

**FAKE NEWS, ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE ROLE OF
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

One of the biggest challenges confronting Nigeria since the restoration of democratic rule in 1999 is how to deliver a free, fair and transparent electoral contest acceptable to all and sundry. Closely related to this is how incidence of fake news otherwise referred to as misinformation continues to undermine electoral administration in Nigeria. With the purveyors of fake news deliberately undermining elections, it is yet to be seen how INEC can earn the trust and confidence of Nigerians on this important assignment. The objective of this paper is to examine how the incidence of fake news sabotages electoral administration in Nigeria and what needs to be done to improve the process. The paper adopts a thematic approach with heavy reliance on secondary sources to arrive at its conclusion. To achieve its objective, the paper is anchored on systems theory as a basis of analysis, interpretation and conclusion. The paper concludes that electoral administration was largely undermined by fake news hence, the need to deal with fake news and misinformation. It recommends the strengthening of state institutions and the deployment of formidable infrastructure by way of cyber security to combat fake news and misinformation in order to re-position electoral administration in Nigeria. Achieving this will greatly boost the confidence of the electorates and other critical stakeholders involved in electoral administration in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Misinformation, Electoral Administration, Artificial Intelligence, Fake News*

Introduction

The process of administering elections anywhere in the world is a painstaking and cumbersome process. From the pre-election stage to the post-election

stage, no other state activity or process attracts such attention like the administration of elections. Because election is an important feature of democracy and democratic transition,

it is the cynosure of attention from all critical stakeholders. Usually, elections are conducted by an election management body saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that the right modalities are set to ensure that votes count and that the outcome of such elections are the true representation of the voting pattern and choices of the electorates. Within the framework of election administration is also the broad concept of elections accountability which stipulates the necessary ingredients for the sustenance of democracy and popular participation. It is broad in the sense that, election accountability and election administration encompasses all issues from the onset of nomination of flag bearers of respective political parties to the declaration of election results.

As the process to ensure elections accountability, it is important to reiterate that democracy has been under assault in the recent time and this is largely caused by how interested parties prepare for elections and react to the outcome of such elections. In the Nigerian political landscape where elections generates tensions and apprehension, election accountability have been largely been a subject of debate and controversy. This is due to the propensity of parties to deviate from laid down rules or deliberately manipulate the process towards desirable outcomes. The immediate consequence is that the process is marred and consequently damages the nation's democratic credentials and records. While this rubs off on the government in power, it further

highlights the inadequacies of the process which is often characterised by irregularities and manipulations. Even when there are laid down conditions and pre-requisite for conducting free, fair and credible elections, available records point in the contrary as the rules of the game are not followed, adhered to and respected by some or all of the stakeholders concerned.

To further examine the issues at stake, the following questions will provide directions for this paper. Why are elections a subject of debate and controversy? What are the remote and immediate causes of electoral malfeasance? Why are elections largely not transparent? What other extraneous variables make elections accountability difficult in Nigeria? The above questions amongst others will provide the leeway for this paper as we intend to examine the emergence of fake news and how this phenomenon undermines elections accountability and electoral administration in Nigeria. To achieve this, this paper shall be subdivided into six sections. The first shall be the conceptual clarifications. The second section examines the emergence and rise of fake news while the third delves into how fake news sabotages elections administration in Nigeria. The fourth section is the theoretical framework while the fifth examines the implications of compromising on electoral administration. The sixth section is the conclusion and recommendations of the paper.

Conceptual Clarifications Electoral Administration

As a concept, the term election administration is a broad concept encapsulating how elections are organized and how it is successfully executed by the election management body. Essentially, it is about how the management of a parade of public affairs and events called the electoral process is carried out (Agbaje, 1999). It also a process of registering voters and monitoring the process to ensure that votes cast are a true representation of the outcome of such elections. The style and pattern of Electoral Administration will determine the voting pattern and the outcome of such elections. Because of the high incidence of electoral fraud, it has now become very pertinent to ensure that elections are administered in a way that will ensure that voter's turn out are not suppressed and that the outcome reflect the voting pattern of the people (Akanji, 2008). The process of conducting elections is a tedious one involving all critical stakeholder for the purpose of inclusiveness.

Considering the different strata of society involved in elections, it is therefore imperative to note that the task of delivering on a completely free and fair process is not an easy task. The vested interests, compromised state institutions and the refusal of the parties involved to play by the rules invariably make election accountability difficult and electoral fraud inevitable. Central to the conduct of elections is the election management body who has a pivotal role to play to ensure that the process is not compromised but rather monitored and

supervised to ensure that the expected outcomes are delivered without any hitch. In view of the above, this paper submits that electoral administration is a wholistic process covering the three stages of elections from pre-election, actual election and even post-election process. It is the framework for conducting elections and ensuring that constitutional democracies are not circumvented by anti-democratic forces. Where democracy is practiced, periodic elections is a regular feature and the process of conducting elections to make transition seamless is what election administration revolves around. It is about the whole gamut of elections and how democratic rule is sustained.

In as much democracy remains the most preferred form of government the world over, it is important to note that there are anti-democratic forces in every democratic setting. Where they attempt to subvert the will of the people, it is the duty of state institutions including the election management body and security agencies to ensure that the process is not compromised or altered in any way. To strengthen democratic systems, it is important that all forces working against electoral administration including fake news are identified for the purpose of protecting that institution from any form of manipulation. One of the immediate threats against electoral administration today is the incidence of fake news and this incidentally will be examined subsequently.

Fake News

As a concept, the term fake news also

referred to as misinformation or disinformation can be described as a neologism for deliberate spread of falsehood, half-truths and fabricated news (Ogbette, Idam, Kareem & Ogbette, 2019). The high incidence of deliberate dissemination of falsehood has come to the fore due to the expansion of the information space especially electronic media which have served as the channel for spreading falsehood or half-truths. In another instance, fake news has been used to hoodwink members of the public into believing some narratives which the purveyors want to spread. Fake news is not peculiar to Nigeria rather it is a global phenomenon that is spreading. Part of what culminated in the spread of fake news is information age which has engulfed the world like a storm. Similarly, the advancement in technology and digital space have made fake news to be perverse and widespread (Mavridis, 2018).

While people seek for information and news to feed their curiosity and be updated on events around, it is imperative to note that fake news is abundant in the media space. This presupposes that fake news is spread and disseminated through electronic and social media platforms. Fake news is a recurrent factor which seeks to change a particular narrative or spread falsehood to members of the public with ulterior motives. As the world evolves, fake news is increasingly becoming a major threat to world peace considering its impact on electoral administration in Nigeria.

Artificial Intelligence

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2016), Artificial Intelligence is the ability of machines and systems to solve complex challenges by enhancing education and improving healthcare and driving scientific innovation and climate action. In a similar vein, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2024) holds the view that artificial intelligence is a programming tool used to solve complex problems by providing alternatives and create an inclusive inter-play between machines and man. As the world witnesses advancements in technology, so is artificial intelligence which is revolutionizing the way and manner to solving tasks. This revolution is coming at a time when there is increased demand for information as such, it fits into evolving technological landscape.

Conceptually, artificial intelligence is a domain of computer science which makes computers to mimic human behavior by solving complex tasks in the field of science and technology (Ghosh & Arunachalam, 2021). But the emergence of Artificial intelligence has not been without some concerns, especially as it is now performing tasks that were initially the exclusive preserve of man. As it is, the introduction of artificial intelligence is set to change the world, but there are questions about the limitations of the programming tool. As more breakthroughs are made with respect to replicating human intelligence by computer systems and programmes, it is yet to be seen what artificial

intelligence portends for humans and society, but certainly, it will change the way and manner man interacts with his environment and community. The deployment of fake news content through electronic platforms that use artificial intelligence is what links artificial intelligence to fake news and this has far reaching implications for the country.

Emergence and Rise of Fake News

The new millennium came with some new vistas and opportunities. First was the increased use of the internet and the growth and development of the social media (Mavridis, 2018). The increased use of social media platforms including X formerly Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram etc which has birthed increased access to information has also allowed misinformation to flourish in the media and public space (Micich & Cross, 2023). Though, the growth is something to be applauded, the development has generated wide concerns over the use of these platforms to disseminate fake news and outrageous content to attract the attention of the public. Apart from causing apprehension among the public, the spread of fake news has also deepened the trust deficit between the citizens and the government. Consequently, fake news has shown that it has the propensity to trigger instability and violence especially when deployed by politicians and political actors to achieve ulterior motives and change public opinion about a particular issue.

Interestingly, the purveyors of fake

news has exploited the inherent gaps in information space to push out fake news to the unsuspecting public. With unconscious/conscious bias on the part of the public, they become susceptible to consuming fake news despite the availability of credible news content out there. To underscore the enormity of the problem, this paper highlights the fact that fake news is not peculiar to Nigeria rather, its perverseness is an indication that no part of the world is immune to fake news. The spread spanning across countries and continents has shown that fake news is intrinsically linked to the expansion of information. Though, information is important to humans, the high incidence of fake news is a red flag. From electioneering process to release of information from the government, fake news continue to feature constantly thereby creating anxiety and apprehension from both the leaders and the led. Considering the damage and apprehension caused by fake news and misinformation, government institutions have presumably lost credibility as purveyors have chosen to deploy propaganda in order to manipulate opinion in a particular direction (Morgan, 2018). This assault on the sensibilities of the people and on democratic institutions is why this paper argues that fake news is indeed a threat to democracy and indeed global peace.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning for this paper is the systems theory. The theory propounded by Karl Luwid von Bertalanffy (1969) stipulates that systems are built on processes and

procedures. The theory emphasizes relationships between sub-units and not individual functions of components (Olabiyi, 2002). Similarly, the theory identifies that systems are a product of each component performing assigned functions which ultimately produce desirable or expected outcomes. The theory is particularly relevant in this paper which examines electoral administration and threats to elections accountability in Nigeria. The theory discusses the processes involved in electoral administration and how the different actors play their assigned roles to produce a free, fair and credible election. As earlier discussed, electoral administration is a wholistic process which encapsulates the procedures and processes involved in delivering an acceptable electoral outcome devoid of rancor, dispute and controversy.

So, what happens when a sub-unit or component fails to deliver on its mandate? What will be the likely result when political actors or security agencies or other state institutions fails to align with the overall goal of delivering on a credible and transparent process? Within the Nigerian political space, not all the sub-units perform optimally and that is why elections results fall short of accountability and transparency index. The outcome is usually a product of compromise by one or multiple states institutions or even the manipulation of the entire process by the same component units that are supposed to work in alignment to achieve the overall goal. From appointments of INEC officials, to the conduct of primaries, adhering to campaign funding limits, ensuring the

independence of security agencies, adequate media reportage of elections, independence of INEC, civil society organisations playing the role of a watch dog without fear or favor, proper conduct of political parties and political figures amongst many others, achieving electoral accountability and elections administration remains problematic. Though, this theory is not without some inadequacies, its focus on notions of order and goal-realization of systems vis-à-vis components makes it relevant to the paper and the issue under review (Ogundiwin, 2015).

From the foregoing, the theory which emphasizes relationships is a *quid pro quo* for achieving elections accountability and electoral administration within the Nigerian political landscape.

Implications of compromising Electoral Administration

Electoral administration is an input-output process consisting of preparing for and then implementing an election. The input produces the output as such, it is important that all necessary component parts in an electoral process are present and perform optimally. Where a component or conglomerate of components in the election administration process refuses to align or work together, not only will such an electoral system be compromised but also fail to achieve the desired objective of achieving electoral accountability. The implications of compromising electoral administration are far-fetched and this shall examine thus;

One of the foremost implications of

compromising electoral administration in any democratic setting is the destruction of the country's democratic credentials, by implication disrupting seamless transition. When electoral administration comes under the assault via the deployment of fake news or other form or anomalies, it is democracy that is under assault. So therefore, civil rule is made possible when the transition from democratic regime to another is made seamless and hutch free. Where election accountability is undermined by fake news or even other anti-democratic forces, it is electoral administration that is compromised.

Another implication of compromising electoral administration is impunity which allows anti-democratic get away with malfeasance without necessarily been checked. No matter the crimes or offences committed, these forces seemingly get away with it. More worrisome is the inability or reluctance of the security agencies to fully prosecute these perpetrators. Today, despite the threats posed by vote buying to constitutional democracy, no single case of vote buying has been successfully prosecuted in law courts. This invariably emboldens the perpetrators to commit more havoc that invariably undermines electoral administration and constitutional democracy in Nigeria.

On the whole, fake news threatens electoral administration and electoral integrity. During the 2023 general elections, there were reported instances of dissemination of fake news through social media platforms to gain traction

and influence public opinion on the election and its likely outcome. What this does is to destroy the credibility of such elections and create uneasy calm in volatile states or areas. It is also important to take note of the interests of politicians and political actors who because of their desperation to secure public office for themselves or associates deliberately misinform the public. Considering what information connotes and what the dissemination of false information can do, it can be deduced that the unchecked dissemination of fake news portends great danger to Nigeria's democracy and constitutional rule. When election administration is compromised, it is democracy that is under threat. The earlier it is viewed from that prism, the better to ensure that electoral administration is not compromised in order to guarantee freedom, equity, and fairness to all and sundry.

Research Findings

One of the foremost findings made in this paper is that fake news is a threat to Electoral Administration and democracy. The earlier it dealt with, the better. Similarly, majority of Nigerians lacked awareness about the dangers and threats posed by fake news and misinformation. That is why they often fall victim of such and over react afterwards. The growth of information age is good but it is not without some inherent challenges. Part of the challenges is now the issue of fake news. As such, citizens must now be aware of the threats posed by fake news and how not to fall victim of the antics of its purveyors. In addition, this paper also identifies the introduction of

Artificial Intelligence and how this programming tool has opened new vista of opportunities for solving complex tasks hitherto performed by human beings. Artificial Intelligence has the capacity to ensure electoral administration is seamless but there are concerns about how the same tool could be misapplied. One other finding in this study is that digital literacy in the country remains low and this could be counterproductive if not checked. Lastly, the paper found out that here are no effective infrastructure or measures to tackle fake news in the country, but that adequate awareness and advocacy alongside bridging literacy gap in the country can change the narrative.

Conclusion

The growth of information age has come with some inherent challenges. These challenges which have come in the form of fake news and misinformation has done considerable damage to electoral accountability and the institutions of democracy as a whole. While the decentralization of information in the media space is a good development, its utilization for other purposes poses real and potent threats to democracy and development. The thesis of this paper is that though institutions of government are working to deliver a credible and transparent electoral process, the incidence of fake news and misinformation posed a big challenge to electoral administration and the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. While fake news cut across the different strata of human endeavor, its high incidence and recurrence before and during the 2023 general elections is a pointer to what may befall the

nation's democratic process if it was not checked. The growth of fake news amidst the emergence of new programming tool otherwise referred to as artificial intelligence is another task that requires urgent attention of all. While Artificial intelligence has opened a new vista of opportunities for solving complex tasks, the challenge now is for critical stakeholders to take note of this recent breakthrough and what this portends for the nation if and when misapplied. It is in this sense that this paper posits that artificial intelligence have both positive and negative connotation depending on its application and use. If its misapplication is not checked, it has the propensity to undermine subsequent elections especially now that the independent national electoral commission is gravitating towards electronic voting. Therefore, the development of a robust architecture to counter fake news must be a priority for all stakeholders in election administration. To improve the nation's elections administration, it becomes necessary that all state institutions perform assigned roles without any form of compromise. This paper hereby concludes that the infrastructure to counter fake news should come in the form of having cyber security framework under the auspices of artificial intelligence in order to deepen electoral reforms and ensure that the high incidence of fake news is appropriately checked.

Recommendations

To combat the high incidence of fake news and restore confidence in the nation's electoral process, the

following measures are advocated for. This paper calls for stricter regulations of electronic and social media platforms which have provided viable platforms for the perpetration of fake news and misinformation not only in Nigeria but across the world. This paper calls for proper sifting of news content in order to prevent the churning out of half-truths and outright falsehood that undermine electoral administration, democracy and civil rule.

The paper also recommends the urgent need for information and media literacy to be stepped up across the length and breadth of the country. This could be achieved through continuous learning programmes for adults who may not have had the opportunity of formal school in order to equip them with the skills to distinguish between accurate information and propaganda.

As a corollary to the above, this paper recommends the need for the provision of digital infrastructure in rural areas to tackle adult literacy in Nigeria. This provision of this infrastructure would ensure that persons who did not have formal education can be well equipped detect fake news content. In addition, non-formal education should not only be made to be continuous, but that the programmes should be incentivized in order to encourage those affected to enlist on the programme.

This paper also calls on the general public to scrutinize information they consume especially on electronic and social media. The propensity of purveyors of fake news to misinform or

manipulate information through the electronic and social media is high as such, there is the need for a counter strategy by consumers of such information to receive news with cautious skepticism.

It is in this sense that this paper calls for the provision of robust infrastructure to counter fake news. The convergence of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity has the capacity to counter fake news and all manners of misinformation in the media space. Dealing effectively with fake news is a step further in deepening electoral reforms and electoral administration as it will go a long way to restore confidence of Nigerians and the international community that the nation is indeed committed to ideals of democracy in line with standard best practices.

Similarly, this paper calls for the strengthening of state institutions such as the security agencies, election management body, courts, media organisations among others stakeholders to deliver on their respective mandates without fear or favor. They must see that persons who undermine electoral administration, manipulate the process and or even spread fake news are prosecuted and punished heavily in order to discourage such practices.

Finally, the paper recommends the review of Nigeria's criminal laws so that persons who commit punishable offenses are made to face the music. Law breakers must be prosecuted and punished. To get the country to achieve its latent potentials, crimes must not go

unpunished. One of the immediate avenues to put the nation's democratic institution on a strong pedestal is by

ensuring that all agents of destabilization are summarily dealt with adequately and effectively.

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