Fake News as Threat to Democracy in Nigeria

Abubakar Salihu

Abstract

Ultimately, the effects of “fake news” can have detrimental consequences for the government of a polity and its democratic process. To be simple, the entire political process of democracy is based on reliable information. With large-scale and widespread dissemination of “fake news,” this crucial foundation has been more or less violated. As a result, citizens are not always able to form well considered opinions and hence make rational political decisions. It is on this basis that this study intends to examine fake news as a threat to Nigerian Democracy. The study is anchored on four objectives; to find out the rate of spread of fake news among Nigerians on both social and conventional media; to examine the effects of fake news on democracy, to proffer solution for combating fake news. In order to achieve the following objectives, the study utilizes secondary data as its methodology. From the study, we observed that the major causes of fake news are; quest for relevance, hostile government and civil actors, poor regularization / of the internet and money making. The effects of it has been so bad that it threatens the democracy in Nigeria and result to political violence. As a result of the above, we recommend that there. There is need to always confirm the source of information and also the need to penalize those blog and people spreading fake news.

Keywords: Fake News, Democracy Politics and Social Media

Introduction

We live in a digital world, surrounded by a deluge of information. The internet has made us more connected than ever in one sense, and yet we seem disconnected from each other in a fundamental sense. In this new information age, we are always surrounded by information, a large part of which is reliable with the more significant chunk unverifiable. Thus, discerning truth from untruth has become a herculean task. Citizens, development practitioners and other stakeholders around the world have raised concerns about the prevalence of fake news in contemporary politics mainly because of its characters and manifestations. The fact that fake news can be quickly spread and difficult to correct, popularity it has gained in global politics, its capacity to distort the truth, render it useless and replace it with damaging information, and the threat it poses on democracy re-emphasise the need for corrective measures.

Today, it is a well-known fact that, World news does not only hold its relevance to traditional newspapers or news channels but has been spread widely through the growing dominance of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. The verification of information or news shared via these platforms has been neglected hence an increase in false information has grown drastically via this medium of communication and interaction. Fake news became an on-trend topic of research and gained global popularity...
during the 2016 US presidential elections. The rise of fake news does not remain restrained only to western societies but is a growing phenomenon in countries like Nigeria and many other countries in the world. This term has found widespread research interest with regards to its influence and effects on Political campaigns via social media platforms (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Gu, Kropotov, & Yarochkin, 2017; Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2016).

Nigeria is the largest democracy in Africa with almost 200 million people living in the country. The country since its very independence has focused on its spirit of nationalism within the masses always prioritizing national identity. This is evidently clear through the National youth service corps program (NYSC). Nigerian media has also played a significant role in the political evolution of the country since independence, with the incessant of military intervention into politics for close to 37 years which was characterized by the dictatorial rule, suspension of the constitution and clamping down on traditional media houses which affected freedom of expression. Thus giving rise to insinuations, and to what is referred to as today fake news. From 1999 with the dawn of the new democracy at the political sphere and with the rise of internet awareness and social media there is a wave of awareness amongst people to send out information which was hitherto were bottled up because of the military decree on freedom of expression. This hitherto existing problem of freedom of expression faded away with the return of democracy in the Nigerian fourth republic. People therefore began to express their views via social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. However, the vast amount of digital information shared via these social media platforms in 2018 has worsened the problem of fake news in Nigeria.

Today in Nigeria most fake news circulated within the country has been constructed by political parties who hire people to create fake news mostly targeting their opponents in politics and religious minorities. Such fake news has always aimed at creating political animosity as well as evoke the feeling of prejudice among the masses. Nigeria in the past year have battled against the spread of fake news with political propaganda and have constantly struggled to curb extremist nationalism which will jeopardize the democracy of the country.

Statement of the Research Problem

The rise of fake news is no doubt a threat to Nigerian democracy because it has stirred the political atmosphere with misinformation spread from various platforms to people who are indulging and believing in every information they come across. However, the impact of fake news through social media has not only caused political turmoil but has caused an increase in violence across many states in Nigeria. Nigeria been a democratic country with a very large population made up of different religious groups and ethnicities, are always a cause of concern as the spread of fake news during the election season gives rise to religious and ethnic violence and this is a big blow to the democracy of the country. During 2019 year’s election some state of Nigeria, for instance plateau, Kaduna, Imo, Kano and Lagos to mention few was subject to violence due to fake news that was circulated via Facebook (Adegoke, 2019). Most of this area in Nigeria is already subject to ethnic violence, a post in Facebook circulated on June 23, 2018, showing pictures of a man’s skull open and a baby with machete wounds across its head and jaw was made viral around Facebook and was watched about 11,000 times. The news which was circulated by the user was claimed to project the growing violence in the Gashish district of Plateau State, Nigeria (Adegoke, 2019). According to the claims a tribe called
the Fulani Muslims were killing Christians of Berom ethnic minority. This news engulfed hatred among both tribes costing the life of Many Fulani Muslims in the region. Similarly, as a result of the threat of fake news the federal government of Nigeria have started initiating a bill which may curtail the menace and, in another sense, restricting people from expressing their opinion which is one of the tenant of democracy. This and other anomalies was the motive behind this research titled fake news as a threat to Nigerian Democracy

Aims and Objectives of the Study
The aim of this study is:
1. To analyse the impact of fake news as a threat to Nigerian democracy
2. To discuss the implications of fake news on freedom of press and speech in Nigeria
3. To proffer solution to the problems of fake news in Nigeria

Literature Review
Fake News
Fake News as an apparent novel phenomenon has been on the political agenda since the 2016 US-election. It sparked academic interest by scholars in various disciplines. Most attention has been paid to the US and the UK and their election and referendum, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2016; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2017). But fake news made the news around the world, and the threat by Russian manipulation of internal affairs is a concern not only for the US (Baldacci & Pelagalli, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Fake News are seen as a threat for democracy since they distort the formation of public opinion and increase level of populism and xenophobia.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that the phrase “fake news” has been “appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable” (p. 5). Although anecdotal evidence supports this, no systematic analyses exist of whether, and if so, how, politicians beyond the U.S. might use the discourse of fake news. In the same way that the Americanization of election campaigning was shaped by national cultures and political systems (Scammell, 1995), fake news discourse may manifest distinctly in different locations. McNair (2018) argues that “fake news” can be used in deliberate ways for strategic political ends, labeling this “weaponization” and asserting that the current information ecosystem facilitates this strategic political usage.

The discourse of fake news can similarly be weaponized for political gain. Research shows that political elites’ use of the term “fake news” negatively affects individuals’ trust in news media. This has significant implications for liberal democracies, including for the coexistence of diverse perspectives, the discussion of actual mis- or disinformation, media trust, and the democratic process, which relies on a wellinformed citizenry (Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Messner, 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2018). This finding underlines the importance of examining fake news terminology usage by political elites beyond the U.S.

The term “fake news” is “false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins Dictionary, 2017, online). The term is gaining global attention over the years that it was named the Collins Dictionary Word of the Year in 2017 due to its increased usage by 365% in the Collins Corpus (Towers-Clark, 2018, October 4). According to the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), fake news is information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or doubtful messages (EJN, 2017). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) defines fake news as “completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to
confuse or disinform; information, photos or videos manipulated to deceive, or old photographs shared as new; satire or parody which means no harm but can fool people” (BBC News, 2019 June 29, online). Globally, the issue of fake news has assumed increased concern because of its impact in the 2016 US Presidential elections campaigns and the Brexit referendum.

Furthermore, one of Nigeria’s independent verification and fact-checking platforms, Dubawa, which is supported by the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) defines fake news or false information as fraudulent, inaccurate or false verbal or visual messages disseminated for public attention through the conventional or social media, hugely to mislead, disinform or misdirect. It is a fluid subject that is differently perceived, interpreted and understood by individuals depending on many factors. Fake news is often embellished, sensationalised and made alarmingly attractive. Sometimes, it can be difficult to detect fraudulent news especially when such stories contain authoritative lies except through critical examination of the words mostly designed to capture and retain the attention of receivers in uncommon ways. Fake news is subtly and sophisticatedly presented to hide its falsity with unverifiable sources or claims. Fake news violates contextual and multicultural realities through mischief and ignorance presented as valid information (Dubawa, 2019, Ting & Song, 2017). Furthermore, Steinmetz (2018 September 6, online) notes that fake news debases the truth and causes “confusion of fantasy and reality” in the minds of the audience.

As noted by Siapera (2018), there are three significant factors that characterise the current brand of fake news. First, the ease by which people can create contents; second, the distribution patterns across new and social media, and third, the political economy of the online domain which enables and incentivises the creation of these forms of news. She further noted that anyone with internet access can effectively produce and distribute contents of any kind of quality and that “people can avail of the various functionalities of computer software such as photoshop and create highly believable contents…. Fake news can travel very far on the internet” (Siapera, 2018, p.57).

Fake news is a real challenge in Nigeria especially given the country’s fragile social setting, loose democratic culture, poverty, illiteracy, depressing human conditions, inflation, weak economy, intolerance and high tendencies for disunity among the peoples of the country (Ogola, 2017 February 27). As Nigeria rises to curb the negative impact of fake news on its democratic process, Pate (2018 September 7) offers some recommended to help individuals and newsrooms to instantly identify and avoid being victims of fake news:

1. Check sources: individuals are encouraged to fall back on most trusted news brands they could rely on for their news.
2. Fact-check from multiple sources
3. Use verification tools
4. Check metadata
5. Think before broadcasting/publishing
6. Media literacy: increase the standard of education and media literacy particularly for young people to be highly critical on what to trust on conventional and social media platforms
7. Use fact checking sites
8. Individuals and newsrooms should institute the culture of fact-checking for stories and claims

Types of Fake News
The term ‘fake news’, on closer inspection, turns out to refer to a range of phenomena: from deliberately misleading attempts to undermine elections or national security at one end of the continuum to any view that
challenges consensus ‘group think’ on the other.

According to (LSE Media policy 2017) fake news is categorize into six
1. Ad-driven innovation fake news
2. Parody and satire
3. Bad journalism
4. News that challenges orthodox authority
5. News that is ideologically opposed
6. Alleged foreign interference in domestic election through fake news

1. Ad-driven innovation fake news
Fake news “boiler houses” in Macedonia target resonance and share-ability ahead of any consideration for truth. Numerous investigations confirm that new ad models open new opportunities for people to make money through the peddling of fake news, and this may have been a factor in misinformation during the US presidential elections. Social media companies are in a difficult position: they do not wish to actively engage as editors in the process of news selection and distribution, but neither do they want to be seen as choosing to do nothing about this problem. It is of course theoretically possible for news sites or stories to fit into both categories 1 and 2.

2. Parody and satire
One of the refreshing peculiarities of social media news is a new flourishing of political satire, and in particular, parody of news genres. Since Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal, it has been abundantly clear that this form of fake news is a particularly important form of political speech, and it is important to note that regulatory solutions should protect, and perhaps even encourage it. A by-product of this genre has always been that a number of people will believe these parodies to be true. However as in the case of A Modest Proposal, when they are believed to be true, satire and parody are at their most powerful and are most worthy of protection.

3. Bad journalism
In the history of journalism there are numerous infamous cases of journalists simply making it up. In celebrity gossip in particular, journalists have an interest in conspiring with the publicity-hungry subjects of stories to feed public hunger for stories with scant regard for truth. Journalism sourcing ethics do not deal effectively with this. Since the UK Editors’ Code has been in existence, the most complained about article is consistently Article 1: Accuracy.

The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.

Since neither industry body IPSO, nor its predecessor the PCC pro-actively policed this article of the code (they responded to complaints) and since neither body sought to adjudicate accuracy itself (they focused on journalistic processes of ‘taking care’), standards of accuracy in the press have not had a strong incentive to improve: readers were left to decide what was true and what was not and the assumption was that this would lead to at least some commercial pressure to verify. The result was that readers didn’t really know what to believe, and a great many people in all likelihood believe much that is fabricated. In some cases, where the subjects of stories are likely to complain, there are stronger incentives for more active verification to avoid potentially embarrassing complaints being upheld.

4. News that challenges orthodox authority
Any political community in any political epoch is characterised by a zeitgeist or shared orthodoxy, a set of rules or civic codes, or even ‘hegemony’. Attempts to present facts and events from the perspective that is not based on the shared set of assumptions would likely be dismissed as fake. This is seen most clearly
in the area of business news. It is well established that business news is subject to ‘pro-cyclical’ group think which tends to exacerbate market corrections when they do come, as was the case during the financial crisis. In relation to all of these, it is important to reflect on the difference between statements of fact, the framing of those facts, and the decision-making process which determines the ‘news value’ of those facts and whether they deserve a wider audience.

5. News that is ideologically opposed
Donald Trump in his infamous press conferences during the first month of his presidency devoted a good deal of time to “calling out” what he described as the fake news contained in the “mainstream media”. His ire was directed at the New York Times and CNN. But similar attempts to undermine and relativise authoritative voices, or indeed any voice that challenges one’s own perspective have used the phrase “fake news” as a form of insult.

6. Alleged foreign interference in domestic elections through fake news
It is claimed that Russian organisations have supported distribution of fake stories that support new populists such as Donald Trump and the Front National in France. The European Union has funded a disinformation review: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/. The aim of this review is to monitor and fact-check what appear to be deliberate attempts to spread misinformation. There seem to be relatively few examples of deliberately fake stories propagated with the aim of affecting election results that are published in the language of the target country.

The Nexus between Fake News and Social Media in Nigeria
There is no doubt that there is a great nexus between fake news and social media in Nigeria. This is because in any discuss of fake news the medium prone to the spread of fake news has been credited to social media. (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016 May 26)

Initially, reactions to the chances and opportunities posed by social media and the age of digital democracy were almost euphoric. The internet promised more transparency, an approachable political class, and a social discourse encompassing the entire public sphere. Yet even years ago, some approached the new media with scepticism. Jürgen Habermas, grand theorist of the structural transformation of the public sphere, warned of a potential decline in the quality of public discourse imas early as 2008. In the virtual realm, he claimed, the public sphere threatened to splinter off into “random groups, united by special interests.” The past 18 months seem to have confirmed these fears. Today, we speak of the filter bubble. In the context of the Brexit campaign and the US presidential election, Facebook and other social networks functioned as a type of unsocial media, undermining public debate rather than reviving it. Hate speech tainted public discourse, while fake news and targeted hacking attacks derailed it further. Data driven information and manipulation campaigns, often in connection with the British firm Cambridge Analytica, made elections campaigns look like a farce. To many, it appeared as if social media was eating away at the very foundations of our democracies.

That said, doom and gloom is not the only thing on the horizon. In many ways, the Internet and social media have changed our democracy for the better in many countries and Nigeria is not an exceptional case. Today in Nigeria many Online petitions capture the sentiment of countless citizens, politicians are placed in direct contact with their voters via Facebook or Twitter, and more people than ever take part in public debates. Similarly transparency to some certain extent have been actualize through social media. This is because many update with regard the happening of
election and public service are spread through social media platform. Nevertheless, social media’s dark side is undeniably real: populist parties and movements in particular use automated bots, fake news and data-driven manipulation in their public relations work, while foreign hackers interfered with the American and French presidential elections. None of this, however, has really managed to sway the outcome of an election. Neither Cambridge Analytica, nor WikiLeaks or hackers alone made Donald Trump President of the United States. Hence, while this type of interference is unlikely to change the outcome of an election, it does threaten to undermine our trust in the political processes that make up the backbone of our political system. Fake news can increase citizens’ distrust in the media. Hate speech and social media bots threaten the viability of civilised public discourse online. Hacks and leaks, often mixed with disinformation, undermine public trust in the political establishment of the present Nigeria. Manipulative campaigns suggest that the ability to influence voting decision is only a click away.

In 2016, Facebook user numbers per month reached 1.8bn and Twitter numbered 400m; this was reinforced by a Gallup poll which indicated that there was “a continuing decline of ‘trust and confidence’ in the mass media” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). “Fake news” has become dominant across platforms, and the biggest factor behind “fake news” stories’ success is their high level of social engagement. Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, the public’s engagement with “fake news” through Facebook was higher than through mainstream sources (Silverman, 2016, November 16). A post-election survey conducted by Alleott and Gentzkow (2017) found for the month before the 2019 election, people reported spending 66 min each day “reading, watching or listening to election news” – 38 percent was on social media. Diehl et al. (2016) conducted the first study in 2016 to help demonstrate the relationship between news consumption and persuasion in social media, and since then, studies on this relationship have increased and further extended to the realm of “fake news.

The relationship between “fake news” and social media in Nigeria is especially important when taken into consideration with the identity factors and political partisanship which govern many of our interactions on these platforms. Social networks connect us with other like-minded people. Our networks of Facebook “friends” or Twitter “followers” generally consist of people who share our values and beliefs. These values may be social, political or economic; the information we share through these networks helps define who we are and what we believe in. Earlier scholarship often saw this characteristic of social media as a positive attribute – they argued that by enabling access to a plethora of opinions and ideas, the general public would become exposed to differing views which would thus either alter their views or enhance their own beliefs through educating them on the opposition (Keele and Wolak, 2008; Huckfeldt et al., 2004). In a study conducted by Diehl et al. (2016), it was argued that “a large diverse network of social connections should naturally lead to a higher volume of competing or conflicting views, and ultimately more ambivalent attitudes.” However, this study was notably taken up for those pre-2016 elections, and new scholarship is showcasing a trend toward increasingly selective viewing. Spohr (2017) noted, for example, many theorists argued at the advent of the internet that such a platform would increase exposure to political differences; yet, as he sums up, “this optimistic assumption does not seem to have materialized.” For example the National Democratic Institute (NDI) report that as internet penetration deepens across the country, millions of Nigerians now access and
share information via smartphones, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp (NDI, 2018 July 20). The 2017 Afrobarometer poll for Nigeria stated that 39 percent of respondents regularly consume news on social media. These platforms offer new ways for citizens to engage in political and electoral processes. They also offer political parties, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and government institutions to share information with voters. However, some Nigerians are fearful that, if not used responsibly, these platforms could become vehicles for disinformation and hate speech.

Disinformation (sometimes called fake news) is the deliberate generation and dissemination of false information to manipulate public opinion and perceptions (Adamic, 2015; NDI, 2018 July 20; Sadiku et al., 2018). The spread of fake news and hate speech in Nigeria have promote violence and social destabilization. Although fake news can be disseminated via any type of medium, the recent category of fake news (especially as triggered by the 2019 Nigerian General election) is rather a child of the internet-based media (e.g., e-mails, web portals and social media) (Oro, 2019 2017) rather than the traditional media. However, this is without bias to the fact that fake news can also actively spread over the broadcast media (radio and TV) especially in the less-technologically developed nations (Bartels, 1993; Spiro et al., 2006) such as Nigeria. Hence, online fake news can be said to be a form of cyber propaganda; and propaganda (whether cyber-based or in real life) accompanied with hate speech is just a time bomb waiting to explode (Abdullahi, 2018 March 13).

**Fake News Posing Threat to Freedom of Expression**

In contemporary media landscape, journalists, communications experts and others see expression as a weapon. The Internet which provides open space for the exercise of the right to receive and impart information has redefine public discourse and information sharing process. The open nature of the Internet, social media and the lack of total regulation and restrictions by authorities in Nigeria and the world at large defiles freedom of expression. However, in a number of cases, countries like China in order to prevent access to certain content adopted measures such as blocking and filtering for the purpose of adequate regulation.

In Nigeria, before the advent of social media, people rely on the conventional media as their reliable and trusted news source. This is because, the conventional media provide the public with well researched news that were gate kept and scrutinised. Our democracy thrived on this model impressively. Unfortunately, the social media arrive with a freedom for public to develop and distribute information in their own quota. This is a new model that has been abused for several selfish and nonchalant reasons. It provides the public with anonymity and immunity to by cut the order. As a result, some unscrupulous elements with gruesome intentions use the social media to create fake news and distribute. Such news has created public chaos, communal clashes, political tension as well as economic threats which are very pillar in democratic dispensation. To this end, it can be deduced that fake news is a threat to Nigeria’s growing democracy not just as a country with high population but as a country with huge diversity and differences.

In order to combat fake news, scholars posit that glaring discrepancies should be enacted in respect of how freedom of expression is exercised physically (offline) and virtually (online). The potentially universal accessibility of the Internet by everyone as a publisher; and its ability to support new, democratic public spaces for debate (the so-called virtual public
square value of the Internet) where social media handlers explore platforms for mobilization and incorporation of citizens in protest schemes regardless of distance and geographical barriers; a worrying trend, must be carefully checked.

Fake news as a Threat to Nigerian Democracy

Ultimately, the effects of “fake news” can have detrimental consequences for the Nigerian government and its democratic process. To be simple, the entire political process of any democratic country (Nigeria inclusive) is based on reliable information. With large-scale and widespread dissemination of “fake news,” this crucial foundation has been more or less violated. As a result, citizens are not always able to form well-considered opinions and hence make rational political decisions. Such a result is an increasing correlation between viewing “fake news” and attitudes of inefficacy, alienation and cynicism toward politics (Balmas, 2014). One of the dangerous consequences that factually “fake news” has on the US democracy is that people often confuse or conflate the two distinct types of “fake news,” factual and ideological, providing validity to ideological claims of “fake news.” This has left the populace in the Nigeria unwilling to trust the mainstream media and becoming more politically polarized, resulting in individuals adhering to alternative sets of facts, or worse, not knowing what to believe. “Fake news” at this point diminishes the possibility of democratic debate and the subsequent legitimacy of the democratic process. It also presents a destabilizing capacity which effects citizens’ trust in policies, governments or even in democracy as a whole. Perhaps more debilitating, such destabilization would lead to the result in tensions between citizens and in citizen–media interactions. Bishop (2008) argued in his popular book “fake news” creates communities that act as feedback loops where we are “hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read […] and the neighborhoods we live in.” Such political polarization creates immense consequences for the success of Nigerian democracy, as individuals are utilizing the destabilizing properties of “fake news” to propel partisan politics in Nigeria.

This validation of ideological “fake news” without questioning confuses the general public. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Democratic Research and Development (CFDRD 2019), “a majority of the Nigerian adults – 62 percent – get news on social media, and 18 percent do so often” (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016, May 26) This is taken into account alongside another survey found that “about two-in-three adults in Nigeria (64 percent) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.” This trend is equally prevalent among both the Partisan and Non partisan group and is also “shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations, and most other demographic characteristics.” Perhaps most interesting, the same survey found that although many Nigerians recognized the confusion that may be brought about by “fake news,” most reported that they were at least somewhat confident in their ability to discern a fabricated news story fact from completely made up: 39 percent reported that there were “very confident,” 45 percent were “somewhat confident,” 9 percent were “not very confident” and only 6 percent were “not at all confident” (Barthel et al., 2016, December 15).

Recently, BBC News interviewed a group of experts what was their opinion about the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Several them indicated that the failure of credible information sources is one of the serious problems Nigerians faced nowadays, indeed the entire mankind (Wasserman & Madrid-
Morales, 2018 November 21). As a matter of fact, nowadays, truth has shifted to become relative, facts have assumed more prominence now to having alternatives, and news has been converted into a weapon of war of words, a phenomenon the current Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed described as probably the most dangerous threat to the country’s democratic process, where Jimoh (2018 August 7).

A further analysis of news and information dissemination in Nigeria takes us to the purviews of constitutional provisions. Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria assigns a role to the press: “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people” (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, online).

Furthermore, Section 24 of the 1960 Constitution which became Section 25 of the Republican Constitution of 1963 and formed the major part of Section 36 of the 1979 Constitution and Section 39 of the (current) 1999 Constitution states that:

i. every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart ideas and information without interference; and

ii. without prejudice to the generality of Sub-section (1) of this Section every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate a medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions... (Ibrahim, 2017, pp.4-5; Pate & Idris, 2016, p.161)

Most of Nigerian constitutions have been framed as part of the process of democratization (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13). Therefore, the authors can confidently say that the makers of the Nigerian constitution recognized freedom of expression and freedom of the press as fundamental elements in every democracy (Epstein, 2011). Democracy thrives only when the people have free access to genuine and correct information about issues and matters that affect them and can use this information to make informed decisions and choices (Ibrahim & Pate, 2019; Oro, 2011; Epstein, 2011).

Taking from the famous words of former US President, Abraham Lincoln who defined democracy as the government of the people, for the people and by the people (Haney, 1944), democracy is a system of government which is founded on the consensus of the majority of people. For upholding the democratic principles of equality and plurality, democracy assures that everyone would have their say, but the majority must have their way. The fundamental assumption behind this principle, however, is that the choice that people make would be based on facts, or correct information (Ezema, Ezeah, Ishiwu, & Ikwueze, 2012; Kazeem, 2018 November 29).

In other words, facts are suppressed or distorted then the right of the people to freely choose what or who they want to choose would have been subverted (Eskridge Jr., 2010 November 19; Haney, 1944).

Therefore, the escalating negative effects of fake news and the scholarly discussion about ‘alternative facts’ are a direct assault on the fundamental principle of democracy, both in theory and in practice. This treatise agrees with Sen’s (1987) argument that the freedom or right to act is inauthentically attributed to individuals who do not have the capability to act. Section 39 of the Constitution provides for every Nigerian citizen the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. However, “interference is exactly what fake news does”; and by battling for space and vying for acceptability with authentic information and news, fake news deprives people of the very constitutional right to hold opinions and
receive and impart ideas and information (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13, online; Oro, 2011).

Side by side with authentic information, the creation of alternative facts often makes it difficult for people to distinguish truth from untruth. When people get confused as to what the truth, or genuine information is, certainly, they cannot create a shared starting point from which to engage in meaningful conversations about issues and matters affecting them, let alone able to hold their political representatives accountable for their stewardships (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21).

Instinctive understanding over what happened paves the way for meaningful debate over what needs to be done and how. The urge to solve any problem must advance from a common understanding of what the problem constitutes and upon what objective sets of facts it is based. If the facts become disputed, people’s engagement in the process of finding solutions to their common problems becomes almost impossible (Ezema et al., 2012). The Information and Democracy Commission (IDC) summarizes this discourse as follows:

Political control of the media, subjugation of news and information to private interests, the growing influence of corporate actors who escape democratic control, online mass disinformation, violence against reporters and editors, and the undermining of quality journalism, threaten the exercise of the right to knowledge. Any attempt to abusively limit it, whether by force, technology or legal means, is a violation of the right to freedom of opinion. (IDC, 2018 November 5, p.3)

The freedom to receive and share information is the soul of any democracy (IDC, 2018 November 5). Hence, one can confidently say that social media are the greatest democratic forces in human history. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc., have empowered the people tremendously more beyond the imagination of everyone, from mere content consumers to content creators (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13; Buzzetto-More, 2013; Kenix, 2011). ICT and other forms of the new media have ensured that people can access vast amounts of information virtually free of charge. With the unprecedented ubiquity and pervasiveness of the new media technologies, it is almost impossible to be not to be informed (Oro, 2011) much as it is almost impossible to not to communicate as an individual, group or organization. For example, if you own a mobile phone or smartphone, you have one of the cheapest means of accessing information, at least this is true with most urban phone owners and internet users (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016).

Furthermore, as people actively use the social media platforms by uploading and sharing as well as tweeting and retweeting contents, ordinary people have become active agents in the information value chain, not only receiving but also creating and recreating meanings (Kenix, 2011; Moinuddin, Menzies, Vezér, & Morrow, 2017). Once again, no phenomenon in human history has had such a pervasive revolutionary influence on society and human relationships as social media (Buzzetto-More, 2013). ICT is considered the greatest weapon in the momentous battle to undo the culture of silence and promote the right to know, the freedom to receive and disseminate information as the ultimate power of the people (Abdullahi, 2017 March 13; Buzzetto-More, 2013; Kenix, 2011).

Furthermore, to borrow from Lai Mohammed’s assertion (cited earlier in Okakwu, 2018 July 11), the rise of fake news beckons Nigerian democracy’s capability for disintegration. While ICT has provided us with the means and power to manipulate reality in many ways that were hitherto considered ‘humanly’ impossible, the internet and social media have made it possible for us to propagate this misleading reality and trumped-up stories at an incredible speed regardless of one’s geographical location (Ibrahim &
Ada, 2016). For example, a picture snapped or contrived in this place and shared on the internet can go online viral and make it across the country faster than one can imagine.

Recommendations
There is need to always confirm the source of information (social media accounts often try to appear as if they are from legitimate news sites), check different sources to confirm the authentication of the information you are reading. Also, engage different verification tools online like Tin Eye, Google and Bing which can tell what you need to know about information you came across. Again, there is need to engage Metadata (a tool); it will tell you where and when an image or video was captured to avoid confusion in the case of fake news. After that, then think before you post/share is very important. There is need to always penalize those blogs or media outlets that post fake news no matter the circumstance. By so doing, it will serve as a deterrent to others using it as a way to gain relevance or with other reasons too. There is need for the government to work with the media and invest also to avoid creating room for fake news. Also, the government should give room for full press freedom and journalistic integrity in Nigeria and the world at large.

Conclusion
In a nutshell, we can say that the threat that fake news poses to democracy is not peculiar to Nigeria alone, it is a global problem which has done more harm than good in our society. We are of the opinion that the government at all levels should work aggressively and assiduously with the media towards ensuring that the rate at which fake news grow are minimized to an insignificant level to avoid further tensions, killings and so on. The government should do more on media literacy and promote some reliable media outlets the people can always fall back on for information. If all these mentioned above can be achieved then the world will be a better place.

References


