question is justified by the postulation of Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) thus: “reputational concerns discourage mass media outlets from knowingly reporting false stories”.

*RQ4: Is there any difference in reports published on popular online newspapers from those broadcast through social media platforms?*

The finding presented in Table 4 provides a two- fold answer to this research question. Adding up the percentages of respondents who voted ‘different’ and ‘very different’ to the comparison between information circulated on social media and those published by online newspapers shows that this view is popular by 72 per cent. Little wonder that Nigerians wholly believe what they read in the online newspapers as the “social media are well-suited for fake news dissemination”. This finding also aligns with the Selectivity Factor theories in that people would rather selectively expose themselves to, perceive, pay attention to, and remember information published by online newspapers than the ones circulated on the social media.

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**CHAPTER FIVE**

**SUMMARY CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**5.1 Summary**

The major focus of this paper is on impact of Fake news on the society.

The study was divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, we stated the problem of the study, its objectives and formulated for testing research hypotheses. In the second chapter, we reviewed literatures related to the topic. In the third chapter, we described the methodology employed or adopted to arrive at the study’s findings. In the fourth chapter Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were used to present and analyze data gathered from the study.

**5.2 Conclusion**

Cases of the circulation of fake news are prevalent in the country as it is across the world, but the circulation of false information have not started to have a toll on the perceived credibility of popular online newspapers. Those who because of fake news are cautiously optimistic about the credibility of popular online newspapers were found to be slightly higher than those who have allowed incidence of fake news make them suspect reports on popular online newspapers as not credible. This means that fake news still poses a threat to the perception Nigerians have of reputable online newspapers. As the Uses and Gratification and the Selectivity theories go, those who have the notion that popular online newspapers are purveyors of fake news may switch to other mediums of mass communication or take information passed by online newspapers with a pinch of salt. When this becomes the case, the influence of popular online newspapers with regards to the role of the press to the society is whittled down and hampered, essentially because of the scourge of fake news.

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**5.3 Recommendations**

Drawing from the knowledge and finding garnered in the course of this study, the under-listed ideas can be proffered as recommendations through which fake news and its impact on the public perception of online newspapers in Nigeria can be tackled:

1. Online newspapers should adopt the operation model of the conventional newspaper. Stories should written to perfection, subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of the head of the reporter’s desk, checked again by the news editor and his team with a strong re-write desk ensuring that the story conforms to a house style; and then a final check by the editor of the paper. (Daniel, This Day April 22, 2017)
2. Online newspapers should ensure they employ only qualified and well-trained journalists who can validate and can defend whatever story that has their by-line.
3. Granted that running a newspaper requires a huge capital outlay which makes publishers are reporters susceptible to moneybags looking for where to plant stories that would further their interest, online newspaper practitioners should rather rely on international donor agencies which support independent media organisations which funds to enable them better hold the government accountable to the people.
4. Online newspapers must not base their reports on rumours spread on the social media. Whenever they want to report what was post on the social media by newsmakers, they should ensure that the posting is actually on the verified social media account of the prominent personality in question.
5. The government, the Nigeria Union of Journalists and other associations in the media industry should find a means of streamlining the process of setting up online newspapers so as to avert the springing up mushroom news sites which publish false stories that dent the perception of the online newspaper.
6. When a story published by an online newspaper is found to be false, such stories should promptly be pulled down with the same online site publishing a corrigendum and an apology signed by its editor to the readers.

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**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**INSTRUCTION**: please indicate your class below and endeavour to tick in the right bracket

**Please choose department**

Mass communication ( )

ICT ( )

Computer science ( )

Political science ( )

What is your gender?

Male ( )

Female ( )

Which of these best describes your age?

18-22 ( )

23-30 ( )

30+ ( )

**SECTION B**

Do you understand the meaning of fake news?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

Have you ever been a victim of fake news?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

Do you consider misleading a direct consequence of fake news?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

News agency can also propagate fake news.

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

The media can be a huge part of fake news carrier if the news is not verified.

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

Are there known cases of fake news disseminated by the media?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

On a scale of 1 -5, rate the level of media involvement in disseminating fake news?

1. ---- not involved ( )
2. -----less involved ( )
3. ----Involved ( )
4. ----Moderately Involved ( )
5. ----Significantly Involved ( )

How frequent is media dissemination of fake news.

More frequent ( )

Less frequent ( )

None ( )

Do you think that Nigerians agree with media reports?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

To what extent do Nigerian agree with media reports?

To a less extent ( )

To an average extent ( )

To a significant extent ( )

Do you think that Nigerians consider media reports as genuine always?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

One of the disadvantages of fake news is wrong activities and actions in the society.

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

Fake news can lead to riot or violent activities in the society.

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )

Fake news can lead to religious or ethnic wars in the society.

Yes ( )

No ( )

Maybe ( )