

ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ACTIONS AGAINST HARMFUL EFFECTS OF FAKE NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG RESIDENTS OF ENUGU METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the level of awareness and actions against harmful effects of exposure to fake news among residents of Enugu metropolis. The study adopted survey method while questionnaire was used as instrument to generate quantitative data used for the study. The researchers adopted multi-stage random sampling to select 384 respondents from the four Local Government Areas that make up Enugu metropolis for the study. Media Ecology Theory was adopted as a suitable theoretical framework for the study. The study found, among other things that there is high awareness of the existence of fake news on social media among residents of Enugu metropolis. It also found that there is high awareness that exposure to fake news can be harmful. However, the study revealed that high level of awareness about the existence of fake news on social media platforms and of the dangers of exposure to such fake news does not influence residents' view of the need to interrogate any news on social media before believing them. Similarly, despite the high level of awareness of the existence of fake news on social media and the danger of exposure to them, most respondents do not bother about the importance of checking if information they got on social media is true before sharing them with others and spreading them online. The researchers therefore recommend that there is need to embark on general social media use education/campaign among residents of Enugu metropolis. The campaign should focus on creating awareness of and inculcating the habit of interrogating any information on social media to confirm that they are true before believing them and before sharing them with others and spreading them online. The education should aim to reduce the urge to quickly share and spread information until such information has been confirmed as true.

Keywords: Assessment, Public Awareness, Fake News, Social Media

Introduction

Using social media platforms for information dissemination and gathering is now a popular practice especially among young people. There is a growing trend of people getting involved in the use of one or more social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and others in search of current information. Most young people are so attached to their mobile devices and frequently visit social media platforms in order to keep

up to date with recent information about things happening around them and in different parts of the world. Like any other information, the information gotten through social media networks can have positive or negative influence on people. When most people receive information on social media platforms, they do not only spread such information verbally to people around them. They copy and share such information online through other social media platforms and handles available to them. In some cases, such information has capacity to evoke an emotional response in the receiver. Unfortunately, the person spreading the information may not have checked to confirm whether the information being shared is true or not (Cook et al., 2012). This way, both true and false information continue to be spread like wild fire as most people may not have the capacity to interrogate the contents of the news to which they are exposed.

One of the developments associated with the increasing use of the social media in most societies today is the spreading of fake news. Fake news can be best described as a manipulated or fabricated story with the intention of misleading people. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (2019), fake news is completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or misinform people; information, photos or videos manipulated to deceive, or old photographs shared as new; satire or parody which means no harm but can fool people. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) noted that fake news represents an array of misleading news style stories that were fabricated and promoted on social media to deceive the public for ideological and/or financial gain.

There has not been a time when fake news is spread so fast and wide in clever ways that makes it very difficult to identify it as fake than now. People can now use some software applications to create believable false contents. Tools such as Photoshop can be used to doctor photographs and make it difficult for undiscerning members of the public to know that the photograph was doctored and not real.

There are genuine reasons to be concerned about the spread of fake news in the present generation using social media platforms and handles. Fake news spread faster through the social media because there are no measures to restrict or check information before they are released to the masses. One major challenge of social media sites is that they are mostly open, free and unrestricted (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Today, professional editors and journalists no longer have control of the information that people can access (McGrew et al, 2017). Everyone who has access to the internet can generate and spread any content whether true or false. Individuals, groups, organizations, parties, and politicians can create any information they want to create and spread same through social media. Such unverified information can have great impact on the perception and opinion of the public.

Unfortunately, nobody has the responsibility of checking the information being spread online in most platforms to confirm if they are true or false, fake or real. It is left for individual media consumers to evaluate the information at their disposal (McGrew et al., 2017), and to either believe them or reject them. It is understandable that not every media consumer has the capacity to determine the information that is false or true, fake or real. Some are so gullible that they accept whatever they read hook, line and sinker.

Allcott and Gentzkow (cited above); and Hirst (2017) examined the motivations behind the creation and spreading of false information. They noted that fake news generation is mostly fueled by commercial motivations and political motivations. Some create and disseminate fake news in order to drive traffic of readership to their news site in order to drive more advertising revenue. Others create false information for political reasons. They seek to

manipulate the minds of the public against political opponents by creating false information intended to defame and damage their public image.

Fake and false information spreading without checks on social media platforms should be a matter of concern to all because most people depend on social media as their major and most easily accessible source of information. Many people do not consult professionally edited media sources to crosscheck the information they receive online (Klein & Wueller, 2017). This increases public vulnerability to manipulation and other negative impacts of exposure to false information.

Pennycook et al. (2017) noted that fake news is most likely to be believed by many people if it is shared and liked by many others. Similarly, some would be more likely to believe a fake content as true due to prior exposure. That is, if a fake content is shared widely, people are likely going to be exposed to them repeatedly. In the minds of members of the public, seeing such information repeatedly may mean that the information is true. Similarly, if users think that a website or online news source appears to be journalistic, they are most likely to believe the false content. That is why some fake news producers exploit this by employing journalistic-sounding names for the fake news sources (Klein and Wueller, 2017).

Members of the public can take certain steps to identify false information. This can be done by manual efforts or by automated approaches of veracity check (Albright, 2017). Some of the measures that people can take include:

1. **Checking the source:** This involves making efforts to ensure that the source is credible and has good reputation.
2. **Be skeptical of dramatic headlines:** headlines that are dramatic are probably exaggerating something. It is important to double check such information.
3. **Check the language:** Lots of spelling or grammatical errors may also be a sign that indicates that the information did not go through editing thorough editing.
4. **Confirm with other reliable sources:** check other news sites to see if the same story is running on multiple credible sources.

Statement of the problem

Individuals want to be informed; they want to be able to know what is happening around them. They want to know what happened, why it happened, where it happened, when it happened and who is involved. Before the advent of social media, people depended on conventional media of mass communication like radio, television, newspapers and magazines for accurate information about things that happen in different parts of the world. That situation has changed. Most people now depend on social media platforms for information. Unfortunately, there are no gatekeepers to double check information before they are released through the social media platforms and handles. The emergence of social media has made news content lack credibility and authenticity because everybody has become content creators. Emergence of social media has transformed people from being passive and at the receiving end of one way mass communication to becoming active producers and transmitters of information.

Some people build information on lies in order to deceive the audience. Unfortunately, most internet users like bloggers post fake news just to drive traffic to their websites, while

others generate and spread fake news for fun. Some generate fake news with the intention of harming someone or a group, while others do so, expecting to benefit from the emotional reactions of people. Some do it deliberately to achieve certain premeditated goals of damaging the reputation of others, causing agitations, and outright confusion in society. Information is powerful, fake information can be negatively powerful. False information can be dangerous as it can lead people to reactions that could be very destructive to self, to others and to society. On the basis of the situation described above, the researchers desired to examine the awareness of residents of Enugu metropolis about the danger of exposure to fake news on social media, believing, and spreading same without checking to confirm if such information is true.

Research questions

In line with the research objectives, the following research questions were formulated⁷

1. To what extent are residents of Enugu metropolis aware of the existence of fake news on social media platforms?
2. To what extent are residents of Enugu metropolis aware of the dangers associated with believing and spreading fake news on social media platforms?
3. To what extent do residents of Enugu metropolis interrogate news which they read on social media before believing or sharing them?
4. To what extent do residents of Enugu metropolis believe that it is necessary not to share social media contents before confirming if they are true?

Social Media and Fake news in Nigeria

Spence, Lachlan, Edwards, and Edwards (2016) stated that misinformation is more quickly disseminated through social media when there is high uncertainty and high demand for public information about the issues such as crisis and health concerns. Adeleke (2016) stated that the spread of the fake news on the internet is caused by the internet's ever connected nature and the preference for speed over accuracy. Because internet content providers and distributors are in a battle for attention and advertising revenue, they will do any and everything to boost traffic. Unfortunately, many journalists also, while competing for attention and mindshare, are forced to publish first and verify later. Thus the spread of fake news has become a global problem which is heavily manifest in Nigeria.

Amobi (2019) opined that false claims are on the rise in Nigeria, partly because of citizen journalism. The advent of social media and users' ability to generate their own content has further increased the presence and reach of misinformation. False claims can spread fast, taking on the garb of truth. News sites and blogs in Nigeria according to Adeleke (2016) publish stories without first authenticating the sources. Fake news stories are usually sensational in nature and so are very likely to spread quickly. And because the platforms containing the news already have a massive readership base that looks to them for information, the stories will most likely be believed by the people that read them. These people will, in turn, share the story on social media in order to pride themselves on being the first to know. Sometimes, even after the story has been debunked, the fake news still prevails.

Fake news has been declared a huge challenge in Nigeria because of the fragile social setting in the country, as well as her loose democratic culture, poverty, illiteracy, depressing human conditions, inflation, weak economy, intolerance and high tendencies for disunity among the peoples of Nigeria (Ogola, 2017). Ogbette et al., (2019) observed that fake news creates tension, killings and pandemonium which are not good for the peace and unity of Nigeria and the world at large. They observed that the major causes of fake news in Nigeria include quest for relevance, hostile government and civil actors, poor regularization / of the internet and money making. Fake news is contributing to insecurity in Nigeria especially now when the country is facing different crises like fulani-herdsmen and farmers crisis, militancy, and so on which goes a long way to create tension, killings and pandemonium.

In Nigeria, there are many instances of false claims causing avoidable harm to citizens. From 2002 to 2006, false claims about the polio vaccine contributed to the increase in polio cases in Nigeria. Political and religious leaders in the northern Kano, Zamfara and Kaduna states claimed, without evidence, that the vaccine was laced with HIV, anti-fertility agents and carcinogens, so as to reduce the population of mainly Muslim region. The claims ended vaccination campaigns, allowing the crippling disease to claim more victims (Africa Check, 2017). In 2014 during the outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), false information circulated through text messages and posts on social media claiming that hot water and salt prevent Ebola and equally cure infected patients. According to World Health Organization (2014) at least two people died after drinking salt water.

Amobi (2019) noted that in 2017, the Nigerian Army had just begun a free medical service of administering polio vaccination as part of its military operations in South-East of Nigeria when rumours were circulated that the army was going to schools to inject pupils with the monkey pox virus. This caused massive panic that led to the closure of some schools. Students hurriedly left their schools, while worried parents came to pick up their wards.

Okakwu (2018) observed that the current Minister of Information in Nigeria, Alhaji Lai Mohammed argued that fake news is not restricted to the social media alone. He pointed out that on 5th July, 2018, the front page headline of a national newspaper was: Court orders National Assembly to begin impeachment of Buhari. According to the Minister, the news was fake news. Quoting the certified true copy of the order, the Minister noted that the order of the court was manipulated to read that the court has given the go-ahead for the National Assembly to commence impeachment proceedings against the President. Similarly, Elebeke (2018) noted that in 2017, a fake report circulated on the social media claiming that five students of the College of Education, Gidan Waya, were ambushed and killed by Fulani herdsmen in Southern Kaduna. That report turned out to be false. No student was killed. In 2017 also, false information went viral claiming that President Muhammadu Buhari was dead. This was when the President travelled on health leave to the United Kingdom. In October 2019, there was another viral rumour all over the social media space in Nigeria that the President is taking another wife. The rumour was supported with supposed invitation cards. Ahmed (2020), noted that the recent outbreak of Corona Virus has also witnessed the spreading of a lot of false information about the virus in Nigeria.

Harmful effects of fake news

Regrettably, fake news has the ability to trigger quick actions, outcomes and consequences,

especially if they are spread through social media (Pennycook et al, 2017). Fake news can be quite serious and can pose real dangers to society in many ways. Fake news can be used to damage people's reputation. Spreading lies about someone can change the way people feel about him or her. Fake news can cause public harm. The spread of false information may lead to physical harm on members of the public. The spread of fake news has generated tension between races and religious groups by fueling hatred among people of different race and religion. Fake news is also known to have caused tension between the public and government when unverified information concerning government and its activities is spread. This may lead to crisis and unnecessary protests. Spreading of fake news could result to violence, cause public disorder and chaos and lead to murder of innocent people. Disseminating false information can trigger fear and panic reactions in people. In Nigeria, fake news reportedly caused so many people to bath with salt water during the outbreak of Ebola. Fake news can be very harmful. Currently, lots of fake, false and misleading information are on social media relating to Covid 19 pandemic.

Nyhan, Brendan, Reifler, and Jason (2015) noted that one of the challenges of fake news is that misinformation can be very difficult to correct and may have lasting effects even after it is discredited. Consequently, false information may continue to influence beliefs and attitudes even after being debunked if it is not replaced by an alternate casual explanation.

Efforts against fake news in Nigeria

There have been a lot of campaign efforts geared towards combating fake news in Nigeria. As reported by Premium Times newspaper on July 11, 2018, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched a national campaign against fake news. During the campaign, the Minister of Information, Alhaji Lai Mohammed likened the effects of fake news to a time bomb waiting to explode. He said the campaign will employ active collaborations engaging digital as well as traditional media operators and the National Orientation Agency to educate Nigerians on the effect of fake news on Nigeria's democracy and corporate existence as a nation as well as on the peace and security, and the fact that all Nigerian citizens have a role to play in curtailing the spread of fake news.

Ahmed (2020) recalls that the World Health Organization partnered with WhatsApp, a popular social media platform, to halt the spread of fake news on the Corona Virus outbreak. The initiative called WhatsApp Corona Virus Information Hub was a response to the spread of misleading information on social media, most especially on WhatsApp about the pandemic. The hub is geared to offer simple, actionable guidance, general tips, and resources for users around the world to be better informed about the disease and hence reduce the spread of rumours. With this new initiative by WhatsApp, a platform widely used among Nigerians, the people can rely on a credible source to get facts and figures on the pandemic without any compromise.

Reducing the spread of Fake News

Oberiri and Bahiyah (2020), stated that in order to reduce the spread of fake news, there is need to increase media and information literacy among the citizens, especially among young people. The aim is to make people critical in accessing and responding to media messages. They noted that there should be constant adverts, workshops, jingles on TV and Radio as a part of the strategy to fight circulation of fake news. Social media users should be

encouraged to check the integrity of the information they receive, before sharing it with others. They believe that fake news has become a menace which could only be curbed by sustained collective efforts, involving individuals and all policy makers. They also proposed that the Federal Government of Nigeria should mobilize its agencies like the Ministry of Information and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to increase campaigns against fake news in Nigeria, particularly as it concerns national security.

Theoretical Framework: Media Ecology Theory

This study is anchored on Media Ecology Theory (MET). The concept of the theory was proposed by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 while the term was first formally introduced by Neil Postman in 1968. McLuhan sought to define the relationship between media technology and members of a specific culture. He noted that electronic media have brought far reaching changes in society as society has become dependent on these communication technologies and that it is difficult to locate any society that is not influenced by electronic media. The theory upholds three key assumptions: One, media are infused into every act and action in society; Two, media fix our perceptions and organize our experiences; Three, media tie the world together. These assumptions seek to explain that media are powerful in shaping the way people view the world around them. Octavio et al (2016) stated that MET is the study of media as environments and that the theory seeks to interpret how media of communication influence human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how interaction with media facilitates or impedes human chances of survival. It also claims that media act directly to shape and organize culture. It tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing, why media make us feel and act as we do. Kaialiisa (2012) while discussing MET, upholds that media environment gives us information and creates stereotypes and prejudices of things and people, but it gives us also broader choices to choose what we would like to do with our lives.

The assumptions of the theory are found as suitable framework for the study in the following sense: Social media have become ubiquitous and so intertwined with the daily lives of so many people today. Information on social media contributes immensely in determining how people understand and interpret the world. Social media more than any other form of media binds people together across the world. False information created in one part of the globe can spread so fast to millions of people across the globe and may lead to unimaginable impact.

Methodology

The researchers adopted survey as the design for the study. The population for the study was 968,300 drawn from the areas that constitute Enugu metropolis. These are Enugu East LGA, Enugu North LGA, and Enugu South LGA. The sample size of the study is 384. The researchers applied multi-stage random sampling technique to select two towns from each of the participating LGA's first. Sixty-four respondents were then drawn from each of the towns for the study. Questionnaire was deployed as instrument for gathering data needed for the study. The questionnaire was administered to each respondent directly by a team of research assistants. Data collected from the field were presented in simple percentage tables for interpretation and analysis.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Three hundred and eighty-four (384) copies of the research questionnaire were distributed, out of which 38 copies were not retrieved and 348 (90.6%) were returned, validly completed and used for analysis.

Table 1: Respondents' awareness of the existence of fake news on social media platforms

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Yes	272	78.2
No	32	9.2
Can't Say	44	12.6
Total	348	100.0

Majority of the respondents (78.2%) indicated that they are aware of the existence of fake news on social media platforms. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that there is high awareness of the existence of fake news on social media platforms among residents in Enugu metropolis.

Table 2: Respondents' awareness of the dangers associated with believing and spreading fake news.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	18	5.2
Disagree	20	5.7
Undecided	13	3.8
Agree	101	29.0
Strongly Agree	196	56.3
Total	348	100

Majority of the respondents (85%) agree and strongly agree that they are aware of the dangers associated with believing and spreading fake news. Therefore awareness is also high as relates to dangers associated with spreading fake news.

Table 3: Respondents' view on the importance of interrogating any news from social media before believing them

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	202	58
Disagree	96	27.6
Undecided	26	7.5
Agree	16	4.6
Strongly Agree	8	2.3
Total	348	100

Majority of the respondents (85%) strongly disagree and disagree that it is important to always interrogate news from social media before believing them. This indicates that they will likely believe any social media content without questioning them.

Table 4: Participants' views on the importance of not sharing unconfirmed social media contents

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	98	28.2
Disagree	85	24.4
Undecided	25	7.2
Agree	76	21.8
Strongly Agree	64	18.4
Total	348	100

Slightly above half of the respondents (52%) strongly disagree and disagree that it is important not to share any social media content before confirming that it is true.

Discussion of Findings

From the data presented above, it is safe to conclude that there is high awareness of the existence of fake news on social media platforms among residents of Enugu metropolis. This agrees with Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) who noted that the quantity of fake and false information on social media is very high. There is also a high awareness that exposure to fake news can be harmful. However, the high level of awareness about existence of fake news on social media and the dangers of exposure to fake news does not influence residents' view of the need to interrogate news on social media before believing them. This agrees with Klein and Wueller (2017) when they observed that so many people do not bother to check if social media contents are true before believing them. Similarly, above half of the respondents do not think it is important to avoid spreading social media contents before confirming if such information is true or false. This finding agrees with the views of Adeleke (2016) that people share information fast, preferring speed to accuracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers conclude that awareness of existence of fake news on social media and awareness of the dangers of exposure to fake news alone does not influence residents' attitude and actions relating to believing and sharing social media contents without verification and authentication. The researchers therefore strongly recommend in agreement with Oberiri and Bahiyah (2020), that residents of Enugu are in serious need of education on the need to question any social media content before believing them and sharing them. They should be thought how to check if social media content is true or false. They should be oriented to avoid the urge to quickly share information with anyone else until they have independently confirmed that such information is true. The researchers believe that this approach will go a long way to reduce the spreading of fake news and unconfirmed information among residents of Enugu metropolis.

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