Internet Fake News and Issues of Misrepresentation and Misinterpretation

Dr Bibian Ugoala
Department of English, Faculty of Arts,
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria
ugoalabibian@gmail.com +2348034082115
&
Dr Osuchukwu, Caroline Nonye
Department of English and Literature,
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Nigeria
carolineosuchukwu1@gmail.com +2348030998834

Abstract
This study analysed data randomly sourced from the internet to prove that misrepresentation of information by netizens ultimately leads to misinterpretation. The objectives of the study are: to examine the nature of fake news on social media; and to examine if netizens acknowledge the existence of fake news on social media. The data for the study were sourced from several websites and social media. The study is anchored on Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistic theory, which considers language as a social semiotic, that presents language users with a network of choices to create both spoken and written texts. Findings reveal that the samples of fake news presented and analysed all look real; it is also revealed that some media organisations are not exonerated in the issue of fake news reporting. It is recommended that all social media sites should have fake news detection devices that detect fake news even before they are aired; the sites should also have an inbuilt face detection device which will reveal the faces of users of social media platforms. The study concludes that fake news generates varied complex issues of misinterpretation as a result of the misrepresentation.
Keywords: Internet Fake news, Social-Media, Misrepresentation, Misinterpretation, Misinformation

Introduction
The internet is one of the most used means of communication in contemporary times (Zanatta et al., 2021). It is used for giving and receiving information, including news. This form of new media has become an interactive platform for various users with different views of life. On some social media platforms, individuals and groups, create, use and manage their content for different purposes (Sankar & Bouchard, 2009). Scholars like McPeak (2014) Barnhart (2019), McLachlan and Newberry (2021), and Prajapati (2021) highlight some benefits of social media for communication and agree that social media has made life easier. McPeak (2014: 581) points out that ''social media data is changing the face of civil discovery in many cases, and informal discovery of social media content on sites such as Facebook can prove extremely valuable for litigants''. Social media are websites for social networking, communication, interaction, meeting, re-union dating, and advertisement. The implication of McPeak (2014: 581) comment is that social media is a site where all kinds of news can be found. Roomi (2021) notes that apart from the

benefits of social media, its down side should not be overlooked. One of the downsides of social media is its use by netizens for the spread of fake news, this is the preoccupation of the current study. Activities on social media are possible with a connection to the internet (Ugoala, 2020).

Despite the attested benefits of the internet, its down sides have roused scholarly attention in recent times, with the view that fake news is the intentional spread of untrue information, which is disseminated on the internet with so many users (Shu et al., 2017; Zuiderveen, Möller & Kruikemeier, 2018; Sharma et al., 2019; Pulido et al., 2020; Ugoala, 2020). Pieces of the information displayed by netizens on the internet could be shared by readers (Koohikamali and Sidorova, 2017: 216; McPeak, 2014: 583; Myerson, 2013). In the course of sharing, both real and fake pieces of information (news) are shared. A piece of information shared can influence the reader (The Information Society Project, 2017: 5).

Defining fake news from the angle of the internet or new media, Mavridis (2018: 19) describes it as viral posts, which are based on fake accounts made to seem like ''real'' news reports. For example, in May 2019, a video clip of Nancy Pelosi, went viral on social media, showing her stammering and slurring her speech. That made some people question Nancy's mental aptitude. Nancy Pelosi is the first woman to serve as a speaker representing San Francisco elected in 2007, and who in January 2019, regained her position second-in-line to the presidency. The New York Times reported that it was a doctored video clip. Also, in early 2020, different myths and tales were spread by both social and traditional media about the supposed treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic (Rocha et al., 2021). The implication of Mavridis' (2018: 19) definition is that real or true news does not go viral as much as fake news does.

Fake news, as Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) note, refers to stories, which are intentionally and verifiably false, misleading and misinforming readers. This definition points out that fake news is intentionally created and spread by those who do so. It also foregrounds the view that fake news could be verified to be an untrue representation of communication content. Essentially, untrue representations in any form which are made to seem real, are misrepresentations of the realities made. Similarly, defining fake news from the angle of perceived propaganda, Leonhardt and Thompson (2017) describes fake news as a kind of ''propaganda or yellow and misleading journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation, spread via traditional media outlets (their print or online editions) or online social media.'' This definition tallies with that of Allcott & Gentzkow (2017), which see fake news as misleading news.

Fake news is noted to ''devalue and delegitimise voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data'' and all these undermine a society's ability to rationally engage in facts-shared discourses (The Information Society Project, 2017: 3). Fake news aggravates the extant deep-rooted structural problems in the media industry (The Information Society Project, 2017: 4-5). Factors behind fake news include curiosity, perception, worldview, power and politics, propaganda, the lapses of the traditional (mass) media, social factors like tribalism, bias and discrimination, the drive to make money from news formation and dissemination, the rise of the profitable information economy, and so on (The Information Society Project, 2017: 4-5). Recently, a video clip showing a snake inside a toilet closet on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter went viral, spreading misinformation that snakes can survive the heat in the pipes of toilet closets. Thereafter, a counter audio post was made by an expert, who clarifies that no snake can live and survive in toilet pipes. Such pieces of information usually misinform and mislead the audience.

Tandoc et al. (2018: 147) categorise fake news into six: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda. The categorization by Tandoc et. al (2018) indicates that fake news occurs in varied dimensions. For this study, fake news refers to falsified information about what is supposed to be communicated or disseminated. It involves giving the opposite of the real or factual information to the public or individual/group audience(s). Fake news is fabricated stories, meant to deceive and manipulate the audience for the hidden motives of the producer.

The current study holds and demonstrates that misrepresentation of information on social media can occur at the individual and group levels (media); also misrepresentation leads to misinterpretation. The media which are supposed to be purveyors of truthful news, sometimes are sources of fake news. Thus, the significance of this study rests on its promising scholarly attempt to sieve and foreground the fact that internet fake news builds on existing societal issues but in the wrong way. The current study aims at analyzing some internet fake news to show cases of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of communication among users. The objectives of the study, therefore, are: to examine the nature of fake news on social media; to examine if netizens acknowledge the existence of fake news on social media, and, to examine if the social media organisations are exonerated in the issue of fake news reporting.

The Pros and Cons of information on the Social-Media
Misinformation on social media and the internet has gained scholarly attention recently. The term ''fake news'' is associate term with ''misinformation''. Other associate terms include ''disinformation'', ''rumour'', ''urban legend'', ''spam'', and ''troll'' (Mavridis, 2018: 19). It is observed that there are three main platforms for the dissemination of internet fake news, which are: WhatsApp, Internet browsers and Facebook (Zanatta et al., 2021). In the same vein, Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) observe that it is evidential that false materials are spread widely and rapidly on the internet through social media owing to such human behaviour. Zanatta et al. (2021) reveal a high frequency of fake news broadcast on the digital media of mass communication. Buchanan (2020) reveals that upon encountering fake news or information online, most people assume it to be true and thereby spread it further to the platforms they belong.

Ogbette et al. (2019) examined the impact of Fake News in Nigeria: Causes, Effects and its Management in Nigeria and the world at large. The study sourced its data from a secondary source. The study observed that the major causes of fake news are: the quest for relevance, hostile government and civil actors, poor regularization of the internet and money making. The study recommends that there is always the need to confirm the source of information, especially on social media to confirm the authentication of the information ones is reading.

In their effort to contribute to finding a solution to fake news on social media, Khan et al. (2020) propose an application model that insists that tags should be attached to users' information input at the output phase. They hold that by tagging the output of users' given information, the system can easily identify it as either fake or real (Khan et al., 2020: 367). According to them, upon receiving the user's message, the system transforms ''the message sent by the user into the numerical vector using word2vec and doc2vec word embedding techniques'' (Khan et al., 2020: 367). Upon looking at internet users' experience of fake and the tendency to recognise fake news, Traylor, Straub, Gurmeet & Snell (2019) propose the use of the Natural Language Processing method for the detection of fake news. This proposed method revolves around language-based techniques as the panacea to fake news. Thus, it implicitly affirms the efficacy of using language to checkmate fake news.

Mavridis (2018: 7) explains how Ellinika Hoaxes, a Greek Facebook group, with more than 110.000 members, consistently identifies and curbs misinformation on the internet. Members of this group actively participate in ''discussions by providing external links with accurate data or by giving facts and other elements which certify whether the story is fake or not'' (Mavridis, 2018: 7). Upon verifying any post to be fake news, members of this group rapidly spread counter posts to it, notifying the public of the fakeness of the posted information or news. Membership to, and posts on the group are subject to the approval of the group administrators. Similarly, Rajdev & Lee (2015) propose a system that focuses on the detection of spam messages during natural calamities, using classification and feature detection of information that gets tweeted during natural calamities. Popat et. al. (2016) focus on the credibility of messages spread on the internet, particularly on social media. The study proposes methods in which the sources of news are fed to a supervised classifier for credibility check. However, it should be noted that not all news on social media is fake news and propaganda.

Theoretical Framework
The study is anchored on Halliday's (1985) theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL hereafter). Systemic Functional Linguistics is a theory that considers language as a social semiotic. By being a social semiotic, SFL means that language is a system that presents its users with a network of choices to create both spoken and written texts. Halliday (1985: 1) explains that: "It seemed to me that explanations of linguistic phenomena needed to be sought in relationships among systems rather than among structures – in what I once called 'deep paradigms' – since these were essentially where speakers made their choices." By implication, the meaning of either spoken or written text is dependent on the choices made by the speaker from the options within the language system, or in some cases, from what is not chosen (Teo, 2000: 24).

Systemic Functional Linguistics perceives language as a resource for making meaning. Meanwhile, meaning conversely resides in systemic patterns of choice. This notion is in contrast with the traditional assertion of language, which considers language as a system of rules which stifles creativity in speech (Chomsky, 1956). As a system of choice, language is the mechanism with which internet users choose bio-data entries, what to post, share and comment on, and the choice of producing and spreading fake or real news. Further, Halliday (1985: 1) theorises that the explanation of how language works needed to be grounded in a functional analysis since language had evolved in the process of carrying out certain critical functions, as human beings interact with their '…eco-social environment.' Among others, Eggins (1994) and Anderson (2014) point out that the theoretical assumptions of SFL can be summarised as follow:

(i)   SFL postulates that language is functional. That is, it is concerned with how language is structured and used to make meanings. Thus, making meanings implies that language is functional.

(ii)   Language is semiotic. This means that the meaning of a text is dependent on the choices made by the speaker, from the options available within the language system.

(iii)   A text is understood within context. In this sense, a text is understood in terms of the information about the context within which it was generated, either the context of a situation or the context of culture.

Therefore, a text or discourse provides readers with a view of the world as seen or understood by the writer or the speaker. Halliday (1994) further introduces the term 'lexicogrammar', a technical

linguistic concept that is very essential in understanding language functions. According to him, a language consists of more-or-less closed systems of words and grammatical structures, with our vocabulary constituting a relatively open system, and grammar that has a fixed number of relatively closed ones. It is from these systems that language users make choices in order to construct wordings and meanings. Meanings are of three categories, and every utterance encodes meaning on three levels, simultaneously known as metafunctions. The three types of meanings available to speakers are ideational, interpersonal and textual. Language users use their lexicon-cum-grammar throughout a given utterance: to represent experience (Ideational Meaning); to achieve interpersonal goals (Interpersonal Meaning); for efficient structural information from a communicative point of view (Textual Meaning).

On the whole, Systemic Functional Linguistics theory suits this study in terms of its assumptions and theoretical explanations that aptly reflect the language used by internet users. Following the language of the choice presents to users, some of them use it rightly to give factual and essential information and news, while others use it wrongly for fake news and other forms of misinformation. The linguistic principles, norms and conventions guiding language use are the parameters for determining the rightfulness or otherwise of language by internet users. Also, the contexts explained by SFL manifest in the relationship and interactions among internet users, especially those on social media. Leaning on SFL, it is understood that internet users are participants in varied contexts with varied experiences and playing the roles of encoders and decoders of communication contents.

Methods of data collection and analysis
The data for the study were sourced randomly form the internet. One of the criteria for the selection is the appearance of the data under the search tool ''fake news''. In other words, the data must appear under fake news for it to be selected. Seven items were selected for the study because of the page limit. The theoretical concept of Systemic Functional Linguistics by Halliday (1985, 1994) was applied to the data in the analysis to reveal that internet users' choices have a great role to play in the production of true or misleading information on social media.

1. **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Figure 1: Fake news caused an audience's death in Iraq

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

On 21 December 2021, Reason Magazine reported the death of an Iraqi mother, whose ''death'' was caused by Trump's propaganda. The news bar of figure 1 (of the death of an Iraqi mother) proves the extent to which fake news can cause harm to an individual. This is one of many misrepresentations of political themes and intentions. According to Halliday (1985), the choice of lexical items in a proposition depends on an individual. The linguistic choices of the author of figure 1, could have also been deployed in a positive way to make his/her report, but the author chose to make the report the way it is. Language choices can make or mar a situation. Consider another example below:

Figure 2: Social media fake news about a Nigerian, regarding Covid-19

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

As the headline of figure 2 indicates, fake news caused a young Nigerian driver in Lagos severe agony during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fake news, containing the video clip of the driver (above), was spread on social media by mischief makers, giving fake information about the driver. The driver is indicted in the video clip on social media as the one who drove round with the foreigner who brought in Corona virus (Covid-19) to Nigeria. As such, it is insinuated that the man infected him with the Covid-19 virus. The driver became abandoned, avoided, rejected and dejected by all and sundry, including family members and friends. That is, social media's fake news had a terrible effect on the driver. The driver suffered stigmatisation, isolation, and humiliation until he had to make and post his video, disclaiming the fake news about him.

Russian parliament passes a law imposing jail terms and fines for 'fake news.'

Figure 3: Institutional legislation against fake news: Russia's example

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

Figure 3 shows that fake news is a problem also recognized by the Russian government; and as such, has come up with measures to help curb the spread of fake news. The Russian government took the bold step of enacting and implementing strong legislation against peddlers of fake news. The above post got so many likes and positive comments at the time of gathering data for this study. Mixed feelings and reactions graced the post. While some welcome the development, others lashed the government of Russia for the imposition of jail terms and fines on defaulters of fake news. Social media users took to different internet platforms to react to posts or news on the Russian government's action against the peddlers of fake news. Some of the reactionary posts on Facebook to the posts on the Russian government's legislation against fake news are presented below:

Dave McNeill

Great idea but the issue is that what's considered fake will change as governments change. Accountability in media and governments everywhere is sorely lacking these days. Canadian media being the latest to show its abandonment of journalistic principles.
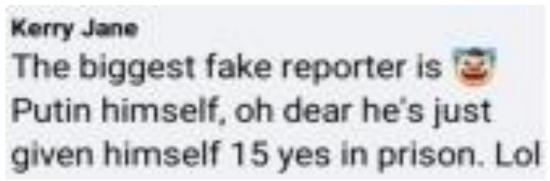
Figure 4a

Figure 4b

Figure 4c

Figure 4d
Figures 4a-4d: Facebook users' reactions to legislation against fake news in Russia

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022
Figures 4a-4d above show misinterpretation of the proclaimed law against fake news in Russia. Those who reacted negatively to the Russian government's legislation against fake news certainly misinterpreted what is communicated as being behind the statutory declaration. As they misinterpret, so they made some of their followers misinterpret the post by the Russia government too. This is in a chain reaction, where what one person believes rubs off on others close to him/her.

CNN accused of fake news

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

The above post is a sarcastic one where a netizen (Trian Trung Hung) says that ''fake news is a gift that God only give to the good guys''. In response, Ron Peters added ''especially BBC and CNN'', implying that apart from individuals, big media organisations like BBC and CNN are purveyors of fake news also. BBC is an acronym for the abbreviation for *'British Broadcasting Corporation',* a broadcasting outfit in the United Kingdom. These media organisations are supposedly sources of authentic news for people.

Figure 6: CNN accused of fake news

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

Figure 6 is somewhat related to figure 5. Figure 6 has on the background the ''CNN'' acronym, and superimposed on it is 'AMERICA'S SOURCE FOR FAKE NEWS'. On the news bar is 'EMBARRASSMENT TO THE WORLD'. Figure 6 is an affirmation that big media organisations are carriers of fake new too. CNN is the acronym for *Cable News Network,* a US news network on cable television that broadcasts news daily. The fact that large media organisations are also accused of fake news show actually that all news reports are not true.
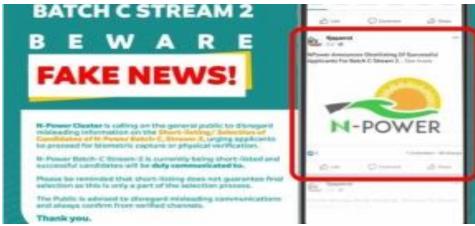
Figure 7: Fake news about job vacancies

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2022

Figure 7 shows how N-Power disclaims on its website news about job vacancies in its organization. To keep the pubic abreast of real information about vacancies, recruitment and its processes and updates, companies now resort to posting warnings on their websites. The warning could be a result of fraudster(s) spreading false information about N-Power recruitment. This warning by N-Power shows that fake news can be spread by some persons to defraud. N-Power is a scheme set up by the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari on 8 June 2016, to *address the issues of youth unemployment and help increase* social development.

Findings and Discussion

The samples of fake news presented and analysed in this study all look real. In other words, they all look true. All the samples show or have labels on them that show that either the government or the media had tagged them as fake news. With the notices of fake news on the different social media platforms, most netizens are aware of the existence of fake news on social media, and sometimes the users themselves tag fake news as such. Some media organisations are not exonerated in the issue of fake news reporting; figures 1, 5, and 6 support this. If large organisations like CNN, and BBC are accused of peddling fake news, it shows that smaller media organizations may not be left in the dissemination of false unverified news. Fake news as light as they seem on the surface can have a dire impact on an individual, the government or a country. This study recommends that all social media sites should have fake news detection devices that detect fake news even before they are aired; the sites should also have inbuilt face detection devices which will reveal the faces of users of social media platforms. The linguistic choices of individuals, groups and media organisations are very key to labelling a piece of news report as either fake or true.

Conclusion

The study concludes that fake news generates varied complex issues of misinterpretation as a result of the misrepresentation. Fake news is devastating and worrisome. When a false report is aired against an individual, group or media organization it destabilises. Some persons deliberately create and spread fake news by sharing it on social media. Those who receive the fake news most often share without scrutiny or scepticism. If fake news is not checked, because of the liberty to free expression, so many people in society will be misinformed about events and happenings in society. This study recommends that appropriate legislations, mass sensitisation and socialisation of the

public on using language-based techniques to curtail internet fake news are the panaceas. The study calls on the government to checkmate internet fake news with sustained statutory sanctions that spare no defaulter. The government takes the overall decision on, and against fake news. However, what is needed for justice is enacting balanced legislation against the same offences from both the leaders and the led. This study has contributed to the body of knowledge that fake news exists and can be brought to the barest minimum if the appropriate sanctions are put in place. While the undercurrent of this study is the danger of fake news in society, it should be pointed out that the advantages of social media in the timely dissemination of information can never be backgrounded.

References

Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31 (2), 211–236.

Anderson, J. (2014). A stylistic analysis of some selected political speeches by John Evans Atta Mills. MPHIL English thesis submitted to the University of Ghana, Legon.

Barnhart, B. (2019). 'The 9 most overlooked benefits of social media' https://sproutsocial.com/insights/benefits-of-social-media/

Brianna, S. (2020). The impact of fake news on society. *INOSR Humanities And Social Sciences 6(1),* 21-26, http://www.inosr.net/inosr-humanities-and-social-sciences/Steph.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *Spoken and written Language*. Geelong, Vic.: Deakin University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar (2nd ed.)*. Edward Arnold.

Khan, M., Jain, A., Chouhan, R. and Sheikh, S.H. (2020). Fake news identification on social media. *International Journal of Engineering Research & Technology (IJERT), vol. 9, issue 01*, IJERTV9IS010183, http://www.ijert.org.

Leonhardt, D., and Thompson, S.A. (2017). 'Trump's lies.' *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html

Mavridis, G. (2018). Fake news and social media: How Greek users identify and curb misinformation online. Master's thesis, Media and Communication Studies, Malmö University.

McLachlan, S. and Newberry, C. (2021). '22 Benefits of Social Media for Business' https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-for-business/

McPeak, A. (2014). Avoiding misrepresentation in informal social media discovery. SMU Sci. & Tech. L. Rev., 581, https://scholar.smu.edu/scitech/vol17/iss4/7.

Ogbette, A. S., Idam, M. Otu, Kareem, A. O. & Ogbette, D. N. (2019) Fake News in Nigeria: Causes, Effects and Management. Information and Knowledge Management www.iiste.org (Online) DOI: 10.7176/IKMVol.9, No.2.

Popat, K., Mukherjee, S., Strotgen, J. and Weikum, G. (2016). Credibility assessment of textual claims on the web. *ACM*.

Prajapati, V. (2021) 'Top 20+ Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media' https://www.techprevue.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-social-media/

Pulido, C.M., Ruiz-Eugenio L., Redondo-Sama, G. and Villarejo-Carballido, B. (2020). A new application of social impact in social media for overcoming fake news in health. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 17(7), 1-15, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17072430.

Rajdev, M. & Lee, K. (2015). 'Fake and spam messages: Detecting misinformation during natural disasters on social media.' *IEEE/WIC/ACM International Conference*.

Roomi, M. (2021). 'Drawbacks and Benefits of social media for students'. https://www.hitechwhizz.com/2021/05/5-advantages-and-disadvantages-drawbacks-benefits-of-social-media-for-students.html

Tandoc, E., Lim, Z. & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "fake news": A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism, 6, 2*, 137-153.

Teo, P. (2000). Racism in the news: A critical discourse analysis of news reporting in two Australian newspapers. *Discourse and Society 11* (1), 7-48.

The Information Society Project (2017). 'Fighting fake news.' Workshop Report, hosted by The Information Society Project and The Floyd Abrams Institute for Freedom of Expression.

Townsend, T. (2016). 'Meet the Romanian Trump fan behind a major fake news site.' https://www.inc.com/tess-townsend/ending-fed-trumpfacebook.html.

Traylor, T., Straub, J. Gurmeet, and Snell, N. (2019). 'Classifying fake news articles using natural language processing to identify in-article attribution as aSupervised Learning Estimator.' *IEEE (ICSC)*.

Ugoala, B. (2020). Adaptability and linguistic creativity of Nigerian English in internet memes. *International Journal of Integrative Humanism, vol.12, no.2*, Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, ISSN: 2026-6286, pp. 36-51.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359*, 1146–1151, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559 PMID: 29590045.

Zanatta, E.T., Wanderley, G.P.M., Branco, I.K., Pereira, D., Kato, L.H. and Maluf, E.M.C.P. (2021). Fake news: The impact of the internet on population health. *Rev Assoc Med Bras, 67(7)*, 926-930.