

The Legal And Ethical Implications Of Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake News And Hate Speech In Nigeria's Political Landscape

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Abstract: *This study investigates the legal and ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech in Nigeria's political landscape. The study specifically focuses on Lagos State political landscape and the population of the study population comprises registered journalists who are members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Lagos State Chapter. The study adopted a survey research design, and a sample of 150 respondents was selected for the study, while the Agenda Setting Theory was adopted. The study used a research questionnaire for data collection and a purposive sampling method. The data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Findings revealed that misinformation is prevalent in political discussions and campaigns, particularly on social media. Fake news about candidates, parties, and government actions undermines journalistic ethics, as unverified information weakens professional standards. Also, hate speech exacerbates intolerance and violates ethical communication principles, potentially damaging media credibility. In addition, result of the study revealed that misinformation can skew voter perceptions and decisions, jeopardizing electoral fairness and public trust in electoral institutions, while heightening political tension among party supporters. The study recommends the need to foster fact-checking of information within media organisations because this initiative can play a crucial role in debunking fake news and giving accurate information to the public.*

Keywords: Communication, Fake news, Hate Speech, Misinformation, Political landscape

Introduction

In today's ever-changing, interconnected world, fake news—a catch-all term for a wide range of misinformation and disinformation has become a major concern. False news manufacturing has proliferated in the contemporary era of decentralised media, enabled by the internet and social media with little to no content supervision, resulting in controversial discussions and viewpoints among the general public. The spread of incorrect information and fake news on digital and new media threatens global democratic processes. This problem is particularly evident in Nigeria, where social media usage is quickly expanding. The Internet and social media have made false news a threat to society because of the nature and speed with which these communication technologies foster the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Due to its tendency to influence public opinion and discussion, influence political behaviour, provoke action, and spread radical ideas, hate speech, and political polarisation, fake news is harmful. Nevertheless, fake news and political misinformation on digital media can have profound consequences, eroding public confidence and trust in government and escalating already-existing social divisions in a complex sociopolitical landscape like Nigeria (with its diverse ethnic groups) and tense ethno-religious and political disparities. Lately there has been a lot of concern about fake news and false information because of the way it affects modern politics (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu 2023). In a democracy, false information can be dangerous because it spreads fast and could be difficult to correct. The ability of information to influence decision making process is another challenge as false information can be spread in order to promote interest of a particular political party or propaganda (Barasch & Glinski 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's political scene is increasingly relying on both conventional and modern ways of communication. Political parties, candidates, journalists, and citizens now use media and other online platforms to share news, give opinions, and communicate with one another. The risk becomes more serious during the election period, when false information can affect how voters see candidates, parties, and politics. Studies on Nigeria's 2023 election revealed that false information was used to promote preferred candidates and discredit opponents, resulting in political division and having a negative impact on democracy. Such developments make people worry about the quality and reliability of the political information that citizens can access when making political decisions. Lagos State is relevant to such problems because of its busy political scene and strong media presence. The rapid pace at which information

circulates on social media makes it hard for people to differentiate genuine political information from false or misleading information. During competitive periods, especially during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, the prevalence of hate speech shows how careless political communication can harm society. Racial, religious or belief-based attacks can worsen existing challenges and create conflict among different groups and communities. In Lagos State, where politics is very active and diverse, these problems are obstacles to uniting people, fostering responsible political discourse, and keeping democracy peaceful.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the legal and ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech in Lagos State political landscape. The secondary objectives are to:

- i. examine the extent to which misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech are prevalent in Lagos State political landscape.
- ii. examine the ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech on political communication and journalism in Lagos State.
- iii. assess the effects of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech on electoral processes and democratic development in Lagos State.

Research Questions

- i. What is the extent to which misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech are prevalent in Lagos' political landscape?
- ii. What are the ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on political communication and journalism in Lagos State?
- iii. What are the effects of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on electoral processes and democratic development in Lagos State?

Literature Review

Misinformation Spread on Digital Media

In the digital world, the use of algorithms to choose viral material is essential since it increases online interaction and affects user exposure depending on preferences. Due to consumers' frequent engagement with sensational content that reinforces their ideas due to cognitive bias, social media platforms have the potential to disseminate false information and fake news (Lakshmanan, 2022). Filter bubbles and echo chambers, which encourage the dissemination of false information, exacerbate this problem. Additionally, social media facilitates the quick spread of unverified information, such as rumours spread by citizen journalists, making it challenging to successfully refute them (Friggeri et al., 2014). Misinformation spreads faster than attempts to rectify it.

According to Loveless (2020), false news uses instability for political or financial advantage and serves as an emotional polariser of public opinion. The expansion of social media and the Internet has democratised access to information, allowing disinformation to spread widely and decreasing professional oversight of data management (Lee 2019). Although fake news has always existed, Rodny-Gumede (2018) notes that its influence has increased due to modern communication technologies. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp are the most popular social media platforms among Nigeria's 31.6 million users. These platforms' unregulated nature makes it possible for false information to proliferate quickly.

The rise of individualized online platforms has transformed individuals into content makers, resulting in a competitive ecosystem where speed takes precedence over verification. In Nigeria, several news websites post unsubstantiated reports, resulting in the rapid spread of fake news, which viewers frequently accept as factual. Individual motivations to share knowledge, cultural factors such as media distrust and unemployment, and high trust in social media networks, notably WhatsApp, all play a role in this phenomenon. This combination permits disinformation to spread throughout Nigeria's dense population, making it a pervasive problem. (Msughter & Maradun, 2023; Apuke & Omar, 2020).

Implication of Fake News

The rise of information technology, particularly the Internet and social media, has dramatically altered Nigeria's political scene. This trend became apparent during the 2011 general elections, signaling a break from traditional media's domination of political information. The internet has democratized information exchange, allowing Nigerians to participate in politics with fewer restrictions. However, this empowerment has resulted in an increase in misinformation and disinformation, threatening democratic integrity. According to McKay & Tenove (2021), disinformation harms democracy and is exacerbated by structural changes in global communication. Fake news from different sources, including government and political groups, is undermining the legitimacy of Nigerian and African elections and democratic institutions. Disinformation campaigns are frequently aimed at doing more than just influence elections; they also seek to undermine fundamental democratic institutions. In Nigeria, suspicions of vote manipulation

have been leveled against Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman Yakubu Mahmood, as well as claims that former Minister Babatunde Fashola authored a tribunal judgment. Fake news undermines the credibility of democratic processes. Disinformation has also undermined candidates' legitimacy, as evidenced by President Buhari dispelling reports of his death during the 2019 elections, and Labour Party candidate Peter Obi being wrongly accused of financial malfeasance and separatist links during the 2023 elections. These strategies can affect fair competition and influence election results.

Fake news has a substantial impact on political engagement beyond elections, especially during protests. It can cause confusion, deflect attention away from critical concerns, and incite dissension among protestors, resulting in internal conflicts. In other cases, it can exacerbate tensions and encourage violence, as seen during the 2020 EndSARS demonstration against police brutality in Nigeria, when Ajaebgu et al. (2022) documented 15 instances of misinformation. This deception was intended to weaken the demonstration by implying foreign funding and political opposition participation (Mwai, 2020). Fake news hampered the protest by causing tensions and confusion, overshadowing its core objective. Olaimolu & Adebumiti (2022) emphasized that fake news has a substantial impact on health and safety, as evidenced by the 2020 COVID pandemic, which saw widespread misinformation regarding the virus and government actions. This resulted in insufficient government intervention and a spike in COVID cases, leading to fatalities. Furthermore, disinformation undermines public faith in the media, as highlighted by Wasserman & Madrid-Morales' (2019) study in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, which discovered that exposure to fake news is associated with decreasing trust in the media. This reduction could have a negative impact on democracy, as the media is critical for informed public decision-making, particularly during elections.

Ethical Implications of Misinformation and Fake News

The ethical implications of misinformation are intimately connected to the obligations of media and digital platforms in sustaining public trust and acting socially responsibly. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter dominate public discourse, they have an ethical responsibility to ensure information does not harm public welfare (Zubair, Raquib, & Qadir, 2019). Scholars advocate for meticulous content moderation and emphasize accuracy over engagement-driven algorithms, which often foster inaccurate content. The inability to meet these commitments lowers public trust, leading to distrust towards media and digital platforms (Napoli, 2019). In addition, ethical challenges entail data utilization, privacy, and openness, affecting trust (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). The influence of misinformation on democracy creates issues, such as electoral manipulation and targeting vulnerable groups; therefore, platforms must put an emphasis on veracity and productive discourse (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). Digital platforms have an obligation to safeguard democratic integrity as they increasingly enable political participation, which calls for a proactive strategy against deceptive information.

Agenda Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw developed agenda-setting theory in 1972, which stresses how the media influences public opinion by spotlighting specific concerns. This theory has grown dramatically in the digital era, notably with the rise of social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram, which use algorithmic content to shape public discourse and alter perceptions. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found a substantial relationship between media agendas and public agendas, particularly in political circumstances. Diddi and LaRose (2006) showed how online media influences public perception, proving the theory's validity today. In Nigeria's digital media landscape, agenda-setting theory aids in analyzing the spread of disinformation, emphasizing the importance of effective remedies to protect public perception from fake news.

Empirical Reviews

Abiodun (2024) used a desk study approach to investigate the influence of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic involvement in Nigeria. The data were collected using available resources. The findings show that fake news considerably impedes informed decision-making, promotes political polarisation, and undermines public trust in institutions. It also aids in the propagation of rumours and conspiracy theories, undermines trustworthy news sources, and is used for political manipulation and instigating violence. To address these challenges, the report recommends adopting media literacy programs, fact-checking activities, and legal measures to counteract the spread of misleading information.

Olakoyenikan (2024) examined the legal and ethical ramifications of the different regulatory approaches to disinformation in the US and the EU. The US places a higher priority on free speech safeguards, but the EU encourages proactive content moderation and platform accountability. A balanced, hybrid regulatory strategy may be more effective in addressing misinformation issues, according to the study, which also outlines the advantages and disadvantages of both frameworks. It also suggests further investigation into international guidelines for countering false information in diverse legal circumstances.

Omolasoye (2026) examined hate speech and fake news in Nigeria. The research problem centres on how hate speech and fake news mutually reinforce one another to erode social cohesion and democratic stability in Nigeria, while scholarly understanding of their

interaction remains fragmented and poorly supported by empirical data. The study's objective is to systematically review and synthesise existing scholarship to map dominant explanations, compare methodological approaches, and identify critical knowledge gaps. Methodologically, a qualitative systematic literature review was conducted, thematically analysing 45 peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2024. The theoretical framework draws on Social Responsibility Theory, Technological Determinism, and Conflict Theory to analyse how historical ethnoreligious divisions, algorithmic platform architectures, and political manipulation collectively fuel harmful content. Key findings reveal that Nigerian scholarship treats hate speech and fake news largely in isolation, lacks empirical audience-reception studies, and relies heavily on a narrow set of authors. The literature further exposes a tension between legislative deterrence and media literacy interventions, as well as weak and fragmented regulatory responses. The study concluded that an effective counter-strategy must balance precise legal sanctions with robust media literacy programmes, enforceable platform accountability, and community-driven counter-speech, all tailored to Nigeria's socio-political context and aligned with international human rights standards.

Research Methodology

The study utilized a survey research method which makes it easier to analyse numerical data to identify a variable or group of variables. This kind of research relies on gathering data using organised techniques, like questionnaires, surveys, or experiments, in order to examine the correlation between variables and identify trends and patterns. The study population comprises registered journalists who are members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Lagos State Chapter. The selection of this demographic is acceptable since journalists play an important role in the Nigerian information ecosystem, with professional duties for information veracity, fairness, verification, and responsible dissemination. The NUJ Code of Ethics states, "Truth is the essence of journalism, and the NUJ believes that accuracy is fundamental to the practice of journalism. The Lagos State Council is especially important because it is the hub of the country's media industry, with journalists working for newspapers, television, radio, online media, and news agencies. A total number of 150 respondents were selected for this study using a purposive sampling method. The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire and data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 23.0 software. On a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, there were five possible answers for each question. "Strongly disagree" (lowest score 1) and "strongly agree" (highest score 5). The study made use of descriptive and measures of central tendencies such as mean and standard deviation to analyze the research questions.

Data Analysis

Research Question One: What is the extent to which misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech are prevalent in Lagos' political landscape?

Table 1: The extent to which misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech are prevalent in Lagos' political landscape

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std Dev
1	Misinformation is widely circulated during political discussions and campaigns in Lagos	55 (36.7%)	81 (54.0%)	14 (9.3%)	-	-	3.71	1.13
2	Deliberately fabricated or manipulated information is frequently used to influence political opinions in Lagos	60 (40.0%)	80 (53.3%)	10 (6.7%)	-	-	3.59	1.21
3	Fake news about political candidates, parties, and government activities is commonly encountered on social media platforms	121 (80.7%)	8 (5.3%)	21 (14.0%)	-	-	3.49	1.42
4	Hate speech is frequently used in political communication, particularly during election periods	31 (20.7%)	107 (71.3%)	12 (8.0%)	-	-	3.61	1.71
5	Political misinformation and disinformation are widely spread through social media, blogs, and online news platforms	51 (34.0%)	86 (57.3%)	13 (8.7%)	-	-	3.82	1.23

Table 1 shows that 81 (54.0%) of the respondents agree that misinformation is widely circulated during political discussions and campaigns in Lagos, 55 (36.7%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, while 14 (9.3%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Also, 80 (53.3%) of the respondents agree that deliberately fabricated or manipulated information is frequently used to influence political opinions in Lagos; 60 (40.0%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, while 10 (6.7%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. In addition, 121 (80.7%) of the respondents strongly agree that fake news about political candidates, parties, and government activities is commonly encountered on social media platforms; 21 (14.0%) of the respondents were undecided, while 8 (5.3%) of the respondents agreed with the statement. Similarly, 107 (71.3%) of the respondents agreed that hate speech is frequently used in political communication, particularly during election periods; 31 (20.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, while 12 (8.0%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Furthermore, 86 (57.3%) of the respondents agree that political misinformation and disinformation are widely spread through social media, blogs, and online news platforms; 51 (34.0%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, while 13 (8.7%) of the respondents were undecided.

Research Question Two: What are the ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on political communication and journalism in Lagos State?

Table 2: The ethical implications of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on political communication and journalism in Lagos State

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std Dev
1	The spread of misinformation and fake news undermines the ethical responsibility of journalists to provide accurate and reliable information to the public	69 (46.0%)	77 (51.3%)	4 (2.7%)	-	-	3.47	1.29
2	The deliberate dissemination of disinformation compromises the principles of truthfulness, objectivity, and fairness in political communication	83 (52.7%)	55 (36.7%)	12 (8.0%)	-	-	3.51	1.21
3	The publication or circulation of unverified political information weakens professional standards and ethical practices in Lagos State journalism	91 (60.7%)	47 (26.0%)	12 (8.0%)	-	-	3.58	1.66
4	The use of hate speech in political communication promotes intolerance and violates ethical principles of responsible public discourse	87 (58.0%)	61 (40.7%)	2 (1.3%)	-	-	3.77	1.41
5	Political misinformation and disinformation can damage the reputation and credibility of journalists and media organisations in Lagos State	84 (56.0%)	46 (30.7%)	20 (13.3%)	-	-	3.63	1.07

Table 2 shows that 77 (51.3%) of the respondents agree that the spread of misinformation and fake news undermines the ethical responsibility of journalists to provide accurate and reliable information to the public, 69 (46.0%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, while 4 (2.7%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Also, 83 (52.7%) of the respondents strongly agree that the deliberate dissemination of disinformation compromises the principles of truthfulness, objectivity, and fairness in political communication; 55 (36.7%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 12 (8.0%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. In addition, 91 (60.7%) of the respondents strongly agree that the publication or circulation of unverified political information weakens professional standards and ethical practices in Lagos State journalism; 47 (26.0%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 12 (8.0%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Similarly, 87 (58.0%) of the respondents strongly agree that the use of hate speech in political communication promotes intolerance and violates ethical principles of responsible public discourse; 61 (40.7%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 2 (1.3%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Furthermore, 84 (56.0%) of the respondents agree that political misinformation and disinformation can damage the reputation and credibility of journalists and media organisations in Lagos State; 46 (30.7%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 20 (13.3%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement.

Research Question Three: What are the effects of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on electoral processes and democratic development in Lagos State?**Table 3: The effects of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on electoral processes and democratic development in Lagos**

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std Dev
1	Misinformation and fake news can influence voters' perceptions and decisions during elections	96 (64.0%)	43 (28.7%)	11 (7.3%)	-	-	3.37	1.27
2	Disinformation about political candidates and political parties can undermine the fairness and credibility of electoral processes in Lagos	48 (32.0%)	78 (52.0%)	19 (12.7%)	5 (3.3%)	-	3.59	1.41
3	The spread of false information about election procedures and results can reduce public confidence in electoral institutions	111 (74.0%)	23 (15.4%)	11 (7.3%)	5 (3.3%)	-	3.67	1.81
4	Hate speech during election campaigns can increase political tension, intolerance, and hostility among supporters of different political parties	85 (56.6%)	49 (32.7%)	16 (10.7%)	-	-	3.83	1.29
5	Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news can discourage citizens from participating in elections and other democratic activities	94 (62.7%)	30 (20.0%)	21 (14.0%)	5 (3.3%)	-	3.41	1.19

Table 3 shows that 96 (64.0%) of the respondents strongly agree that misinformation and fake news can influence voters' perceptions and decisions during elections, 43 (28.7%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 11 (7.3%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Also, 78 (52.0%) of the respondents agree that disinformation about political candidates and political parties can undermine the fairness and credibility of electoral processes in Lagos; 48 (32.0%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, 19 (12.7%) were undecided, while 5 (3.3%) of the respondents disagree with the statement. In addition, 111 (74.0%) of the respondents strongly agree that the spread of false information about election procedures and results can reduce public confidence in electoral institutions, 23 (15.3%) of the respondents agree with the statement, 11 (7.3%) were undecided, while 5 (3.3%) of the respondents disagree with the statement. Similarly, 85 (56.6%) of the respondents strongly agree that hate speech during election campaigns can increase political tension, intolerance, and hostility among supporters of different political parties; 49 (32.7%) of the respondents agree with the statement, while 16 (10.7%) of the respondents were undecided on the statement. Furthermore, 94 (62.7%) of the respondents strongly agree that misinformation, disinformation, and fake news can discourage citizens from participating in elections and other democratic activities; 30 (20.0%) of the respondents agree with the statement; 21 (14.0%) of the respondents were undecided, while 5 (3.3%) of the respondents disagree with the statement.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the respondents agree that misinformation is widely circulated during political discussions and campaigns in Lagos; fake news about political candidates, parties, and government activities is commonly encountered on social media platforms; hate speech is frequently used in political communication, particularly during election periods; and political misinformation and disinformation are widely spread through social media, blogs, and online news platforms. In addition, the majority of the respondents agree that the spread of misinformation and fake news undermines the ethical responsibility of journalists to provide accurate and reliable information to the public; the publication or circulation of unverified political information weakens professional standards and ethical practices in Lagos State journalism; the use of hate speech in

political communication promotes intolerance and violates ethical principles of responsible public discourse; and political misinformation and disinformation can damage the reputation and credibility of journalists and media organisations in Lagos State. In addition, the majority of the respondents agree that misinformation and fake news can influence voters' perceptions and decisions during elections; disinformation about political candidates and political parties can undermine the fairness and credibility of electoral processes in Lagos; the spread of false information about election procedures and results can reduce public confidence in electoral institutions; and hate speech during election campaigns can increase political tension, intolerance, and hostility among supporters of different political parties are some of the effects of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech on electoral processes and democratic development in Lagos State. These findings support the study of Abiodun (2024) on the influence of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic involvement in Nigeria, which revealed that fake news considerably impedes informed decision-making, promotes political polarisation, and undermines public trust in institutions.

Conclusion

The study reveals that misinformation is prevalent in political discussions and campaigns, particularly on social media. Fake news about candidates, parties, and government actions undermines journalistic ethics, as unverified information weakens professional standards. Hate speech exacerbates intolerance and violates ethical communication principles, potentially damaging media credibility. Furthermore, misinformation can skew voter perceptions and decisions, jeopardizing electoral fairness and public trust in electoral institutions, while heightening political tension among party supporters.

The prevalence of misinformation and deception in Nigerian media is rising, and it creates serious risks to social stability and democracy. To deal with this issue, a multifaceted strategy involving the government, media outlets, academic institutions, tech corporations, and civil society is needed. Nigerian media outlets and civil society organisations should establish fact-checking protocols to guarantee that information is reliable, and the general public should be trained on how to evaluate information sources effectively. False information may seriously distort political discourse and jeopardise the democratic process. It is frequently disseminated via social media and other online means. Fake news can exacerbate tensions, foster mistrust of institutions, and even inspire violence, as seen in a number of occurrences, such as the spread of provocative narratives and fictitious election outcomes. Furthermore, the dissemination of false information has the potential to undermine public confidence in trustworthy information sources, making it more difficult for people to make educated decisions about their political preferences and level of civic engagement.

Recommendations

- i. There is a need for collaboration between policymakers, legal experts, journalists, and civil society to develop regulations that preserve free expression while also combating the dissemination of false information.
- ii. There is a need to foster fact-checking of information within media organisations because this initiative can play a crucial role in debunking fake news and giving accurate information to the public.

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