



Fake News: The Digital Wildfires

Policy Recommendations

1. Corporate organizations and professional associations should work with the governments to [create databases for people to source accurate data](#).
2. Nigerians should be encouraged to [boost their digital literacy level](#).
3. Personal philosophy of [double-checking whatever information](#) should be encouraged among Nigerians.
4. Persons who deliberately violate the laws prohibiting fake news should be prosecuted.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

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As political campaigns gather momentum ahead of the 2019 general elections, mainstream and social [media platforms have become awash with both reliable and unreliable information](#). Yet a 'digital wildfire' which is a false rumour that goes viral in online space, can be dangerous in a religiously and ethnically segmented society such as Nigeria. Such yellow journalism can rip through the public consciousness at breakneck speed to generate panic in society and erode mutual trust among groups. Such [deliberate misinformation](#) can build and feed on community divisions and fuel hate speech which leads to violence and death. A propaganda of this nature is a threat to the notion of truth and so toxic for public discourse because it makes citizens less able to make decisions based on facts. Ultimately, [the fabrication and spread of fake news](#) undermines legitimate media; instils a false sense of truth; and distorts the democratic process. [Fake news is a gross violation of the laws](#) which criminalize libel and scandal. For many Nigerians, the sharing of news is socially validating especially on such platforms as [WhatsApp and Facebook](#) where everyday news is debated, amplified and consumed most times uncritically. Following these backdrops, this edition of Nextier SPD Weekly examines the phenomenon of fake news and makes recommendations on how they can be redressed.

In Nigeria as in most African countries, there is a dearth of reliable, accurate and independent [databases where information can be verified](#). As a result, deliberate misinformation thrives across different sectors. Such fake

news is shared in both mainstream and [social media](#) with the intent to mislead, increase readership, or damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically. Politicians deliberately share fake news about their opponents in order to have undue advantage over them in electoral competition. In the same vein, a number of young job seekers have been duped as a result of fake news of job interviews and employment. [Similarly, fake news has been used to create and feed public panic](#) and anxiety in the [era of terrorism](#). For example, one of the conflicts in Zango-Kataf in Kaduna State in 1992 was sparked off by a piece of meat bought from a trader which was rumoured to be pork. Sadly, before the truth about the meat could be established, several people had been killed in the ensuing religious conflicts (Ludwig, 2008). Also, the extrajudicial murder of Gideon Akaluka was most barbaric. The Christian evangelist of Igbo extraction was arrested and detained by the police on the rumoured accusation of desecrating Qur'an in Kano in 1994. While awaiting trial, some Muslim fundamentalists invaded the prison and beheaded Akaluka and danced through the streets of Kano with his head hung on a spear (Enwerem, 1995).

As a response, the government, and some other organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), [WhatsApp and Nigeria's media organizations](#) have come up with measures to address the level of fake news. For example, there is an ongoing advertisement by WhatsApp aimed at making Nigerians to ['share facts, not rumours'](#). However, more measures are



required to effectively manage the scourge of fake news.

should care more about the source of information than who the sender is.

1. Corporate organizations and professional associations should work with the governments to [create databases for people to source accurate data](#). Fake news proliferates because of the dearth of reliable and independent databases from which the people can verify information. Thus, the creation of such databases will enable fake news to be nipped in the bud through verification.

4. Persons who deliberately violate the laws prohibiting fake news should be prosecuted. Politicians, organizations and other groups which share fake news should be made to face the wrath of the law without fear or favour. Fake news is harmful to the personal, corporate and national integrity which takes years to build. It undermines the tradition of truth which is the bedrock of every democratic society.

2. Nigerians should be encouraged to [boost their digital literacy level](#). Several millions of Nigerians especially those living in rural areas do not only lack access to the Internet, but they also do not know how to use it. As a result, they cannot use the Google or any other search engine to dis/confirm information. So both students and parents should be encouraged to acquire computer literacy.

Fake stories about politicians and political parties will be at all-time high and spreading quickly from group to group like Harmattan fire, as we go to the polls. Some may either lose or win elections due to the impact of fake news, which may sway voters on either side. It may as well fuel electoral crisis with political opponents relying on it to perpetuate electoral violence. With Nigeria as one of the countries to be studied under the \$1Million research grant on fake news instituted by Whatsapp, tackling fake news should go beyond public information, enlightenment, education, equipping and training the relevant authority which should monitor such fake information, to creating information centres with free-toll dedicated lines which people can call to confirm whether particular information is true or false.

3. Nigerians should as a matter of personal philosophy [double-check whatever information](#) they get. Rather than being less stringent if a news story positively affirms an aspect of their identity, Nigerians should show a fair amount of scrutiny about news on political updates and social issues. Nigerians

References

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