

IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS AND SENSATIONALIZATION ON THE PROSPECT OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN NIGERIA

by

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Abstract

The researchers investigated the prospect of the traditional media houses in the face of this common trend of sensationalism in journalism to redirect the upcoming journalists toward the proper method of news presentation and dissemination. The study used a survey research method to study selected residents in Asaba who are a constant media audience. The research instrument for data collection. The data were presented and analyzed using a simple percentage table method from where it was found that the Nigerian media largely get involved in sensational reporting and much more than that figure (77.1%) also related fake news with sensational reporting, insisting that they have the same implications in journalism. The majority (57.9%) of the audience believe that fake news with sensational reporting is unethical and unacceptable, and for both of them, the biggest possible effect of sensational reporting on the prospect of the media organization in Nigeria is that both can lead to loss of credibility and its potential to incite crises and other social issues. It was recommended that the incidence of fake news and sensationalism will be reduced if ethics and laws of journalism should be given prior consideration in journalism schools and other higher institutions to make students know its importance in serving society in an objective, efficient, and effective way.

Keywords: Fake News, Sensationalisation & Main Stream Media

Introduction

There have been a lot of scenarios where stories considered to be fake and 'too sensational' have led to controversies in

the Nigerian social and political landscapes. Some that easily came to mind include the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) of Nigeria

objected to a report that was published by Sahara Reporters, claiming that "no officer of the EFCC was permitted to talk with Sahara reporters on the above-mentioned story or any matter influencing the investigation of the Paris Club Refund." Furthermore, the then Senate President, who was the target of the narrative, said that Sahara Reporters' Publisher tends to fabricate stories and quote anonymous sources. This is not, however, a one-time occurrence. The supposed death of immediate past President, Muhammadu Buhari, shortly after he took a health leave to the UK on January 19, 2017, was another notable example of fake news and whistleblowing strategy that filled Nigeria's media arena. The masterminds were so bold that they made a replica of the Metro newspaper in the United Kingdom or the Huffington Post in the United States, declaring in parodies that President Buhari had died in a London hospital. While "Metro" announced the Nigerian president's "death," the "Huffington Post" claimed he was caught "committing suicide." In both stories, the same picture of President Buhari was used, and the same sentences were repeated. However, these inconsistencies did not stop the spoofs from causing a stir on the internet in Nigeria, with some blogs and social media outlets reporting on Buhari's alleged death.

In light of this, it is no surprise that then Nigeria's Information and Culture Minister, Mr. Lai Mohammed, declared in February 2017 that fake news and whistleblowing constitute a greater threat to the country than insurrection and militancy. He listed some of the misleading stories that his Ministry has had to deal with, especially with the report that Christians are being persecuted in Nigeria. There was also a false rumor that Nigeria's armed forces had armed Fulani herders and incited them to attack. All of

this information is false and has the potential to pit one religion or community against another (Premium Times, February 21, 2017). The Chocolate City founder, Audu Maikori, was arrested in the same month by security operatives citing his publication of a false report about the violence in Kaduna state's southern region and the Kaduna State Governor, Mr. Nasir El-Rufai, an accusation that it led to the killing of Fulanis in the region (Pulse. ng 2017, March 3).

Arising from these and other examples, which suggest that the practice is taking on a life of its own in Nigeria, the purpose of this research is to determine how the prevalence of fake news and whistleblowing strategies is eroding the prospects of mainstream media. This is in keeping with Ekwueme's assertion (2008) that:

"Your readers want the facts you heard or saw from your numerous sources, not a fabrication of your imagination. Many people feel that media messages are gospel truth, and some readers, correctly or wrongly, believe that anything that is not in the media is not legitimate. You don't break their trust since they have placed it in you. If you betray it, you betray both yourself and your medium's integrity."

The mass media frequently develop agendas for the public to follow; they study trends and happenings in our society and set their agenda depending on what they have monitored (Asemah, 2009). Whatever matter the media raised becomes a matter of public interest. Additionally, it has been said that online newspapers should be doing a fantastic service to humanity by electronically re-creating the news to reach a much larger audience than

just the subscribers to their print publications. They are after all giving readers more knowledge than anybody else in history at a time when information is more valuable as a commodity than it has ever been (Thiel, 1998).

Society stands to suffer if many well-known mainstream media platforms disappear due to sensationalism or other unethical factors, as well as the need to uphold the preeminence that the media once held in agenda setting and, among other things, in keeping the government accountable to the people (Anyanwu et al., 2017). Given the consequences of sensationalization, which have already been established in bodies of literature, this study seeks to examine the opinion of the Asaba-based media audience on the impact of sensational journalism on the prospect of mainstream media in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The news media is widely recognized as a “reliable provider of a realistic image of what happens across the world,” (Motsaathebe, 2011). In creating the news, journalists rely on numerous sources to authenticate or provide credibility to the information that they transmit. Fake news and whistle-blowing strategy seem to have become the greatest thing in town (Kolawole, 2017). It is however, not brand new. This generation of social media users did not invent it. We've spent much of our lives dealing with fake news and whistle-blowing tactics. The SAP riots of 1989, for example, were fuelled by fake news and a whistle-blowing strategy. The preceding arguments demonstrate how fake news and whistle-blowing strategy influences not only the media but also society.

The scourge of sensationalization, fake news and whistle-blowing strategy has become more prominent with the new

media and its negative influence on major online newspapers is extremely clear. The falling faith in mainstream media could have caused or resulted from fake news and whistle-blowing tactic gaining hold (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017). If fake news and whistle-blowing tactics can influence traditional media, imagine what effect it will have on large internet newspapers. The nation's media literacy rate is still below the threshold at which everyone understands the distinctions between fake news and accurate news. Some people who consume media continue to believe there is no distinction between them. But for some of the literate media audience, what is their attitude towards fake news and sensational stories in the prospect of mainstream media in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Know if the media get involved in sensational reporting in Nigeria;
2. Find out the extent that the media get involved in fake reporting in Nigeria
3. Understand the perception of the audience in this fake news reporting or sensationalism; and
4. Ascertain the possible effect of sensational reporting on the prospect of the media organization in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Concept of Fake News

The term "fake news" was first used in the US media landscape to describe false, typically sensational, information transmitted beneath the pretext of news reporting (Collins Dictionary). Scholars of communication have looked into several aspects of the fake news phenomenon,

particularly the reasons for its creation and transmission (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Subramanian, 2017), and the potential (bad) effects of its consumption (Gu, et al., 2017; Ferrara et al., 2016). Incidentally, academics believe that business (chrematistic interest) and political (ideological) incentives are the primary drivers of fake news production (Hirst, 2017). For one, business incentives imply the fabrication and transmission of fake news to boost a news site's viewership and, as a result, increase advertising revenue (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2016). For example, one of the major fake news producers in the 2016 US elections was formed by adolescents in a Macedonian town without any ideological objective but financial incentives (Subramanian, 2017; Silverman, 2016). They increased their advertising revenue by publishing pro-Trump content (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The second incentive, on the other hand, is ideological (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gu et al., 2017), and is based on campaign manipulation and defamation of politicians to harm their public image. The goal of fake news sources in this scenario is to empower the candidate they support by spreading misleading information that can sway the public's attitude (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In July 2016, a website known as wtoe5news.com released an article suggesting Pope Francis's support for Donald Trump's presidential campaign (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The story was posted had a lot of engagement on Facebook with over one million posts, and many people assumed the headline was true.

Previous research shows that the scale and influence of fake news are linked to social media's ability to spread it and their growing role in news consumption; as Allcot and Gentzkow (2017) point out, the fixed costs of entering the market and producing content are vanishingly small on

social media, and the format of social media can make judging an article's veracity difficult.

Recent data also demonstrates that social media accounts for 41.8% of website traffic for fake news, while traditional and top news sites only account for 10% of overall traffic (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This is in contrast to the relationship between social networking sites and the propagation of false news. According to some experts, the quick propagation of false information online is related to the rise of social bots (Shao et al., 2017). Ferrara et al. (2017) claim that there has been a sharp rise in the number of social media profiles managed by computer programmes that seem to be real people. Humans are more vulnerable to online manipulations as a result of fake accounts posting content and interacting with real users on social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Shao et al., 2017). Pew Research Center reports that 74 percent of Twitter users get their news from the platform, while 9 percent to 15% of active Twitter accounts are bots (Ferrara et al., 2017). Evidence shows that extremely robotic accounts manage 45 percent of Twitter activity in Russia (Woolley & Howard, 2017).

Fake news is proliferating swiftly because obstacles to information access and consumption have virtually disappeared and because social media platforms are now free and unconstrained for news sharing and consumption (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In today's media landscape, information is freely available on the Internet and few traditional gatekeepers, such as skilled editors and journalists are present (Cook et al., 2012; McGrew et al., 2017). Because of this phenomenon, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the general public to distinguish between professional and non-professional news content and, as a result,

to regulate the difference between false and accurate information (Tandoc et al., 2017). This phenomenon places a significant burden on people to critically self-evaluate the accuracy of online news (McGrew et al., 2017). As a vibrant media landscape (Anyanwu et al., 2015), similar studies in Nigeria also show there is a deluge of fake news on Nigeria's social media space and many Nigerian believe them (Inobemhe et al., 2020). This may cause individuals anywhere in the world to make judgments that are not in their best interests (McGrew et al., 2017).

In this climate of news uncertainty, academics agree that professional journalism and fact-checking will continue to be important to diminish the likelihood of audiences being prejudiced by misinformation (Amazeen, 2017; Anyanwu & Ejem, 2016). At the same time, the public is witnessing a decline in their belief in conventional mainstream media (Goyanes & Vara-Miguel, 2017). A lack of confidence in traditional media may be the root of the rising demand for news from unconventional sources (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Only one-third of respondents in 36 different countries, according to a Reuters study, think they can trust the news media (Reuters Institute, 2017). People are biased information seekers, as evidenced by their preference for news sources that support their existing opinions (Cook et al., 2012; Baum et al., 2017). This approach results in audiences finding partisan content more interesting and educational than content that challenges their own opinions (Coe et al., 2008). Users tend to read and share news pieces associated with their ideological perspectives on social networks like Facebook and Twitter, which are ideologically separated (Bakshy et al., 2015). Furthermore, regardless of whether the article is produced by a real news organization or a fictional one, readers

trust the sharer more than the author (Media Insight Project 2016).

People are more inclined to share news sources with friends when they see a post from a reliable source than when it comes from an unreliable or antagonistic one (Media Insight Project 2016). Baum et al. (2017) note that, in addition to being older and having a higher level of education, people who consume more media also tend to have more accurate news beliefs (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). On the other hand, young social media users might be classified as "incidental" in their news consumption because news is presented to them in the same way as entertainment items they come across online when using social media (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017). Emotions, on the other hand, play a major role in how people react to false political propaganda (Weeks, 2015). People with anxiety, unlike furious people, who process information partisanly, lessen their reliance on partisanship (Weeks, 2015). People transmit information that will elicit an emotional response in the receiver, regardless of whether the information is genuine or not (Cook et al., 2012). As a result, newsreaders may accidentally or consciously contribute to the propagation of fake news by spreading content that has a greater impact on their online social connections (Barthel et al., 2016).

Various Types of Fake News

There are numerous types of fake or false news, as well as numerous reasons for their production. The editors identified three types of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information in a 2018 UNESCO report titled "Journalism, 'Fake News,' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training." With increasing levels of misbehavior, four kinds were identified:

Genuine errors

One type of fake news is caused by inaccuracies or misunderstandings, which can occur as a result of transcribing an event or miscalculating a problem, as well as carelessness and genuine misunderstanding. This form of "false news" has always existed, and those who perpetrate it are only excused because they are "just human."

Satire

Another type of news that is delivered is satire, which is news that is presented to readers and viewers as not genuine or as a joke. Typically, no harm appears to have been done, and the media organization identifies the story later or inserts indications inside the narrative indicating that it was made up. However, not everyone views satire as harmless, and individuals might be angered when they believe they are being deceived or mocked. Calling or mispronouncing three names, such as Mat Sabu (currently Minister of Defence) as Mat Sapu or Zahid Hamidi as Zahid Komedi, is humorous or "memperkecilkan" or demeaning to others.

Half-truths

Finally, there is disinformation that includes some truths and twists, usually by selectively quoting some parts while ignoring others. People frequently use this to support their own beliefs or a particular argument, intending to suppress facts that might be detrimental to them.

News that has been fabricated

The most dangerous type of "fake news" is created or generated with the intent to deceive by presenting lies or twisting the facts. The intention is clear. They may appear to be true news, yet they are the most harmful type of false news. When this created "fake news" is repeated

frequently and for a long time, it stifles reasonable debate, which is important for democracy to work, and leaves readers, listeners, and viewers unsure of what they hear, read, or believe.

Most respected traditional media outlets rarely produce such tales, partially because journalists are educated to be cynical and to verify facts. The mainstream media's news outlets go through a process of accepting and editing stories. Publishers and broadcasters realize that if they can maintain confidence, their readership and audience numbers will return to them for news. And they will continue to have faith in them if the news they publish is truly reliable.

Fake news has been described in literature as news stories that are purposely and verifiably untrue, and potentially mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Another definition of fake news is that it is either entirely false or has intentionally deceptive components in its substance or context. The fact that fake news is widely disseminated online is a key element of today's fake news (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

According to a review of the literature on false news, fake news has certain features, such as:

1. Intentional;
2. False;
3. Deceptive;
4. Inaccurate;
5. Exaggerated;
6. and skewed
7. Unacceptable (Idid, 2019)

After grasping the concept of fake news, we'd want to turn our attention to our

second concern: the relationship between false news and media trust. Remember that false news is the polar opposite of news that journalists claim to be reliable. The notion is that audience members purchase and consume media to receive trustworthy news or information. They would put their trust in the channel, the sources, and the journalists to supply them with accurate and well-written news.

Methodology

This study will employ the survey research approach, which is the one most frequently employed by behaviourist scientists. This is so that selected individuals from a population (referred to as a Sample) can respond to a set of questions (known as a questionnaire) on numerous topics or various facets of a given topic, and their responses were used to generalize to the wider population. A total of 300 questionnaire copies were distributed to

Data Presentation and Analysis

For easy analysis, tables showing the distribution of respondents' responses and percentages are presented below:

Table 1: Age of Respondents

Age	Distribution	Percentage (%)
17 – 25 years	116	44
25 – 35 years	100	38
35 – 45 years	31	12
45 years and above	15	6
Total	262	100

Table 1 shows that out of 262 respondents, 116 (44%) were within the age bracket of 17 – 25, 100(38%) belong to the age bracket of 25 – 35, 31 (12%) fell between the age range of 35 – 45 while 15 (6%) of the respondents were above forty-five years. This data implied that the majority

the residents of Asaba who are regularly exposed to the mass media news and this set of people is regarded as the sample size which is drawn from the entire population of the area. Data collected were presented in the simple percentage table technique from where necessary analyses of the table contents were made. Upon return of the distrusted copies of the questionnaire, 262 (87.3%) copies were retrieved and considered valid for use in the analysis.

Results

This chapter presents analyses and discusses data gathered with the use of the questionnaire According to Bordens and Abbot (2008), once a researcher has conducted his research, the next step is to organize, summarize and describe data: these procedures are followed in such a way that data yield answers to research questions, intending to achieve the objectives of this study.

of the audience that participated in this research were millennials, who are characterized by their curiosity, impatience, and tech savviness, are accustomed to having a voice, love social media, and are an optimistic generation. They will give very unique perspectives to

the study of sensationalization and fake news in the media, as they are the generation that typically facilitates the spreading of fake news.

Table 2: The Extent that the Media Get Involved in Sensational Reporting in Nigeria

Options	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Largely	156	60
To an extent, yes.	76	29
Not at all	30	11
Total	262	100

Data in Table 2 shows that out of the 262 respondents, 156 (60%) said that the Nigerian media largely get involved in sensational reporting; 76(29%) were not so confident but suggested that the Nigerian

media only get involved in sensational reporting to an extent; and 30(11%) of the respondents were insistent that the media in Nigeria do not get involved in sensational reporting.

Table 3: Association Between Sensational Reporting and Fake News

Options	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Yes	202	77.1
No	57	21.8
Can't Say	3	1.1
Total	262	100

Data in Table 3 shows that out of the 262 respondents, 202 (77.1%) related fake news with sensational reporting; 57(21.8%) think there is a disparity between fake news and sensational

reporting, and they have different implications in journalism; and 3 (1.1%) of the respondents did not have any opinion about their relationship.

Table 4: The Extent that the Media Get Involved in Fake News Reporting in Nigeria

Options	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Largely	56	21.4
To an extent, yes.	85	32
Not at all	121	46.2

Total	262	100
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Interestingly, data in Table 4 shows the opposite of what was seen in Table 2. The data shows that out of the 262 respondents, the majority (46.2%) said that the Nigerian media largely do not get involved in fake news reporting; 56 (21.4%) insisted that

said that the Nigerian media largely get involved in fake news reporting; and 85(32%) of the respondents were insistent that the media in Nigeria do get involved in fake news reporting but only to an extent.

Table 5: Perception Towards Fake News Reporting and Sensationalism

Options	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Fake news is unethical	60	23
Sensationalization is unethical	48	18
Positive attitude towards sensational reporting	3	1.1
Positive attitude towards fake news reporting	0	0
Both are unethical and unacceptable	151	57.9
Total	262	100

Data in Table 5 shows the perception of the respondents towards fake news reporting and sensationalism. The majority (57.9%) of the 262 respondents find both are unethical and unacceptable; 60 (23%) said that they find fake news unethical;

sensationalization is unethical; 48 (18%) said that they find fake news unethical; Nigerian media largely do not get involved in fake news reporting; and 3 (1.1%) stated that positive attitude towards sensational reporting.

Table 6: Possible Effect of Sensational Reporting on The Prospect of The Media Organization in Nigeria

Options	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Loss of credibility	40	15
Potential to incite crises and other social issues	44	17
All of the above	178	68
None of the above	-	-
Total	262	100

Table 6 above shows that out of 262 respondents, the majority (68%) said that the biggest possible effect of sensational reporting on the prospect of the media organization in Nigeria is both loss of credibility and its potential to incite crises and other social issues; 44 (17%) said its basic loss of credibility, and 44 (17%) said its potential to incite crises and other social issues.

Discussion of Findings

Insights were gained from the data analysis following the collection of data from 262 media audiences into the impact of fake news and sensationalization on the prospect of mainstream media in Nigeria. It was, first of all, established that the majority of the audience that participated in this research were millennials, who are characterized by their curiosity, impatience, and tech savviness, are accustomed to having a voice, love social media, and are the optimistic generation. They will give very unique perspectives to the study of sensationalization and fake news in the media, as they are the generation that typically facilitates the spreading of fake news (xx). This makes them sufficiently informed to give their opinion about fake news and sensational stories. The research found that the majority (60%) of the respondents believed that the Nigerian media largely get involved in sensational reporting and much more than that figure (77.1%) also related fake news with sensational reporting, insisting that they have the same implications in journalism.

What it means is that the Nigerian media audiences believe that the Nigerian news landscape is replete with stories that are blown out of proportion, and which the unlearned mind might be drawn to call fake news. However, the majority (46.2%) said that the Nigerian media largely do not get involved in fake news reporting. That

means while they consider that most of the media stories are sensational, they insist that they are not fake. By this opinion, the audience seemed to draw a clear line between fake news and sensational stories and feel like Nigerian media have been supplying accurate information but they present in such a manner that heightens the impact of the incident and take it more seriously.

However, irrespective of the different impressions that the audience has about fake news and sensationalism, there is a consensus among the majority (57.9%) of the audience that both are unethical and unacceptable and for both of them, the biggest possible effect of sensational reporting on the prospect of the media organization in Nigeria is that both can lead to loss of credibility and its potential to incite crises and other social issues.

Conclusion

Based on the insights above, the researchers can conclude that fake news and sensationalism are considered both unethical and unacceptable, and their biggest possible effect on the prospect of the media organization in Nigeria is that both can lead to loss of credibility and its potential to incite crises and other social issues. It was further confirmed that the Nigerian media audience believes that the Nigerian news landscape is replete with stories that are blown out of proportion, and which the unlearned mind might be drawn to call fake news. The audience seemed to draw a clear line between fake news and sensational stories, and they feel like Nigerian media have been supplying accurate information but they present in such a manner that heightens the impact of the incident and take it more seriously.

To that end, it is recommended that the incidence of fake news and sensationalism will be reduced if ethics and laws of journalism should be given prior

consideration in journalism schools and other higher institutions to make students know its importance in serving society in an objective, efficient and effective way, and the laws and ethics should be upheld by all journalists to preserve the credibility of the mainstream media.

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