Application of Social Media for Rumour Governance in Nigeria

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The advent and growth of social media has a considerable impact on governance and this has dramatically changed the entire political landscape not only in Nigeria, but throughout the world. The pervasiveness of social media has made it to become an integral part of public discourse and communication. Academic literature extensively documents the trend, and interrogates its manifestation, especially on the digital media space, the complications in conceptualisation, the basic motivations for creating and sharing it, and the various mitigation strategies. The paper anchors on the logic of trend analysis as it utilizes Rumour Theory and secondary data to interrogate the application of social media for rumour governance in Nigeria. Within this context, it is established that social media serve as a platform for rumour governance in Nigeria. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, among others have become the most important channel of public opinion diffusion in governance. Consequently, this study provides the basis to interrogate the manifestation of rumour governance within the context of Nigeria and highlight the concerns it poses. The study concludes that mitigating the scourge within the Nigerian context requires a careful implementation of the various strategies documented in the literature, conscious of their various strengths and limitations in context. On the whole, the study demonstrates that although rumour governance is a global phenomenon, geo-specific and contextual factors are critical towards understanding its manifestation, and have a lot to do with its effective mitigation.

Keywords: application, governance, Nigeria, rumour and social media

Introduction

It is apparent that the advent of the digital age has brought an amazing transformation in all areas of human endeavours. From the way people live, communicate, and do business down to governance processes, the digital age has radically transformed and ushered in new paradigms in all activities. Social media have created a global forum for synthesizing opinions and thoughts, and sharing of ideas on governance, religion, education, relationships, and every other thing the human mind can think of. It has helped to improve society and make a difference in human endeavours (Abdullahi, 2020). The world is transforming at a great pace and the attendant opening of the digital economy is transforming economies globally. Nations around the world are harnessing the potential of digital resources and cyberspace to grow and transform their societies in all sectors. Social media platforms are helping state and non-state actors reach out to numbers of people previously unimaginable, at minimal cost.

Social media have helped nations streamline and improve their processes, organisational efficiency and effectiveness. From the implementation of Government to Government Solutions, Government to Business

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Solutions, Government to Citizen Solutions, and Citizen to Citizen Solutions, developed societies have used digital platforms to develop robust government and governance structures for the betterment of their citizens. E-government has to do with the use of digital media to improve the activities of public sector organisations and provide quality services to citizens. Essentially, E-government helps to improve the administrative process, reduce government bureaucracies, enhance citizen engagement, ease the provision of services, and helps to build and strengthen interaction and interfaces between citizens, organisations, and government (Msughter, Maradun, & Yar'Adua, 2022).

Changes in the media eco-system have given rise to new challenges in the media landscape that journalists, academicians, technology companies, and experts have been struggling to combat and rein-in. One of the most prominent of such challenges is rumour (Darnton, 2017). The issue of rumour has grasped the attention of media researchers in a special way despite the fact that it is not a new problem. Darnton (2017) observed that it has been discussed, analysed, researched, and continued to dominate the public sphere due to its impact and potential impact on journalism, journalists, and the general public. The issue of rumour is dominating discourse across different strata of the community from the political, academic, diplomatic, traditional, and social media. It became more prominent and a recurring term in day-to-day discourse in the period before, during, and after election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of United States in 2016. His election played a vital role in the resurgence of discussion about rumour or what others considered as fake news on a large scale and since his election in November 2016, rumour had been escalating and evolving iteration of the news cycle (Abdullahi, 2020). The Brexit referendum in the UK served as a precursor to Trump's election in terms of mainstreaming the discourse on rumour as both the Trump and Brexit campaigns witnessed a combination of media and technologies in spreading questionable information and struggle to combat it (Ball, 2017).

However, amidst all these discussions in the international arena, less attention is paid to the phenomenon of rumour on the African continent and the threat it poses or otherwise to journalism practice, political discourse, and public sphere on the continent. One of the most popular recurring cases of rumour on the African continent is the recurring stories of purported ill health, death, or incapacitation of Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari. Despite several denials and proof of life provided by the Nigeria's presidency, the rumour about the president's death continues unabated to the point that others said it is not Buhari that is ruling Nigeria. It disappears for a while only to resurface again with new vigour.

Rumour has given rise to several fact checking initiatives and although some researchers have raised doubts about the role and effectiveness of the fact checking and issuing corrections to stories, there are currently no alternatives to fact checking approach (Kurfi, Msughter, & Mohammed, 2021). Several fact checking organisations, governments, and technology giants scramble to combat the issue of rumour on global scale.

Research Questions

1. How big are rumour, misinformation, disinformation, and alternative facts in Nigeria?

2. What is being done about social media data for rumour governance in Nigeria?

3. What is the impact of fact-checking initiatives on social media?

4. What is being done on using social media for rumour governance for journalism practice and politics in Nigeria?

Theoretical Application

The paper examined the application of social media for rumour governance in Nigeria. Within this context, Rumour Theory was adopted to serve the study goal. From a social psychological perspective, Li, Yang, and Ren (2020) related rumour phenomena to information convergence, which typically occurs in the early stages in governance. They considered rumour as one of the dangerous weapon for the dissemination of fake news. Rumouring is what evaluates and interprets information to reach a common understanding of uncertain situations, to alleviate social tension. It is formed part of the communication on government issues through social support. The generation and transmission of rumour on social media, according to the theoretical postulations of the theory, is inseparable in practice on social media (Shklovski, Burke, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2010).

Rumour governance has become a major crisis in government as a result of the social media enabled platforms. People normally turn to social media to discuss certain situations or share information on governance. In this context, rumour helps people cope with ambiguous that create social tension in the public domain. Using social media, people spread rumour and mobilize informal social networks such as neighbours, friends, etc., to fill the information gap (Mills, Chen, Lee, & Rao, 2009).

From the theoretical underpinning, it is apparent that the birth and dissemination of a rumour, both message sender and recipient, masked with some level of ambiguity. If the story seems not to be imperative, there is no psychological incentive for people to pass along the story to other persons. Again, if the story has no level of ambiguity or fact that is not subject or elaboration and interpretation, people share and create content on social media that can be fake or rumour in disposition. Therefore, the adoption of Rumour Theory is apt to this paper as the theoretical postulations establish a nexus of social media for rumour governance.

Research Method

This study employed a systematic review design based on logic trend. Purposive sampling was employed to select 26 articles for this study. The selected articles were sourced from academic repositories such as scopus.com, researchgates.com, publons, academia.edu, and offline libraries, which have direct bearing to the subject matter. Emphasis is given to peer-reviewed works on social media for rumour governance within Nigerian context. To contextualise discussions in the study, specific issues of rumour regarding President Muhammadu Buhari were interrogated. Insights from the systematically reviewed literature are interrogated critically to understand rumour using digital space within the Nigerian socio-political setting. Below are the selected articles.

Table 1

Selected Articles for the Study

S/N	Author	Year
1	Abdulllahi	2020
2	Akinloye	2017
3	Brown	2017
4	Chen & Guestrin	2016
5	Daniels	2017
6	Darnton	2017
7	Farber	2017
8	Hern	2017

9	Lazer	2017
10	Mabena	2017
11	Mihailidis & Viotty	2017
12	Mojaye & Msughter	2022
13	Msughter	2022
14	Musa	2011
15	Nwachukwu	2017
16	Ogola	2017
17	Oliver	2016
18	Pachico	2017
19	Targema et al.	2023
20	Aondover	2024
21	Aondover	2022
22	Idris & Msughter	2022
23	Maikaba & Msughter	2019
24	Kurfi et al.	2021
25	Maradun	2021
26	Msughter	2024

Rumour, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Alternative Facts

There have been several attempts by academics, researchers, journalists, politicians, and even individuals among the public to define exactly what the term rumour means as the definitions vary from one person to another (Abdulllahi, 2020). Within this context, Darnton (2017) explained that there are some precise distinctions between "rumours" on the one hand, and ideological slanted news, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, etc. He observed that there is a need for more research work to develop a clear demarcation between rumour and other misinformation terminologies. All these in addition to the US President, Donald Trump's action of labeling major news outlets aired stories not favourable to his government as "rumour" or "fake news" and the case of his media handler who tried to spin "suspected" major mistakes, lies, and disinformation emanating from their camp as "alternative facts" when they were caught out (Abdulllahi, 2020). These coupled with several governments, institutions, individuals, and politicians including in Nigeria who also label anything they disagree with as rumour, all point to the fact that agreeing on one definition for rumour is complicated.

It is therefore safe to argue that rumour is false information intentionally fabricated to whip up a sentiment and gain more audience or mislead readers, viewers, or listeners to achieve certain premeditated goals, be it political, economic, religious, social, or otherwise. Media are the carriers of rumour because there is no way rumour will be on the rise without major media outlets playing a role in it. The icing on the cake is the role of key politicians in dismissing stories and media institutions they deemed not favourable to them, their government, or their narratives as rumour.

The media landscape in Africa could be described as a fertile ground for the spread and entrenchment of rumour. According to Ogola (2017), most African governments own media institutions through which they "invent" the truth or delegitimise it when it is perceived as threat to their existence. This situation sows the seed of distrust for news from mainstream media in the minds of media consumers in many African countries because they rightly or wrongly believe that their governments might be lying to them to stay in power.

Ogola (2017) went on to cite other factors that make the continent fertile for rumour to include instances in countries like South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, where although the private media play a vital role in checking the excesses of government in terms of information manipulation, their limitation is in the fact that private media in those countries and more on the continent mostly rely on state patronage via advertisement and monetary contributions to stay afloat. That situation sometimes forces some of the private media operators to dance to the tune of the government in distorting facts and sometime send out fabricated stories to the public. This in turns fuels the widespread distrust of some media on the continent (Msughter, 2024).

The next stage is the accessibility and spread of internet technology in Nigeria which paved way for the proliferation of bloggers and online or citizen journalists who sprang up to provide alternative sources of news and in turn changed the news landscape in Nigeria. This was subsequently boosted by the proliferation of social media (Mojaye & Msughter, 2022). The freedom offered by social media to everyone who owns a mobile phone and an internet connection made the platform a breeding ground for the spread of propaganda, half-truth, misinformation, disinformation, and rumour.

Another source of the spread in Africa is imposters on social media positing as the real newsmakers to send fake tweets (Mabena, 2017). The fake tweets or anecdotes are then picked up and shared by other social media users including sometimes news outlets without carrying out necessary verifications. The issue of rumour on the African continent has led some governments including South Africa to come up with suggestions to regulate social media in order to combat fake news, a move opposed by many supporters of open internet.

In countries like Nigeria, the phenomenon of "Brown Envelope" given to journalists as gratification to influence the tone of the coverage of stories is also one of the major contributors of spread of rumour. Another glaring evidence of the proliferation of rumour in Nigeria is the concept of planting fake stories in the media by politicians. Those planted stories are mostly outright lies or riddled with distorted facts and get published or broadcast by media houses passing them on as credible stories (Musa, 2011).

Interrogating Social Media for Rumour Governance in Nigeria

The main case study of rumour in governance can be attributed to the issue of several fake stories published around the death of President Muhammadu Buhari, a development that led Nigeria's government to consider fake news as a serious threat. Thus, Nigeria's Minister of Information Lai Muhammad declared that "fake news, if left unchecked, poses more threat to the nation than insurgency and militancy" (Msughter, 2022, p. 3). He went on to cite several cases of rumours that the government had to repeatedly dispute, while according to him, the peddlers of such rumours continue unabated (Vanguard, 2017).

The issue of President Muhammadu Buhari's health status however stood out to have generated a number of fake stories and it appears that every time the government tried to dispel the disinformation with what they claimed to be fact, it attracted more counter fake stories. Initially, the Nigeria's presidency was accused of shrouding the issue of the president's health in secrecy not coming out openly to tell Nigerians about the status of the president's health. However, at later stage, the president officially handed over the reins of power to his deputy Yemi Osinbanjo and proceeded to London to tend to his health (Vanguard, 2017). However, many "unverified" stories were published at the time claiming that the president was unconscious or even dead, and several attempts by the president's media handlers to discredit such stories attracted more unverified claims (Maradun, Yar'Adua, & Msughter, 2021).

For example, several fake stories or rumour were written to discredit the visit of two leaders of Nigeria's ruling party All Progressives Congress (APC) to President Muahmmadu Buhari in London in February, 2017 by claiming that the visit was fake, despite pictorial evident circulated by the government (Akinloye, 2017). The rumour peddlers had spread several stories earlier that the president was unconscious and could not have received any visitor. It also took the release by the US government to the readout of phone conversation between President Donald Trump and President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria for the fake stories peddlers to soften their stories after they had dished out several fake stories claiming that no such phone call ever took place (Kurfi et al., 2021).

The barrage of rumour or fake stories on the health or death of Nigeria's president resurfaced again in May 2017 forcing the presidency to issue several denials that the president was hale and doing well in London. It is a fact based on the president's admission himself that he was ill, but some of the stories flying around at the time went up to the point of claiming that the president was dead (Nwachukwu, 2017; Maikaba & Msughter, 2019).

A controversial and "disgraced" (Black & James) ex-British lawmaker, Eric Joyce fueled the rumour claiming the death of the Nigeria's president which was latched upon by several media in Nigeria without necessarily checking the fact of the story or verifying the credibility of the person making the claim, which a simple search on the internet could have enabled them to do (Vanguard, 2017). The Cable News, an online news platform based in Nigeria, which is one of the early adopters of fact checking in the country, had earlier carried out some fact checks around the stories journalese about the purported death of the president (Lazer, 2017; Idris & Msughter, 2022).

This led some analysts in Nigeria to describe the recurring rumour on the death of Nigeria's president as a big business and a scourge that has no cure (Daniels, 2017). A former BBC journalist Craig Oliver noted in his book *Unleashing Demons* how purveyors of fake stories are getting favourable coverage from the media without much challenge from the press: "Serious Journalism is struggling to hold to account those who are prepared to go beyond standard campaign hyperbole and stray into straightforward lies" (Oliver, 2016, p. 6). Nigeria's minister of information Lai Mohammed seems to support the argument by Oliver as applicable in the case of the recurring cases of fake stories on the health of Nigeria's president Muahmmadu Buhari: "I am more worried that the media that they used in spreading this falsehood and hate speeches do not think that they have the responsibility to go back and hold them to account" (Vanguard, 2017).

Fact-Checking Initiatives on Social Media

Perhaps, one of the classical issues that led to serious fact-checking initiatives on social media is the rumour of President Buhari's clone story. Wide scale speculations hit the digital space in the wake of the President's frequent medical trips to the UK that he was dead and his look-alike, one Jubrin Aminu from Sudan had undergone a plastic surgery at the instance of the Aso-Rock cabal to impersonate Buhari. The speculation became rife following the president's prolonged stay on one of such trips that lasted for over a hundred days. It is instructive to note that a combination of factors was responsible for the attention which the audience paid to this saga that appeared to be an obviously fabricated story from the beginning. The factor that nurtured the growth of this narrative was the silence from the presidency, and the poor communication strategies that were deployed to inform Nigerians of President Buhari's medical condition (Aondover, Aondover, & Babele, 2022).

Within this context, the recent efforts to fight the spread of rumour, the e-commerce giant eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, pledged $100 million to fight fake news by strengthening fact based investigative journalism (Farber, 2017), while Facebook launched its news integrity initiative "to address the problems of misinformation

and disinformation" (Brown, 2017). Facebook had earlier announced other measures, which include introducing buttons on the platform that will allow users to report content as fake news and collaborating with fact checkers to label suspected content as disputed content (Mosseri, 2016). Internet giant Google announced its measures to fight rumour on its search engines via new tools empowering users to report misleading information and by tweaking its algorithm to give priority to more authoritative pages in its search engine and push down low quality content (Hern, 2017).

Also as part of effort to combat rumour using social media, the co-founder of Wikipedia Jimmy Wales said "news is broken and we can fix it" and announced that his team is developing a living, breathing tool that will present accurate information with real evidence, so that you can confidently make up your own mind. Several governments have also stepped in by announcing measures that will curtail the spread of rumour from those announcing fines for social media companies who fail to curtail such rumour on their platform (Liu, Jin, & Shen, 2019; Aondover, Ebele, Onyejelem & Akin-Odukoya, 2024).

On the African continent one of the most prominent fact-checking initiatives is the Africa Check, a non-profit organisation devoted to exposing rumour across the continent. Another such initiative on the continent is PesaCheck, which fact checks statements by public officials, especially on budgets and public finance (Pachico, 2017). The International Centre for Investigative Reporting, and Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) based in Nigeria also joined the movement to propel the act of fact-checking in Nigeria. PTCIJ launched two fact-checking websites "DUBAWA and UDEME" … meant to provide accurate information to people, fact-check publicly available information, and generally deepen the democratic space (Abdullaji, 2020).

Using Social Media for Rumour Governance in Nigeria

The popularity and the widespread of social network have necessitated users to immediately exchange information using mobile phone devices to access news report and share ideas through social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). However, the negative side of the online information behaviour has also generated arguments among communication scholars with a consensus that the bad side of it should not be neglected. As a result of exaggerated, incorrect, and lack of control, distorted information can be circulated using these networks. The publicized confirmations of rumour information as manifested on social media within Nigerian context have evidence base in the existing literature (Msughter et al., 2022).

For instance, the clone story of President Buhari's ill health has wide scale speculations, which hit the digital space in the wake of the president's frequent medical trips to the UK that he was dead and his look-alike. The rumour of one Jubrin Aminu from Sudan on the account that he had undergone a plastic surgery at the instance of the Aso-Rock cabal to impersonate Buhari has a wide spread on social media. The speculation became rife following the president's prolonged stay on one of such trips that lasted for over a hundred days. According to Akinwotu in Targema, Lawrence, and Nesssi (2023), Agence France-Presse (AFP's) fact-check indicates that the speculation has no factual base; notwithstanding, it continues to spread on the digital platforms, particularly, social media sites like WhatsApp, Facebook Twitter, and among others. Major progenitors of this narrative were Nnamdi Kanu—leader of the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB, a separatist group from the south eastern part of the country predominantly of the Igbo nationality clamouring for independence from Nigeria), a former aide to President Goodluck Jonathan Mr. Reno Omokri, a former Minister of Aviation under President Olusegun Obasanjo Mr. Femi Fani Kayode, and the former governor of Ekiti State, Mr. Ayodele Fayose among other

prominent voices critical of President Buhari's administration that collectively attracted a pool of believers to the conspiracy (Targema et al., 2023).

The realities of the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua death were on a vegetation machine in Saudi Arabia for about three months, a situation that caused a serious constitutional crisis and resulted in the swearing in of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as Acting President was among the reasons that promoted the wide spread of rumour concerning Buhari's death on social media. Targema et al. (2023) observed that Yar'Adua's return to Nigeria in coma and eventual death soon afterwards build impressions in Nigerians on how far leaders could hold on to power even at the expense of their health. Closely related to this development was the fear of abrupt power shift to the southern part of the country in the unlikely event of president Buhari's demise. Conspiracy theorists held that the north that had suffered that after Yar'Addua's demise was not ready to allow for abrupt power shift to the south, a development that would further disrupt the APC (the ruling party) power plan (Chen & Guestrin, 2016). These realities surrounding the issue were creatively explored by progenitors to aggressively sell the rhetoric of Buhari's double-body to Nigerians, and indeed, it went a long way in getting more people give in to the narrative.

According to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), social media have served as a platform for narrative and the spread of rumour governance as posts by the progenitors attracted multiple re-tweets and shares on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc. Similarly, the wide spread of these conspiracies was served in end-to-end encrypted chat platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram among others. In the final analysis, therefore, it is evident in the existing literature; according to Targema et al. (2023), a combination of political and economic motives was a major driving force in the perpetuation of President Buhari's double-body narrative that gained serious popularity on the digital space. It must be emphasised that the saga intensified in the build-up to the 2019 general elections with the president's health one of the topmost arguments that critics and opposition politicians advanced to discredit the candidacy of the president before the electorate. This scenario lays a good background for illustrating how effective the fake news-digital media synergy plays out within the Nigerian socio-political setting (Aondover, Igwe, Akin-Odukoya & Ridwan, 2024).

The preceding evidence clearly shows the manifestation of social media usage for rumour governance in Nigeria. This also underscores the realities of fake news on social media for in this digital era. The malicious motives or the intentions of such rumour can be considered dangerous for a healthy democracy all over the world. In addition, the speculation of rumour on social media has an implication for the proper functioning of a democratic society. Such rumours tend to destroy long standing relationship and create hatred among individuals, which in turn slow down the development of a country. The role of the media to fact-check such rumours for credibility and believability is significant and relevant in this digital era.

Conclusion

This study examines social media use for rumour governance in Nigeria. Consequently, this study provides the basis to interrogate the manifestation of rumour governance within the context of Nigeria and highlight the concerns it poses. The study concludes that mitigating the scourge within the Nigerian context requires a careful implementation of the various strategies documented in the literature, conscious of their various strengths and limitations in context. On the whole, the study demonstrates that although rumour governance is a global phenomenon, geo-specific and contextual factors are critical towards understanding its manifestation, and have a lot to do with its effective mitigation.

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