



HISTORICIZING DISINFORMATION IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and the consequent dissemination of false or misleading information to achieve, among others, intended political purposes. It involves a deliberate intent to mislead people. In this article, I first of all trace its evolution through the lens of its rather major occurrences from 1999, when Nigeria's Fourth Republic was birthed after years of military rule, to 2024, when Nigeria marked the 25th anniversary of uninterrupted democracy in the same Fourth Republic, the longest stretch since its independence in 1960. I focus my attention mainly on the presidential elections held every four years within this timeframe. I then try to point out what this history of disinformation in the country's presidential elections in the Fourth Republic says not only about the nature of disinformation itself, but also the nature and future of democracy in the country.

Keywords: Historicizing, Disinformation, Presidential elections, Democracy, Nigeria, Fourth Republic.

Introduction

Nigeria gained its independence from Britain on October 1, 1960 (Amaefule, 2023). Though a sovereign state, it retained the constitutional monarchy it inherited from Britain. In 1963, however, it became a republic. But its experience of democracy, the latter often defined, borrowing from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, as "government of the people, by the people and for the people" (Cited in Behrouzi, 2005), has always been without the interruption of the military. In 1966, for instance, the military ended the country's first civilian republic and, ipso facto, democracy. While the second republic came in 1979, it was again truncated by the military in 1983. The third republic, ten years later in 1993, amidst the then "third wave" of democratization in Africa (Huntington, 1991; Diamond, 1999), in the 1990s (Amaefule, 2019a), could not see the light of day. This was due to the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election by the military. But the fourth republic and thus the country's return to democracy came in 1999, and to date, the military has kept off. Thus, the longest uninterrupted run and experience of democracy in the country since independence.

Among other factors that aided Nigeria's political independence, mention must be made of the media. The media was also not found wanting in challenging the military and in helping to restore democratic rule in the country (Jacob, 2019). Its role, however, has often seemed ambivalent. While helping on the one hand, to construct a collective national identity, it has also often represented regional and sectional interests (Aimufua, 2007). In fact, Uche (1989) notes how the establishment of mass media in Nigeria was along ethnic lines and how such ethnic orientations somewhat affected their functionality. But the same ambivalent role of media in the



country's democracy is seen in yet another thing: in the fact that while the media served and continues to serve as an instrument of information, it also served and continues to serve as an instrument of disinformation (Ikeanyibe et al, 2017).

In this article, I first of all trace the evolution of this reality of disinformation in Nigeria's political landscape, especially, in the presidential elections, through the lens of its major occurrences from 1999, when Nigeria's fourth republic was birthed, to 2024 when Nigeria marked the 25th anniversary of uninterrupted democracy in the same Fourth Republic, the longest stretch since its independence in 1960. I then try to point out what the history of disinformation in the country's presidential elections in the Fourth Republic says not only about the nature of disinformation itself, but also the nature and future of democracy in the country. Granted, there have been some studies in recent times on the reality of disinformation in Nigeria's politics and democracy. Some of these, however, have dealt with issues and realities concerning disinformation in one historical period or another (Fasakin et al., 2017; Oduwole, 2020; Ugbo and Bebenimibo, 2020; Omotola, 2024). Igohosa's work (2021), for instance, deals with the role that disinformation plays in electoral violence in Nigeria from the 1960s to 2019. Ibrahim and Ekdale's (2025) deal with disinformation as regards the 2023 presidential elections. But none of the studies that I am aware of have tried to give a panoramic view of disinformation in presidential elections from the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 to date. This, then, is the gap that this article endeavours to fill. It is structured into five parts. The first opens with the introduction; the second tries to understand what disinformation is all about and then, the nature of presidential elections in the Fourth Republic; the third considers the understanding of things in terms of disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections from 1999-2024; the fourth deals with the critical evaluation of the historical rundown, and the fifth and final part concludes the article.

What is Disinformation?

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and consequent dissemination of false or misleading information to achieve intended political purposes (Roberts and Karekwaivanane, 2024). Here, there is a deliberate intent to mislead (Luberisse, 2023). It seems to portray political opponents in a bad light and thus help to mislead and manipulate the electorate in their opinions, decisions, and voting behaviour (Roberts and Karekwaivanane, 2024). It often takes the form of not only authentic material used in a deliberately wrong context to make a false connection, such as an authentic picture displayed with a fake caption, but also outright false information, shared through graphics, images, and videos (Nemr and Gangware, 2019). Sometimes, it also takes the form of manipulated image and video content, where controversial elements are photoshopped into innocuous contexts to evoke anger or outrage, or even the form of fake news sites or ones that are deliberately designed to look like well-known sites (Nemr and Gangware, 2019).

When the latest case is the case, that is, when there is a deliberate impersonation and mimicry of a well-known news site in the spread of misleading information, what one has is "fake news" (Lazer et al, 2018). Zimdars and McLeod (Cited in Silverman and Smith, 2024) define it as "purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading, or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news". Thus, fake news could be said to be a type of disinformation that is not only dressed in the borrowed apparel of mainstream news (Dao,



2024), but also made catchy so that it could go viral (Grazulis and Rogers, 2019; Pope Francis, 2018; Higdon, 2020). However, the same term, “fake news”, has also come to depict, in recent times, an inconvenient truth that political actors do not like or accept and thus easily dismiss (Devine, 2018). Given that this second understanding of fake news is almost an instrumentalization of the term in order to delegitimize news media (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019), it is good to state that it is not included here in our understanding of what disinformation is.

Understanding the Nature of Presidential Elections in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

Presidential elections in Nigeria are held every four years to elect the president who, according to section 130(2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is the Head of State, Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federation. By the time of writing, seven such presidential elections have been held consecutively in the Fourth Republic (1999; 2003; 2007; 2011; 2015; 2019; 2023), resulting, as it were, in a peaceful transfer of power (Sule and Sambo, 2024). Candidates stand for these elections, conducted by the country’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), on the platform of political parties. As was the case in the second republic in 1979, the Fourth Republic runs on the wheels of a multiparty system, although most times, one party, especially the ruling party, more than others, would dominate the political landscape. Sule and Sambo (2024) have noted how most of these parties in the Fourth Republic often lack ideology and principles and how the main motive for their existence has been to secure power at all costs or to negotiate with stronger parties for material benefits in order to support the large parties in election campaigns. While such a multi-party system was introduced, among others, to curtail regional and ethno-religious considerations during elections, the fact remains that the latter still hold sway. Among other factors that have also influenced these elections are money politics, violence, and disinformation. It is our preoccupation here to ascertain the nature and depth of the influence of the latter and the implications it holds for the future of democracy in the country and the understanding of the nature of disinformation itself.

Disinformation and Presidential Elections in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, 1999-2024

The focus will be on some of the major occurrences of disinformation in presidential elections within the given timeframe. And for better comprehension, I have divided the issues here into the following periods:

a) Presidential Elections, 1999-2011

Within this space of time, presidential elections were held four times in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. As was the case with the first and second republics and even the ill-fated third republic, in 1999, at the beginning of the Fourth Republic, traditional media - radio, television and the newspaper (aided by word of mouth) helped in the dissemination of ethnically-charged disinformation. However, around the early 2000s, there appeared a certain kind of revolution in the media landscape in Nigeria. Some Nigerians living in the West, precisely, in the United States, set up online citizen media platforms that soon became the source of information not only



for the ordinary Nigerians but also the traditional media journalists at home (Kperoqi, 2024). Some of these online citizen media platforms include Elendu Reports (established in 2003), the Nigerian Village Square (established in 2003), the Times of Nigeria (established in 2005), Sahara Reporters (2006), and PointBlankNews (2007) (Kperoqi, 2012). And some years after, some more changes came to be observed with the emergence of social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. In fact, the 2011 presidential elections would go down in history as the first time Nigeria experienced the use of social media platforms, especially Facebook and X, in political participation (Nnanyelugo and Nwafor, 2013). As expected, all these, coupled with the expansion of the mobile data subscriber base and the growing availability of affordable smartphones, would coalesce to play a part as well not only in the spread of information but also of disinformation, before, during and after presidential elections (Hassan, 2023; Daramola, 2022).

b) Presidential Elections, 2015-2019

Within this space of time, presidential elections were held two times in 2015 and 2019. Hinde (2017) has noted, for instance, how in “all political campaigns there are debates about facts, allegations of lying and actual blatant untruths.” The campaigns mounted by the two major parties in Nigeria in the build-up to the 2015 presidential elections, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC), proved Hinde’s observation right. For instance, the disinformation was promoted mainly by the APC and some Muslims that the then president and candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, of the Ijaw ethnic minority group, was the sponsor of Boko Haram insurgents. The latter’s attacks in the northern part of the country, especially, the Muslim-dominated North East, were seen by them as Jonathan’s strategy of preventing voting there and consequently reducing the chances of his opponent, the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim Fulani, from emerging as the president (Onapajo, 2016). Allegations, among others, of corruption, missing money, training of snipers to kill political opponents, etc., were also made against him and those around him (Obasanjo, 2013).

All these “blatant untruths”, among other factors, both internal and external, would see to his defeat at the polls, becoming the first incumbent president in Nigeria’s political history to lose a re-election, and thus the first case of alternation of party in power in the country, what LeVan (2019) calls “party turnover.” In his book, *My Transition Hours*, Jonathan (Cited in Ibekwe, 2018) acknowledges the reality and gravity of a disinformation campaign against him, then, thus: “Throughout my tenure in office as President, there was a constant barrage of what Donald Trump has now termed ‘fake news’ coming from a well-oiled media propaganda machine. I can say as a matter of fact that there were never any snipers in training or already trained. There were no lists of political enemies to be taken out. There was no missing \$49.8 billion, and more importantly, I can say that even those who made these and other allegations knew that they were false. This probably explains why many of these allegations died a natural death.”

On his own part, Buhari was also not spared from some of the same disinformation. His party and, ipso facto, he himself, were accused by the Peoples Democratic Party, some Christians, and states in the southern part of the country, of pursuing an Islamization agenda (Odunsi, 2021;



Onapajo, 2016). In fact, it has recently emerged that Cambridge Analytica, a British analyst firm, was contacted by an unnamed rich Nigerian supporting Jonathan (without, however, the latter's knowledge) to run a campaign against Buhari during the said election wherein he was presented as a Boko Haram sympathizer and Muslim fanatic who was out to introduce sharia in Nigeria and to end the rights of women (Cadwalladr, 2018). The overall aim of the disinformation campaign was to show Buhari in a bad light and thus make the people to vote for Jonathan (Roberts and Karekwaivanane, 2024). And the framing in this manner of the disinformation against Buhari here may not be unconnected to events in the past wherein not only had Boko Haram chosen him, among others, to moderate talks with the federal government ("Boko Haram Picks", 2012), he himself is credited to have said that, "Any attack on Boko Haram is attack on the North" ("Buhari Said Attack", 2014; Fasan, 2020). Even before then, in 2001, the same Buhari had confessed, during a talk in Kaduna, thus: "I will continue to show openly and inside me the total commitment to the Sharia movement that is sweeping all over Nigeria. God willing, we will not stop the agitation for the total implementation of the Sharia in the country." (Oyewole, 2014; Maja-Pearce, 2024). Hence, while the two parties, PDP and APC, as shown above, were engaged in disinformation, it was the latter rather than the former that, thanks to online and social media platforms, had the upper hand and rode to victory (Maho, 2017). And with the victory came the birth of state-sponsored disinformation and later the illusion of truth in governance (Obi, 2024).

That said, the same disinformation campaign would extend to the next general elections in 2019. Many months before the elections, there was the disinformation that the same Buhari, then the sitting president and the presidential candidate of the APC, had died in London, where he was receiving treatment, and that it was actually his clone, Jubril, from Sudan, that was calling shots at Aso Rock, Nigeria's seat of power. The disinformation that went viral on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube was traced to the now-incarcerated Nnamdi Kalu, who led the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a separatist movement that was later declared a terrorist group by the government. "I can stand and prove who I am, but Buhari cannot do the same thing. The man you are looking at on the television", Kalu had told a crowd, "is not Buhari. His name is Jubril, and he's from Sudan. After extensive surgery, they brought him back. They taught him Buhari's mannerisms, and he came back deceiving all of you. He cannot deceive Nnamdi Kalu and IPOB" ("The Man You are Looking", 2017). Buhari (Cited in Brennan, 2018; Busari, 2019) would later be forced to refute the claim during an interaction with Nigerians living in Poland: "It's the real me, I assure you. I will soon celebrate my 76th birthday, and I will still go strong." But that did not prevent a good number of people from still being skeptical as to whether the person was Buhari or not. These included even supporters of Buhari (Hassan, 2019).

Meanwhile, the two main political parties in the same 2019 general elections, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), with Atiku Abubakar as its presidential candidate, and the All Progressives Congress (APC), with Buhari, as said above, as its presidential candidate, tried as much as possible to outdo each other in the spread of disinformation. They both established "Media centres" - Buhari New Media Center (BNMC), and Atiku Media Center (AMC) - which were more or less centers for the dissemination of disinformation, or, what some have even called, "fake news factories" (Hassan, 2019). For instance, during the campaign, a photo



appeared online allegedly showing Atiku sharing food and money during one of his rallies. It was shared on X (then known as Twitter) by President Buhari's social media adviser, Laurretta Onochie, with the caption, "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday." But when fact-checked, it was found out to be a photo of a different event organized two years earlier in 2017 by a foundation, the Kokun Foundation, which campaigns against hunger ("Nigerian Elections 2019").

Likewise, a video was shared showing the same Atiku entering a deal with members of the Islamist group, Boko Haram, in exchange for land and oil. But it soon turned out that no such thing happened ("Nigerian Elections 2019"). Also, an image of US President Donald Trump, appearing to endorse Atiku, was posted on Facebook by an account linked to the same PDP. But when fact-checked, it showed that the image was already three years old, appearing first in 2016, during the US presidential elections campaign (Busari, 2019). And like the situation in 2015, it has been discovered that an Israeli political consulting and lobbying firm, Archimedes, was deeply involved in spreading disinformation during the election, targeted, especially, against Atiku Abubakar, and in praise of Buhari (Debre, 2019). Again, though the two candidates in the presidential election, Buhari and Atiku, were Muslims from northern Nigeria and more or less identified as Hausa-Fulani, they had vice presidential candidates from southern Nigeria, both Christians, but of different ethnic groups, PDP's Peter Obi, an Igbo, and APC's Yemi Osinbajo, a Yoruba. Hence, like the case in the 2015 elections, ethnically-motivated disinformation was not missing in action (Egbunike, 2019).

c) **Presidential Elections, 2023-2024**

Within this space of time, a presidential election was held once in 2023. True to the report that disinformation campaigns seeking to manipulate African information systems had surged nearly fourfold since 2022 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024), the February 2023 presidential election in Nigeria did witness a notable surge in disinformation as well. The three major candidates, Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), received their more than fair share of them. For instance, unfounded claims were made against Obi that he was affiliated to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which had been proscribed by the government, and that he was actually receiving orders from them (Nwonwu et al, 2023). Also, a doctored photo of Obi eating in a restaurant and drinking two bottles of Hero beer was posted on X (formerly Twitter), barely a month before the presidential elections, by an APC member, Adamu Garba. (Garba II, 2023). The intentions were to cast him, a Christian, in a bad light for the many Muslim voters in northern Nigeria (Okpi, 2023). This is significant when it is recognized that alcohol is forbidden under Islam, and in many places in northern Nigeria, the public sale and consumption of alcohol are prohibited by Sharia law. His drinking of the Hero Beer with its symbol of a yellow rising sun that includes the colours red, green, and black – making it similar to the flag of Biafra, was a way of associating him yet again with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). (Okpi, 2023) Equally, allegations were that when he was the governor of Anambra State (2006-2014), he demolished some mosques and sent many Muslims out of the state. This was later found out not to be true (Tyohemba). Also, some months before the election, a purported photo of Tinubu was



posted on Facebook showing him sick and indeed in a wheelchair in a London hospital, where it was said that he was receiving treatment. It was equally said that his doctors had advised him to discontinue from the presidential race (<https://perma.cc/LS5Z-TWA9>). This followed his absence for more than a week from the campaign trail. However, it was later found out that the photo was doctored, and the claim that the said photo showed him in the hospital was false (Bakare, 2022). With a video of him spinning a fitness bike, Tinubu later posted on his X account that he was still in the race. “Many”, he noted, “have said I have died; others claim I have withdrawn from the presidential campaign. Well... Nope. This is the reality: I am strong, I am healthy and I am READY to serve Nigerians from Day One” (<https://x.com/officialABAT/status/1576645496516808705?>)

Similarly, before the said general elections in Nigeria, a video came out on TikTok claiming that Donald Trump had endorsed Peter Obi. “I think I’m going to support Peter Obi because he is the man who is so much concerned with accountability”, he supposedly said in the video. This was soon discovered to have been false and the video was only a deepfake (Flanagan, 2023). This is an instance of what is called “Foreign Leader Impersonation” in the emerging deepfake tactics (Insikt Group, 2024). But the information had reached many before the clarification came. The same goes for a similar video that went viral on WhatsApp and Facebook claiming that US billionaire, Elon Musk, had expressed his support for the same Peter Obi’s presidential ambition. “I am so delighted”, Musk appeared to be saying, “about the work of the Peter Obi campaign. Nigerians need to take their country back. He is someone I have great respect for and will be working with in the future by next year.” The video was later found to be fake and AI-generated (Awojulugbe, 2022). Also, prior to the election, an audio of a conversation between Atiku Abubakar, PDP’s presidential candidate, Ifeanyi Okowa, his running mate, and Aminu Tambuwal, the then Governor of Sokoto State and Director General of Atiku’s presidential campaign, came out. It showed them plotting on how to rig the 2023 presidential election. But it was later discovered to be also a deepfake, even as many had listened to it by then (Shibayan, 2023). This is akin to what happened to one of the top presidential candidates in Slovakia’s most recent election, Michal Šimečka of the Progressive Slovakia party. Two days before the elections, he was heard, in a deepfake audio recording, allegedly discussing with a journalist on how to rig the election. The audio would later go viral on social media platforms like Telegram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook (Meaker, 2023; Devine, 2024).

In yet another way, deepfakes became, before the same 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, alibi for many political actors to hide the mistakes or misdeeds of their clients and candidates. A case in point is the then APC presidential candidate, Ahmed Tinubu. Weeks before the election, while speaking with private stakeholders in Owerri, Imo State capital, and in a bid to justify his refusal to attend town hall debates, he had incoherently said, to the surprise of those around him, “A town hall, different from balabu blu blu bulaba” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05x3dFTckmI>.) Often called “TBB -Tinubu’s Balablu blunder”, it was used by many, at the other end of the political spectrum, and, indeed, by many Nigerians, to underscore, among other such statements, how mentally unsuitable they believed that Tinubu was to be the country’s president. Even, the gaffe eventually made its way into the exam questions of a university (Oluwasanjo, 2023). However, it was not long before those close



to him came out first, to water down the gaffe on the pretext that it showed Tinubu's sense of humour (Oluwasanjo, 2022), and then later, to dispel the authenticity of the video with the excuse that the video was doctored, it was a deepfake (Odunsi, 2023). But the fact of the matter is that it is not; it really happened, making their move yet another spread of disinformation (Sulaimon, 2023). Theirs, however, underscores the reality of what has come to be termed "liar's dividend" in which political actors and figures, directly by themselves or indirectly through proxies, easily deny the truth and authenticity of genuine videos and audios by denouncing them as deepfakes (Citron and Chesney, 2019; Schiff, et al., 2024). This way it becomes for them a kind of damage control strategy (Goldstein and Lohn, 2024).

Barely a month after the election, an audio was leaked containing the conversation between Peter Obi and the founder of Living Faith Church, otherwise, Winners Chapel, Bishop David Oyedepo. Therein, Obi is said to have referred to the 2023 election as a religious war, between Christians and Muslims, especially, those in South West and parts of North central. While Obi's critics say that the audio, now called the "Yes Daddy audio", is authentic (Kperogi, 2023; Arogbonlo, 2023), Obi himself maintains that it had been doctored with the aim of not only presenting him in a bad light before Nigerians, but also of manipulating Nigerians against him (Mojeed, 2023). And with Obi's intention to contest the next presidential election, even in 2024, disinformation was still targeted at him. For instance, in 2024, some videos were manipulated and then circulated online showing him declaring war on people from the northern part of the country, the majority of whom are Muslims, when, in fact, he had, in a speech, spoken about declaring war on economic stagnation, insecurity, and corruption ("Videos Being Twisted", 2024). Similarly, another video was circulated online supposedly showing him leading the end bad governance protest in Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, in August 2024. The protest which also held in some other cities in the country was called following the hardship, inflation, hunger and a general economic crisis that engulfed the country then. But the truth is that the video was taken during his visit to the headquarters of his then party, Labour Party, where he had mediated a clash between the Labour Party and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) ("Videos Being Twisted", 2024).

Towards a Critical Observation of the Foregoing Historical Rundown

a) **Disinformation as a Consistent Feature of Presidential Elections in Nigeria:** One of the first things that the foregoing history of the dissemination of disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections shows is that disinformation thereof is never a new thing. It has always been there, right from the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999 and then backwards to even before Nigeria got her independence. This seems to underscore the observation of Roberts and Karekwaivanane (2024) that disinformation is as "old as politics in Africa."

b) **On the Nature of Disinformation Itself:** The historical rundown also shows how there is a certain deliberateness noticed as regards the dissemination of disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections. This is in the sense that those involved in spreading disinformation here actually knew what they were doing, they did not do such accidentally. They knew as well that what they were dishing out or disseminating was information, or better, a type of information, even as the information was misleading. Thus, from the beginning, the intention to mislead had



been there. A case in point could be the aforesaid doctored photo of Peter Obi eating in a restaurant and drinking two bottles of Hero beer which was posted on X (formerly Twitter) barely a month to the presidential elections by an APC member, Adamu Garba. Garba knew what he was doing and what he wanted to achieve with what he intentionally posted. Here, one sees at work the three features which Fallis (2015) believes encapsulate the reality of disinformation: 1) that disinformation is a type of information 2) that it is misleading information, 3) that it is nonaccidentally misleading information. Also, what is said here has a way of helping to differentiate disinformation from another related term, “misinformation.” Whereas in disinformation the dissemination of the misleading information is done deliberately, that is, the person knows that the information is false, in misinformation it is done inadvertently, unknowingly, with the person believing that the misleading information being dished out is true (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018). Hence, the deliberate intent to mislead, on the part of disinformation, is what separates it from misinformation.

c) **Electoral Behaviour and Outcome:** Related to what is said above is the fact that those involved in disseminating disinformation in presidential elections in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic knew that the same disinformation would have consequences: it would affect not only the way that the people would come to see a particular person(s), but also the way they would come to behave towards the person(s), especially, in casting their votes. For instance, the barrage of disinformation mounted by the then opposition party, APC, against the administration of the then incumbent and PDP candidate, Goodluck Jonathan, in the lead up to the 2015 presidential election, eventuated, as hinted at above, in the electorate voting against him and consequently, his loss at the polls.

d) **Evolution in the Means Utilized in the Spread of Disinformation:** It is equally observed that there is a certain evolution in the means utilized in the spread of disinformation in the same presidential elections in the country’s Fourth Republic. For instance, by the time the Fourth Republic began in 1999, it was the traditional news media, especially, television, radio and newspaper, which were used in the dissemination of disinformation. This is said not oblivious of the fact that word of mouth was also made use of. While the state owned some of these traditional news media, some private individuals also owned some and accordingly, deployed them, as shown above, in the dissemination not only of information, but also of disinformation. This shows that both the state and private-owned media were involved in the dissemination of disinformation. By the time both online citizen media platforms and social media platforms came, they were also used in the same way alongside the traditional news media. In fact, as pointed out before, 2011 presidential election saw Nigeria make use for the first time social media platforms in political participation (Nnanyelugo and Nwafor, 2013), an experience that would be intensified four years later during the 2015 presidential election (Aduloju, 2016). By 2019 presidential election, apart from making use of both the traditional media and other social media platforms, there was a peculiar use of Whatsapp by the major players in the same election. This has made some to dub that election “Nigeria’s first WhatsApp election” (Cheeseman, et al, 2020). But the same election saw also to the extensive use of WhatsApp in the dissemination of disinformation, as was the case, in recent times, in other countries, as well (Belli, 2018; Harris, 2019).



However, for the 2023 presidential election, a somewhat change was observed in the way disinformation was disseminated. Unlike the previous presidential elections, it witnessed more to the dissemination of disinformation by way of AI-generated deepfake images, videos and audios (Oghenemaro and Ayo-Obiremi, 2024; Ezeja, 2023). This shows at least four things. One, the reality and ubiquity of artificial intelligence as a digital innovation. Two, its often deployment in negative deepfake technology and the ease and inexpensive way this could be done. Three, the attendant threat that such negative deepfake technology poses to the integrity of democratic elections, a concern being shared by many the world over (Puutio and David Timis, 2020; Pawelec, 2022; Ray, 2021; Jee, 2020; Feliba, 2023; Muñoz, 2023; Murphy, 2024). Four, that each historical era often makes use of information and communication technologies of that era to spread not only information but also disinformation (Roberts and Karekwaivanane, 2024). Yes, this deployment of AI-generated content during the aforesaid 2023 presidential election, has come to be considered by some as most probably one of the first among general elections in Africa (Okolo, 2024).

But that does not mean that the same AI has not been employed in some positive sense in the presidential elections in the country. In fact, Nigeria remains one of the few countries in Africa wherein AI is somewhat employed by the electoral body, in this case, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Itodo, 2024). And to deepen whatever use that was made of the same AI in the past, INEC recently created a division of Artificial Intelligence under the existing ICT Department, to “continue to harness the positive aspects of AI and to mitigate its negative impact on elections” (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2025). That said, it is good to underscore the fact that with the advent of both the social media platforms and AI-generated contents and deepfakes, that word of mouth and the traditional media, already hinted out above, were not thrown away in the spread of disinformation in presidential elections. As a matter of fact, they have sometimes become the amplifiers and megaphones of the disinformation originated by the social media platforms and AI-generated contents (Moyo, et al, 2020). Here, then, one sees in evidence how disinformation “spreads through a complex interaction of social media, online news sites, traditional media, and offline spaces” (Stepney and Lally, 2024).

e) **Relationship with Other Elections:** Even if not explicitly stated thereof, one thing about disinformation in presidential elections in the Nigeria is that it has a way of influencing disinformation in other elections, especially, governorship elections. A case in point here is the 2023 governorship election in Lagos State, Southwest Nigeria, where, for instance, ethnically-charged disinformation present during the presidential election had a much more field day. Yes, of the many candidates of the said governorship election, two were much more pronounced: the incumbent governor and the candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Babajide Sanwo-Olu, and the Labor Party candidate, Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour. For years, close to almost every governorship election in the state, the statement, “Lagos is a no man’s land”, always pops up. While the statement is literally wrong since there are people who are and have been indigenes of what is known today as Lagos, it has, however, been there at least since 1947. It is credited to the Igbo-born lawyer and politician, Jaja Wachuku, later independent Nigeria’s first Speaker of House of Representatives (Akinbode, 2021). But it is reported that Wachuku had wished, by that statement, to convey the idea that Lagos is “an all-Nigerian city – wherein all Nigerians were



entitled to equal rights.”(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaja_Wachuku). Yes, a sort of home for all, which correctly captures the reality of Lagos as a megacity! In other words, he used it not because he believed that nobody owns Lagos, but because being then the Federal Capital Territory, he believed that Lagos belonged to all Nigerians (Ojikutu, 2023). During his inauguration in 1979 as the first civilian governor of Lagos State, Lateef Jakande, a Yoruba, also used the phrase to describe Lagos State (Lawal, 2021). In 2013, Orji Kalu, an Igbo, and former Governor of Abia State, also echoed the same statement (Nnanna, 2013).

But close to the 2023 governorship election, that statement came to be presented as something said very much recently by the generality of the Igbo people, encapsulating, as it were, their desire to take over Lagos state, a core Yoruba land. This is also significant given: a) that Peter Obi, the 2023 presidential candidate of the Labour Party and an Igbo, had floored Bola Tinubu of the APC and a Yoruba in Lagos during the 2023 presidential elections b) that although Rhodes-Vivour is Yoruba, his mother is from the Igbo ethnic group. Hence, hawkers of ethnocentric disinformation, especially, desperate politicians and their minnows, succeeded not only in scoring political points and wins, but also in exacerbating the ethnic tension between the Igbo and the Yoruba, the two most dominant ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria.

Consequently, some Igbo people in Lagos were not only intimidated on the said election-day in 2023, but were told by some of these ethnic jingoists to leave Lagos and go back to Igboland from hence they come so as to vote (Adeyemi, 2023). Some other Igbo people living in Lagos, or even, those looking like Igbo people there, confessed to being beaten up during the same election (Bolarinwa, 2023). Bayo Onanuga, the then director of media and publicity of APC’s Presidential Campaign Council, and now, President Tinubu’s spokesman, eventually wrote on X, thus: “Let 2023 be the last time of Igbo interference in Lagos politics. Let there be no repeat in 2027. Lagos is like Anambra, Imo, any Nigerian state. It is not No Man’s Land, not Federal Capital Territory. It is Yoruba land. Mind your business.” (<https://x.com/aonanuga1956/status/1637221887582388225>) When he was called out, he refused to apologize (“I Owe Nobody”). This seems to confirm Anderson’s observation that, “in Nigeria fake news has an arguably more invidious and dangerous purpose: to stoke rivalries and hostilities between different ethnic nationalities.”(Anderson, 2019)

Similarly, the use of AI-generated deepfake images, videos and audios in the dissemination of disinformation in the presidential elections veered into subsequent governorship elections in the country, as well. For example, a few days before the governorship election in Imo State, Southeast Nigeria, in 2023, a video surfaced on social media platforms that the Peoples Democratic Party’s candidate in the election, Samuel Anyanwu, had withdrawn from the race for Governor Hope Uzodinma, the candidate of the All Progressives Congress. Anyanwu would later debunk the claim in the viral video as fake, describing it, through his aide, as not only a “blatant lie from the pit of hell, very mischievous, ridiculous and misleading, but a senseless vile sheepishly formulated by the outgoing Governor Uzodinma to deceive the public.” (“Imo PDP Gov Candidate”, 2023). Similarly, on September 21, 2024, Edo State in Southern Nigeria, held its off-cycle governorship election. A day before the election, however, a press statement appeared online purporting that the Labour Party governorship candidate, Olumide Akpata, had



withdrawn from the race, and had decided to support the governorship candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Asue Ighodalo. But the fact of the matter is that no such thing happened. “Let it be unequivocally clear”, Akpata would thus be forced to say in a statement he later released, “that I am still in this race. The notion that I step down on the eve of the election after the overwhelming support received from the good people of our state borders on delusion.” (Egbejule, 2024)

On November 16, 2024, Ondo State, South-West Nigeria, held its own off-cycle governorship election. However, a month before it, in October, a video surfaced online allegedly showing the governor of the State, Lucky Aiyedatiwa, who was contesting in the same election, in a fight in London with a woman whom they claimed he was having an affair with. But when the video was fact-checked, the man in the video was found not to be the governor (Akewushola, 2024). Debunking the claim, an aide to the governor notes how it was the opposition parties, particularly the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), that were behind the spread of the video whose aim, he said, was “to damage the reputation of Governor Aiyedatiwa, who is also the APC candidate.” He then stated: “For the benefit of the unsuspecting public who may be swayed by the video at first glance, it is crucial to clarify that the man in the video is not the Governor of Ondo State.” (Johnson, 2024).

f) **Disinformation and Ethnocentrism:** While, admittedly, there are many causes of disinformation in presidential elections in Nigeria, what the foregoing very much illustrates is that ethnocentrism remains one of the major causes. In fact, while disinformation helps to widen the existing polarization and ethnic cracks, the latter often force people to adopt disinformation as a way of life. The impact can only be imagined in a fragile multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Nigeria, where, among others, many political actors and leaders are not only deep in corruption (Amaefule, 2020), personal enrichment (Amaefule, 2020), and prebendalism (Joseph, 1987), but have also mastered the art of playing the religion and ethnic cards (Amaefule, 2019b).

g) **Disinformation and Violence:** From what is said above, for instance, about the situation of things in Lagos State during the 2023 governorship, it is obvious that there is a relationship between disinformation and violence. Often times, disinformation leads to violence, and in a way, violence reinforces disinformation. This is also evident in what happened in the aftermath of the 2011 presidential election which the main opposition candidate in the election, Muhammadu Buhari, lost to the then incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan. Disinformation about how the election was rigged saw to a post-election violence in northern Nigeria where over 800 persons were reportedly killed by supporters of Buhari (Human Rights Watch, 2011). This is akin to what happened in Kenya three years earlier in 2008 where over 1,200 persons were killed and over 300, 000 were displaced (United Nations, 2008).

h) **Foreign Involvement in Disinformation in Presidential Elections:** The same history of disinformation in the country’s presidential elections in the Fourth Republic shows the involvement of foreign actors, in addition to local actors, in the dissemination of disinformation. The case of the British analyst firm, Cambridge Analytica, in the 2015 elections could be cited. Recently, it has been shown that another foreign firm, Team Jorge, collaborated with Cambridge Analytica in the said business of spreading disinformation (Leloup and Reynaud, 2023). Also, in



2019 presidential elections, yet another foreign actor, the Israeli political consulting and lobbying firm, Archimedes, as hinted at above, was deeply involved in spreading disinformation.

Conclusion

The article has endeavoured to trace the deployment and dissemination of disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections from 1999 to 2023. One of the first things that the foregoing history shows is that disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections is never a new thing. It has always been there, right from the beginning in 1999 and then backwards to even before Nigeria got her independence. This seems to underscore the observation of Roberts and Karekwaivanane (2024) that disinformation is as "old as politics in Africa." But it shows yet another thing: There is a certain deliberateness noticed as regards the dissemination of the cases of disinformation in Nigeria's presidential elections pointed out above. Those involved actually knew what they were doing, they did not do such accidentally. They knew as well that what they were dishing out or disseminating was information, or better, a type of information, even as the information was misleading. Finally, they knew that the same misleading information would have consequences: it would affect not only the way that the people would come to see a particular person(s), but also the way they would come to behave towards the person(s), especially, in casting their votes. Thus, from the beginning, the intention to mislead had been there.

Here, one sees at work the three features which Fallis (2015) believes encapsulate the reality of disinformation: 1) that disinformation is a type of information 2) that it is misleading information, 3) that it is nonaccidentally misleading information. Also, what is said here has a way of helping to differentiate disinformation from another related term, "misinformation." Whereas in disinformation the dissemination of the misleading information is done deliberately, that is, the person knows that the information is false, in misinformation it is done inadvertently, unknowingly, with the person believing that the misleading information being dished out is true (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018). Hence, the deliberate intent to mislead, on the part of disinformation, is what separates it from misinformation.

Furthermore, it is observed that there is a certain evolution in the means utilized in the spread of disinformation in presidential elections in the country. By the time Nigeria's fourth republic began in 1999, it was the traditional news media, especially, television, radio and newspaper, which were used in the dissemination of disinformation. This is said not oblivious of the fact that word of mouth was also made use of. While the state owned some of these traditional news media, some private individuals also owned some and accordingly, deployed them, as shown above, in the dissemination not only of information, but also of disinformation. This shows that both the state and private-owned media were involved in the dissemination of disinformation. By the time both online citizen media platforms and social media platforms came, they were also used in the same way alongside the traditional news media. In fact, as pointed out before, 2011 presidential election saw Nigeria make use for the first time social media platforms in political participation (Nnanyelugo and Nwafor, 2013), an experience that would be intensified four years later during the 2015 presidential election (Aduloju, 2016). By 2019 presidential election, apart from making use of both the traditional media and other social media platforms, there was a peculiar use of Whatsapp by the major players in the same election. This has made some to dub



that election “Nigeria’s first WhatsApp election” (Cheeseman, et al, 2020). But the same election saw also to the extensive use of WhatsApp in the dissemination of disinformation, as was the case, in recent times, in other countries, as well (Belli, 2018; Harris, 2019).

However, for the 2023 presidential election, a somewhat change was observed in the way disinformation was disseminated. Unlike the previous general elections, it witnessed more to the dissemination of disinformation by way of AI-generated deepfake images, videos and audios (Oghenemaro and Ayo-Obiremi, 2024; Ezeja, 2023). This shows at least four things. One, the reality and ubiquity of artificial intelligence as a digital innovation. Two, its often deployment in negative deepfake technology and the ease and inexpensive way this could be done. Three, the attendant threat that such negative deepfake technology poses to the integrity of democratic elections, a concern being shared by many the world over (Puutio and David Timis, 2020; Pawelec, 2022; Ray, 2021; Jee, 2020; Feliba, 2023; Muñoz, 2023; Murphy, 2024). Four, that each historical era often makes use of information and communication technologies of that era to spread not only information but also disinformation (Roberts and Karekwaivanane, 2024). Yes, this deployment of AI-generated content during the aforesaid 2023 presidential election, has come to be considered by some as most probably one of the first among general elections in Africa (Okolo, 2024).

But that does not mean that the same AI has not been employed in some positive sense in the electoral process in the country. In fact, Nigeria remains one of the few countries in Africa wherein AI is somewhat employed by the electoral body, in this case, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Itodo, 2024). And to deepen whatever use that was made of the same AI in the past, INEC recently created a division of Artificial Intelligence under the existing ICT Department, to “continue to harness the positive aspects of AI and to mitigate its negative impact on elections” (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2025). That said, it is good to underscore the fact that with the advent of both the social media platforms and AI-generated contents and deepfakes, that word of mouth and the traditional media, already hinted out above, were not thrown away in the spread of disinformation. As a matter of fact, they have sometimes become the amplifiers and megaphones of the disinformation originated by the social media platforms and AI-generated contents (Moyo, et al, 2020). Here, then, one sees in evidence how disinformation “spreads through a complex interaction of social media, online news sites, traditional media, and offline spaces” (Stepney and Lally, 2024).

Finally, in the same history of disinformation in the country’s presidential elections in the Fourth Republic, one could notice the involvement of foreign actors in the dissemination of disinformation. These foreign actors could be state or private firms. Also noticed is the somewhat relationship existing between disinformation and ethnocentrism, with each impacting the other, as was the case in the three previous republics. Yes, while disinformation helps to widen the existing polarization and ethnic cracks, the latter often force people to adopt disinformation as a way of life. The impact can only be imagined in a fragile multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Nigeria, where, among others, many political actors and leaders are not only deep in corruption (Amaefule, 2020a), personal enrichment (Amaefule, 2020b), and prebendalism (Joseph, 1987), but have also mastered the art of playing the religion and ethnic cards (Amaefule,



2019b). The overall victim in all this is democracy itself in which the informed decisions that the people could have made in the election of their leaders, in this case, the president, and in the choice of policies, are vitiated by misleading information that are deliberately placed on their way. Hence, the need for the government, political parties, civil societies, faith-based organizations, individuals, scholars, etc. to join in the campaign to counter it, that is, disinformation in the country's presidential election and the entire democratic practice. This way, not only will democracy in the country not be destroyed by disinformation, its future will be much more guaranteed.

Conclusion

Through the lens of its rather major occurrences, the paper has tried to trace the evolution of disinformation in presidential elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This spans from 1999, when the Fourth Republic was birthed, to 2024, when Nigeria marked the 25th anniversary of uninterrupted democracy in the same Fourth Republic. Critical observation of the historical rundown revealed, among others, how there is not only an evolution in the means utilized in the dissemination of disinformation in presidential elections, but also how a certain deliberateness could be detected thereof on the part of those involved in disseminating the same disinformation, helping thus to underscore the basic difference between disinformation and mere misinformation. Also revealed is the relationship often existing between disinformation and ethnocentrism, between disinformation and violence, and how foreign actors, in addition to the local actors, have been involved in the dissemination of disinformation in presidential elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. When all is said and done, the overall victim of the foregoing presence of disinformation in presidential elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is democracy itself in which the informed decisions that the people could have made in the election of their leaders, in this case, the president, and in the choice of policies, are vitiated by misleading information that are deliberately placed on their way. Hence, the need for the government, political parties, civil societies, faith-based organizations, individuals, scholars, etc. to join in the campaign to counter it, that is, disinformation in the country's presidential election and the entire democratic practice. This way, not only will democracy in the country not be destroyed by disinformation, its future will be much more guaranteed.

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