

Combating Fake News in the Digital Age in Nigeria: The Christian Perspective

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Abstract

In the era of largely unmonitored information-sharing platforms such as social media, and other sources of crowd-sourced content, the spread of fake-news poses a significant concern. A contemporary challenge faced globally is the identification and mitigation of fake-news propagated through digital channels. This paper delves into the Christian perspective on combating fake-news in the digital age, shedding light on the motivations driving the creation and dissemination of false information, as well as exploring why many individuals propagate such misinformation without subjecting it to thorough scrutiny. The study underscores the impacts of fake-news on the society at large. Its effects traverse spheres of life, triggering panic, and fostering public discord, fueling political tensions, inciting religious strife, and even posing substantial health threats. Acknowledging the strides made by governmental bodies in raising awareness about the perils of fake-news, the paper advocates for a collaborative approach involving religious leaders and scholars to augment these efforts, thereby potentially curbing the proliferation of misinformation. Employing a range of primary and secondary sources, including the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, theological interpretations, scholarly journals, and reputable websites, the paper presents a series of strategies aimed at combating fake news. The paper provides recommendations to address the pervasive spread of fake news, emphasizing the role that religious leaders and scholars in educating and empower social media users to eschew the dissemination of unverified information. By upholding Christian values and principles, individuals can actively contribute to the reduction of fake news within society.

Keywords: fake news, information literacy, combating, Bible, teachings of Jesus.

Introduction

The issue of misinformation through fake news is as old as humanity itself. It can be traced back to the time when the serpent deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, leading them to go against God's command regarding the forbidden fruit. Genesis 3:13 illustrates this: "Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'" False or misleading information can have significant negative impacts on social, political, religious, and economic relationships. A notable recent example is the heightened attention to "fake news," a form of disinformation that includes hoaxes, frauds, or deceptions designed to mislead. The widespread nature of

false information and its rapid dissemination pose serious threats to our society. Alan Bundy (1998) remarks that: "Misinformation on the internet is dangerous and part of a much larger picture. Bending the truth or telling outright lies is not new. It's just the messenger who has changed, and this messenger spreads the word lightning fast and to far-flung places."

Before the digital age, people relied on conventional media as their trusted news sources. Although not entirely free from spreading fake news, conventional media was less susceptible compared to today, where social media provides individuals the freedom to create and share information easily. This digital landscape has been exploited by some with harmful intentions to spread fake news.

The recent surge in fake news is alarming due to its widespread impact on society. It spreads rapidly and is challenging to control or correct, especially as it has the power to distort truth, posing a threat to societal well-being. Christianity cautions against falsehood and encourages its followers, through Biblical teachings, to uphold truth and integrity. This paper will explore fake news from a biblical perspective, examine the reasons behind its creation and spread, its negative effects, and efforts by governments to counteract it. Additionally, it will discuss Christian approaches to combating fake news and offer recommendations, concluding with a summary.

Understanding Fake News

The term "fake news" has evolved to mean different things to different people. Fundamentally, "fake news" refers to news stories that are untrue: these stories are fabricated with no verifiable facts, sources, or quotes. They can sometimes be propaganda meant to mislead readers or "click bait" crafted for financial gain.

Fake news is essentially made-up content designed to look like legitimate news, with the intention of deceiving people. It's crucial to understand that the information is false, yet appears true. Fake news is akin to a large-scale false rumor. Fake news is part of a broader landscape of misinformation and disinformation. According to Merriam-Webster, misinformation is false or inaccurate information spread without intent to deceive. Disinformation, on the other hand, is false information spread deliberately to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

Former President Donald Trump expanded the definition of "fake news" to include negative coverage of his administration. The term gained significant attention during the 2016 election and continues to be relevant today, especially with the spread of false information around COVID-19 vaccines and climate change. Claire Wardle argues against using the term "fake news," considering it inadequate for describing the problem. She prefers "information pollution" and identifies three issues: "misinformation," "disinformation," and

"mal-information." She explains: (i) Misinformation is false information shared without harmful intent. (ii) Disinformation is shared with harmful intent, and (iii) Mal-information involves sharing true information intended to cause harm. From a Christian perspective, spreading false information goes against the values of honesty and truthfulness emphasized in scripture.

Effects of Fake News

In the opinion of the researcher, current information-sharing systems, which are largely unregulated, have significantly changed traditional information behavior. Information published based on falsehoods, even if containing a small amount of truth, can have serious consequences for governments, individuals, businesses, and information professionals. For instance, some people began consuming excessive alcohol when it was falsely claimed that it could cure or prevent COVID-19.

- i. Misinformation is particularly troublesome because it creates confusion and mistrust among its audience, making information difficult to use. It can lead to misunderstandings about significant social and political issues, resulting in chaos and tension.
- ii. Academically, fake news can impact grades. High-quality information sources are essential for research, assignments, and papers. If these sources contain false or misleading information, it can result in lower academic performance.
- iii. It poses health risks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation spread rapidly, such as the false ideas that inhaling hot air could kill the virus, drinking certain alcohol could prevent it, or that 5G technology was spreading it. Social media is rife with false information about treatments for various conditions, and believing these can lead to harmful health decisions. The World Health Organization's Director-General even described this situation as an "infodemic."
- iv. Fake news obscures the truth. It is an act of deception, hiding behind a façade while pretending to be truthful. Christianity emphasizes honesty and rejects falsehood. The Bible teaches the importance of truth, as seen in passages like Proverbs 12:22, which states, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy."
- v. Fake news can damage relationships. Individuals have private information in their personal and social lives that should be kept confidential. However, modern tools can easily expose this information.
- vi. Misunderstandings about Christianity often stem from misinformation and disinformation on the internet. Some people may even leave the faith due to

misinterpretations of its teachings. For example, derogatory content shared online can misrepresent Christian values, leading to prejudice and hostility.

- vii. Economic impact: The internet hosts many scammers and fraudsters who sell false promises and subpar products. Professional fake news creators aim to manipulate opinions for their gain through targeted disinformation.

Some Local Efforts to Regulate Social Media

In addition to various awareness campaigns on misinformation undertaken by the Nigerian government to educate the public on the dangers of fake news, regulating social media content has also been a concern in the National Assembly. According to The Guardian, in 2016, the Senate withdrew the Frivolous Petition Bill sponsored by Senator Bala Ibn Na'Allah. This bill aimed to regulate the use of social media and Short Message Service (SMS) in the country, but it faced backlash from Nigerians who found parts of it unacceptable. The bill was withdrawn after the Senate's committee on human rights and legal matters reported that its provisions conflicted with existing laws.

Nigeria's former Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, stated at a press conference in Abuja that: "It has reached a point where the government may no longer stand by and allow this to continue." Clearly, no responsible government would want social media activities that could ignite unrest in the country to persist. However, the minister reassured stakeholders that responsible journalists have nothing to fear, as the government does not intend to stifle the media. Former Vice President Yemi Osinbajo also cautioned religious leaders about the dangers of fake news spreading on social media during an interfaith dialogue on promoting religious tolerance organized by the UAE Embassy in Abuja. He said: "I believe that as people of faith, as leaders, and as active users of social media, we have a responsibility to our society and to everyone else to ensure it does not become an instrument of conflict and division." He urged for "self-regulation and ensuring that we do not allow our platforms to be used by those who promote discord."

The Washington Post reported that in 2019, Nigerian lawmakers proposed legislation that would impose heavy fines or jail time on internet users for spreading what authorities deem fake news, known as the social media bill. The bill was sponsored by Senator Mohammed Sani Musa. According to the draft text: "Police could arrest individuals whose posts are perceived to threaten national security, influence elections, or 'diminish public confidence' in the government. Authorities could also cut internet access for those violating the regulation. Anyone accused under this proposed law would have the opportunity to defend themselves in court. Those found guilty of intentionally spreading false information could face fines of up to N300,000 or three years imprisonment. Companies, including media outlets, could face penalties of \$27,500."

If the social media bill is passed, law enforcement agencies would have the authority to shut down the internet at any time. The bill has been forwarded to the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Human Rights, and Legal Matters for thorough examination and to hold public hearings. This measure is intended to protect Nigerians from falsehoods that may cause unrest at a time when countries worldwide are dealing with the challenges of misinformation.

The Christian Ways of Combating Fake News

In the Christian faith, believers are not only granted the right but also entrusted with the responsibility to seek knowledge, comprehend current events, and act in a manner that aligns with the teachings of Christ to prevent harm or regression. The Bible, as the foundational text of Christianity, equips us with essential principles to discern the truth amidst a sea of information. It urges us to scrutinize the source of information, evaluate its credibility, and ensure that it harmonizes with the Word of God. Is the information logical, verifiable, and consistent with Christian values? Does it contribute to the well-being of ourselves and others?

The practice of combating fake news finds its roots in the rich tradition of Christian scholarship. By drawing upon the wisdom of the Scriptures, Christians are able to adapt and respond effectively to the challenges of the modern age. To combat the spread of misinformation and falsehoods, Christians can apply the following biblical approaches:

i. Discernment and Critical Thinking

The ability to think critically and discern truth is a hallmark of Christian wisdom. Proverbs 3:13-18 extols the value of wisdom, stating that those who find wisdom are blessed and gain understanding. Likewise, 1 Thessalonians 5:21 instruct believers to "test everything; hold fast what is good."

As Christians, we are called to exercise discernment when receiving news and information. Philippians 1:9-10 encourages us to abound in love with knowledge and all discernment, so that we may approve what is excellent. By engaging in thoughtful analysis and evaluation before forming judgments or taking action, we can guard ourselves against deception and misinformation.

ii. Lifelong Learning and Growth

A crucial aspect of combating fake news lies in cultivating a spirit of continuous learning and personal growth. Proverbs 1:5 emphasizes the importance of acquiring wisdom and guidance through listening and learning. In Colossians 3:16, believers are urged to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. Jesus Christ Himself serves as the ultimate example of growth and knowledge. In Luke

2:52, we learn that Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. This underscores the value of seeking knowledge in both spiritual and practical matters to fulfill God's purposes in our lives.

The Christian community recognizes the holistic nature of knowledge acquisition, encompassing both spiritual truths and practical wisdom. Proverbs 18:15 reminds us that the heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, and the ears of the wise seek it out. By continuing to pursue knowledge, staying informed about our surroundings, and engaging in lifelong learning, Christians can fortify themselves against the dangers of misinformation and deception. Proverbs 2:6 assures believers that the Lord gives wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to those who seek Him diligently.

iii. Source Validity

The validity of a source is crucial for effective communication between the message sender and receiver. Source validity aligns with key communicative principles. The Bible emphasizes this in Proverbs 18:13, which states, "To answer before listening—that is folly and shame." This underscores the importance of understanding before speaking. When sharing news or information to inform others, the distributor should ethically ensure the source's validity before disseminating it. If not, false information can mislead recipients, causing harm that might be difficult to rectify.

iv. Investigation

In today's world, characterized by the prevalence of information from computers, smart phones, social media, and the internet, we have instant access to knowledge. These tools offer significant benefits but can also be misused, spreading falsehoods rapidly, inciting panic, or leading to societal harm. Thus, combating misinformation in our information age requires discernment to differentiate between truth and falsehood. As Christians, verifying truth, understanding sources, and managing knowledge are essential aspects of our faith. The Bereans, as noted in Acts 17:11, were commended for examining the Scriptures daily to see if what they were taught was true (NIV). Augustine emphasized the pursuit of truth, urging believers to seek wisdom and understanding. He noted, "The truth is like a lion; you don't have to defend it. Let it loose; it will defend itself" (Augustine, as cited in Schaff, 1886). The early church fathers practiced rigorous verification and preservation of Scripture, ensuring that what was passed down was authentic and true. This meticulous approach ensured the reliability of the biblical texts we have today (Metzger, 1987).

v. Verification

We must verify information thoroughly before acting on it or forming judgments. This principle is echoed in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test everything; hold fast what is good" (NIV). Information must be reliable before it is accepted, applied, and shared.

Sometimes, we encounter unreliable sources. A biblical example is found in 1 John 4:1: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (NIV).

The story of the Bereans demonstrates the importance of verifying truth. They cross-referenced what they learned with Scripture to ensure its validity, setting a precedent for us to follow.

vi. *Caution with Information*

The Bible advises caution with information. James 1:19 advises, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (NIV). This encourages careful consideration before reacting to information. In conclusion, believers are called to verify the truth of what they hear to avoid the consequences of rash decisions. Patience and discernment, as taught by Christian tradition, are essential in navigating the vast sea of information today.

vii. *Seeking the Views of Experts*

Information literacy involves the ability to discern credible sources from those that are less reliable. It is crucial to identify experts in various fields, including their leading organizations and associations. While expertise is not infallible, as both individual scholars and organizations can make mistakes, experts are generally more likely to be correct than laypeople. This grants them a certain authority within their fields, as they take public responsibility for their errors. The Bible offers guidance on seeking wisdom and understanding. In James 1:5 (NIV), it states, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." This principle highlights the importance of seeking knowledge from those who are wise and knowledgeable. In the Christian tradition, asking questions and seeking guidance is a way to overcome ignorance. Proverbs 15:22 (NIV) says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." This underscores the value of consulting experts to gain insight and understanding. Throughout history, Christian scholars have engaged with experts in various fields to address complex issues. For example, theologians like C.S. Lewis and more recently, scholars like N.T. Wright have contributed to discussions on contemporary issues by integrating faith with scholarly insights (Wright, 2012).

In recent times, Christian medical ethicists have collaborated with experts to form opinions on modern bioethical issues such as cloning and organ donation. Respecting the domain of each science, we must trust and follow those who are qualified to address these subjects. For instance, the claim that 5G mobile technology spreads COVID-19 has been debunked by experts.

When we encounter information from non-credible sources, it is our responsibility to investigate further before acting on it. In today's information-rich environment, ambiguity is inevitable; therefore, one must verify dubious claims or, if verification is not possible, suspend judgment and action.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Fake news is one of the most significant challenges facing the world today. The ability to discern truth from falsehood on social media is crucial. Misinformation spreads rapidly, distorting reality and posing a threat to society. Social media can disseminate false information instantly, inciting panic or anger through misleading messages, audios, and videos, potentially altering the course of nations negatively. Therefore, we must be vigilant against spreading misinformation through emails, spam messages, conspiracy theories, and fake news articles, which harm society.

The Bible warns against spreading falsehoods. Proverbs 12:22 states, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy." It is sinful to pass along gossip, rumors, and unverified information. In today's world, a lie can spread globally in seconds. The internet is a powerful tool with vast information, but as Christians, verifying truth and managing knowledge responsibly is essential. Before sharing information, we must seek its source, investigate, and consult experts. Being informed about current events is crucial. After thorough investigation, rely on discernment to judge the information's reliability. Be humble enough to accept the truth from any source, as we are called to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19).

We are hopeful that by following biblical principles and applying modern techniques to sift through the information overload on social media, the issue of fake news can be managed and its harms mitigated.

At this point, the following recommendations are made for everyone:

1. Fake news equates to lying, which is a grave sin in Christianity with spiritual consequences.
2. Adhering to Christian teachings can greatly reduce the spread of fake news and its negative effects.
3. Religious leaders should collaborate with the government to raise awareness about the dangers of fake news and educate social media users against spreading unverified information.
4. Authorities should propose laws to combat the spread of fake information while respecting freedom of expression.
5. Those who spread harmful fake news should be prosecuted to deter others.

Finally, we must be humble enough to accept the truth from any source, whether it comes from an opposing viewpoint, a dissenting voice, or an ordinary person. Proverbs 11:2 reminds us, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom." Accepting truth from any source is a sign of true humility.

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