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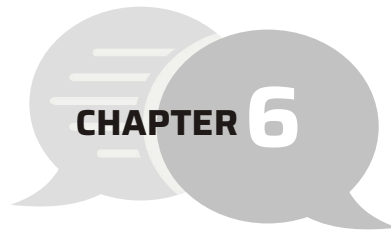
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MEDIA LITERACY AS A PANACEA FOR VERIFYING AND MANAGING ONLINE FAKE NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Adeboye OLA



Introduction

Photography is seen as a powerful mediated communication that can serve as evidence of what was once a physical manifestation of reality (Sontag, 2008). This position stands debatable in a digital era where photography now has a dual acceptability "to either depict the truth or fabricate the truth' (Kangkana, 2020). This ambivalence power is being exploited by the promoters of information disorder to cause rancour within a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual society like Nigeria where people are highly sensitive to their cultural and religious affinity.

The 21st century has been credited with revolutionizing the nature of news reportage and visual storytelling with Web 2.0 technology. The popularity of social media as a platform for information sharing among peoples of the world has made more people rely on it instead of the traditional medium of mass communication. A study conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2016) confirmed that consumption of news on social platforms is on the increase with *Facebook* standing out as the first choice. The import of this is that more people are taking to social media for their daily dose of information. As those platforms attract more

people, so also producers and distributors of news move their content to meet target audiences. The development is beginning to affect the credibility of photojournalism with the issue of fake news taking centre stage. At the centre of this are media content providers, either as trained journalists or enthusiasts practising as citizen journalists. When it comes to the information they provide, the media audiences draw no line in what is given to them.

So much responsibility and trust are placed on journalists to provide truthful and authentic information that to do otherwise would be tantamount to great betrayal. The scenario where news producers will be involved in misinformation as it is with fake news must have been envisaged by UNESCO (1980) when it came up with an ethical framework to serve as a moral compass for those engaging in the production and distribution of news content, news photos inclusive, on whatever platform they choose to engage their audiences.

The **International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism** has ten-point principles agreed upon by International and regional organisations of professional journalists in 1978. Three key Principles out of the ten are very relevant to show the unethical nature of fake news to media professionals involved in the practice: People's Right to True Information, the Journalist's Dedication to Objective Reality and The Journalist's Social Responsibility:

Principle I: People's Right to True Information- people and individuals have the right to acquire an objective picture of reality using accurate and comprehensive information as well as to express themselves freely through the various media of culture and communication.

Principle II: The Journalist's Dedication to Objective Reality- The foremost task of the journalist is to serve the people's right to authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality whereby facts are reported conscientiously in their proper context, pointing out their essential connections and without causing distortions, with the due deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist, so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate the formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and states of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.

Principle III: The Journalist's Social Responsibility- Information in journalism is understood as a social good and not as a commodity, which means that the journalist shares responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus accountable not only to those controlling the media but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist's social responsibility requires that he or she will act under all circumstances in conformity.

Photojournalism in its simplest form refers to the usage of photographs to report news and tell interesting stories. Operating within a profession where fact is considered sacred, it sometimes works with a notion that sees truth as an ideology. At the core of ethical journalism is its normative principle that has as its goals an obligation to truthful information, loyalty to citizens, accountability and independency (Ashley *et al.*, 2013). Newton (2001) explained that at the heart of photojournalism is the portrayal of human experience "accurately, honestly, and with an overriding sense of social responsibility". The 'ideology of press objectivity' appears important in how news photographs are framed

to show the sanctity of the frozen moments. Objectivity in photojournalism, therefore, is an evidential reflection of what the photojournalist witnessed and the accurate rendition of what was in front of the camera, both in content and tone.

Barthes (1977) posited that the nature of photography having polysemic meaning makes it dynamic and therefore subjected to diverse interpretations. The import of this is that photography is fluid with the potential for an amorphous meaning that keeps changing as a photograph moves across diverse cultural spaces (Sassoon, 2007). This feature is being exploited negatively by those using news photographs to further their predestined agenda. While photographic meaning could be deciphered from denotative and connotative angles as postulated by Barthes, it is theorised that as photographs pass through different mediums, there is a tendency for the connotative meaning to change while the denotative remains the same (Bull, 2010). The intended meaning where the connotative operates is usually what purveyors of misinformation exploit to spread their messages of hatred, cultural brainwashing, ethnic profiling, religious bigotry and political mudslinging, among others.

Faking news is not a recent phenomenon in Journalism having been linked to the Guttenberg era of the printing press. The age of enlightenment that followed witnessed printing becoming a pastime for all and sundry. What, however, came to be identified as Yellow journalism has also been seen as fake news in action, which Shu *et al.* (2017) tagged as 'Traditional fake news' American William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the *New York Journal*, had been identified with war-mongering believed to have contributed to America going to war with Spain in 1897. His stories stoked the war fire with their accusation that Spain was responsible for the explosion of the USS Maine in the harbour of Havana (Gelfert, 2018). In the same vein, *CNN* and the *New York Times* were believed to have been conscripted into the U.S. military campaign in the invasion of Iraq to help boost the war push with false information as news, “a tactic known as psychological operations” (Love, 2007 as cited in Gelfert, 2018).

The Concept of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism, either as a philosophical or normative concept, is an umbrella for the multiplicity of cultures in society. It has been described by Stacy Wong as cited in Udebunu (2011, p. 2) as “the coexistence of many cultures in a society, without any one culture dominating the region”. Its strength lies in the collective acceptability of other cultures beyond ours and the logicity of clamouring for a mutual understanding and the coexistence of diverse cultures in a cohesive society. Multiculturalism is also believed to include religious and ethnic justice against discrimination (Modood, 2008). The diversity of the Nigerian state as a multicultural society has been well documented in pieces of literature where the exact number of ethnic groups and languages have been variously put between 250 to 500 (Adegbami & Uche, 2015; Asike, 2019; Udebunu, 2011). Nigeria has been on a journey of nationhood since 1960 where its multiple cultural components try to find unity in its diversity. Asikie (2019) highlights the characteristics of the Nigerian multicultural society as follows:

- a. It has cultural diversity, so many aspects of cultures within its locality.
- b. It covers a wider variety of areas
- c. It is grounded in profound differences about the conceptions of a good life and religious ideology

- d. It does not share many important moral beliefs and social practices.
- e. It has more defiant as it relates to modern society in seeking rights, power and equality amongst members of the political community
- f. It is a multicultural society in the context of increasing globalization (pp.0073-0074)

The acceptability of multiple cultures in any politically homogenised state is therefore aimed at allying oneness where the ethos of unity in diversity is acceptable to all. While that cohesiveness is still a work in progress, any form of public communication where respect for other cultures and religions is taken for granted will make the sought-after unity elusive. This is the danger inherent in the new culture of misinformation currently witnessed on the internet with the attendant negative consequences. A major finding of Chudnovskaya & Lipatova (2018) in their study of ethnocultural stereotypes among British and Russian youths is the influence of social networks as the 'highest ranked' form of mass media for the 'sustainable generators of shaping stereotypes in the youth environment' (p. 430). The total population of youths is believed to be more than 50 % of the Nigerian estimated population of 213m (World Bank, 2022) which is instructive in facing the danger posed by the unwholesome consumption of misinformation in the mass media.

What is News?

The meaning of any information generally accepted as news has come in different colours that most people now try to play safe with the opinion that what is big news in Ibadan may not be news in Lagos. News is seen generally as any new information that people somewhere will find interesting. It must be something they have not heard about or any unusual thing they have not seen before. But news evolves from activities and occurrences within the society which McQuail (2010) described to be the main form in which current information about public events is carried by media of all kinds. News in his view is of different types and formats, with cross-cultural differences in nature, with the defining characteristics, generally held to be timeliness, relevance and reliability (p. 488)

Irrespective of the information gathered by journalists as news, the key consideration before disseminating such is to ensure its accuracy and reliability. What this implies is the belief that Journalism is more than an ordinary distribution of fact-based information. Journalists, as news producers, are expected to be fair and accurate all the time. Their stories must not only be authentic but 'one that reflects reality, not their own perception of it or anyone else's, be it online or in print (Potter, n.d, p. 9).

The credibility issue has become a major issue in the media with journalism moving online. The race to first 'break' the news has heightened the pace at which media content reaches the audience. The impact of the breaking news competition is the integrity of what is presented in the information space that is often filled with factual inaccuracies (Akpan *et al.*, 2012). The contemporary face of fake news is happening in the era of digitisation and online journalism, the age of news democratisation.

What is Fake News?

Fake News, which Sullivan (2017) tagged as a "tainted Term" and Facebook prefers to call "False News" (Oremus, 2017), has generated much debate that it is somehow difficult to reach a consensus on its actual definition. Din *et al.* (n.d) highlighted in a study conducted by Khaldarova & Pantti (2016) on the 2009 Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute, a multi-layered oxymoron of the term "fake news" as it is used today. They have linked it to an array of terms

such as: “ 'fabricated stories', 'misinformation', 'disinformation', 'counter-narrative', 'strategic narrative', 'blame', 'scandalous material/reportage', 'false news stories', 'misleading/sensational images', 'set of stereotypes', 'propaganda-entertainment' 'hostile comments' 'bizarre news' 'journalistically dubious stories'”(p.1).

A conceptual explanation of it seems to have expanded wide to cover areas such as unintentional reporting mistakes, rumours, satire, conspiracy theories false statements by politicians, reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false, etc. (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Holan, (2016) claimed that “Fake news is made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word” (cited in Fitzpatrick, 2018, p.49).

Nielse and Graves (2017, p.1) on the other hand looked at fake news, which they chose to identify as false news, being, “the kinds peddled by for-profit actors or as part of misinformation campaigns”. Their study of audience perspective on the syndrome came up with many conclusions one of which is 'that the fake news problem is only in part about fabricated news reports' which, however, could be taken as a sign of news consumers' discontentment with the sources of information from the public and other avenues like news media and politicians, without excluding the platform companies. From the view of Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), however, fake news could simply be defined as “news stories that have no factual basis but are presented as facts” (p. 5). UNESCO has narrowed the discourse on fake news to three categorisations: *Misinformation*, *Disinformation* and *Malinformation* (Ireton and Posetti, 2018).

Misinformation has been categorised as inaccurate information disseminated without any intention to fool people. *Disinformation* covers all deliberately produced false and inaccurate information disseminated to mislead the media audience. *Malinformation* however contains true information used deliberately against individuals, organisations and a country to portray them in a bad light. Seven types of Misinformation and Disinformation have been identified by Wardle (2017) for further understanding of Information disorder when they appear on the internet:

1. *Satire or Parody*: No intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool
2. *Misleading Content*- misleading use of information to frame an issue or individuals.
3. *Imposter content*- when genuine sources are impersonated.
4. *Fabricated Content*- News content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.
5. *False Connection*- when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.
6. *False Context*- when genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
7. *Manipulated Content*- when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive. (FIRSTDRAFT)

Fake news photographs should be seen as a mixed grill of facts supported with visual elements that are completely unrelated but are used deliberately as evidence. Gelfert (2018) believed that the confusing narratives only show that “Many fake news stories are not wholly false, but mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths as a means of obfuscation” (p.100). It is interesting to know that media consumers could tacitly be encouraging information disorder through their patronage of online new platforms identified to be unprofessional in handling information. Ugwuanyi (2017) discovered that

despite news consumers' awareness of fake news in Nigeria, like in other parts of the world, most readers still see online newspapers as a credible source of information.

The implication is that even when some of these media outlets have been identified with fake news, some news consumers still did not see it as enough justification to boycott them. One thing not established, but probably taken for granted, in the study is the media literacy level of the sampled news consumers. Edogor *et al.*'s (2015) finding showed that most media consumers on social media and mainstream media online platforms do not have what it takes to assess the credibility of the information they consume on the internet. More worrisome is the issue of online readers reposting inaccurate information the consequences of which can be damning for society at large

Fake News in Nigeria

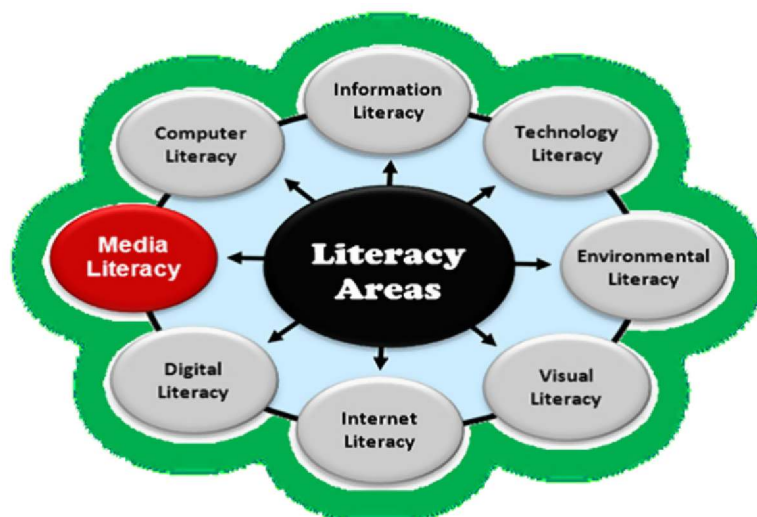
Nigeria's cyberspace as part of the global internet terrain is not immune to the fake news syndrome. Long before Journalism found life on Web 2.0 technology, there have been cases of malfeasance on the integrity of news published in some newspapers and magazines. Publisher cum cartoonist, Lawrence Akapa, was found guilty by the ethics committee of the Nigerian Union of Journalists in 1990 for publishing fiction as factual stories in his defunct weekly, *TopNews Magazine*. The publication used fake and contrived photographs as evidence of cameracaptured images for their contrived and mostly weird stories. While the primary motive for publishing those manufactured stories was economic, the outcome showed the unsuspecting reading public being served misinformation by a deceitful organisation.

The internet appeared to have taken the faking syndrome to a new level on social media with images considered not necessarily news photographs but digitally manipulated to further a cause or support political, ethnic or religious partisanship. It becomes more worrisome when political, religious, socio and cultural differences are thrown overboard by all agents of misinformation. Sometimes the photographs are original and untouched but used wrongly in different contexts. Fake news photographs are antithetical to the integrity of Journalism, a profession associated with the dissemination of truth. At the heart of photojournalism is the portrayal of human experience "accurately, honestly, and with an overriding sense of social responsibility" (Newton, 2001). The core objective of Journalism, therefore, should be to provide information that will satisfy the news audience's interest in unknown activities within their immediate environment and events around the world.

Media Literacy

Literacy in its elementary meaning simply refers to the ability to read and write. It was a word which at its evolution in the 19th also incorporated knowledge of Arithmetic (Pereira & Moura, 2019, as cited in e-Media, 2018). Competencies in the three areas were believed to be an indicator of knowledge by someone who had overcome illiteracy, in addition to fluency in the usage of a particular language of human communication. Literacy in the 21st century has moved beyond reading, writing and Arithmetic with scholars' identification of a multiplicity of literacies that cut across different disciplines. Advancements in technology and the internet revolution have drastically changed how man communicates leading to new requirements for measuring literacy.

The octopi nature of the Literacy concept has been highlighted by Yanarates (2020) whose work revealed the many faces of literacy today (see Table 1). Located within the literacy orbit is Media Literacy. It is a form of literacy linked to the mass media content as seen in the news (text and photographs), video and other mediated content that aims at providing information to a heterogeneous audience.



(Yanarates, 2020)

UNESCO has gone further to incorporate several forms of literacies under the umbrella of Global Media and Information Literacy (MIL). Media literacy is identified here as a subset that also includes others like Digital Literacy, Basic Literacy, News Literacy, Cultural Diversity, ICT Literacy/Digital internet Literacy, Library Literacy, Information Literacy and Other Types of Literacy. The aim of all forms of literacy within MIL is an audience approach to mediated content presented as information to enable citizens “understand the functions of the media and other information providers, critically evaluate their content and make informed decisions as users and producers of information and media content.” (UNESCO, 2013)

What is Media Literacy?

Media Literacy [ML] has become a buzzword in academic study, media education and professional conversations across different fields of human endeavour. It deals with media content/messages as seen in fiction, advertising, films, etc. Its outlook is on how media audiences should approach media content and how to immune themselves from the unwholesome acceptability of such offerings.

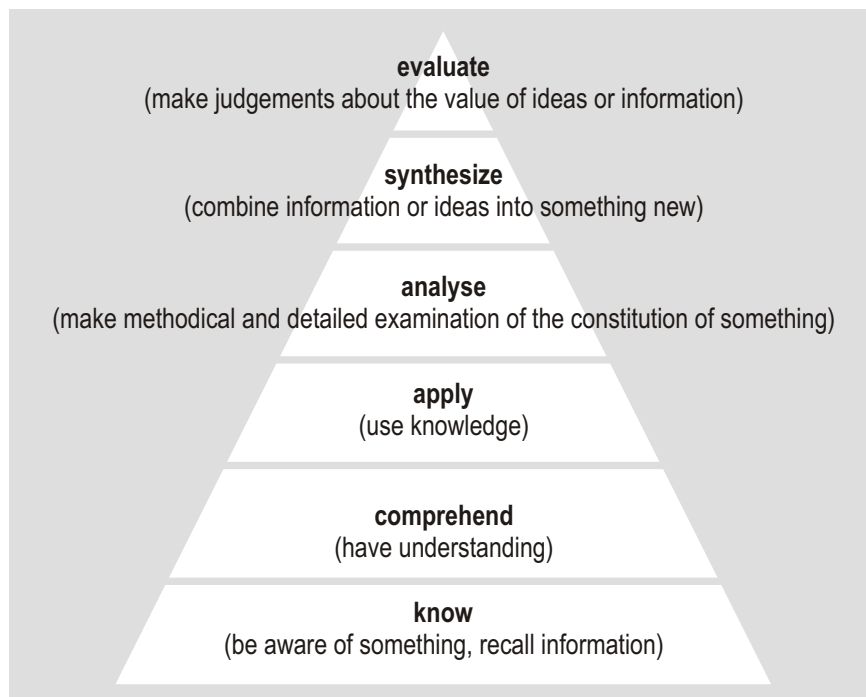
US National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines ML as, 'the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication' (Bulger & Davison, 2018, p.7). The 'ability' focuses on individuals as media audiences and content creators as obtainable in online journalism. NAMLE seems to agree with the European Commission that sees ML as the ability “to access the media to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts”(Silver, n.d, p. 1)

A more engaging definition might be from the Centre for Media Literacy which looks at ML from a learning perspective as “the ability to communicate competently in all media forms,

print, and electronic, as well as to access, understand, and analyze and evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make our contemporary mass media culture” (Potter, 2013, p.418). It is a definition that accepts media consumers as active recipients who are not expected to take for granted what the media offer in the information space. ML as a subset of MIL raises the media consciousness of media audiences and makes them active and knowledgeable through some acquired skill sets that promote critical engagement with media content. Some definitions have therefore highlighted the importance of critical thinking in media audience reception of media content (Adams and Hamm, 2001; Thoman and Jolls, 2003; Moeller, 2009).

Critical thinking is a mental exercise that puts a media audience into asking questions about mediated content in the media. It is a self-paced critical examination of information and evaluation of such information against the background of supporting evidence and what the person knows before the encounter that will lead to making an informed decision. When you think critically, you weigh up all sides of an argument and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. So, critical thinking skills entail: actively seeking all sides of an argument, testing the soundness of the claims made, and testing the soundness of the evidence used to support the claims. According to UNESCO's definition, “critical thinking is a process that involves asking appropriate questions, gathering and creatively sorting through relevant information, relating new information to existing knowledge, re-examining beliefs and assumptions, reasoning logically, and drawing reliable and trustworthy conclusions” (UNESCO, para. 1).

The Bloom Taxonomy, though developed for education, has been applied in varying degrees to explain critical thinking in different situations. It offers a set of processes using specific skills that will lead to informed decision-making when applied in a hierarchical order. The application starts from the pyramid base from 'exposure' to a piece of information/idea and ends at the apex with the 'evaluation' of such.



Bloom (1956) Level of intellectual skill thinking triangle

Centre for Media Literacy (CML) has narrowed what appeared as six items on Bloom's taxonomy to a manageable four-key media literacy process skills in a linear order: Access-Analyse-Evaluate-Create (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). The four items are geared towards achieving double-edge results in critical evaluation of media content, but also obtaining a skill set to enable a media audience to create content.

Critical thinking is generally associated with a media audience asking relevant questions as key to unravelling hidden signals in media content. The following are some of the reasons why media literacy is important:

1. The democratisation of media content on the internet has led to the proliferation of information disorder. The fallout of this is the promotion of false and non-verifiable information as news. Media consumers need to be enlightened and know how to sift the good from the bad before arriving at individual decisions that may be detrimental to society. Democracy thrives on accurate information needed by the citizenry to make informed decisions. Fake information to media consumers who are not media literate will be inimical to the survival of democracy.
2. Media as the fourth estate of the realm need to be accountable since much is expected from them as information producers. Media literate audiences are expected to scrutinise content served to them in a process that can lead to the unmasking of fake information promoters online.
3. The 21st century has witnessed a quantum rise in visual culture across the globe. The media is becoming more visual too, while social media and the availability of camera phones have made almost everybody a visual enthusiast. The ease at which image editing software can be used has turned every photograph on the internet suspect. As technology makes photography less reliable as a record of reality, media literacy skills will ensure that fake images are easily identified before they cause discord in the information space.
4. Audience engagement with the media makes people aware of what is in the media space as news and information, a relationship that portrays them as critical stakeholders in the information circuit. This awareness can create a feeling of self-actualisation in an audience as an enlightened person that can also enlighten others based on their media literacy. But most important is the long-time effect. In the words of Livingstone (2004, p. 20.), "The promise of media literacy, surely, is that it can form part of a strategy to reposition the media user- from passive to active, from the recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen."

Mediated content is brought to life under the banner of information dissemination. The content may appear brief, innocent and innocuous, but there is a belief that the context where the real meaning and motives lie may contain deeper information that only the literate in media matter may find easy to decode. A critical and analytical mind is expected to ask questions that will unmask what may lie beneath the veil. This explains the idea behind the Centre for Media Literacy's probing questions on media literacy based on five core concepts. These are:

1. All media messages are 'constructed.'
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power(Thoman & Jolls,

2005, p.18).

The five concepts point to one single thing about media content- messages are created on purpose. Getting to know why a media message was created and the purpose behind it forms the main issue only people who are media literates can comprehend.

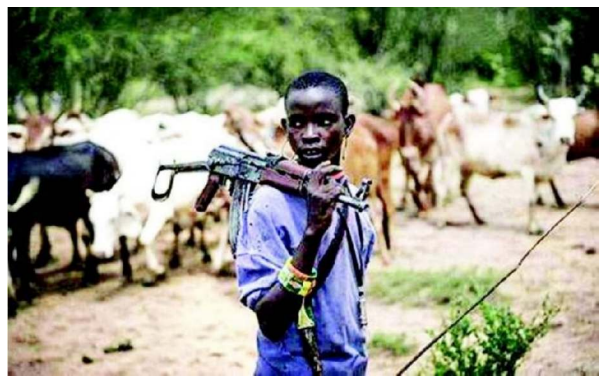
Fake Photographs in the Media Space

Manipulated images, fake news photographs and false-context photographs have become the norm in the media. The prevalence is probably higher as more news consumers turned online for their news consumption. The trend in political campaigning has created a new business for some with SM skills as 'Propaganda secretaries' to the officeseeking politicians. Their modus operandi ranges from 'factchecking' stories about opponents or downright manufacturing misleading content to demarket opposing political candidates on social media. (Hassan & Hitchen, 2019). "Accuracy is not always prioritised over political point-scoring, especially as these online operators are looking to illustrate their value to the party or candidate by creating viral content that increases their visibility' (para. 10). It is a new discouraging reality that portends more danger for the nation's political stability as Misinformation becomes another form of Business entrepreneurship/venture especially in an age of ethnoreligious distrust.

Two different photographs were for a long time used online by many Nigerian media organisations to corroborate their reportage of the incessant killings of farmers by suspected Fulani herdsmen in the North Central Geopolitical zone of the country. Some Nigerian mainstream media (the *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Thisday*, *Guardian*, *Daily Trust*, etc) and a coterie of online publications and bloggers at one time or the other used these photographs as that of 'armed' Fulani herdsmen.



Pix 1



Pix 2

Abdulhamid and Bamas (2016) in an online article revealed that the two photographs going viral as images of marauding herdsmen were not taken in Nigeria. According to the duo, "The photo credit (Pix 1) belongs to Reuters/Goran Tomasevic and was first published online on December 14, 2013. It is a photo of a man from the Dinka tribe holding his AK 47 rifle in front of a herd of cows in a Dinka cattle herders' camp".

Pix 2 was also of a young cattle herder in Kenya with its original caption being, " *Young Pokot warrior, Korinamba Ruto, herding his cattle with an AKS 47 gun which he carries for protection against attacks from cattle rustlers from the neighbouring Turkana community, Kenya. Photo date: June 19, 2012. Credit: Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures/Felix Features*".

For many online readers yearning for photographs showing the “killer” herdsmen, there was no way to know that they have been conned by the media who were unable to get the real photograph from the theatre of action. Former President of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Waheed Odusile, cited in *Abdulhamid and Bamas (2016)* described the motive behind the fake photographs as an attempt at stigmatising a whole race by the press. A scholar, Dr Farook Kperogi, interviewed in the article looked at the legal implications of using photographs without the copyright owner's authorisation, but also noted that “there is an ethical imperative to verify the real source of a picture before using it, especially in light of the tendency for purveyors of hate on social media to mislabel and misidentify pictures to promote (a) predetermined agenda.”

Also trending during the 2020 #endSARS protest were photographs posted on *Twitter* by some account holders who probably were acting anonymously to justify the protest and also woo more people to the cause.



The Nigerian Catholic conference match was later discovered to be disinformation from a verification conducted by Mwai (2020) for the *BBC*. The photograph was used out of context having been taken originally in 2020 during the clergymen's street match in Abuja against insecurity in the country

Effect of Fake News Photographs

At the receiving end of published fake news photographs is the audience who, with poor media literacy skills, becomes susceptible to media manipulation. The general notion that photography is evidence of what has happened makes the audience accept what they see as truth; whether an image has been used out of context or irrelevant to the story may be waived aside by a readership that is thirsty for visuals. To Mallonee (2016), “This works to the advantage of those who sell lies as truth, knowing that people believe what they see and see what they believe”. This view finds relevance in what Sontag, cited by Mallonee (2016), highlighted as, “Something we hear about, but doubt seems proven when we're showing a photograph of it”(para.8).

Mallonee (2016) recognised the emotive power of photographs in helping fake news go viral and therefore theorised by identifying 'misappropriation' and 'misrepresentation' as two ways by which fake news can be helped to spread. He believed that “The people publishing and promoting fake news routinely take photos out of context, digitally alter them, or combine them with text to manipulate readers, knowing that people tend to accept photographs as truthful representations” (Mallonee, 2016, para.3). The main intention of fake news promoters, when they manipulate images either through alteration or combining two composite images, is primarily to make them real and convincing to indiscernible news consumers who are mostly media illiterates to achieve a predetermined objective. These could be for partisanship to mobilise against political opponents (Peterson *et al.*, 2018) Another major reason why the audience of social media is susceptible to fake news more has been attributed by Shu *et al.* (2017) to the followership nature that binds people together in a network as determined 'by topics, interest and relations' and the 'like-minded' spirit of a community. They concluded that “users on social media tend to form groups containing like-minded people where they then polarize their opinions, resulting in an echo chamber effect. The echo chamber effect facilitates the process by which people consume and believe fake news” (Echo Chamber Effect, para 1).

The prevalence of fake news on the internet could erroneously give a wrong impression that it is one of the features of online Journalism. It should be noted that those who profit from its existence are those who produce them for reasons ranging from political gains to profiteering. Shu *et al.* (2017) looked into the negative impact of fake news on individuals and came up with this revelation:

First, fake news can break the authenticity balance of the news ecosystem. For example, the most popular fake news was even more widely spread on Facebook than the most popular authentic mainstream news during the U.S. 2016 presidential election. Second, fake news intentionally persuades consumers to accept biased or false beliefs. Fake news is usually manipulated by propagandists to convey political messages or influence. For example, some report shows that Russia has created fake accounts and social bots to spread false stories. Third, fake news changes the way people interpret and respond to real news. For example, some fake news was just created to trigger people's distrust and make them confused, impeding their abilities to differentiate what is true from what is not (p.1)

Verification Process to Debunk Fake News Photographs

Verification is a new word in the 21st century news ecology. It refers to the deliberate process carried out by a reporter or a news consumer to ascertain the accuracy and the authenticity of information, news photographs and other forms of mediated stories, in the public space. Individuals and media organisations who peddle misinformation and disinformation often play on media audience emotions and bias for various reasons bordering on the profit motive, political influence and troublemaking (Wanjiku, 2022).

Some stages should be followed to ascertain the originality, accuracy and authenticity of a news photograph online irrespective of what the sharer or source wants viewers to believe. They are in the form of probing questions that serve as **Verification checks** intended to scrutinise both the content and the context:

1. What does the content show?

2. How original is the content of the photograph?
3. What is the source?
4. Where was the photograph captured/recorded? Can you discover visual clues as in distinctive buildings or the street?
5. When was it captured in terms of time and date? Anything from the weather condition visible from the direction of the shadow, lighting, rain, etc?
6. What other clues can you [the viewer] obtain from the content?
7. Can one make anything out of the street signs, billboards, placards and other visual clues?
8. Can the photograph be shown to colleagues and trusted friends for their views?
9. Any possibility of getting an eyewitness account, officials or reporters who probably witnessed the event?
10. What could be the bigger picture? Why was the photograph taken? Could there be a hidden motive behind the photograph?

The above critical analysis will determine what to look out for as verification moves to forensic scrutiny of the photograph using the appropriate verification tools. There are many tools available online to verify visual content like news photographs, especially in an online environment. Everything depends on what exactly one is trying to verify

Verification Tools for Photographs

A. *Google Reverse Image Search, TinEye, Yandex, Labinol/reverse, Dupli Checker, etc.*

They are used to achieve these specific objectives:

1. To ascertain the original source/uploader of the photograph.
2. Check the earliest known history [where and when the photograph has been used on the internet.
3. Where and when the photograph was created/taken/produced.
4. To check if the photograph is being used in the right context.

B. *Jeffrey's Image Metadata, Foto Forensics, EXIF Viewer*

1. To examine the image metadata for the possible discovery of context
2. To know the date and time when the photograph was recorded
3. Ascertain image details like the camera used, exposure, GPS, etc.
4. Conduct a cross-reference of content

C. *Google Maps/Earth/Street View, Wikimapia, Yandex maps, Bing maps*

1. To verify the location where the photograph was taken.
2. To verify visual clues noticed in the photograph

D. *Invid Toolkit, Google Earth, Youtube Image Viewer, Suncalc*

1. To verify videos
2. To check the angle of shadows in a video

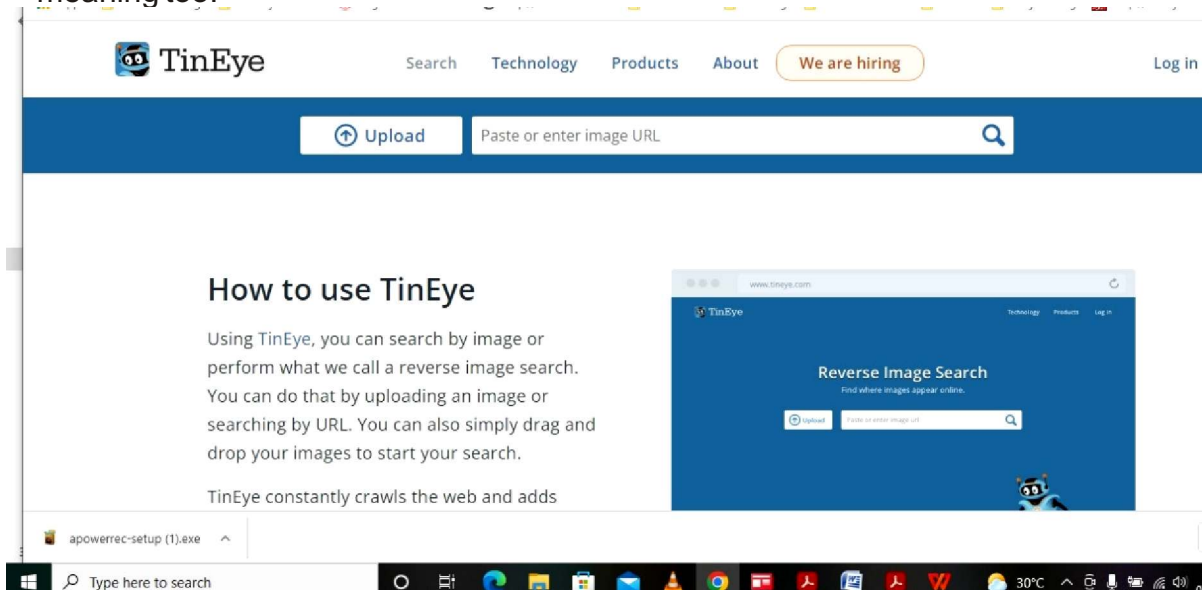
E. *Wolfram Alpha, Weather Info, Weather Forecaster,*

1. To cross-reference the weather situation in the published video/photos
2. For establishing geolocation.

Practical Exercise on How to Verify Photographs

1. Use any of these verification tools- *Google Reverse Image Search, TinEye, or Yandex.*
2. Identify the photograph. Download and save on the laptop/notebook/desktop.
3. Such identified photographs can also be right-clicked. Select "search Google for image" from the drop-down menu (when Google IRS is used).
4. Go to any of the tool websites i.e <https://tineye.com>

5. If using Google RIS, go to Google images
6. Click Search by image icon
7. Click **Upload an image** or drag the photograph where it was saved and drop it in the search
8. Go to the folder where the photograph was saved on your system.
9. Click **Open** or **Choose**.
10. The same photograph can be uploaded by pasting its URL on the image icon in Google Images, TinEye
11. The search will look for the photo to check if it has appeared online before and in what context. The search will reveal if the user has taken the photograph out of its original meaning too.



How To Avoid or Minimise Misinformation

This is the media literacy key to energising the literacy skills of consumers of media content online. While there is always the instinct to repost and share information that aligns with one's cognitive biases, following these steps could immunise one from being used as a courier of fake news on the internet.

1. Read before sharing
2. Pause and Think. How authentic is the source of the information? Is it from an authentic website?
3. Is the claim in the news photograph backed with visible evidence? A Verification exercise may be conducted for an objective analysis.
4. Double-check. Is the information appearing in other media outlets? Wait a bit before reposting if it claims to be an 'exclusive'.
5. Have you considered the number of people the information may affect negatively [amplification effect]? If it doesn't serve the general interest of your immediate society, don't post.

Conclusion

Nigeria as a multiethnic entity stands to lose its identity and possibly fragmentation if unverifiable visual information on social media is left unchecked. Images anchored on

ethnic profiling, religious sentiments, political mudslinging and brainwashing are capable of misleading many Nigerians with poor media literacy. For many who are less tolerant of others' right to ethnoreligious and political differences as the hallmark of a multiethnic society, any visuals are weapons of propagating their beliefs, but a sure recipe over time for disintegration. While Media literacy is an antidote in the war against misinformation, content verification should become part of media consumption for individuals on Social media. Not only will messengers of unverifiable information be exposed, but it will also help those at the receiving end of misinformation to take necessary legal action against the identified culprits.

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