Bisi Alimi
Foundation

ACCELERATING SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE
OF LGBT PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

THE IMPACT OF ~~FAKE NEWS~~ ON NIGERIAN LGBT PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fake news or false information has been a phenomenon dating back to civilization. It is a news item that presents opinion-based, fictitious, and/or unverified statements that further particular interests as facts and threatens to mislead the reader/listener/viewer.

In Nigeria, studies show that social media is the major carrier of fake news with 68% of Nigerians reported to have encountered it on social media, as compared to 10% who encountered it on conventional media and the remaining 22% on both. On an average, Nigerians who are active on social media, encounter fake news daily. 7% encounter fake news every minute, 20% every hour, 15% weekly and 8% monthly. Unfortunately, 95% of Nigerians share fake information they get online with 63.3% of them not verifying it at all. Only 36.7% go the extra mile of verifying such information.

Sadly, LGBT people have been targeted by fake news many times which has left a long trail of negative narratives and myths about them in both the mainstream and social media. These negative narratives are what has caused the high level of violence against, and the non-acceptance of LGBT people in Nigeria.

As the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases continue to rise globally, which has been reported to be over 6 million with the number of death over 370,000 and over 2.8 million have recovered (WHO Situation Report 127 on COVID-19,1st June, 2020), the pandemic has brought in a new rush of fake news across Africa as the world struggles to make meaning of the virus and its spread. The impact of the false information being peddled has had negative impacts on the efforts being made by the international bodies and the government in handling the spread of the virus. Fake news ranging from the use of hydroxychloroquine as a cure for the virus, to the conspiracy theories about the 5G technology or God's punishment for homosexuality being the cause of the virus and many others, have been shared on social media and is been accepted by people as true.

The World Health Organisation and UNESCO have warned against the spread of false information as it is putting people's lives at risk. We therefore advocate the need to carry out media literacy campaigns that will help reduce the spread of fake news and its effect on our society and the LGBT people. Citizens should always utilize measures put in place to verify news such as confirming the source, author, date, facts, checking biases and cross checking with fact checking sites. LGBT people also have the freedom to counter and report false information published about them to correct the negative narratives in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon in our society today as we have been dealing with it for years. Traditionally, news was gotten from trusted sources; journalists or renowned media outlets who were known or required to follow strict codes of practice. However, over time, the internet took over and a lot of the population have moved away from the traditional mode to the internet mode which has enabled publishing and sharing of information most times without any form of regulation. [1]

Historically, fake news dates all the way back to when news became a concept over 500 years ago with the invention of print in 1439. [2] Even before then, people carried about misinformed opinion about certain subject matters and peddled such information around. This caused irreparable harm in the past which often led to violence, discrimination, and inflamed prejudices.

Fake news (a concept that gained popularity in 2016 after being used by Donald Trump) [3] also more properly termed, 'false information' refers to news, stories or hoaxes created to deliberately misinform or deceive readers or listeners. It is related to the concepts of misinformation and disinformation.

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[1] Explained: What is False Information (Fake News), https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/what-is-fake-news/ last accessed 27/05/20

[2] Jacob Soll, 'The Long and Brutal History of Fake News.' *Politico Magazine* December 18, 2016 https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535 last accessed 27/05/20

[3] Stephen Poole, ' Before Trump: 'The Real History of Fake News' *The Guardian Online* November 22, 2019 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/22/factitious-taradiddle-dictionary-real-history-fake-news last accessed 27/05/20

The Cambridge Dictionary defines Fake news as "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke." [4]

According to Axel Gilfert, fake news is a "deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where these are misleading by design. The phrase 'by design' here refers to systemic features of the design of the sources and channels by which fake news propagates and, thereby, manipulates the audience's cognitive processes." [5]

The concept of fake news will be better understood by the definition of disinformation, misinformation and mal information offered by UNESCO. According to a UNESCO publication titled 'Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation', "disinformation is generally used to refer to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them." It is usually created to harm a person, social group, organisation, or country. It is on a similar footing with Mal information, which is information based on realities, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation, or country.
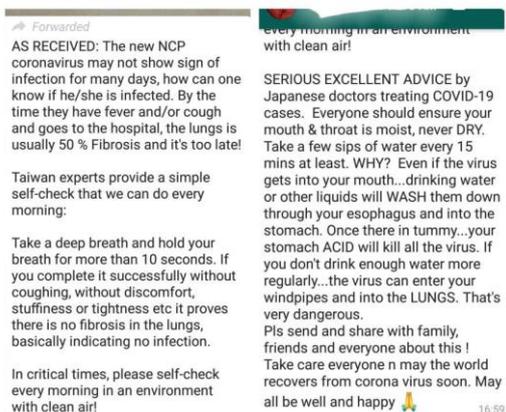

On the other hand, "Misinformation is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent, and without the intention to cause harm." They are all problems for society, but disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology to cause harm.

CATEGORIES OF FAKE NEWS OR FALSE INFORMATION

There are various types of fake news we need to be aware of. This categorization was done by the UK Parliament in its Interim Report on Disinformation and 'Fake news'. These types are used especially in evaluating online content.

1. **Satire or Parody:** This is news with no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.
2. **Misleading content:** Misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual. This can be caused by sloppy journalism by reporters or journalists who may publish a story with unreliable information or without checking all the facts which can mislead audiences.
3. **Imposter content:** When genuine sources are impersonated. for example, by using the branding of an established news agency.
4. **Fabricated content:** News content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.
5. **False connection:** When headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content.
6. **False context:** When genuine content is shared with false contextual information. This is usually done using biased/ slanted news. Many people are drawn to news or stories that confirm their own beliefs or biases and fake news can prey on these biases. Social

[4] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news last accessed 27/05/20
[5] Gelfert, A. (2018). 'Fake News: A Definition.' *Informal Logic*, *38* (1), 84–117. https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v38i1.5068

media news feeds tend to display news and articles that they think we will like based on our personalised searches.

7. **Manipulated content:** When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive. For example, using a clickbait which refers to stories that are deliberately fabricated to gain more website visitors and increase advertising revenue for websites. They usually use sensationalist headlines to grab attention and drive click-throughs to the publisher website, normally at the expense of truth or accuracy.

Marriana Spring, a specialist disinformation reporter enumerated a concise list of types of people who start and spread viral misinformation in this period of the corona virus pandemic. They are the jokers, scammers, politicians, conspiracy theorists, insiders, relatives and celebrities.

STRATEGIES FOR FAKE NEWS DISSEMINATION

♦ Making it look professional and credible. For instance, having the heading "BREAKING NEWS."

make it look real and give it a credible look.

♦ Make it popular or posting it on a popular site.

♦ Win public opinion by preying on or confirming their biases.

♦ Causing confusion by posting controversial news or sowing discord to weaken opponent.

♦ Changing of page name or using multiple profiles

♦ Use of fake trolls and fans to

THE SITUATION OF FAKE NEWS IN NIGERIA

Fake news is a matter of concern in Nigeria. Almost every person in Nigeria has encountered or been affected by fake news in one way or the other. This phenomenon has been seriously heightened because of technology which has made it easier for false information to be shared just by one or two clicks. However, poor journalism also allows false information to originate or leak into the mainstream media.

According to a research conducted by Wilson and Umar, [6] It was discovered that, 68% of Nigerians encountered fake news on social media, 10% encountered it on conventional media while 22% encountered it on both conventional and social media. This reiterates the point that social media is a major carrier of fake news compared to conventional media.

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[6] Wilson F. and Umar MA. (2019) The Effect of Fake News on Nigeria's Democracy within the Premise of Freedom of Expression. *Global Media Journal*, 17:32

With regards to the frequency of this contact, it was recorded that 7% of Nigerians who are active on social media come in contact with fake news every minute, 20% said that they see fake news every hour, 15% said weekly, while only 8% suggested every month. This means an average Nigerian encounters fake news every day and can be influenced by constantly seeing them.

It is however heart-breaking to discover that 95% of Nigerians share fake information they get online with 63.3% of them not verifying it at all. Only 36.7% go the extra mile of verifying such information.

From a study by BBC News titled 'Duty, Identity, Credibility: Fake News and the Ordinary Citizen in Kenya and Nigeria – A comparative Study'; the motivation behind sharing fake news in Nigeria is that sharing news is seen as a 'social currency' which means it accelerates one status as being knowledgeable, up to date and engaging (having the juice or spilling the tea) or as a 'civic duty' which means actively participating in the world and helping others. In the case of civic duty, the sharer feels obliged to warn and update others to inform them when they receive news of a supposed impending security crisis, propagate religious messages or solutions of such crisis, which in some instances might even be more harmful than the crisis itself. Like in the case of false information about ingesting salt and using salt to take a bath to prevent and cure Ebola which went viral when news of an Ebola outbreak was announced in Nigeria in 2014, and led to the death of at least two people.

THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON LGBT PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

Fake news has been used against LGBT people for many years. According to SOGI Campaigns, Many LGBT people in Nigeria grew up hearing nasty, whispered rumours from their school mates or peers or reading lies about LGBT issues from the media. In many cases, such false information also stems from traditional or religious leaders and groups who have continued to term same sex relations as a taboo, sin, or demonic influence and have even been linked to be the cause of insecurity in Nigeria. Sexual minorities are often portrayed as being un-African, un-Godly, and a threat to society. [7]

7 Strand C. & Svensson J. (2019): "Fake News" on Sexual Minorities is "Old News": A Study of Digital Platforms as Spaces for Challenging Inaccurate Reporting on Ugandan Sexual Minorities, *African Journalism Studies*, DOI: c10.1080/23743670.2019.1665565 last accessed on 27/05/2020

In recent times, the greatest driver of fake news on LGBT people has been the social media. This is especially because there is little or no censorship when it comes to expressions made online and opinions and myths have replaced facts and realities about sexual minorities in Nigeria.

According to a report titled "The Situation of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nigeria (2014-2018)" by the Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in 2019, there are many cases of media reports that target sexual minorities and portray them negatively. These narratives have continued to affect LGBT people adversely leading to hate, discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia.

2019: Association of Nigerian Gay Men Endorses Atiku for President

By Ehi Ekhator on October 14, 2018 · No Comment

In the last Nigerian election in 2019, there was news of the existence of an Association of Nigerian Gay Men which the media put out had endorsed Atiku for President. This news though now confirmed fake was shared around by blogs, tabloids and even legitimate media houses (Vanguard and the Nation) and caused an outrage among some citizens who believed that Atiku had promised the Nigerian LGBT that the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act will be repealed and they will also be granted special rights if he is voted into office.

The Nation Nigeria

2019: LGBT movement endorses Atiku for president, give reason

by Our reporter — October 26, 2018 in Uncategorized   0

There are also myths and negative narratives about LGBT people which has been shared and believed by the Nigerian populace. [8] The mainstream media also contributes to this false information when they publish biased or slanted news about LGBT issues or carry out sloppy journalism without proper research or investigations.[9] These negative narratives are what has caused the high level of violence against, and the non-acceptance of LGBT people in Nigeria.

FAKE NEWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

At the inception of the announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, there were a lot of uncertainties as to what the disease was and how best to prevent it. This gave rise to fake news been shared around Africa where large number of cases had not been recorded. This was a huge concern in Nigeria particularly.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) were concerned about the fact that this phenomenon was putting lives at risk. They stated that unreliable and false information about the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading around the world to such extent it was termed 'disinfodemic'.[10]

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[8] Watch Untold Facts S4 E3: Myths about Homosexuality in Nigeria by TIERS Nigeria on Youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3gOJYZh6FU last accessed on 27/05/2020
[9] An example of this can be found in this publication by Sun News. https://www.sunnewsonline.com/the-world-of-nigerias-lesbians/ last accessed on 27/05/2020
[10] UN News: Global Perspective Human Stories. https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061592 last accessed on 27/05/2020

The Director for Policies and Strategies regarding Communication and Information at UNESCO, and one of the agency's lead officials on the subject of disinformation further stated that, "There seems to be barely an area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, ranging from the origin of the virus, through to unproven prevention and 'cures', and encompassing responses by governments, companies, celebrities and others."

He added that "in a time of high fears, uncertainties and unknowns, there is fertile ground for fabrications to flourish and grow. The big risk is that any single falsehood that gains traction can negate the significance of a body of true facts. When disinformation is repeated and amplified, including by influential people, the grave danger is that information which is based on truth, ends up having only marginal impact."

This led the World Health Organisation to release a list of myths busters and facts about the COVID-19 pandemic. It refutes a staggering array of myths, including claims that gargling warm water, drinking potent alcoholic drinks, exposure to high temperatures, or conversely, cold weather, can kill the virus.

In Nigeria, the government had to issue a warning to the public to avoid the abuse of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine as they were admitting patients who had overdosed on the drugs. This came about after the comment made by Donald Trump (President of the USA) that he was taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventive measure against COVID-19. It was thereafter circulated on social media that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine were effective in preventing and treating COVID-19.

There are also reports here and here that some religious leaders have been spreading false information about the COVID-19 pandemic being a punishment from God for sexual sins and homosexuality which has inadvertently led to the spread of hate against LGBT people physically and online.

Several false information has continued to circulate on social media in Nigeria with some funny and not harmful while some are harmful and seek to prevent people from having verified information and preventing themselves from contracting the virus. An example of this is the conspiracy theory about the 5G technology being the root cause of COVID-19 or one of the agenda for the spread of COVID-19 to cause fear and submission to a "New World Order" or that there is a microchipped COVID-19 vaccine being produced as a weapon to control the entire population.

HOW TO SPOT AND VERIFY FALSE INFORMATION

1. Consider the Source: Check the source of the story. Do you recognise the website? Is it a credible/ reliable source? Make sure to investigate the site, its mission, and its contact information.
2. Check the Author: Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?
3. Check the date: It is also a good idea to check when the article was published, is it current or old news story? Reposting old news stories does not mean they are relevant to current events.
4. Check the facts: Stories with false information often contain incorrect dates or altered timelines.
5. Check your biases: Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgment.
6. Read beyond headlines: Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What is the whole story?

7. Supporting sources: Click on those links. Determine if the information given supports the story. Also, check other popular sources and compare the information.
8. Is it a joke? If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.
9. Ask the Experts: Ask a librarian or a reliable source or consult a fact checking site to verify. Examples of fact checking sites are Africa check, AFP Fact Check and BBC Reality Check.

To verify any information, you get about COVID-19 online, you can go to these sites:

→ https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place/

→ https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

→ https://factcheck.afp.com/how-spot-covid-19-misinformation-whatsapp

→ https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TACKLING FAKE NEWS

From the Report by BBC News earlier mentioned, it shows that there are some positive signs in behaviour and attitude of citizens with respect to fake news. But some of the tactics they are adopting to separate fake from fact are liable t o crack under the strain of heightened tensions, biases, or pressures during politically intense periods, for example, during elections, or in the case of a pandemic.

The solutions to tackling fake news can only be possible through collaborative efforts from individuals, organisations, governments, and tech giants who have a level of control over online engagements. We therefore recommend the following strategies for Nigeria:

1. **Strengthened Media Literacy Campaign:** This concerns different media (broadcasting, radio, press), different distribution channels (traditional, internet, social media) and addresses the needs of all ages. Media literacy is also a tool, empowering citizens as well as raising their awareness and helping counter the effects of disinformation campaigns and fake news spreading through digital media. The Bisi Alimi Foundation carries out a Media Justice Fellowship every year in an effort to carry out media literacy as it affects LGBT issues in Nigeria.

2. **Citizens are enjoined to be critical thinkers and logical.** Before you share that news, have a rethink and research about it. Subject it to the verification process to find out if such information is manipulative or misleading. Also, beware of biases.

3. **Tech giants such as Facebook and Twitter** have now come up with a strategy of flagging some information as fake or inappropriate to warn readers from believing such information. In some cases, the account is suspended and posts containing false information taken down. This means that social media users can take advantage of this by countering and reporting posts that contain false information, homophobic and hateful disinformation about LGBT people.

4. **Media houses and online bloggers** are encouraged to avoid sloppy journalism or publishing slanted/biased news. They should be able to build trust around verified contents by publishing with the highest level of ethical standards taking into consideration the core principles of accuracy, independence, fairness, confidentiality, humanity, accountability, and transparency.

5. The Nigerian government, in order to counter rumours about the COVID-19 pandemic, should be more transparent, and proactively disclose more data, in line with the right to information laws and policies. Access to information from official sources is very important for credibility in this crisis and it is important that such information be carried to the grassroot to reach communities where information cannot be gotten online.