

Curbing “Covid-Infodemic”: An Assessment of Fact-Check Sources of Dubawa Nigeria and Dubawa Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus disease, officially described as 2019-nCoV (or COVID-19) by the World Health Organisation has caused over 4.6 million deaths worldwide as at September 17, 2021. With the World Health Organisation's guidelines, individual country's Centres for Disease Control disseminate information on preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic through different media platforms to educate the populace about the virus. Unfortunately, these media (both conventional and new) platforms have been inundated with misinformation and disinformation about prevention, control, and cure of the disease causing an “infodemic”. In response to an epidemic of misinformation about the pandemic, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced a new communication initiative “to flood the Internet with facts and science while countering” the fake news related to COVID-19. This paper investigates sources of fake news reports on COVID-19 in Nigeria and Ghana by fact-check websites: Dubawa Nigeria and Dubawa Ghana. The research design is built on online content analysis. The key findings show that majority of fact-checked reports were false and largely emanated from gossip/disinformation blogs. More specifically, the coding-sheet (<http://bit.ly/DUBAWA>) shows that 106 reports were fact-checked, out of which 84% falsely sourced from gossip/disinformation blogs peddle fake news about COVID-19 in both Nigeria and Ghana. The paper recommends that Dubawa in both countries should continue to fact-check reports and flag sources of fake news about COVID-19. Moreover, it strongly advocates for campaigns (News Literacy) against gossip/disinformation blogs which have been the major sources of fake news reports in a bid to curb misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19.

KEY WORDS:

COVID-19, Fact-checking, Fake News, Gossip/Disinformation Blogs, Infodemic

Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on December 1, 2019 in Wuhan, China has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Concerted efforts by the United Nations and member states through their respective national centre for disease control and prevention to curb the spread of COVID-19 have been dependent on information like washing of hands, social/physical distancing and wearing of face masks as non-pharmaceutical preventive measures. Where there is a suspected case of the contraction of the virus, the WHO has also reeled out possible signs and symptoms that include dry cough, tiredness, aches and pains, sore throat, diarrhoea, conjunctivitis, headache, loss of taste or smell, a rash on the skin, or discolouration of fingers or toes,

difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, chest pain or pressure and loss of speech or movement (World Health Organisation, 2020).

The WHO was not only battling the COVID-19 in terms of curbing its spread; it had to focus on dispelling the grey areas and fake news generated by basic COVID-19 prevention and management information. Globally, there was a wave of fake news on COVID-19 prevention, management and cure even from highly-placed government officials and Presidents who are revered news sources. For instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation fact-checked five claims made by the immediate past United States President, Donald Trump in March, 2020 and found that four out of the five claims were false and one unverified/misleading (Team, 2020). Also, in August, 2020 hospitals in Madagascar have been trying to deal with an increase in COVID-19 infections, whilst the president, despite the WHO warning against using untested drugs, has been marketing an unproven substance he claims will cure the disease. Cases on the island of the Indian Ocean have quadrupled in the past month, with more than 13,000 illnesses and 162 coronavirus deaths, expanding to all but one of its 22 areas. Despite the jump, President Andry Rajoelina is standing by the COVID-Organics herbal concoction, which was unveiled in April to great fanfare (Ioussouf, 2020).

The WHO has been at the vanguard against fake news bordering on the COVID-19 pandemic by dispelling fake news on its myth-buster webpage. Updated regularly, the WHO has dispelled disinformation and misinformation surrounding news about COVID-19 and 5G mobile networks, alcohol, antibiotics, bleach, cold weather, snow, drugs, garlic, hand dryers, holding your breath, hot and humid climates, hot baths, hot peppers, houseflies, hydroxychloroquine, masks, CO² intoxication, exercise, medicines, methanol, ethanol, mosquitoes, older people, younger people, pneumonia vaccines, recovery, saline, shoes, sunny and hot weather, supplements, thermal scanners, ultra-violet (UV) lamps, and viruses, bacteria, antibiotics.

The news media and independent fact-checkers have joined the WHO in dispelling the fake news making the rounds in each country. Major news organisations have fact-checking desks like the *BBC*, *AFP*, *Reuters*, *New York Times* while independent fact-checking organisations are *Poynter Institute/International Fact-Checking Network* (USA), *Africa Check*, *Fact Check* (USA), *Dubawa* (Nigeria/Ghana), *Fact-Check* (Ghana), *Full Fact* (UK) among others. *Dubawa* is an independent fact-checking website that has its footprints in Nigeria (*Dubawa.org*), Ghana (*Ghana.Dubawa.org*) and recently Sierra Leone. *Dubawa* has joined other fact-checking news and non-news organisations in curbing the spread of the COVID-19 infodemic.

The Problem

Information and communication are essential in managing the spread of COVID-19. Although a major public health issue has been sparked by the outbreak

of COVID-19, pervasive confusion is fuelling much of the panic surrounding the disease. We live in a world with curious similarities where we have access to more information than any past generation but false news and disinformation are plaguing us at the same time. To be sure, fake news is untrue information portrayed as news. It also attempts to harm a person's or entity's image or gain money from advertisement sales which are dependent on a large audience base that fake news attracts. The proliferation of fake news, once prevalent in print and broadcast, has risen with the rise of social media [blogs, social networking sites, online forums, wikis, instant messaging] (Dickinson, 2018).

All year, fake news antagonists are on the prowl seeking current affairs and creating fake news to mislead their audiences, gain more traffic to their websites which in turn means more advertising revenue or use it as a tool for propaganda as they are sponsored by political and marketing groups. “A key component of managing any crisis is effective communication — which can be difficult during an infodemic. As the world scrambles to contain the coronavirus pandemic, the role of effective communication is becoming increasingly critical” (Ntonjira, 2020, para.7). The prevalence of User-Generated Content in a COVID-19 pandemic makes the WHO daily press briefing, news organisations with fact-checking desks and independent fact-checking the first and last line of defence in this infodemic (often including rumours, stigma, and conspiracy theories).

Fact-checking needs to be objective and ethical, therefore, identifying the sources of fake news either as misinformation or disinformation is critical in alerting the public to avoid dominant fake news sources. Studies by Islam (2020), Ngozika, Anikwenze, and Isiani (2020), Ahmad and Murad (2020) accept that COVID-19 infodemic is prevalent on social media but which medium (blogs, social networking sites, online forums, wikis, instant messaging) is the dominant source of the infodemic in the mass media ecology in Nigeria and Ghana? This study investigates this problem to close the knowledge gap in fighting the infodemic in a pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What is the total number of fact-checked reports on COVID-19 by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*?
2. What is the total number of misleading, false and true fact-checked reports on COVID-19 by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*?
3. What is the dominant source of fact-checked reports on COVID-19 by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*?

Literature Review

Fact-Checking

The concept of Fact-Checking describes the process and procedure to determine the credibility of information circulating or circulated in the mass media (mainstream or online). Fact-Checking as a concept has developed as a sub-concept under News Literacy which is a sub-concept or component of Media and Information Literacy (Karén & Thinsz, 2019). But before Media and Information Literacy as propagated by UNESCO in 2004 (UNESCO, 2004), in order to assess its veracity and correctness, fact-checking is the method of testing details in non-fictional and fictional documents.

The term “fact-checking” can mean two different things in journalism. Traditionally, fact-checkers were hired by newsrooms to proofread and validate factual statements created in their papers by reporters. This method of fact-checking measures the strength of the reporting, double-checks statistics and serves before release as an additional round of quality management for the content of a news source. In contemporary journalism, the dawn of this activity, at least in the West, is credited to major U.S. weekly magazines like *TIME* in the 1920s. Secondly, fact-checking is done before the document is written or otherwise disseminated (ante hoc) or after (post hoc). Internal fact-checking is the publisher's in-house checking; where a third party analyses the report, the procedure is called external fact-checking (Mantzaris, 2018).

Fake News and COVID-19

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 is the first pandemic in history in which technology and social media are used to keep people healthy, aware, active and linked on a large scale. Around the same time, the infrastructure in which we depend to stay linked and updated makes and amplifies an infodemic that threatens to disrupt the global response and jeopardises pandemic control steps. An infodemic is an over-abundance of both online and offline information. It entails concerted efforts to disseminate false facts in order to disrupt the reaction of public health and encourage alternate goals of organisations or individuals. Misinformation and disinformation can affect the physical and mental health of individuals; increase stigmatisation; endanger important health gains; and contribute to poor compliance with public health policies, thus decreasing their efficacy and jeopardising the ability of countries to avoid the pandemic (WHO, 2020).

Fake News is a term that gained notoriety with the democratisation of the Internet which is the proliferation of Internet users not as consumers of Internet media but also creators, hence widening the scope of User-Generated Content. According to Price water house Coopers (2017), the quantity of digital content generated, shared and consumed is growing worldwide by the day and since the Internet has democratised access to resources for production and distribution, the boundaries between professional and amateur content are blurring in all sections of

the creative industry.

The origin of the democratisation of the Internet dates back when its usage remained restricted to communications between scientists and within the United States Government after the creation of the Internet in 1969, although the use of email and messaging boards was common for those with access. Up until the 1990s, it did not become a common means of communication. The US federal government opened the Internet to trade in 1993 and the development of HTML provided the framework for global accessibility (Ferdinand, 2000). The democratisation of the Internet has evolved new media concepts like Prosumer, Produser, Digital Divide, Digital Culture, Participation Divide, Participatory Culture, Convergence Culture, Digital Literacy, Creativity, Web 2.0, Self-Expression, and Citizen Journalism that have encouraged content creators for text, photos, audio, video, 2 dimension and 3-dimension animations.

Officially known as online content creation (OCC) - which is the use of online spaces (often, but not always, commercial) where users are encouraged to create and share "content" (Break, 2014) - Online Content Creators are on the cyberspace not just on personal terms but to make money online. A study by *Re-Create Coalition in 2019* revealed that content creators received nearly \$ 4 billion on YouTube in 2017, a 20% rise from the previous year, according to the review of the results. Although YouTube received the highest in the aggregate for content producers, Instagram had the largest growth in earnings. The overall amount of money received on Instagram by content creators rose 50% year-over-year. WordPress was the only website that saw a year-over-year drop in gross sales for content developers (Feldman, 2019). Basically, an online content creator is someone responsible for the contribution of material to every medium and, most specifically, to digital media. Any of the following can be submitted by a content creator: blog, news, photograph, video, audio, email, social updates and other related materials (Stastik, 2019). It is safe to say that Online Content Creators are the oil that keeps the engines of social media running.

Where does Fake News come from? *National Public Radio* (an American privately and publicly funded non-profit media organisation based in Washington, D.C.) journalist, Laura Sydell, tracked down a fake news creator and investigated the circumstances on why fake news thrives globally. Her findings show that while the prevalence of fake news is not recent, the Internet and social media have altered the way it is produced and disseminated. Fake News is a multi-step method involving creating or taking content created by others, passing it off as actual news, and capitalising on social media to get as much exposure as possible. Fundamentally, those who run fake news websites want as much traffic as possible to their blogs. Although others may wish their guests to see the content and make it impact their political views, some merely want them to be clicked on by Internet users which sometimes leads them to a website where they see more content and/or see ads (ideological or not). If a website has advertisements on it, such visitors bring

commercial taxes to the owner of the website. Both moral and commercial motives need as many individuals as possible to click on the website link and visit (Sydell, 2016).

The Center for Information Technology and Society corroborates this as its investigations show that Step 1: Create a Fake News Site; Step 2: Steal Content; Step 3: Sell Advertising; Step 4: Spreading via Social Media; Step 5: Repeat (Center for Information Technology and Society, 2020). The coming of COVID-19 which was first reported to the World Health Organisation on the 31st of December, 2019 in Wuhan, China changed the global media landscape. As the virus and its consequent fatality was largely unknown, news media organisations like *Reuters* interested in this development had headlines like “Chinese officials probe unidentified pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan” (Reuters, 2019), probably one of the first international news report on COVID-19. Almost 20 months later, there is over 4 billion news on COVID-19 as populated by Google News and Google News populates 860 million COVID-19 reports related to fake news possibly originating from Fake News Creators/Online Content Creators. These figures are the relative statistics in the realm of Big Data as these figures are generated for only Google News English.

An analysis of these fake COVID-19 news reports is divided horizontally and vertically.

Horizontally, COVID-19 news reports can be direct reports and indirect reports. Direct reports are news linked directly to COVID-19. Instances are outbreak; contraction, safety and preventive protocols, isolation and treatment, cure and vaccine. Indirect COVID-19 report instances are COVID-19 and economy, security, agriculture, entertainment, sports, business, etc. Vertical COVID-19 reports are basically sources from the most reliable to the least authoritative. Instances are virologists, medical doctors, pharmacists, biologists, down to politicians and government officials. This group is the news source on the “information-web” on COVID-19 that is capable of providing truthful, false or misleading information on COVID-19. This mix in the information-web where there is no single authoritative voice and multiple sources from professional experts to public affairs analysts make information flow in a pandemic extremely difficult to streamline. An instance to amplify this line of thought is the Donald Trump vs Anthony Fauci saga or popularly known as TRUMP v TONY. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been supported by many Americans whenever he counters Donald Trump on his utterances like setting the records straight on Trump's claim that hydroxychloroquine was a possible cure (Dowd, 2020). Unfortunately, Anthony Fauci has been wrong in some of his “professional” statements about COVID-19. The Cable Network News fact-checked some statements made by Anthony Fauci and found some misleading. “Fauci certainly hasn't been perfect in his public pronouncements. But compared to Trump, it is no contest” (Subramaniam, Dale,

& Lybrand, 2020). Another instance in an infodemic information-web mix was the previous Ebola Virus Disease where non-professionals exploited the social media in creating an infodemic whereby bathing in or drinking saltwater and ingestion of Nano Silver, an experimental drug was circulated in China (Chun-Hai Fung et al., 2016) and saltwater drinking and bathing in Nigeria (Balami & Meleh, 2019).

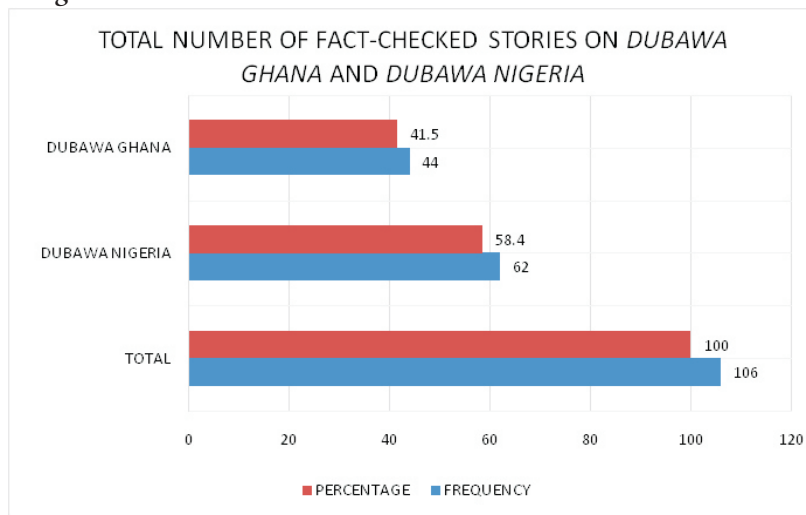
Methodology

The quantitative methodology was adopted for this study. The research design was Online Content Analysis. “Content Analysis is a quantitative approach to analysing mass media content and involves developing a system of classification to analyse the key features of media sources and then simply counting how many times these features occur in a given text” (Thompson, 2017, para. 7). “Websites, social media posts and similar virtual documents are all forms of secondary data, and thus amenable to both quantitative and qualitative content analysis” (Thompson, 2017, para. 1). The Total Population was the procedure used for this study and all reports (106 reports) related to COVID-19 on the *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* websites were content-analysed to discover its verification as True, False or Misleading and the major source of all false news reports. The instrument of data collection was the Coding Sheet. The method of data analysis was frequency ratings and simple percentages presented in bar charts.

Results and Discussion

Results

Figure 1: Total number of fact-checked reports on the Coronavirus on *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*



The above chart indicates that the combined total number of reports fact-checked by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* is 106. More than half (58.4%) of these reports relating to COVID-19 were from *Dubawa Nigeria* fact-checked while

Dubawa Ghana fact-checked 41.5% reports also related to COVID-19 as of August, 2020. The data shows that *Dubawa Nigeria* had more fact-checked reports than *Dubawa Ghana*. This could be deduced that news and information about COVID-19 on the mass media and social media that were misleading were more prominent in the Nigerian mass media ecology than that of the Ghanaian mass media ecology.

Figure 2: Total number of fact-checked reports on COVID-19 on *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* that was misleading, false or true

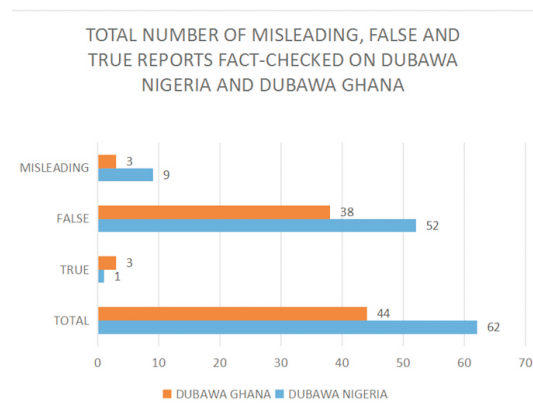


Chart 2 shows that of all the 106 fact-checked reports relating to COVID-19, 90 reports were verified as FALSE i.e. 38 reports by *Dubawa Ghana* and 52 reports by *Dubawa Nigeria*. 42% of the total FALSE reports were by *Dubawa Ghana* while 57% of the total FALSE reports were by *Dubawa Nigeria*. 11.3% (12 reports, i.e., 3 from *Dubawa Ghana* and 9 from *Dubawa Nigeria*) were MISLEADING. 84.9% (3.7% were certified TRUE (4 reports i.e., 3 by *Dubawa Ghana* and 1 by *Dubawa Nigeria*). The misleading reports could not be fact-checked as FALSE or TRUE due to the fact that the sources of the reports could not be traced or did not deny or verify such information. Generally, misleading reports are most times categorised as false until verified or fact-checked.

Figure 3: Sources of fact-checked reports on coronavirus on *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*

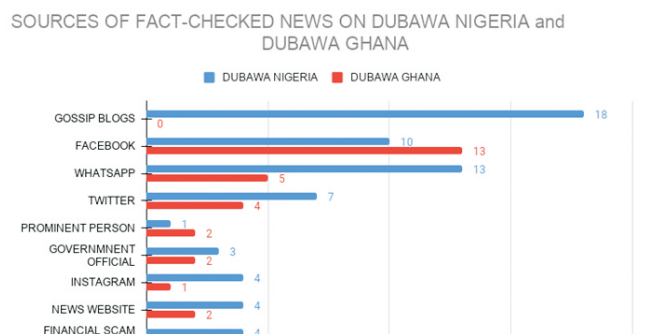


Chart 3 shows the sources of reports fact-checked by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*.

Arranged to show prominence, the data reveals that Gossip Blogs were the highest sources of

fake news reports with 18%. The Coding Sheet (<http://bit.ly/DUBAWA>) shows that *Dubawa Nigeria* recorded 30% of fake news reports and two misleading (unverified) from Gossip Blogs. Gossip Blogs were not the source of fake news reports in Ghana as assessed by *Dubawa Ghana*. This may reveal information on the misuse of gossip blogs in Nigeria that generate fake news about COVID-19 and other items of public interest.

Discussion

Research Question One investigated the total number of fact-checked news reports by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* on COVID-19. The data reveals that a total of 106 news reports were fact-checked by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* as of August, 2020. *Dubawa Nigeria* had more fact-checks with 62 while *Dubawa Ghana* had 44. This data is a pointer to the fact that the fake news phenomenon is deeply rooted in the Nigerian media ecosystem and evolving into a social malaise. This notion affirms the position of Bakare (2020) that the problem of false news in Nigeria is extremely serious, with 187 million active mobile phone lines, over 20 million individuals on social media, and approximately 80% of the social media population using WhatsApp.

Research Question Two verified all news reports by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*. The findings show that 12 news reports (3 from *Dubawa Ghana* and 9 from *Dubawa Nigeria*) were MISLEADING. 90 news reports were verified as FALSE (38 by *Dubawa Ghana* and 52 by *Dubawa Nigeria*). 4 news reports were certified TRUE (3 by *Dubawa Ghana* and 1 by *Dubawa Nigeria*). This data suggests that false and misleading news reports that circulated in Ghana and Nigeria amount to 96.2%. According to the Coding Sheet (<http://bit.ly/DUBAWA>), some misleading news reports that were difficult to verify are: *The Prolonged Use of Facemasks Will Cause Hypoxia*; *Bill Gates Offers \$10m Bribe To Nigerian Legislators*; *Touching Naira Notes Increases the Risk Of Coronavirus*; *BCG May Cure Tuberculosis But Not COVID-19*. Some verified fake news stores by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* are; *WHO Exempts Children Under Six From Wearing Facemasks*; *Garlic and Cocaine Cures Coronavirus*; *Sobolo (Hibiscus Drink) and Akpeteshie (Local Ghanian Gin/Spirit) Cures COVID-19*.

Research Question Three assessed the prominent source of the news reports fact-checked by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*. The findings show that Gossip Blogs are the most prominent source of all the verified fake news reports. Also described as Disinformation-Riddled

Blogs by Agarwal and Bandeli (2018), gossip blogs are different from news websites because the study revealed that their major characteristics are 'copying and pasting'

news and information from credible news websites with no attribution, generate outright lies, lift reports from social media, post unverified news reports, have one or two correspondents, some by-lines listed as Editor, Admin, Local Correspondent, solicit for news and reports from readers, dominated by sensational entertainment news about celebrities other than news of prominent people and events and are advertisement-seeking. They are also not satirical websites. Satirical news websites resemble real news websites that contain fake news reports for humorous purposes. Satirical news is great for entertainment but is not a news source (LibGuides, 2020).

A few examples from the Coding Sheet (<http://bit.ly/DUBAWA>) are; *NAFDAC Approves Pax-Herbal Cuzin as a Treatment for COVID-19*; *Atiku Weeps as his Son Dies of COVID-19*; *Obasanjo Sends N5,000 to all Nigerian Youths Using BVN*; *COVID-19: Buhari Sacks Abba Kyari- Appoints Ajimobi*; *Ghana Health Services Announces 100% Recovery of COVID-19 Patients*. In the order of prominence of sources, following gossip blogs, the findings show that Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were all purveyors of fake and misleading news reports about COVID-19.

Some government officials were also culpable of spreading misleading information verified as fake news reports. The Coding Sheet (<http://bit.ly/DUBAWA>) shows that Nigeria's Garba Shehu (Senior Special Assistant on Media to the Nigerian President Buhari) said *822 Nigerians die daily from malaria and undue attention was given to COVID-19*, while Nigeria's Ibrahim Magu, the former acting Economic and Financial Crimes Commission Chairperson made news when he said '*Corruption is the cause of the coronavirus*'. News Websites like Vanguardngr.com (Nigeria), Pulse.com (Nigeria), citinewsroom.com (Ghana), dailypost.ng (Nigeria), independent.ng (Nigeria) and dailynigerian.com (Nigeria) were sources of false and misleading news reports about COVID-19. *Dubawa Nigeria* linked financial scams websites as sources of fake news reports to three websites that reported that *Dangote Foundation Gives N15,000 Weekly During Lockdown*; *World Health Organisation Offering Jobs During Lockdown*, *Nigerian Government to Disburse N30,000 to all Nigerians as Lockdown Relief*. Such sites like <https://naijaoffers.online/dangotefoundationfunds.html> reported fake news reports asking consumers to input sensitive bank details with a promise to send the funds to them. No true, misleading or fake news was sourced to any of the traditional media (TV, radio and newspaper). This does not suggest that traditional media are not fake news outlets as it has been established that they are on the contrary.

According to a global study conducted in 2019, 62% of respondents thought that on internet websites and platforms, there was a reasonable amount or a great deal of fake news. In contrast, ten per cent fewer (52%) said the same thing for TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, identifying traditional media as being more credible than online formats in general as regards fake news sources (Watson, 2019). In Nigeria, a study conducted in January, 2019 revealed that 47% of the total respondents believe that the print media was a source of fake news (Watson,

2019).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper assessed fake news reports and sources on independent fact-checking website *Dubawa* as it fact-checked news reports of COVID-19 on the mass media (mainstream and online). The findings show that 106 news reports relating to COVID-19 were fact-checked by *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana*; 84% of all news reports were false and all social media including news websites were sources of fake news reports about COVID-19. In order of prominence, gossip blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, prominent persons, government officials and news websites (some owned by traditional news media) were sources of fake news reports on COVID-19.

Literature from Sydell (2016) show how fake news creators build websites and post fake news reports which snowball to social media for many reasons including advertising revenue.

Identifying sources of fake news on COVID-19 in the Nigerian and Ghanaian news media ecology can be the first step in directing news literacy campaigns. To this end, the study has open another area of research; an investigation into direct (prevention, cure, isolation, vaccine) and indirect (economy, lifestyle, culture) news reports on COVID-19 vis-à-vis fake news reportage.

The paper recommends that *Dubawa Nigeria* and *Dubawa Ghana* continue to fact-check reports and flag sources of fake news about COVID-19 and consider News Literacy campaigns against gossip/disinformation blogs whose fake content snowball into social media and mainstream media. Agarwal and Bandeli (2018) provide a set of heuristics to identify blogs that are potentially riddled with mis/disinformation that can be used to build news literacy campaigns against gossip blogs. These heuristics are: Pay attention to the 'contact us' section of the page to validate and verify site authors; Pay close attention to the URLs, sources, images, and editorial standards of the writing; Always crosscheck the story with fact-checking websites; Search for the post in well-known search engines; Check if the article has been previously published and if it is being reused to affect perceptions about an event; Check if the post is disturbing or controversial.

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