MEDIA LITERACY, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 2023 ELECTIONS IN PLATEAU STATE

SHALGAN, LOHNAN MOSES; & TAYE OBATERU

Department of Mass Communication, University of Jos
Corresponding Author: lohnan2002@yahoo.com
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ABSTRACT

The social media seems to have increased the velocity of spreading falsehoods and misinformation, being even more influential around electioneering times. This study looks at how low media literacy has worsened the spread of misinformation in the 2023 general elections in Plateau State, Nigeria. Using a mixed methods research design, the study attempts to measure media

Introduction

Media literacy refers to the competencies to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media texts in different formats. It is indispensable in a digital context, where the propagation of misinformation and disinformation mostly occurs in the realm of social media (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). All of this has now been amplified by social media, drastically affecting the way people communicate, giving instantaneous access to information, while at the same time enabling the dissemination of misleading content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). It has been noted that during the 2023 elections of Plateau State, Nigeria, misinformation and disinformation have fostered to unprecedented levels of spread that hinge on voter perception and electoral outcomes.

The growing dependence on digital platforms for political information has left questions as to whether the electorate can actively assess news sources (Guess,

literacy across different demographics and its effects on voter perception and decision-making using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The outcomes suggest that the low levels of media literacy predispose individuals to manipulation from that misinformation into electoral choices, widening political polarisation and destroying the integrity of democracy. This study identifies the main sources and channels for the spread of misinformation across social media sites, political campaigning, and some traditional media. This study focuses on the furtherance of false narratives and the curtailment of critical engagement with factual information through algorithmic content, echo chambers, and cognitive biases. The study suggests targeted media literacy campaigns informing voters how to identify credible sources, policy regulations on disinformation spread, and technological approaches such as AI fact-checking systems to identify and flag misleading content as possible ways out of the problem. Enhancing partnership between government agencies, civil society organizations, and digital platforms was noted as a significant step toward combating misinformation and creating an informed electorate. This study provides an overview to the general subject of information disorder and emphasizes the urgent need to make media literacy an anchor against manipulative activities of the opinion in any democratic process.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Misinformation, Disinformation, Social Media

Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). Research indicates that those with low media literacy are more likely to believe in and spread false information, fuelling political polarisation and decay of democratic values (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). In Nigeria, where media literacy contributes significantly to the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of various populations, its role in ameliorating the impact of misinformation during elections has gained scholarly attention (Ogundele, Gyang, & Sambo, 2015).

This study takes a look at the level of media literacy among voters in Plateau State and how this affects misinformation and disinformation during the 2023 general elections. By studying media consumption patterns in Plateau State, alongside levels of exposure to misinformation, and the decision-making process of voters

during the 2023 elections, the study will shed light on how media literacy affects electoral integrity. This would feed into academic conversations about information disorder and enable the shaping of proposed interventions for increasing digital literacy among the Nigerian electorate.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A lack of media literacy can create an environment where the public is unable to tell genuine information from half-baked or completely false news. Since people lacking in media literacy skills may unwittingly pass on or accept such information, the wrong content passes around within a very short time frame, impacting voters' decision-making. Elections can be hijacked by wrong information, which does grave damage to the democratic process. Misinformed voters may make equally erroneous decisions as to voting for or against certain candidates, parties, or even issues in the given scenarios due to the wrong perception of certain candidates, parties, and issues. It may also, in issues of elections, compel them to make some decisions such as voting in the wrong persons or not to vote at all. One component of tactical deception counteracts the requirement for truthfulness, balance, and factuality in information crucial for decision-making (Jones-Jang, Mortensen & Liu, 2019).

When taken in the context of disinformation and misinformation, groups that polarize are stronger. Disparate individuals receiving two distinct falsehoods of information may become sequence-polarized, which mutes the opportunity for fruitful political debates along such common ground in many critical ways.(Gaultney, Sherron, & Boden,2022).

Media illiteracy can breed dispositions applying distortions to capabilities that distinguish between genuine news institutions and sources of misinformation. When the audience gets so confused between genuine and questionable Information or sometimes confounding fake with authentic news, they become skeptics to all authentic websites and news as well. Such ignorance can be exploited by those in politics for the sowing of negative narratives against their opponent or against the entire political system. They could enforce existing divisions to serve their self-interests thus deepening the crisis of democracy in the conduct of elections. (Guess, Lerer, Lyons & Sircar, 2020).

Studies have shown that a lot of people are digitally incompetent and hence unable to avoid all forms of fake news obtained from the internet. For an individual

low in digital literacy skills, it is far easier to accept misinformation as fact and share it with others. Hence, people being low in such digital skills could be one of the major distributors of the fake news. In this sense, misinformation is against voter turnout during elections. (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). Poor media literacy can also weaken the citizens' ability to make informed decisions regarding policies. If they cannot tell between well-researched policy proposals and those exuding funny claims, voters might then go ahead to endorse policies that are not in their interest. (Rand & Sirlin, 2022)

Misinformation can distort people's assessments of candidates' qualifications, positions on issues, and records. Voters may thereby support or oppose candidates by relying on misinformation instead of their accurate judgments. These far-reaching implications of disinformation and misinformation in social media due to poor media literacy call for an investigation into the role that the phenomenon has played in the outcome of the 2023 general election in Plateau State. Several studies indicate that the youth population across various parts of Nigeria suffers from inadequate media literacy. Wogu, Afolabi, & Iwhiwhu, (2019). Study on media literacy levels among undergraduates of South-Eastern Nigerian Universities concluded that they lacked the critical ability to assess and analyze media. In a similar vein, Ogundele, Gyang & Sambo (2015) reported levels of media literacy that were low among the lecturers and students of tertiary institutions in Plateau State. The implication from these studies is that the young people consists majorly of social media users and voters who lack adequate media literacy.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to examine the implication of inadequate Media Literacy, misinformation and disinformation on social media during the 2023 elections in Plateau State.

To achieve the above goal, the study will be guided by four objectives:

1. To determine the extent of media literacy among the different demography within Plateau State's population during the 2023 general election.
2. To ascertain whether low media literacy of the public was a factor for circulation of fake news and false information during the 2023 elections in Plateau State.
4. To determine specific instances of misrepresentation in the social Media during the election period in Plateau state.

5. To examine the effects of misinformation and disinformation for electoral decisions and democratization in Plateau State.

Literature Review

Media Literacy

Media literacy is an essential competency in this digital era where individuals need to critically analyze, evaluate, and create media content on different platforms. According to Buckingham (2019), media literacy is how one accesses, understands, evaluates, and participates in digital communication effectively. It has cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, those vital for fostering critical thinking and informed decision-making (Potter, 2018).

Researches show that people with high media literacy tend to fall less toward misinformation and disinformation (Hobbs, 2021). Kahne and Bowyer (2017) found that media-literate individuals were more likely than other people to check the facts of dubious online claims before they share them. Furthermore, the low media literacy group is prone to believing and propagating false narratives rampantly, especially during elections when misinformation is strategically placed to sway public opinion against each other (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017).

According to Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, digital media literacy goes beyond being able to read and write, to understanding social media algorithms, echo chambers, and the role of bots in amplifying misinformation. Research by Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) states that social media, and particularly its algorithm-driven content curation, aggregates familiar beliefs in silos on Facebook and Twitter, fuelling misinformation.

Traditional forms of media such as newspapers, television, and the radio continue to be major sources of information. These sources are generally more regulated than social media, but not exempt to misinformation. Studies have shown that those who get most of their news through traditional media generally had higher media literacy levels since news reporting is usually under editorial scrutiny to be more accurate (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). However, misleading information can still be disseminated through biased reporting, sensationalism, and political influence (Duffy & Tandoc, 2019). Thus, media literacy efforts should also focus on evaluation of the digital and the traditional sources.

This, therefore, means that there will have to be an educational intervention, regulatory measures, and digital literacy programs for improving media literacy

(Vraga & Tully, 2021). Therefore, the most effective media literacy training should include source verification, checking facts, and knowing how to spot a bias in news content or emotional manipulation (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Misinformation versus Disinformation

Misinformation refers to untrue or misleading information spread without malice; disinformation refers to content knowingly false and intended to manipulate public perception with a will to deceive (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Research indicates that misinformation tends to emanate from cognitive errors and unsubstantiated sources while disinformation is crafted for the purpose of manipulating political and social discourse (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). False narratives about elections can easily damage public trust in these very democratic institutions (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook. 2017).

Traditionally, printed newspapers and many forms of broadcasts were the mainstay sources from which political information was derived and were often considered credible because of some regulatory bodies that oversee the content. Misinformation and disinformation through traditional media sources have, however, also occurred in instances. Evidence shows that newspapers and broadcast media have actually contributed to misinformation by means of politically-biased reporting, editorial slants, and sensationalist headlines (Duffy & Tandoc, 2019). Talk shows, especially in politically charged atmospheres, have equally facilitated the spread of misleading narratives that shape public perceptions (Ojebode . 2012).

A case of traditional media creating and propagating a sphere of misinformation was visible in the 2023 elections in Plateau State when some newspapers and TV stations were accused of broadcasting unverified claims. Unlike social media, where misinformation spreads rapidly through interaction on the part of users and through the algorithms, traditional media engage in public discourse through repetitive exposure and authoritative sources (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Furthermore, misinformation may be spread by newspapers and broadcasting stations when they do not verify political statements or when, however unintentionally, they amplify misleading political rhetoric. The problem is compounded by a few politically controlled media that place partisan interests above objective reporting.

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An effort to neutralize the effects of misinformation emanating from traditional media should be focused on enhancing journalistic integrity and regulation and building a bridge between mainstream media and independent fact-checking organizations. Promoting responsible journalism and holding journalists accountable for the content they produce will be very important in limiting both misinformation and disinformation's influence in elections (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Social Media as a Means for Disseminating False Information

Social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become the primary means through which information is shared. They allow for quick interactions; yet, the same platforms can fund the rapid propagation of misinformation and disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Research indicates that algorithm-driven content distribution helps create echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and restrict access to varying views (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). Additionally, social media platforms are essentially unregulated, so real-world perpetrators can cloak their identities under the protection of anonymity, thus encouraging certain bad actors in the dissemination of untruths (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018).

The social media channel especially favours misinformation during elections since misleading information is amplified through coordinated campaigns of misinformation and automation of bots (Bovet & Makse, 2019). Social studies show that in those situations false news spreads more rapidly than true news, fuelled by the emotions of the content shared, and hence receives a great deal of engagement and shares (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Such manipulation has far-reaching consequences for democratic processes as voters keep being subjected to manipulated content designed to sway their political opinions (Persily & Tucker, 2020).

Another important factor in the propagation of misinformation on social media is the tendency for information to be shared peer-to-peer. Oftentimes, people are more likely to trust information coming from family and friends and pass it on, almost regardless of whether it has been verified (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This sort of social trust drive most times aggravates the spread of false narratives, especially within settings where low levels of digital literacy exist.

Besides social media influencers and political actors, the other factors in misinformation amplification include algorithmic dissemination strategies that foster the virility of information. Studies find out that these influential figures with the greatest audience can propagate those misleading narratives which gain ground improvement fast, especially when they coincide with the prejudice of their audience (Ferrara et al., 2016). This situation is aggravated from the other side by micro targeting schemes used by political campaigns relying on personalized user data in order to disseminate false information that actually pitches in into reinforcing existing contrary viewpoints of the targeted audience (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Actions against misinformation on social media entail the intervention on the platform itself, such as the use of content moderation, fact-checking labels, and algorithm changes to reduce visibility (Lazer et al., 2018). However, the effectiveness of these interventions is still debated, as misinformation persists and often adapts to new strategies against its dissemination. In addition, malicious actors have now mastered advanced tactics ranging from deepfake videos to artificially generated content, thus making it hard to differentiate between valid and false information (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

Clear media literacy programs should tackle the unique challenges of the social media realm and instruct users on how to evaluate online content in a critical manner, as well as withstanding manipulation. This is all the more important in order to bring governments and technology firms together with civil society organizations to promote sustainable policy implementation that encourages transparency, accountability, and responsible everyday engagements online (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). 2.4 Impact of Misinformation on Electoral Decisions

Misinformation and disinformation shape perceptions of candidates and policies, thereby influencing voter behaviour. Persily and Tucker (2020) indicate how carefully constructed falsehoods can shift public opinion and influence election outcomes. In the Nigerian setting, these have become a tool to delegitimize political opponents, incite violence, and cast doubt on electoral processes (Ojebode, 2012). With the timber of less-than-adequate media literacy further amplifying these impacts, there is a need for direct interventions geared towards enhancing information discernment by voters.

Strategies for Fighting Against Misinformation

Different strategies for fighting misinformation include media literacy, fact-checking, and legislative action. Studies suggest that higher media literacy allows individuals to detect and counter misinformation more effectively (Vraga & Tully, 2021). Fact-checking organizations like Africa Check and Dubawa perform the important task of verifying election-related misinformation in Nigeria (Adeniran, 2022). The other important line of intervention is the policymaking one, targeted toward halting the flow of disinformation by regulating digital platforms and promoting responsible journalism (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Furthermore, social media companies must take active steps to countering misinformation. The platforms could also deploy AI tools for detection and labelling of false content, ensure transparency with political ads, and give greater prominence to credible sources in search results and news feeds (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020). On their part, states have a responsibility to create legal frameworks that will impose liability on natural and legal persons responsible for spreading harmful misinformation while ensuring these regulations do not violate free speech (Tambini, 2017).

Misinformation awareness and digital literacy education should be integrated into curricula at all levels, from basic education to adult education. Community fact-checking initiatives and cooperation between academia and media organizations and technology companies will help make the public more empowered to distinguish between misinformation and authoritative sources (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Advocating for responsible information-sharing behaviours while passing legislation enforcing media ethics and accountability will aid in building a more informed and resilient society in digital times.

Misinformation can effectively be curbed using a plethora of intervention measures aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity and reinforcing democratic institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory, developed by Gerbner (1972), is useful in understanding the impact of long-term exposure to media content on people's conception of reality. It contends that heavy consumers of media, especially television and digital, will conceive of reality in very much the same way as the most common or predominant messages that they have been exposed to.

With particular reference to the influence of misinformation and disinformation on social media, Cultivation Theory would suggest that persons who are constantly subjected to the view of faintly represented content may then become recipients of such false narratives. This is especially critical during elections where misinformation on candidates, issues, and electoral processes could sway public opinion and have a basis in ballot choice. Given that social media is a prominent source of news for many of its users, an environment with heavy exposure to skewed and manipulated information could cultivate skewed perceptions of political and social issues (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015).

This theory is aptly applicable to the 2023 elections in Plateau State, where very little media literacy worsened the effects of misinformation. Many voters were made continuously exposed to these confusing and misleading narratives, for instance, fake endorsements, photo shopped cartoons, and fictitious electoral processes. As predicted by Cultivation Theory, those who were unschooled in critical media literacy abilities became more swayed by these untruths, thus inducing behavioural changes in voters and political polarization.

Additionally, the algorithms of social media reinforce cultivation effects as they curate personalized content that agrees with the already existing beliefs of the users. They create echo chambers that limit exposure to other views and solidify belief in the misinformation. Provided that people do not have the capacity to critically analyse sources and fact-checking, they become more likely to hold the misleading narratives which prevail in their digital worlds (Stroud, 2011).

Interventions through media literacy programs, fact-checking solutions, and regulating content are, therefore, essential in attenuating the effects that Cultivation Theory downplays. Thus, equipping individuals with skills to critically assess their media content will limit the influence of the misinformation and create an informed electorate.

Research Methodology
Research Design
The research design for this investigation combines qualitative and quantitative in its mixed-methods approach and dimensions. The two methods used, therefore, allow a complete understanding of the impact media illiteracy has when it comes to misinformation and disinformation during elections. The quantitative involved administering structured surveys, while in-depth interviews with purposively selected respondents were qualitative.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted voters across the entire Plateau State in Nigeria, that is, all 17 Local Government Areas. A stratified random sampling technique was then applied to make certain that all sorts of demographics were acquired, including age, educational level, and patterns used to access the internet. In all, 400 respondents participated in the survey while nine key informants were interviewed.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were obtained using both structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions that assessed respondents' levels of media literacy, their exposure to misinformation, as well as how it affects them in their voting decisions. Interviews provided more thorough insights into how misinformation is diffused and the modes by which its effects can be lessened.

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data set was analysed and assessed using frequencies ad percentages to establish the relationship between media literacy and ignorance about misconception. The qualitative data from interviews were thematically analysed to identify the recurring patterns and major narratives concerning misinformation during elections

Findings and Discussion

Extent of Media Literacy

Findings prove that a considerable number of voters from the state of Plateau lack necessary media literacy skills that can help in critiquing political information. In the survey outcome, it was revealed that 62% respondents were clueless about sources that were credible compared to misleading content. Furthermore, political news without verification was shared by 54% of respondents. These statistics indicate an increase in the necessity of better media literacy in helping voters identify credible information.

Contribution to Misinformation

Insufficient media literacy was a major contributor to the spread of misinformation and disinformation in elections held in 2023. It was revealed

through the study that voters with poor digital literacy had 70% chances of sharing unverified content than voters with higher media literacy. False information often shared includes:

Sensationalist Headlines (82% of respondents reported having seen salacious headlines on social media).

Manipulated images and videos (49% of respondents admitted to believing at some point in doctored media).

Fabricated Political Advocacy (63% of the respondents encountered false endorsements of candidates by reputed figures).

Algorithms on social media escalated the issue because there are more echo chambers. Study of user engagement showed that 85% increased likelihood of individuals engaging with political content were likely to see similar, possibly misleading information, further entrenching their beliefs.

Specific Examples of Misinformation

Fake Endorsements: Those were claims that some notable figures endorsed some candidates, whereas this was formally denied in public. For instance, a viral post falsely claimed top religious leaders endorsed some candidate, among some segmented religious voters.

Doctored Images and Videos: Those were altered images misrepresenting political events. For example, manipulated videos suggesting electoral fraud were widely disseminated and worsened the sense of distrust in the electoral process.

False Voting Procedure Information: These were incorrect entries about polling places and requirements, thereby confusing some segments of voters, who were led to believe they are not eligible to vote at all.

Ethnic/Religious Misinformation: These were divisive false narratives attributed to a candidate as having said derogatory remarks, thereby heightening tensions among different ethnic and religious groups.

Electoral and Democratic Consequences

Consequently, the consequences of misinformation and disinformation in the elections were devastating. The biggest consequences:

Cognitive Manipulation: 37% of respondents admitted to being swayed by misinformation in their voting decisions.

Tarnished Faith: 64% of respondents indicated they lost trust in institutions of democracy as a result of misinformation related to the elections.

Political Divisions: The dissemination of misinformation served to incite more social and political divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

Understating Political Participation: 29% of non-voters said misleading reports on electoral fraud or violence kept them from taking part in elections. Such findings indicate the need to enhance media literacy programs. Such programs will ensure that voters are equipped to accurately scrutinize the credibility of published political information.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Low media literacy provided critical sustenance for the consumption of misinformation during the elections in Plateau State and subsequently affected voter conduct and democratic participation. The results thus underscore the necessity of equipping voters with the skills that will allow them to engage with digital information in a more responsible manner.

Recommendations

Education and Awareness Campaigns: Media literacy programs should be run in schools and communities to strengthen critical thinking among voters, especially in distinguishing between misinformation and information-"Go verify it before you share it."

Policy Interventions: Enhance regulations on the deliberate misinformation campaign. Secondly, scapegoats found guilty should be levied with penalties.

Technological Intervention: Encourage the development of fact-checking tools and AI-based content verification systems. These social media companies need to ramp up content moderation to spot and flag misleading information.

Working Collaboration Among Media and Government: Establish partnerships with government institutions, the media, and fact-checking entities to build ethical journalism and accurate electoral reporting.

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