
SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION AND VOTING DECISIONS DURING 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

*Koblwe OBONO, Ph.D.

**Karimah Aminu DIYO

Abstract

Social media spread disinformation due to their characteristic features of anonymity and ease of producing, accessing, forwarding, and replicating media contents. Although studies have analyzed the influence of disinformation on voter choices, little is known about the false information that went viral on social media during the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections and its influence on voting decisions. Accordingly, the study identified social media disinformation about Muhammadu Buhari (All Progressives Congress) and Atiku Abubakar (Peoples Democratic Party), and its influence on voting decisions. Content analysis of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube posts revealed 10 viral pieces of disinformation about the contestants. Although the messages looked authentic because of their attribution, they were tagged false by independent fact checkers and disclaimers. They were also ascribed as false by survey respondents. Despite their presence, the information had little influence on voting decisions. While Facebook is the most used social media platform (48.6%), Twitter (60%) is the core channel of political disinformation. Posts used multiple story formats and information sources to make claims appear real. A combination of text, video, and picture was used for the political messaging, with pictures accompanying most stories for emphasis and message authentication. Each news story had more than 2000 likes and shares, which has implications for the continuous spread of false information.

Keywords: Social media disinformation, Story formats, Political messaging, Presidential elections, Voter decisions.

***Koblwe OBONO, Ph.D.** is of the Department of Communication and Language Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
Email: koblwe.obono@gmail.com

****Karimah Aminu DIYO** is of the Department of Communication and Language Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
Email: karima.diy@gmail.com

Introduction

The emergence of social media in Nigeria has facilitated the dissemination of political information across the country, but it also facilitates political disinformation. This is particularly true during presidential elections, where candidates manipulate information to disfigure the reputation of their opponents. Although disinformation is disseminated through different communication channels and sources, what is not certain is how false information informs and affects voter behaviour. In other words, it is one thing to be exposed to false information but another thing to act based on falsehood. Until recently, political actors campaigned through traditional and indigenous media platforms to reach the public. They did this through party manifestoes and political messages to influence voter decisions. Today, many presidential candidates exploit the internet and social media with the aim of reaching the public to inform the electorates and enhance political participation and engagement (Ehiemua & Omoera, 2015; Obono, 2018; Eze & Obono, 2018). It is now common to use social media to inform or disinform the public about political matters.

As used in this paper, disinformation is false information created and spread with the aim of harming an entity. Specific to this discourse, the disinformation refers to that targeted against the 2019 Nigerian presidential candidates – Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Such messages may contain propaganda information to disorientate the electorates. The messages are disseminated through diverse media platforms. Social media enable the spread of disinformation because of their support for online content creation, posting, access and replication. This does not suggest that social media is bad; rather, it is sometimes used to harm targeted candidates during an election period. For instance, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other online channels have been used to spread false information that impacts the way in which democracies work (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Social media also have several advantages. They facilitate interpersonal, group and instantaneous mass communication, create livelihood for entrepreneurs and serve as sources of entertainment. The media play crucial roles in disinformation. Disinformation is not limited to politicking. It generates misperceptions, which affect economy, health, climate change, and foreign policy (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). Disinformation compromises the ability of societies to make informed opinions based on false claims about issues, events and people during elections. It aided the 2016 United States presidential elections, which brought Donald Trump into power (Vosoughi, Roy & Alan, 2018, Alcott & Gentzow, 2016), meaning that disinformation is neither a new phenomenon nor limited to the Nigerian political field because

developed democracies also thrive on peddling false information. Social media enable the spread of disinformation because of their support for online content creation, posting, replication and access. Disinformation, therefore, is the deliberate sharing of information that is fully or partially false in order to influence opinion or stir controversy (Niclewicz, 2017)). It is fabricated and deceptive content that is presented as real. Though attractive and designed to increase online readership, sharing and internet revenue, disinformation is intended to mislead and damage the reputation of rivals. Political messaging could play a role in the presentation of misleading information to voters. Accordingly, messages about the two front runner presidential candidates in the 2019 Nigerian elections went viral on social media but many people receive and consume the messages without interrogating the veracity of the information, which may affect voting decisions. The paper examines the political messages that went viral on social media to determine the level of disinformation and its influence on voter decisions.

Statement of the Problem

Studies have been conducted to analyze the role of disinformation in election. Some of these studies show that a substantial number of U.S. adults were exposed to false stories prior to the 2016 election, adding that many people who read these stories believed them to be true and played a major role in that election. Other studies claimed that disinformation on social media affected the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum. Similar studies have been conducted in Italy, Germany, Myanmar, Kenya and Brazil to determine how false news on social media influences the political environment. However, few studies on disinformation exist in Nigeria. The study, therefore, examined social media disinformation about the two front runner presidential candidates during the 2019 Nigerian elections and described its influence on voter decisions. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify social media disinformation about the front runner candidates that went viral during the 2019 presidential elections.
2. Determine the influence of social media disinformation on voting decisions.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory, which was first introduced in Public Opinion Quarterly by Drs. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972). The theory was developed as a study on the 1968 United States of American presidential election to determine what

the most important issues of the election were and what the local and national media reported as the most important issues. The theory explains the relationship between the emphasis that the mass media place on issues and the importance the audiences place on those issues. It portrays the power of the media to determine the relevance of a topic in the public sphere through vivid presentation, positioning of the story and priming. McCombs and Shaw suggest that the media sets public agenda by telling the public what to think about. In essence, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign (Freeland, 2012).

For Cohen (1963), the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but successful in telling its readers what to think about. This is because, people look differently to issues “depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read” (Cohen, cited in Baran & Davis, 2006, p. 314). In the basic sense, agenda setting suggests the creation of public awareness based on the salient issues projected by the news media. The basic assumptions of agenda setting are that: The media filter and shape reality, and their concentration on a few issues lead to public perception that those issues are the most important. In line with this, the paper highlights social media disinformation, audience perception about the issues and its likely influence on voting decisions. There is concern over the agenda set by the media in contemporary society. Relative to news production and dissemination by traditional media, modern media is populated by bloggers, citizen journalists, Facebook and Twitter users, among other online media enthusiasts. Based on this, anybody can create, produce and share uncensored information. While the mass media influence the public’s priorities by focusing attention on their topics, social media also “set the agenda” for their publics. Social media like Facebook and Twitter now serve functions that were formally in the domain of mass media. Their users are increasingly being exposed to news about social and political issues via status updates and shared online links. Wohn and Bowe (2014), therefore, note that companies like Facebook are taking on agenda-setting roles, not just through algorithms, but users’ online social networks. They posit that the way people develop perceptions of reality is an emergent process rather than the previous one-directional top-down approach of agenda setting.

The internet has changed how information is distributed. While Facebook serves as some people’s source of news, traditional mass media outlets no longer function as the primary sources of news. In 2014, half of internet-using adults reported getting news about government or politics from Facebook (Mitchell, 2015). Social media have now assumed roles as media spaces to discuss news of the day as well as first-line reference for people, who increasingly turn to online

networks as the initial source of information (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). Despite these contemporary sources of news, people are still susceptible to their agenda being set (Feezell, 2014). In other words, while media platforms and sources of information have changed, the consequences of exposure to news have not changed. What has changed is who is setting the agenda. The original “agenda setters” referred to the traditional mass media, constituted by news room staff, editors, journalists, among others. However, the “agenda setters” today is mixed, including people who work on the newsfeed teams of social media corporations and write the algorithms. The synergy of algorithms and the lines of code that dictate what appears on user’s news feed make “agenda setters” group to be both human and machine processes.

Methods

The study used the quantitative research approach. It combined Content Analysis and Survey to gather data on the research phenomenon. It began with social media search to determine the level of disinformation about Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar during the 2019 presidential election. After content analyzing the posts on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, false information was identified and ascertained by independent fact checkers and disclaimers from the alleged sources of information. The most used information checkers are: CrossCheck Nigeria (a project where journalists from different Nigerian media organizations work together to determine the accuracy of online information), and Reality Check team (a fact checker website of BBC News). The ascertained misleading information was presented to voters to indicate the messages they believed to be true and whether such messages influenced their voting decisions. Data retrieved through the survey questionnaire and content analysis became the basis for determining the level of disinformation and its influence on voting decisions.

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of social media, posts and survey respondents. To be eligible for selection, the post has to be featured on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube because of the permanence of messages on these platforms, accessibility and high level of use for election matters in Nigeria. The post must contain information about Muhammadu Buhari or Atiku Abubakar and contain elements of false information posted on social media between February 2018 and February 2019. Posts must have at least 500 comments, likes, shares, views or retweets. The same sampling technique was used to select survey respondents. They must be user of any of the selected social media and must have voted in the 2019 presidential

elections. Samples were drawn from Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo state, including Bodija, Agbowo, Ojo and the University of Ibadan. Oyo state was purposively selected because it is not a single party state as it has a history of voting into power governors from diverse political parties. This is important because the study is not interested in a state that has voted the same party continuously. This helps obtain information from electorates from diverse political orientations rather than from a population with an overwhelming support for one candidate. While 10 posts were content analyzed, 220 copies of a questionnaire were administered and 200 became viable for the analysis. Data were analysed through descriptive and textual analysis.

Results

Social media disinformation about the two front runner candidates during the 2019 presidential elections is presented focusing on President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and his opponent, Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Findings show the different aspects of disinformation, news sources, messaging, format of story presentation and influence of false information on voters. Sociodemographic characteristics of citizens play a strategic role in the use of social media for election matters. Respondents are made up of individuals of varying sociodemographic backgrounds. Most are females (56.5%), singles (56.5%), and youths aged 18-35 years (59.5%). In essence, majority of the respondents are young persons who are social media savvy. All respondents voted during the elections. Three social networks were mostly used for political participation, with some voters using multiple networks (Table 1) as shown in the difference between the total number of survey respondents (200) and social media use (269). On the whole, Facebook emerged as the most used (48.6) social media network for information acquisition.

Table 1: Social Media Use by Respondents

| <i>Social Media</i> | <i>Use</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Facebook | 131 | 48.6 |
| Twitter | 74 | 27.5 |
| YouTube | 64 | 23.8 |
| Total | 269 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2019

These preliminary findings are important for a holistic understanding of social media political messaging, disinformation and voting decisions.

Social Media Disinformation about Presidential Candidates

Disinformation about the major presidential candidates went viral on social media. Although some of messages appeared authentic on the surface level due to the nature of messaging and the ascribed story sources, findings revealed elements of disinformation. The stories were presented in text, picture and video formats, and shared to a large number of social media users. Generally, the content of the messages looks real, authentic and factual but examination of contents by independent fact checkers and disclaimers suggests falsehood. The political messaging was intentional to manipulate voters' minds and opinions about presidential candidates. It was a deliberate and tactical attempt to mislead voters using false information. Below are the most viewed and circulated posts about Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar: some messages are falsely attributed to former political office holders, public figures, opinion leaders and significant others, whose political views are often respected based on their integrity. Despite the ascribed "sources" of information, messages are tagged as disinformation by independent fact checkers. Some of the untrue messages that went viral on social media during the 2019 presidential election are presented:

Buhari has finished fighting corruption; he
should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty
and hunger – *Professor Wole Soyinka*

The statement was falsely attributed to the Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka. His picture was added to authenticate the information (Figure 1). The post was published on Facebook by "NAIJA MUST WORK AGAIN", a personal blog with 148,000 followers who viewed the posts claiming that the statement concerning Buhari and Atiku was made by this Nobel laureate.



Figure 1: *Buhari should vacate for Abubakar*
 Source: <https://m.facebook.com/naijamustworkagain/>

The post was liked by 500 users, shared 3087 times and commented on 1365 times. However, CrossCheck Nigeria has written that the information is false and wrongly attributed to Soyinka.

If the current INEC chairman can emulate
 me and conduct free and fair elections,
 nothing will stop Atiku from winning 2019
 election – *Prof Attahiru Jega*

The statement was attributed to former Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman, Prof Attahiru Jega, who conducted Nigeria's 2011 general elections that was considered to be free and fair. The post claims Jega said that if Prof Mahmood Yakubu, the incumbent INEC chairman, conducts free and fair elections in 2019, Atiku Abubakar will emerge victorious.



Figure 2: Proclamation about Atiku Winning

Source: <https://twitter.com/dadiyata/status/115705002226251936>

The post was published on Twitter by “Dadiyata” on January 1, 2019. The Twitter account has 381,000 followers that viewed the post, which was retweeted (shared) by 710 Twitter users and liked by 860 users. Reality Check team however published that the statement is false and Prof Jega never said anything like that.

BREAKING NEWS: Diezani -returns \$90 billion dollars to President Buhari — CNN.

This disinformation was presented in the image of CNN news reporting Nigeria’s former Minister of Petroleum Resources, Diezani Alison-Madueke. In what looks like a teleprompter, the picture of Alison-Madueke is projected, with the newscaster holding papers and a text scroll at the bottom of the screen reads ‘CNN BREAKING NEWS: Diezani returns \$90 billion Dollars to President Buhari.



Figure 3: Diezani returned \$90 billion to President Buhari

Source: <https://twitter.com/flexxyworld/status/1025720419072643272>

The image was posted on Twitter by “Flexxyworld”, whose account has 32,775 followers. The post was shared by 875 twitter users and liked by 1025 users. CrossCheck Nigeria reveals that the information is false as CNN never reported it. The image was to misinform the public.

Buhari has been replaced by a Sudanese clone named Jubril – Nnamdi Kanu.

In a YouTube video viewed 370,000 times, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, explained six “scientific” facts to back his claim that Jubril Aminu Al-Sudani is impersonating President Muhammadu Buhari. The video concludes that “Jubril from Sudan is not a biological clone of Buhari but a completely different fellow impersonating the late Buhari.



Figure 4: Buhari replaced with a Sudanese clone

Source: https://youtube.com/watch?v=rv_A4hnqDpo

The information was widely spread so much that Presidential spokesman, Garba Shehu, published a post on Facebook that a Nigerian at a meeting with President Buhari in Krakow, Poland asked Buhari if he was the real Buhari or “the much talked about Jubril from Sudan”. Buhari affirmed his identity and also posted a video on Twitter where he dismissed the information as rumors.

40 million Nigerians are mad and are
suffering from mental illness – *President
Muhammadu Buhari.*

In a Twitter post, Femi Fani-Kayode claims that President Buhari said 40 million Nigerians are suffering from mental illness. Fani-Kayode, a spokesman to former President Olusegun Obasanjo, former Minister of Culture and former Minister of Aviation, alleges that Buhari made the statement in Paris on November 11, 2018. He wrote on his Twitter page: “Buhari went to France and told the world that one quarter of the Nigerian people are mad? I am at a loss for words! May God deliver us from this man!”. This is reflected in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Buhari said Nigerians are mad

Source: <https://twitter.com/realFFK/status/1227234627091402752>

Fani-Kayode's Twitter account has 938,500 followers that viewed the posts. It was liked by 2,715 Twitter users and retweeted 1,883 times. Pulse News (2018), however, reports that the statement falsely attributed to Buhari was made by Abdulaziz Abdullahi, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health, who said an estimated 20 – 30% of Nigeria's population is believed to suffer from mental disorders. Abdullahi was lamenting about the inadequacy of the attention that mental disorders receive in the country and was advocating for better awareness.

Keep them in poverty, then give them
handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday
– *Lauretta Onochie.*

President Buhari’s media aide Lauretta Onochie published a post on Twitter, alleging that Atiku Abubakar shared food and a cash handout of ₦500 to Nigerians who attended his inaugural campaign rally in Sokoto. Onochie posted a picture showing ₦500 notes attached to several food packs with the caption “KEEP THEM IN POVERTY, THEN GIVE THEM HANDOUTS – ATIKU in Sokoto yesterday”. This is revealed in Figure 6, which also presents derogatory information accusing Atiku of looting billions of naira, buying the PDP candidacy with billions, and spending millions of dollars to acquire forgiveness from America.



Figure 6: Corruption allegations against Atiku Abubakar

Source: <https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/12271727450542082>

Onochie also claims that Atiku plans to scrap the poverty alleviation programmes of the Buhari administration. Her Twitter account has 105,100 followers who view her posts, which is liked by 1520 Twitter users and retweeted by 1800 users. CrossCheck Nigeria found that the image Onochie used was recycled and miscontextualized. The image first appeared online in February 2017 when a Lagos based charity foundation released pictures from an outreach.

Atiku has made a ceasefire deal with Boko Haram in exchange for oil and land in Borno state

A 44 seconds long video posted on Facebook by “Make Nigeria Worse Again” claims that Atiku Abubakar made a ceasefire plan with Boko Haram insurgents. The video claims that the deal would give Boko Haram some land and autonomy in the North eastern state of Borno, and oil fields in exchange for a ceasefire. Captioned “We must stop Atiku’s hellish plan to GIVE AWAY parts of Borno state and oil to Boko Haram in exchange for a cease-fire”, the video was posted on January 8, 2019. It shows Atiku and a Boko Haram member (Figure 7) with inscription indicating “Atiku’s new worst idea”.



Figure 7: Atiku made ceasefire deal with Boko Haram
Source: <https://m.facebook.com/makenigeriaworseagain/>

The video has been viewed more than 190, 000 times, liked by 1200 Facebook users, commented on by 1000 users and shared 994 times. The page that posted the video is liked by more than 9700 Facebook users and followed by more than 10,000 users. However,

there is no evidence that Atiku's campaign announced such a plan. CrossCheck Nigeria writes that spokesperson to Atiku Abubakar, Segun Showunmi said the video is "high level criminal misinformation...".

Atiku avoided arrest in USA because he was
booked as an office aide to Senate President
Saraki – *Lauretta Onochie*

Lauretta Onochie, a social media aide to President Buhari used her Twitter account to make untrue allegations against Atiku Abubakar. In the post, she referred to Atiku and former Senate President Saraki as "low lives". She also claimed that the US Department of African Affairs said that Atiku was not arrested on his USA visit because of their diplomatic ties with Nigeria and the fact that Atiku was booked as an office aide to Saraki (Figure 8). Onochie added images alleging that Atiku refused to pay back a N150 million loan obtained from Ecobank, took N300 million from Bank PHB in 1998 to fund his governorship election and as Vice President.



Figure 8: Allegations against Atiku

Source: <https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/1189869220768686080>

She further claimed that Atiku used offshore companies to siphon millions of dollars to Jennifer Douglas, his fourth wife in the United States. She concluded the post by stating that "Atiku has let his followers down". These allegations through a single post are many and weighty. CrossCheck Nigeria, however, writes that Onochie's allegations against Atiku Abubakar are all claims that have not been substantiated with proof and no court has leveled charges against Atiku over these allegations. Onochie's Twitter account is followed by 106,500 people who view her posts that are liked 1,390 times and retweeted (shared) 978 times.

800 companies shut down in Nigeria during
Buhari tenure - *Monday Osunbor*

A Twitter user, "Monday Osunbor", alleges that 800 companies were shut down in 3 years during Buhari's tenure. He attributed the statement to Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (NACCIMA). The account has 18,010 followers that viewed its posts, liked 1900 times and shared 1090 times. Premium Times reports that the President of NACCIMA, Herbert Ajayi, said that at least 800 companies closed shops in Nigeria between 2009 and 2011 due to harsh operating business environment. This statement by Ajayi was made before Buhari's tenure and the companies that shut down did so during the reign of President Goodluck Jonathan.

US President Donald Trump endorsing Atiku Abubakar

A video posted on Facebook shows United States President, Donald Trump, endorsing Atiku Abubakar. The video was posted by "Fabian Obum Uzochukwu" and was shared more than 3000 times. The video was posted with the caption: "Breaking News from Capitol Hill, Washington D.C United State President Donald Trump has officially endorsed Alhaji Atiku Abubakar as the incoming president of Nigeria."

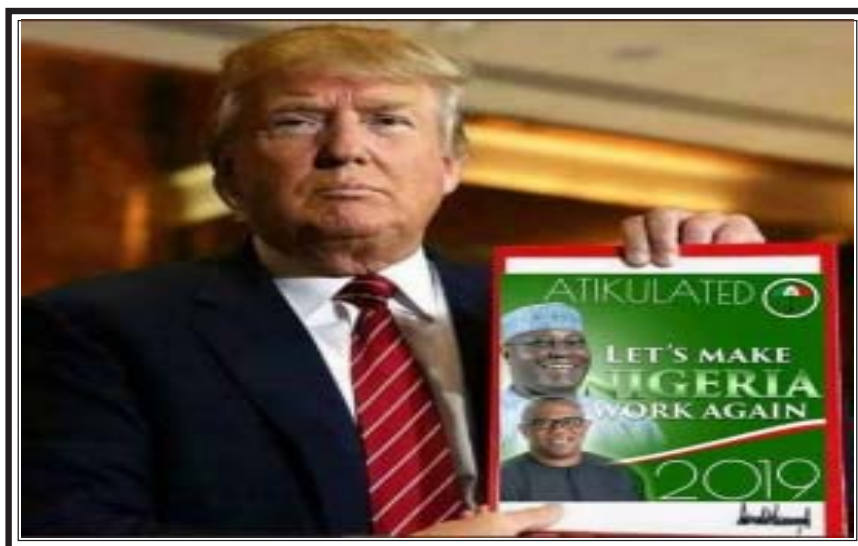


Figure 9: Trump endorses Atiku Abubakar

Source: <https://m.facebook.com/fabianobumuzochukwu/>

CrossCheck Nigeria denies such endorsement by Trump. The video is a doctored version of footage showing the American president signing an executive order weakening the health reforms known as Obamacare in October, 2017. The manipulation of political information is deceptive, and assisted and actualized through political messaging.

Characteristic Features of Social Media Disinformation

Analysis shows how disinformation operated and was sustained during the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections. Posts used powerful information sources, contents, formats, likes and shares to reach many voters on different social media platforms. In addition to the high level of sharing and liking of the false information by the large number of followers, a convergence of visual, textual and audio media was exploited for emphasis. Most of the messages were backed up with pictures to authenticate the information. More characteristic features that sustained disinformation during the election period is summarized in Table 2, which shows that out of the 10 disinformation messages that went viral, six appeared on Twitter, targeted both presidential candidates and mostly used multiple message formats. Twitter (60%) is, therefore, identified as a key source of false political information in the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria.

Table 2: Features of social media disinformation

| <i>Variable</i> | | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|------------------|-------------|------------------|----------------|
| Platform | Facebook | 3 | 30 |
| | Twitter | 6 | 60 |
| | YouTube | 1 | 10 |
| Candidate | Atiku | 5 | 50 |
| | Buhari | 5 | 50 |
| Format | Text | 2 | 20 |
| | Video | 3 | 30 |
| | Multi | 5 | 50 |
| Likes | 500 – 1000 | 2 | 20 |
| | 1001 – 2000 | 5 | 50 |
| | Above 2000 | 3 | 30 |
| Shares | 500 – 1000 | 5 | 50 |
| | 1001 – 2000 | 3 | 30 |
| | Above 2000 | 2 | 20 |

Source: Content Analysis, 2019

The table also revealed that 80% and 50% of disinformation was respectively liked and shared by more than 1000 social media users, implying the engagement of social media users in spreading false information to online community of friends and followers. The use of multiple social media platforms for disinformation affirms findings of the study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the digital platforms used for the spread of disinformation. While Atiku Abubakar and Muhammadu Buhari were objects of disinformation, their political fans contributed to the posting and spreading of false information. This portrays the findings of The Oxford Internet Institute (2019) that in 45 democracies, political parties and politicians use social media to spread disinformation to gain voter support. Knowledge that so many people were exposed to the different forms of disinformation increases the circulation of false political information, which could harm or favour contestants at different political levels.

Influence of Disinformation on Voting Decisions

To determine the influence of disinformation on voting decisions, respondents were provided with 10 false information about the two front runner candidates in the 2019 presidential election. They were to indicate which information they considered "True" or "False" as a

means of assessing voters' knowledge of political disinformation. Table 3 reveals most voters identifying false messages, especially those claiming that Buhari has been replaced by a Sudanese clone (71.5%) and that 40 million Nigerians are mad and suffering from mental illness (71.5%).

Table 3: Respondents' recognition of social media disinformation

| S/N | Message | Against | True | % | False | % | Total |
|-----|--|---------|------|------|-------|------|-------|
| 1 | "Buhari has finished fighting corruption, he should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty and Hunger" – Prof. Wole Soyinka | Buhari | 98 | 49 | 102 | 51 | 200 |
| 2 | "If the current INEC chairman can emulate me and conduct free and fair elections, nothing will stop Atiku from winning 2019 elections" – Prof. Attahiru Jega | Buhari | 89 | 44.5 | 111 | 55.5 | 200 |
| 3 | "Diezani returns \$90 billion to President Buhari" – CNN | Buhari | 96 | 48 | 104 | 52 | 200 |
| 4 | "Buhari has been replaced with a Sudanese clone named Jubril" – Nnamdi Kanu | Buhari | 57 | 28.5 | 143 | 71.5 | 200 |
| 5 | "40 million Nigerians are mad and are suffering from mental illness" - President Muhammadu Buhari | Atiku | 57 | 28.5 | 143 | 71.5 | 200 |
| 6 | 800 companies shut down in Nigeria during Buhari tenure | Buhari | 93 | 46.5 | 107 | 53.5 | 200 |
| 7 | A photo of food packs with money attached. "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday" – Laaretta Onochie | Atiku | 96 | 48 | 104 | 52 | 200 |
| 8 | Video that claims Atiku has made a ceasefire deal with Boko Haram in exchange for oil and land in Borno state | Atiku | 71 | 35.5 | 129 | 64.5 | 200 |
| 9 | "Atiku avoided arrest in USA because he was booked as an office aide to Senate President Saraki" – Laaretta Onochie | Atiku | 89 | 44.5 | 111 | 55.5 | 200 |
| 10 | An image of US president Donald Trump, endorsing Atiku Abubakar | Atiku | 65 | 32.5 | 135 | 67.5 | 200 |

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The information mostly believed to be true is the one attributed to Prof. Soyinka, which claims that Buhari has finished fighting corruption and should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty and hunger (49%). The disparity between some of the voters' opinions is at boarder lines. Examining whether false information affects voting decisions, findings reveal that the messages had an influence on voters at different levels. Table 4 shows that disinformation decreased voters' interest on candidates as well as had a low degree of influence on voters.

Table 4: Influence of disinformation on voters

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Frequency(n=200)</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Decrease in Interest | | |
| High/Great extent | 95 | 47.5 |
| Low/Little extent | 105 | 52.5 |
| Degree of influence | | |
| High | 61 | 30.5 |
| Low | 139 | 69.5 |

Source: Survey, 2019

In other words, disinformation influenced decisions for the selection of a presidential candidate during the 2019 elections. The degree of influence varies but mostly to a little extent (52.5%) and low degree (69.5%). Disinformation is powerful. Hence, despite the high awareness about false political news, the information still affected voter decisions.

Discussion

New media are used to disseminate political information. In Nigeria, political parties and presidential candidates use social media for electioneering (Obono, 2016). The use of different communication strategies is to ensure message reach to people with diverse sociodemographic characteristics. Music, song, video, photography, dramaturgy, incantation, text, and chants are used for political information dissemination (Obono, 2018a; Obono, 2018b). Citizens derive information from different social media platforms. Adults get news about government or politics from Facebook (Mitchell, 2015), which serves as source of news to many. Most youths are also exposed to social media political messaging, which may be true or false. What matters the most is their interrogation of news and what they eventually do with the information. Accordingly, social media have become an information reference point for discussing news of the day (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014).

Following the quick exposure of the audience to online messages, traditional mass media outlets like television or newspaper no longer function as the primary sources of news (Drahasova, 2014). Social media currently perform some of the functions of the mass media. They operate as sources of political information while people make political decisions based on the information. Users are promptly exposed to political news through status updates and shared links. By implication, online media services have blurred the traditional lines (Castells, 2007). Messages sent through the new media should be truthful to favorably impact the democratic process. Factual political messaging is important because inaccurate information would threaten the foundations of democracy, and by extension, economic and human development. The Latin America Center of the Atlantic Council (2019) observes that citizens shape the social and political environment through engagement in politics and participation in elections. Falsehood undermines the democratic process through distorted decision making. Since the support for a candidate depends on beliefs, falsehood colors judgment, leading to the support of positions that are contrary to individuals' value systems.

The National Democratic Institute states that a pre-existing and globally-recognized standard for democratic elections is the right to seek, receive and impart information for informed choice on election day. In other words, voters have the right to seek, receive and impart accurate information that allows informed choices. This position is grounded on the freedom of expression provisions contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). Electoral disinformation subverts this right as it is designed to deceive and mislead voters, create confusion and undermine the electoral process. While Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been exploited for disinformation in the Nigerian political system, Twitter is a major source of false political information during the 2019 presidential elections. The low influence of social media disinformation on voting decisions supports Fracaroli, Contarella and Volpe (2019) observation that disinformation had a negligible and non-significant effect on populist vote during the Italian 2018 general elections. These findings partially contradict some of the propositions of the agenda setting theory in that social media was only successful in telling voters what to think about (Baran and Davies, 2006) but had a low influence on voting decisions.

Conclusion

Disinformation about the two front runner candidates in the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria went viral on social media. This false

information had a low influence on the voting decisions of electorates in the Nigerian political field. The information was spread on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube using political messaging techniques that combined text, video and pictures to make them look real. While Twitter was the highest channel of disinformation, the stories were falsely attributed to respected society members so as to give credence to the information. Media Literacy is advocated. This will equip the public with relevant skills to distinguish truth from falsehood on social media politicking as well as enable the public to make informed decisions about the choice of political candidates.

References

- Alcott, H., & Gentzow, M. (2016). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–232.
- Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. K. (2006). *Mass Communication Theory Foundations, Ferment, and Future*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter power in the Network society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1(3), 238 – 266.
- Cohen, B. C. (1963). *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- CrossCheck Nigeria (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.crosschecknigeria.org>
- Drahasova, E. (2014). Online groups and political discourse: Do online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to political disagreement? *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 40-56.
- Ehiemua, K.I. & Omoera, O.S. (2015). Social media platforms of reality drama: A study of selected Facebook accounts. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 7 (2), 185-201. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.7.2.185_1
- Eze, V. C., & Obono, K. (2018). The influence of Internet use on the political participation of youth in Ikeja, Lagos. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 11(7), 24-43.
- Feezell, J. T. (2014). Agenda Setting through social media: The importance of incidental news exposure and social filtering in the digital era. *Political Research Quarterly* 71(4), 123 -131.
- Fernandez, M., & Alani, H. (2018). Online misinformation: Challenges and future directions. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1145/3184558.3188730>
- Fracaroli, N., Contarella, M., & Volpe, R. G. (2019). Does fake news affect voting behaviour? *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

- Freeland, M. A. (2012). An overview of Agenda Setting Theory in mass communications. *Journal of Applied Media studies*, 4(3), 34 – 40.
- Matsa, K. E. & Mitchell, A. (2014). 8 key takeaways about social media and news. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/8-key-takeaways-about-social-media-and-news>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
- Mitchell, E. M. (2015). Measuring online social bubble. Retrieved from <http://www.doi.org/10.1002/sim.6496>
- National Democratic Institute (nd.). Disinformation and electoral integrity: A guidance document for NDI elections programs. Retrieved from <https://www.ndi.com/disinformation-electoral-integrity>
- Niclewicz, K. (2017). Weeding out fake news: An approach to Social Media regulation. Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies. Retrieved from <https://martenscente.eu/sites/default/files>
- Obono, K. (2016). The architecture and use of social media in the 2015 Nigerian general elections. *The Nigerian Journal of Communication*, 13(1), 47-78.
- Obono, K. (2018a). Sociocultural framing of 'Ambo-Gbabe' music video campaign in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Lagos state, Nigeria. *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 16(1), 31-46.
- Obono, K. (2018b). Resolving the political tension: How online photographs portray candidates in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. *Covenant Journal of Communication*, 5(2), 66-86.
- Pulse News (2018, February 9). FG says around 60 million Nigerians suffer from mental illness.
- Reality Check. (2019). Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/reality_check
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2018). Social media use in 2018. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/social/media/use>
- The Latin America Center of the Atlantic Council, (2019). Disinformation in democracies: Strengthening digital resilience in Latin America. Retrieved from www.atlanticcouncil.org
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science* 35(9), 21-25. Retrieved from <https://media.mit.edu>
- Wohn, D. W., & Bowe, B. J. (2016). Micro Agenda setters: The effect of social media on young adults' exposure to and attitude towards news. *Sage Journals*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305626750>