

## Chapter 14

# Social Media and the Challenges of Curtailing the Spread of Fake News in Nigeria

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The rising trend of fake news on social media in Nigeria has raised serious concern about the survival of the country's fledgling democracy especially as the country prepares for the 2019 polls which is expected to usher in a new set of leaders. The federal government had in response to the menace which has reached an alarming proportion launched a campaign against fake news in July 2018 to raise awareness about the dangers fake news portends for the polity. While some applaud the government for the initiative, others lampoon the government for chasing shadows instead of addressing the root cause. This chapter therefore examines the issues, controversies and problems associated with the deadly scourge and proffer solutions to halt the growing menace of fake news in the country.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's contemporary society, social media has become a common and important factor as it touches every facet of our daily life. It has affected business; politics and the way people communicate and socialize on the web positively. The popularity of the internet has enabled individuals use social media tools to connect with each other online. Many businesses effectively use social media tools to market their products and connect with existing and potential customers (Smith, n.d.; Petersen, 2018).

Social media has gained attention as the most viable communication choice for bloggers, article writers, content creators and other users. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as a group of internet-based application that build the ideological and technological foundation of web 2.0 and that allow creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media includes all forms of electronic communication, such as social networking sites and microblogs, through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (images, videos).

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## ***Social Media and the Challenges of Curtailing the Spread of Fake News in Nigeria***

Over the years, social media has grown rapidly because it serves various social needs. It has grown because of the increasing importance of networking. Social networking sites (Facebook), microblogging services (Twitter), content sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr) have introduced the opportunity for large scale online social participation.

The positive effects notwithstanding, social media has its flipside. Its negative aspects could be seen in cyber bullying, invasion of privacy, cyber stalking, fake news, among others. Fake news is a global phenomenon (Elebeke, 2018, p. 18) that modern societies had to contend with in this digital age. Fake news means different thing to different people. To most people, fake news means fabricated new stories presented without any credible evidence and for the apparent purpose to misinform or to persuade through misinformation. Others use the term to simply describe a news story from a traditional source that contains a mistake or news that seems to contradict their own point of view. However, Rini (2017, p. 45) defines a fake news story as one that “purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false and is transmitted with the two goals of being re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience”

The spread of fake news could either be politically motivated or economically driven (Angus, 2018, Hunt, 2016, POLITICO, 2017). Creators of fake news post articles on their websites and share them on Facebook and other platforms to generate a lot of web traffic, which earns them money. Audience consumes fake news from a variety of sources and young and old people are susceptible (Marzilli, n.d.). But particularly susceptible are young people. Fake news comes in different forms that include distorted truth, outright lies, and exaggerated facts and so on.

There is no doubt that the advent of social media as a veritable means of information dissemination has made communication easier. It has also made the world a global village. But the obvious problems being observed on the social media platforms these days are the prevalence of fake news, distorted facts, hate speeches, blackmail and others, capable of plunging the society into undue crisis (Ezea, 2018). Some social media users have latched on the non-regulation and confidentiality of the platforms to abuse it, using it to spread fake news, hate speeches and distort facts to suit their selfish desires.

From WhatsApp to Facebook, people often spread fabricated messages of news information, which their sources and motives cannot be verified or determined. The trend has been on the increase in Nigeria to the extent that, at the peak of President MuhammaduBuhari’s sick leave at the United Kingdom, some social media users capitalizing on non-disclosure of their identities cloned the website of London-based newspaper Metro UK to announce Buhari’s demise. Expectedly, the fake news which, gone viral on social media platforms created panic, fear and confusion in the country. Not even the consistent denials and explanations by the presidential spokesmen (Femi Adesina and Garba Shehu) could calm the frayed nerves. Many had believed the fake news because of the reputation of the London-based newspaper, without knowing that the story did not emanate from it.

Many bloggers in Nigeria without fixed addresses are busy spreading fake news on their blogs, using it to blackmail and extort money from people. On several occasions, some of them have been arrested, while many are still operating undisturbed. It is because of the prevalence of fake news on the social media and its capacity to undermine the security of a country that some national governments have legislate against the use of social media in their countries. Attempts by the Nigerian government to streamline the use of social media were greeted by opposition and criticisms. The National Assembly is currently working on a bill to criminalize hate speech spewing especially from social media. But whether this proposed law will be able to curtail the growing trend of fake news, disinformation and hate speech on social media in the country is a matter of conjecture.

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