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### Ethical Challenges of the New Media in a Covid-19 Pandemic Era: The Nigeria Perspective

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# Ethical Challenges Of The New Media In A Covid-19 Pandemic Era: The Nigeria Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence showing that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective means of preventing COVID-19 disease with high records of mortality, there has been a proliferation of false misleading claims trying to undermine the public's confidence in their safety and uptake. No thanks to the spread of fake news in the digital age as it demonstrates the erosion of long-standing institutional barriers against misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and fake news. Because of the internet, many of these barriers to news dissemination have been compromised. This allows information outlets that do not follow these media norms to compete more effectively online than they might be able to compete outside. This has aided the collapse of traditional news organisations that formerly enjoyed considerable public trust and respect. The public's trust in the media has decreased, causing widespread anxiety. However, little is understood about fundamental issues such as individuals, institutions, and society to manipulations by malicious actors. Adopting a conceptual framework, this paper used a descriptive method while library research was used to generate secondary data to examine the role of new media ethical challenges - misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and fake news in a COVID-19 pandemic era from the Nigeria perspective and their implications, using the social responsibility and technological determinism theoretical frameworks as a guide. Findings revealed a high level of vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria majorly attributed to circulating misleading information from social media and trusted stakeholders. The paper, however, concludes that fact-checking tools be used in Nigeria to minimize the dissemination of fake news and that the Nigerian official national communication policy should be revisited, rejigged, duly approved, and implemented by the government.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Ethics, New Media, Nigeria, Pandemic

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The media have become a critical social institution as a result of the crucial role they perform in society. Lasswell, according to Suleiman (2018) citing Hanson and Max (1996), was the first scholar to discuss the roles, which the mass media perform in a contemporary democratic society. Lasswell identified three functions of the media in the modern world: surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of the society in responding to the environment, and transmission of social heritage (p. 209). He maintained further that the media also entertain and help in the formation of attitudes by establishing values for society, thereby building a climate of change in the nation. These roles lie in the capability of the media to teach, manipulate, sensitize and mobilize through the dissemination of information. This information confers on people the power of participation (Inuwa, 2007; Nwabueze, 2005).

According to McGuire, Aulisio, Davis, Erwin, et al. (2020):

Community engagement has long been integral to public health and specifically in planning for pandemics and addressing such controversial issues as allocating limited resources. Experience indicates that community engagement is potentially valuable across a range of functions, from setting achievable objectives for health-related initiatives to enhancing public awareness and understanding of complex matters and eliciting public concerns and priorities. If well intended, designed, and executed, community engagement strategies can exemplify the principle of respect for persons in the community and thereby engender and promote mutual trust and shared accountability between Health Community Officers, their patients, and communities (p. 21).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a critical point for many and has transformed or suspended many projects – a disruption still happening very much in real-time – has been swift and dramatic (Participants in an Ethics of Digitalization Research Sprint. (2021, p. 9). Around the globe, government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been plagued by disinformation and poor planning. The result is a misinformed, distrustful public, which is already burdened by deficits in health literacy, especially around issues of dying and death (Finestone and Inderwies 2008 cited in McGuire, et al., 2020, p. 21). No thanks to the advent of the new media. With no end of platforms becoming inundated with an overload of information – about the virus, COVID-19 has forever changed the social media landscape. The easy accessibility of social media platforms has abundantly facilitated the creation and dissemination of false information. The spread of false information has been a pressing concern for most countries all over the world (Hamdani and Housseine, 2021, p. 30).

Against this background, and drawing from the perspectives of different domains across the globe, this paper focuses on the new media ethical dilemmas and challenges faced by Nigeria when the World Health Organisation announced COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020. According to Bamdad, Finaughty, and Johns (2022) citing Crowhurst and Ennedy-Macoy (2013), the experience emphasizes the unpredictability of relationships with gatekeepers and also highlights the different ways in which some gatekeepers can influence other gatekeepers' decisions to collaborate or disassociate in research (p. 36).

The experience thus confirms that when it comes to promoting a cause, developing community engagement and building rapport over the internet is a very complex and complicated process as the lack of face-to-face interactions, and the fact that we could only communicate online through the social media platforms meant that our intentions were open to interpretation by our contacts as lack of clear guidance, and the perceptions of influential gatekeepers could result in the failure of negotiating once position (Bamdad, Finaughty & Johns, 2022, p. 27).

### **1.1 The objective of the Paper**

This paper aims to advance a conceptual position on the new media ethical dilemmas and challenges faced by Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic era. This paper's emphasis is basically on the easy accessibility of social media platforms in abundantly facilitating the creation and dissemination of false propaganda – misinformation, disinformation, and fake news.

## 1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

This work takes a cue from the social responsibility and technological determinism theories. Further, the study adopts the social responsibility theory as a basis for analysis or discussion

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

According to Okunna (1999) cited in Apuke and Omar (2021); social responsibility theory is a modern theory in that it emerged in the twentieth century. The theory is an offshoot of the

### **libertarian Theory**

The theory emerged due to observed unethical practices of a free press as manifested in excess cases of defamation of character, invasion of privacy, sedition, sensationalism, distortions of information, and other unethical practices among media practitioners. Thus, the social responsibility theory came to correct these wrongs without necessarily denying the press their right (p. 3).

Apuke and Omar (2021) citing McQuail (2005) posited that the theory talks about responsible press. According to him, the independence of the media is attached to the obligation. The responsibilities attached to the rights of the media are based on high professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance which are core ethical issues of the media today. Based on the theory, it is the responsibility of the media to give an accurate and balanced report of all events and ensure that their reports and activities in no way encourage or go against cultural, legal, and professional ethics.

Hence, the theory implores media practitioners to conduct themselves under high media ethical standards. It is based on the above notion that this study finds the theory relevant to the present study, especially with the advent of online journalism, information has been made speedily accessible, and news production becoming easier. This situation has contributed to unethical practices like an inaccurate report, lack of decency, and sensationalism among others which has necessitated a call for more responsible online journalism in Nigeria.

### **Technological Determinism**

Technological Determinism theory, according to Abanewe, (2013) cited in Oluyi and Abioye (2020) is believed to have been coined by the American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929). The theory presumes that a society's technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values (p. 23). The first major elaboration of technological determinism came from the German philosopher and economist, Karl Marx, whose theoretical framework was based upon the idea that changes in technology and production technology are the primary influence on the organisation of social relations, and that social relations and cultural practices ultimately revolve around the technological and economic base of a society.

According to technological determinists, particular technical developments, communication technologies or media, or most broadly, technology, in general, are the prime antecedent causes of change in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organisation (Oluyi and Abioye, 2020, p. 23).

### **Assumptions of Technological Determinism**

Technological determinism theory is usually based on the following assumptions:

1. Communication technology is basic to society;
2. Technology drives change in media industries;
3. Each technology is tilted towards particular communication forms, contents, and uses;
4. The sequence of invention and application of technology influence social change;
5. Communication revolutions engender social revolutions; and;
6. New media undermine old bases (Abanewe, 2013 cited in Oluyi and Abioye, 2020).

From the explanation above, social media as technological innovation is not just a development initiative, but also a new media designed primarily to help people, and uplift their quality of life of people economically, socially, and even culturally. It needs to be stressed here that since technology is central to this study, assessing how inclusive the invention of new technologies has been for the rapid dissemination of false information is imperative. More importantly, according to Hamdani and Housseine (2021), new media technology has enabled fake news to proliferate like wildfire, assisted by the spread of social media, which has created a propitious environment for the false news explosion. The increase in the use of social media exposes users to misleading information, which appears to challenge an essential foundation of ethical media (p. 30).

### **1.3 Methodology**

The researchers used a descriptive method while library research was used to generate secondary data for this paper, thereby employing content analysis to drive home their points.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 COVID-19**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Zhou et al. 2020; Chan et al, 2020; Huangetal, 2020). The outbreak of this disease was first recorded in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Fasina, 2020, p. 97). The outbreak of COVID-19 started in December 2019 and the first patient with an atypical form of pneumonia was diagnosed in China. One month later, in January 2020, the causative agent of the COVID-19 disease, the SARS-COV-2 virus, was deciphered and identified and its genome was published rapidly (Yuen, Ye, Fung, Chan, & Jin, 2020). SARS-COV-2 belongs to the coronavirus family, as are SARS-CoV-1 (which generated the 2003 SARS epidemic) and MERS-CoV (which generated the MERS epidemic in 2013) (Docea et al., 2020). The novel SARS-COV-2 coronavirus (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) produces COVID-19 (Coronavirus infectious disease-2019), respiratory infection with a 5-day incubation period between two and 14 days. (Chan et al, 2020; Docea et al., 2020; Goumenou, Spandidos, & Tsatsakis, 2020; Yuen, Ye, Fung, Chan, & Jin, 2020).

Within the next four (4) months thereafter, the infection spread across many nations of the world with resultant negative impacts on the individuals, families, economy, social, occupational, and other areas of human functioning and responsibilities. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a public health emergency of international concern on the 30th of January 2020 and later a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Globally, COVID-19 updates on 1st April 2022 reflected a total of 486,761,597 confirmed cases and 6,172,729 deaths (WHO, 2022). Across the continents of the world, Europe was the worst hit with the pandemic recording a total number of 202,693,049 cases; Americas, 150,709372; South-East Asia, 57,130,457;

Western Pacific, 46,071,142; Eastern Mediterranean, 21,576,432 and Africa, 8,580.381 (WHO, 2022).

## 2.2 Pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared that the global spread of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, was a pandemic. When the strain of a virus that is causing a certain infectious disease is unknown, it is impossible to know what vaccines or medications are most appropriate should be looked to for the development of a treatment plan to combat the outbreak. The first development plan for pandemic vaccine preparation and stocking before an infectious disease outbreak poses the challenge of what to research, develop, and keep and stock for a what-if situation, upon which it can be made available for distribution and administration before the strain becomes known (Alahmad, Richi, BaniMustafa & Almutairi, 2021, p. 2). Qualitative modes of inquiry are essential to designing and implementing effective and inclusive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and future emergencies. As public health recommended (PHR) behavioral measures remain essential to controlling the pandemic amid emerging virus variants of concern as established by WHO (2021) cited in Newman, Guta, and Black (2021), investigations that aim to explore and understand knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and structural factors that impede support these measures are crucial (p. 2).

## 2.3 Ethics

Broadly conceived, ethics concerns the creation and evaluation of goodness, or “the good,” by responding to the general question: *How shall we live?* The word ethics itself comes from the Greek word *ethnos*, which means habit or custom, whereas the word moral comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word *ethos*. Ethics govern and yet are distinct from law. That is, while laws encode values and customs that will be enforced by the power of the state, more generally ethics concern those values and beliefs (whether enforced by law or not) that a society or group, or individual believes will most likely create goodness (Ekwueme, 2012). According to Ojo (2013) citing Merrill (1997), journalists can be ethical when they uphold decisions or behave by any of the ethical theories. He, however, concluded that though there have been various controversial ways of classifying theories of ethics approaches, yet, he categorized them all under two major forms – Pragmatic and Humanistic. Pragmatic according to him talks about the thorough investigation and reporting of truth for forthright disclosure of the day’s happenings while Humanistic is interested in the self-improvement of individual journalists and their concerns ethically for their sources or audiences (p. 89).

## 2.4 New Media

New media is a broad term in media studies that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. For example, new media holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation, and community formation around the media content. Another important promise of new media is the “democratization” of the creation, publishing, distribution, and consumption of media content. What distinguishes new media from traditional media is the digitizing of content into bits. (Adelakun, 2006, p.50). The world is a global village. Interactions among communities though are complex. Technologies have changed communication, making it more transnational, intercultural, and international. Business is increasingly global and influenced by political, economic, social, and cultural issues. To implement communication strategies globally – where cultural and linguistic awareness and sensitivity are crucial – International Communication (IC) Specialists need wide-ranging interdisciplinary expertise (Capobianco, 2018, para 1-2).

The challenges media organizations face in the new communication age are considerable. Organizational contexts are dynamic and unpredictable, and stakeholders are more demanding, empowered, and connected. The days when organizations can exert any control over that context are over if they were ever a reality. The gatekeeping function of media professionals is also no longer a possibility. The potential for everyone to be a communicator and for everyone to be communicated with, both inside and outside the organization means that gatekeeping is a thing of the past. A significant part of the communicator's task is to make the whole organization communicatively competent (Arthur, 2007).

However, important changes have also occurred on the path of information from the sources to the journalist and from the journalist to the editorial office. Sooner than expected from now, the digital media explosion would be extraordinary, and the cellular phone would become one of the instruments for promotion, along with the others previously mentioned. Not only the role of television would change, but the transfer of elements belonging to the private space into the public space would also continue, with or without the assent of those involved (Szabo, 2014, pp.33-34).

According to Zuckerman, (2017) cited in Hamdani and Housseine (2021), the challenge of fake news arises from its definition; it can have very different meanings depending on the speaker and the context in which it occurs. The term "fake news" has remained a controversial concept in the field of media studies due to its convoluted and ambiguous aspect that covers everything, including media both-sides-ism, propaganda, and disinformation (p. 31). In examining information, much of the discussion on 'fake news' conflates three main terms: disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information. The different types have been suggested by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) to "examine information disorder".

In the suggested typology, misinformation refers to "information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true" whereas "disinformation is false information, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively misinformed by malicious actors". According to Sitek et al. (2020), misinformation is "when false information is shared, but no harm is meant" whereas disinformation is "when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm". Mal-information, on the other hand, refers to "genuine information which is shared to cause harm."

### 3. COVID-19 MYTHS: NIGERIA PERSPECTIVE

Myths is a widely held false beliefs or ideas. It is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involves supernatural beings or events. **The non-existence of COVID-19** is a major myth about COVID-19. Spanned from the belief that it does not exist (Wonodi et al., 2022). Therefore, it was opined that the pandemic response is a means for the Nigerian government officials and politicians to obtain pecuniary gains from misusing the response funds. This view confirms similar skepticism reported in other studies and countries about the virus's existence perceived as a hoax and the COVID-19 prevention efforts as an avenue for politicians to embezzle public funds (Grimes & Serra, 2021; Olatunji, et al., 2020; Aasim, 2021; Uscinski et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Hoax-related conspiracy theories have been shown to predict refusal to engage in preventive behaviors, including vaccination (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

Skepticism is an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity. It is a method of systematic doubt or that knowledge in a particular area is uncertain. The Igbos from Southeast Nigeria were perceived to have the highest level of skepticism about COVID-19 (Wonodi et al., 2022). This is because of a distrust of the current government. The recent separatist movement in the Southeast has put the zone in the federal government's crosshairs, creating a trust deficit and geopolitical tension that may now be spilling over into public health. National surveys have reported that the lowest rates of intention to receive the COVID-19 vaccine were among Southeast participants compared to those from other zones in the country (Adebisi et al., 2021; NO I Polls, 2020).

These low rates raise fundamental concerns that high COVID-19 skepticism may translate into vaccine hesitancy among South easterners who have historically had one of the highest rates of childhood vaccine uptake, who also show strong faith in routine childhood vaccines (Wonodi et al., 2022). Nevertheless, as more cases and deaths become evident, the claim of COVID-19 is a hoax may have less salience to those who need the evidence to convince them. However, programs must also brace for those with lingering doubts, who will continue to perceive that the pandemic is exaggerated because SARS-CoV-2 has affected Africa much less than the United States, Europe, or India.

### **3.1 Religious interpretation of the pandemic**

There is a widespread understanding of the pandemic among Christians that relates it to the end-times and the Antichrist predicted in Christian scriptures. These statements, according to Adelakun (2020) and Dwoskin, (2021) cited in Wonodi et al. (2022), have been associated with prominent Nigerian pastors with strong followership and with Christian evangelicals globally. Interestingly, in previous experience of polio vaccine conspiracy and hesitancy in Nigeria, misinformation about vaccines and fertility was prominent among Muslim rather than Christian groups (Wonodi et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of engaging broadly with different population subgroups, not just those with historic hesitancy, to assess concerns and craft messaging accordingly.

### **3.2 COVID-19 vaccines are tools of Western actors to control or reduce the African population , track people, and alter their DNA**

Reports have shown that people commonly reported that the disease was developed for population control, especially in Africa, and to also track people (Wonodi et al., 2022). The same was reported in other studies (Efendioglu, 2020; Goodman et al., 2020). These unsubstantiated claims may hinge on long-held concerns about a structural imbalance between Africa and the Western world, as well as the colonial legacies the continent continues to bear. Political leaders' disparaging statements about the vaccines, such as Tanzania's late President John Magufuli, which referred to the vaccine as "dangerous for our health" are highly damaging and confusing for a skeptical public. Although some conspiracy theories' beliefs are rooted in people's distrust of the government and its institutions, these same actors have a vital role in engaging the public, building their confidence in the vaccine programs, and communicating the right messages (Jensen et al., 2021).

### **3.3 COVID-19 vaccine causes permanent menstrual cycle changes and infertility**

Online rumors about vaccine effects on fertility and pregnancy have regularly appeared since the vaccine rollout started, particularly during its early phases. The misinformation is often spread through influencer videos posted to social media platforms (Abbasi, 2020). Unfortunately, with the emergence of Delta last summer, more cases of unvaccinated pregnant people ending up in emergency rooms and hospitals and facing some severe consequences of



COVID, including an increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, and even significant health complications for the birthing persons has been reported (Abbasi, 2022). Lately, some patients frequently reported they have heard that COVID-19 vaccines cause significant and permanent menstrual cycle changes that can lead to fertility problems. Misinformation about menstrual changes is being used to “add new fuel to the claim that COVID vaccines affect fertility.

Some myths related to the COVID-19 vaccines include but are not limited to:

- Myth 1: COVID-19 vaccine will affect fertility.
- Myth 2: If I have already had COVID-19, I do not need a vaccine.
- Myth 3: Researchers rushed the development of COVID-19 vaccines, so their effectiveness and safety cannot be trusted.
- Myth 4: Getting the COVID-19 vaccines will give you COVID-19.
- Myth 5: The side effects of COVID-19 vaccines are dangerous.
- Myth 6: The COVID-19 Vaccine was developed with or contains controversial substances.
- Myth 7: COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips.
- Myth 8: Receiving the COVID-19 vaccine can make you magnetic.

Other myths related to the Covid -19 Virus in Nigeria and the facts attending to them are listed in the table below:

**Table 1 - Ten (10) Myths About Coronavirus – WHO.**

Myth	Facts
Hand dryers are effective in killing the new coronavirus	Hand dryers are not effective in killing a virus
Ultraviolet disinfection lamps kill COVID-19	No, ultraviolet lamps will not kill the virus and they can cause skin irritation.
Spraying alcohol or chlorine bleach on yourself can kill the virus.	No. They won't kill the virus, and they will burn your skin. You can, however, use those substances to clean surfaces in your home or office that could have the virus on them.
It's unsafe to open a package from China.	Yes, it is safe to open it. Coronaviruses do not survive long on objects like letters or packages
I can get the coronavirus from my pet.	According to the WHO, there is no evidence that companion animals such as dogs or cats can be infected with the new coronavirus
The pneumonia vaccine provides protection against COVID-19.	There is no vaccine yet that protects against the coronavirus, including pneumonia viruses. Researchers have said they believe a vaccine for COVID-19 will be available in about a year.
Saline rinses help kill the virus.	No. There is no evidence that regularly rinsing your nostrils with saline offers any protection against the new coronavirus.
The coronavirus is only dangerous for older people and those who have pre-existing medical conditions.	No, the coronavirus can affect anyone. Older people and those with certain medical conditions appear more vulnerable to the virus, according to the WHO.
Antibiotics will help if you get the virus.	No, COVID-19 is a virus. Antibiotics do not work against viruses.
Medicine given after the virus can cure it.	There is no vaccine or mention to prevent coronavirus, although cases have been successfully treated.

Source: Premium Times, 2020

Going by these myths mostly put up and disseminated through the social media, many Nigerians put up a non-challenge attitude and this has led to the loss of several lives as a result of negligence to the COVID-19 safety precautions in Nigeria. Most Nigerians strongly believed that the existence of COVID-19 is all a lie and a scheme of the government (and the devil) to deceive people and lure them to hell (also a myth), therefore, they frown strongly at the mention of COVID-19 or the vaccine. All of these led to the refusal to take the COVID-19 jabs. These attitudes are a result of false beliefs (myths) held by people due to disinformation and misinformation they have received.

Some of the negative attitudes put up by Nigerians concerning the COVID 19 pandemic include;

1. Refusal to adhere to COVID-19 preventive protocol e.g., refusal to put on nose mask, refusal to practice handwashing, refusal to avoid crowded places or events, etc.
2. Refusal to go for COVID-19 tests to know their status.
3. Refusal of people to stay on lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid the spread of the disease.
4. Infected persons often refuse to be quarantined or isolated from family members and society.
5. Denial of individuals of having COVID-19, stating that the symptoms of COVID19 are similar to " normal malaria"
6. .6. Refusal to avoid close contact with infected persons, hence causing a wide spread of the disease.
7. People refused to abstain from organizing events that require a lot of people to say that the existence of COVID-19 is a lie, hence their parties cannot be on hold.

#### **4. COVID-19: MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND FAKE NEWS**

Misinformation has caused confusion and led people to decline COVID-19 vaccines, rejected public health measures such as masking and physical distancing, and use unproven treatments. The main source of vaccine misinformation is social media. The main public health concern around COVID-19 vaccine misinformation is the risk of it leading to a reduction in vaccine uptake and the use of drugs that would be harmful to their health. It also prevents individuals from practicing infection control measures such as hand washing, the wearing of a nose mask, etc.

Some of the misinformation includes:

3. COVID-19 was a human-made virus designed by pharmaceutical companies for financial gains.
4. The virus as a human-made biological weapon
5. COVID-19 cannot be transmitted in areas with hot climates
6. Children will not be infected or carry the virus
7. Most people who get the virus would die
8. Antibiotics are effective in preventing and treating the new coronavirus
9. COVID-19 can be prevented or treated by eating raw garlic and drinking hot tea containing anise

The misinformation about the virus started gaining traction in Nigeria when governments and popular figures started pedaling information of conspiracy about the origination of the virus. Through the help of social media, it was easy to spread misinformation and fake news and attract more audience and attention from conspiracy lovers. Some misinformation about COVID-19 spread in Nigeria includes:

- An elected senator referred to the virus as being linked to the 5G network and anti-Christ and the same assertion was supported and widely promoted on Twitter and Facebook.
- There were also speculations by the former President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, that the virus was not serious and that it was overhyped and politicized. Misinformation like that got to the Nigerian social media and that continued to stir up panic about the virus even before the arrival of vaccines in Nigeria.
- The false assumption that hydroxychloroquine and saltwater bath could provide a solution was also another concrete misinformation of information that was widely spread by people.
- The religious leaders in Nigeria played a major role in disseminating false assumptions about the virus with a Pastor referring to it as a microchip and a sign of the devil to control the people.
- When some religious leaders started branding the virus as the devil made and the vaccine as the sign of anti-Christ, most Nigerians have concluded that they will distance themselves from the vaccine and have nothing to do with the virus.

## **5. CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL ISSUES: INTERROGATING THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA**

The COVID-19 pandemic, according to McGuire et al. (2020) has raised a host of ethical challenges (p. 16), but key among these has been the possibility that the phenomenon of fake news is perceived as a powerful force that has the potential to affect democracy. The spread of online fake news has presented a plethora of challenges to governments all over the world. At least, it has threatened the social and political stability of many countries by spreading panic and anxiety among the public and, in some cases, has brought about incivility and violence (Rainie, Anderson, & Albright, 2017; Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018).

All these challenges have raised the question about the real role that media should assume to maintain professional standards and ethics. In this regard, according to Bali and Desai (2019) cited in Hamdani and Housseine (2021), rampant efforts have been made by many world governments and organizations to combat fake news. In many countries, varied steps have been taken to enforce the removal of fake news “by bringing in a law to restrict the usage or penalize the perpetrators” (p. 34).

However, some countries have taken strict measures, while others have been less prescriptive. Nigeria, for example, did not react officially to the threat posed by the spread of fake news, mainly on social media platforms. Though, the federal government, through the appropriate authorities wielded the big stick of the law by getting people who contravened the COVID-19 lockdown rules and guidelines arrested and prosecuted, among which we have the popular artiste, Naira Marley and the Nollywood actress, Funke Akindele, whose actions were said to have incited people to ignore precautionary measures recommended by the Nigerian Ministry of Health.

## 6. CONCLUSION

With the growing debate over how to expose and eliminate fake news during the COVID-19 crisis, the issue of media ethics and proper conduct has rigorously come under fire. The pandemic has provided some governments in the world with a new excuse to wield laws, criminalizing the spread of fake news and crackdown on the free media. Alarmingly, many countries have put restrictions on media freedom, either through limiting access to information or a launch of verbal and physical attacks on people reporting on the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Media users including journalists and social media influencers have been harassed and jailed for interrogating government accounts about the pandemic, or for using social media to reveal potential unreported incidents. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the media range violently at a time when it should play a central role in providing correct information and fighting fake news about the pandemic.

Media practitioners and users have increasingly seen their rights infringed while the government considers emergency measures to tackle the pandemic as a reasonable pretext to censor news and information (Hamdani and Housseine, 2021, pp. 35-36). Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the free flow of news is more indispensable than ever, guaranteeing an easy exchange of accurate information. The issue of dealing with fake news is a common responsibility. However, without responsible media reporting, vulnerable people all over the world would fall prey to fake news. Countering false and misleading information needs to ensure the ability of people to have access to accurate information. On the other hand, any responses to address fake news need to consider global standards of freedom of expression. Governments should guarantee the presence of effectively resourced media and place measures to endorse media diversity and provide care for the creation of various reliable media content (Hamdani and Housseine, 2021, p. 36).

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