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The Nigerian Alternative Online Media and Political Misinformation: News producers' perspective on the defining characteristics, tensions and mitigation strategies.

MSc Media and Communications

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media as an effective tool for political discourse with the intent to influence governance despite claims that the form of media is awash with political misinformation - which is mostly termed “fake news” in the local parlance. This thesis takes an *Afrikology* stance in defining the role of the Nigerian alternative online media as a digital public sphere placing the people’s lived and cultural experiences at the centre of the discourse from the content producer’s perspective.

The research used qualitative interviews for the data collection taking a purposive sampling in recruiting elite content producers. The content producer’s perspective is instrumental to give vital information about the news-making process of the Nigerian alternative online media platforms in a bid to find out how their platforms have been mitigating the spread of misleading political information prominent in the digital space. Likewise, the research also normatively discusses the types and levels of political misinformation in Nigeria opening up a professional understanding beyond the general use of “fake news”.

The result of the investigation shows that the Nigerian alternative online media has evolved beyond mere resistance to the government or as an alternative to the mainstream but as an integral component in sustaining and deepening the country’s democracy. Likewise, the influx of the platform's publishing news in the country’s digital space due to the open access occasioned by the internet has contributed to increased tension in the private and public sphere that has contributed to the spread of political misinformation. In mitigating this political misinformation, the interviewees highlight their efforts in combating this menace and also sue for a collective effort from all actors by placing the public interest at the centre of their decisions.

Key words: Afrikology, Nigerian Alternative Online Media, Political Misinformation, News Production Studies, African Digital Journalism, Fake News, Nigerian digital public sphere.

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Introduction

The Brexit and the 2020 presidential election in the USA were marred with accusations and counter-accusations of circulating misleading news in the alternative online media with the intent to create unrest (Walsh, 2021). In the USA, false information has become a looming threat to the country's democracy (Lee and Hosam, 2020). During the USA November 2016 election, misleading information in the media became a center of attention as it was a political tool to change public opinion and dictate political actions in the build up to the election and after the election (Lee and Hosam, 2020). The invasion of the US capitol on the January 6, 2021 was linked to the spread of misleading information by supporters of Donald Trump and affirms how the online menace is effective in brewing an offline breakdown of law and order (Argentino, 2021). The spread of misleading information is a global menace, with every country or part of the world having a share in the threat posed by media actors in the mainstream and non-mainstream media. Africa is having to deal with the growing influence of the alternative online media in the continent, there are rising cases of misleading information that are politically influenced (Tully et. al 2021; Anyim, 2021; Arquob et. al., 2020).

In Nigeria, it has become increasingly difficult for the Nigerian government to deal with the threats posed by politically motivated misleading information largely due to the increasing numbers of social media users (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In addition to the growing internet users, the public service is perceived as weak and partisan since it is funded by the government (Obuya, 2021), while the private mainstream news outlets are believed to be given stringent measures by the government through the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Thus, weakening their role as gatekeepers of the country's democracy. The citizens have found solace in the alternative online media as they pose opposing views to the government's activities (Andersen et. al, 2021) and a safe haven to contribute to political discourse (Harcup, 2005).

While the alternative online media functions effectively as a contributing factor to the Nigeria democracy, it has been marred with accusations of being a tool of propagating falsehood and spreading information that can spark unrest (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). This accusation by the government was the justification presented during the shut out of the microblogging platform *Twitter* in the country's internet space between 5th June 2021 to 13th January, 2022 (Anyim, 2021). This kind of shut out infringes the role of the internet as a digital public sphere as a mediator between the government and the governed (Papacharissi, 2009).

There have been limited scholarly articles that have invested time to investigate the characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media. As such, understanding the alternative online media seems the first step in detailing the kind of political misinformation peculiar to it before highlighting workable mitigation strategies. Hence, this thesis aims to bridge the gap by contributing scholarly discussion from the content producers' perspective in highlighting the defining characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media, detailing the tensions posed by politically influenced misleading information and proffering mitigation strategies.

In detailing a societal issue like political misinformation it is better treated from the contextual lens (Mare et al., 2019). As such, this study adopts the *Afrikology* heuristic tool in placing African lived experiences at the center of the research while discussing the multifaceted problems of politically motivated misleading information in Nigeria (Mano and Milton, 2020).

This thesis investigates the role of the Nigerian alternative online media as a digital public sphere, paying attention to its defining characteristics, exploring the evident tensions, and examining workable solutions in mitigating the spread of false information from the media producers' perspective. The thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media?
2. How do the Nigerian alternative online media mitigate political misinformation in their news production process?
3. What are the tensions in the private and public spheres in mitigating political misinformation in Nigeria and how can the tensions be resolved?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Historical Background of the Nigerian Media

Situating the alternative news media within the Nigerian context will offer an in-depth understanding of the case under review. Journalism is context specific and the Nigerian alternative news media is not an exception. Several scholars have argued that the British missionaries have a huge influence on the kind of journalism practised in Nigeria (Ogbondah, 1990; Omu, 1974). While subscribing to their argument as the first set of newspaper publishers were British and the journalists who took over the reins were trained in the UK and the USA, it is imperative to mention that there is a poetic form of journalism that was practiced in Africa prior to the advent of the British missionaries (Mano, 2007) and is still evident in the style of digital journalism practiced on the African continent.

Scholars have argued that there is a need to have an historical knowledge of the Nigerian media in order to make sense of the dynamics, strengths, and weaknesses of the news production of the country's alternative news media (Cheruiyot et. al. 2021; Kperogi, 2020; Pate and Ibrahim, 2019:92). The early Nigerian newspapers, radio and television stations of the 1920s to 1950s were formidable tools used by the country's nationalists to pressurise the British colonial authorities for self governance which was achieved by October 1st 1960 (Bourne, 2018:164; Akinfemisoye 2013:8). There were constant issues of press friction between the British colonial authorities and regionally controlled media houses in Nigeria prior to the independence (Bourne, 2018:165). Newell (2013) noted that the newspapers during this period acted like "parallel government" (p.41). In a bid to counter the narrative of the nationalists, the British colonial administration sponsored indigenous persons to set up newspapers which were used to dispel some of the allegations levelled against them (Kperogi, 2020). When this measure did not work, the British colonialists withdrew advertisement patronage and passed some laws to criminalise publications perceived to embarrass their government (Kperogi, 2020).

After the independence, the Nigerian media metamorphosed from the anti-colonial struggle to pursuing stories against the maladministration of both the civilian and military governments, with the government striving hard to keep a footing by keeping the journalists at check with the Nigerian Broadcasting Ordinance of 1963 and the Newspaper Amendment Act of 1964

(Newell 2013:166). The Nigerian press since inception had been a tool for political struggle between the government and the governed due to the perceived level of misrule by the masses. Shortly after the independence, there was a military takeover in 1966, the regime was strict on what was allowed to filter in the press. The military regime propagated the Newspaper Decree 17, that gave enormous power to the government to ban the circulation of newspapers perceived to ridicule the government and the decree also mandated the newspaper publishers to submit their publications for vetting by the government (Kperogi, 2020). During the military regimes between 1975 to 1999, journalists faced torrid times as many media actors left the country on exiles, some were killed while the lucky ones were incarcerated in gaols across the country. Their major offence was being accused of publishing stories against the interest of the state.

The era that preceded the digital age in Nigeria journalism was the period after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. The 1993 election, won by the publisher of *Concord Newspaper* Chief Moshood Abiola, was adjudged the free and fairest election conducted in the country. The annulment led to a discontented media which birthed a style of journalism labelled the “guerilla journalism” by scholars and media actors during this period (Kperogi, 2020). Olukotun (2002) defined guerilla journalism as “a hit and run style” (p. 317) where journalists were publishing stories in hideouts to challenge the military administration while advocating for democracy. The country returned to a democratic government in 1999, and the owners of the major television stations, radio stations, newspapers and the underground journalists became part of the new democratic government. Some were elected as governors and some got political appointments due to the role they played in returning the country to a democratic system of government.

With the main actors in the Nigerian mainstream media part of the new government, the traditional nature of the press as the “people’s mouthpiece” (Olukotun, 2002: 318) was suppressed paving way for an agitating alternative media which was interested in exposing the corrupt practices of the government officials (Kperogi, 2020). The earliest form of these media in Nigeria, like *Sahara Reporters*, took up the guerilla journalism style and were operating outside the shores of the country (Kperogi, 2020). According to the publisher of *Sahara Reporters*, the online news outfit was founded to expose the corrupt activities of the democratic government and report the high handling of the government officials while releasing news that the mainstream news outfits were scared to publish (ibid). Due to the success of the pioneer online news platforms like *Sahara Reporters* and the increased access to the internet in Nigeria

with the availability of smartphones, the last ten years have seen a huge rise in demand for online news as the audience is yearning for news and updates on political situations on the move.

Afrikology

Media and communication are vital aspects of society as they cover the economy, politics, institutions, and societal structures that are enshrined in the corridors of power (Mano and Milton, 2021). Afrikology, or African media, is the research field produced by African scholars and Africanists about media and communication in Africa (Mutua et al., 2022). Over the years, there has been an exponential growth in media scholarship by writers in the West. This has stirred a revolution and questions surrounding African media scholarship (Mano and Milton, 2021; Gondwe, 2022). As a result, writers such as Gondwe have advocated for knowledge and epistemological compatibility between indigenous African (media) scholars and western African (media) scholars (Gondwe, 2022; Mano and Milton, 2021). Afrikology encapsulates the different approaches used to convey African knowledge in the media space, how they engage the digital space and, in the same breath, change the existing narrative painted by the west (Mutua et al., 2022; Mano and Milton, 2021).

Afrikology has its roots in Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa, where communication studies were infused into the education system in Africa. The discipline was designed to debunk the dominance of western theories and perspectives propounded by western scholars to explain communicative methods in Africa (Mutua et al., 2022). In recent years, Africa has been developing a new communication ecosystem as a function of evolving technology, which is having an undeniable effect on the African communication discourse (Langmia, 2018). However, as the number of African media scholars grows exponentially, there is a need for a shift from theory-building to a multicultural approach (Gondwe, 2022).

Furthermore, proponents like Mano and Milton assert that African media and communication seem a bit vague as the concepts are not sufficiently represented in the media and communication discourse (Mano and Milton, 2021). It is worthy of note to know that contemporary Africans are influenced by colonialism (Gondwe, 2022), but have refused to be defined by colonialism (Mutua et al., 2022). Many studies have shown that African journalists are often gagged by government authorities, and in recent years, journalism in Africa has been infiltrated with misinformation, which are mostly called “fake news” drawing inference from

Donald Trump's use of the term (Gondwe, 2022). This research, taking the *Afrikology* stance will give new insights about the Nigerian alternative online media in attempt to detach it from the appendages or set rules of the global North by placing the people's experiences and the content producer's thought at the center of the inquiry. While the thesis will contribute to literature of *Afrikology* it intends to awaken African scholars on the need to project valuable African knowledge within the field of Media and Communications that are true representation of the people's experience and looking inwards within the system to provide workable solution to problems that may be inherent.

The Alternative Media

In relation to the present alternative online media practised in Nigeria, it is beneficial to chronicle what existed prior to the advent of the internet. Having a grasp of the concept will set the pace for why it is context specific and justifies why taking an *Afrikology* stance is decisive. The alternative media is not a new phenomenon (Atton, 2002; Atton 2003; Downing, 2001; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021), it is perceived as "a radical challenge to the institutionalised practices in the mainstream media" (Atton 2003:p. 267). In an earlier body of work, Atton noted that alternative media is mostly non-profit and it is more rooted in its ability to advocate for social change (Atton, 2002:11). Likewise, Couldry and Curran (2003) define alternative media as media productions that challenge the power concentration of the mainstream with the intent of achieving "wider social emancipation" (p.7). This adds to the justification why this study is investigating the Nigerian alternative online media from its political participation values.

Harcup (2005) notes there is no generalised definition for alternative media. The scholar adds that most alternative media practitioners see their kind of journalism as "a political activity, a perspective that appears to be far from the norm among journalists in the wider industry" (p. 362). Harcup (2005) employs a qualitative research approach to ask journalists in their words for the definition of alternative media and one of the respondents defines it as "a voice for otherwise disenfranchised groups in the society" (p. 363). This definition is quick to develop the activist role of the alternative media as a voice for the people, which is similar to the "guerrilla journalism" in Nigeria prior to the country's return to democratic government.

Bailey et. al (2007) in the book *Understanding Alternative Media*, take a sharp deviation from the definitions of alternative media as a “radical media” (Atton, 2003; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Harcup, 2005). The scholars advocate for a shift in discussing the phenomena within its radical tendencies by paying attention to the mediated features of the alternative media. They believe that the alternative media is the form of media that is different from the mainstream in ways the contents are produced, circulated as well as the ability “to voice ideas which are important and distinctive in their own right” (p. xii). They further argue that alternative media due to the advent of the internet is a tool that gives the majority of the citizens a voice against the backdrop of the monopolised mainstream media and is viable in exercising of citizenship and the promotion of the people’s civic culture (Bailey et. al. 2007: xiii).

With the advent of the internet, the conversations around alternative media keep ongoing as there are various attempts to conceptualise it and frame it within the content they produce and the role they serve within the field of media and communications. Lievrouw (2011) argues that the access to the internet has allowed social groups to create a community that is used to “present alternative or marginal views” (p. 2) in their quest for “social, political or cultural change” (p.3). In keeping up with fast pace of the evolvment, Lievrouw (2011) dwelling on an earlier research (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002, 2006) made a case for “new media” as information and communication technologies within their social context that comprises of three main components “artifacts”, “practices” and “arrangements” (p.7). The “artifacts” are the gadgets like mobile phones used for communications, while “practices” are the activities ongoing as people make use of the gadgets (artifacts) and the “arrangements” are the community created around the artifacts and practices (p.7).

McDowell-Naylor et. al 2021 argue that with the advent of social media which has given so much freedom to the people to express themselves has led to a new form of alternative media that is exceeding the level of influence wielded by the mainstream (p.169). The scholars term this new form of media “Alternative Online Political Media”. The scholars added that the distinctive features of the AOPM is the self identification as an alternative media to mainstream media and having a “strong political editorialisation of news and comments” (p.169) with their medium of content circulation on “websites and social media” (p. 169). The scholars while drawing the example of the Finnish ‘counter media’ note that the growing influence of the AOPM can be attributed to the level of mistrust in the mainstream media (170). The scholars identify that the major challenge of the AOPM is how fact-checkers, mainstream journalists

and content producers are quick to label them as purveyors of misinformation and they suggest that before linking AOPM to misinformation there should be enough evidence (170).

Holt et. al (2019) while reviewing the previous scholarly works on alternative media agree with other scholars that the generally accepted distinctive feature of the alternative media is an opposition to the mainstream media and their work includes that the digital space contributed immensely to the increased number of actors (p. 861). The scholars highlight the discrepancy in the alternative media and the mainstream media by drawing on previous works that possibly term alternative media as a purer form of media, which was not set up for profit (ibid: 861). The scholars who are the first to conceptualize “alternative news media” give this definition:

Alternative news media represent a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system. This stated “alternativeness” can emerge on and should be studied on multiple different levels: Alternative news media can publish different voices (alternative content creators) trying to influence public opinion according to an agenda that is perceived by their promoters and/or audiences as underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media, alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events (alternative news content), rely on alternative publishing routines via alternative media organizations and/or through channels outside and unsupported by the major networks and newspapers in an alternative media system. (p. 862).

This definition by Holt et. al (2019) gives a relational approach and the meaning of alternative news media can differ based on perspectives and contexts. They argue that the correctness of the counter-hegemonic nature of alternative news media can be validated from up to three perspectives namely the “content producers perspective”, “audience perspective” and the “third party’s perspective (competitors or government)” (Holt et. al., 2019: 863). The multilevel approach validates the importance of researching “macro-level perspectives” and “different contextual lenses (ibid: 866). Likewise, Mare et. al. (2019) argue that misinformation in the digital space especially in sub-saharan Africa cannot be understood without placing close attention to the context as it gives “forms and shape to the recurring challenge of fake news” (p. 2).

From the scholarly works reviewed in situating the meaning of alternative media, it is obvious that the definition of alternative media is not fixed and most times context specific. This study will take a normative approach in defining the *Nigerian Alternative Online Media* relying on

the data from the open-ended interviews with content producers in the country. Kperogi (2020) backs this context position, noting that “what constitutes progressive, emancipatory political agenda varies from country to country” (p. 17). The scholar talks about the peculiarities of the Nigerian alternative media drawing mainly from the diasporic Nigerians operating online news websites outside the shores of the countries (Kperogi 2020, 2011). The researcher uses a mixed-method approach to inquire about the features of the alternative media from the angle of the diasporic practitioners leaving out the experience of alternative news outlets living and operating in Nigeria. Noticing the gap in Kperogi (2020, 2011), and the changes in trends as the content production functions and roles are not static. This research adopts qualitative open-ended interviews with editorial members of seven different prominent alternative online media outlets residing in Nigeria to situate the characteristics of the alternative online media in Nigeria paying attention to its roles in making a digital public sphere (Habermas, 1974) and also identifying misinformation as a major challenge, hereby proffering solutions from the “content producers perspective” (Holt et. al., 2019: 863).

Digital Public Sphere

The internet provides a free form of expression and several scholars believe the opportunity it presents for political engagement complement Habermas’ notion of the public sphere (Schäfer, 2015). In a bid to have a grasp of the concept of the digital public sphere, we have to make recourse to Habermas’ discussions about the public sphere. Habermas posits that the “public sphere” is a free space where citizens can discuss issues related to their own welfare without any form of restriction (Habermas, 1974). The public sphere from when it first appeared in social discussion has seen several transformations due to modern democracies and private influence on the mass media (Schäfer, 2015). The online community brings to fore a break from the norm, an alternative online sphere where everyone can have their voices heard, replacing the role of the traditional journalist’s gatekeeping barrier, empowering the masses to have a user to user engagement with political office holders without the interference of the traditional media, in influencing political decisions (ibid, 2015).

The digital public sphere keeps generating scholarly attention on what necessarily makes the internet space a public sphere, Papacharissi (2009) argues that conceptually the public sphere is different from public opinion as it is “a sphere that mediates between society and state” (p. 5) while challenging “the public agenda” (p.9) in enhancing democratic practices. Papacharissi

(2009) adds that due to the transnational nature of the internet, it is best discussed within its “local, regional or national public spheres over a global public sphere” (p.9). Obadare (2016) notes that the public sphere in Africa is quite different with the trauma of a repressive military era that went on for decades on the African continent and the citizens trying to stamp their feet in the emerging democracy. Hence, this study is integral to defining the Nigerian alternative online media in line with its public sphere tendencies within the people’s lived experiences (Mare et al., 2019).

However, Fuchs (2014) argues that the digital media is controlled by political and economic interest thereby creating tensions instead of being an avenue to discuss pressing democratic issues. The political economy of the digital media is perceived to create an adverse effect in cementing the new media as a viable public sphere. While agreeing with Fuchs on the importance of having a digital media devoid of political or economic interest, this is not enough to disregard the effective democratic interventions the common citizens have been able to use the alternative online media to achieve majorly in Africa. The public sphere is not without its tensions - political influences, and commercial control, it can help in “critiquing and contextualizing the political role of online media, but not in prescribing that role” (p. 24).

Similarly, Nielsen (2016) notes that due to the affordability of the digital media in making the cost of new production lesser unlike the mainstream there is “an intense direct competition with other media for consumer attention” (p. 58). Hereby adds to the tension within the digital public sphere as the alternative online media compete for audience attention in exchange for money from advertisers (ibid) in their quest for survival as against serving the public interest.

Political Participation and Alternative Online Media

According to Leung (2015), alternative online media is designed to alter every impediment enveloped by economic, political, and social ideology regulating the mainstream media in order to give a voice to the voiceless (Leung, 2015). Alternative online media is considered a ‘safe haven’ for citizens who are inhibited from expressing their views in the mainstream media (Leung, 2015; Harcup, 2015). In Leung’s work, he asserts that alternative online media is a harbour for agitators who have been ostracised from the mainstream media. Leung’s narrative captures the media situation in Hong Kong, where the media has been gagged from 2004-2014, and the aftermath has been the emergence of internet radio (Leung, 2015).

In this context, alternative online media has become a tool used to highlight political and democratic deficits (Leung, 2015; Harcup, 2015). However, if the concept of alternative online media encompasses active citizenship, civic engagement, and democratic practices (Harcup, 2015), then paying attention to such voices and movements is important (Leung, 2015). In retrospect, alternative online media is considered a journalistic movement by a small group of people without elite ties, unethical in conduct, with a biased reporting style, poorly funded, and founded outside the structures of commercial media (Sandberg and Ihlebæk, 2019). Conversely, in Hong Kong, alternative online media has been linked to some elite citizens in society who were politicians and top television broadcasters (Leung, 2015). It is pertinent to note that the concept of alternative online media has been met with controversies. Alternative online media is often considered a self-contradictory term, in the sense that it is an alternative or afterthought to something else, but in this case, an afterthought of the mainstream media (Rauch, 2014).

Despite its shortcomings, alternative online media is still useful because it allows audiences to have their imprint and perspectives on media production (Rauch, 2014). The alternative online media challenges the hegemony of the mainstream media and tackles the ills of the authorities, unlike the mainstream, which defends the government and is often self-censored to avert the wrath of the authorities (Kwong, 2015). The audience of the mainstream media is often those who are not comfortable with the information the alternative online media produces, while the alternative online media audience is made up of people who do not trust the mainstream media (Kwong, 2015 ; Dare, 2011). Alternative online media is oftentimes categorised along with its 'citizens' media' tendencies, for it is believed that it represents the masses more than the conventional media (Leung, 2015 ; Kwong, 2015 ; Dare, 2011). Alternative online media has become the channel for investigative journalism to thrive, especially in third world countries like Nigeria, where the mainstream media is heavily gagged and censored by the government. Top-secret information is often diffused through the platforms of alternative online media (Dare, 2011).

Alternative online media has exposed the ugly deeds of government officials and powerful citizens, and has brought about change and justice for those who need it. Hong Kong, Nigeria, and Britain have witnessed distinct changes propagated by the alternative media (Leung, 2015 ; Rauch, 2014; Kwong, 2015 ; Dare, 2011). The writers contributed greatly to this field of knowledge. Having used qualitative and quantitative methodology tentatively by most of the

writers, it is important to know that the writers concentrated on the information from the audience, texts, and the internet, while the frontliners (alternative media publishers, writers, producers, and editors) were not appropriately featured. This research is geared toward covering this visible gap in the literature of alternative online media.

Political Misinformation

Circulation of false information has been part of the African ecosystem owing to the fact that African history has been shaded with distorted truth (Wasserman, 2020) and it is not exclusively limited to the online medium (Mare, et. al, 2019). Likewise, politicians do make unrealistic promises during election campaigns, and there have been rumours circulated to discredit other candidates but the level of false information in circulation in the present digital age is unprecedented (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). There have been complexities in defining the various types of misleading information in the digital space. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) categorised the information disorder into three; namely misinformation, dis-information and mal-information. Misinformation is defined as “when false information is shared, but no harm is meant”, dis-information as “when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm” and mal-information as “when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Within the African context, all the three categories are intertwined and mostly seen as “fake news” mostly by the layman and in most cases given different meanings.

Mare et. al (2019) argues that “Western-centric conceptions cannot be taken as the sole point of departure when unpacking and conceptualising social experiences across the globe” (p.7) but a need to take into cognisance “socio-political and cultural factors at play” (7-8). Fake news seems the most popular usage within the African context and Mare et. al., (2019) define fake news as:

the deliberate production and sharing of misleading and false information with the sole purpose of intentionally gaining political, economic and ideological points. (p. 4).

While relying on the categorizations and definitions highlighted above as an entry point, the study will look inwards from the lenses of the content producers and media professionals in situating how “fake news” is used in the Nigerian context. No matter the definition or meaning

ascribed to the political information disorder there is a meeting for the need to sieve factuality from falsehood.

Mitigating Political Misinformation

Chambers (2021) argues for “structural, regulatory and ethical responses” (p. 160) in the pursuit of accuracy against the huge threats posed by political misinformation. Dwelling on the works of Jürgen Habermas, and Bernard Williams in line with a discursive democracy, Chamber (2021) concludes that a collective effort is integral in the response against the menace:

“A full and adequate response would require that owners, users, designers, and regulators of social media embrace and recognize the fact that, even if this is not how social media were originally envisioned, they now have a political democratic function in the public sphere” (p. 160-161).

Looking at the collective efforts proposed by Chambers (2021), content producers' role is at the center of the discussion as there are a decline in gatekeeping and fact verification functions due to the alarming rate of “unverified and misleading information competing for audience” (Mare, et. al., 2019:160). Reich and Barnoy (2016) notes that digital journalism is about “series of productive action” which has span beyond the first publication as “post hoc corrections and follow-ups” are part of the production process (p.479). The news production process is a vital entry point into the discussion on mitigating political misinformation for content producers in digital journalism. With the question in mind, do journalists practising in the digital sphere verify claims? If they do, why do we still have reputable platforms publishing misleading political information? Borden and Tew (2007), in answering these questions, believe the high rate of false political information in the digital era has necessitated the need to revisit the journalists' ethics and review same in the wake of the present realities. The scholars call for “epistemological standards” and “moral commitments” in journalists' discharge of their duties (ibid, 2007:303).

The concept of “discursive ethics” (Ward, 2016: 70) is helpful to understand the discussion around the review of media ethics in the digital age. Ward (2016) argues that digital media has opened up a new discussion around the ethics of journalism. The scholar feels “ethics should be discursive” and there is a need to hold conversations with practitioners in “dealing with new

conditions and new issues” (p. 71) in a digital time. Nothing that there should be a room for ethical practices but such practices “should not make beliefs immune from revision and impervious to discourse” (ibid, 2016:71). Ward also believes the new model of practice should transcend borders and takes into consideration “the importance of stories in other cultures and nations” (p.72). This takes us to some of the discussions around ethical practices with media content producers in the course of the research with the respondents in the mitigation of political misinformation in the Nigerian public sphere.

Likewise, as part of the ‘collective role’ (Chambers, 2021) media literacy is another discussion amongst scholars that is perceived to be essential in mitigating political misinformation (Jones-Jang et. al. 2021; Adjin-Tetteh, 2022). Jones-Jang et. al. (2021) employ a quantitative audience survey to find out if the audience’s media literacy can be an effective tool in mitigating the spread of information. The scholars use an online survey to reach a conclusion that information literacy helps in the identification of fake information on the internet. The scholars define information literacy as “peoples’ abilities to navigate and find information online that is verified and reliable” (p. 382). Similarly, Adjin-Tetteh (2022) adopts an experimental research approach to conduct a study for undergraduate students in Ghana using online questionnaires to find out how Media and Information Literacy (MIL) can be a catalyst for identifying misleading information on social media. Jones-Jang et. al (2021) and Adjin-Tetteh (2022) research have their limitations as they were not able to address how identifying false information through media literacy has led to the reduction in the spread.

Social media platforms make it easier for misleading information to circulate (Chambers, 2021) and as such the owners of the platforms are critical stakeholders in the discussion of stopping the spread (Clayton et. al, 2019). Adam Mosseri, Head of Instagram, in a release on the Meta website (formerly Facebook) notes that the spread of misinformation is a threat to the society and highlighted the position of Meta to stop the spread of false information by taking three vital steps of “disrupting the economic incentives”, “building new products” and “helping people to make more informed decisions” (Mosseri, 2017). Farooqi and Shafiq (2019) in a 16 month study of 1.5billion tweets on Twitter found out that the platform is struggling to keep up with robotic accounts spreading spam, malware and other harmful links or information. Following feedback from Twitter users to step up on their approach to tackle misleading information, Twitter added a label to tweets perceived to be harmful and also reduced the visibility of such tweets (Roth and Achuthan, 2020). With Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

being the major social media platforms used to circulate news producer's content in the Nigerian online space, the research will look at their collaborative role with content producers and see if the policies used in mitigating the spread of misleading information are efficient within the Nigerian digital public sphere as they are in the countries in the Global North.

News Production Studies

Schudson, (1989) argues that the news production is not a mere selection by the editors or journalists, but it is socially constructed and as such decisions within the newsroom along editorial is influenced by “political economy”, “occupational ideology” and “anthropological approach” (p. 266). According to Schudson, 1989 these three entry points are vital mode of investigating editorial positions in the contents they publish.

The news and media are big on shaping narratives and there is a consensus that media is integral to all sectors (Klinenberg, 2005) including political communications. It is quite important for researchers not to guess about new producers “strategies, practices and interests” (ibid: 49) that shape their news production but take the bold steps in investigating what is ongoing in the newsrooms. Researching within this field using qualitative interviews with the content producers is an important entry point to those who have “direct power and the production of content” in the digital public sphere (Bruun, 2016:133).

There is less research on the online news production due to the affordance of the internet as the traditional newsrooms are disappearing and journalists are working from different locations (Ryfe, 2016). This research is valid as it will put out some general assumptions about the Nigerian alternative online media as the content producers sampled for the research will set some of the records straight from their own experience as ‘elite informants’ (Bruun, 2016:133) and also contribute to discussion on online news production studies from the Nigerian context.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodological Approach

This study takes an *Afikology* stance in situating the distinct features of the Nigerian alternative online media as a viable digital public sphere. Identifying the tensions within the sphere and investigating possible ways to mitigate the spread of political misinformation through semi-structured qualitative news production interviews. A qualitative interview approach affords a rich explanation of events (Bryne, 2018). This thesis while taking a case study approach provides knowledge about events that are “concrete, practical and context-dependent” (Flyvbjerg, 2001:70) to the Nigerian situation. The choice of a qualitative approach enables deeper meanings, varieties of answers, concrete examples in dissecting the societal values around news production in the Nigerian context (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The research did not examine how the Nigerian case is interested in understanding the wider or global phenomenon of political misinformation as proposed by Flyvberg (2001) but how *Akfrikology* approach is used in researching the Nigerian alternative online media within the people’s lived experiences, beyond relying on the guidelines or provisions of the Global North.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis and Coding Process

The study was initially designed to investigate both producers and audiences' perspectives but due to the time constraint for the research, I decided to concentrate on the news production research due to their in-depth knowledge of the content producers about the subject matter of discourse in the thesis.

The research was set rolling by designing the interview guide to normatively discuss the alternative online media in the Nigerian context - paying attention to the defining characteristics, occupational and organisational routines in *news production* (Schudson, 1989) and the *audience feedback engagement* in the Nigerian alternative online media. The interviews were transcribed manually and listened to on three different occasions to enable proper understanding and immersion with the data. The coding of data was done on Nvivo using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) relying on deductive and inductive approaches in generating the themes.

Thematic analysis enables finding common patterns and meanings within the data set around the participants' experience as media producers (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Likewise, the choice of thematic analysis was not far fetched as it enables a nuanced “collective or shared meaning and experiences” (ibid: 57).

In the process of starting out with the coding on Nvivo, what came to my mind is how best to organise my codes (Kuckartz, 2014). So I developed a strategy to have a folder in the Nodes named “Initial Codes” to include all the codes generated during the first stage of coding. Moving to the stage of making choices on my initial codes in relation to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012), I moved all the codes in the “Initial Codes” folder to a new folder in the Nodes section named “Analytical Coding”. The “Analytical Coding” folder served as the working tool for my development of themes and renaming codes for clarity. I was able to delete some codes which are not related to the research questions, and also combine codes that were quite similar at the refining stage.

Since the interviews were not conducted once, the later interviews were conducted to fill in the gaps noticeable and unpack new themes emerging from the earlier interviews (Rivas, 2018). I used a recursive process entailing a back and forth around the data set throughout the project enabling emerging themes from the participants' perspective on *Mitigating Political Misinformation* and the *Public and Private Tensions* in the Nigerian Digital Public Sphere.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to the interview, a consent form was sent to the respondents by email. The consent form was filled out and returned to the researcher. Furthermore, the content of the consent form was also read out before the start of each interview with the researcher for another round of verbal consent.

The respondents were informed that the research will mention their platform in the process of analysis to which they consented. They were also informed that their role within the alternative online media outfit will also be mentioned to draw emphasis and validate the research work. The respondents are known personalities within the Nigerian alternative online media circle as they fall under the category of the elites informant. I decided to leave out their names as having their names for the analysis does not add anything different to the research as what is paramount

to this research is the alternative online media platform they operate and their editorial role within the platform.

During the process of the interviews, I skipped questions that seemed difficult to answer for the respondents if they are unwilling to delve into personal issues or questions that are quite confidential in their news production process. Likewise, in the process of the analysis, I treated responses that are vital to the research questions and left out answers that can spark controversies.

Sampling

Nigeria has over 70 million citizens who are connected to the internet and rely on the same for their news consumption. This has led to an influx of online news websites in the country. The sample of the research was targeted at the elite content producers within the Nigerian digital public sphere for validity and to uphold the quality of the research work (Bruun, 2016). The research adopts a purposive sampling in recruiting elite informants that possesses in depth understanding of the Nigerian alternative online media (Patton, 2002). The sample of the research was limited to media outlets and fact checking journalists operating within the digital sphere. Fact checkers are included in the sampling as they are professionals who “make up the current news environment” (Reich and Barnoy, 2016:484).

The respondents were contacted via direct messages written to their social media accounts. Some of the messages were not responded to and had to speak with other colleagues who facilitated the exchange of phone numbers to set up the meetings. After many months of trying to make contact with some of the elite content producers, the research was successful in talking to content publishers with huge influence, who are big on shaping discussions in the Nigerian digital public sphere (Bruun, 2016). Likewise, the respondents for the research also include pioneer fact checkers who have devoted their time to the reduction in the spread of misinformation in Nigeria. Seven interviews were conducted in total and five of them were face-to-face interviews. The other two opted for Zoom meetings due to their tight schedules in setting up the physical meetings as the online meeting was more convenient for them. The five face to face interviews were conducted in different locations in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria between 14th January to 30th March 2022, the participants are:

Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*. *Sahara Reporters* a foremost online news platform birthed in 2006 and boasts of reaching over 15 million Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. *Sahara Reporters* encourages citizen journalism and is big on reporting breaking stories of the high handling of the Nigerian government officials.

The Editor and Head Fact Check Desk at *The Cable*. *The Cable* was launched in 2014 and prides itself as one of the most respected online news outlets in the country due to its core editorial values - independence, impartiality, integrity, defence of the public interest and respect for diversity.

The Coordinator *Pen Radio*. *Pen Radio* is an online radio streaming only on the internet. The online radio is owned by the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ). The institute is the foremost training hub for Nigerian journalists with existence since 1971.

Fact-Checking Journalist with AFP Lagos Bureau, Digital Verification Division. This division of AFP has been at the forefront in combating online misinformation in Nigeria, and other West African countries and collaborating with other bureaus in Africa. The arm of AFP is using digital investigation skills in unraveling misinformation around multimedia content online and publishing their results on the AFP blog.

The Managing Editor *Information Nigeria*. *Information Nigeria* is an online news website that prides itself as Nigeria's number one information portal. The brand has been in existence for over five years and is amongst the platforms with a great amount of social media followers. On their official Facebook account, there are over 3.5 million followers.

The Nigeria Editor *Africa Check*. *Africa Check* is a foremost fact checking platform in Africa that was established in 2012. It is a non-partisan and independent fact checking website that has published over one thousand fact checks reports in the online arena and also trained over three thousand journalists on digital verification skills across the continent.

Investigative Journalist with *Premium Times* and Nigeria Editor at *Dubawa*. *Premium Times* was founded in 2011. The news outfit describes its editorial stance on the nation's development and social reengineering through the media. While *Dubawa* (Hausa word for 'to check') is an initiative of *The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID)*. *Dubawa* was

established to check misleading information in the digital public sphere from influential Nigerian personalities.

Researcher's Reflection

The whole data collection process was quite fascinating for me as a researcher and a practising journalist who operates an online magazine platform in Nigeria with experience in practising digital journalism. Despite my knowledge about some of these issues, it was important for me “to assume less and investigate more” (Corner, 2011:87) and follow the conversation religiously to have a grasp of their new production procedures and tap into their experiences in mitigating the spread false political information in the Nigerian digital public sphere.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Characteristics of the Nigerian Alternative Online Media

The Nigerian alternative online media has its distinctive characteristics which are influenced by the people's "lived experiences, social, economic" (Mano and Milton, 2021:3) and political orientations (Mare et. al., 2019). One of the interviewees, carpets the influence of the country's diversity on the kind of news and content produced by the Nigerian alternative online media which makes it distinct from what is practised in the Global North:

Nigeria in itself is diverse in terms of background, religion, our cultural views and political inclination all of these things make us very unique. So when you publish, all of these things shape narratives, it triggers discussions online. (Fact Checker, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau).

Building on the statement above, it is obvious the news produced by the Nigerian alternative online media is an offshoot of the society, laced with its distinctive features to spark debates in the digital public sphere and it is meant to be studied by placing "Africa at the centre" (Mano and Milton, 2021:5).

Holt et. al (2019) note that the alternative media is capable of influencing "public opinion" and an alternative to what existed in the mainstream. The Nigerian alternative online media takes its functions a step above influencing public opinion nor serving as an alternative to the mainstream. It is a viable tool for activating discussions around the excesses of the government and non-government actors with a serious intent of correcting these excesses. Thus conforming with Papacharissi (2009) argument that the internet's role as a public sphere is beyond access to information or the ability to discuss public opinion. Publisher *Sahara Reporters*, one of the front runners of the Nigeria alternative online media, captures the role of the Nigerian alternative online when *Sahara Reporters* was birthed in the early 2000s:

I started thinking about how news can empower people to the point that we can use news to regulate both government and non-governmental outlets and by extension eradicate corruption. (*Publisher, Sahara Reporters*).

The Nigerian alternative online news media role is not limited to being the “webs of resistance” (Kperogi, 2011) to the government but also a tool for effective social, economic and political emancipation (Couldry and Curran, 2003). The multi award winning journalist with *The Cable NG*, affirms that:

We do not just publish stories, there are certain stories that we do that hit the government and in turn make them decide to change a particular policy as it is not serving the public interest. (Fact Check Head *The Cable*)

He details how a news piece published on their online platform was instrumental in changing the government's policy.

Take for example one of our stories we did last year about the Ikoyi Marriage Registry corruption. There were a lot of reactions to the story on social media. People voiced their gloomy experiences at the registry. A few days later there was a reaction from the government and the registry process was revised and due process was enforced at the registry. (Fact Check Head *The Cable*).

The example given above cements the role of the Nigerian alternative online media as an impact-driven digital public sphere which is not necessarily to compete with the mainstream but to leave its positive marks on the polity as an avenue for electorates to be part of the process (Habermas, 1973) by improving “societal communication, and revive the public sphere” (Schäfer, 2015). This position is strengthened by another interviewee, the Coordinator Pen Radio O who adds that “we are not contending with anybody, most of the stories we report are not from the angle of prominence but from the angle of impact”.

Another impressive impact of the Nigerian alternative online media is its role in deepening the country's democracy. The country's alternative online media is giving a voice to the voiceless (Leung, 2015) and the citizens are using the medium to speak up in the face of daunting challenges. The publisher *Sahara Reporters*, harps on the impact of the Nigerian alternative online media:

Nigeria's democracy would have fallen apart ... One party has already bragged that they will be in power for 60 years, but I think it was alternative media driven by penetration and activities that truly democratised the democratic space. (Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

Atton (2003) dwells on radical prowess of the alternative media against the hegemony of the mainstream media, the Nigerian alternative online media conforms to the radical attribute highlighted by Atton (2003) by offering an alternative to the mainstream media in Nigeria and also challenging the dominance of the foreign media in the Nigerian digital space. The Publisher *Sahara Reporters* believes the Nigerian alternative online media "portray Africans as people who are capable of telling our own stories as opposed to waiting for news from New York Times, Reuters, AP or AFP".

Despite the influence and impressive successes recorded by the Nigerian alternative online media, the communicative channels keep evolving and are not without their challenges, especially with funding. Due to the fierce competition for audience attention (Nielsen, 2016) the media outfits operating in the Nigerian digital public sphere rely on advertisers for survival which in turn shape the news at times against the public interest. The poor funding is also linked to the spread of political misinformation (McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021).

Another challenge of the Nigerian alternative online media is the pursuit of virality by news producers and this can also be nailed to the competition for "consumer attention" (Nielsen, 2016:58). In a bid to drive traffic to their websites to service the digital advertisement embedded news producers create misleading headlines to attract the audience. One of the respondents who is a multi award winning journalist with *Premium Times NG* and *Dubawa*, says that many of the news platforms in the Nigerian digital space are "putting out sensational information just for the clicks".

Likewise, another major problem identified in the course of the research to the increasing rate of political misinformation is the news producers' urge to be the first to break the news and this was tied to the neglect of "structural, regulatory and ethical responses" (Chambers, 2021:160). These ethical responses from the mainstream media should be considered by content and news producers alike in making sure factuality is given utmost prominence ahead of being the first in breaking the news:

In the 1970s and the 80s, there was accuracy but nowadays everyone wants to release breaking news...we can potentially set the society on fire. (The Nigerian Editor of Africa Check)

In the quest of actually informing people, they go ahead in misinforming people, this is a problem as it is taking away some of the journalistic processes that ought to have been followed duly. (Fact Checking Journalist, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau)

The problem of political misinformation is a serious cause of concern in the Nigerian digital public sphere (Mare, et. al., 2019) and it entails huge priority as it has led to political apathy in recent times, hereby discouraging people from exercising their civic duty which is detrimental to the country's emerging democracy:

Images of violence lead to political apathy. I can actually attest to that. We have seen that in the recent Ondo (2021) and Anambra (2022) election fact checks . A lot of people had already decided that they were not going to vote, even before the election". (Journalist, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*)

The Coordinator of the *Pen Online Radio*, believes the radical nature of the Nigerian alternative online media is robbing the country of social and economic gains under what he calls "the auspices of telling the truth". He believes the alternative online media is giving a wrong representation of the country "our culture is not full of violence, but they have projected us as if we are full of violence. Secondly, that we have low self esteem and that we are educated illiterate". He therefore raised another question for consideration "What is the Truth?" as he feels the said truth is creating more problems.

Understanding the Political Misinformation in the Nigerian Digital Public Sphere

Mare et. al. (2019) argue that you cannot effectively proffer solutions to the information disorder menace in sub-saharan Africa without a "sophisticated understanding that acknowledges and distinguishes its contextual variations" (p. 8). Having the scholar's position in mind and with the research taking an Afrikology approach (Mano and Milton, 2021) it is

integral to understand the information disorder phenomena from the media professional's perspective.

There are different degrees of false political information in the Nigerian digital public sphere and they highlighted the frequent ones as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and fake news. The most frequent of these degrees is political misinformation. Mare et al., (2019) argue that within the African context it is most caused by "literacy level" and "limited access to crosscheck facts" (p. 6). This is circulated within the digital public sphere due to ignorance and not to create any harm:

I will say that it is the biggest menace in Nigeria if you compare. It's basically just people spreading false information, and they don't know that it's false information and it could harm the public. (Journalist, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*).

Similarly, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau fact checking journalist, adds that "misinformation is when people share content without the intent to hurt you but did not do their due diligence to ascertain the veracity of the claim". While the publisher of *Sahara Reporters*, defines misinformation as "cooking up some stories hoping you believe it".

The media producers interviewed believe political disinformation is motivated by the construction of truth and false (Mare et. al., 2019: 6). The Nigeria Editor for *Africa Check* said that disinformation "has to do with people who convey fabricated information despite knowing that it is false, and the people who received the information refuting its authenticity, taking it back and forth". Closely, the AFP Lagos Digital Bureau fact checking journalist, carpets disinformation in the Nigerian context as the situation "when you know that it (the information) is not accurate and you go ahead to publish it for one reason or the other". Still, within the precinct of constructing truth and false (Mare et. al, 2019), the Editor at *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*, notes that political disinformation is people deliberating spreading falsehood to score political points:

Most of the time, we see that with businesses and with politics (politicians), especially during elections. It's election season now (2022). You will see people putting out false press releases just to tarnish the image of their opponent. (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*)

Fake news is the most common terminology used within the Nigerian digital public sphere to embody all these forms of information disorder discussed above. While Mare et. al. (2019) “acknowledge the complexity of defining “fake news” (p. 4) the scholars define the concept as “the deliberate production and sharing of misleading and false information with the sole purpose of intentionally gaining political, economic and ideological points” (p.4). The managing editor for *Information Nigeria* conforms with Mare et. al. (2019) definition as he categorises all the forms of false information in the Nigerian digital public sphere as fake news, he says “to me I categorise all of them to be fake news”.

The Editor at *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*, while agreeing that the term “fake news” enjoys enormous popularity within the Nigerian digital public sphere, he believes it is better classified differently from political misinformation and disinformation for better understanding of the terminology:

Firstly, it has been misappropriated by politicians, and secondly, it doesn't cover everything that we have within the information disorder ecosystem. We have misinformation in the ecosystem, which can be false information, videos, or other things that are not news in and of themselves. So if you say fake news, it does not cover all that...it has to be true because facts and truth are the basis of journalism. So there is nothing like fake news and real news, but then, the term has gained such wide publicity that sometimes, even I, at public events, say fake news. (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*)

AFP Lagos Digital Bureau fact checking journalist, sheds more light on the misuse of the term “fake news” within the Nigerian context:

Looking at it from the Nigerian context, fake news is a news item published by the media that has some sort of inaccurate information. That is what is perceived as fake news but ideally that is not fake news, that is misinformation or false information, because anything you call news any piece that is newsworthy it has to be accurate from the beginning to the end. (Fact Checker, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau).

He further highlights another dominant usage of “fake news” within the Nigerian digital public sphere whereby politicians use the term to carpet “any information that doesn't suit their

narrative, that doesn't support them or that is against them". He gave a scenario for better understanding:

It is common in Nigeria among government agencies, once there is any news item or report about their agency, that doesn't portray them well, what they do is to come out instead of them to dismiss it by giving you counter fact to show that this is not, what they do is to screenshot it and tag it fake news. (Fact Checker, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau).

The publisher of *Sahara Reporters* agrees with this above statement that when the Nigerian government is interested in changing the narrative or "delegitimizing a story" (Mare, et. al 2019:7) they call it "fake news". He adds that this has led to some media groups infiltrating the digital space with false information to also discredit the government:

The moment the government starts getting interested in news to the level that they call it fake, you should just know that they want to change the narrative...I think the reason the government is suddenly interested in fake news is because they are seeing competitors in the business of lying (laughs). So, in some ways, there are groups out there that use fake news as a weapon against the government. When you tell us lies, we tell lies against you. (Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

It is obvious that despite the prominence of the use of the term "fake news" there are two different meanings ascribed to its usage in the Nigerian alternative online media. Likewise, there is an ongoing reorientation by the media producers to stamp their feet and give a definition along the classification handed down by Western scholars while still drawing examples from the Nigerian context.

News Making Process in Mitigating political misinformation

News verification for accuracy

The way digital journalism operates in recent times has changed the way journalism is practised with the use of multiple technologies in the news production process (Reich and Barnoy, 2016). The news production mechanisms have changed from the linear approach to a series of post production “corrections and follow ups” (Reich and Barnoy, 2016:479).

Some scholars have attributed the flexible mode of operation of some of these platforms to the high influx of misleading information in the digital public sphere (Chambers, 2021). An inquiry into the news making process of the media producers, who are “the optimal link in the news chain” (Reich and Barnoy, 2016) is an opening point of discussion in mitigating political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere. Findings show that Nigerian alternative online media employs several methods in their news verification processes to make sure what is published is factual:

The verification process differs depending on the story, for example, there was this viral information last week, it was everywhere, a lot of persons were tweeting it and sharing it on different groups, it was about the Minister of Education approving DNA for free in government hospitals starting from June 2022. It was not true, first thing we did was the fact that when was this statement issued, where and when.. first of all it wasn't reported by major newspapers, all the credible newspapers did not report that story, that was the first red flag for us, it is a very important story and it was not possible that newspapers wouldn't have reported it. That was the first suspicion and we called the ministry and affirmed that the statement was not true, we called the minister who the story said issued the statement and he told us he didn't say that.
(Fact Check Head, The Cable)

The Cable sometimes seeks validation from major news outlets with the mainstream inclusive which he called “credible newspapers”. This points to Shu et al. (2020) on detection of false information by double checking with other news sources. In the same vein, the Managing Editor with *Information Nigeria*, notes that his platform relies on the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), a central news organ of the Nigerian government, to ascertain the credibility of some

news before publishing and this is an integral part of their political misinformation mitigation strategy:

We have NAN (News Agency of Nigeria), any story you find on NAN is true. It is a national news agency and they don't post fake news. Secondly, I check sources of news. I verify, there was a news that filtered about the demise of the former Governor of Oyo State. I had to make calls to get direct access to the family members to confirm the news, so that is how to verify the news. There is some news you cannot verify from our own end, such news we don't publish. (Managing Editor, Information Nigeria).

Hinging on journalists' "moral commitment" (Borden and Tew, 2007: 303) in their discharge of duties, the Nigerian alternative online media journalists do reach out to those directly involved in the news to get confirmation on the story before publishing. This stance is being echoed by the Coordinator of *Pen Radio*, "when we are in a dicey position we call those in the government to hear their side of the story".

Performing this journalist's ethical duties of verifying the news by reaching out to the other side has its challenges in the Nigerian social setup due to the bureaucratic bottlenecks within the political system in the way governance is structured. The publisher of *Sahara Reporters* calls for a very swift, timely and professional response to inquiries to enable the news producers complete their news verification process "Sometimes you lose time due to the bureaucracy, when you call someone to verify stories most of the time they ignore you or insult you".

Shu et. al (2020) argues that research on the "multi-modality information" (p. 5) in detecting false information is a viable tool for detecting misleading content in the digital space. Multi-modality information is the combination of different modes like image, text or video which are integral to the simultaneous meaning making process of the information circulated (Bernsen and Dybkjær, 2009). The Nigerian alternative online media use an array of technology interventions to verify the information they publish. The Managing Editor for *Information Nigeria* says before going ahead to publish any news that has to deal with images or video on *Information Nigeria* he conducts a "reverse google search". Likewise, *The Cable* deploys the use of technology in their news verification process to ensure what they dish out to the audience is factual:

There are sometimes you have to use technology if it has to do with distorted images, we have google reverse images, we have trojan desk, immediately you key those images, they will show you if they are distorted, if those images are photoshoped or if those images were on the internet before now, they will even tell you where the images first appeared on the internet. So we have many verification processes, depending on the nature of the story (Fact Check Head, The Cable NG)

Similarly, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau uses several methods in dealing with user-generated multimedia content to ensure accuracy before publishing:

Most of the time when we are dealing with multimedia content, they reach out to the factchecking arm to ensure that this is actually the true case, it becomes very dicey when you doing with UGCs (user generated contents). So sometimes, you will wonder how accurate this information is, you need to go to press quickly but then you also need to confirm that this is accurate, the reporting desk reaches out to the fact checking arm to ascertain if the information is accurate. (Fact Checker, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau)

Due to the social and political lived experiences of Nigerians and their behaviour of circulating political misinformation due to illiteracy and the urge to help others without an intent to cause any harm (Mare et al., 2019), the news verification process in the newsroom entails a multidimensional approach. The publisher *Sahara Reporters*, explains the importance of a viable verification by saying “nothing hurts news media outlets more than putting out half information, sometimes half information is worse than publishing at all”. Nigerian alternative online media platforms like *Sahara Reporters* developed a “multifaceted approach” to complement their evidence-based news reporting style as there were occasions people try to discredit the platform by furnishing the editorial team with falsified information.

Objectivity in the newsroom

Objectivity in the newsroom has attracted several scholarly arguments among communication scholars in recent times (Akpan et. al. 2012). The Nigerian political culture has made the news within the public sphere overtly subjective which is most times used to score political scores

and as such Akpan et al. (2012) made a case for “Rethinking Objectivity in News reporting in the Digital Age”.

Chambers (2021) argues that despite the way the social media is structured without a concrete regulation for mitigating misleading information, social media users and content producers alike have a political democratic responsibility and must act accordingly. Chambers (2021) advocates for the pursuit of factuality in the public sphere without any form of bias. There is a huge call for objectivity in the Nigerian alternative online media newsrooms by adhering to the journalism ethical practices (Akpan et. al, 2012). The Coordinator *Pen Radio*, laments the subjective nature of the digital journalism practised in the country (Akpan et. al., 2012) due to free speech enjoyed within the Nigerian digital public sphere, he describes the digital media practised as “ever subjective” and notes that their digital radio platform decides to maintain fairness through developmental stories. He gives an insight into the importance of fairness as a valid contribution to the public sphere:

We should not forget that we are part of the society and it will absolutely be wrong for us to collapse the society, so we should have a second look at any information we are trying to disseminate. It is not about that we are not affected, even the government is part of the society, so platforms should not cause chaos between the government and the governed. Our responsibility is to ensure we are fair in information dissemination. (Coordinator, Pen Radio).

Borden and Tew (2007) argue that journalists provide “epistemological standards” in their interpretation of the knowledge in the digital public space and the standards include “reliability, truthfulness and independence” (p.303). The respondents are in sync with Borden and Tew (2007) as the Nigeria Editor for *Africa Check*, argues for the importance of non bias attitude of journalists in the news production and dissemination. He adds that *Africa Check* makes “sure the entire process is just transparent and clear”.

The notable platforms in the Nigerian alternative online media like *Premium Times* is “driven by objectivity and non-partisanship” (Interview with *Premium Times*’ Editor) and strives at every opportunity to uphold the journalist values by giving a factual account of situations irrespective of government or public opinion (Akpan et. al., 2012):

We see some people commenting on our post that we are employed by APC. The next week, you see someone commenting that we are employed by PDP, and what have you. We get that a lot. At every point, we get driven by objectivity and non-partisanship, so that has really helped us a lot, and has helped us gain a lot of trust. (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*).

Audience Feedback Mechanism

With the evolving ethics of journalism practice in the digital public sphere which allows for editing of the news, the audience have assumed the role of gatekeepers and integral part of the news making process and the mitigation of false information (Reich and Barnoy, 2016; Domingo et. al., 2008). The Nigerian alternative online media rely on its feedback mechanisms in making sure some of the news they publish are accurate:

Sometimes we do some stories and we are told this is not the actual thing and they give us evidence, immediately we have to edit the story and put an editor's note. We have to update the story to show that this is the true info, this what is happening. At the end of the story, the editor's note will indicate that the story has changed because of the new information that we got from our audience. (Fact Check Head, *The Cable*).

We try as much as possible to make our lines available for feedback, even when we cast our news we tell them that if there is any reaction, or updates if you feel that we are behind they get in touch, and people do, people react to our news. (Coordinator, *Pen Radio*)

In addition, the publisher *Sahara Reporters*, while answering a question on the news producer and audience interaction, believes feedback from the audience is the core of the news production and refers to the audience in the Nigerian alternative online media as “editors” who are ever ready to scrutinise the news you publish:

There is the comment section where people give feedback, even if you do not use the function, the moment you circulate it through the social media platforms... People can tear you apart that this story is not true and can also provide their own facts on the

timeline. In a way, anybody who consumes news on social media is also an editor, the moment you give them the news, the first thing is to editorialise it, this is hogwash, this is half truth, it helps the content producers to get better information from the comment sections and the feedbacks. In fact, there are days when people give you direct messages to help you to break stories. (Publisher, *Premium Times*)

The respondents also agree that no one is above mistakes and the audience's role in maintaining factuality should be recognised and the ability to own up to mistakes is integral in keeping the digital public space devoid of false information. Fact check Editor at *The Cable* notes that:

When we were talking about engagement with our audience, most of our audience talk to us through social media, they flag us on some issues and things that they feel are not right enough, they find us if their position is true and we own up to our mistake which is the right thing to do, immediately we find out that you are saying the truth, we put an editor's note at the foot of the publication, that this story have been edited based on fresh story that we got. (Fact Check Head, *The Cable*)

Likewise, the Managing Editor for *Information Nigeria*, harps on the importance of the audience feedback mechanism in ensuring the sanity in the digital public “it is better to do your corrections, tell your audience that this is the corrections that have been made, no one is above mistake, just do the corrections and republish it”. The Editor at *Premium Times* and *Dubawa* also adds his bit on the importance of owning up to the mistake when pointed it that the audience is now an integral part of the gatekeeping process “The major lesson for us is that no matter how much gatekeeping you put into something, it can't always be right and you gain more strength if you own up to your mistake”. The AFP Lagos Digital Bureau fact checking journalist, feels correcting the mistake helps in deepening transparency and people's trust in the media platform and as such “ it is not just enough to acknowledge (the mistake) we still have to go ahead to correct that mistake”.

Despite the integral role the audience feedback mechanism plays in sanitising the Nigerian digital public sphere. The audience feedback cannot be wholly trusted with the audience providing false information to discredit the alternative online media platforms. The publisher *Sahara Reporters* says “end users can also be very funny” as their platform has experienced the audience feeding them with false information. The Fact Check Editor at *The Cable*

corroborates *Sahara Reporters'* publisher position by giving an account of his experience with some of their audience:

Now, let me tell you something, the reason we cannot be perfect is that some persons are there to misinform journalists, there are people that we trust so much and have given you good stories before, they will just give you something superficial, something incorrect and you can ask another person who says it is true. The story may not be entirely false, but an item in it might be false, that particular reader might call you on that particular item, immediately we realise that, we now try to verify more, when we find out we are wrong, we apologise, operate the story and put an editor's note.

Delaying the news for accuracy

Ward (2016) argues for a “discursive ethics” (p.70) in the practice of digital journalism with its “new condition and new issues” (p. 71). In the course of the research and discussing the recent journalist ethics within the Nigerian alternative online media with new producers, some of the respondents note they have adopted the strategy of delaying news so as not to be caught napping in the web of false information going around in the Nigerian digital public sphere. *Pen Online Radio* explores this strategy in making sure their news is accurate, it is an editorial responsibility of the platform as a bedding place for journalists to set the pace and lead by example:

We do delay tactics so we would not be teaching the students wrong things, so they won't go and join the society with the bandwagon approach, our own media training for them is not about fetching money but ensuring reform and educating the society. (Managing Director, Pen Online Radio).

Information Nigeria also uses the delay tactics for news they find difficult to verify instead of publishing false information, “If it is a news we cannot verify we pend it until we get a green light from other credible newspapers” (Interview with the Editor *Information Nigeria*). In addition, Publisher *Sahara Reporters*, notes that with the way the digital public sphere is structured you have to employ both “conventional wisdom and artificial intelligence”, he points

out that delaying the news and waiting for how the news develop is a viable tool in making sure you are sending out the right information.

Private and Public Tensions in the Nigerian Digital Public Sphere

Professional control amid open participation culture

Lewis (2012) notes that the advent of digital communication networks have opened up a form of tension between professional control and open participation in the field of digital journalism. Lewis (2012) further adds this is “sometimes depicted as a war between corporate and grassroots interests” (p. 846) and what should be the standard of operation. The tension between control and open participation in no small measure affects the public opinion duties of the digital public sphere.

Due to the diverse nature of the Nigerian society - divisions across ethnic, political and religious lines, the interviewees open up the debate for ethical considerations and minimum standards (Ward, 2016) in practising journalism to sanitise the Nigerian digital public sphere due to the high level of unprofessional conducts of practising journalists. The Coordinator at *Pen Radio*, advocates for “a professional form of control over content” (Lewis, 2012) in the digital sphere amid the rising tension between the news producers, the audience and the government. He says “some of them (the journalists) see themselves as junk journalists” without recourse to the ethics of the profession but just out there to contaminate the digital public sphere with unprofessional contents.

Similarly, professionals in the Nigerian alternative online media have noticed the problem associated with the nonprofessional actors in the Nigerian digital public sphere and there is an ongoing questioning of the legitimacy of these kind of journalists (Lewis, 2012):

“these guys are referred to as bloggers...they want clicks we don’t want clicks, we want people to read and inform the people”. (Gbenga Odunsi, *Information Nigeria*).

The Editor *Premium Times* and *Dubawa* believes there should be a minimum standard expected for journalists practising within the Nigerian digital public sphere, he calls for media owners and publishers to “tighten the knots” as there is an influx of “people who do not have any

qualifications to be journalists calling themselves journalists because they are the reporter, editor, and everything else”. He advocates for a form of training within the editorial board for those who might not study journalism to be abreast of the standard expected of them from the society. As for citizen journalists within the Nigerian digital public sphere, he feels “they need to be taught about the repercussions of false information, and how they can establish a gatekeeping process before they push out information”.

The Publisher *Sahara Reporters* argues that the journalist ethics are a form of content control and a mode to infringe on the citizens right (Lewis, 2012). He states that ethics has failed to totally cater for the demands of digital and calls for a renew form of ethics in Nigeria in line with the people’s reality just as Ward (2016) has argued for a reviewal of the ethics in line with present realities:

The ethics of journalism have been overtaken by technological breakthrough, the ethics have not been upgraded since whatever, when they were writing they haven’t taken into consideration the internet or the information age. (Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

Another way to curb the excesses of this set of untrained citizen journalists with a minimal set of rules to check them (Lewis, 2012) in the Nigerian alternative online media is the “collective efforts” from content producers, audience and the social media owners (Chambers, 2021:160):

What I want to say is that we need every alternative news media outfit to have a fact checking desk, when we all come out en masse to expose the false claim, such accounts are flagged, if it is a blog they reduce their visibility. Facebook is also working on that fight against misinformation, if we all invest on the fact checking desk, there is a possibility that we can curb this menace. What I will suggest is for us to continue to call out incorrect platforms to cleanse the Nigerian online space. (Fact Check Head, *The Cable*)

Government control and user's resistance

Papacharissi (2009) argues that the value of the public sphere is its ability to trigger diverse discussions of public interest to deepen democratic traditions. Nigerian political history of

government control (Dare, 2011) of the public sphere is met with the tension of who controls the flow of information between the government and the content producers. In explaining this tension between the government and internet users, Fact Check Head at *The Cable* says:

They are trying to control the flow of information, they used to in the days when they solely had the mainstream media, right now they can't do that again with technology and digital journalism.

With the ongoing tension and battle for controlling the narrative in the Nigerian digital public sphere. The Nigerian government “appoint people who are going to handle the public perception” (Interview the AFP Lagos Digital Bureau, Fact Checking Journalist) most times these are opinion shapers and people who have a huge presence in the online space. In so doing, they twist the narrative by dishing out falsehood:

The government is the biggest source of disinformation, they put together a lot of things, through propaganda, they will lie to you and they push it out, they keep hammering on it until you believe it.” (Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*).

The government's approach of controlling the flow of information has led to a new problem within the Nigerian digital public sphere as a resistance to the misleading information peddled by the government. Some media actors in the alternative online media in a response to government control also lie against the government to heat up the polity. Heating up the polity is detrimental to the roles of the Nigerian alternative online media and defeats the essence of free speech. There is a need for decency from the media actors in line with Chambers (2021) position that “they now have a political democratic function in the public sphere” (p. 161). The Coordinator *Pen Radio* while addressing the issue of media actors in the Nigerian alternative online media putting up contents to heat up the polity pacify them on the importance of taking collective societal responsibility as against personal interests “we are not saying you shouldn't be an antagonist to the government but hate speech, watch it, don't unnecessarily create tension” (Interview with the Coordinator *Pen Radio*).

With the unregulated structure of the Nigerian alternative online media, there will be pockets of people still adamant about spreading false information about the government and the

government should be alerted to the responsibility to the people by being on high alert in debunking misleading information with counter facts instead of forcefully looking to control the flow of information:

Government should be proactively telling the truth about what is happening, if there is a false information in the USA that the president has died...there will probably somebody in the press room of the white house who will just dismiss it with a wave of hand... So, you know, what the government can do is to put out accurate news about governance and be proactively transparent and accountable to the people. (The Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

Though this might not totally put an end to the issues of political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere but when the government becomes more believable by the citizens it makes it harder for platforms to cook unreal stories:

...immediately the government becomes believable it makes it harder for news platforms to write things that are not correct. (The Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

Furthermore, the moment the government tries to forcefully control the flow of information it creates a new avenue for the spread of malicious information in the digital public sphere, as the politically active citizens in the digital public sphere are wired to find other means to air their dissenting voices (Kperogi, 2011). Drawing practical example from the recent ban on the Twitter app in Nigeria which lasted for seven months between June 2021 to January 2022, one of the interviewees reiterated this stance:

Where people's right to communicate (free speech) is impeded in any way it also breeds an avenue for misinformation and disinformation because the truth is that if you tell a classroom of 50 students, composed of 15-year-old nobody should make noise, they will still communicate using notes, and you remove the notes, they will still communicate through sign language. The more you make it harder for them to communicate on the platform of their preferred choice, what you are doing indirectly is creating an environment that will breed misinformation disorder. (Nigeria Editor, *Africa Check*).

In corroborating the adverse effect of the government forcefully controlling the flow of information, the Managing Editor *Information Nigeria*, notes that “even during the Twitter ban, some people still use VPN to tweet stories that are untrue”. The Fact Check Head at *The Cable*, while agreeing with *Information Nigeria’s* Managing Editor affirms that the spread of false information was not affected by the Twitter ban as people used VPN to bypass the government control procedure and still went ahead to circulate political misinformation on the Twitter app “what I noticed as a fact-checker was that...misinformation was still everywhere, it didn’t make any significant difference” (Fact Check Head, *The Cable*).

The Nigerian alternative online media has been self-regulating to some extent and the government can only complement what is on ground as against forcefully controlling the flow of information. There are lapses evident in the self-regulating measures of the Nigerian alternative online media but the government interference can only escalate the problem without any meaningful progress, thus need to intensify and work on how these self-regulating measures are paramount in a bid to preserve the free speech and open access that can further strengthen the Nigerian alternative online media as a viable digital public sphere:

What can we do? The best means is self-regulation. If you wait for the government to regulate the media ecosystem, then we are in very big trouble. That means you won’t even be free to express yourself, but if you self-regulate. (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*).

“I also think that the internet publishing is self regulating due to the feedback mechanism that is embedded in the part of publishing”. (Publisher *Sahara Reporters*)

The AFP Lagos Digital Bureau fact checking journalist, taking the same stance as the *Premium Times* and *Sahara Reporter’s* editors, feels the Nigerian digital public sphere can self cleanse he says “I do not think the government should regulate the media as the media is self regulated”.

Economic Control of the Digital Public Sphere

Fuchs (2014) argues that in the public sphere humans are driven by several interests and one of such is socio-economic interest, which is capable of shaping “control of property/

surplus, collective decision and social meanings” (p. 61). The economic interest driving the content produced is the major bane of the Nigerian alternative online media in its role in positively impacting the country’s democracy. Some of the media actors in the public sphere do not place the public interest as the core of the editorial policies and are readily interested in the economic gains from the start:

Most of them (Nigerian alternative online media outlets) actually commenced and started this business without direction, some of them created their platforms for the means of fetching money, so they want to go the extra mile in getting money
(Coordinator, *Pen Radio*).

Drawing on the critique of the Habermas public sphere theory, Fuchs argues that those with economic control “creates its own limits and thereby its own immanent critique” (Fuchs, 2014:62). Furthermore, there is an ongoing battle for prominence and competition for staying afloat amid the increasing numbers of content producers in the Nigerian alternative online media, this is what Nielsen (2016) refers to as “intense competition.. for consumer attention” (p. 58). The pursuit of virality through clicks and views is another economically motivated factor in the spread of false political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere.

People who want to click bait have commercial interest, when I say commercial interest I mean people are sometimes looking for traffic, they also have these websites electronic adverts, where they need a number of clicks to make money. (Publisher, *Sahara Reporters*)

To the best of my knowledge it is about traffic, every online platform need traffic, the more traffic you have the more you get from google adsense, if you are able to publish a story not available on other platforms, everybody credit that story to you and also make more money from Google Adsense (Managing Editor, *Information Nigeria*)

So it (click baiting) is quite worrisome in my own opinion, when I reached out to some of these media organizations, to be sincere some of them told me the truth, that they are aware that it is actually an old policy note but they needed to get traffic, so as to meet some of their (economic) target. (Fact Checker, AFP Lagos Digital Bureau)

The drive to compete through the creation of traction is rubbing off on what the Nigerian alternative media as a digital public sphere as a place where citizens voice is meant to be heard and influence government policies. These issues are alarming, and it is a misplaced priority and is gradually becoming a norm with the Nigerian alternative online media:

There is a difference between issues that are of public interest and issues that are interesting to the public. Issues that are interesting to the public are you showing off, and all these kinds of obscene things that we are seeing around us, and that is what sells on most of these alternative media platforms. And a lot of the time, they end up misinforming the public, just because they want to sell, want to be the first to break the news. (Interview with Editor *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*).

This economic tension of pursuit of virality can be reduced through adequate media literacy. Jones-Jang et al., (2021) argues that online media users should be equipped with the “abilities to navigate and find information online that is verified and reliable” (p. 382). The news producers as part of the collective efforts exemplified by Chamber (2021) should teach the Nigerian digital audience the red flags to look out for when faced with misleading content like click baiting. The Editor *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*, believes media literacy will be helpful for the audience’s political participation in the Nigerian digital public space to know “how they can relate to the media content they consume, how they can identify true news from false information”. Likewise, Nigeria Editor Africa Check, believes the journalists have a significant role to play as part of their responsibility to the public sphere by sensitising their readers and equipping them with digital media literacy skills:

Also, journalist themselves should be the conveyors of media literacy to their readers. Aside from inform, surveillance, mobilization, objectivity, I will also like to add one more, which is media literacy, sensitize the readers. It is not about giving them information, but teaching them how to verify information. (Nigeria Editor, Africa Check)

Likewise, social media platforms have a vital role to play in reducing the spread of political misinformation in the Nigerian public spread motivated by the drive for clicks in the pursuit of virality. This kind of political misinformation is circulated with the help of the platforms and if their mitigating policy is effective it will cut the spread of such content. Clayton et al. (2019) believe the social media platform owners are integral in this kind of discussion and there is a need to do more from their end. It is evident that despite the mitigation policies of Twitter (Roth and Achuthan, 2020) and Meta's (Mosseri, 2017) are not quite stemming the diffusion of political misinformation adequately as is expected in the Nigerian context, there is a practical call to domesticate their approach in line with the Nigerians lived experiences and peculiarities (Mano and Milton, 2021) reducing the spread of political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere:

...what happens if someone tweets something in Yoruba language, Igbo language, or Hausa language? How do those algorithms identify such things? That's a very big issue. And we have seen cases, where videos, images that spread false information still continue to go viral even after a fact checker has worked on it (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*).

There is also a call to the social media owners from the fact checkers in the Nigerian alternative online media to downgrade the visibility of some misleading stories after being fact checked by the professionals working in this field.

You can fact check from now to whenever, if a social media platform refuses to downgrade or reduce the visibility of a particular story, there is nothing you can do. (Fact Check Head, *The Cable*)

The Twitter mitigation icon has not been very effective. YouTube mitigation is not even there at all. I think recently the IFCN (International Fact Checking Network) wrote a letter to YouTube, and we are currently in conversation with them. So there is a need for these platforms to take more responsibility. (Editor, *Premium Times* and *Dubawa*)

The tensions in the private and public spheres demand huge attention in mitigating the presence of political misleading content. There is a responsibility in the hands of all the actors in the Nigerian digital public sphere, from the content producers to the audience, government and social media platform owners to take up a collective role in mitigating political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere. All these actors must contribute their quota in the quest for a robust and engaging public sphere which is integral to the success of the democracy practised in Nigeria as against pushing their selfish agenda mostly for economic gains.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The research taking an *Afrikology* stance was interested in finding out the peculiarities of the Nigerian alternative online media and also awakening its intrinsic traits in line with economic, social and political realities of the country (Mano and Milton, 2021). The *Afrikology* approach allows a domestic lens into how the platforms are contributing their quota in sanitising the public sphere from political misinformation, what the government needs to do in dealing with the menace and how all the actors should collectively proffer solutions. This research aimed to see how news producers in Nigeria are positively reacting to the influx of misleading political information in the country's alternative online media against the backdrop of the government's calls for legislative regulations. What I mean by the positive reaction is their responsibility to reduce political misinformation to the barest minimum if it can not be completely extirpated.

Clear patterns emerged in my discussions with the interviewees for this research and the patterns will be discussed in relation to the research questions. The conclusion will also allow me to look at what works well with the concepts used for the research in the process of domesticating it to the Nigerian context.

The first research question asks: What are the characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media? This research while contributing to the limited literature around the subject matter successfully made a case for the Nigerian alternative online media as a digital public sphere meant to serve the public's interest. The research findings detail the democratic values of the Nigerian alternative online media beyond the radical media values (Kperogi, 2011; Atton, 2003), an avenue to discuss public opinion or as an alternative to the mainstream. The research situates the Nigerian alternative online media as the medium of telling the Nigerian stories by indigenous persons, functioning as a stabiliser of the country's democracy where the free speech enjoyed must be protected.

The Nigerian alternative media is characterised by its role as the voice for the voiceless and space of free speech against the backdrop of gagged mainstream media. The Nigerian alternative online media has been fearless in the quest to protect the rights of the citizens and serve as a space to drive political change. The transition of a change from the opposition

political party to the helm of the country's affairs was made possible by the incursions carried out by the Nigerian alternative online media. Furthermore, the Nigerian alternative online media is carrying out this societal impactful role by serving as checks and balances to government decisions directly affecting the people. This thesis while detailing the positive characteristics did not shy away from the challenges which have limited the optimal performance of the Nigerian alternative online media. The online space is heavily populated by non-professional actors who do not place the public interest at the centre of the editorial policies but are out for the economic gains. In addition, in the drive for traffic and urge to gain prominence within the influx of media outfits in the Nigerian alternative online media, the media publishers are always in haste to break the news without taking into cognisance ethical considerations.

The second research question asks: How do the alternative online news media mitigate political misinformation in the Nigerian digital public sphere? In answering the research question, the research finds that the news producers employ multiple methods in mitigating political misinformation in their news production process. Based on the empirical data from the open-ended interviews, the news producers at times seek validation from other "credible newspapers" for news that they find suspicious. Interpretation from the empirical data shows that the Nigerian alternative online media news producers rely on media operators in the mainstream media who have built credibility spanning decades for validation. This news verification style for accuracy in the news making process implies that the Nigerian alternative online media is not downright independent of their mainstream counterpart.

Likewise, in the findings from the empirical data, the Nigerian alternative online media still adopts the traditional method of putting calls across to concerned individuals in their quest to ensure factuality, though the Publisher *Sahara Reporters*, berates this approach, especially when dealing with government officials due to the bottlenecks occasioned by bureaucracy in Nigeria. While making recourse to the traditional mode of ensuring factuality, the news producers are combining the traditional methods with technology innovations to keep up with speed with the enormous falsified multimedia contents in the Nigerian digital public sphere. The empirical data showed that this "multifaceted approach" is integral in mitigating misinformation as some informants are also out to feed alternative online media journalists with falsehood in a bid to discredit their platforms. Though the style used by the different platforms varies from one to the other, the ones with the fact checking desk are more thorough

in the use of the technology. Thus, having a fact checking arm in each outfit will be instrumental in reducing the spread of political mis/disinformation. Logically, a platform saddled with fact checking others will not want to be found wanting in their due diligence.

The empirical data also shows that the Nigerian alternative online media public sphere is awash with subjective content which are meant to heat up the polity and pitch the politicians against the masses and vice versa. In suing for an active digital public sphere meant to positively impact democracy (Papachariss, 2009), the news producers adopt objectivity in their news production mechanism. Detailing Borden and Tew (2007) journalist “epistemological standards” are vital in gaining public trust and not found wanting by sending out incorrect or half information.

In addition, the empirical data details how the audience feedback mechanism is vital in ensuring accuracy in the news production process of the Nigerian alternative online media. The instant feedback features of some of the websites and the social media platforms the media outfits use in circulating their news have equipped the audience as effective gatekeepers. In the same vein, the news production is not complete without the input of the audience who now serve as “editors” in the Nigerian digital public sphere, thoroughly scrutinising the stories and giving their views if any part of it is misleading. The empirical data shows that all the news producers interviewed for the research have experienced a time or the other when the audience had to draw their attention to a misleading story on their platform and provide them with superior facts. This shows the sophisticated nature of the Nigerian news audience and how well they are integral to the news making process. The empirical data explains that news producers acknowledge the impact of the audience and accept their role as editors as they integrate their position and own up to the mistakes any time they are found wanting in doing their due diligence. Notwithstanding the importance of the audience in the news making process, the audience is believed to be mischievous at times or can be problematic while giving them the avenue to be editors they should not be allowed to take over the whole process. As such what they serve in the feedback can also be misleading and the content producers must double check.

To conclude, the results from the data identify the use of delay tactics by the alternative online media to ascertain the factuality of stories to be published. With the rush to break the news that seems the main characteristic of the alternative online media all over the world, some of the content producers in the Nigerian public sphere are employing a pause mode instead of being forced to tender apologies or bring down the news after they might have already published.

In answering the third research question: What are the tensions in the commercial and public spheres in mitigating political misinformation in the Nigerian alternative news media? The research takes a dive into some of the issues bewildering the Nigerian alternative online media in its quest to be a safe haven devoid of misleading political information while serving as a sphere for political engagement. It is imperative to note that from the resolutions from the interviewees, these tensions are not something that can be eradicated due to the diverse nature of Nigerian politics with divisions across party lines, ethnic and religious interests. Likewise, the unfettered access to the internet has empowered everyone to be content producers and with over 60 million Nigerians having access to the public sphere the control of the flow of information becomes more difficult. Nevertheless, this research was able to identify some of these tensions and delve into solutions from the content producers that participated in the research this will be instrumental for policy makers and other researchers working in the areas of mitigating mis/disinformation from the Nigerian context.

According to the empirical data, there is a tension between the news producers and the citizen journalists as the latter believe that there should be a minimum standard in ethical and professional conduct expected of those practising digital journalism in Nigeria. There is a call to “tighten the knot” by publishers of the Nigerian alternative online media in the professional conduct of their journalists. While most of the interviewees believe it is not utmost for practitioners to study journalism but it is paramount for the platforms they use in operating to give them the needed training to function effectively for the growth of the society. Likewise, The Publisher *Sahara Reporters*, feels there is a need to review the ethics in line with the present realities of the digital age and calls for professional review. In the same vein, the fact checkers who participated in the study highlighted what they are doing and hoped that with an improved fact checking practise some of these unprofessional conducts can be nipped under the bud.

Furthermore, the empirical data examines the tension created by the user’s resistance to the government control of the communication line. From the research, the respondents note that the Nigerian government is big on controlling the media narratives and tend to tilt most of the discussions around topics that favours the government interest. This tension is apparently adduced to the growing spate of misleading political information either to discredit the government or the government bid to put out a viral news which they find detrimental to

national interest. With the free speech enjoyed the government control is faced with huge resistance and quite for the government to exercise full control over the alternative online media unlike the government regulatory bodies in place for the mainstream media operating in the shores of the country. In reducing this tension, the respondents are quite divided on the solutions while some feel there might still be a need for some regulations from the government in keeping sanity, others are of the opinion that the public sphere is self regulating. They believe in line with the self regulation nature of the digital public sphere, the government should work on being proactive in telling the truth at all times and design mechanisms to swiftly debunk stories that are not untrue within the public sphere as any form of regulations will hamper the free press enjoyed in the realm.

Economic interest is believed to be a major influence on the independence of the public sphere (Fuchs, 2014). The interviewees believe the poor economy of Nigeria has contributed to the influx of misleading political information through click baiting to improve revenue from digital adverts on the websites of the Nigerian alternative online media. The interviewees for the research call for more regulatory measures from the social media platforms which are used to spread this misleading information. While they believe the social media platforms are stepping up, they call for more action and also include the Nigerian languages into their algorithm in tracking misleading information that is not written in English.

In the same vein, platforms also rely on patronage from politicians and some are being funded by the government, hereby, leading to them doing the bidding of their pay masters. The data result shows that all the content producers interviewed berate this economic influence and call for media literacy in order for the audience to identify this misleading political information and reduce the spread by reporting it or stop the spread by not sharing or engaging with the content.

The *Afrikology* approach was evident in placing the Nigerian alternative online media within its own frame and highlighting its distinct qualities. The peculiarities of political misinformation are also brought to the fore as there are different meanings attached to it which is different from the categorisation of misinformation, disinformation and misinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). While the use of “fake news” is the most common, the research has been able to find out that there is an attempt by the content producers to adequately distinguish the degrees and levels of misleading political information in the Nigerian context as “fake news” does not cover all the levels.

This research successfully situates the characteristics of the Nigerian alternative online media as a digital public sphere and argues that political misinformation is one of the major flaws debarring it from fulling the digital public sphere roles in its entirety. The research also suggests that in mitigating the spread of this misleading political information there is a need for collective efforts from the content producers, audience, social media platforms and the government as every critical actor must put the society first in the discharge of their roles. As part of these collective efforts, there can be a platform in the form of annual symposium where all critical stakeholders in the Nigerian alternative online media can have discussions around the developing issues and the best ways to neutralize them from time to time due to the evolving nature of the digital journalism.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

How long have your platform been publishing?

What is your take on the alternative media in Nigeria compared to the western country?

What are the specific characteristics that makes it different from the western alternative media?

Engagement with the audience

Can you tell me how you engage with your audience?

- Do you have a feedback mechanism?
- How does the feedback from the audience shape your news production and fact checking?

Role as a public sphere

What is your view on the increasing media power wielded by the alternative new media (blogs) outfits in Nigeria? Feels sorry about the state of the country, creating serious menace.

What kind of emotional responsibility do your platform have on what is published?

How important is the alternative news media outlets in sustaining Nigeria's democracy?

- What do the alternative media offer differently from the mainstream media in Nigeria?
- (news producer)

News Production

- What's your view on media trust?
- How has your platform been able to gain the audience's trust?
- How do you verify news?

Misinformation related questions

How do you feel about the recent spate of communication crisis occasioned by fake news/misinformation?

- What type of information do you take as fake or real?

- Do you have any internal mechanism in place to fact check information before publishing?
- Can you give examples of how this is handled within your editorial team?
- How do you react when any of your publication is flagged as fake either by the audience or those directly affected by the news?
- What lessons do you think other media outfits can take from your approach?
- What is your take on the pursuit of virality with misleading headlines? (Click Baiting)

Mitigating Misinformation

The recent Twitter ban led to accusations and counter accusations from the government and the microblogging users, what is your publication's position on this ban?

- Is there any instance of misinformation leading to chaos as claimed by the government?
- What do you think the government could do differently that will not affect press freedom?

How did your media outfit respond to the Twitter ban effected by the Nigerian government?

- What were the reasons behind your decision?
- What changed in your approach due to the Twitter ban.
- Do you think the Nigerian alternative media should be regulated?

Do you have any comment, reflection or something you will like to add?

Appendix 2

Transcript Sample

The interview was held at the Headquarters Office of Cable Online Newspaper at Ikeja Lagos. The discussion lasted about 50 minutes.

How long has your platform been publishing?

The Cable has been publishing since 2014

What is your take on the alternative media in Nigeria compared to the western country?

I think the alternative media has come to stay, it is becoming quite vibrant as people hardly buy newspapers. We have a quite huge population and a lot of people are using smartphones. With the proliferation of the internet, a lot of people are now getting most of their news online. We produce stories for them online, they read on the go, they get news every minute, they consume articles, every now and then. This is the future in Nigeria, it is a vibrant one anyway.

What are the specific characteristics that makes it different from the western alternative media?

Let start with the issue of free press, over there in the west, with the nature of free press, they can publish stories that can make impact, lets say hit the government. In our clime it is different, you want to consider that the government can come after you, the you want to consider that the government can clamp down on your social media account, you want to consider the fact that your offices can be invaded by the government security operatives. The west is more democratic while ours is different, which actually affects what we do. In addition, eh... when it comes to issue of resources, we do not have enough resources to pursue stories that matter but over there in the west, there are funds set aside for journalism. Here in Nigeria you depend on advertiser and advertisers too can somehow influence the kind of story you do. So the differences there.

Engagement with the audience

How do you engage with your audience which feedback mechanism do you use?

We engage with them on social media, our website have a comment policy. We do not allow our readers to directly comment on the website. So that it will be neat and devoid of abuses,

we basically engage with them on social media. There are some times they mention us, maybe we do a story and sometimes they comment on the story and they tell us things we can work on. When it is an investigative story, we do social media call out, we ask them about their experience, they talk to us through this means. Sometime, they talk to us via email, they send story ideas and these are some of the ways we engage with our audience.

How does the feedback from the audience shape your news production and fact checking?

I think it does, let me begin with ..erm...news production generally before I go into fact check, because there are sometimes we do some stories and we are told this is not the actual thing and they give us evidences, immediately we have to edit the story and put an editor's note. We have to update the story to show that this is the true info, this what is happening. At the end of the story, the editor's note will indicate that the story has changed because of the new information that we got from our audience. When the audience point us to investigative stories, we got to the community which will serve as fixers for us, we don't need people to show the way, when the government reacts on some of those things it has impact. Coming to fact check, someone sent me a DM on twitter and he said that we should look at a particular piece of new information, erm.. I think it is fake news, immediately the person sent the request, I asked him why do you think we should work on this and why do you think it is important, and he gave me all the information I needed, I requested for the video, it has to do with a misleading claim about the Minister of Works, Fashola, it was a story that was..aaaa... we are currently working on it.

..cuts.. was it published on your platform?

It wasn't published on our platform but so many platforms published it like Sahara reporters, majorly blogs. You could have seen the story where they said, Fashola has done so well more than USA in terms of infrastructure, he didn't actually say that, the reason we did not publish the story is that we couldn't get the video to confirm the story. Some news website published the story without any verification, immediately we found out that particular story wasn't true and we were given evidence that we needed, we had to do a bit of diggings ourselves. We should put our story to sensitize the public that this is false and it is misleading.

Media Power related questions

What is your view on the increasing media power wielded by the alternative new media (blogs) outfits in Nigeria?

With the proliferation of the internet everywhere, everyone has practically become a journalist, and the alternative media for me it is practically unregulated. If you have a phone and can open a blog on the wordpress and you have some audience on your social media pages, you have practically become a journalist, people tend to believe them, they churn out information which are not verified. There is no way you can practically tell them what to do or not to do, that's why you have the factcheck desk, because I see that as the only way we can regulate those people. Most times when we do our stories, we hyperlink those blogs, the stories they have done and sometimes we do a screenshot of the misleading story they have done, that is one of those ways we can check. Fact checking is a beautiful way of checking those platforms from dishing out misinformation because when you are aware that there is another platform, that has a vibrant factchecking desk, that will call them out if they keep on publishing false stories.

What has been the response of other platform, when your publication call them out?

I have seen situations whereby colleague will call me that "we are one and you shouldn't be tackling us, when I do a story and it is wrong, just tell me, I will delete it". My response to them that it isn't done that way, my job is to put out the reality. The onus is on you to verify you do any story. They always argue that we should have corrected them but I always tell them, no! I could have corrected you but what about those who have consumed that particular story that have been circulated to the audience. It is about the public for us and what they have consumed, I always tell them to always verify their stories before they publish as it is our own media responsibility to always factcheck misleading stories.

What kind of emotional responsibility do your platform have on what is published?

There is nothing like emotional responsibility, everything boils down to public interest, when you have a piece of information on twitter and it is fake and we are friends, I have to look at the public interest as a lot of your audience have consumed that false claim, so I have to a story to call you out that what you have done is fake. For us it is about public interest, so if it serves the public interest, emotions do not come in again.

How important is the alternative news media outlets in sustaining Nigeria's democracy?

Our platform is quite important in sustaining democracy in Nigeria, we do not just publish stories, we want to make the government accountable and do stories for public interest, we do news stories, we do developmental stories, we do investigations and we do factchecks. These are stories that actually generate impacts. These are stories, the government react to and these are stories that make the public aware of certain things that they are not used to. I think the stories we do are quite important in sustaining democracy. Take for example one of our stories we did last year an investigation about the Ikoyi Marriage Registry corruption. There was a lot of reactions to the story on social media. People voiced out their gloomy experiences at registry after few days there was a reaction from the government and the registry process was revised and due process were enforced at the registry. That was beautiful for us because, it was a big impact on the polity, thousand of Nigerians can now register for their marriages without meeting officials to bribe them, for us there are certain stories that we do that hits the government and in turn make them decide to change a particular policy as it is not serving the public interest. I think that important in sustaining Nigeria's democracy.

What do the alternative media offer differently from the mainstream media in Nigeria?

Speed!! We are offering speed, you can't set that aside, because if there is a developing story right now for the mainstream they have to wait till tomorrow to publish, but for the alternative media, we could publish immediately. Breaking News and everyone gets it. So news consumption is becoming instantaneous, you have to put it out immediately. The second one is it reduces government interference in the news room, before the government may decide to blackout a whole country from a particular news information, they can buy out a whole newspaper early in the morning and they make sure people do not have access to the story. But right now people have the information on their phones and government cannot gag their phone. That's why the government is striving hard, as you can what the minister of information is doing to gag the social media. They are trying to control the flow of information, they use to in the days when they solely have the mainstream media, right now they can't do that again with technology and digital journalism. We send the information out so fast, there are some times you think you want to delete the story, within 5 minutes it has gone viral and if deleted, you will be called out that why did you delete that story. SO the difference is clear, we are offering a new kind of journalism that the mainstream cannot no longer sustain, we making people aware of programs and events on the go. So you have tonnes information now which you do not have to wait till the next day.

Some of the non-mainstream media in Nigeria have social media accounts and publish news on the go, what do you think is the difference despite have these instantaneous feature as the alternative media.

If you are operating an old system and you seeing a new system giving you a run for your money, you try to adjust. It is a kind of adjustment on their own part, they try to compete with the alternative media if they do not compete they will die. Few years back you will see newspaper selling up to 200000 copies a day. Right now I don't think all the newspapers in Nigeria are selling up to 50,000 copies in a day, I am not even sure of 10,000 copies. So they are practically transiting into alternative media, there are some who say the mainstream media might go into extinction, I do not believe that, they will somehow blend to the demands of the audience. They are not the same as the alternative media in Nigeria, they are blending to the new technology age and stay in business as this is the new normal.

Do you think the news the mainstream produce still have to go through the rigid bureaucratic system?

They use to but now they are changing, if they still have to go through that, the Cable have published the same story and if you are publishing three hours after, nobody will read the news piece again. Infact the negative consequence is that is limiting the gate keeping process, you know before, a reporter files a story, an editor looks at it, another editor looks at it, before getting to the final editor that what they use to do. In our system in the Cable, the reporter is expected to file a near perfect story from the beginning. So you won't expect to cross your Ts or dot the Is, so when your story get to one editor, it is published immediately as we are competing and readers need to get the information immediately.

What's the media trust in your platform?

For ours it is strong, people will tell us they have read as stories on different platforms and visted our website to confirm if the story is true. Because if we are factchecking others, they are sure that there is no way we would publish misleading stories. Some people also come to tell us, they read a story somewhere and could not find context to what I needed, must of the time they still come to our platform to read our story on it. That's why when you are talking about digital journalism in Nigeria, if you are not placing the Cable first, they it has to be the second. We are just about 8 years, people have come to trust us that they even call us to ask, "are you sure about this, is it true? That has to do with the kind of trust we have built over the

years, as our had to do with credibility, that is what we sell. Although, we go with the technological advancement, we do not joke with credibility and accuracy.

Misinformation related questions

How do you verify your news?

It depends on the nature of the news, if it is a news story from the government, most of the time you have to call people in the office where the statement was issued; “Who issued the statement, when was it issued, how come it is not on your website?”, there are sometimes when you see a particular story, you go to the website or social media platform of the agency or persons involved. For example, if there is a particular story about Atiku (Nigeria’s former vice-president, the major opposition leader in the country), you have to run through his twitter account because he tweets quite often, If you see a story about the president, you that if you check the social media accounts of his media aides, you are going to see a piece of information about the story. Immediately you do not see that, firstly you have to suspect that story may not be true, so we have a lot of ways that we can actually verify and there are some times that some stories may be very difficult to verify, we wait and have to call stakeholders who are well informed on the news story. Social media, websites, stakeholders and the people involved.

What type of information do you take as fake or real?

The kind of information you take as fake are.... Practically the ones that are not from the real source, maybe an image that has been distorted, maybe a statement that doesn’t exist,.. the distortion of fact. When we distort fact, that’s falsehood. The moment you notice that a statement is false, you first of all try to verify, when you notice that there is a bit of distortion, what I will call ‘perforation of the truth’ then you feel this is fake.

We use to have propaganda, do you feel propaganda is the same as fake news?

Fake news is fake news no matter the coloration, the nature of propaganda has reduced with factchecking in Nigeria, because most political leaders are quite aware of the factcheckers that will call them out in a minute, let me give you an example, last week Senator Bola Tinubu (Former Lagos State Governor and the National Leader of the ruling party APC) made a statement that the current PVC (Permanent Voters Cards) have expired, immediately the video went out, we were the only media outfit that factchecked that particular information and within minutes the story was everywhere. The second day, Senator Tinubu apologized

that he was wrong due to the factcheck story we released to dispel the misleading information. Before, that will have been circulated under the umbrella of propaganda, people dish out a lot of things just to sway people. Right now they are very careful, as factcheckers will dig out the truth, not matter what you call it, if it is fake it is fake.

Do you have any internal mechanism in place to fact check information before publishing?

Yes we have an internal mechanism, immediately you come across a piece of information that is fake, the first thing you do is that you verify. The verification process differs depending on the story, for example, there was this viral information last week, it was everywhere, a lot of persons were tweeting it and sharing it on different groups, it was about the Minister of Education approving DNA for free in government hospitals starting from June 2022. It was not true, first thing we did was the fact that when was this statement issued, where and when.. first of all it wasn't reported by major newspapers, all the credible newspapers did not report that story, that was the first redflag for us, it is a very important story and it was not possible that newspapers wouldn't have reported it. That was the first suspicion and we called the ministry and affirmed that the statement was not true, we called minister which the story said issued the statement and he told us he didn't say that. Some you have to go websites like WHO, IMF when you are statistics infused in some stories. If it has to do with COVID-19 misinformation, you can even call, let me say the NCDC, you call the ministry of health or send emails to the procuders of the vaccines, we have done that before and they replied in a matter of 30 minutes with the right information which we shared with our audience. There are sometimes you have to use technology if it has to do with distorted images, we have google reverse images, we have trojan desk, immediately you key those images, they will show you if they are distorted, if those images are photoshoped or if those images were on the internet before now, they will even tell you where the images first appeared on the internet. So we have many verification processes, depending on the nature of the story

How do you feel about the recent spate of communication crisis occasioned by fake news/misinformation?

If I get you clearly, there is nothing we can do about the communication crisis, what we can do is how you can clean up the process, the communication line, when these kind of information get to the public, you have to make sure that the public is well informed about

what they have consumed, our business is new production, we can only clean up this process, over time there has always been information crisis, before now there were time a newspaper will publish a story and another newspaper will publish another version of it. What we do at our end is to look at all the sides, we try to contextualize the story and try to tell the readers what we think it is true according to our research and analysis.

Have you had a situation that you published a news, and you have a feedback that it is not right?

Yes, we cannot be perfect. When we were talking about engagement with our audience, most of our audience talk us through social media, they flag us on some issues and things that they feel are not right enough, we find us if their position is true and we own up to our mistake which is the right thing to do, immediately we find out that you are saying the truth, we put an editor's note at the foot of the publication, that this story have been edited based on fresh story that we got. Now, let me tell you something, the reason we cannot be perfect is that some persons are there to misinform journalist, there are people that we trust so much and have given you good stories before, they will just give you something superficial, something incorrect and you can another person who says it is true. The story may not be entirely false, but an item in it might be false, that particular reader might call you on that particular item, immediately we realise that, we now try to verify more, when we find out we are wrong, we apologise, operate the story and put an editor's note.

What do you think other platforms can learn from your approach?

There is one thing I do tell reporters on my desk, one of the things I tell them is "who factchecks the factchecker?" the reason I ask them is for them not to write a factchecking story that people will factcheck, so you don't publish our factcheck based on speed. We can be very swift with news, factcheck no. Like I noted we got a story about the Minister of Power last week, we haven't published yet, we will publish on Friday, we have to be sure as we are not expected to be called out base on factcheck story. (laughs) a factcheck cannot mislead again, what I will advise other colleagues to do is to own up to their mistakes, we are human, the nature of the news is very fast and you can miss the fact. So own up to the mistake, accept you are wrong and update the new correct information gathered.

Press Freedom and policy making related questions

What is your take on the Twitter ban?

It didn't do anything good, the government said they wanted to curb fake news with the twitter ban but people bypass the whole process and were able to use VPNs to tweet, so they only thing they wanted to do was to control the flow information of people. They knew the power of twitter during the #EndSars protest, people were able to amass a massive followership of the protest through twitter, they wanted to stop flow of information and also want to stop the advocacy of good governance from Twitter. They noticed the platform was more powerful than they assumed, now that have corrected it but the fact is it was an unfortunate decision and it did us no good but we are happy that the microblogging platform is back.

Is there any piece of information or particular from twitter that led to chaos as claimed by the government?

The Minister of Information Alhaji Lai Mohammed said Jack (Twitter founder) sponsored #EndSARS protest as he RT the calls for donation. The government accused him of one of the persons that caused the chaos inflicted on the government properties during the #EndSars Protest. That wasn't true, we did a factcheck on that and we made sure, we let the minister know that what he said wasn't true, he didn't sponsor like they said but only RT the call for donation as it was about the people's call for good governance. The government leveraged on that as one of the reasons for clamping down on twitter but that wasn't true. What I noticed as a factchecker was that period when twitter was banned, misinformation was still everywhere, it didn't make any significant difference, were still getting a lot of misleading claims from the twitter app. Immediately we sight those misleading information, we refer to the poster, give our review and make our verdict.

How did your media outfit respond to the Twitter ban effected by the Nigerian government?

We didn't take any official position, what we did was that we covered the #EndSARs process and the twitter ban to the later but as a media outfit we were neutral and didn't take any official position. Ours is to be objective, I know we can do editorial writeups that this is our position but the management didn't fit to maintain a position but rather felt let us observe things and report for our audience.

Were you using Twitter?

(Emphatically) Yes!!! Because we didn't believe in it, we didn't take direct stance, if the government says we should not use twitter and we have a responsibility to the people, we have to keep the people informed, if the government is trying to clamp down on the citizens, it is the responsibility of a media outfit like us to say NO we are not following this trend, because we feel it is undemocratic that was why we tweeted all through. We didn't take an official stand but we knew we have a responsibility to deliver to the people, that why we had to stay on twitter to tweet for our audience.

Was there any positive for you brand occasioned by the Twitter ban?

There was no positive to it, it served anybody no good, we used to have a lot traffic from twitter, because people had to stress to access twitter, it reduced our traffic from twitter as much affected us negatively.

What was your platform response to the drop in traffic due to the twitter ban?

We were tweeting all along, we do use to post on facebook and we kept posting on the platform. There was no extra focus or tactical switch. We kept on and assumed there was no twitter ban.

Do you think the Nigerian alternative media should be regulated?

If you are doing everything good and the government want to take a drastic decision, they will still take it. If they think in their own ways, that we need to cut this they will, you cant stop it. But one thing I know, for me is that the alternative media in Nigeria needs a bit of cleansing but I don't know how. I feel there should be a bit of regulation, I don't know how, the regulation should come from the government, what they claim to be regulations in Nigeria is actually a clamp down. For example, China will tell you that they are regulating the social media, but they are not regulating the social media, they are actually shutting down the social media. I feel it will self cleanse, that what we are doing with factcheck. When we factcheck on our platforms we put tweets of those with the misleading stories so if Twitter wants to flag them using AI, it becomes easier. Likewise, the general public will know that this particular person is fond of tweeting claims that way people will be aware, if we call out someone today. At the end of the day there will be a self cleansing for the social media place, at the end of the day I still think there should be a bit regulation as people are going haywire on the space.

On click baiting

As factcheckers we go to certain blog and when we notice a misleading headline from the body of the story we call them out that your headline is misleading. All these you are trying to deceive the public.

Do you have any comment, reflection or something you will like to add?

What I want to say is that we need every alternative news media outfit should have a factchecking desk, when we all come out enmass to expose the false claim, such accounts is flagged, if it is a blog they reduce their visibility. Facebook is also working on that fight against misinformation, if we all invest on the factchecking desk, there is a possibly that we can curb this menace. What I will suggest is for us to continue to call out incorrect platforms to cleanse the Nigerian online space.

On evidence-based reporting

Evidence may not be true, when you get to court all the parties present their evidence at the end of the day one person will be wrong, some evidence maybe a bit correct, when it is not 100% correct it is still misinformation. What we are working towards is to make sure everything is 100% correct so as to feed the audience with the right information. Each new platforms have agenda, what I know is what is fake, even if you call it investigative journalism, propaganda or evidence based if not 100% correct it is fake.

There is one thing I must talk about, there are times we do certain stories and the government does not find interesting they call it fake. Just like our minister of information, you publish a story and he will just call it fake news just like Donald Trump. The fact is the story has hit a part of him that doesn't like, during the #EndSars protest, the Nigerian Army flagged a lot of pictures fake news, fake news, we are not here. When the panel of enquiry was resumed, they later accepted that they were at the scene of the protest. The fact that the government flag a news story fake does not mean it is fake. The government are the main producers of fake news but tag it as propaganda, shaping the narrative or greater good of the Nigerian project.

Thank You very much sir.

Appendix 3

Coding with Nvivo

The screenshot shows the Nvivo software interface. The top menu bar includes File, Home, Import, Create, Explore, and Share. The ribbon contains various tools for clipboard, properties, open, memo link, create as code, query, visualize, code, auto code, range code, and uncode. The main workspace is titled 'Analytical Coding' and displays a table with the following data:

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Characteristics of Nigerian Alternative Media	7	50	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:23 PM	B O
Tensions in the flow of information	7	99	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:53 PM	B O
mitigating political misinformation	7	135	4/23/2022 8:35 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:57 PM	B O
defining misinformation	5	13	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/23/2022 5:09 PM	B O

The screenshot shows a detailed view of the Nvivo software interface. The top menu bar and ribbon are the same as in the previous screenshot. The main workspace is titled 'Analytical Coding' and displays a hierarchical tree structure of coding results. The data is as follows:

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Characteristics of Nigerian Alternative Media	7	50	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:23 PM	B O
Difference between Nigeria and the West	1	1	4/24/2022 11:59 AM	B O	4/24/2022 12:00 PM	B O
Effect of political misinformation	2	3	4/23/2022 9:01 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:22 PM	B O
negative	5	6	4/23/2022 8:28 PM	B O	4/26/2022 12:50 AM	B O
disadvantages of speed to break the news	3	3	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/21/2022 7:46 PM	B O
there is little funds to pursue the stories	1	1	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/21/2022 2:06 PM	B O
Undemocratic nature of the government	1	1	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 8:29 PM	B O
Positive	6	39	4/23/2022 8:27 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:43 PM	B O
Aids investigative journalism	1	1	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:52 PM	B O
Changed the way news is consumed	6	18	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:53 PM	B O
Mission driven and evidence based	1	1	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:52 PM	B O
Reduce government interference in the newsroom	1	1	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:53 PM	B O
Regulate government and non-government actors	1	6	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:54 PM	B O
serving as alternative to what existed before	1	2	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/21/2022 10:01 AM	B O
Strengthening democracy	2	3	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:07 PM	B O
Tell the African story	1	1	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:54 PM	B O
the alternative media offers speed	1	5	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/21/2022 2:39 PM	B O
Transcending the shores of the country	1	1	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:53 PM	B O

File Home Import Create Explore Share

Paste Cut Copy Merge Properties Open Memo Link Item Add To Set Create As Code Create As Cases Query Visualize Code Auto Code Range Code Uncode Case Classification File Classification Detail View Sort By Undock Navigation View List View Find

Analytical Coding

Search Project

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Tensions in the flow of information	7	99	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:53 PM	B O
Economic Factors	5	17	4/24/2022 11:42 AM	B O	5/1/2022 12:33 PM	B O
spreading false information for commercial gains	5	16	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/26/2022 12:46 AM	B O
Political Factors	6	52	4/24/2022 11:43 AM	B O	4/24/2022 12:14 PM	B O
Distracting political issues	1	3	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:34 PM	B O
government influencing false information	4	9	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/21/2022 6:47 PM	B O
government's failure to understand the society	3	6	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/21/2022 6:07 PM	B O
partisanship	2	7	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:30 PM	B O
Platform ban infringement on the public space	6	26	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:23 PM	B O
some platforms are not subjective	1	1	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/21/2022 5:50 PM	B O
social factors	7	29	4/24/2022 11:42 AM	B O	4/24/2022 12:13 PM	B O
Citizens as sources of information	7	24	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/30/2022 6:07 PM	B O
Misleading Intentions	1	1	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:29 PM	B O
religious, cultural, population demography	2	4	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:28 PM	B O
mitigating political misinformation	7	135	4/23/2022 8:35 PM	B O	4/23/2022 9:57 PM	B O
Audience feedback mechanism	5	7	4/23/2022 9:40 PM	B O	4/24/2022 11:39 AM	B O
Collective efforts	1	6	4/23/2022 8:08 PM	B O	4/24/2022 12:20 PM	B O

B O 112 Items

