



# TACKLING FAKE NEWS: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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**A**t a recent launch of a new TV station in the capital, Abuja, the Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, said that as well as damaging Nigeria's reputation broad, fake news was destroying the media industry and sowing national disunity. This is a favourite theme of the Minister. Last year he described fake news as a "time bomb" waiting to explode. Misinformation and hate speech, he said, "threaten the peace, unity, security and corporate existence of Nigerians".

A scan of the long list of fake news items to emerge in the past months (a period during which elections for President, National and State Assemblies and Governors were held) shows just how far things have gone in the country.

## PRESIDENT BUHARI: I'M REAL

One example is the well-documented video report touting a conspiracy that President Muhammadu Buhari, who in his first term suffered illness and long absences, had in fact died and been replaced by a Sudanese double. It was viewed half a million times and prompted the President, standing for a second term, to make a public denial while on a visit to Poland. "This is the real me," he insisted.

Welcome to election season Nigerian style. Such stories are legion. As Lolade Nwanze, a journalist and digital specialist at the Guardian Nigeria newspaper, says, fake news "has been on steroids". For example, a claim that Mr Buhari's main opponent for the presidency, Atiku Abubakar, was being supported by the LGBT community was designed to damage his support in the religious and socially conservative north.

## ASSUMED GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT

Neither side is innocent. It's well known, according to Fredrick Nwabufo, a political analyst, that the two big parties ran media operations to disseminate misinformation and fake news during the elections. President Buhari's Special Adviser on Social Media posted a video on Twitter which showed his supporters at a big rally when in reality the images were from a religious gathering the year before. She

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also posted a photo of a major road construction, citing it as an example of the President's public works. The public works were in Rwanda. She issued an apology, saying: "My big mistake, apologies to all, friends and wailers alike. It won't happen again."

Months later, it did. A tweet came out accusing Mr Abubakar of sharing food and money during his campaigning. It came with a photo of food packs with money attached and a caption saying: "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday." The hurly-burly of political campaigning? Or evidence of how fake news has become engrained in Nigeria's political culture? Many think the latter, and that it has to stop. The Twitter claims against Atiku Abubakar were investigated by a coalition of journalists, brought together by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting, that comprises 16 leading Nigerian media houses as well as Agence France Presse (AFP). They discovered the image was from an earlier charity event.<sup>1</sup>

### FACT CHECKERS UNITED

The journalists' initiative is called CrossCheck Nigeria<sup>2</sup> and is one of several fact-checking organisations dedicated to exposing fake news and preserving the reputation and credibility of well-researched and honest journalism. Another is FactCheck Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> CrossCheck says its method is simple: to identify claims and posts it thinks are fake, investigate them, then publish the real version.

### WORLD WAR 3?

However, in Nigeria fake news has an arguably more invidious and dangerous purpose: to stoke rivalries and hostilities between different ethnic nationalities, pitting the country's mainly Muslim north against the predominantly Christian south. This aspect was highlighted in early 2019, when the BBC organised a symposium on fake news, attracting some of the best thinkers on the issue in Nigeria. Among them was the Nigerian Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka, who described the threat thus: "I've said this before

that fake news may cause World War 3 and that fake news will be started by a Nigerian." Witness the forcing of the country's nationalities "into ethno-tribal cocoons," he argues.

### WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

On World Press Freedom Day, an annual UNESCO event, many media professionals in Nigeria said the authorities had failed to respond to the dangers of fake news by providing better protection for journalists reporting from often difficult terrain.

It is also important for government communication to be faster and more pro-active. Pro-activity is an opportunity to establish the facts in any given controversy, as well as to build credibility and trustworthiness. ECES<sup>4</sup> has been particularly active in this sphere, supporting INEC with its strategic communications and its future capacity to monitor traditional and social media, collecting quantitative and qualitative data over long periods of time.

Others have called for a public campaign on social media literacy to help people question more effectively what they read, a point noted by Professor Lai Oso of School of Media, Lagos State University: "Not many people are able to make a distinction between the real media and social media, and this has posed a serious challenge to the country at large."

Especially during election season. Combatting fake news presents election assistance organisations with particular challenges. Political parties of all persuasions have been identified as among the culprits. In Nigeria and Kenya for example, in the face of fierce competition for elective offices at all levels, the parties' use of fake news to undermine opponents is unlikely to diminish.

However, there are approaches explored by some election assistance providers such as ECES, IFES, the Centre for Democracy and Development and BBC Media Action, that can tackle the rise from a number of different angles:

- Public awareness through different media engagements, building people's capacity in spotting and call-



- ing out fake news, disinformation and misinformation.
- Supporting the increasing number of fact-checkers, especially around the time of General Elections.
  - Establishing traditional and social media monitoring operations to build hard data-based records of incidents and profile perpetrators.
  - Pro-active engagement with social media companies like Facebook to design and introduce more effective and fast-acting systems to police fake news.
  - The symbiotic relationship of fake news and hate speech is well documented. Avenues are open to election assistance providers, like ECES, with the EU and its implementing partners, to support advocates of legislative measures to combat both.
  - Supporting capacity of those engaged in building counter-narratives to fake news, particularly where it affects trust in institutions that still retain some degree of public trust (such as INEC).
  - Quantitative and qualitative, data-based media monitoring, of the type provided by ECES in Madagascar, and soon Nigeria, can support this by providing statistics and insights into trends.
  - The Nigeria-based Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) also suggests active support for the traditional media to reinforce their credibility and as a means of reducing the space in which fake news thrives

### **"A MODIFIED SYSTEM OF PROPAGANDA MORPHING INTO FALSEHOOD"**

Mr Ralph Akinfeleye, Professor of Mass Communication and multimedia consultant to the Centre of Excellence Radio, Television, said those involved in spreading fake news and hate speech are information traffickers. "We saw how this affected the election processes. Fake news is a modified system of propaganda, which has metamorphosed into falsehood. Its credibility cannot last."

But its omni-presence can, and will. Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been turning summersaults to tackle fake news, the more so after the rise and demise of Cambridge Analytica. Facebook says it is continuously monitoring and taking action against fake accounts and

is investing heavily in people and technology to prevent abuse. Twitter says it has been working closely with the INEC to make reporting problem accounts, and switching them down, easier.

### **WHATSBREWING?**

As for WhatsApp, which is widely used in Africa, it is particularly difficult to establish the source of fake news because of the platform's end-to-end encryption. CNN says an 8-year-old report about weapons being smuggled into Nigeria, filmed in the lead-up to the 2011 elections, was shared recently on WhatsApp as if it was current news related to the 2019 elections. The 2011 elections were among the most violent in the country's history.

To what extent fake news influenced the result of the election is not clear. President Buhari was re-elected by a clear margin of victory, almost 4 million votes. Is that gap, or part of it, the result of public opinion having been steered in his favour through misinformation and fake news? It is impossible to quantify, but it seems improbable. But who's to say fake news can't be disseminated deeper and wider, and more convincingly, with new technologies such as 5G and Artificial Intelligence, and through new delivery methods such as more personalised smart devices replacing smart phones and the provision of detailed information, whatever the source, on voice command?

It is clear the strategy for dealing with fake news needs to be multi-pronged and to evolve around new technologies and new levels of public awareness. Because elections are at the heart of democracy, election assistance needs to play a central role.

It is also clear that the fight against fake news needs to involve communities of fact checkers, not just inspired journalist cooperatives. Part media organisations, part government, part community grassroots activity. It's a national scourge in Nigeria and it needs national solutions, from individuals and communities up, and from government and institutions down, and no time is more vulnerable than election time.



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1. <https://twitter.com/GuardianNigeria/status/1070060988085489664>
  2. P. Arnold, "CrossCheck Nigeria launches to fight information disorder", *First Draft*, 28 November 2018.
  3. <http://www.factchecknigeria.com/>
  4. The European Centre for Electoral Support, ECES, has been active in supporting efforts to detect and counter fake news in the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC.