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SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROLIFERATION OF FAKE NEWS, DODGY HEALTH ADVICE AND FAKE CURES OF COVID 19

Fake news, also known as junk news, pseudo-news, alternative facts or hoax news, is a form of news consisting of deliberate [disinformation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disinformation) or [hoaxes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoax) spread via traditional [news media](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_media) (print and broadcast) or online [social media](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media). Fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using [sensationalist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensationalist), dishonest, or outright fabricated [headlines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Headline) to increase readership.

What is Social media? Social media is a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. These are websites and applications that enable users to create and share contact to participate in social networking. They include; twitter, instagram, whatsapp, snapchat, youtube, tiktok, thriller,etc.

With the increment of social media usage and the now rampant citizen journalism, the proliferation of fake news is now the order of the day. Before the advent of digital media, getting news to the public was regulated, it was either the public got their information from reputable newspapers or television, any other news was regarded as hearsay. This is not the order of the day in these times.

By design, social media is internet-based and gives users quick electronic communication of content. With one click from the comfort of their homes, people can easily send out information. Is this a blessing or a curse? The jury is still out on that as digital news has facilitated increased usage of fake news, or [yellow journalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_journalism). The news is then often reverberated as [misinformation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misinformation) on social media but occasionally finds its way to the [mainstream media](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainstream_media) as well. These stories are not only found in politics, but also in areas like vaccination, stock values and nutrition

The global Covid-19 pandemic couldn’t have chosen a better time. The pandemic is happening at a time when sorting out facts from fiction is increasingly difficult. All over the world, there have been several conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus, ranging from a turf war between the United States of America and China (there were stories circulating that supported this view, some said that the virus was targeted at the United States of America from China to undermine their economy due to the feud that has been happening between the two world powers) to the tell-tale signs of the end of the world. The ease in the usage of social media platforms majorly Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp has expedited the spread of these conspiracy theories.

According to a report by in [mopenDeocracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OpenDemocracy)2020, the Armenian website Medmedia.am was spreading disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, calling [COVID-19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronavirus_disease_2019) a “fake pandemic” and warning Armenians to refuse future vaccine programmes.

In Nigeria, a wave of information flooding the internet has accompanied the virus’s spread, provoking the fear and exploiting vulnerabilities. Health misinformation is not new to Nigeria. The Ebola Crisis in 2014 is a perfect example of how fake news, especially the ones that concern health can be misleading. During the Ebola pandemic, ten deaths were recorded, eight of these deaths were caused by the Ebola crisis itself, the other two were caused by a misinformation that ingesting and bathing in salt water could act as a vaccination against the disease. Social media usage was not even as popular in 2014 as it is in 2020 now. In 2015, Nigeria had 76 million internet subscribers. By 2019, this has increased to 122 million.

This pattern has already reemerged during the COVID 19 outbreak. According to Lagos health officials, three people have been hospitalized after overdosing on chroloquine. There were several things that were being spread about the cures of and preventive measures to be taken to avoid contracting the virus. They include using condiments like garlic, ginger, black seed, boiling the barks of several trees, sitting in the sun, constant sex and so on. The platforms used to share COVID 19 vary across geopolitical zones and demographics in Nigeria. Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter continue to be the most popular platforms. Whatsapp in particular is a common conduit as it allows for the circulation of different types of media such as audio, video, text and links.

One of the biggest problems that sharing of fake news on COVID 19 is that it annihilates the already shaky trust between the public and media outlets. If there are so many news floating around, the public won’t know which to believe. The Nigerian Centre for Disease (NCDC) control has been very instrumental in keeping the public abreast with information about the virus even with their official Twitter handle. However, the voice on the NCDC can easily be lost in the stream of other websites and social media handles of media outlets that are only interested in attracting the public with false clickbates like “how to cure COVID 19” to increase their ratings.

For media outlets, the ability to attract viewers to their websites is necessary to generate online advertising revenue. Therefore headlines as captivating as “cures for covid-19” easily attract attention from the scrolling public who will easily devour any information on a virus as unprecedented and global as the Corona virus. They may therefore continue to publish stories with false content that attracts users, benefits advertisers and improves ratings. The links to these websites can easily be shared through the usage of various social media platforms. Studies have also shown that fake news get spread three times faster than factual news. Easy access to online [advertisement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advertisement) revenue, increased political polarization are part of the reasons why there are so many fake new on the internet.

Fake news undermines the serious media coverage that still exists on social media and its believability which in turn makes it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories. The numbers recorded regarding the carriers of the virus, deaths and cures have been warped so much that some people do not even believe that the virus exist.

In the attachments below there are a few examples of broadcast messages circulating on Whatsapp of fake news about false cures of COVID 19.

Reference

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_news>

MopenDemocracy 2020

Medmedia.am

Africanargumrnts.org

