Marketing Government: X-raying Nigerian Government's Use of Disinformation in Citizen-Engagement (2015-2023)

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ABSTRACT

The goal of citizen/public engagement is to make develop trust between the government and the governed. However, evidence shows that citizens are losing trust on the government owing to misleading information. Thus, it has become imperative to investigate the underlying aim of government communication and the consequence of the approach adopted by the governments in engaging with their citizens. This paper sought to peripherally investigate the approach adopted by the Nigerian government between May 29th 2015, and May 29th 2023. Since the work of marketing the government is predominately domiciled within the official functions of the Minister of Information and Culture, this paper focuses on the speeches made by the then Minister. The study adopted agenda setting theory and propaganda model as the theoretical framework that guided the research. To attain the basic aim of this paper, qualitative content analysis was adopted by the researcher, which allows for the speeches made by the Minister within the timeframe being studied to be examined. This study found that most of the information and speeches made via interviews, press releases and press conferences for public consumption by the then Minister of on issues about security and economy were generally misleading. Thus, the study recommended that the government adopt a different but balanced approach, as its current strategy will likely cause general disillusionment amongst the citizenry. The balance must keep the citizens gainfully informed, even considering public safety, interest and the government's official secrets.

Keywords: Government, citizen engagement, disinformation, Nigeria, Media

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the goal of public or citizenship engagement is to promote trust between the governed and the government (Colomina et al., 2021). Similar to how Indonesia

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leveraged its diplomatic strength in the Rohingya case, successfully earning trust by drafting a five-point consensus on Myanmar that was endorsed by ASEAN countries (Marlina, et al., 2024). Unfortunately, in most cases, citizens' trust and confidence in their government are on a decline, which is traceable to 'marketing-the-government' approach which often leads to misleading information (Jackson, 2018; Iroanusi, 2019).

In Nigeria, public engagement is implemented by the government through its Ministry of Information (Ajimotokan, 2023), with focus on communicating government's initiatives on issues of public concern. In the context of Nigeria in general, and the study period in particular, these concerns bordered majorly on issues with security, power generation, fuel scarcity, corruption, crude oil theft, economy, foreign relations, education, health, and mining (Ibekwe, 2015; Agomuo, 2023). On these outlined challenges, the Nigerian government made a number of statements and claims to the citizenry on strategies and achievements in handling these challenges (Ibekwe, 2015; Ajimotokan, 2023).

On the surface, this willingness to share information and engage with the citizenry represents the expectation of democracy, where the popular assumption is that an informed citizenry is necessary for democracy to thrive (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). A thriving democracy, therefore, must create situations where citizens will have access to credible information due to its power to "guide" public opinion and form consciences and preferences. This perhaps informs this position by Akinfeleye (2003) who stressed that:

> Information is even more necessary for effective governance and administration. Lack of information, misuse of information, or hoarding of information will be counterproductive in governance and/or administration". It is sufficient to say that in modern society, information occupies a very important position in the day-to-day activities of modern man. Any inadequacy in information gathering, processing, and dissemination will give room for rumor networking.

However, it would appear that the reality is that governments' communication is generally steered towards disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). A cynical view of the modern democratic state is that it is run by politicians whose objective, among others, is to feed citizens misleading information to create a notion that such a thing can be a reliable fact (Butcher, 2019). The outcome is that disinformation broadly defined as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted intentionally to cause public harm or achieve an objective (Colomina et al., 2021) is more prevalent, with the impact now exacerbated due to the rise of social media platforms. The 2019 Bradshaw & Howard report indicates that political parties or leaders in countries where democracy is practiced, including Nigeria, "used computational propaganda tools by amassing fake followers to gain voter support."

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Given this context, it is logical to assume that the Nigerian government has adopted disinformation at various points in its engagement with citizens. This study investigates disinformation and propaganda as citizen engagement strategies between 2015 and 2023 by examining selected speeches, releases, and reports from the Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed. Citizen engagement involves acting-by-listening, where interactions enhance self-determination in taking action. It is a combination of two-way involvement and two-way communication by the government (Canel et al., 2022).

The Federal Minister overseeing the Ministry of Information and Culture is responsible for public engagements on behalf of the Presidency, aiming to build citizens' trust in the country's leadership, an essential construct in the social contract under which government and the governed live, especially in democratic societies (Kumagai & Iorio, 2018). However, the 2022 Trust Barometer by the Edelman Group suggests that more citizens globally are losing trust in their governments, with 66% of respondents indicating their governments have been misleading in their information (Kehoe, 2022). This raises questions about the underlying aim of government communication and the consequences of the approach adopted by most governments in engaging with their citizens. Thus, this study aims to determine if the Nigerian government has engaged in using disinformation as a citizen-engagement strategy, focusing on the activities of the Nigerian Minister for Information, Culture, and National Orientation, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, from 2015 to 2023.

The broad objective of this study is to ascertain if, and the extent to which, the Nigerian government, through Alhaji Lai Mohammed, has used disinformation in its communication with Nigerians about the administration's activities and achievements from 2015 to 2023. Specific objectives include determining key claims made by the Minister on government activities and achievements and establishing the use of disinformation by verifying these claims against independent data.

This study's novelty lies in its insightful discourse on the idea of marketing the government in Nigeria through evaluations of statements credited to the Minister of Information under President Buhari's administration. No other study has investigated the exact objectives of this research. The content analytical approach provided a wide variety of sources, adding to the study's novelty.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND
Disinformation: Conceptual clarifications
Disinformation is a current phenomenon (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019). The concept of disinformation has been variously defined with the same variables by individuals and organisations. Disinformation is defined as "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda" (Citron, 2023). Disinformation is not different from misinformation. The difference is in the motives. The UNESCO handbook on journalism training states that while disinformation is intentionally created to mislead, harm or manipulate someone or a group of people,

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misinformation is false information created or shared without the intention to cause harm. Disinformation is also different from malinformation, as malinformation is based on fact but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022).

Santos-D'amorim and Miranda (2020) give a graphical representation of disinformation, misinformation and misinformation as shown below.
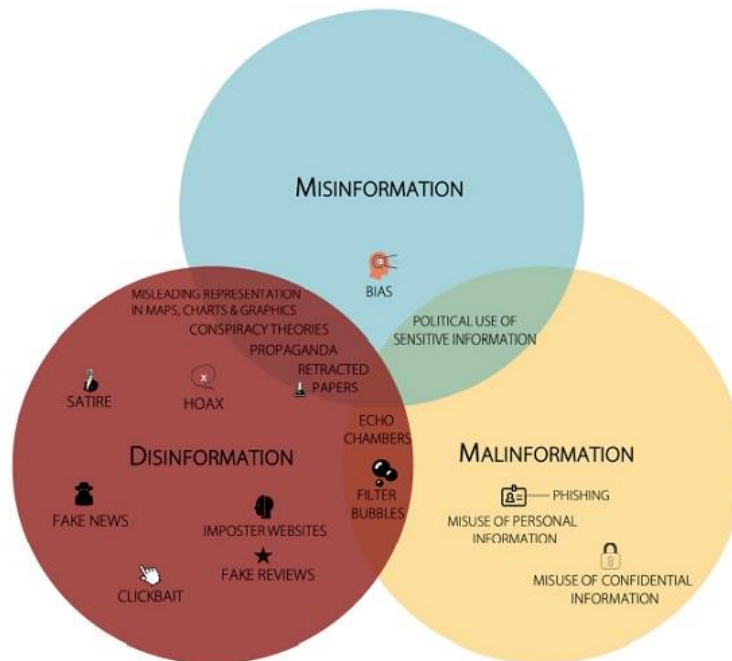

Figure 1: Santos-D'amorim and Miranda's Practical incidences about mis-, dis-, and mal-information according to their intentionality (2020).

However, for the purpose of this study, Jackson's (2018) definition which sees disinformation as *the use of half-truths and non-rational arguments to manipulate public opinion in pursuit of political objectives*, will serve to guide the understanding of the concept and its application in the arguments going forward.

Democracy, information and disinformation
According to Gibson and Rommel (2007), the characterisation of modern societies as "information societies" has become commonplace; in general, all societies are constituted by communication, as all social processes are performed by exchanging information. Quoting Bell (1973) and Salvaggio (1989), they admit that more than ever before, the control of information and communication has become a central determinant of political power and social structure (Success and failure of individual and collective actors alike depend increasingly on their ability to communicate properly.

Freelon and Wells (2020) feel that disinformation is part of political communication. Due to the nature of politics, disinformation has become a citizen's engagement strategy widely used by politicians. Although its usage is not restricted to politics, Santos-D'amorim and Miranda (2020) give the scenarios where disinformation

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has been used. They include the 2016 election campaign in the United States of America, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and, more recently, the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil, where disinformation was credited to have helped Bolsonaro as the winner (Riberiro, 2018). It can also be said that it played out in general election campaigns in Nigeria. For instance, in the build-up to the 2023 elections (a trend that had started from the 2015, and continued in the 2019 general elections), Luckscheiter (2022) quoted Dr. Tobi Oluwatola, executive director of the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) as saying that key political players used bots to grow their social media following and engagement, which had negative implications for the proliferation of fake and unverified news, before, during and after the elections. Iroanusi (2019) cites a Premium Times newspaper fact check of how political actors used social media in during the 2019 presidential elections to present false narratives of their popularity; for instance, the use of other events – either very well or scantily attended – to show how popular their candidates were, and how unpopular the opposition was.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has observed that the practice of disinformation, while not new to democracies, is a core challenge to democracy, rights, and the promotion of good governance (Reppell & Shein, 2019). As Bennett & Livingston (2018) stated, this concept, as a political communication strategy, is gaining ground significantly as many democratic nations are experiencing increased levels of false information circulating through social media and political websites that mimic journalism formats, especially with the democratization of media ownership. In many cases, the authors submitted, disinformation is associated with the efforts of movements and parties on the radical right to mobilize supporters against center parties and the mainstream press that carries their messages.

In today's world, it has become very common in Western societies and, indeed, in every democratic society, candidacies for public office depend on candidates' abilities to reach voters through the mass media. In a similar vein, Zavala (2011) expands the gamut of political communication by saying that the new technology has increased the sophistication of political communication in political campaigns and governmental communications. New media technologies extend the potential for matching political messages and private interests, permitting greater effectiveness in marketing its candidate or cause (Zavala, 2011). New media offer communication channels between citizens, politicians, and institutions more effectively than the mass media.

Akers et al. (2019) classify that the current mis- and dis-information situation is due to six factors: (1) democratization of content creation, (2) rapid news cycle and economic incentives, (3) wide and immediate reach and interactivity, (4) organic and intentionally created filter bubbles, (5) algorithmic curation and lack of transparency, and (6) scale and anonymity in online accounts.

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Theoretical framework

a. *Agenda setting*

The media's influence on society has been the focus of a considerable number of theoretical postulations. The role of the media in governance and politics is the focus of one of the most popular media-effects theories: agenda setting. Malcheff (2010) identifies that the agenda-setting theory is a product of studies into what he termed the 'pervasiveness of media.' Postulated by Valenzuela and McCombs (2019), agenda setting captures the general perception of the media's capacity to influence the public's dominant thoughts. Zain (2014) described the theory in stating that the media may not tell people to think, but can influence what they think about. Ojo et al. (2021) opine that the theory postulates that the opinions people hold on public importance are largely influenced by the information provided by the media about those issues. They believe whether an issue is worthy of public importance is generally determined by how much the media pay attention and cast their spotlight on those issues. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) identify that what agenda setting does is that it shows the relationship between the media and society concerning what people should generally think about. These 'agendas', which are identified as media's, public's or policy's, are generally geared towards influencing the general direction of public opinion, which is a key construct in agenda setting.

What is clear from this is that if there are agendas, then there will be entities behind these agendas that aim to shape or channel public interest and opinion in the direction that best serves them. These interests, according to Klaehn (2002) are largely political and economic and wield significant power over how the media engage with the public to shape their opinion. This study's position is largely how political interests use the media, with specific attention paid to how the government engage, using the media to sell its agendas. The ideal situation is that the position of the government concerning how they will engage with the citizenry using the media will be driven by the public interest (Blankertz, 2020). Public interest here symbolises the 'common good' or the 'general well-being of the people. However, the actual situation is that altruistic objectives like public interest do not always drive the government's agenda (Blankertz, 2020).

While the government also uses the media to set agenda for policy, there are strong pointers to the fact that the government also uses the media to drive the agenda of perpetuating itself, which, in many instances, would mean attempting to shape public opinion on issues that do not advance the wellbeing of the generality of the populace (Resodihardjo, 2021). The government's – in this case, the Nigerian government – use of the media to frame issues of public importance has been the focus of many empirical endeavours, and a consensus is that the government often seek to control media apparatuses – either directly by ownership or indirectly, through regulations and laws – with the view to

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ensuring that the media are, essentially, mouthpieces for their agenda. This will describe the motivation behind the proliferation of government-owned broadcast media stations by different state governments before and even after the deregulation of the Nigerian broadcast industry, which allowed for private ownership of broadcasting stations (Sunday, 2008). A direct implication of the need for the government to control the narrative is the tendency to twist, distort, misrepresent or embellish facts to bend them to fit the agenda/frame the government is trying to promote at the time. This best introduces the second theoretical leg this study is standing on.

b. *Propaganda Model*

Propaganda has been described by Jefkins (2003) as a benign information, communication, education and persuasion strategy, who added that the negative perception that is now being attached to the term can be traced to its use by notorious characters, such as Adolf Hitler. However, the extent to which people have adopted this 'strategy' created the need to provide an empirical attempt to understand how the media helps shape opinions and drive narratives.

Klaehn (2009) states that these 'news-defining' factors (or filters, as they called them) as including ownership, advertising, information sourcing, flak, and anti-communism. For Klaehn, the sum of these filters is that they explain the hegemonic relationship between those who control the media – Pedro-Carañana (2011, p. 1865) refers to them as 'elites', in particular, those with "financial-economic power, political-state power, and military power, although it is not limited exclusively to these three sectors" – seek to have with the general public, especially concerning how public opinion is shaped through the instrumentality of news. The propaganda model assumes intentionality about how news is gathered and who is considered a worthy information source, all contributing to how the 'mainstream news' appetite is built up in media audiences. For instance, Klaehn (2008) cites Herman (2000) as saying that press releases (and other PR activities) constitute a significant source of news, which means that every press conference or media briefing is an attempt to control the narrative and shape social reality, often to the benefit of the 'elites'.

Nigeria perfectly fits the environment's profile that Pedro-carañana et al (2018) describe as conducive for the hegemonic relationship that the propaganda model thrives. The government now operates commercial broadcasting (under the guise of public service broadcasting) often in direct competition with private economic interests who control media. It is not uncommon to see government-owned media accounts of public events noticeably different from the same reports by privately-owned media organisations, which is a manifestation of attempts to drive a narrative – garbed as news – that will advance the economic and/or political interests of their sponsors.

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METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts qualitative content analysis. The study period was from 2015 to 2023, the period during Alhaji Lai Mohammed was spokesperson – as Minister of Information – on behalf of President Buhari's government. The population was comprised all the speeches, press releases and press conferences undertaken by the Minister, as reported in newspapers, magazines, government websites and blogs. However, the sampling frame was further restricted to two themes: security and the economy, based on the position of the Buhari administration that these two directions will be main focus of their operational policy (Shehu, 2021), and the total items that fell into the scope of the sampling frame were 245 items.

Selection of entries in the study was done using the purposive sampling method, described as a non-probabilistic sampling technique where the basis of selection is the perception that study subjects will deliver the required type of information (Campbell et al., 2020). Data were collected until the point where data saturation was achieved, where the researchers deemed that the information gathered was sufficient for analysis to achieve the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2018). In this case, saturation was reached when over 90% of the speeches and reported credited to the Minister within the period of the study were collected from official sources, inlcuding the Ministry's website, as well as newspaper/online archives. The speeches and press releases are analysed using a narrative approach

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Presentation

This section focuses on presenting the data ascertained from the search. The speeches, press releases and press conferences officially made by Lai Mohammed (the then Minister of Information under the immediate past administration of Former President Buhari) in his official capacity focusing on security and the economy were searched, and the findings are presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Security

Variables	Newspaper	Blogs	Magazines	Government's Websites	Social Media	Total
Interviews	46	14	3	6	7	76
Press Release/Conference	11	2	0	7	2	22
International Briefings	9	2	1	2	3	17
Total	66	18	4	15	12	115

Table 2: Economy

Variables	Newspaper	Blogs	Magazines	Government's Websites	Social Media	Total
Interviews	44	11	2	9	9	75
Press Release/Conference	13	4	1	11	3	32
International Briefings	12	1	2	5	3	23

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Total	69	16	5	25	15	130

From Tables 1 and 2, 115 speeches were recovered on security, and 130 speeches were recovered on the economy covering 2015 and 2023. However, the researcher understands that some of the publications (newspapers, blogs, websites, social media posts and magazines) reported same/similar matters/issues. Therefore, the facts of the reportages were evaluated to streamline the focus of this analysis to core reportages on diverse matters and issues. The core/key claims made as identified are presented in the next subsection.

Key Claims

1. **"**Today we are here to tell you that … our military and other security agencies have succeeded and are succeeding – in substantially restoring security across the nation. Regarding the daunting security challenges we face, we can tell you that the worst is over. Never again will terrorists, bandits, and their cohorts hold sway in our country" (Oyeyemi, September 5, 2022).

2. **"**The military and other security forces have been very proactive in tackling security issues… Terrorists have been hard hit and put on the run. Bandits have been decimated and scattered. Our country is safer today than any time in recent times…" (Tolu-Kolawole, October, 25, 2022).

3. **"**There is no reason for any Nigerian to feel unsafe anywhere in the country… Nigerians, irrespective of where they reside, to go about their daily activities without fear." (Unini, June 7, 2017).

4. **"**The worst of insecurity in the country is over… We are proud that in our time, Nigerians are once again able to travel by rail, this time in total comfort and safety… The camps of the terrorists have been decimated, and thousands of the terrorists and their families are surrendering in their droves." (Onwukwe, September, 13, 2022).

5. **"**I can say without hesitation that… the security situation is far better than what we met in 2015." (Adetayo, 2021).

6. **"**Nigerians will soon begin to feel the impact of the country's improved economy in their daily lives… We are winning the battle to revive the economy… Nigeria has moved up 24 places to 145th in the World Bank's Doing Business report… And the country is recognised as one of the world's top 10 most improved economies." (Gorge, November 6, 2017).

7. **"**Nigeria's economy is better now than in the previous administration. Nigeria would not have any economy if you were still in power…" (Olafusi, November 7, 2022).

8. "Nigerian economy witnessed strong performance in 2019… the Nigerian economy grew at an average rate of 2.2 per cent over the first three quarters… the oil sector grew at an average of four per cent over the three quarters… and oil production rose to its highest in the last three years… Inflation rate steadily trending downwards." (Ships & Ports, 2019).

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9. **"**Millions of New Jobs added to the economy since 2015." (NTA News, February 4, 2018).

Analysis: Disinformation as citizen-engagement strategy

The areas where the immediate past government of Buhari used disinformation most are security and economy. The key claims in the preceding section evidently shows the speeches made the government's Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed regarding security and economy. In the analysis done in this section, the identified key facts as made by Lai Mohammed alongside other relative speeches will be fact-checked or evaluated through other verifiable sources to ascertain the veracity of the claims made.

Contrary to the assertion made by the then Honorable Minister for Information and Culture, as captured in key claim 1, a recent survey showed that 77% of Nigerians feel unsafe in the country (Cited in Musa, 2023). The security situation in Nigeria has deteriorated in the two tenures of the past administration, affecting every region of the country. In a complied data comparing the records between May 2007 to May 2015 (Before the assumption of office by Lai Mohammed as Minister) and the records from 29 May 2015 to May 2023 (During Lai Mohammed's tenure), fatalities from security-related incidents were at over 25,000 difference-indicating a worse situation than the preceding eight years (Musa, 2023). The foregoing contradicts the assertion of the then-minister as captured in key fact 6 above, presenting the minister's claim as basically untrue intentionally stated to mislead the public and present the administration in good light.

"The worst is over" as seen in the key claims above is largely misleading as Nigeria still suffers security woes (Agomuo, 2023). Between January and July 2022, over 7,000 Nigerians were killed and over 3,000 abducted, with Boko Haram contributing over 1,000 of the casualties. While Nigeria was merely battling with Boko Haram in the North East and had almost subdued militancy in the Niger Delta under the previous administration, the Buhari-led administration saw the spread of non-state armed groups across various regions of the country (Musa, 2023). The minister's speech reads, "Never again will terrorists and bandits and their cohorts hold sway in our country", however, the recently held general elections were not held in some locations because they are terrorised areas under the control of terrorists, unknown gunmen and bandits (Eboh, 2023).

Agreeably with the key claim above, the military and other security forces have made tremendous efforts to tackle security challenges in the country; however, it amounts to an exaggerated claim to say that the "…country is safer today…" as Nigeria has experienced an increased rate of insecurity owing to increasing terrorism attacks, inter-communal clashes, criminal banditry, herdsman attacks, unknown gunmen attacks, and abductions (US Department of State, 2023).

The speech in key claim 4, that there is no reason for any Nigerian to feel unsafe anywhere in Nigeria is a mockery of Nigerians and their security woes (Agomuo, 2023).

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For instance, few days following the publication of key claim 5 stating that "the worst of insecurity in the country is over…" about nine victims were abducted in Ondo State (Onwukwe, 2022). Exactly two days before the speech was made, the convoy of a serving senator (Senator Ifeanyi Ubah) was mercilessly attacked, leading to the death of his security aides (Onwukwe, 2022). Also, barely few hours after the claim that "… Nigerians are once again able to travel by rail, this time in total comfort and safety", an Abuja-bound train from Kaduna carrying about 900 passengers was attacked by terrorists with few killed, others injured, and hundreds of them abducted (Onwukwe, 2022).

Another key claim in the area of security was made in 2015 with the statement that:

> Boko Haram has been largely defeated. They (Boko Haram) know they are on their way out," Mohammed told journalists in Lagos. They cannot launch horrendous attacks they used to do in the past. We have succeeded in dislodging them. Our problem is resetting the internally displaced people (AFP, 2015).

However, events from 2015, when he first made the statement; and 2019, when he reiterated it; till the present showed Boko Haram members have continued to kill residents and kidnap school children in the northeast region. In the days leading to the end of 2015, Boko Haram bombed Maiduguri, killing 21 people and injuring scores of others. In 2020 alone, Professor Babagana Zulum, the Governor of Borno State, was attacked twice by Boko Haram terrorists, first on the 30th of July 2020 and 28th September, 2020 (Odesola, 2021).

Government has invested significantly in developing the security infrastructure of the country to meet the challenges of internal security, not limited to Boko Haram terrorists, insurgents, Fulani herdsmen, bandits and unknown gun-men (Ogunlesi, 2022; TheCable, 2021). This has resulted in the progress of the country on the Global Terrorism Index, dropping from 9.2 in 2015 to 8.2 in 2022 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). However, the reality is that even though Boko Haram has been restricted – which would lend credence to the 'technically-defeated' position of the government– the terror group has been replaced by the impact of bandits in the North West, Fulani herdsmen in different parts of the country, kidnapping rings in different parts of the country (particularly in the South-South and South-East), and the ESN/unknown gunmen in the South East. This means that unlike previous times when the insecurity threat was largely limited to the Northeast and sporadic attacks in other parts of the country (a number of attacks on Abuja, including the bombing of the UN building in Abuja, provide a case in note). The situation has worsened, with threats now manifesting in different parts of the country due to the activities of multiple aggressors besides Boko Haram. The activities of these elements have had significant negative implications on the extent to which Nigerians feel safe, with the World Risk Poll survey in 2022, showing that 61% of Nigerians feel less safe than they felt in 2017 (Toochukwu, 2023; Yusuf, 2022).

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The safe conclusion on this argument thus would be that on the issue of security, the government's impact on security has not been as far-reaching as the claims the Minister has made, which would speak to the use of disinformation in engaging with Nigerians on the state of security in the country.

Beyond security issues, the economy is another area of focus where the government has made a number of claims in its engagements with Nigerians. As captured in key claim 7, Lai Mohammed had stated that the economy of Nigeria under the Buhari administration (2015-2023) was better than the previous administration's (2011-2015). A fact check was conducted using the World Bank indices for GDP growth, which revealed that the GDP rate and growth of Nigeria was at its all-time best and highest rate/growth in 2014 (previous administration) and its all-time lowest in 2017 (Buhari administration) (World Bank, 2023). Comparing the economy at the end of the previous administration (May 2015) and the end of Buhari's administration (May 2023), using inflation, GDP, etc. as indices, the economy of Nigeria was better in 2015 than it was at the end of the administration (World Bank, 2023).

Another claim was concerning the creation of millions of jobs. Lai Mohammed attempted to aver that the President fulfilled its promise of creating millions of jobs and reducing unemployment rate. In 2019, the Minister had asserted that their administration had created two million job opportunities since 2016, and as a result, five million Nigerians had been lifted from extreme poverty (Fakoyejo, 2019). Between 2019 and 2021, Nigerians were told that the government had lifted 10.5 million Nigerians out of poverty. If the five million people between 2016 and 2019 are added to the 10.5 million between 2019 and 2021, the results will be 15.5 million. That should have significantly reduced Nigeria's poverty level.

On the contrary, Bailey (2023) observed that Nigeria's unemployment rate increased more than fourfold during the Buhari administration. Existing data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) before August 2023 showed that the unemployment rate in the country rose to over 14% in 2016, and to over 33% under the administration, skyrocketing the number of unemployed persons to over 23.2 million from 6.1 million between 2015 and 2021. However, even though this does not apply to the Buhari administration, new data from the NBS, based on new parameters for determining unemployment, appear to support the government's claim in this respect, with current unemployment rate standing at 4.1%, while youth unemployment rate stands at 18.1%. While there are concerns on the bases for computing the new unemployment rate (e.g. the determination of who is employed was reduced from one who worked 40 hours a week to working 20 hours a week), coupled with the fact that, as Omale (2023) alleges, the new figures were not reached based on evidence that new jobs had been created; the statement in The Vanguard Newspaper of October 6, 2023, credited to the Minister of Budget and Economic Planning, Sen. Atiku Bagudu, that the Tinubu administration wanted to 'reduce' unemployment to 6.3% by 2030 and 2050 (Okogba, 2023) – from 4.1% - might suggest that a subterfuge is in play.

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The fact-check carried out by Premium Times, an online investigative news portal, proved that the claims of the Buhari government on the poverty alleviation programmes of his government did not match the reality on ground, with more Nigerians poor now than in 2015 (Olawoyin, 2021). Whilst agreeably, in early 2021, the President Buhari's administration had inaugurated the National Council on Poverty Reduction, with the bold claim that it will lift at least 100 million people out of poverty by 2030. However, this was adjudged to be unrealistic by the Director-General of the African Development Bank Group's Nigeria Country Department, Mr. Lamin Barro, given the high rate of unemployment and income inequality in Nigeria, as well as the fact that the requisite 30 million jobs required to achieve this was also impossible (Sun Newspaper, 2021). The reality is the fact that Nigeria became the country with the highest number of poor people in the world, with official data from the NBS showing that 63% of Nigerians – 133 million people – slipped into multidimensional poverty in 2022 (Ubanagu, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Akinkuotu, 2022). However, this figure has improved, with World Bank data on global poverty affirming that Nigeria now has more than 37% of its population living in poverty, with the real figure put at 84 million, which makes the country second behind India as the residence of the poorest people in the world (World Bank, 2023)

A logical conclusion from the foregoing is that the position painted of the Nigerian economy by the Minister is based largely on half-truths and exaggeration of the impact that the economic policies. While there is proof that the economic plans of the administration in question had created millions of jobs across different sectors, the numbers given by the government at different times do not match the actual number as confirmed by verifiable data. For instance, Odifa (2023) expresses skepticism at the claim by the administration to have created 13 million jobs across the agricultural value chain, stating that data from the sector did not lend any credence to this claim. For instance, World Bank data shows that there has been a consistent drop in the contribution of the agricultural sector to the overall employment figures, dropping from 38% in 2015 to 35% as at 2021 (World Bank, 2021; Oyaniran, 2020). Furthermore, even though jobs were created, it failed to meet targets set by the government itself (Akanbi, 2023).

While this may have been worsened by the impact of COVID-19 in 2020 which caused millions of job losses globally and in Nigeria, recovery efforts through interventions like the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Survival Fund (which according to Daudu et al. (2023) helped to restore job losses by up to 70% by 2022), the poor economic performance of the administration – which witnessed two recessions, one in 2016 and another in 2020, according to the NBS (Majeed, 2021; Okwe, 2020) – has consistently been excused away by the government.

CONCLUSION

The objectives of this paper was to determine if disinformation had been adopted by the Nigerian government between 2015 and 2023, as a public engagement strategy, by

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identifying the assertions made by the spokesperson of the government – Alhaji Lai Mohammed and President Muhammadu Buhari - in the areas of security and the economy, and determining if these claims were based on actual facts and data. From the findings and discussions above, this paper concludes that disinformation has been adopted by the administration to mislead or confuse Nigerians into believing that the government was working. In reality however, the security situation in the country was not encouraging and had not improved to match the government's claims; while Nigerians slipped deeper and deeper into poverty and economic hardship, ranking No. 2 behind India on the World Bank's global poverty rankings, contrary to the government's positions.

The negative implications of this for public trust in the government are far-reaching, especially given the arduous task the current – and arguably, subsequent – government has to turn around the fortunes of the country, a task for which national unity towards a common purpose is imperative. This means that all stakeholders must see disinformation for the long-term harm that it portends, and thus must address the problem from the perspective that applies to them.

Thus, the recommendation to the government is that government spokespeople to change the current disinformation strategy while engaging with Nigerians. It is dangerous and harmful to Nigerians who are becoming disillusioned by the reality in the country. Whilst 100% honesty in divulging details of issues of national importance cannot realistically be expected, especially with considerations of not compromising national security to be made, having the public interest – rather than political objectives and ambitions – at heart will inform a balanced approach to information sharing that will satisfy the public's need to know and the government's obligation to engage. It will also be apt that public relations professionals – rather than journalists, however experienced – should be tasked with interfacing between the government and the people. PR professionals are more suited for information and communication management than journalists due to their professional training; which is why it is not surprising that some of the best information ministers in the nation's history such as late Sir Alex Akinyele were registered public relations professionals, registered with the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR).

As the fourth estate of the realm saddled with the responsibility of holding governments accountable, the media must own up to its contribution to the spread of disinformation by political actors, and recommit herself to the ethos of truthful, fact-based, accurate reporting. While there are political economy factors to consider – per the postulations of the propaganda model – the media must honor its sacrosanct obligation to factual reporting, and clearly indicate and distinguish opinion from editorial; they must fact-check before reporting, and where an error is reported (especially where it came from 'sponsored' information), the media must provide corrective action. Self-regulation among the media must spell out, and implement, stiffer punishments for non-compliance to serve as a deterrent. Fines gotten can be put to better use in training media professionals on how to actively work against the use of

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disinformation to the detriment of the public good. Furthermore, the media can – where it does not have the resources – foster relationships and engage with independent fact checking organisations, where they can leverage on the resources and work of these fact-checking organisations to improve on the veracity of their reporting.

Finally, while this study reviewed and found evidence of government's use of disinformation, there is need to determine the implications of this on citizens' (mis)trust of the government. Further quantitative and qualitative studies can be conducted on this area, with findings likely to be useful for government information management functionaries, public (government) relations professionals, and the general public on how best to manage information sharing with the citizenry for the purpose of trust building.

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