# Combating Fake News: How Increased Media Competences Can Curb Disinformation Trends in Nigeria

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This study examined how Nigerians understood fake news. It took a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with 30 journalists to determine their understanding of fake news and explore how media literacy can help combat fake news. The sample was purportedly drawn from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones to ensure representativeness. Gatekeeping Theory and Public Sphere Theory were used to better understand how journalists use their professional role of vetting information and releasing only credible information to the public. The analyzed data show that social networks facilitate the spread of false news more than mainstream media. The findings also show that fake news spreads due to factors such as time constraints, clickbait, user-generated content, and competitiveness. Media literacy is important because it serves as the foundation for being an informed and critical thinker; thus, the study recommends, among other things, that media outlets evaluate and cross-check their sources, as well as encourage politicians and government officials to be cautious in their choice of words, as they have the potential to spread rapidly and incite violence.

Keywords: disinformation, fake news, journalism; journalist, misinformation, clickbait, user-generated content, Nigeria

The definitions of news and journalism have not changed in centuries, as they are inextricably linked. Journalism is the practice of writing news, whereas news, which has acquired a questionable qualifier as a result of the advent of Internet technology, has given rise to numerous information dissemination platforms. We now have fake news, a new type of news that is completely different from what news has always been known to be. Fake news has prompted several questions in the media industry. One such question is whether what is fake can still be called news if the term fake contradicts the very nature or characteristic of news. Fake news has also been debated whether it is a product of journalism, a profession guided and guarded by unbreakable normative boundaries (Aitamurto, 2018). Fake news has increased interest in media literacy, which is commonly defined as the ability to critically think about the information you consume and create. This includes distinguishing between facts and opinions, as well as understanding how the media can be used to persuade people.

Experts believe that the surge in fake news, which in extreme cases has resulted in death (Okocha and Akpe, 2022), has "triggered a renewed interest in various forms of media literacy" (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu, 2019). This is allegedly based on the authors' belief that media literacy intervention would help various mass media audiences be "inoculated against any harmful effects of misleading information." In an empirical study, these researchers concluded that "information literacy" can significantly increase "the likelihood of identifying fake news stories."

In an age of ubiquitous technology and media, media literacy lays the groundwork for becoming a well-informed and critical thinker. It protects individuals from undue manipulation and false information. This article does not assume that "fake news" has a widely accepted definition. News is verifiable information published in the public interest. It must be valid and truthful. Any piece of information that fails to meet these criteria is not considered news. Thus, the term fake news refers to information that does not meet the news's verifiability and public interest standards. Fake news is more than just inaccurate and misleading information presented as news. It is a charged, weaponized term used to undermine and denigrate journalism. As a result, phrases like misinformation, disinformation, and information disorder are recommended, despite their lack of appropriateness.

While fake news is not as spectacular, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) wonder why it's become such a global topic, attracting so much attention.

The primary reason is that fake news can be produced and broadcast online faster and at a lower cost than through traditional news outlets (Shu, Silva, Wang, Tang and Liu, 2017). The emergence and popularity of social media have contributed to this sudden interest (Olteanu, Castillo, Diaze, and Kiciman, 2019; Zafarani, Ahmadi, and Shahzrad, 2014). According to Uwakwe (2018), fake news began in the 12th century, when false information about Jews drinking children's blood sparked attacks that resulted in massive deaths. They reported that on Easter Sunday, 1475, fake news struck Trent, Italy, when a 2½-year-old child, Simonino, went missing and a Franciscan preacher, Bernadinho da Feltre, delivered a series of sermons claiming that the Jews had murdered the child, drained his blood, and drank his blood to celebrate Passover. The rumors spread rapidly. Even after the boy's body was discovered, the Prince-Bishop of Trent, Johannes IV Hinderback, immediately ordered the city's entire Jewish community arrested and tortured. Fifteen of them were found guilty and executed at the stake. When the story inspired people in nearby areas to commit similar crimes, the papal leadership intervened in an attempt to put an end to both the lie and the murders.

Today, with the rise of social networks, people are easily duped into believing, sharing, and even acting on false information. As a result, the demand for fact-checking and analysis has increased, and both news consumers and practitioners bear responsibility. There is a growing debate about how to address these concerns while maintaining the benefits of digital media. Individuals can improve their media literacy skills by learning to distinguish between truth, satire, falsehood, dislike, and inaccuracy, as well as understanding why fake news has become so popular.

In this paper, disinformation refers to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through dishonest information (Grange, 2019). Today, we have online journalism, which the newspaper industry had to adapt to over time and with a lot of effort. With the advent of the Internet, printing became more expensive, making online publication an option. It became clear that people were not abandoning the news; rather, they were receiving it in different, more convenient formats. The key is to adapt or fail. Because it allows content to be distributed without the use of physical infrastructure, online newspapers have been able to avoid government restrictions and gatekeeping. Because the sources were not fact-checked, there was a chain result of disinformation and misinformation.

Journalism has grown in popularity, and news is now much more widely available. As a result, "fake news" can quickly spread to a large impact of people. It is also worth noting that as people become accustomed to receiving more and more information in real time, their demand for additional information, whether factual or opinionated, will increase. Facts are true accounts of what happened or existed, whereas opinions are interpretations of what happened, usually from one person's perspective. This could result in the spread of false information. This study examines Nigerian journalists' perspectives on fake news and its spread in the Nigerian public sphere.

## Objectives of the Study

This study explores into Nigerian journalists' perceptions of fake news and how media literacy awareness can help combat disinformation and misinformation that are classified as fake news. This study is divided into two sections: empirical and theoretical, and it concludes with policy recommendations. The study has three objectives. First, the study will look into how newsroom staff perceive fake news. Second, to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon, we intend to identify the causes of the increase in fake news in Nigeria. Third, we want to look into how media literacy can help to curb fake news trends.

## Theoretical Framework

The study used the public sphere theory and the gatekeeping theory. Habermas developed the concept of the public sphere in the 18th century, claiming that it was distinguished by its critical nature, as opposed to the representative nature of the feudal system (Boeder, 2005). According to Hauser (1988), it is a discursive space where people can share their perspectives in order to reach a consensus judgment. This critical nature is jeopardized by the power of mass media, which converts the majority of society into a passive audience, the goals of consumer culture. Ajakaiye et al. (2019) argue that the media's classification and atomization of the public domain is central to the theory. The massification of the media simply shows how access to the media is no longer limited to professionals. Amateurs alike have free access to report happenings around them by using Web 2.0, regardless of how ethical or unethical their report is (Flichy

2019, Jinatu 2016 & Ajakaiye et al. 2019). Despite the ambiguity of this concept, it is possible and beneficial to develop an analytical framework that reflects the complexities of the public domain in contemporary society. Even if we acknowledge this complication, we must remember that any attempt to present a systematic account of the nature of the public sphere will inevitably be contentious.

It is reasonable to conclude that Ajakaiye et al. (2019) made an appropriate contribution. Ajakaiye et al. (2019) defined the public sphere as an arena in which citizens have unlimited access to subjects of general concern, fueled by freedoms of assembly, association, expression, and publication of opinions without undue economic or political restrictions." As a result, various social media groups (Facebook, Whatsapp, Blogs) and websites have been launched on the Internet and used for chatting and uploading information, which in most cases become avenues for peddlers of fake news to carry out their misdeeds to the detriment of those who are ultimately harmed.

Democratization processes in a trending political debate between political parties are adversely affected by bloggers and subscribers to social media platforms in an unregulated public environment and are not controlled by any social gatekeeper (Grange, 2019). According to Cela (2015), it is a well-known fact that the emergence of new media and rapid development in the communication technology sector have fueled unprecedented transformations, even in terms of the public sphere and public discourse. Cela observes that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become the "new communication field being used from the public factors to communicate with the audiences." According to him, the technological opportunities provided by these platforms have made it easier for message senders and receivers to "communicate in a higher level." His conclusion is that social networks have reduced visibility and eliminated barriers between information providers and consumers. Furthermore, and most importantly, social networks have "made the communication more democratic by empowering the simple people who were very passive in the past" (Cela, 2015). However, Fuchs (2014) continues to argue that more media reforms are required to create "a social media sphere" that transcends  control and represents the public interest' in order to realize the media's social potential.

In Nigeria's public domain, the rise of social networks creates a new public realm with ill-defined boundaries in terms of freedoms of assembly,

association, and expression (Ajakaiye et al., 2019, p. 1675), highlighting the theory's relevance to this study. This theory is also relevant to this study because its primary goal is to assess the perspectives of media personnel as a representative of the entire population that constitutes the public sphere.

## Gatekeeping Theory

Kurt Lewin proposed the gatekeeping theory in 1947. According to Harcup (2014, p.114), gatekeeping theory portrays journalists as gatekeepers who allow some events to become news while closing the gate on others. The assumption of theory is based on the professional role of vetting information and making only credible information available to the public. Thus, gatekeepers either allow or prevent information dissemination. Some people questioned the theory because of a bias that the gatekeeper could have. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), gatekeeping determines the information chosen as well as the content and type of messages.

> The emergence of new media appears to have removed the barriers to news distribution. The new media has enabled anyone with information to access the platform and publish stories online without being subjected to gatekeepers. Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso (2008, p.93) It appears that the concept of gatekeeping has vanished with the internet. The internet and its user-friendly World Wide Web graphical overlay are the best examples yet of a postmodern medium; it provides the opportunity for the creation of a highly All relevance, all meaning, is relative to an individual perspective in a personal interface.

Gatekeeping determines why journalists use certain stories and drop others, particularly in traditional media. According to Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2018), this theory ensures that news stories are chosen and shaped based on priority and other mysterious factors used by gatekeepers. According to these scholars, even reporters are gatekeepers because, before their reports reach the editors in the newsroom, they must make individual decisions about whether an event warrants a specific news slant or approach, or any report at all. They believe that even after a report has been posted on social media, those who comment or forward it to other groups must decide which parts of the report are worth reposting. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), "essentially, this makes every actor who is

exposed to the content a potential gatekeeper, albeit with different levels of influence." Gatekeeping in the digital media era, with unprofessional participants in the media process, has received a lot of attention due to the unique nature of information dissemination in new media.

However, critics of gatekeeping theory believe that certain news items were prevented from reaching the public due to factors that could jeopardize the organization's business opportunities. The danger of citizen journalism stems from the amateur's potential bias as a result of the lack of someone to critically scrutinize the information/news items that will be circulated to the public. Gatekeeping is a call to conscience that embodies moral principles such as truth, objectivity, fairness, and responsibility. One of the theories used to anchor this study is gatekeeping theory, which is concerned with verifying the authenticity and value of news sources. This is one of the most effective ways to combat fake news because it only publishes verifiable information, which is why it was used in this study.

## Literature Review

### The Concept of Fake News

Even journalists have struggled to define false news. Pate, Gambo, and Adamkolo (2019, p. 21) define fake news as "fraudulent, inaccurate, or false verbal or visual messages disseminated for public attention via conventional or social networks to mislead, misinform, or misdirect."

It has been described as "a purposely and verifiably false news article" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Shu et al. 2017), which overlaps with fake news, disinformation, and misinformation is "a news piece or message released and promoted by the media, providing false information independent of the means and reasons behind it." (Golbeck et al. 2018). Furthermore, what news is has become increasingly difficult to define as it ranges from a dramatic narrative of something unique or deviant to an account of a current, intriguing, and noteworthy occurrence; in particular, "the digitization of news has challenged traditional definitions of news." Nonjournalists can use online platforms to reach a large audience. (Tandoc Jr et al., 2018). Fake news is information that is intentionally false and published by a news organization. This definition supports recent studies in fake news research (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Shu et al., 2017). Addresses the public's perception of fake news, particularly in the

aftermath of the 2015 Nigerian presidential election. Note that deceptive news is more destructive and difficult to distinguish from carelessly false news, as the former pretends to be true in order to deceive the public more effectively. The definition emphasizes authenticity and intentions; it also ensures that the information posted is newsworthy by determining whether the publisher is a news organization.

Pate and Adamkolo (2020) and Titilayo (2019) capture the role of the Internet in promoting fake news, stating that, as it stands today, fake news would not have been able to rise in an unprecedented manner without the advent of the Internet (Livingstone, 2014). Therefore, for this research, fake news is defined as information that is falsely disseminated to the public through online or offline media in order to misinform or mislead the audience about an individual, group, or topic.

## The Issue of Fake News

Fake news differs from legitimate journalism that adheres to professional standards and ethics. At the same time, they differ from examples of poor journalism that falls short of its potential. For example, continuous (and untreated) inaccuracies caused by insufficient research or careless verification are examples of problematic journalism. It entails sensationalizing for impact and hyperpartisan fact-finding at the expense of fairness. However, this is not to assume an ideal of journalism that transcends all embedded narratives and points of view, as substandard journalism is influenced by ideology. Rather, it indicates that narratives are present in all forms of journalism and that the issue with subpar journalism is not the presence of narratives, but rather a lack of professionalism. This is why weak journalism is not synonymous with disinformation or misinformation. However, poor journalism can allow deception and misinformation into the legitimate news system. However, the causes and solutions to poor journalism differ from those for "fake news." Simultaneously, strong ethical journalism is required as an alternative or antidote to the contamination of the information environment and the consequent spillover effect of news tarnishing in general.

Journalists are no longer passive observers of the flood of misinformation and deception. They are also on the path. This means that:

1. Journalism runs the risk of being drowned out by cacophony.

2. Journalists are vulnerable to manipulation by actors who violate public relations ethics by attempting to mislead or corrupt journalists into spreading false information.

3. As communicators who work in the service of truth, including "inconvenient truths," journalists can become targets of lies, rumors, and hoaxes designed to scare and discredit them and their work, particularly if they threaten to expose those who commission or perpetrate a deception.

Furthermore, journalists should recognize that, while social media is the primary source of disinformation, powerful actors today are using fake news concerns to crack down on legitimate news networks. New and harsh laws are scapegoating news organizations as if they were the originators or lumping them together with broad new restrictions that indiscriminately ban all types of information and activities. Such regulations are frequently out of sync with international principles, which require that restrictions on expression be demonstrably necessary, proportionate, and for a legitimate purpose. Their effect, even if not usually the goal, is to subordinate legitimate news organizations to a "minister of truth" who can suppress information for political purposes. In today's climate of disinformation and misinformation, the ultimate risk is not an unjustifiable regulation of journalism, but that the public will become skeptical of all content, including journalism. People are more likely to accept content recommended by their social networks as trustworthy if it matches their emotions - however, this scenario excludes involvement with their heads. The negative effects for public perceptions of health, science, intercultural understanding, and the status of true expertise are already clear. These hazards are why journalists must confront the rise of fake news head on. At the same time, the dangers provide an opportunity to step up efforts to demonstrate the importance of the news media. They allow you to emphasize the importance of presenting verifiable information and educated viewpoints in the public interest when practicing your profession.

## Fake News in Nigeria

According to Uzochukwu and Okafor (2019), fake news became prevalent in Nigeria prior to the 2015 general election, when the duo was used for political party campaigns, particularly between the ruling party and the most effective opposition party. Fake news has been a source of concern in Nigeria, particularly prior to, during, and after election campaigns, as well as during ethnoreligious farmer/farmer clashes. The trend continued in 2015, when the All Progressives Congress presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, was alleged to have died in London during the peak of the campaign. This report became a pivotal moment for the People's Democratic Party (Ogboshi, Oyeleke, & Folorunsho, 2019).

Lai Mohammed, Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, took the time in 2018 to launch a campaign against fake news and hate speech after recognizing the dangers that the country could face if fake news was not controlled. The Minister visited media organizations, including online publishers, as part of his campaign (Uzochukwu & Okafor, 2019). He described fake news as a ticking time bomb waiting to explode, given Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious configuration (Uwakwe) (2018, p. 112). The minister referred to the fact that, rather than promoting peace and development in the country, some political elite had recently "manipulated socioeconomic conditions such as religious differences, tribal differences (political differences), and poverty to disturb and possibly overthrow political enemies." (Aper, 2003, p.36) by using fake news to fuel their personal ambitions.

The minister urged media organizations not to let the public lose trust in them because of the spread of false news, which could disrupt social order and peace. He emphasized that if people lose trust in the media, society is in trouble (Uwakwe, 2018).

Fake news has been used primarily during election campaigns (Pate & Adamkolo, 2020). Thus, politicians and their allies, as well as prominent citizens, have made statements that can be interpreted as spreading fabricated or misleading information. Some of the fake stories that circulated online and in mainstream media are listed below.

1. "If the 2015 elections are rigged, the party will not recognize the outsource and will go ahead and form a parallel government" -Lai Mohammed (Ajakaiye et al., 2019).

2. Buhari has died, and Jubril Sudani is now Nigeria's president. Aside from this statement, the picture of President Buhari was placed alongside that of Jubril online (Ojebode, 2018).

3. "Breaking: We have spent one Billion Naira on SMS just to educate Nigerians-National Centre for Disease Control." The headline NCDC claims was false (@NCDCgov on Twitter 9/4/2020)

4. "Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender movement endorses Atiku for president, gives reason" (Segun October 26). Atiku Abubakar subsequently distanced himself from the group and declared it untrue.

The above fake news and hate speech came from both high- and low-profile sources, as previously classified by Pate and Adamkolo (2020). False news was spread through mainstream and social media channels.

## Rise of Fake News Within Social Networks

Social networks are the primary driving force behind fake news in the 21st century. Social media was supposed to be a platform for individuals and groups to maintain social connections among themselves, but it has over the years become a tool for sharing information, and in most cases, those who share such information do not bother to know the source of the information; their concern is to forward the information as received (Hoque, 2022).

The digital era resulted in the rise of the audience, the removal of barriers to publication, and the transfer of production tools to individuals. Productage is the function and practice of engaging the audience as co-producers of content, such as news. Peer-to-peer material distribution (particularly on Facebook) began to disrupt traditional methods of information delivery as people developed trusting networks. Users curated their content streams, which included content from news services, journalists, and other reliable information sources, without the need for mediation. Accurate, fraudulent, malevolent, and propagandistic content masquerading as news gained traction due to distribution via "trust networks" (users and peers). According

to Hoque (2022), emotional content and content posted by a friend or family member are more likely to be shared on social media.

The advantages of audience-networked journalism include the ability to crowdsource diverse sources, perform collaborative verification (useful to correct misinformation, debunk disinformation, and identify malicious actors), and build loyal audiences (supported by direct interaction between the news consumer and the journalistic actor). They also give the audience the ability to "talk back" in order to correct the record when reporters make mistakes or to collaborate on research. The networked public sphere also helps journalists and audiences avoid arbitrary constraints and censorship (for example, layers of "spin doctors"), which can be impediments to free societies and information access. The use of social media by journalists to interact with audiences and information sources can be considered a significant new aspect of accountability frameworks that aid self-regulation (Hoque, 2022).

These interactions enable journalists to respond openly and quickly to justified criticisms of their work, to correct errors immediately, and to increase the transparency of their practice by incorporating content into the process.

The disadvantages include an increased likelihood of disinformation and misinformation spreading virally, which is aided by trust networks and emotional reactions, the ability of governments and other agencies to avoid news media interrogation and verification by "going directly to audiences," and the inability to easily retract or correct fake news once it has spread. No amount of debunking or reporting on a falsehood will diminish the impact of a fabricated story, a malicious meme, a propagandistic video masquerading as news, or an incorrect report caused by a failure to verify.

The pressure to publish quickly on social media sites can lead to the unintentional spread of disinformation, misinformation, and material from questionable sources. This means that in many cases, general social media users are unprepared to determine whether the content is genuine before sharing it. The pursuit of vitality over quality and accuracy is a problem that machine learning is likely to exacerbate.

There is no true media convergence because many journalists are now responsible for producing content for multiple platforms (from mobile

to print), reducing the amount of time available for proactive reporting as opposed to reactive strategies such as repurposing public relations content without proper analysis. Reporters are increasingly expected to subedit and publish their stories without proper review. Social-first publishing is common; practices such as "live tweeting," "Facebook Live" videos, and other journalistic acts that do not necessarily involve editorial oversight (similar to live to broadcast) may result in a "publish first, check later" mindset.

Clickbaiting practices, defined as the use of misleading headlines to entice readers to click on links under false pretenses, are intended to increase traffic but have been linked to a loss of trust in professional journalism.

## News and Media Literacy

News literacy refers to the ability to understand the language and traditions of news as a genre, as well as recognize how these elements can be abused with evil intent. Increasing individuals' awareness and their responses to news materials is an important aspect of media literacy (Livingstone, 2014). It allows people to gain insight into their own identities. This empowerment enables people to recognize and resist being duped by fake news that masquerades as news.

Sloppy reporting and insufficient publication processes can result to news that fails to meet ethical standards, as well as news that is purposefully false and thus fraudulent. Media literacy is required to understand the distinction and how such cases compare to professional and ethical news. Today, people get the majority of their news from social media, traditional media websites and blogs, and mobile devices. It is difficult, if not impossible, to define professional journalism.

People with media literacy can learn to recognize that even authentic news is always composed and consumed within larger narrative frameworks that give meaning to facts while also involving broader assumptions, ideologies and identities. This includes the ability to distinguish between various journalistic attempts to capture and interpret salient reality and instances of deception that exploit the news format while violating professional verifiability standards. Multilingualism plays an important role in achieving this goal. Media literacy can also help to dispel stereotypes

and promote intercultural dialogue. However, much more needs to be done in practice to mitigate the impact of fake news (Abu-Fadil, 2007).

Inflammatory political propaganda has thrived on social media platforms. People all over the world are concerned that fake news and other forms of inaccurate information will misinform voters, prompting government action in some nations to address the problem. Despite being largely overlooked in the emerging empirical literature on digital disinformation and fake news, the concept of media literacy captures the skills and competencies required to successfully navigate a complex and fragmented information environment. Most people struggle to assess the quality of information they receive online because they lack the necessary skills and contextual knowledge.

Two related but more specific approaches are somewhat effective at combating misinformation. First, inoculation interventions have been used to protect audiences from misleading content by alerting them to false claims and correcting or identifying the strategies used to spread them. In specific domains, this strategy has been shown to reduce the prevalence of misinformation. Furthermore, several studies have examined the efficacy of issuing specific warnings about misleading information. As a result, we want to see if efforts to promote media literacy can improve respondents' ability to accurately assess the precision of content across issues. The findings would determine whether a lack of media literacy is a major contributing factor to people falling for fake news.

We examine the effects of Facebook's "Tips to Spot False News," which were developed in collaboration with First Draft and then promoted at the top of users' news feeds in 14 countries in April 2017 and printed in full-page newspaper advertisements in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Mexico, and India. According to Via (2018), WhatsApp (a Facebook subsidiary) advertised a variant of these tips in India and Pakistan.

Guess et al. (2020) investigated whether media literacy interventions reduce belief in false news, increase belief in mainstream news, and improve respondents' ability to distinguish between them. The findings show that a lack of media literacy is an important factor in why people believe misinformation found online. We found that simple and scalable media literacy training can reduce people's perceptions of the veracity

of fake news while distinguishing it from mainstream media news. The study also suggests that media literacy campaigns could be an effective strategy for combating misleading news. Second, the study found that the effects faded over time, indicating that social media educators should reinforce these lessons on a regular basis. Third, while the intervention increased overall discrimination between true and misleading news headlines, it had a minor but significant negative impact on the perceived accuracy of mainstream news articles. They lack sufficient evidence to conclude that the intervention affected the consumption of false news in the real world, "perhaps because information habits are ingrained and difficult to alter." Evidence indicates that treatment increased respondents' desire to share mainstream news while decreasing their desire to share hyperpartisan news, implying the possibility of changes in social media behavior. According to the findings of the study, media literacy may be a contributing factor to the widespread dissemination of fake news; however, it can also be used to prevent and combat the spread of misinformation.

## Research Methods

For this study, a qualitative research method was used. The primary goal of qualitative research is to understand rather than measure. This research method is considered the most appropriate for the study because according to Lewis and Thornhill (2009), qualitative research is commonly used as an exploratory tool when there is uncertainty about the subject under investigation (Hague, 2002). This approach "…allows individuals under investigation to respond freely using their linguistic codes and displaying their natural behavioral forms…" (Gunter, 2000:277). It was motivated by the desire to obtain firsthand information from media practitioners about their experiences. The purpose-sampling technique was used to select participants from the pool of practicing journalists.

An in-depth interview was conducted with each of Nigeria's 30 practicing journalists to collect the necessary data for this study. The interview format was chosen for this study because it was flexible, allowing for more follow-up questions due to its informal nature. Participants were able to provide more information on the issues thanks to this format than they could have otherwise. Participants were drawn from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. These six geopolitical zones encompass all 36 states as well as the federal capital Territory. The goal was to ensure that no

zone was excluded in the process (Okocha and Akpe, 2022). Although not all zones produced the same number of participants, each participant was a representative sample of their respective zones. Three key areas derived from the study's objectives were selected for data collection based on responses to semistructured questions posed by the researchers. Data collection lasted 29 days (May 1–29, 2022). It featured both male and female active journalists.

## Data Analysis

Data were gathered using semistructured interviews. Using a semi-structured approach, the interaction remained focused while also allowing individual perspectives to emerge. The data was compiled by recording phone conversations using a transcription app. Otranscribe. The researcher extracted themes from the interviews by reading through the transcripts and highlighting participant comments, and notable exceptions were outlined. A list of common and recurring themes from the interviews was compiled, and each theme was coded and used to create headings for the analysis section. The results are then discussed. The researcher reviewed the identified themes to see if the research questions had been answered as the final step in the data analysis procedure. Participants in the following analysis are coded as J1-J30.

## Q1: Demography

This study identified each participant by geopolitical zone, state of origin, place of residence; sex, and age bracket.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of participants and gender*

| SN | Geopolitical Zones | Number of Participants | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Northwest | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 2 | North East | 2 | 2 | |
| 3 | North Central | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| 4 | Southwest | 8 | 5 | 3 |
| 5 | South-South | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 6 | Southeast | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 6 | 30 | 17 | 13 |

Source: Field Study, 2022

## Q2: Fake news perception

This question stemmed from the study's first objective, which was to investigate how journalists perceive fake news. The 30 media personnel were not only unanimous in their individual responses, but also equally captivated by the subject of fake news. All interviewees agreed that fake news is an increasingly serious issue that must be addressed. Almost all of them shared the same perspective on the definition of fake news and how it has affected professional journalism. They wished for the days when real gatekeeping was the norm in media houses, with gatekeepers performing their duties. Gatekeepers were people who were authorized to double-check every claim made in stories and, if necessary, drop any report until the claims could be verified.

**J13** and **J16** clearly stated that fake news is more of an avoidable virus that has come to contaminate journalism practice in Nigeria because there does not appear to be an effective cure. Both agreed that, as with everything Nigerian, fake journalists were determined to maximize the negative impact of fake news. J15 believed that political workers were responsible for the spread of fake news in Nigeria.

## Q3: Fake news as a new phenomenon?

The majority of participants agreed that fake news isn't a new phenomenon. **J5** believes that, contrary to popular belief, fake news did not begin in Nigeria recently or during the 2015 general elections. He claimed that fake news began when news media professionals began to pay less attention to content and instead focused on sensationalism. He asserts that

> People think it just happened but it's not a new thing. Its journalist's own fault—our fault. We devalued journalism when we accepted free means of media. Fact-checking resources were no longer available. We worshipped the sensational at the expense of factuality

**J3** agreed when he noted that there was nothing new about fake news except the freedom and speed of its spread:

> Fake news has always been around, but the way it is being portrayed as if the news media has never done it before is deceptive.

**J17** and **J21** agreed that they hardly noticed fake news in the past until the invention of the Internet, which gave rise to the creation of multiple news platforms. **J21** noted:

> For me, all the news was authentic as long as it appeared in the electronics. and print media that were fully recognized by law. It was always believed. that the gatekeepers took care of the fact check;

**J17** agreed that it took a personal experience for him to notice that the creation of social media platforms also created fake news.

**J10** suggested that individuals used to be less prone to believing fake news, but times have changed and people are now evaluating information differently. She is actually worried that the rate of seeming acceptability of fake news was alarming.

> I don't believe false news is a new occurrence, but what is new is that people aren't questioning the news critically.

Three participants (**J19, J22,** and **J27)** agreed separately that the Internet only hyped what was previously an ignored phenomenon, which was also labeled junk journalism. This position was echoed by more than 80% of the participants.

## Q4: Why is fake news on the rise?

The participants unanimously agreed that the rise of digital media was primarily responsible for the phenomenal rise in fake news. They argued separately that fake news began to gain traction when social media enabled people to write and publish freely. This resulted in two uncontrollable events: unethical behavior and unprofessionalism. They believed that while fake news existed in the past, it was not as widely distributed as it is now.

The collective view of the participants was captured by **J14:**

> We used to call it junk or gutter journalism. Others labelled it propaganda. It attracted less attention as it has become now. But that does not mean it did not exist.

The rise in fake news has been attributed to a number of factors, the most common of which is the "clickbait" phenomenon. Although fake news is not new, the motivations behind it are, according to **J11**. Another participant, **J2**, stated that the most important incentive he sees is to increase website traffic for monetary gain, as follows.

> Fake news has always existed, but what's new today are these rogue websites that publish nothing but trash and are only interested in getting clicks and traffic... that didn't exist before.

**J7** agreed with this position when he stated:

> I believe it's about clickbait, where headlines are generated based on click-through numbers and then presented as news sites, but they have no news gathering system and are sourced from fiction for profit.

**J8**, conversely, contends that the rise of fake news has been aided by user-generated content that appears on social media. She analyzed previous news reporting, which was fact-checked and monitored by editors, to current news reporting.

**J12** believes that a lack of evaluation skills contributes to the spread of false information, as he notes:

> Some people aren't excellent at spotting fake news; therefore, I suppose the key question is: what's the difference? The difference now is that fake news is likely to be a little more sophisticated, and I believe that people lack critical thinking skills.

**J5** noted that even with high evaluation abilities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to spot fake news on social networks due to the complex nature of fake news.

The rise in fake news has been attributed to a number of factors, including time constraints. In terms of news dissemination, some J1–J15 members believe that timing is critical. They also noted that news organizations do not devote enough time to evaluating, verifying, and assessing material for news stories.

## Q5: Curing Fake News

The study's third goal was to determine how media literacy can help combat fake news trends. To address this, participants revealed that fake news is a problem in Nigeria's media ecosystem, and that it must be addressed with the urgency it deserves. It was agreed that unless journalists educated the public on what not to believe through media literacy, ignorant members of the public would continue to be misled into believing that all news is news as long as it appears in the mass media. Three participants, J16, J23, and J27, alluded to the need for a law to regulate the use of social media. The remaining participants were undoubtedly opposed.

Participants agreed that fake news is a growing problem and suggested additional ways to address it. **J3** states:

> Teaching effective independent verification abilities could help to combat the problem of fake news. By emphasizing the necessity of fact-checking; for example, if someone gives you false information, never trust it and always try to verify it in another way. Also, double-check your sources.

**J15** and **J18** discussed how to evaluate websites based on their URLs, as well as other fundamental evaluation techniques commonly taught in media literacy courses.

Others appear to agree that more efforts should be made to combat fake news in media literacy education.

**J29** states:

> Fake news, I believe, will have to be discussed in media literacy classes. Definitely, and in terms of our strategy, we need to talk about it... Addressing fake news, in my opinion, requires its own area, not just for kids, but for all of us.

**J1** believes that journalists and media professionals can help solve the problem, but it is too large for them to handle alone. Educators have an equally important role to play.

The participants' belief that Nigeria lacks, but urgently needs, a regulatory body to enforce entry requirements into journalism appeared to be the most

important aspect of their response. As part of media literacy, the majority of the participants declared that statutory enforcement of entry qualification into the profession, as obtained in other professions, would reduce the level of quackery that has resulted in unprofessionalism, which eventually leads to publication of information that does not meet the standards..

In specific terms, **J9** declared that

> It is only in Nigeria that journalism that does not have a strictly regulated statutory entry requirements. Medicine is different. Engineering is different.
> Even nursing and other professional fields are different. But journalism has been turned into an all-comers affair because any of the people in these other professions can decide to be a journalist without any level of literacy in media management.

**J11** observed that since the introduction of the Internet, it has become more difficult to define who a journalist is, because anyone who can write and publish has become a journalist without any additional training. **J10,** along with **J30**, stated that people with no media literacy have flooded the profession, and that those whose duty it would be to educate the public on fake news are now contributing to its rise rather than reducing it.

## Discussion

The first objective of this study was to investigate how media professionals perceived fake news. The findings revealed that journalists are well aware of the existence and increasing negative impact of fake news in Nigeria. They also acknowledged the uncontrollable damage that fake news has caused to ethical journalism. Furthermore, they are aware that fakes have not only occurred in Nigeria; they existed prior to the emergence of social networks, but they were not given much attention because their spread was not widespread or their impact was not significant. These findings confirmed Okocha and Akpe's (2022) earlier conclusion that Nigerians had encountered fake news several times before, and that social media only accelerated its spread and broadened its scope.

The findings also confirmed the need for continuous media outlets to eliminate all unverified information. Participants see the enforcement of

normative boundaries by media organizations and individual journalists as an antidote to fake news. This assertion justifies using gatekeeping as a theoretical framework to analyze the study's findings. It also confirms Welbers and Opgenhaffen's (2018) assertion that reporters are gatekeepers, capable of making individual decisions that can reduce or eliminate fake news.

The second goal of the study was to identify the causes of the rise in fake news in Nigeria. The findings showed that the emergence and widespread spread of digital media is the primary cause of the escalation of fake news in Nigeria, as well as around the world. Participants unanimously agreed that prior to the invention of the Internet, which resulted in the proliferation of social media platforms—a virtual environment that allows everyone to gather and express their opinions - fake news was limited to a few junk publications or was regarded as gossip that could be easily traced and ignored. However, the trend has stalled due to the rise of ubiquitous social networks. This finding supports the use of the public domain as a theoretical framework in this study.

The findings also show that the rise of fake news is due to social media platform operators' insatiable desire to gain an advantage over one another by publishing false but sensational information that will attract public attention and increase traffic to their websites. This easily results in increased advertising revenue. The very nature of social networks, which allows published information, whether true or false, to be sent to any recipient, has also been identified as a contributing factor to the widespread spread of false news in Nigeria. This supports Hoque's (2022) hypothesis that both emotional social media content and content posted by friends or family members are more likely to be shared by recipients.

Another aspect of the discovery revealed that the attitude of political jobbers seeking an advantage over one another has resulted in the proliferation of fake news. This is because such publishers have exploited the democratic nature of digital media to disseminate information that is hardly news, as long as it gives them an advantage over their political opponents. These findings support Pate and Adamkolo's (2020) claim that fake news is primarily used during election campaigns for selfish reasons, with no regard for the negative impacts on journalism or the public.

The third and final objective, which focused on how media literacy can be used to combat fake news, yielded some interesting results. Media

literacy was found to be effective in combating fake news trends. The investigation's findings also emphasized the importance of understanding how to analyze websites by looking at the URL, as well as other basic evaluation strategies taught in media literacy sessions. This supported Guess et al (2020).'s conclusion that a lack of media literacy accounts for increased victimization of inexperienced media consumers by those spreading fake news. The findings also supported Livingstone's (2014) claim that media literacy would increase awareness among media audiences and result in deliberate and acceptable discrimination against fake news.

The findings highlighted an aspect of media practice that has been overlooked in Nigeria: the need to enact enforceable statutory requirements for those wishing to practice journalism. This study discovered that the absence of such requirements in a law passed by the National Assembly has allowed anyone with something to say to claim to be a journalist. This has contributed to the profession's toxicity and transformed every writer into a journalist. This study highlighted the importance of enacting legislation that would require every registered journalist's activities to be monitored in order to combat the rise of fake news.

According to the study's findings, gatekeeping by mass media operators, whether traditional or digital, is another way to reduce the spread of fake news. This informed the decision to use gatekeeping theory to analyze the study's findings. Starting with journalists as the primary gatekeepers, training all media practitioners in the art and craft of the profession is viewed as the first step. This supports Harcup's (2014) claim that journalists are better suited to lead media literacy campaigns through their practices.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following. First, before distributing material obtained from third parties, media outlets should thoroughly check and verify its authenticity. Second, any content that appears to promote false news inadvertently should be immediately retracted, and the media outlet responsible should apologize. Third, formal and informal education of media consumers on media literacy is recommended as a critical step toward combating fake news in Nigeria because if there is no patronage for such news, there will be no producers.

## Conclusion

The findings and discussion reveal that citizens and media professionals have many similarities and beliefs. The ongoing debate over fake news has drawn attention to the issue of news media and citizen evaluation and critical verification skills. Despite all of the negative features of the spread of false news, it can be determined that it has placed a positive focus on media literacy and initiated a dialogue about the importance of excellent evaluation skills, not just for media firms but for civil society as a whole.

Although journalists were initially hesitant to discuss the causes of the rise of fake news in the media, their enthusiasm soon showed that they were interested in finding ways to combat fake news. By focusing this study on the problem of false news and how media literacy can help to reduce it, significant similarities have been identified, which will contribute to increased skills and professionalism in journalism practice in the future. As a result, it has been suggested that media literacy can help address the issue of fake news in Nigeria.

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