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Appraisal of Disinformation, Post-Truth and Epistemic Crisis in Nigeria (A Study of Covid-19 Infodemic and Vaccine Misinformation)

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of disinformation, post-truth dynamics, and the epistemic crisis in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 Infodemic and vaccine misinformation. Utilising a secondary research methodology—analysing academic journals, policy papers, and digital records—the study explores how social media algorithms and emotional contagion facilitate the spread of harmful narratives. The investigation reveals that the proliferation of "fake news" regarding COVID-19 and vaccines destabilised social order, fueled vaccine hesitancy, and widened the knowledge gap between the public and health authorities. Key findings highlight the role of religious and traditional leaders in influencing public perception, as well as the impact of social media "echo chambers" created by proprietary algorithms. The paper concludes that addressing these challenges requires a multi-sectoral approach, including increased government funding for health communication, algorithmic reform by social media firms, and the implementation of robust fact-checking mechanisms

Keywords: Disinformation, Misinformation, Community, Health, Infodemic and Communication.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China, in 2019. It then spread worldwide and became the fifth known pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic. Two years after COVID-19 was first recognised, in September 2021, there

were almost 200 million confirmed cases and more than 4.6 million fatalities from the disease, despite efforts to stop its spread through universal vaccination campaigns.

In February of the same year, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern for 2020. The United States released $15 million for the COVID-19 response in March of the same year, beginning with 100,000 cases.

which the WHO classified as a pandemic, with Europe emerging as the epicenter, the US issued a state of emergency, and the first human COVID-19 vaccine trial using the contemporary mRNA vaccine began.

In April 2020, there were 1 million cases, and the WHO recommended wearing a mask to cover the mouth and nose. By August 2020, the WHO identified the Lambda variation, and in September, the Alpha variant was found. Approximately one million COVID-19 deaths also occurred in the same month. In November 2020, Pfizer and BioNTech conducted vaccine trials that demonstrated over 90% efficacy; the Moderna vaccine also demonstrated efficacy; and the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine demonstrated efficacy. In December, the Delta Variant was discovered, the WHO issued its first emergency use authorisation, and by April 2021, 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses were administered (Sarah Moore, 2021).

On February 27, 2020, Nigeria reported its first case since the outbreak started in China in January 2020. This case came to light on February 25, 2020, when an Italian national employed in Nigeria returned to Lagos from Milan, Italy (NCDC, 2020). To ensure the outbreak in Nigeria was swiftly contained by the NCDC and put under control, the Federal Ministry of Health, acting on behalf of the Nigerian government, implemented health measures. Nigeria's multi-sectoral Coronavirus Preparedness Group, led by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), promptly launched its national Emergency Operations Centre and collaborated closely with state governments and Lagos State health officials.

While the global community grappled with emerging variants and vaccine trials, Nigeria faced its own unique set of challenges following the index case in February 2020. To respond to this case and implement firm control measures, and since then, more than 68,000 cases of the disease were confirmed, with 1173 deaths as of November 30, 2020. Nigeria implemented anti-COVID-19 mitigation measures, including travel restrictions, social distancing, source control, contact tracing, self-isolation, quarantine, and clinical interventions, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because everyone was anxious to learn more about the health epidemic that had killed people in days of contamination, the onset of the coronavirus disease in Nigeria in early 2020 caused anxiety. The public sought instant answers to questions about symptoms and proper self-help remedies, and the media emerged as a trustworthy source of information. The coronavirus epidemic also struck during a period when consumers widely used social media. So, most people depended on this innovation for information on the disease, and thus, the beginning of Infodemic masquerading as news tainted the minds of Nigerians, while the public *turned* to social media as a primary source, the lack of gatekeeping led to the consumption of unverified information.

In Nigeria at the time, news of the coronavirus epidemic from distant China was dismissed as unimportant (Kandola, 2020). People suddenly experienced breathing difficulties, headaches, elevated body temperatures, coughing, and other lung-related illnesses (CDC, 2021c), with some of these cases leading to fatalities. Some, however, did not think it was a pandemic and instead assumed it was a local Chinese issue that did not affect Nigeria. Public conspiracy theories attribute the disease to China's development of bioweaponry (Nie, 2020).

When a severe health outbreak, COVID-19, struck the planet, it quickly became a terrifying problem. Coughing and other symptoms led to death, common cold or sneezing. Handshakes and hugs became taboo and forbidden (Martinez & Iftikhar, 2020) because the coronavirus spread through them at one of the fastest rates. WHO promoted hand sanitiser and handwashing, social interactions were prohibited, and people were made to sit according to COVID-19 regulations. According to Allain-Dupre et al. (2020), social life and office closures ceased, and COVID-19 severely impacted local and global economies. In addition to the coronavirus sickness itself, the lack of prompt, rational information on the source and the path out of the pandemic caused more pain.

(WHO, 2020) The World Health Organisation proclaimed COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. In 118 nations, it declared that 4,291 individuals had already died. The word "pandemic" conveyed the attack's intensity. Concerns rose around the world as the virus's spread became uncontrollable, and with the spread of the virus becoming uncontrollable and the rate of casualties increasing daily, people were no longer concerned with an immediate cure, but about what to do to stay alive.

Globally, individuals were eager to learn more about the coronavirus infection. According to UNICEF (2021), during the lockdown implemented to stop the virus from spreading further, health organisations informed the public about symptoms but not about the cure. Here, the Nigerian government announced the suspension of travel in three major cities as the first step in its plans to mobilise the tools of power to combat the coronavirus menace (Daka et al., 2020).

The only access to information on coronavirus available to most Nigerians was through social media platforms, which often disseminate misleading information, known as fake news (disinformation), and deliberately fabricated news intentionally disseminated in a sensational manner to mislead the public. According to UNESCO (2018), the word mislead evokes another term: misinformation, which is defined as misleading information disseminated without malicious intent. However, analysts argued that consumers of such misleading information could be misled into harm's way. This is because some people had no access to information published in the mainstream media due to movement restrictions, leading to unconfirmed information being misleadingly transmitted as news and consumed by frantic media consumers with no other options. Allcott & Gentzkow (2017).

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the impact of misinformation and deception on Nigeria’s public health response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. To assess the ability of media consumers to distinguish between verified reporting and fabricated narratives.
3. To determine the level of public trust in Nigerian media as primary information sources based on pandemic-era experiences.
4. To analyse the manifestations of the post-truth and epistemic crisis within the Nigerian socio-political context.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Framing Theory and the Power of Communication: The 5G Conspiracy Example

Framing Theory explains how media and communicators shape public understanding by selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a message. Rather than simply presenting facts, communicators emphasise specific angles, interpretations, and emotional cues that influence how audiences perceive issues.

The Concept of Understanding Communication

Communication is not merely the transmission of information between a sender and a receiver; it is the construction of meaning. The sender selects particular words, symbols, and narratives, while the medium (such as social media platforms) amplifies and contextualises the message. The recipient then interprets the message based on existing beliefs, fears, and social experiences.

In societies facing health and security challenges, such as Nigeria, communication becomes especially powerful. When framed constructively, it promotes empathy, credibility, engagement, and informed decision-making. However, when framed irresponsibly, it can distort reality and create panic.

The Framing of the 5G Conspiracy

The global 5G conspiracy theory surrounding 5G demonstrates how framing operates. Instead of presenting 5G as an advancement in telecommunications infrastructure, certain actors framed it as:

- A hidden health threat
- A tool for mass surveillance
- A cause of diseases, including COVID-19
- A foreign strategy for population control

This framing deliberately linked 5G technology to pre-existing fears about:

- Government distrust
- Public health crises
- Technological uncertainty
- Global power imbalances

By associating the technology with emotional triggers such as fear, suspicion, and vulnerability, the narrative gained traction. Social media platforms amplified these frames, allowing misinformation to circulate rapidly and emotionally rather than rationally.

Emotional Framing and Public Reaction

Framing Theory emphasises that audiences are not passive. People interpret information through cultural, emotional, and psychological lenses. When messages are framed to align with existing anxieties, such as fear of illness or distrust of authority, they become more persuasive.

In the case of the 5G conspiracy, the emotional framing overshadowed scientific evidence. Instead of focusing on technological benefits or regulatory safeguards, the frame shifted attention to imagined dangers. As a result, public discourse is centred on fear rather than facts.

Media, Government, and the National Agenda

While Framing Theory focuses on how issues are presented, it also highlights responsibility. Governments and media institutions do not merely report reality; they construct it. Through strategic framing, they determine which aspects of an issue receive attention and how they are understood.

When misinformation spreads unchecked, it can undermine public health initiatives and national security. Therefore, institutions must consciously frame public communication in ways that:

- Promote clarity and transparency
- Counter misinformation with accessible explanations
- -Build trust through credible sources
- -Avoid sensationalism

Conclusion

Through the lens of Framing Theory, the 5G conspiracy illustrates how communication shapes perception. By framing 5G technology as a threat rather than an innovation, misinformation actors exploited existing fears to influence public understanding.

This example underscores the central idea that communication is not neutral—it is a powerful tool capable of fostering development and peaceful coexistence, or alternatively, generating fear and division. Responsible framing by governments, media, and experts is therefore essential to protect public health, security, and social cohesion.

COVID-19, Media, Misinformation, and Disinformation

Fake news and disinformation are nothing new, aside from their harmful influence in Nigeria. In 2014, for instance, fake health news about the Ebola virus travelled to other regions of the country after infecting citizens of Lagos.

Unknown individuals clearly disseminated misleading information on how to prevent and treat the virus while experts were fighting the threat, which had previously revealed its catastrophic presence with the death of a medical doctor (Bakare, 2020). The already perplexed public became even more terrified as a result of the phoney news, which ultimately led to multiple fatalities.

In a UNESCO report, Ireton and Posetti (2018) contend that there is no such thing as fake news, arguing that the term is an oxymoron—the deliberate use of two opposing terms for a single concept. Declaring that news is defined as verified information, they added that they disagree with the claim that fake news has an honest or, often, an unspoken purpose.

Charlton (2019) argues that defining fake news can be challenging, noting that stories are labelled as such when they are deliberately released to highlight particular viewpoints and novel ideas, even when they are factually incorrect. In some cases, news reports may be partially accurate yet unconfirmed. While many fake reports employ the innocuous sarcasm technique, the author also noted that some had more terrifying descriptions.

Most of the time, disinformation is intended to meaningfully educate or inform viewers. Every time false information is disseminated to gullible viewers, there is always a goal to achieve and money to be made (Webwise, 2021).

Analysts claim that misinformation is distinct from disinformation, also known as fake news. Misinformation does not intentionally aim to harm, yet fake news appears to the layman to be nothing more than a message designed to contaminate, deceive, and possibly harm people or society as a whole. Hameleers, Brosius, and Vreese (2022) state that although misinformation or disinformation may be damaging and deceptive, it may not be the intent.

Even if the differences between the two are more semantic than factual, misinformation was so prevalent during the COVID-19 era that it outstripped the truth, according to Solovev & Prollochs (2022). For this reason, it is being investigated alongside fake news. Disinformation can provide unfavourable feedback that could lead to conflict or a security issue, according to research. Professionalism must be ensured when disseminating news to the public to curb the spread of fake news, and the media should reevaluate its supervisory mechanisms to prevent the spread of incorrect information.

Because the audience believes that media content is real, disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19 inadvertently mislead them. Since information shapes beliefs, inaccurate information breeds false opinions, whereas accurate information, when disseminated through appropriate channels, encourages positive responses that may be both mental and physical. According to Ekpu (2019), false news or disinformation is a purposeful narrative intended not just to mislead but also to poison people's minds and prompt them to respond in ways detrimental to society as a whole.

According to a 2019 study by Thompson Rivers University Libraries, several factors contribute to the persistence of misinformation and disinformation in fake news. One of these is the mistrust of the government and traditional media, which allows content to be created free from the various layers of fact-checking in journalistic structures that traditional news

organisations frequently ignore. The creators of fake stories are more aware of human gullibility and agenda-setting, and they play on people's emotions. The propagandist of fake news is aware that people, especially in local communities, are drawn to stories that align with their beliefs and preferences. This helps explain why COVID-19 bogus news spread so easily in Nigeria.

According to Okonkwo (2020), journalism in Nigeria has been severely impacted by Infodemic, defined as lies and falsehoods disseminated with the intent to deceive people for personal gain. The authors of fake news only think about making money by disseminating false information to the public.

The claim that the coronavirus, COVID-19, was brought on by the 5G network, a high-speed wireless communication technology that was then gaining international prominence and had already reached Nigeria, was one frightening piece of misinformation that created a great deal of anxiety among many Nigerians. Serious risks to the IT infrastructure were raised by the rumours (Tibken, 2020).

The Upstate New York Poison Centre (2020) warned about the health risks of consuming bleach after social media posts encouraged people to do so as a preventive measure against coronavirus. It cautioned that putting one's life in danger by drinking bleach could result in significant harm and not prevent COVID-19 infections.

A 2020 study by Islam et al. found that Nigerians were exposed to fake news in 2,311 COVID-19-related media items published in 25 languages across 87 nations. Among them, 2,049, or 89%, of the pieces were classified as fake news, 182, or 7.8%, as conspiracy theories, and 82, or 3.5%, as stigma. The public seeking information about the coronavirus disease was provided with these reports, and the unwary social media users believed them without fact-checking. Some of the tales and conspiracy theories that have been spread include using vitamin C or D to help prevent the condition, avoiding hot foods, keeping the throat moist, and eating garlic as a remedy.

Insinuation that sitting in the hot sun is one way to treat the coronavirus, as is using warm water with salt or vinegar. Additionally, the Infodemic hosts suggested that viewers squirt themselves with chlorine. According to investigators, some individuals were advised to take a granite bath in order to avoid contracting the sickness by consuming cow dung and pee as a preventative measure.

The Nigerian Union of Journalists, the fourth estate of the realm, has expressed concern about the speed at which the implementation of COVID-19 preventive measures has been hampered by Infodemic (Gbonegun, 2022). According to the 1974 book Using Framing Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience (Bajracharya, 2018), certain media content is purposefully structured to persuade people to make a particular choice.

The purpose of this framing is to persuade the audience to make a decision by repeatedly presenting the same information. By changing people's beliefs and mindsets and inciting them to act, the media is trying to sway the public or divert their attention from more pressing issues to the data it wants them to focus on. The framing is a sender who disseminates information tailored to their exact goals.

According to this notion, framing sets an agenda for public opinion on topics and motivates people to respond. The system used by the creators of false news or disinformation is one in which media information is presented to the public in such a compelling way that there is no choice but to accept it (Bajracharya, 2018).

Another belief is that framing is most effective when it is introduced early in an event, when contradicting information is not readily available. The makers of fake news used this strategy during the lockdown imposed due to the coronavirus disease, COVID-19.

COVID-19 Post-truth and Epistemic Crisis: the Nigerian Experience

Nigeria, which consists of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, experienced a coronavirus epidemic in every state during 2019–2021 due to the dissemination of false information and fake news.

Other epidemics produce lies and rumours than COVID-19. Snake oil merchants and demagogues have used diseases throughout history to propagate lies, hold onto power, or profit. What appears different now is that we are dealing with a profound cynicism regarding the basic notion that truth exists, rather than lies and false claims. This blurs the distinction between opinion and fact in our post-truth era. Being "caught" in a falsehood no longer ensures bad outcomes, and the adage "believing is seeing" is no longer true.

According to Wendy et al. (2020), COVID-19 might be our first post-truth pandemic, despite the apparent causes of this epistemic crisis being the antivax movement and climate change denial.

A conflict between several varieties of naïve realism the belief that reality comes to us directly, without the aid of interpretation defines post-truth. Perhaps too schematically, the left tends to be third-person naïve realists, treating credentialed experts as forming a consensus of new common sense. In contrast, the right tends to be first-person naïve realists, treating economic and social realities as accessible to the average political participant through simple common sense.

Both sides tend to treat disagreement as a motivational problem, a problem of bad faith, motivated reasoning, perversity, and refusal to see the truth, rather than as an epistemic problem caused by the possibility that each side may hold a different set of interpretive frameworks that determine how and what it sees of reality, when discussing reality as transparent enough to be legible to oneself or to a group of experts (Jeffery Friedman, 2023).

The misinformation, disinformation, and polarisation crises are all aspects of the epistemic crisis. The reality of COVID-19 was apparent, but it was misunderstood. A truly advanced epistemology must acknowledge that the combination of the truths and fallacies that each of us holds to creates an interwoven web that, as it expands in scope and depth over the course of a lifetime, increasingly functions as an ideology in the neutral sense of the word: a self-perpetuating worldview. Empiricism emerged during COVID-19 as fake news creators filled the public with information that required extensive interpretation.

A study demonstrates that Infodemic can cause significant harm to any community if not verified. In the COVID-19 era, fake news results from ignorance: people create it, stumble

upon it, or disseminate it without fact-checking or verification. Few people recalled that the medium is the message; it influences or decides the credibility of the message, according to McLuhan (1964). Some blamed the medium and the content for spreading false news, saying that anything labelled news on social media is untrustworthy.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought on by fake news reveals unreliable information that caused many people to die, since they thought the virus did not exist, until a large number of people died due to carelessness. According to the post-truth, many people who contracted the virus perished as a result of the Infodemic and epistemic catastrophe. The Infodemic creators made unsuspecting people to believe that there was no such thing as COVID-19 and that it was all an attempt by politicians to keep embezzling public monies under the guise of figuring out how to stop an imaginary virus attack.

The Epistemic Crisis shows that, although people mostly relied on newspapers for news prior to the widespread use of social media, fake news was prevalent and widely accepted during this period. Content producers distributed bogus news on their platforms to increase advertising revenue, misrepresented facts to the public for traffic reasons, enforce their opinions on particular matters, disparage the opinions of others, quietly incite fear and terror and profit from it, purposefully mislead the public, and damage the reputations of others for political objectives.

Infodemic occurred with the motive of influencing people's beliefs, thoughts, and behaviours, as evidenced by the current epistemic crisis. It is designed to influence people's opinions and behaviour around a problem or topic. The argument demonstrates that fake news is primarily distorted for personal gain and utilised for situational convenience, leading readers to trust it without question, regardless of whether an individual or an organisation sponsors it.

All this caused drawbacks in the management of COVID-19 at all levels in Nigeria and thus framed the whole COVID-19 pandemic.

The Role of Epistemic Communities

Experts and “epistemic communities” play a crucial role in counter-framing misinformation. Effective communication strategies must go beyond verbal promises. They should involve planning, monitoring, evaluation, and the use of technological tools to ensure accurate information dissemination.

An Infodemic, according to the World Health Organisation, "causes confusion, risk-taking behaviours and mistrust of health officials. Infodemic undermines trust in governmental interventions, public health responses, expert guidance, and scientific facts about COVID-19."

Anti-vaccine Communities.

According to a study, some communities, including religious and traditional leaders, utilised their positions and available channels to sway public opinion, driven by cultural beliefs and a lack of trust in information about the coronavirus pandemic. These communities believe that Nigeria is a unique nation that God loves and protects.

Religion occupies a central space in African societies, including Nigeria, and religious leaders often wield significant trust and power in their communities. Misinformation can be

disseminated by exploiting this trust, however. Religious leaders do disseminate material that supports their own views, regardless of its accuracy, and their followers could be more inclined to believe it without question. Public health efforts were undermined during the COVID-19 epidemic by religious leaders who disseminated misleading information about the virus and its treatment (Okafor et al., 2020).

Misinformation frequently spreads because it is presented in captivating ways that appeal to cultural values and ingrained social fears. Traditional medicine and religious healers are critical in Africa. Misinformation campaigns that promote unproven herbal cures may take advantage of these entrenched belief systems. Alternatively, faith-based cures lead people to neglect evidence-based medicine (Eze et al., 2020).

Public health organisations must learn to incorporate audience segmentation into their Infodemic management communication strategies, alongside evidence-based Infodemic interventions by health agencies and increased participation of younger adults in pandemic efforts to manage misinformation within communities (Vijaykumar et al., 2021). To raise awareness of the immunisation program, it is crucial to engage with the public and the community. The government and stakeholders should get this done through a multifaceted approach that includes the responsible use of social media.

Vaccine Hesitancy

According to the World Health Organisation, vaccine hesitancy is the refusal to get vaccinated even when vaccines are available. The WHO has identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top 10 global health hazards in terms of the development of communicable illnesses worldwide, and it poses a threat to undo the progress made in combating vaccine-preventable diseases. Experts emphasised the problem of "vaccine hesitancy" in relation to COVID-19 vaccination and the role of anti-vaxers.

According to Pullan (2021), anti-vaxers frequently employ conspiracy theories, the promotion of phoney experts, the dissemination of erroneous reasoning, the encouragement of irrational expectations, and the misrepresentation of facts in order to spread false information against the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

Unvaccinated individuals continue to die at significant rates from COVID-19, which is currently the third largest cause of mortality in the US after cancer and heart disease. COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms are the leading causes of vaccination hesitation and rejection.

In contrast to vaccine refusal, which is characterised by the specific intent not to vaccinate, such as those who support the "anti-vax" movement and reject all vaccines, including childhood vaccinations, vaccine hesitancy is defined as prolonged deliberation or delay in accepting vaccination, even when supply is ample. Misinformation about vaccines that first appears offline can swiftly migrate to social media platforms, fueling both vaccine reluctance and refusal. This misinformation trade is reciprocal. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many misleading social media posts about the virus spread, making public health initiatives more difficult and contributing to vaccine hesitancy (Okafor et al., 2020).

Social Media and Algorithm as a source of Infodemic, Misinformation and Disinformation

Social media is proving to be a two-edged sword in the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the researcher, one of the most common sources of misinformation and disinformation on social media was accounts that promoted negative and false information about COVID-19 vaccination, leading to decreased vaccination rates, increased vaccine hesitancy, and avoidable deaths, particularly among specific demographic groups.

Online deception became prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with misinformation about politics and science frequently feeding off of one another. Social media platforms and their users essentially caused the COVID-19 infodemic. Since there is no censorship, the internet spreads information quickly and widely, often without verification of authenticity. This contributes to the current Infodemic.

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Online deception became prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with misinformation about politics and science frequently feeding off of one another. Social media platforms and their users essentially caused the COVID-19 Infodemic. Since there is no censorship, the internet spreads information quickly and widely, often without verification of authenticity. This contributes to the current Infodemic, where social media companies' information filters swiftly spread across various internet platforms, often accessed via search engines and social media algorithms.

Google is the most used search engine, with over 3.5 billion searches made daily worldwide, enabling people to get information from a variety of sources. Although it may appear that users pull information, search engines prioritise specific results, effectively pushing relevant information to users. Additionally, social media algorithms distribute specific content to billions of users.

Misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 are frequently disseminated by exploiting social media firms' proprietary algorithms, which regularly show particular content to people with particular search histories or profiling traits. These algorithms could be improved to lessen the flow of dangerous information that endangers people's health online.

Matias and Morris (2019) discovered that exposure to Facebook echo chambers led to a significant rise in perceptions of erroneous information. Avoiding disinformation is made especially difficult by this system, since educational information might not even reach those who need it the most.

In an effort to keep users engaged, social media algorithms often create echo chambers that expose users mainly to content that reinforces their own opinions.

The majority of COVID-19 posts on Twitter and Facebook during the early stages of the epidemic were from low-credibility sources, which also outnumbered traditional news and

media outlets. Online bots further perplex people and make it harder for them to distinguish between fake and real news. Bots are computer programs created to mimic trusted news sources or user accounts, but they are really tools for spreading false information.

Even the most basic artificial intelligence bots, which use platform data and social media push algorithms, are difficult for social media businesses to detect and eliminate. As a result, it is not surprising that social media sites promote false information and hoaxes regarding the causes, consequences, and avoidance of COVID-19 vaccines.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social bots poses an additional hurdle. "Bots" are automated social media accounts that participate in conversations alongside human users and can spread misleading information. For instance, during the initial worldwide wave of the epidemic, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States discovered that numerous social bots propagated and magnified COVID-19 conspiracy theories and incorrect medical advice via trolls. These people deliberately fabricated identities to spread false information. These trolls have a detrimental impact on internet discussions around vaccines. (2018) Broniatowski et al.

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) once wrote on its website that it is fatal to let oneself be led by false information, as just three months into 2020, nearly 6,000 people worldwide were hospitalised after receiving incorrect treatment due to misinformation about the coronavirus disease. Additionally, it claimed that since the emergence of COVID-19, misleading material has proliferated, ranging from conspiracy theories that immunisations could change human DNA to attempts to debunk the virus's threat.

Mayowa Tijani, an AFP fact-checker, is quoted by Adepoju (2020) as stating that the response to the coronavirus pandemic in the initial months was significantly affected by fake news and enduring trust issues. These incidents unequivocally demonstrate the damage that false information and fake news cause to the coronavirus.

According to Odunlade et al. (2021), bogus news has significantly impacted the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria. According to the authors, the situation has led to a lack of faith in the government and to avoidable violations of COVID-19 preventive measures nationwide. This has inevitably led to the virus spreading excessively.

These results demonstrate the widespread misuse of social media, an otherwise valuable communication medium.

Fake news and disinformation operators, those who assist them in disseminating it, and the marketers who support them financially are all aware of the risks they pose. People still believe that the mainstream media is reliable, nevertheless. This result contradicts the notion that mistrust of the mainstream media is a hallmark of false news (Thompson Rivers University Library, 2019).

One question that comes to mind when considering the effects of misinformation and deception that contribute to the Infodemic is who regulates these social media firms. Four primary paths could lead to significant restrictions or enforcement in the United States, although none were designed specifically for this purpose, and each has significant drawbacks.

Is it the Federal Executive Council, State Legislatures, Executive Addendum, European Regulators, or some other foreign organisation? Social media operates in a regulatory environment largely devoid of predators, with the most dangerous ones being small, nimble ones that can attack before platforms have had a chance to prepare. Coldewey (2020).

Public Distrust

A common factor contributing to the dissemination of false information is widespread mistrust of established institutions, such as governments and the media. Individuals may seek other information sources, even if they are untrustworthy, due to institutions' perceived bias and history of wrongdoing (Voss, 2018).

The 5G and COVID-19 fear in Nigeria, where false allegations linking the technology to the virus spread quickly on social media, is an example of how this mistrust fuels the spread of conspiracy theories and rumours (Freelon et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theories about how the government handled the pandemic were common in Kano State, Nigeria, according to research by Onuora et al. (2020). This led to mistrust and made it more difficult for people to follow public health protocols.

A significant contributing factor to the dissemination of false information is the information gap that frequently occurs between the public and official sources. Due to poor levels of digital literacy and restricted access to trustworthy information, people in Africa are more vulnerable to alternative narratives (Ogubanjo et al., 2021).

Knowledge Gap

A "knowledge gap" is a discrepancy between the public's capacity to recognise accurate COVID-19 information and the medium through which it is disseminated. For future reasons, this is an important matter that requires careful consideration. The public needs governments and health organisations to better inform them about the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who are not as familiar with the virus.

Despite the high literacy rate, approximately half of the literate still have little or no knowledge of this illness. Furthermore, some government officials are not fully aware of the COVID-19 preventive and transformation process. All of these contribute to the disparity in knowledge about the illness.

A significant contributing factor to the dissemination of false information is the information gap that frequently occurs between the public and official sources. Due to low levels of digital literacy and restricted access to trustworthy information, people in Africa are more vulnerable to alternative narratives (Akinola et al., 2020).

According to research by O. Aleshinloye et al. (2021), Nigerian media sources are unable to successfully combat COVID-19 misinformation, leaving the public susceptible to unconfirmed information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government must institutionalise health communication funding and launch statewide sensitisation campaigns to counter misinformation. This action will enable the media and information agencies to remain vigilant and effectively raise public awareness.

2. The suggestion that researchers should do more research to identify the motivations underlying the creation and dissemination of harmful information.
3. To reduce the number of people who fall prey to misleading information, governments, professional associations, and non-governmental organisations should launch awareness campaigns against the dissemination of unreliable information available on social media.
4. Regulators should take action to control social media and content producers who spread falsified and imbalanced information, misleading the public. As a result of social media regulation, each bloc will have an editor responsible for the information it broadcasts.
5. Media organisations should prioritise fact-checking over sensationalism, while academics must work to distinguish ethical journalism from "fake news" for the public.
6. It also suggests that academics make a clear semantic distinction between fake information mistakenly labelled 'fake news' and news produced through traditional or ethical journalism practices.
7. Social media companies have an ethical obligation to reform algorithms that create "echo chambers" and must collaborate with community influencers to mitigate the spread of harmful content.
8. Beyond law and public policy, there are other interventions to take. Bioethicists acknowledge that social media companies have ethical obligations and that moral decision-making and action/inaction are guided by ethical frameworks, two of which are particularly important for social media firms.
9. Social media companies should reform the algorithms that have contributed to the spread of the Infodemic, even if doing so risks their earnings and ad revenue. Censoring prominent users who spread false information may also reduce user activity and engagement on a site, but these measures are necessary to combat the Infodemic.
10. To prevent the public health response to the outbreak from eroding public confidence over time, the media must be prepared to refute and fact-check false information, using evidence to rebut it and giving scientific precedence over sensational tales.
11. Standardise development indicators and appropriate communication technologies must be used on epistemic communities to monitor information ecosystems, provide evidence-based narratives and reframe public debates toward constructive engagement.
12. The National Assembly should amend NBC and NCC laws to integrate the regulation of satellite and digital broadcasting within the Nigerian ecosystem.
13. The Federal and State governments should partner with the private sector to provide ICT facilities in public libraries, fostering the digital literacy required for sustainable development.
14. Regulators should implement measures beyond the Digital Services Act to prevent algorithmic manipulation and ensure political candidates are not "forced" upon consumers through deceptive data practices.
15. Launch initiatives to encourage critical thinking among citizens to mitigate the viral spread of unverified news on social media platforms.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of Framing Theory, the 5G conspiracy illustrates how communication shapes perception. By framing 5G technology as a threat rather than an innovation, misinformation actors exploited existing fears to influence public understanding.

This example underscores the central idea that communication is not neutral; it is a powerful tool capable of fostering development and peaceful coexistence or, alternatively, generating fear and division. Responsible framing by governments, media, and experts is therefore essential to protect public health, security, and social cohesion.

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