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Spotlighting the Cankers of Democracy: Politicians' Dissemination of Fake News and Propaganda in Nigeria

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Abstract

There exists a symbiotic relationship between the media and politics. From military rule in Nigeria to present-day democracy, political actors and public have used media for the exchange of information. While both parties try to influence the news, political actors with wealth and power dominate the media and use it for their personal gains. Hence, the current study aimed to examine the role of politicians in spreading fake news while highlighting some cases. Employing the propaganda model and framing theory, the study used secondary data as well as primary data where quantitative research methodology was used. Three hundred and seventy-three (373) Plateau State residents were purposively selected and analysed for the study. Findings revealed that the heavy use of social media has enabled the politicians to sponsor the spread of fake news which harms democracy practised in Nigeria. The spread and use of propaganda lead towards poor decision-making at the polls. It is therefore, recommended that, media organizations fact-check every piece of information, realign their ideologies, and stop being willing tools of political actors to gain the trust of public.

Keywords: democracy, fake news, media, political communication, propaganda, social media

Introduction

The struggle for independence began with the use of media and the press. Consequently, based on a nationalistic ideology, Nigeria gained her independence in 1960. After several power tussles, Nigeria witnessed interim and military governments which resulted in a new system of government known as `democracy`. The word 'democracy' is a form of governance that was adopted to gain independence, sovereignty, liberty, and fairness. After years of military rule, democracy was set to push forward an

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agenda of unity, peace, and national integration, as well as social and economic stability. However, since its inception, the country's democracy has been overwhelmed by different challenges which may be attributed to the use of media. Since the beginning, Okolie et al. (2021), and Okocha and Akpe (2023) noted that the journalists who were key players, assuming the role of freedom fighters, were not only the owners and editors of newspapers, however, they were also fully engaged in politics. Therefore, after independence, they assumed political positions in the country which led to an alteration of ideology whereby, rather than using their media houses to promote unity and nationalism, became tools to propagate their agenda. This has become a trend in the political environment that is now a scourge to the democracy practised in Nigeria. From military rule to present-day democracy, the media has been used considerably and is still being used by political actors to influence the news in favour of their government (Akoja & Jiboku, 2020). According to Agbegunde and Fajimbola (2018), the mass media is like a two-edged sword that serves as an agent of political communication. For instance, it plays a critical role in the survival of democracy and is also a barrier to democracy since the political and communication systems are parallel to each other.

Therefore, in agreement with Osimen and Adeyefa (2023), it can be deduced that politics cannot exist without media. Moreover, understanding how power is exercised through communication is central to understanding the socio-political world around us (Robinson, 2019). Presently, the political environment with an emphasis on the electoral period of the country, is filled with cacophony of voices as the media is used for propaganda and most recently, fake news fuelled by the political actors. Okolie et al. (2021) defines propaganda as an information-molding and dispensing tool used by political parties and candidates to circumvent the objective reasoning and appeal to the emotions and psyche of the electorates during electioneering. Oparaugo (2021) believes propaganda to be a selective presentation of facts to encourage a particular thinking or perception through language in order to arouse emotions by playing on pre-existing bias. It is, therefore, a manipulative technique deployed by political actors to divert the attention of the reactors from the actual motive to advance a political goal. A political goal can be achieved through the spread of fake news. Okocha and Akpe (2022) define fake news as a deceptive packaging of unverified information intending to mislead consumers.

In the current times, propaganda and fake news have become a trend, employed by politicians to gain acceptance by the general public. Moreover, this trend has taken root in the modern times more than ever before due to the excessive presence of social media. As stated by Apuke and Omar (2020), 'social media is the lifeline of fake news'. Moreover, since media houses are affiliated with political parties or owned by politicians, such fabricated information and propaganda are used to set the agenda. Resultantly, as depicted by the political environment, the media in all its forms has metamorphosed into becoming the political environment itself. Additionally, Idid (2019) observed that politicians and greedy manipulators are keen on promoting themselves or their groups at the expense of their opponents. This has resulted in the spread of rumours which is one of the features of fake news.

Additionally, propaganda may be utilised in specific scenarios while discussing fake news. This is because the terms associated with propaganda include lies, manipulation, and brainwashing. A classic example is Plateau State, where the 2023 gubernatorial elections were masked with propaganda and fake news. During the campaigns, the Plateau State chapter of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) cautioned the public on the lies and propaganda spread by the All-Progressive Congress (APC). As they alerted the public, they also put forward the APC in a bad light through negative statements during campaigns and press conferences as a form of propaganda. Therefore, since Nigerian politicians deliberately spread propaganda amidst an underlying issue of fake news, the current study aimed to understand the perception of audience towards the use and spread of propaganda and fake news by Nigerian politicians.

Research Objectives

The current study aimed to address the following objectives:

1. Ascertain whether Nigerian politicians disseminate fake news and propaganda.

2. Highlight the cases of politicians' promotion/propagation of fake news and propaganda.

3. Know the danger associated with unchecked dissemination of fake news.

4. Examine how fake news and propaganda can be curbed.

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy

The most common and general definition of democracy is a government of, by, and for the people of a country. This definition indicates that democracy is a kind of government that gives people authority. Resultantly, people have the authority to choose who governs them by electing representatives through the electoral process. This is led by one of democracy's guiding principles: periodic free and fair general elections. Thus, no government can be considered democratic if its representatives are not chosen by people in a free and fair electoral process. Free media is another democratic tenet as stated by Bisong and Ekanem (2020) and because people own the government; they have the right to know what is happening. Thus, the media as society's watchdog, looks into the government and reports on matters without the fear of repercussions (Babaleye et al., 2020).

According to the ideals of democracy outlined above, Nigeria is far from practising true democracy. According to Bisong and Ekanem (2020), this is owing to the government's deviation from the established curve of democracy to authoritarianism; for rather than serving the people, it serves the governing oligarchy, enriching them beyond measure. The electoral process is corrupted and accompanied by violence and in some cases, coercion at the polls. This is because political actors disregard people by employing the use of propaganda and the spread of fake news to gain leadership. Therefore, it can be deduced that absolute democracy is far from being actualized in Nigeria.

Propaganda

One of the fundamental elements of democracy for a country is to have an electoral system. In Nigeria, franchised individuals are expected to elect people into power every four years to ensure a transparent democratic process. During the electioneering season, information, such as political campaign messages, speeches, and political rallies are delivered utilizing both traditional and new media to inform the public of their political goals to earn their votes. Sule and Ridwanula (2023) asserted that effective communication is critical to achieve specific goals in Nigerian governance hence the employment of political communication that constitutes propaganda.

According to Ameh ([2023](#)), propaganda is the deliberate manipulation of facts to transmit thoughts other than the intended message. Resultantly, politicians employ words and strategies to convince people about their policy, idea, or cause in order to make them vote for a candidate. Such messages are frequently subjective, resulting in the employment of propaganda to achieve their aim, in which the media participates voluntarily or unwillingly. According to Olaniyan and Akpojivi ([2020](#)), politicians investigate the manipulative side of social media by employing propaganda and alluring people to participate in it.

Politics and propaganda are inextricably linked and interdependent as without the other, neither can function correctly (Obong et al., [2023](#)). Politics, in all its complexities, is rarely successful without the sophisticated use of propaganda weapons. Political actors and promoters can use propaganda to hammer home their ideology, philosophy, sentiments, biases, beliefs, creed, and idiosyncrasies in less powerful, however, convincing and manipulative ways. Resultantly, there is no political party that does not support any political cause, movement, ideology, philosophy, or creed.

Fake News

Fake news according to Ireton and Possetti ([2018](#)) signifies information that can be verified and is in the public interest. In contrast, any item that does not match these requirements is not newsworthy. Thus, the phrase "fake news" is used to denote false material that tries to mislead the public while undermining the credibility of information which is in the public interest. The term disinformation is used for information that confuses or misleads people and is frequently staged to control or baffle the people. When giving a clear perspective towards the concept of fake news, several academics examine the rationale for its dissemination. This is why Visentin et al. ([2019](#)) considered fake news to be the information which is perhaps verifiable, purposely fraudulent, yet realistically depicted. Pate et al. ([2019](#)) understood the term to mean the information that is frequently inflated, sensationalized, and irresistibly intimidating. It might be difficult to identify fake news when such news broadcasts contain authoritative lies through the language employed to grab and retain readers' attention. According to these definitions, fake news is untrue information that is produced to deceive the readers. Pate et al. ([2019](#)) contended that fake news is presented in a nuanced and complex manner to hide its falsehoods by relying on dubious sources or assertions.

Most of the times, the producers of fake news generate stories which are in line with the views of the public and in most cases, their target audience. The definition of fake news presented by Duffy et al. (2019), as an instance of misinformation masquerading news item to mimic the validity that society connects with true news gives a clear picture of how the producers of fake news maximize the use of echo chambers to assert their opinion. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss the concept of fake news without mentioning social media. False news is produced for a number of reasons including those that are completely commercial (to get clicks) and others that are extremely political (to spread propaganda). Social media, as stipulated by Olaniyan and Akpojivi (2020), is a contributing factor to the challenges of democracy in Nigeria. Furthermore, Farkus and Chou (2018) attributed the rise of fake news to be largely associated with populist politics, digital capitalism, the transformation of public sphere, and structural weaknesses in liberal and mainstream media in the Global North. Hence, the issue of fake news is a multidimensional menace that needs to be addressed with no stone left unturned.

Canker

For this study, the term "canker" designates a cause of corruption or debasement according to Merriam-Webster (n.d.). As a transitive verb, 'canker' refers to tarnishing the essence or core of something. However, in the medical field, the term "canker" refers to oral sores called "aphthous ulcers," which are typically unpleasant. It could begin as a little sore in one area of the mouth and later expand to other areas. In Botany, cankerworms are pests that eat up trees and leaves causing defoliation, branch dieback, and reduced growth (Murray & Hodgson, 2020). Thus, the term canker has been used as a metaphor in this study to aid in understanding the damaging propaganda and fake news, causing a democratic decline in Nigeria. Propaganda and fake news have permeated every aspect of Nigerian society, just like the sore and have eaten it deeply just like the cankerworm. The implications that the Nigerians have set play an important role for the nation's democracy. Resultantly, it is rusting all political institutions, eroding public confidence in politicians, and the media, and deepening polarization.

Politicians

Politicians are a group of people who actively participate in the political process, usually holding or trying to pursue a position in the government (Petrarca & Troolin, 2023). Politicians can hold positions at all levels of government, from municipal (Chairmen) to state (Governors) to national (President) level. According to Mills (2024), the term 'politicians' conveys partisanship and may imply a preference for personal gain over public service. Additionally, while the public perceives politicians as skilled state officials, they are sometimes accused of being manipulative. Politicians are elected through an electoral process under a democratic system of government. The elected officials are then given the authority to address public concerns, enact legislation, and engage with the public. For the current study, politicians are people who are actively involved in the Nigerian political environment and those in a registered political party. They may or may not hold public offices, however, they belong to one group or the other.

Theoretical Framework

Propaganda Model

The propaganda model, as expatiated by Jeffery (2009), was introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky as a model of media control in their book 'Manufacturing Consent in the Political Economy of the Mass Media' in 1988. The model is anchored on the assumption that money and power can control the narrative of the news stories to allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. Through the use of filters, the propaganda model situates that information is reshaped and reformed. The first filter of ownership, scale/size, and profit orientation allows market forces to create media discourses based on their interests. The second filter is advertising for funding and resultantly, media discourse frequently reflects the objectives of advertisers and the market. The next is the source of news. There would also be some influential sources that tend to influence media policies.

The media takes appropriate steps in favour of the source to ensure news traffic. Additionally, to avoid negative responses, the media performance is controlled and lastly, anti-communism has over time been modified to be the dominant ideological element of the media. The propaganda model is understood under the traditions of communication as the practical art of talk

which is disseminated to a large audience through mediated forms. Propaganda messages are interpretative as complete objectivity is impossible. However, the model has been criticized to portray media audience as passive and easily controlled. Moreover, it is only concerned with defining the amount to which media discourses are ideologically influenced in connection to structural elements of power. However, it offers distinct avenues for empirical research which this study has embarked upon to provide more understanding into how and why political actors engage in propagandas.

Framing Theory

A renowned scholar, Entman (1993), asserts in his essay "US Coverage of International News: Contrast in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents" that framing theory is a major theoretical framework. It focuses on how media messages impact an individuals' perception and interpretation of events or situations. According to Arowolo (2017), it is the act of thinking about news items and story contents in a familiar context. The concept of framing is similar to the agenda-setting tradition, however, it broadens the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a specific topic. The framing theory opines that media gives more attention to specific occurrences and then positions them into a field of meaning.

Goffman, a social psychologist, proposed the idea in 1974 under the term Frame Analysis. The primary goal of framing theory, as put forward by Entman (1993), is to investigate how media frames can selectively highlight certain parts of an issue while downplaying or eliminating the others, thereby molding public opinion and influencing agenda-setting. According to the idea, frames work through a process of selection, emphasis, and interpretation in which media outlets and communicators select various frames to portray an issue, highlight specific parts, and assign meaning to occurrences. Thus, Entman defines framing as the process to select specific aspects of a perceived reality and emphasize them in a communicating text. Political actors use strategic communication to persuade the news media in order to modify and embrace their perspectives. This is accomplished through understanding what media considers to be newsworthy. In 2011, Dan and Ihlen referred to this as "framing expertise" (Olsson & Øyvind, 2018, p. 7). A significant component of framing competence is the ability to design frames that are appealing to media and follow the logic of the news media, such as dramatization, moral growth,

conflict orientation, and personalization of news. Since communications are intended to influence voter decisions at the polls, framing theory is regarded as socio-psychological in communication traditions. These framed messages are communicated to a large audience via mediated formats and are interpretative due to the subjective nature of the information presented. This theory was suitable for the current study as it can be applied to understand how political actors and the media frame campaign messages to shape public perception and engagement.

Literature Review

Propaganda, Fake News, and Politics in Nigeria

The establishment and ownership patterns of the Nigerian media, based on ethnicity and religion, are a major reason of its role in the dissemination propaganda (Okolie et al., 2021). The end of a government's four-year term in Nigeria is often filled with campaign messages as political aspirants convey messages to the public through the media to solicit their votes. From the traditional to the new media, the media environment is filled with voter education with an emphasis on the need to exercise one's franchise. These messages are sometimes sponsored by non-governmental organisations in conjunction with media houses or are carried out by political parties and actors. As politicians bring their messages, Okoli et al. (2021), asserted that the underpinning of the messages is a propaganda. Hence, the sophistication of the channels used by candidates and political parties to manage and transmit political information and campaign messages to the voters heavily influences the level of voter involvement. Therefore, the outcome of voter turnout during an electoral process is largely dependent on the strength of a party's propaganda apparatus.

Elections are a crucial component of a true and effective democratic system. The electoral process guarantees political participation, encourages political competition, and solidifies the rule of law. However, violence and interruptions have plagued the Nigerian elections throughout the years, costing many people their lives and homes. Violence is sparked by misleading news reports, otherwise known as fake news. In a conceptual review by Pate et al. (2019) on the nexus between fake news, hate speech, and Nigeria's struggle for democratic consolidation, political actors have the propensity to exploit the insecurity in various regions of the country, perceived marginalization, economic instability and the confusion

bedeviling the country to misinform, encourage apathy, or skew voting intentions. Fake news frequently takes advantage of societal rifts already present in Nigeria as it frequently targets particular ethnic or religious groups in an effort to incite conflict or sow discord.

The proliferation of fake news and its implications for the Nigerian polity have become a significant concern in the context of the emerging post-truth political era (Ibrahim & Pate, 2019). In the current dispensation of information communication technologies, Nigerians use social media extensively for news and information. Moreover, the country has a high internet penetration rate which aids the spread of fake news. To determine how to flatten the curve of fake news, Okocha and Chigbo (2023) in a focus group discussion believed that the kind of motive behind fake news is dark and sinister with an aim to achieve personal or group interest. According to Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019), the reason for the spread of fake news is attributed to the lack of trust by public towards the media. Hassan and Hitchen (2019) are of the view that in Nigeria, governors, parliamentary and presidential candidates hire individuals which they refer to as "propaganda secretaries". These individuals are hired to shape and reshape the political narratives and proliferate the misleading information through the use of digital media. These employed individuals serve as cyber warriors with the aim of undermining opponents by disseminating political propaganda on various social media platforms.

Politicians' Propagation of Fake News

An increasing number of people rely on social media as a source of news according to Hassan (2023). Social media is used to upload content in real time and the content is speedily received by many which makes it easy to spread fake news; thereby making it easy to manipulate public opinion. In a newspaper article, Adepetun and Omolaoye (2023) revealed how top presidential candidates employ the services of social media influencers to spread false information about their opponents. This information was made known by the Centre for Democracy Development (CDD) in conjunction with the British Broadcasting Commission (BBC) through investigative reporting. Ahead of the 2023 general elections, the report discovered that political parties in Nigeria secretly pay social media influencers to spread disinformation about their opponents. Along this line, politicians in Nigeria fuel the spread of fake news to achieve victory at polls.

The 2019 electoral period was brought about by violent propaganda messages posted on social media by political party agents; particularly, supporters or detractors of the two major parties and their candidates: former president Muhammadu Buhari of APC and former vice president Atiku Abubakar of PDP. The propaganda messages were aligned along religious sentiments where the APC was depicted as a Muslim party, while the PDP was pictured as a Christian party. Although, the then incumbent governor – Simon Lalong of APC was a Christian, and the aspiring governor was also a Christian, famous cleric, Sheik Yahaya Jingri openly campaigned against the PDP candidate, calling on all Muslims in the state to vote against him, claiming he would not protect the interest of Muslims. This polarization seen in the Plateau State began when Simon Lalong in 2015 attributed his victory to the Hausa Muslims of the state (Adinoyi, 2023).

Moreover, another instance of fake news fueled by political actors was seen after the 2023 presidential elections. There was a press release circulating on social media which read that the European Union (EU) with National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) called for sanctions on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman and the then president-elect, following the conduct of the elections. Findings by FactCheckHub indicated that the press release was based on fake news and was also debunked by EU delegates on their official Twitter handle. Additionally, the official spokesperson of President Tinubu, Ajuri Ngalale claimed that the UAE had lifted its visa ban on Nigeria following an official visit. However, an official of the UAE government refuted this claim, stating that the visa ban was still in effect. This highlights a classical example of propaganda by the government to gain the goodwill of people. It was disseminated by not only social media platforms, however, also by the government-owned and private media outlets. Moreover, it is also an attempt to manipulate the facts in order not to pass the intended message and also an example of how misinformation can spread easily. Additionally, before the Bayelsa, Kogi, and Imo states November 11, 2023, gubernatorial elections, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) came up with a statement signed by ID Ijele, the director of new media. The statement read that INEC was configuring Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) machines at the Government house in Lokaja to manipulate the state's governorship election. The statement was refuted by INEC with evidence to show that it was untrue.

Hazards of Unchecked Dissemination of Fake News and Propaganda

The current problem of fake news cannot be understood in isolation from the recent digital revolution of the news media environment. The paradigm shift is such that the dissemination of information has moved from the hands of those with power to the general public. This is largely attributed to technological innovation whereby, anybody can take pictures, write information, and make it available to the public. Therefore, the rigors of gatekeeping have been jettisoned as citizens are now carriers and distributors of information. According to Reglitz (2022), mainstream networks frequently battle for their listeners' trust by giving factual rather than deceptive information. When the internet became widely available, the situation altered radically. Consequently, it impacted the news media ecosystem by leading towards an increase in unverifiable and unchecked dissemination of information.

Furthermore, the revolution of news media environment has created echo chambers such that the internet users largely consume information which is in agreement with their pre-existing beliefs as stipulated by Peterson and Iyegenar (2019). Marchetti (2023) believes that adherence to these ideas results in biased mental representation, where ideology plays a vital role in the cognitive perception of the facts regardless of the real state of events. Location, career, beliefs, and decisions made by people on regular basis determine why they belong to certain chambers. Levy and Razin (2019) expounded on the phrase "echo" to refer to the possibility of information being repeated and magnified within a chamber. Moreover, it was also referred to as the possibility of just hearing a small number of opinions—those similar to a person's initial viewpoints. Therefore, it can be deduced that in the political environment, people are more likely to believe fake news when it confirms their preexisting partisan preferences and seek out information with 'inaccurate beliefs' that portray their favorite party in a better light than the others.

Democracy, being the system of government in Nigeria, recognizes the presence of public sphere where the views and opinions of the populace are made known. While, social media has provided an environment for the public sphere for over three years to partake actively in democracy. Its impact has created a loss in the common public sphere. No doubt, there is an increase in inclusive political information, however, there is a dearth of political communication and objective deliberations due to the echo

chambers found on the internet. Thwait (2019) ascertains polarization and fragmentation as implications of echo chambers. Additionally, Ibrahim and Pate (2019) posit that media consumers get confused pertaining to the truthfulness of an information when they consume fake news, which can erode public confidence in all news sources.

The implication of fake news as stated by Madu et al. (2022) in the electoral process of the country incites unrest. Political parties tend to influence the circulation of fabricated results during elections that would conflict with the verified electoral results released by the electoral umpire. The disparity in results may fuel widespread violence. Fake news has a detrimental impact on Nigerian politics, fostering a climate of misinformation, distrust, and polarization among citizens. Reglitz (2022) also opines that fake news spread online or via the mainstream media and endangers the democratic principles and processes by lowering the perceived validity of democratic institutions. This is because it has the potential to increase and deepen the current political polarization as well as popular cynicism in democratic institutions, fostering system compromise and deadlock. Additionally, it hurts citizens since it is a contributing factor to citizens' epistemic trust in each other's political opinions and judgments.

Besides politics, the proliferation of fake news harms Nigeria's religious and ethnic balance. According to this point of view, Okoro et al. (2018) stated that the spread of fake news about Nigeria being the most difficult country for Christians to live in might be ascribed to politics, which is destroying the nation's peace and unity. In other words, it is possible to conclude that the ultimate goal of spreading fake news about religion and regional crises is to instill fear, anxiety, and divisiveness among ethnic groups.

Curbing Fake News

A study was conducted by Igbinovia et al. (2021) which examined the effect of Information Literacy Competency (ILC) in curtailing the spread of fake news. Findings showed that curbing fake news can be achieved when institutions that can detect fake news are given top priority for improvement. Additionally, incorporating information literacy into regular school curriculum at all levels is paramount in reducing fake news. In another research, Apuke and Omar (2020), in discussing the proliferation of fake news in Nigeria suggested that, for fake news to be curbed, a focus

should be placed on raising awareness regarding the threats posed by fake news. Deliberate efforts must be made to educate people on the importance of being responsible when creating and spreading knowledge. Additionally, Nigerian social media users should be urged to verify the accuracy of information before sharing it with others. Beyond the headlines, it is necessary to check the authors, conduct an in-depth investigation of news articles by checking the dates, and consult professionals when in doubt. Furthermore, identifying and monitoring the tweets of network influencers may aid in the early debunking of fake news and discourage the use of offensive terms on social media (Gbaje et al., 2023).

Similarly, Aboyade, et al. (2022), in proffering ways to curb the spread of fake news, looked into the matter from the telecommunications standpoint. This is largely because most of the fake news is considered to be financially driven. Therefore, one of the most effective ways to combat fake news is by reducing economic incentives for promulgators of misinformation who profit by posing as credible news outlets and posting hoaxes that go viral visitors to their websites. Additionally, companies in the telecommunication industry should develop innovative goods to detect and control the spread of fake news on their platforms.

Research Methodology

The current study employed a quantitative research approach where survey was adopted and questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection. Using the projected population of 4.7 million as provided by the population development of Plateau State in 2022, this research employed the sample size calculation provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). It posits that a sample size of 384 is sufficient for a population above one million. However, out of the questionnaires distributed, a total of 373 questionnaires were retrieved and used for analysis from which findings and conclusions were made.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Details of Respondents

Characteristics	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	190	50.9
	Female	183	49.1

Characteristics	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Total	373	100
	18-24	82	21.9
	25-30	139	37.3
	31-40	105	28.2
Age Range	41-50	37	9.9
	51 years and above	10	2.7
	Total	373	100
	Civil Servant	73	19.6
	Government Official	27	7.2
Occupation	Self-Employed	128	34.3
	Student	108	28.9
	Others	37	9.9
	Total	373	100

Table above provides the category of people surveyed for this study which include; 190 (50.9%) male respondents and 183(49.1%) female respondents. A total of 139 (37.3%) respondents were between 25-30 years of age, 128 (34.3%) respondents were self-employed with 108 (28.9%) respondents as students. This indicates that majority of the people surveyed were youths.

Table 2

Understanding of the Term Propaganda

Response	Frequency	Percentage
A persuasive and manipulative technique	73	19.6
A political campaign message	63	16.9
A lie with an aim to divert voter's attention from actual motive	106	28.4
The truth of a matter put in a way people would easily buy it	52	13.9
All of the above	75	20.1
No Response	4	1.0
Total	373	100

Data indicates that majority of the respondents 106 (28.4%) believed that propaganda is a lie to divert voter's attention from an actual motive.

However, 75 (20.1%) respondents agreed that all the options define propaganda.

Table 3

Understanding of the Term Fake News

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Information that is factually inaccurate and deliberately shared	68	18.2
Information that is not true yet thought to be true and shared	76	20.4
Information that may or may not be news but shared only for the gain	65	17.4
Information that is said from the wrong angle or perspective	59	15.8
All of the above	98	26.3
No response	7	1.9
Total	373	100

Table 3 shows that 98 (26.3%) respondents identified the meaning of fake news to be information that is inaccurate, not true, and from a wrong perspective yet, shared deliberately for the gains.

Table 4

Major Source of Information

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Television	80	21.4
Radio	30	8
Social Media	227	60.9
Newspaper	16	4.3
Others	19	5
No response	1	0.3
Total	373	100

Table 4 shows that 227 (60.9%) respondents received information from social media, while 16 (4.3%) respondents got information from newspapers. Furthermore, other sources of news as identified by 19 (5%) respondents include discussion with peers, politicians, and people around.

Table 5

Politicians Partake in the Spread of Fake News

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very Unlikely	38	10.2
Unlikely	35	9.4
Neutral	93	24.9
Likely	104	27.9
Very Likely	102	27.3
No Response	1	0.3
Total	373	100

Table above shows that 104 (27.9%) respondents think that politicians are likely to share fake news and 102 (27.3%) respondents think that politicians are very likely to share fake news. On the other hand, 38 (10.2%) and 35 (9.4%) respondents are of the view that politicians are very likely or unlikely to spread fake news, respectively.

Table 6

Political Party that Spreads Fake News the Most in Nigeria

Response	Frequency	Percentage
PDP (People's Democratic Party)	47	12.6
APC (All Progressive Congress)	186	49.9
LP (Labour Party)	34	9.1
NNPP (New Nigeria People's Party)	9	2.4
All of the above	97	26
Total	373	100

Nationally, the APC political party, according to 186 (49.9%) respondents, is thought to spread fake news more than other parties. However, 97 (26%) respondents believe that all political parties spread fake news.

Table 7

Political Party that Heavily Employs the Use of Propaganda

Response	Frequency	Percentage
PDP (People's Democratic Party)	94	25.2
APC (All Progressive Congress)	210	56.3
LP (Labour Party)	49	13.1
NNPP (New Nigeria People's Party)	18	4.8

Response	Frequency	Percentage
No Response	2	0.6
Total	373	100

According to 210 (56.3%) respondents, the APC political party uses propaganda considerably. Whereas, 94 (25.2%) respondents believe that PDP employs the heavy use of propaganda.

Table 8

How Politicians Partake in the Spread of Fake News

Response	Frequency	Percentage
By providing incomplete information	25	6.7
By making statements that incite	68	18.2
Sponsoring the fake news	88	23.6
Debunking authentic information	52	13.9
All of the above	133	35.7
None of the above	7	1.9
Total	373	100

Majority of the respondents, that is, 133 (35.7%), believe that politicians spread fake news through all the above options provided. However, 88 (23.6%) respondents believe that they sponsor the spread of fake news.

Table 9

During Elections, I made a Decision Based on an Information that was Fake and Later Had to Change

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	46	12.3
Disagree	99	26.5
Undecided	71	19
Agree	115	30.8
Strongly Agree	39	10.5
No Response	3	0.8
Total	373	100

Decisions made at 2023 elections, based on fake news and changed later as seen in Table 9 was done by 115 (30.8%) respondents, while 46 (12.3%) respondents strongly disagreed not to have made decisions that were fake.

Table 10

During Elections, the Messages on Media Informs the Decision to Vote

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	56	15
Disagree	129	34.6
Undecided	75	20.1
Agree	74	19.8
Strongly Agree	39	10.5
Total	373	100

The data above shows that 129 (34.6%) respondents did not rely on the messages received from the media to make decisions at the polls. While, 74 (19.8%) and 39 (10.5%) respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively.

Table 11

I deliberately Avoid Consuming Messages that Do Not Align with My Views on Issues.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	73	19.6
Disagree	119	31.9
Undecided	70	18.8
Agree	78	20.9
Strongly Agree	30	8
No response	3	0.8
Total	373	100

While 78 (20.9%) respondents agreed to consume information that does not align with their perspective, 119 (31.9%) of them disagreed and were open to consume information that does not align with their views as seen in Table 11 above.

Table 12

Use of Media for Propaganda by Politicians Leads to Victory that Ends in Bad Governance

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	115	30.8

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Disagree	120	32.2
Undecided	66	17.7
Agree	49	13.1
Strongly Agree	23	6.2
Total	373	100

As seen in Table 12 above, 115 (30.8%) respondents strongly disagreed that propaganda leads to victory that ends in bad governance, while 23 (6.2%) respondents strongly agreed.

Table 13

There Should be a Regulatory Body to Censor the Speech of Political Aspirants

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	115	30.8
Disagree	136	36.5
Undecided	57	15.3
Agree	46	12.3
Strongly Agree	19	5.1
Total	373	100

In response to having a regulatory body to sensor the speech of political aspirants, a total of 115 (30.8%) respondents strongly disagreed and 136 (36.5%) disagreed in contrast to 19 (5.1%) respondents and 46 (12.3%) respondents who strongly disagreed and agreed, respectively.

Discussion

The current study aimed to ascertain whether Nigerian politicians disseminate fake news and propaganda. Table 5 and 6 show that the majority of people in Plateau State believe that political actors are involved in the spread of fake news and propaganda. Due to the reason that the APC and PDP are two well-known political parties, many tilted towards them as the major purveyors of fake news that employ heavy use of propaganda. However, during data analysis, it was observed that older respondents believed that Labour Party (LP) was considerably engaged in the use of propaganda. The use of propaganda by politicians is in line with the core assumption of the propaganda model that, money and power can control the narrative of news stories to allow the government and dominant private

interests get their messages across to the public. Furthermore, through framing, political actors use strategic communication to persuade the news media in order to modify and embrace their perspective. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that these political actors do not achieve the spread of fake news and propaganda in the open and by themselves. Hassan and Hitchen (2019) are of the view that governors, parliamentary and presidential candidates in Nigeria, hire individuals which they refer to as "propaganda secretaries" to shape and reshape their political narratives and proliferate misleading information, especially through the use of digital media. Thus, the social implication of this finding is that it leads to the destruction of democracy by endangering its principles and processes. Eventually, it leads towards a low perceived validity of the Nigerian democratic institutions since propaganda and fake news have the potential to deepen the current political polarization, leading towards a chaotic situation.

The second objective of this study was to highlight the cases of politicians' promotion/propagation of fake news and propaganda. As seen in Table 8, a large number of respondents, 88 (23.6%) individuals out of the sample size, strongly believe that politicians sponsor the spread of fake news. According to Adepetun and Omolaoye (2023), prominent political candidates pay for the services of social media influencers to spread false information. Additionally, 133 (35.7%) respondents are of the view that fake news does not only spread through sponsorship, however, it also spreads by providing incomplete information, debunking credible information, and providing information that incites the public. As argued by Madu et al. (2022), fake news spurs conflict in the electoral process of the country. Political parties tend to influence the circulation of fabricated results that are conflicting with the verified electoral results released by the electoral umpire during elections. The disparity in results has the potential to fuel widespread violence. From the secondary data gathered, politicians and other political actors, partake in the spread of fake news and propaganda to gain the goodwill of people. The example provided on President Tinubu's visit to the UAE shows that the messages by political actors are strategically framed to persuade the news media in order to modify and embrace their perspective as traditional media houses in the country carried the report. Thus, it creates distrust in politicians, political institutions, and the media institutions by the public.

Framing theory investigates how media frames can selectively emphasize certain parts of an issue while downplaying or eliminating the others, thereby molding the public opinion. Table 9 shows that 115 (30.8%) respondents agreed to make decisions based on fake news during electoral periods. Although, they later changed their decisions which is a clear indication that the spread of fake news causes people to make choices that are not based on truth. This is in corroboration with Reglitz (2022) who states that fake news hurts citizens since it is a contributing factor to a decline in citizens' epistemic trust in each other's political opinions and judgments.

Lastly, this study examined on how fake news and propaganda can be curbed. Online users and consumers need to stay open to other perspectives and viewpoints in order to make informed decisions. Table 11 shows that 119 (31.9%) respondents deliberately consumed messages that do not align with their views. This indicates how public disengages from echo chambers, a tool used by political actors to fuel fake news and propaganda. However, in response to having a regulatory body to censor the speech of political aspirants, 115 (30.8%) respondents strongly disagreed and 136 (36.5%) disagreed in contrast to 19 (5.1%) respondents and 46 (12.3%) respondents who strongly agreed and agreed, respectively as seen in Table 13. Therefore, the task to curb fake news lies with the media where they need to authenticate information before its dissemination, as stated by Apuke and Omar (2020).

Conclusion

True democracy in Nigeria would only remain a mirage if necessary actions are not taken to tackle the spread of fake news and propaganda in the country. The irony of the situation is that the government officials and political actors, responsible to curb the menace of fake news, are themselves the ardent sponsors of false information. It is an appalling fact that we are living in an era where truth in politics is not a virtue as lies are told in the form of propaganda just to gain the goodwill of people. Therefore, this study concluded that the spread of fake news and propaganda by politicians is a proof that national interest is not a priority as seen from the selfish agenda demonstrated by the politicians. This practice has become a canker over the years that has eaten the fabric of Nigerian democracy deeply.

Recommendations

The current study proposed following recommendations to curb the spread of fake news:

1. Nigerian politicians should refrain from deploying social media influencers to spread fake news.

2. Politicians need to have their facts checked to avoid making statements that could be fake or are a form of propaganda.

3. The media need to realign their ideologies in order to avoid being used by politicians for their selfish gains as well as to curb the dangers that come with the dissemination of fake news.

4. Organizations, such as the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation should train more people on fact-checking to help the electorate from making wrong decisions at the polls.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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