

Social Media and Political Propaganda: A double-edged Sword for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Osimen Goddy Uwa*

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Ota, **Nigeria**

&

Adeyefa Christianah Ronke**

Department of Mass Communication, Joseph Ayobabalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji. Osun State, **Nigeria**

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ABSTRACT

Social media serves as a powerful tool for politicians to engage with voters and drive the conversation in their favor. Still, the authenticity and accuracy of online information can be questionable as there are currently no mechanisms in place to regulate or sanction the spread of false or misleading information on social media, making it even more challenging to combat the proliferation of political propaganda. Also, the prevalent availability and lack of mechanisms to checkmate it allows individuals and political actors to spread misleading information which causes a significant problem. Therefore, the trust of this paper was to examine the role of social media platforms specifically Facebook and Twitter, as well as the gaps and challenges in identifying the dissemination and amplification of political propaganda in Nigeria. The study utilized qualitative research and was analyzed descriptively. The study revealed that social media promotes political propaganda and manipulates the perception of the electorate which changes the outcome of elections. Ultimately, the paper argues that a comprehensive approach is needed to regulate the spread of political propaganda on social media platforms in Nigeria, which include; the creation of digital literacy programs that focuses on media literacy and online etiquette, deeper cooperation between the Nigerian government and social media platforms to curb the spread of political propaganda, the establishment of legal frameworks to punish offenders, mitigating political propaganda are some of the recommendations highlighted in this study.

Keywords: Social media, Political Propaganda, Election, Politic, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the most influential platforms in almost all areas of society and political system is not exempted from this. Moreover, it is now an effective tool used by politicians to reach out to potential voters with political campaign messages. (Mamman, (2019); Chadwick & Howard 2010; Jenkins et al. 2016). According to Yang & DeHart (2016), social media is a platform where citizens keep tabs on political development, engage in the political process, and access political information. This rise of social media has been a boon to political propaganda. They use these platforms as an alternative outlet to traditional news media because it is free, easy, and allows them to reach certain segments of the population that the propagandist believes will be predisposed to supporting their propaganda. There are also techniques within social media that help, such as the use of fake accounts or troll farms to help spread their message or lend it credibility (Zimmer, 2015).

Political communication serves five essential functions, which people must adhere to for the transmission of information to occur. The first function is to supply the public with knowledge about current events. The second function is to educate the broader audience on the significance

and implications of said events and phenomenon. The third function is to establish a space for deliberating on political issues. The fourth function involves the creation of various publications, while the final function is to supply the press with political agendas and initiatives (Alhassan, 2018). It has been alluded to that there is no politics without the media as it serves as a powerful tool for shaping public perception and disseminating information. With the rise of social media, this influence has intensified, creating an environment where political propaganda thrives. The role of traditional media in setting public agenda and influencing cognitive patterns has been well established in literature (Brügger & Milligan, 2019). With the advent of social media, this function has been magnified and amplified to an unprecedented extent. The accessibility of the internet and low barriers to entry on social media platforms has made it easier for political actors to manipulate public opinion. This has raised concerns about the spread of false or misleading information without effective regulation (Obisesan, 2022). According to Waisbord (2018), political propaganda involves strategic dissemination of information to achieve specific goals, often relying on emotions rather than evidence.

In Nigeria, propaganda refers to the dissemination of biased or misleading information, particularly in politics (Guess & Lyons, 2020). Social media has become a powerful tool for political propaganda. While it offers a means for direct communication with constituents, it also enables the spread of distorted and unsubstantiated information, leading to adverse effects such as influencing voting decisions, creating prejudice, and driving inaccurate conclusions and actions (Mamman, 2019). In this sense, propaganda is not only about spreading false or misleading information but also about influencing the way people think, feel, and behave

Social media serves as a powerful tool for politicians to engage with voters and drive the conversation in their favor. However, the authenticity and accuracy of online information can be questionable as there are currently no mechanisms in place to regulate or sanction the spread of false or misleading information on social media, making it even more challenging to combat the proliferation of political propaganda (Çela, 2015). With a significant portion of the population active on social media, it has become a dominant channel for communication, influencing public opinion and political socialization. The overload of information poses challenges in processing and discerning factual events as the internet's accessibility allows easy creation and sharing of information, blurring the line between political propaganda and genuine news. The rise of public opinion and its manipulation became a significant concern within the realm of the press.

Nigerian politicians utilize social media platforms to connect with voters, target skeptical demographics, and employ propagandistic tactics (Oparaugo, 2021). The lack of guarantee for factual information and difficulty in verifying online events raise concerns about the validity of statements (Inobemhe et al., 2020). With approximately 90 million Nigerians on social media, these platforms have become essential for communication, shaping public opinion and political socialization (Peters, 2022). The abundance of information poses challenges and the primary objective of this research is to examine how social media influences people's beliefs, interests, and the prevalence of fictional and misleading information propagated by political actors for their personal benefits.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, in the dissemination and amplification of political information and the need to regulate this information to meet the conduct of social ethics in our environment.

2. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TERMS

Social media according to Merriam Webster's dictionary refers to any electronic communication channel that allow users to create online communities and exchange various types of content, such as information, opinions, private messages, and more. This includes social networking sites and micro blogging platforms. Social media refers to online platforms that allow individuals to connect, communicate, collaborate, and form communities by creating, modifying, and sharing user-generated content. These platforms provide easy access to content and facilitate interaction among users. Otherwise put, social media consists of web-based programs, codes, or tools that have as their primary function enabling users to share content with friends, whether it be text, audio, or video. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy et al. (2011)

Scholars like Huang and Benyoucef (2013: 246) and Huberman (2010) propose more precise definitions of social media as "Web 2.0 Technologies" designed to collect and distribute intelligence but also allow people and groups to share information among themselves. These are consistent with how the term is conceptualized by O'Reilly and Battelle (2009: 1) as "internet-based and network of connected users."

The concept 'social media' is a phrase used to refer to new media that emerged following the launch of Web 2.0 and is distinguished by a high level of interactivity (Levinson, 2012, p.1) Social media refers to web-based applications and services that enable users to interact, create, share, and search for content online (Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013). It provides a platform for individuals to express themselves, share opinions, perspectives, and information such as career advice. Social media is a subset of new media that emphasizes social networking and provides users with greater freedom to communicate with friends, exchange information, and express their views (Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013). These platforms rely on mobile and internet-based technology to create dynamic environments for users to generate and modify content (Udoka, 2015).

The term "propaganda" originated from the Latin word "propagare," which means to spread or propagate. In the early days, the term was used in the context of religious activities, specifically associated with the efforts of the Catholic Church to spread its faith. Propaganda was considered a noble and honorable activity that commanded the respectful attention of people (American Historical Association, 2018). However, over time, the term came to be associated with manipulative and dishonest tactics used for political purposes. In the political context, propaganda is used as a deliberate method of persuasive communication, which aims to alter the sentiments, perspectives, convictions, and conduct of a target audience to achieve a specific response that aligns with the goals of the political leader or government.

Propaganda can be defined as a social group's coordinated efforts "to secure the conformity of the audience with the activities being contemplated, undertaken, or promoted by the group. It is a coordinated series of messages made with the intention of influencing the views or actions of many individuals and groups (Vamanu, 2019). Propaganda is purposeful and premeditated; it relies on manipulation, specifically through the dissemination of misleading information, and its purpose is to promote political agendas by provoking and regulating behavior. The objective of propaganda is to encourage audiences to take concrete actions, or to accept and not object to a particular course of action. Stanley (2018) asserts that propaganda frequently includes a "call to action," he expresses a similar action-oriented attitude.

Another way to look at propaganda is as a form of persuasion that emphasizes self-interest. Facts are fabricated or misrepresented by propagandists in order to advance their own interests. The definition of propaganda provided by O'Donnell and Jowett (2015) suggests that propaganda is a deliberate and systematic effort to influence people's perceptions, thoughts, and actions to achieve a specific goal or outcome. Propagandists may use various tactics, such as withholding information,

manipulating emotions, or presenting false information, to achieve their desired response from their audience. In line with Szanto's observation, as cited by Akoja and Jiboku (2020), propagandists may deliberately withhold important facts and distract people from other information that contradicts their propaganda. By doing so, they can manipulate people's perceptions and beliefs to achieve their desired outcome.

Propaganda can involve false ideas or statements used to gain support for a political leader or party. However, as noted by Ebeze and cited in Akoja & Jiboku (2020), propaganda is not always composed entirely of lies. Propagandists often use different tactics, such as half-truths, limited truths, and truths taken out of context, to manipulate public opinion. Propagandists may selectively choose information that supports their agenda and present it in a biased way, emphasizing the positive aspects and downplaying the negative. This can lead to a distorted view of reality, as people may only be exposed to one side of the story.

3. THEORETICAL THESIS OF FRAMING

Framing theory is a theoretical framework propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974 which states the media draws attention to specific occurrences before contextualizing them with a specific explanation. This work provides a detailed examination of how cognitive frameworks influence an individual's interpretation of societal dynamics. The author effectively utilized the metaphor of a picture frame to vividly demonstrate and support this theoretical concept (Mass Communication Theory (Online), 2017). The concept of framing entails the deliberate selection of particular aspects of an observed reality and accentuating them within a communication text in order to support a particular problem recognition, causal analysis, ethical evaluation, and/or proposed interventions. (Scheufele, 2019).

According to the framing theory, the way information is presented to an audience (referred to as "the frame") influences how people process and interpret it. Frames, which are conceptual representations, are employed to shape and structure the meaning of messages. The frame acts as a framework that helps individuals contextualize their experiences in life, symbolized by a picture that captures their perception. Framing involves the procedural aspect by which a source of communication establishes and constructs the manner in which information is presented. The dominant utilization of frames is observed in the way news or media outlets shape the presentation of their content. A frame describes how the media, who act as gatekeepers, arrange and interprets concepts, events, and issues they cover (Arowolo, 2017).

Framing is employed to symbolize the communicative element that influences people's inclination to attribute one meaning to another. Efficient communication with a broad audience can be achieved through skillfully structured framing of meanings and topics. Politicians have the ability to effectively frame their visions in a manner that enables the public to comprehend their importance and embrace them. In general, framing has the effect of creating a social reality that people will use to interpret facts and occurrences. Similar to old media, social media can offer "a primary organizing idea or story narrative that offers meaning to an expanding strip of events. The frame makes clear the central contention and the problem. (Gamson & Modigliani 1987 as cited in Lechman & Jack, 2019)

However, in old forms of media, the ability to frame is in the hands of journalists, editors, publishers, producers, networks, etc., and there is a distinct line between framers and audiences. This distinction is blurred by social media since "the people traditionally identified as the audience" participate in the framing (Rosen 2012). When using social media sites, it is frequently difficult to identify the subject of framing or the entity entrusted with the power to undertake framing activities.

The content that individuals view on social media platforms is not created by these platforms; rather, the algorithms in charge of our timelines decide what information we see. Individuals who possess the skill to utilize algorithms have the power to shape narratives on social media platforms. This can be advantageous as it empowers individuals who are not typically in positions of authority to present their own perspectives, thus exposing audiences to a broader range of viewpoints, influences, concerns, and potential solutions (Lechman & Brighton, 2019).

Social media also raises the possibility of misinformation and manipulation. It becomes more challenging to determine the true writers, the audience reach, and the goal of the content as propagandistic content saturates our newsfeeds. Undoubtedly, framing theory serves as a helpful filter for assessing false information on social media. In order to "promote a certain problem description, causal interpretation, moral judgment, and/or treatment prescription," research may attempt to locate the original source of information and track how audiences accept the frame (Entman 1993).

Political propaganda, which involves the strategic framing of messages to advance specific political agendas, is prevalent in Nigerian social media, particularly during elections and other politically charged events. The framing theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing how social media and political propaganda operate in Nigeria, and how they shape public perceptions and attitudes (Tandoc et al., 2018).

One key aspect of the framing theory is the concept of "frames," which are cognitive structures that shape how people perceive and interpret information (Entman, 1993). In the context of social media and political propaganda in Nigeria, frames can be understood as the particular ways in which messages are constructed, packaged, and presented to influence public opinion (Vosoughi et al., 2018). For example, political actors may use social media to frame political opponents as corrupt, incompetent, or unpatriotic, while presenting themselves as the solution to Nigeria's problems. These frames can influence how social media users perceive and interpret political events and personalities, shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Pennycook et al., 2020).

The framing theory also highlights the role of media in shaping public discourse and opinion. In the context of social media in Nigeria, the theory can be used to analyze how political propaganda is disseminated and amplified on social media platforms (Chong & Druckman, 2007). For instance, political actors may use bots or fake accounts to spread propaganda messages, manipulate hashtags, and create echo chambers where like-minded individuals reinforce each other's views. These tactics can contribute to the spread of misinformation, polarization, and the manipulation of public opinion, which can have significant implications for political processes and outcomes in Nigeria (Kioussis, 2002).

Furthermore, the framing theory emphasizes the power dynamics involved in shaping public discourse (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In Nigeria, social media is often used by political elites and powerful interest groups to advance their agendas and maintain their dominance. The framing theory can help analyze how these powerful actors use framing techniques to control the narrative, silence dissenting voices, and shape public perceptions of political events. For example, political elites in Nigeria may use social media to amplify their own views while marginalizing opposing voices or to construct narratives that promote ethnic or religious divisions to gain political advantage. The framing theory can shed light on these power dynamics and the ways in which they influence social media discourse and political propaganda in Nigeria (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018).

4. THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACTS ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

The evolution of media is typically divided into the broadcast era and the interactive era (Jeong, 2015). Media distribution during the broadcast era was largely centralized, with many individuals relying on a sole company, such as a radio or television station, for their news and media consumption (Milligan, 2017). Response to the media often suffered from significant delays, indirectness, and a lack of personalization (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). On a much smaller scale, mediation was employed to promote communication between people through personal correspondence, telephone conversations, or sporadically on a relatively larger scale utilizing resources such as duplicated family newsletters (Rufai, 2021).

The development of digital and mobile technology ushered in a new era of media wherein interaction took precedence in the functions of media, making it easier than ever before for individuals to participate in substantial interaction (Treem et al, 2016). Currently, a speaker has the ability to speak to a large audience and receive instant responses. In the past, individuals who were part of the general public had limited and occasionally suppressed means of expressing themselves, but now they have the opportunity to voice their concerns to a wider range of people. Furthermore, there is greater availability of media choices than ever before, thanks to the affordability and easy access provided by new technologies. Instead of depending only on a few news outlets, individuals can now access information from various sources and actively participate in discussions through message boards (Chang & Park, 2020; Rufai, 2021).

Social media have become an increasingly important tool for political communication and engagement. The ability to reach large audiences quickly and cheaply has made social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube popular among politicians, political parties, and activists.

The news media landscape has changed dramatically over the past decades. West (2017) argued that, through digital sources, there has been a tremendous increase in the reach of journalism, social media, and public engagement. Checking for news online, whether through Google, Twitter, Facebook, major newspapers, or local media websites has become ubiquitous, and smartphone alerts and mobile applications bring the latest developments to people instantaneously around the world.

Social media has transformed political communication by allowing politicians and political parties to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with their constituents” (Brown, 2018). In his article titled "The Role of Social Media in Political Communication," Professor M. Jones, who specializes in African and social history, emphasized that political messaging and advertising have become essential through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. For example, during the 2020 US presidential election, both candidates used social media to communicate their campaign messages and reach out to voters. The use of social media also provides politicians and political parties with real-time feedback on their policies and messages, enabling them to adjust their messaging and campaign strategies accordingly.

Social media has had a significant impact on election campaigns, particularly in terms of fundraising, organizing, and mobilizing voters (Garcia& Hernandez, 2019). Social media platforms have become essential tools for political fundraising, with candidates and political parties using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to raise funds from small donors. Social media has also enabled political campaigns to more effectively organize and mobilize supporters, with campaigns using social media platforms to coordinate events and activities (Garcia& Hernandez, 2019).

Social media has also had a significant impact on citizen participation in politics. Social media platforms have become important channels for political engagement, with citizens using platforms

such as Twitter and Facebook to express their views, share information, and connect with like-minded individuals (Lee & Kim, 2018). Social media has also enabled citizens to mobilize around specific issues and causes, leading to the formation of online communities that can influence public opinion and policy decisions, (Chen & Liang, 2020).

Furthermore, social media has facilitated easier access to political information for citizens and enhanced their ability to engage with political leaders. Social media platforms have become important sources of news and information, with many citizens using platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to stay informed about political developments, (Kim & Lee, 2019). According to Lilleker (2020), a scholar specializing in political communication, social media has also enabled citizens to communicate directly with political leaders, with many politicians using social media platforms to engage with their constituents and respond to their concerns. Political communication experts agree that both traditional and internet-based media have a significant impact on how individuals engage in politics (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013). Social media allows for two-way communication, enables political organizations and candidates to connect with voters and receive feedback in real-time. As a result, it is now common for political contenders to maintain profiles on social networking sites and other mobile social networks such as Twitter (Mustapha, Gbonegun & Mustapha, 2016).

5. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS

The interplay between politics and social media describes the power dynamics that take place as users of social media platforms compete to further their objectives and ideologies (Amenyeawu, 2021). The politics of social media may be capable of influencing both individual and collective preferences, views and belief systems depending on the objectives of those utilizing it. This might have a huge impact on the information people absorb, possibly changing the power centers that shape meaning (Brügger & Milligan, 2019). Social media has given users, especially non-professionals, access to ready-made tools that make it easier than ever for them to generate and exchange information, organize trending and explosive events, find others who share their interests, collaborate to produce work together to produce information, insight, and knowledge, and expand on the work and contributions of others to develop original and novel ideas (Broersma, Marcel, and Graham, 2016). The perception, configuration and functioning (structural patterns, information dissemination, and regulated streams) of networks have inherent political biases, lack neutrality, and can undermine democracy in terms of their conception, usage, and regulations (Calderaro, 2018). These factors are inevitably biased because of the values of specific stakeholders that control others' behavior on social media acting in accordance with their values of social media as egalitarian, impartial, objective, and democratic went hand in hand with this ability. In reality, though, the fundamental components of social media—its architecture (platforms and networks) are anything but this (Mirza & Yousuf, 2021).

To grasp the political dynamics of social media, it is important to consider three fundamental forms of power. The first power mode relates to the ability to shape the choices made by other social actors. This is consistent with the theories advanced by political scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Robert Dahl (1957) who defines power as influence on another person's behavior arguing that if person A has power over person B that he can then persuade person B to do something that person B would not otherwise do (Mirza & Yousuf, 2021). Social media has a powerful ability to influence public opinion and alter not only the message but also values, misuse of power, and the nature of political struggle. According to Calderaro (2018), there is a lot of interest among people regarding the impact of social media and other internet communication platforms on political activity.

The second crucial power mode is the framing and control of the political scene, agenda and discourse, which influences the development and operation of social media, as well as how potential issues are kept out of the political process and public spaces. Political scientists from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s notably Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz helped conceptualize the second mode of power. Thus, any adequate analysis of power must consider both the first form of power—the influence of social media on decisions—and the second—the interpretation of non-decisions—such as silencing calls for change or providing additional topics to agendas—as decisions (Garzia, 2017). For instance, Twitter only allows 140 characters for each tweet. The content that is distributed throughout the service has been significantly impacted by this design. Users must be brief, concise, and straightforward in their posts when they are only allowed 140 characters, if not outright blunt. Twitter is mostly utilized for live event updates, which is no accident. Its designers intentionally set it up in this manner, copying SMS usage patterns and utilizing the actions of users as a mechanism for revealing current activities. Twitter has prioritized a specific sort of material (live tweets in real time) over alternative content, thereby creating such polished and nuanced arguments, by limiting the agenda (to 140 characters) (Van Dijck, 2011). The third power mode is concerned with behavior (actions and also inactions) that try to shape and influence the views, thoughts, and preferences of an individual (latent or manifest). This is accomplished, for instance, by getting people to accept the status quo because it is seen as "logical," "immutable," or "beneficial" because there don't seem to be any alternatives. This conception is in line with Lukes (2005), who claimed that power is the capacity to influence the psyche and give phenomena context. Although this type of power is challenging to monitor, it has the most influence of the power modes because the changes it causes occur within the perceiver (individual or group) that is being affected. It entails a fundamental shift in belief systems, causing person A to believe that decide to take actions that support the bias of the system, advancing the interests of person B at her own expense, typically through compliance (Karamat and Farooq, 2020).

6. THE EFFECTS OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA ON ELECTIONEERING PROCESS

Despite the many benefits of social media in politics, there are also challenges and concerns associated with its use (Kim & Lee, 2019). The new digital platforms have unleashed innovative journalistic practices that enable novel forms of communication and greater global reach than at any point in human history. But on the other hand, disinformation and hoaxes that are popularly referred to as “fake news” are accelerating and affecting the way individuals interpret daily developments (West, 2017). Driven by foreign actors, citizen journalism, and the proliferation of talk radio and cable news, many information systems have become more polarized and contentious, and there has been a precipitous decline in public trust in traditional journalism.

The potential for social media to spread misinformation and disinformation, particularly during election campaigns is widely opened. Social media platforms have been used to spread false information and propaganda, which can have a significant effect on public opinion and election outcomes. It also has the potential to amplify extreme views and polarize political discourse over time (Woolley & Guilbeault, 2018). Social media algorithms tend to prioritize content that generates high levels of engagement, which can lead to the spread of extreme and polarizing content.

Over the past years, the rapid development of social media has led to a surge in fabricated news. Fake news has become pervasive, causing significant impacts on individuals and society. Several characteristics define fake news, including its high volume, variety (rumors, satire news, false advertisements, etc.), and velocity (short-lived nature and real-time focus).

It is crucial to uncover the origins and motives behind the widespread dissemination of fake news on social media. The creators and spreaders of fabricated news can be categorized as either human

or non-human entities. Non-human entities include social bots and cyborgs, which are algorithms engineered to imitate human conduct and content on social media platforms. While some social bots serve legitimate purposes, many are specifically programmed to spread rumors, spam, malware, misinformation, and noise. As a case in point, during the 2016 U.S. election, a large number of social media bots were deployed to promote either Trump or Clinton and disseminated fake news through tweets. Cyborgs, on the other hand, refer to accounts that involve a combination encompassing individuals assisted by bots and bots assisted by individuals. These accounts, whether fully automated or human-controlled, mislead social media users by spreading false information, damaging trust and belief within the online community.

Real humans play a crucial role in the diffusion of fake news. Social bots and cyborgs are merely vehicles for spreading false messages created by humans. Whether disseminated manually or automatically, malicious online users intentionally generate fake content, making it challenging to discern between false and accurate information based solely on the examination of textual and linguistic elements.

The purpose of political propaganda is to influence public perception and manipulate people's thoughts and actions in favor of particular agendas or objectives (Vysotskyi & Pavlov, 2020). It is worth noting that mass media political campaign messages have a significant influence on how voters think, decide, and make choices when participating in Nigerian elections (Abagen, 2009). By reporting and presenting information, statistics, facts, and analytical articles concerning pivotal political matters, the media holds meaningful sway over the formation of understanding and awareness in the electoral proceedings. Therefore, it seems evident that voting constituents depend on the media they engage with to inform their decisions (Oriavwote, 2000).

The availability of online information, including political propaganda, has an impact on the voting behavior of individuals. Similarities can be observed between marketing, advertising, and politics, with voters seen as consumers of political services. Choosing political parties is comparable to making consumer purchasing decisions in the business realm. Political stimuli influence the process of making decisions for voters, and if political candidates fail to meet voters' expectations, dissatisfaction can arise, resulting in a reluctance to vote for them in future elections. One key characteristic of propaganda is that it is mobilized by the speaker for their own benefit rather than for the audience's benefit (Bennett & O'Rourke, 2006). In simple terms, propaganda can distort the truth and lead people to make political decisions based on false or misleading information (Zollmann, 2019). When the truth is undermined, citizens find it difficult to discern what to believe, leaving them vulnerable to government lies. This can lead to disengagement from politics and a lack of accountability for government actions (Tavernise & Gardiner, 2019).

It's important to note that even well-intentioned internet users have the ability to contribute to the spread of misleading information and false narratives. In some cases, legitimate users share and propagate false news without realizing its inaccuracy. This further amplifies the dissemination of fake news within social collectives, where acquaintances and supporters of these authorized users evolve into the next wave of propagators. This creates an "echo chamber" effect, enabling the widespread propagation of false information. The anonymity of the Internet allows users to evade responsibility for their posts, shares, and comments, resulting in the far-reaching dissemination of unidentified messages with significant consequences. The intended recipients targeted by false news can vary based on the specific purpose of the deceptive information. This notion is supported by research done by Zhang & Ghorbani (2020) on the characterization and detection of internet-based fabricated news.

Sometimes, fake news stories are amplified and disseminated quickly through false accounts, or automated “bots. West, (2017) believe that most bots are benign in nature, and some major sites like Facebook ban bots and seek to remove them, but there are social bots that are “malicious entities designed specifically with the purpose to harm. These bots mislead, exploit, and manipulate social media discourse with rumors, spam, malware, misinformation, slander, or even just noise. This information can distort election campaigns, affect public perceptions, or shape human emotions. Recent research has found that “elusive bots could easily infiltrate a population of unaware humans and manipulate them to affect their perception of reality, with unpredictable results. In some cases, they can “engage in more complex types of interactions, such as entertaining conversations with other people, commenting on their posts, and answering their questions.” Through designated keywords and interactions with influential posters, they can magnify their influence and affect national or global conversations, especially resonating with like-minded clusters of people (West, 2017).

The prevalence of online disinformation during Nigerian elections has complicated the electoral landscape. Political analysts and digital rights activists argue that those spreading fake news have become more sophisticated and organized, strategically disseminating content across multiple social media applications at an unprecedented speed. The rapid circulation of fictitious content on networking sites like Twitter and Facebook makes it increasingly challenging for citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction.

With over half of Nigeria's population of 216 million connected to the internet, the country Boasts the largest user base on social media platforms in Africa. In early 2022, approximately 325.4 thousand users in Nigeria were on Twitter, and over 26 million people used Facebook (DataReportal). The widespread accessibility and usage of these social media applications contribute to the extensive spread of fabricated information, raising concerns about its impact on voters' decision-making during elections. Idayat Hassan, the director of the policy advocacy group Centre for Democracy and Development, highlights the potential consequences of the relentless dissemination of fake news. She emphasizes that the speed and ubiquity of fictitious news across various platforms can leave voters uncertain about their choices when casting their ballots. The emergence of fabricated stories and fraudulent content predominantly stems from technology-dependent platforms like social media and the internet, instead of established media outlets (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Governments around the world are strictly regulating information on social media in the interests of addressing fake news. Then, starting from the premise of social media as a “watchdog” of democracy and moving on to the contention that fake news is a phenomenon of “mature” democracy, it is important to know the effects new digital platform has caused within and outside political terrain.

7. CONCLUSION

Fake news and sophisticated disinformation through social media are especially problematic in democratic systems, and there is growing debate on how to address these issues without undermining the benefits of digital media as well as infringing the right to freedom of expression. The misuse of social media for propaganda purposes has led to the proliferation of fake news, hate speeches, and divisive narratives, impacting public discourse and trust in institutions. It is evident that social media plays a crucial role in shaping political landscapes, making it imperative to address the challenges associated with the spread of political propaganda as the potential consequences of false or misleading information are concerning.

Therefore, in order to maintain an open, democratic system and to safeguard the integrity of democratic systems, it is important that government, media practitioners, business, and consumers work together to solve these problems. Governments should promote news literacy and strong professional journalism in their societies. The news industry must provide high-quality journalism in order to build public trust and correct fake news and disinformation without legitimizing them. Technology companies should invest in tools that identify fake news, reduce financial incentives for those who profit from disinformation, and improve online accountability. Educational institutions should make informing people about news literacy a high priority. Government, through the National Information and Technology Development Agency, should monitor the content shared on social media platforms. Given that many individuals tend to believe and rely on what they read or see on these platforms. Clear legal frameworks and penalties should be established for individuals or groups found guilty of intentionally spreading false or misleading information on social media platforms. This can act as a deterrent and discourage the dissemination of political propaganda. Finally, individuals should follow a diversity of news sources, and be skeptical of what they read and watch.

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