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# **FAKE NEWS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURES**

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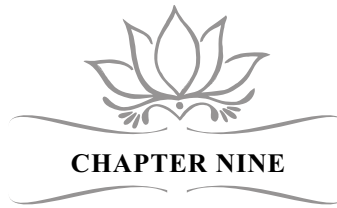
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## CHAPTER NINE

# FAKE NEWS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURES

*Simon Ayodele OKAIYETO & Rasheed Idowu BADMUS*

### Introduction

Social media, enabled by the internet, has helped to redefine and re-pattern human communication. A matrix of communication media which transcend national boundaries has now been facilitated by the internet. As a result increasing numbers of technological-savvy citizens hook up via the *information superhighway*. Over the last decade, Nigerians have also migrated online using a variety of social media platforms. December 2017 statistics show that ninety eight million Nigerians are online ([www.Internetworldstats.com](http://www.Internetworldstats.com)). This works out to be 54 per cent of Nigerians who had access to the internet (based on total population estimates of 180 million). Nigeria is thus the largest internet-using African nation. With this massive online presence and vibrancy of activities engaged in by Nigerians on social networking sites, it is to be expected that social media texts - tweets, posts, comments, pictures, videos and online discussions - become sources of news among the public

While social media have great impact across diverse areas of social life, it can be said that the greatest sphere of influence impacted upon is political communication and democracy. Given the view that modern day democracy is not working (Dahlgren, 2009); that the citizenry are increasingly disengaging from civic life and political participation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009); therefore democracy requires information-rich environment through which citizens come to know vital issues of the day, as well as spaces for robust critical-rational conversations on matters of concern. Both are essential for forming public opinion. Social media like the internet thus offer hope, and critical lifelines for the prospects of democracy. According to Baek et al (2011) the internet's pro-democratic potentials includes the promise to “provide an improved forum for debate, one that involves geographically disparate citizens, where issues [of] relevance matter, social status is less important, and arguments are evaluated based on their strength”(p.364). Invariably, social media, being the most conspicuous aspect of web 2.0 architecture provides rich information environment as well as tendencies for instantaneous and deliberative communication upon which democracy can blossom.

However, just as notable as the meteoric rise of social media, is its importance to democracy through the provision of rich and all-inclusive information, so also is the increasing prevalence of fake news in these spaces. (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Davies, 2016; Menczer, 2016). With misinformation circulating freely and going 'viral' on social media, it is very likely that people who get their news from social media are daily exposed to doses of hoaxes, rumours, misinformation, falsehoods, conspiracy theories and misleading news (Menczer, 2016; Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016)). Both fake news and disinformation are major concerns around the globe, but the virulent nature of dissemination via social media has attracted even more global outcry and of particular concern are the implications on promised balance of democracy (Gaughan, 2016; Silverman, 2016). This global fear was invigorated by the speculations, theorizing and studies about the impact of online-based fake news on America's 2016 Presidential Election and the UK's Brexit Referendum (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Persily, 2017; Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017). Could online disinformation sway key democratic processes in two of the oldest and largest democracies in the world? What then is the likely brunt of same on emerging democracies? These are now concerns for theorists. The increasing number of studies on the subject - the impact of online fake news on democracy, its key processes, and its consolidation in emerging democratic countries - reflects this (Boler, 2010; Speed & Mannion, 2017; Sunstein, 2018). This paper sets out to address the situation in Nigeria, which is an example of an emerging democracy. It is the largest in Africa, with aspirations for attaining ideal democratic cultures.

Nigeria's multiculturalism and its fledgling democracy make online fake news a bigger threat to the consolidation of its democracy. Democratic consolidation occurs as a culmination of various processes aimed at facilitating broad legitimization of democracy, to the extent that the systems of government become resilient. In the case of Nigeria, consolidation was required after long years of military rule. It can be argued that after nineteen years of democratic governance, the nation is marching firmly towards democratic consolidation. Nonetheless, it can also be argued that fake news circulating freely within Nigeria's social media landscape could become a cog in the wheel of democratic consolidation. Fake news tends to leverage on various ethnic, social, religious and political tensions existing in the country to disrupt peace and derail democracy. There is no doubt that the Nigerian government understands this position very well. A high ranking government minister referred to fake news as a time-bomb that can destroy the very foundation of the fragile unity being enjoyed in the country (Odebode and Fabiyi, 2018, para 3 & 5). Against the backdrop of global efforts (spearheaded by transnational social media corporations like Facebook, Twitter and such) to stem the tide of online fake news, the Nigerian government also launched a sensitization campaign against fake news. (Odebode and Fabiyi, 2018, para 8). Advances in technology, such as the advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IOT), create the capacity to make fake news to look 'real'. Such technological advances could also enhance the allure for the use of social media. Many Nigerians still rely on various social media platforms. Undoubtedly the threat to Nigeria's democratic consolidation from social media based fake news is not going away any time soon. The paper therefore appraises the use of social media in the attempts to consolidate a democratic culture. It explains how when disseminated via social media, fake news is likely to undermine democratic processes and desired consolidation of the democratic culture. It proposes digital media literacy as a long term solution to this scourge.

### **Social Media, Civic Engagement and Democratic Consolidation**

With its advent in the twilight of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and its increasing proliferation among people over the years, networking on social media platforms has become

one of the most important activities online (Nielsen Social Media Report, 2012) and has attracted millions of users worldwide. Having permuted communication patterns of users, the Nielsen report notes like other researchers that social media is also increasingly becoming relied upon as sources of news and news sharing among people, (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012). This is most evident amongst the digital natives, that is

*'the generation of individuals who are by far younger than most of these technologies driving social media, and subsequently, they have little or no recollection of a life before broadband, mobile technologies and ubiquitous search thereby making them to be more comfortable with "QWERTY" keyboards than with paper and pen, and are happier reading from a computer screen or cell phone screen than from a book' (Shambare et al, 2012, p.576).*

So pervasive are they, that in countries across the world, it is now hard to delineate media landscape without factoring-in social media. In addition to its foundational role of facilitating social networking, social media have increasingly been found to play a key role in promoting civic and democratic engagement, and fostering a well-informed pluralist society (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Lee & Ma, 2012; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014)). Much of the hope pinned on social media stems from their adoption within the political arena, and the potential for effecting political change. It has become possible for citizens to address and discuss a diverse range of public affairs via social media platforms. They are also able to initiate 'public will mobilization' against their governments at relatively low costs (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). Hence, if indeed a robust information environment provides informed citizenry who then drive the wheel of democracy across all critical sectors of the democratic system, social media must be regarded as contributing immensely to the attainment of a democratic culture since it enables such information rich environment.

Social media users are aware that they have the power in their own hands to organize on behalf of political candidates and causes (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010) and can participate in large scale deliberation on issue of common concerns. All these have been instrumental in shaping democratic participation, catalysing its processes and reinvigorating public spheres (Dahlgren, 2001, 2013a, 2013b). Mass media audiences lacked the authority to exercise such agency since the media were controlled by professional intermediaries. The decentralization of information and communication brought by social media has empowered citizens and enabled marginalized people to express themselves by utilizing independent channels to voice their opinions and take part directly or indirectly in social change. Citizens who are marginalized by the mainstream media, and thereby distanced from mainstream politics and civic discourse have since leveraged on the vibrancy of social media for political engagement.

In all conditions required for consolidating sound democratic cultures - robust information environment, informed citizenry and active participation in democratic processes social media can be relied on to foster these. This must be to the extent that democracy is sustained. Indeed democratic consolidation represents various processes leading to the increasingly maturation and entrenchment of democracy and its culture within a political system. Much more than this is that the culture is entrenched to the extent that it becomes impossible for such a democratic system of government to break down or revert to forms of authoritarianism in its systems of governance (Alexander, 2001, 2002; Diamond, 1994; Gasiorowski & Power, 1998; Schedler,

1998, 2001; Valenzuela, 1990). To that end, measures such as rule of law, accountability, vibrant civil society and free and vibrant media are often listed as catalysts for consolidation of the democratic culture. Of these the media stand out. Basically, media in democracies are expected to constitute the 'public sphere' in which critical-rational discourse on public affairs will culminate into public opinion vociferous enough to ensure accountability, influence policymaking and guide good governance. This is the ideal expected of the media in a democratic society, yet the growing trade liberalization an inherent element of liberal democracy, is fast inducting the media into an economic system that is locked into myriads of controls. Such influences are capable of shrinking the sphere from being a space for the public to one reserved for elites. This is more so with the mainstream media, so it is arguable that social media, being decentralized and not subject to such direct (editorial) controls, has been augmenting mainstream media in driving democratic consolidation. The rich information environment fostered by social media along with its tendencies for spontaneous access and deliberative communication have helped in driving the democratic culture.

It is arguable that social media have empowered Nigerians through cross fertilization of a wide range of views on public issues, and permitting them to navigate these, identify common grounds and crystallize public opinion on such issues. Nigeria's mainstream media have since been hamstrung in what can be said to be a dark triangle consisting of political and economic forces. Influence of politically motivated media barons; severe market adversity; and a government bent on co-opting the hegemony of the media limit these media. By contrast, social media have provided the necessary bastion for the thriving of democracy in recent time. With leaks and exposés hurtling down the information superhighway at a speed of light, generating substantial discussions, extrapolations and inferences, politicians are much more acutely alerted to their actions or inactions. In recent times, political office holders have come under intense scrutiny not initiated by professional media operatives, but by online bashings from ordinary Nigerian netizens. Many political office holders maintain a presence online. They are now forced to address audacious comments and observations which they get through these social media handles; these include the sort of feedback that may never have filtered through editorial controls on mainstream media. Social media content tend to be quite organic; the agenda is set by the popularity of the subject judged by how well it 'trends' or goes 'viral'. These are indicators for all stakeholders to see actual concerns and safeguard the democratic culture on a daily basis.

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced the longest spell of uninterrupted democracy with this dispensation being over 15 years (since 1998). It can be argued that social media has and will continue to play an even more defining role in the long march towards entrenching the democratic culture. As exemplified by the Occupy Nigeria campaign in 2012 and #Bringbackourgirls, which both leveraged on social media, government can be compelled to do the biddings of the people. Such experiences encourage many to become more vociferous in airing their views and when people get used to using their voices, they are more likely to resist repression. A more democratic climate is thus established.

### **Social Media Fake news in Nigeria: Analysing Sources and Proliferators**

Fake news has become as a global social scourge, ravaging and threatening to snuff credibility out of the web 2.0 architecture (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Silverman, 2016). The Nigerian social media landscape is not exempted; in recent times it has also been bogged down by free circulation of fake news and other forms of disinformation. Much of this seems to be stimulated by a combination of commercial and political imperatives and not so much by ideological imperatives. A holistic look at the



emerging pattern of web based fake news in Nigeria, suggests that the bulk of fake news on social media circle is mainly attributable to Nigeria's teeming 'Bloggerpreneurs' (Badmus & Okaiyeto, 2018a). These include political actors; satirical/parody sites or accounts; and other entities moved by vested interests to peddle falsehood on internet.

The term 'Bloggerpreneur', an amalgam of *blogger* and *entrepreneur* refers to the horde of bloggers in the country who ventured into blogging for profit - a sort of entrepreneurship (Badmus and Okaiyeto, 2018a). Largely powered by the youths, it boasts of numerous blogs with diverse areas of focus like politics, entertainment, technology, how-to and other themes that attract people and society. However, the ability to monetize blogs and earn in hard currency without any significant capital investment has been the *raison d'être* for the burgeoning blogosphere in the country. Bloggers can register with AdSense which is Google's published directory of *approved* blogs. Its clientele advertise on these and the blogger is paid a certain percentage based on the number of clicks on the advert. Google is known to pay the blogger (known as the publisher) 68 per cent of the advertising revenue while retaining the remaining 32 per cent (Badmus & Okaiyeto, 2018a). On AdSense publishers earn per click, this is calculated based on the number of clicks on the advertising message placed within the blog, by inference the traffic on their page is most valuable to bloggers. Recently, Nigerian bloggerpreneurs have achieved notoriety in the manner they lure traffic to their blogs; this is due to the instrumentality of fake news. Known as click-baiting (Badmus & Okaiyeto, 2018b), news content on issues of great importance, will be posted on the blog. To attract the traffic, the reports are sensationalized and aspects may be fabricated. Links to the posts are placed on various social media handles, online forums and news feeds to entice netizens to click. Such fake news is likely to be embellished with screaming headlines and leveraging on the interlinked architecture of web 2.0, they tend to go viral.

Political actors and their retinue of media advisers constitute another source of the fake news circulated on Nigerian social media. This upsurge in social media usage by Nigerians and the new pattern of electioneering anchored on populist slogans and catchy promises no doubts summons politicians and political actors to the cyberspace. In the build up to 2011 general election in the country, political office aspirants greatly explored the use of social media in reaching out to the Nigerian 'netizens' (Dare, 2011). By 2015 general election, new media became a major theatre for the war, by competing political parties and their aspirants, to win the hearts of Nigerians. They maintained social media presence and participated online. However, the decentralized media platforms, have also placed politicians under intense scrutiny while also brandishing contestable promises about the sacking or mass acceptance of candidates. Since politicians lack the controls and protection which were guaranteed by regulatory regimes in mainstream media, and politicians crave control of the new battle-front of political communication, they have since invaded this cyber-sphere with their army of paid publicists or spin doctors. One of their most potent weapon in the hegemonic struggle has been engineering the use of fake news and other political disinformation on social media. In recent time, examples abound on how politicians and their media advisers, especially the social media aides which is becoming 'a must have', have been peddling political disinformation on the social media.

In 2014, the social media aide to incumbent Nigerian president at the time, Reno Omokri was exposed for allegedly using a fake social media handle to disseminate fake political news about his boss's opponent (Judah, 2014). Like the bloggerpreneur whose cottage business model drives them to peddle fake news as a way of attracting traffic, politicians too, hone the use of fake news as potent weapon for electoral gains, opinion engineering and image laundering. In view of this,

one can predict that open data mining of netizens, engagement of social bots and other forms of artificial intelligence may be pressed into the service of political disinformation.

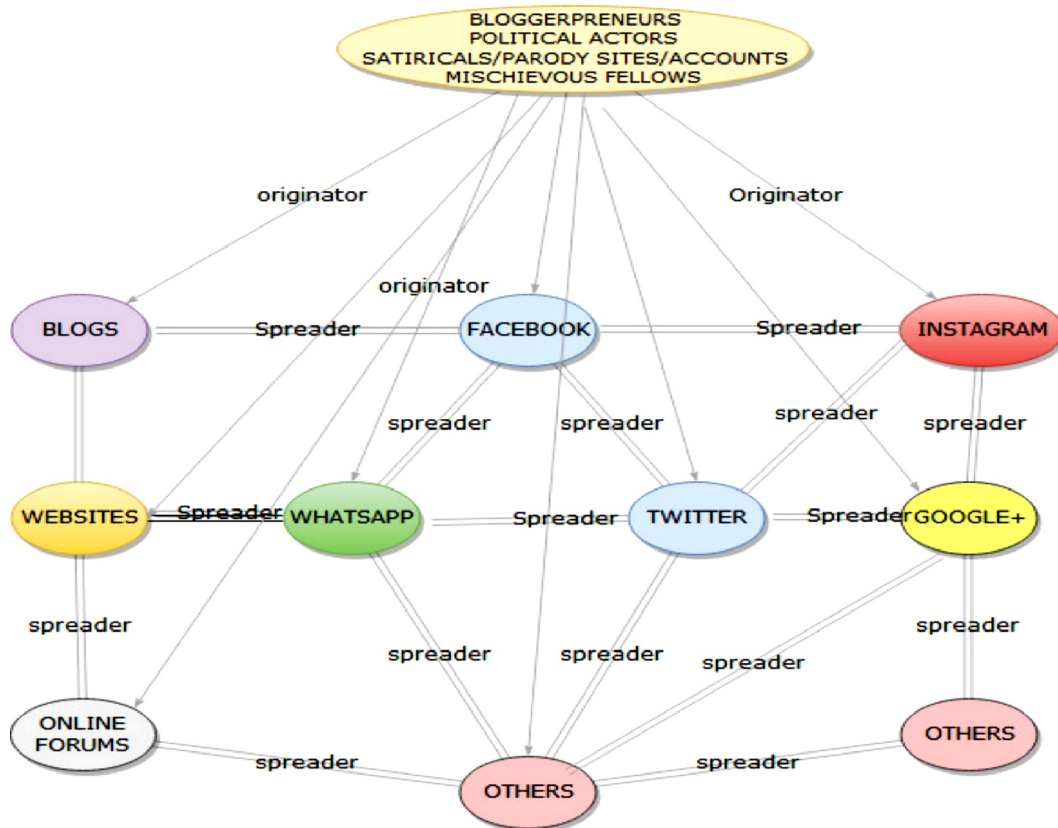


Fig. 1: sources and spreaders of fake news online in Nigeria (source: authors)

Satirical news sites/parody handles are also sources of fake news within Nigerian social media sphere. Satirical news sites carry news satire, which is a genre that relies heavily on the use of irony and humour to amuse readers, but mimics the format and style of bona fide journalism practices (Rubin, Conroy, Chen, & Cornwell, 2016). Similarly, parody social media accounts are handles deliberately created with names similar to those of influential media outlets (or important political or economic figures). There are created ostensibly for entertainment and to convene a substantial gathering of followers. Although there could be a range of motivations for both forms, (from economic to political), one point is clear - their content is often fabricated, but passed on to unsuspecting netizens as real news. Though the satirical sites and parody accounts may state explicitly the satirical nature of their posts, the similarity in the names of accounts or sites some users are still fooled. Coupled with the supersonic speed of online information dissemination these are pedestals for viral disinformation parading as real news.

Other mischievous individuals or entities, propelled by myriads of reasons, have also been sources of disinformation within the social media circles. In a country with social, economic, religious, political, and ethnic cleavages, peddling of falsehood on social media has become an effortless way of throwing stones at people deemed to be on the other side of identified divides. Hence, it is very rare to see fake news which is not divisive since they tend to discredit individuals, or entities by their ethnic or social grouping, or religious orientation. Also influential

in the disinformation ecosystem are the propagators - individuals who ensure the viral proliferation of fake news using the interlinked architecture of web 2.0 as the necessary springboard for such disinformation. Although the automated spreading of fake news is possible using social bots which are software-controlled profiles or pages, as exemplified in various political disinformation surrounding US 2016 election and Brexit referendum in Britain (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Shao et al., 2017), human propagators still account largely for spreading fake news on social media. The use of social bots is still in its infancy in Nigeria. Whether due to their cognitive limitations or implicit bias, Nigerian 'netizens' have the tendency to spread news and views on social media, be it fake or real news. More often than not, fake news which appeals to individuals is shared to peers and groups within social media landscape. Whatsapp and Facebook have emerged as fertile terrains for sharing of such disinformation. One danger of this '*let-others see it though*' syndrome is that fake news may acquire artificial credibility and authentication while in transit. Netizens may confer the high regard which they have for sharers on the information, especially if such sharer is a respectable opinion leader. Consequently, the credibility rating associated with individuals sharing the fake news will be associated with the fake news thus diffusing doubts about the authenticity of such information. So to sum up, human channels are critical in the trajectory of fake news on social media. Any concerted effort to scale down fake news on social media must be designed with this channel in mind.

### **Social Media, Fake News and Nigerian democracy: Towards a model of Perturbation**

Democracy as a system of government hinges on a rich and all-inclusive communications environment that provides citizens with the motivation, ability, and opportunity to participate in various democratic tensions and decision makings (Shapiro, 2011). Currently, up to half of Nigerians have access to the internet, making it the largest internet using country in Africa. The youths, who are credited for the dynamism and burgeoning online presence have demonstrated promise in shaping their ability to shape the nation's political future. This political awareness is reflected in the political use of social media; the user generated contents, opinions published through social media have become critical in the shaping of public opinion and the nation's political climate. However, what happens when information at the disposal of the 'netizens' is fake, or misleading? This tendency is evident in other parts of the world where online falsehood spreads and takes its toll on the balance of democracy (McNair, 2017; Tandoc Jr, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Yee, 2017). False news on social media portend grave danger for democratic societies especially the nascent and fragile democracy. A well-functioning democracy requires free flow of healthy and factual information as its lifeblood, but fake news, especially as it goes viral so quickly proves toxic for the democratic environment (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

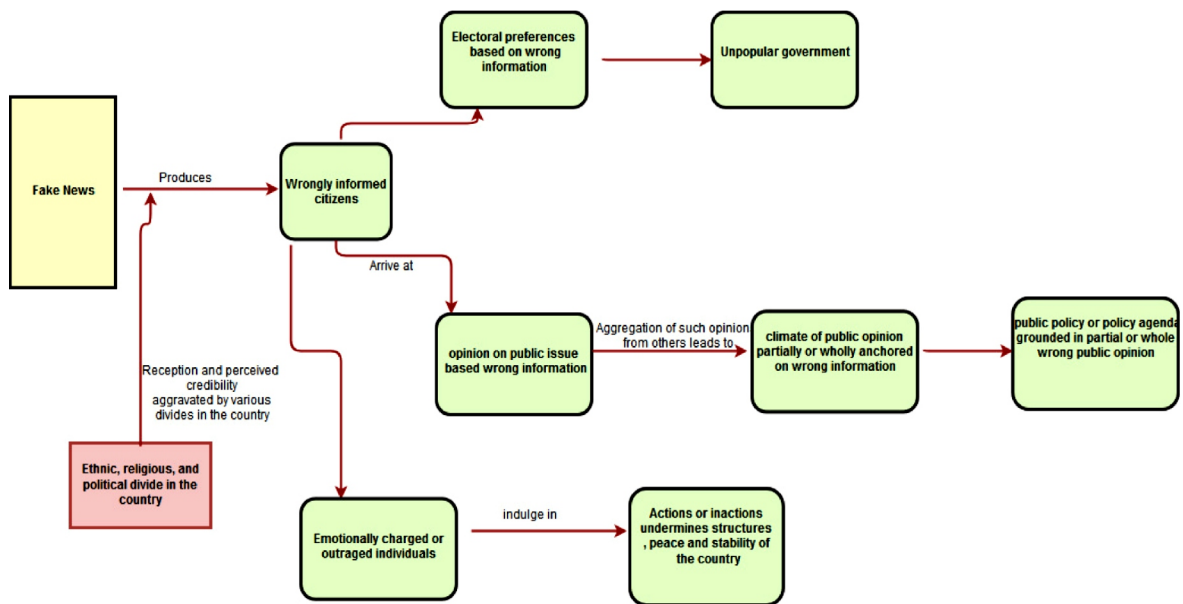
The strength of fake news online within an emerging agenda setting has been studied (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018), so has the potential of online disinformation to influence political processes. Though the scrutiny of the influence of social media disinformation on elections gained momentum post 2018 - following the 2016 American Presidential Election and Brexit referendum, findings of such studies is for now not definitive ( Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Humprecht, 2018; Jankowski, 2018). Nonetheless, governments around the world, as exemplified by the 2019 UK Parliamentary Committee (DCMS) report, have continued to sound the alarm regarding dangers posed by fake news to democracy. Fake news may be viewed as a pollutant to the healthy and robust pool of information from which citizens come to draw and share knowledge of vital issues of the day. Fake news is toxic to the communication environment (Dell Carpini, 2004). Online fake news is a direct threat to democratic consolidation in emerging democracies.



Nigeria's nascent democracy illustrates this. It can be argued that with its many distinctive social and political configurations, it is susceptible to the disconcertion created by fake news online. Bakir & McStay aptly capture the challenging nature of such an experience when they noted that fake news tend to produce 'wrongly informed citizens that are likely to stay wrongly informed in the echo chambers and be emotionally antagonized or outraged given the affective and provocative nature of much fake news" (Bakir & McStay, 2018, p. 6). Bakir and McStay's submission explains the mechanism through which fake news could destabilize democracy in a nation like Nigeria, but their submission had to be refined to fit the political context peculiar to Nigeria. The required model has to consider how online fake news can be checked, whilst preventing the erosion of the thin line between democracy and autocracy lest there be a derailing of the march towards democratic consolidation.

Accordingly, we proposed a conceptual model on how online fake news could perturb Nigeria's nascent democratic culture (see fig.2). Our model sees online disinformation reception and believability being aided by the various polarizations (ethnic, religious, social and political) and as such produces wrongly informed citizens. Such wrongly informed citizens then;

- A1. Make electoral decisions based on disinformation devoured
- A2. Arrive at opinions on common concerns based on false information
- A3. Become provoked and emotionally charged up



*Fig 2: A Conceptual model of How Online fake news Could Perturb Democracy*

Action A1 when taken by enough individuals leads to unpopular government. Action A2 impacts upon the climate of public opinion when a substantial proportion of the population are taken in wholly or partially by the disinformation being circulated. The climate may also be reflected in policy, when policy agenda is also anchored wholly or partially on disinformation. Action A3 goes further as it reveals individuals who are so provoked that they engage in actions that undermine peace and stability in the nation. A democracy with unpopular government, climate of public opinion and policy agenda distant from reality and a horde of emotionally charged citizens ready to destabilize fragile peace in the country cannot be said to marching towards democratic consolidation.

Our model shows that all the breaches could be engendered by social media -enabled fake news. This is a country of about 180 million people out of which 98 million (more than half) have social media presence, but only a meagre 29,432,083 (approximately 16 per cent) elected the president in 2015 general election. It is a country where hyper political, ethnic and religious polarization strengthens reverberations in the echo chamber for matters of public concern. Such echoing and reverberations which manifest as 'trending' items influence the climate of public opinion. In this country multitudes take up arms in defence of their religious, political and ethnic affiliations often as a result of hearsay and information from other unverified sources. Online fake news portends great danger for democracy in such contexts. If not checked, it could end any relative peace and stability attained. The Nigerian Minister for Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, recognised this position very well when he said:

*In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like ours, fake news is a time bomb. And in recent weeks, many anarchists have been doing everything possible to detonate the bomb. But for the prudence and vigilance of Nigerians, they the religious and ethnic bigots among us would have set the nation on fire, especially over the farmers-herders clashes as well as communal clashes... it is a clear and present danger to global peace and security. It is a threat to democracy” (Odebode & Fabiyi, 2018, para 3 & 5)*

**Digital media literacy as the long term panacea for combatting fake news.**

With the potentials of social media -enabled fake news to short-circuit democratic consolidation processes, we should explore the best way to tame this scourge. To stem the ebb of fake news on the information superhighway, tech giants like Facebook and Google, governments, software developers, information scientists, ethicists, media corporations, journalists and academic researchers have at least proposed or taken some action on the matter. Since they got called out by several governments, Facebook and Google recently banned the publishing of fake news from their advertising programmes (Kottasova, 2016). In addition, Facebook also announced that it will henceforth fact-check items in its newsfeed using fact-checkers like Polifact (Heath, 2016). Another Facebook owned company, Whatsapp, known as a platform for quick broadcast of disinformation, also announced plan to introduce features that can detect suspicious links. Similarly corporate media outlets like *Washington Post* have launched fact-checking sites to appraise suspicious information, while software developers keep working on application to automatically detect fake news online (Mele et al., 2017).

In Nigeria, the government recently launched a national campaign against fake news in the country which, in the words of the Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, is to “sensitise all Nigerians to the danger posed to the peace and security, and indeed the corporate existence of Nigeria by the phenomenon, and the fact that each and every Nigerian has a role to play in curtailing the spread of fake news” (Odebode & Fabiyi, 2018, para 13).

Though these measures could combat disinformation on a short term basis, they appear to fall short since they do not anticipate further technological developments that may render some of the suggested safeguards obsolete. For example, advances in artificial intelligence system, one of the bastions in the fight against fake news online, may in the no-distant future get reconfigured to enhance the powerful weapon in the hands of disseminators of disinformation online (social bots). AI systems used to produce fake information could get more sophisticated making what is 'fake' look more 'real'. Through the use of deep-learning neural networks, an AI system that

mimics how neurons are connected in the brain, could one day produce artificial but 'real' looking and compelling images or video (Castelvecchi, 2017). Such convincing images when pressed into the service of disinformation could further compound the situation. Similarly, Internet of Things (IoT), an emerging technology which promises interconnection of electronic and mechanical machines, home appliances, computing gadgets, vehicles, and others, is also poised to bring internet closer to the people. With this people are bound to encounter fake news online perhaps even with more intensity than is the case within a web 2.0 environment where only thin line will separate 'fake' from 'real'.

A better safeguard in anticipation of such technologies that could further intensify disinformation, the major and final fortress against online fake news should be human intelligence. That being said, individuals, especially the 'Google Generation' must be cognitively empowered. This is the generation for whom the absence of the internet is inconceivable; they would feel disconnected, disoriented, and tutored. They must be armed with various skills needed to discern fake from factual information online. Such empowerment and skills can best be inculcated via a national policy on digital media literacy education.

Digital media literacy, as a competence that avail individuals expertise needed to critique deconstruct, analyze and produces media in an online environment, (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017). It has become vital to navigate through the maze of disinformation online. To Martins digital media literacy provides 'the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources' (2006 p. 19). Hobb sees digital and media literacy 'as a constellation of life skills that are necessary for full participation in our media-saturated, information-rich society' (2010 p.7). As everyday lives become more saturated and enmeshed with information, digital media literacy competencies give ability to:

1. "Make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas
2. Analyze messages in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose and point of view, and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content
3. Create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound, and new digital tools and technologies
4. Reflect on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical principles" (Hobbs, 2010, p.7-8)

Essentially, digital media literacy builds critical thinking on, and evaluation of information (especially when sourced online) thereby preparing them for discerning, discarding and even campaigning against online disinformation. Allied skills gained from digital media literacy such as privacy online and data protection can also equip netizens to guard against those who intent on mining their data for political disinformation. Therefore any country deeply concerned about inoculating its citizens against the minefield of online disinformation must work towards integrating digital media literacy programmes into the mainstream education. Digital media literacy could also be encouraged to be taught in summer camps, specialized training centres, community gatherings, gatherings of faith based group and others. Specifically, the Nigeria government, having recognized online fake news as a time bomb, should key into digital media literacy, within its national campaign against fake news, as viable long term treatment of the scourge. For a start, digital media literacy could be introduced as part of the curriculum of Computer Studies in secondary schools. It can also be introduced as general study course in

universities and polytechnics while specialist ICT training institutes can also introduce short courses to teach these competences.

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly democracy as a system of government must be built on a rich and all-inclusive communications environment that helps provide citizens with the motivation, ability, and opportunity to participate in various democratic deliberations and decision makings. As many as half of Nigerians' active users of web 2.0 architecture still get substantial part of political information and news from the internet. The big question raised is what happens when information at the disposal of these 'netizens' is likely fake - deliberate disinformation, or inadvertent misinformation? Driven by commercial and economic imperatives, or sometimes inadvertently, Nigerians in recent times have cultivated profound proclivity for spreading fake news via Whatsapp, Twitter and Facebook and blogs. This is an extension of their freedom to publish or broadcast information facilitated by the social media, yet it portends grave danger for the democracy in the country. While a democratic society requires free flow of healthy and factual information as its lifeblood, the unmitigated dissemination of erroneous information could bring a state of anarchy. This is more so in a context where so many in the population may be limited in the broad based knowledge - they rely on social-media, without adequate reliance on the mainstream media, or other sources of general education. Fake news rides on this popularity of social media. When adopted by individuals who either as a result of their cognitive limitations, or implicit biases based on their declared identity groups - affiliation to political, ethnic or religious groupings - Nigerians netizens are arguably highly susceptible to being misled by the glut of fake news online. This is consequential to various democratic processes and ultimately, the peace and stability of the country. A fledgling democracy ought not to labour under an unpopular government, hostile climate for generating public opinion, policy agenda that is distrusted or deemed unrealistic. A democratic society would do better with rational citizens, not those who are emotionally charged and ready to destabilize their nation.

Our model demonstrates how fake news could perturb democratic consolidation; it shows the role of social media enabled fake news in this. Yet we must look beyond the technologically deterministic explanation regarding fake news. It is imperative to consider the social dimensions and reiterate that human channels are really important in the equation of how fake news is spread or resisted. The human factor is essential in making the media social or not. Therefore any concerted effort to scale down the scourge that fake news has become on social media must be designed with this human factor in mind. While the various initiatives taken by different stakeholders - tech giants like Facebook and Google, governments, software developers, information scientist, media corporations, journalists, ethicists, and academic researchers is commendable, we argue that they are incomplete without the investment in digital media literacy that addresses the human factor. We advocate that digital media literacy be incorporated into the relevant and crucial elements of educational curriculum. Having recognized online fake news as a time bomb, the Nigerian government and others in similar situation should adopt digital media literacy and combat the ignorance that aids the viral transmission of the fake messages. It is more advisable that nations should go for long lasting treatment for the scourge. To ensure that digital media literacy is well established, users should have several opportunities of being exposed to the lessons. These should occur at different levels of educations from primary to the tertiary level so the messages can be reinforced and internalised. The wider the reach the better, so the subjects (vehicles) through which digital media literacy will be driven to the people must be carefully selected. This form of education should enable online users to filter out the fake from credible news and views. It is a long term action, but it is the required panacea.

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