Media perspectives on fake news in Ghana

MEDIA PERSPECTIVES ON FAKE NEWS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

New digital tools and the spin-off innovative offerings and opportunities they provide has unleashed ground-breaking forms of gathering and publishing news including increased speed of news dissemination and ability to reach a wider audience. These innovations have affected the traditional means of verifying and validating news content. Thus, fake news (spreading falsehood, misinformation and disinformation in public discourse) has now become part and parcel of the global news ecosystem, a situation that has had an associated adverse impact on citizens' lack of trust not only in the news media but also, in key governance institutions and the way they consume news.

There are growing concerns and calls on governments to step in to tackle the challenges that come with the proliferation of fake news without necessarily curbing free speech, which is a key tenet of democracy or undermining the progress of the use of technology in the news production cycle. Given this background, this study sets out to understand the prevalence of the fake news problem in Ghana and assess the measures being put in place to combat this rapidly growing phenomenon.

Based on the survey of 154 newsrooms nationwide, a major finding of the study points to the fact that the Ghanaian media landscape does not have systems, budget and trained personnel dedicated to combat the menace of fake news. Another revealing finding is that fake news is mostly manifested as fabricated content and false headline without connection to content.

Overall, the results of the study show that fake news is a growing problem in Ghana. However, the media, regulatory bodies, and government do not have a clear-cut strategy to deal with the problem.

Key Words: Fake News, Misinformation, Disinformation, Social Media, Ghana, Newsrooms

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INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing a significant phenomenon of fake news, misinformation, hoaxes and disinformation, which has far-reaching implications on democratic systems of governance. Given the fact that there are growing numbers of news consumers who rely on online and social media sources for news and relevant content, this issue is becoming one worthy of consideration at all levels of decision-making. Fast news cycles where news is "always on" 24/7 in an era where reporters have a huge appetite for breaking news and shorter-form content, is playing no small part in increasing the demand for fake news.

Furthermore, although a lot of information consumers in Ghana receive content via radio, it is important to stress that several media houses rely on social media and online content in their news production processes. This situation poses a major risk since the use of social media and online content is now the norm in most newsrooms across the country. As a result, fake news is not only an online and social media occurrence since its influence on traditional media is now a reality. Fake news has generally been described as news reports, publications or stories created to deliberately misinform, spread rumours or deceive readers with the intention to cause confusion, influence or opinion or set a political Agenda.

Bardi (2018) suggests that there is documented evidence of the existence of fake news in politics for over a century, albeit in fictional form. However, the increased ubiquitousness of social media and online access is fuelling its growth and widespread impact. Traditional media houses serve gatekeeping and watchdog roles, curating information and content that is consumed by the public. However, with the increase in the usage of social media, the floodgates have been opened for user-generated content that is not constrained by any editorial limitation. This however means that all kinds of news and content, including fake news, are generated and distributed at the speed of light. Invariably, fake news now presents a key challenge to journalists and newsrooms to simultaneously deal with audience mistrust and upholding the mandate of journalism as the Fourth Estate to speak truth to power (Richardson, 2017).

In commenting on the impact of fake news on journalism, the Ghanaian Times (2017) holds the view that fake news is causing damage to journalism in Ghana and it is important for journalists to take their responsibility seriously as professionals not only in ensuring that they publish credible stories, but to also avoid disseminating fake news on their platforms.

The immediate impact of this is reflected in the challenges information consumers have in determining the difference between truth and fake content. This situation invariably contributes to lack of trust in the mass media and state institutions as well as in eroding the whole notion of citizens' participation in governance since information is key to participatory governance. How can citizens monitor the performance of elected and unelected officials if the information they are acting upon may not be true? According to Information Society Project (2017), the most striking danger associated with fake news is that "it devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data—all of which undermines society's ability to engage in rational discourse based upon shared facts". This implies that reasoned arguments based on evidence and high quality information are thrown out and replaced with noise, which have the tendency of eroding trust in institutions, processes and systems that guide our society.

Fake news does not have any boundaries since it is found in all aspects of public communications, especially in political contexts where political actors are now seeing it as a tool for them to gain political power during elections. Fake news is found in areas such as education, entertainment, health, business, and religion – among others. Its destructive power is seen in how it is increasingly undermining the credibility of media outlets; albeit some argue that media outlets benefit from the phenomenon since they see it as content that drives traffic.

Fake news is not only restricted to mainstream media, social media and online platforms but in academia. This problem has also become a challenge, which has led some researchers to publish false research findings (Ioannidis, 2005).

The key issue, which is the subject of a growing debate, is how to tackle fake news head-on while preserving the very foundation of democratic systems that advocate freedom of speech. This paper set itself three key objectives, namely: to find out the extent of the problem in Ghana; assess the nature of fake news in Ghana; and determine measures to combat it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study by Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018) based on an analysis of 126,000 rumours spread by 3 million persons on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, it was found that false news reaches between 1,000 and 100,000 persons in comparison to factual stories that reached only 1,000 persons daily. This finding suggests that false news reached more persons than truth. Furthermore, humans spread fake news as forcefully as automated bots, thus, although bots are a contributory factor to the spread of false news, it spreads faster because humans, not bots, spread it. Also, the authors noted that "Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information." For many people, fake news is seen as novel in comparison to true news. Since most persons will share novel information, it implies that the likelihood of sharing fake news is higher. It is therefore important to understand the distribution mechanism of fake news in f

clear: if fake news is seen as a novelty, then its ability to spread is guaranteed. One can argue that in situations where bots are still not very popular, humans will become the primary distributors of fake news. Also, since most content and news are distributed using messaging platforms like WhatsApp, which does not lend itself to bots, naturally it means that given this context, humans will play a greater role in fake news dissemination.

At the global level, the United Nations, working with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), recognize the growing prevalence of "fake news" in both traditional and social media as a global topic of concern. They have therefore called on nations to ensure that reliable and trustworthy information, especially related to public interest, is circulated widely through a Joint Declaration. The UN had called on state actors to avoid the situation of promoting and disseminating content that they know or reasonably know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate disregard for verifiable information (propaganda). It also points out the risks of countering fake news, emphasizing that it could lead to censorship, suppression of critical thinking, and infringing on human rights laws (United Nations Human Rights, 2017).

In assessing the nature of fake news in the USA, Pew Research (2016) indicated that most Americans suspect that made-up news is having an impact on day-to-day life and decisions. 64% of American adults said fabricated news stories causes a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. In terms of ability of Americans to detect fake news, 39% expressed confidently that they can recognize whether news is fabricated or not. Also, the survey revealed that 23% of respondents have shared

a made-up news story either knowingly or not. Lastly, 32% of respondents hold the view that political news found online are mostly made up.

In comparison, countries in Africa especially Ghana, lack ample data for similar analysis. Given that the contexts are very different, we cannot generalize the American findings to Ghana. However, it can serve as a signpost for this study and in conducting further research to understand the nature and extent to which news is regarded as fake or otherwise, and the ability of consumers to detect the difference.

It is a fact that fake news will not go away overnight. There is therefore the need to deal with it at the level of newsrooms. Silverman (2015) provides some bad practices by journalists and editors that is compounding the situation. They are: lack of systems to conduct basic verification, not following up on rumours and claims after initial coverage to determine truth or otherwise, pairing rumours and unverified claims with headlines that declares them to be true, presenting unverified claims as a question (especially in headlines),lack of high standards for content aggregation and use as news, and the absence of concerted efforts to debunk or correct questionable claims and falsehoods. In view of this, it is critical for key actors in the newsroom, especially editorial teams, who provide leadership to put an end to these bad practices and take steps to avoid them. That said, some newsrooms benefit from high traffic driven by fake news therefore for some, there is no motivation to aggressively take steps to halt its flow since it comes with commercial benefits.

In Ghana, literature about fake news is very sparse. In the literature reviewed (mostly news articles), it came out that "fake news" about death of famous politicians or actors remains top on the list of fake news stories. In a popular case, the state broadcaster, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation fell into this trap when it aired as real news, a satirical piece from a fake website which claimed former South African President Thabo Mbeki had died without crosschecking (Owusua, 2017). The incident was a watershed one mainly because the state broadcaster is expected to have high journalistic standards. This incident illustrates the fact that no newsroom can claim immunity to fake news. Similarly, Ghana's former President Kufour was reported dead by a fake news chain and was distributed on social media until his office refuted the false story (Gyamfi, 2017).

In delivery of fake news, either a credible website inadvertently posts it, or they are shared via social media such as Twitter or Facebook. Also, we are witnessing the advent of fake news websites, which tend to clone other popular websites in order to appear as a credible source. Another characteristic of fake news worthy of mention is linked to misinforming the public that a political opponent is no longer in a race in order to prevent voters from voting for such candidates, thereby redirecting votes to a preferred candidate. Related to this is the use of fake news to smear or defame political opponents.

In assessing the legal and regulatory environment in Ghana, we observed that there are no laws or regulations dealing with the challenge of fake news. However, Ghana is not an exception since there are only few countries with such laws or are attempting to promulgate them. According to Robertson (2018), Malaysia is one of the few countries in the world that have on its statue books a law punishing persons for distributing fake news by sentencing offenders to a six year jail term. Even in this case, there is a lot of public push-back since the law is perceived to be against freedom of expression (Channel News Asia, 2018). This perception is

largely due to the fact that governments can use such legislations to persecute persons they believe are speaking against their policies or interventions by declaring them to be propagating fake news, and punish them as such.

Countries such as Germany have in place the Net Enforcement Act law against fake news and hate speech but excluding defamation (Toor, 2017). In Indonesia, the government has set up a cyber security unit to deal with online hate speech and fake news. Other countries such as Singapore, Philippines, UK, India and France are all planning to put in place laws to punish the publication of misinformation (Malaymail & Priday, 2018).

In particular, the UK government has set up a fake news unit with the mandate of serving as a "rapid response social media capability" to deal with challenges of fake news though there is no clarity about how this will work in practice (Burgess, 2018). The European Union has also set up a high-level group of experts ("the HLEG") with the mandate to provide policy options in its quest to counter fake news and disinformation online. In its report, the group made a number of recommendations but did not suggest a new law or regulation (European Union, 2018).

It is important to note that ideas about promulgating those laws are not being received with open arms since citizens and civil society actors in those countries are voicing concerns about these laws for fear that they may impact on freedom of speech. Providing further arguments against government regulations and laws to fight fake news, Rose (2017) noted that this solution is problematic for a number of reasons including the fact that huge volumes of empirical data from different countries throughout history point to the fact that even in democratic countries, such laws are used as a tool to silence opposition and shut down any speech the ruling government does not like. This situation becomes direr in non-democratic states where such a law against the distribution of fake information can be used as a powerful tool for persecution of religious and ethnic minorities and to clamp down on political opponents.

However, proponents of regulating social media to fight fake news hold the view that regulating social media can enhance access to reliable information. They also maintain that social media companies have a bigger role to play in fighting fake news since it is they who allow fake news to spread through their platforms; for that reason, regulations can ensure that these companies are held accountable (Bill of Rights Institute ,2018).

Haskins (2017) argues that if a government passed laws to outlaw fake news, it will have a negative effect on persons who express contrary views that may be tagged falsely as fake news. Rather, the main legal recourse to fake news should be defamation lawsuits. That said, this argument is impracticable since it is very difficult, if not impossible to identify the source of such fake news. Levinson (2017) also kicks against governmental regulation of social media in the quest to fight fake news since it risks giving power to the authorities to determine what they consider to be "hate speech" with the potential of infringing on people's right to free speech. This will have implications that persons who are speaking or exchanging ideas can suffer from being branded purveyors of fake news when they are not. This situation can have a long-lasting damage on democracy, which is anchored on freedom of speech. Self-regulation as a solution is a moot point because some media companies are part of the problem and they may consider self-regulation not to be in their interest since it may have a negative impact on their commercial model.

Beyond technical and government interven-

tions, some actors on the global stage such as Reporters Without Borders (RSF), working with European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Global Editors Network (GEN), and some international broadcasters are working on a new set of trust and transparency standards for journalists known as The Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which aims to provide certification in verifying news outlets and news sources with high ethical standards.

They hope that the use of a "trusted media label" for newsrooms or "media white list" can help consumers to differentiate truth from fake news (Agence France-Presse, 2018).

This is a good example of industry self-regulation and its effectiveness will be premised on the willingness of fake news distributors to sign on.

2.1 What is fake news?

According to Baum (2018), "fake news" refers to made-up information that looks like news content but the intention and the process of organization as well as its structure is not the same as found in newsrooms such as the editorial norms and ethics needed to ensure content accuracy and credibility. Fake news is found in the same basket as misinformation (false or misleading content) and disinformation (false information designed to deceive its consumers).

Fake news means different things to different persons and contexts. For some persons, news satire, as well as parodies, are regarded as fake news. In USA, most of the fake news that was recorded during the 2016 elections, can be characterized as written pieces and recorded content promoting conspiracy theories or promoting false information. (Ordway, 2017). Mukaddam (2017) describes fake news as the distribution of online false information packaged as authentic news due to a number of motivations that is financial with the main aim to drive internet traffic or advertising

income, personal reasons to harm an individual or business reputation, and a political agenda to influence the publics' ideology or view point. Although propaganda can be premised on false information thereby making it fake news, not all propaganda is fake news since some could be premised on truth but exaggerated to achieve a stated purpose.

In discussing fake news, it is important to recognize that it is as old as the news industry itself, with misinformation, deception, hoaxes, propaganda, and satire being its main anchor. Fake news can be defined as information that cannot be verified, sometimes without sources, and possibly untrue. It can take the form of deliberate misinformation,mostly content written for profit and distributed via social media and directed to persons who want to believe it is true.

False headlines, where news headlines state something as fact but the body of the article contains something different. In internet parlance, this is called "click bait" – a headline that lures readers to click on it but it serves them fake news instead. Another case is that of false information that finds its way onto social media platforms; and due to its novelty, gets widely shared and as it starts trending, it may be believed as true. Lastly, satire is another form of fake news that is designed to use often twisted humour containing some elements of truth to make a point. Often times, satire is lost on some consumers who will believe this type of fake news as truth (Enoch Pratt Free Library, 2018).

Disinformation and hoaxes (fake news) are affecting how individuals interpret daily happenings around them. In describing channels of distribution, West (2017) suggests that they are distributed by a number of actors including citizen journalists, foreign agents, talk show hosts, cable news anchors, and a host of other information systems with

the ultimate results of a fast decline of public trust in traditional journalism. We can identify 5 key actors in the fake news ecosystem, namely; Content Creators made up of publishers, journalists, bloggers, as well as known or unknown content contributors and entities; Content Consumers of fake news whose role goes beyond just consuming to liking, sharing and searching; the social media and online outlets, especially Facebook and Twitter that serve as channels for the distribution of fake news, Economic Actors, that is, advertisers and organizations that pay for such content creation; and "fake news Police" who provide fact-checking, naming and shaming, and general watchdog services. It is imperative to note that fake news distribution is now being amplified by social bots, that is, internet robots that power automated social media accounts by impersonating humans.

Having a deeper understanding of how these social bots work becomes important in understanding the phenomenon of fake news.

For this study, we define fake news as content that is created with the motive for profit, as well as personal or group gain aimed at the creation of deception, spreading falsehood, misinformation and disinformation in the public discourse. In recent times, in an attempt to break news, media are unintentionally propagating fake news

The study makes use of primary data collected from media organizations in Ghana made up of print, online, convergence (the combination of print, television, radio, online and interactive digital technologies) and television. These media organizations were selected from all the ten (10) regions of Ghana. The study makes use of a 2-stage stratified sampling method. Since the number of media organizations in Ghana vary from region to region, at the first sampling stage, the study used the Solvins formula method

for sample selection. The formula states that:
$n=N/(1+Ne^2)$
where n=Sample size
N=Population
e=sign error of 5%
Per the formula above, a sample of 165 newsrooms was expected to be drawn from a population of 282 newsrooms. A disproportionate stratified sampling was used to select media organizations from each region (strata). Next, a purposive sample also known as judgmental or expert sample made up of newsroom from these media organization was selected for the study premised on the researchers' in-depth knowledge and understanding of the Ghanaian media landscape. According to Lavrakas (2008), the main objective of purposive sampling is to produce a sample that is selected in a non-random manner premised on expert knowledge of the population, which represents a cross-section of the population. From these newsrooms, a senior Journalist or Editor was contacted to provide responses to a questionnaire.

In developing a sampling frame, the targeted population comprised of all media organizations in Ghana sourced from two data sources of licensed radio and TV stations. They were the National Communications Authority (2016; 2017) and the Government of Ghana portal, which lists key newspapers in Ghana.

Different kinds of data were collected to ascertain the extent, nature and measures to combat fake news in Ghana. Administering structured questionnaire with the aid of phone interviews was employed as the main tool for data collection. Open- and closed-ended questions were posed in both the questionnaire and interviews.

The data was analysed based on the responses from respondents. The analysis was done using IBM Statistical Package for Social Scientist (SPSS) v20 software using simple frequency and percentage tables with

bar graphs to present responses on the prevalence and nature of fake news to determine measures to combat fake news in Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

In all, the survey had 154 respondents spread through the ten regions of Ghana, making it a national survey. In terms of gender composition, 86.4% of the respondents were male while 13.6 % were female. The study revealed that the majority (71.7 %) of participants were from radio stations, which corresponds to the dominance of radio as a media form in Ghana. 13.3% of the newsrooms surveyed were converged (a combination of two or more media types namely TV, radio, newspaper and online). Newspaper, Television and New media/ online constituted 6.4%, 5.2%, and 3.5% respectively. The results of the study are presented in three parts showing the extent of the fake news problem in Ghana, an assessment of the key attributes of fake news in Ghana, and measures being put in place to combat the phenomenon.

4.1 Extent of Fake News Problem in Ghana
A question posed to individual newsrooms was to establish whether they do make use of social media or user-generated content in their newsrooms. 87.1% of newsrooms responded in the affirmative while 12.9% of newsroomsdisagreed (See Figure 1). The affinity of newsrooms in the Ghanaian media landscape to social media or user-generated content increased with the number of years media houses existed. However, the use of this co-generaed content makes newsrooms

susceptible to fake news as they rely heavily on user-generated content from social media.

Figure 1:Percentage of Newsrooms Using Social Media/User Content
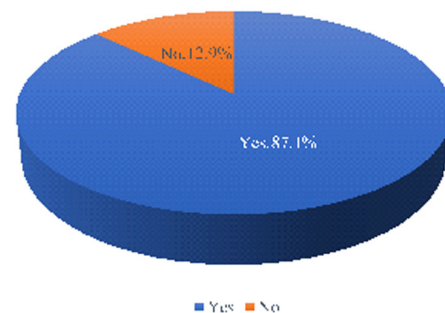
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Results from the study show that the management of social media or user-generated content is mostly done on adhoc bases (55.1%) or not done at all (15.4%.) whereas, 29.5% of social media management by newsrooms is done on a egular basis. This demonstrates weak editorial systems and concerted efforts to put in procedures and structures to monitor the news media. As a result of this, newsrooms are vulnerable to the dessemination of fake news.

4.1.1. Newsrooms View on Prevalence of Fake News in Ghana
This study revealed that 73.5% of respondents considered fake news to be either frequent (35.3%) or more frequent (38.2%), whereas 26.5% of the respondents indicated that it is less frequent. To understand the prevalence rate in the last six months, the results indicate that more than half of the newsrooms surveyed (59.3%) with 24.4% saying more frequent whereas 34.9% and expressed the view that fake news was prevalent.
An interesting result that corresponds with the earlier result that prevalence of fake news as experienced by the newsroom has reduced in recent times is the fact that over 81.4% of respondents stated that they had not issued any fake content in the last 6 months com-

pared to 18.6% who had issued fake news as depicted in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Percentage of Newsrooms Who Put Out Content But Later Realised Was Fake News In the Last 6 Months
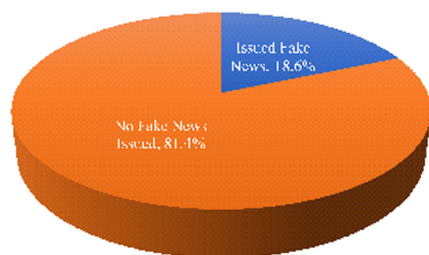
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Considering the impact of fake news on the credibility of newsrooms and the need to uphold best practices in journalism, it was worrying to find that only 17.50% (figure 3) of newsrooms in Ghana dedicated programmes or newspaper columns to combat the spread of fake news.

Figure 3: Percentage of Newsrooms With Program or Column for Combatting Fake News in Ghana
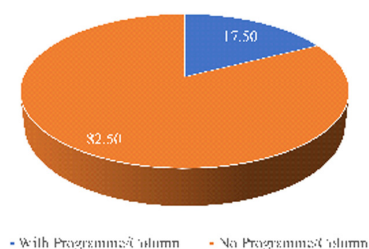
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Journalists and newsrooms all over the world are respected and trusted based on their audiences belief that they are credible sources, therefore, any issues that affect their creadiblity can impact negatively on them. As depicted in figure 4 below, the results of this study support the assertion with 87.8% of respondents indicating that fake news is a major source of discredit for them whereas 12.2% hold the view that it does not create creadiblity issues for them.

Figure 4: Percentage of Newsrooms Who Think Using Fake News Can Create Credibility Issues
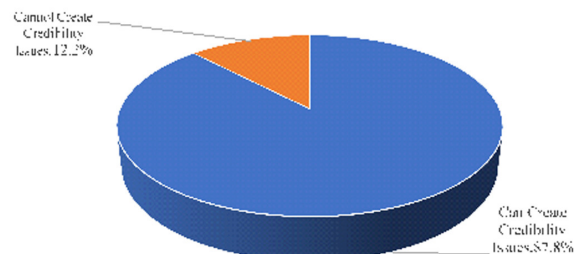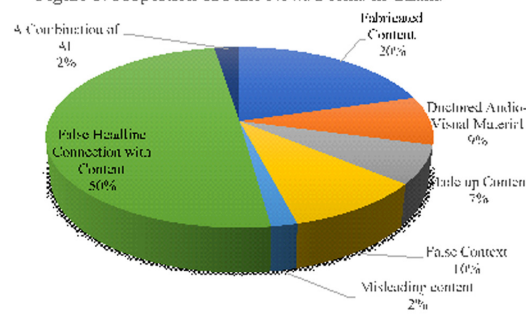
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

4.2 Assessing Key Attributes of Fake News in Ghana

The study developed 7 types of fake news categories. Based on this classification, the study results show Doctored Audio/Visual Material (9%) Made-up Content (7%), False Content (10%), Misleading Content (2%), False Headline without connection with content (50%), Fabricated Content (20%), Satire (0%), while 2% indicated a combination of all types as their response (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Proportion of Fake News Forms in Ghana

Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

4.3 Measures To Combat Fake News In Ghana

According to the study results, majority, that is 73.1% of 173 newsrooms stated that they have a system in place to combat fake news whereas 26.9% indicated that there is no such system in place. The table below contains respondents' descriptions of verification systems.

Newsroom 1: We cross check from other media houses, social media platforms, Twitter, official handles, Facebook, official websites, WhatsApp platforms and other reliable platforms and contact persons on the ground where the news is associated with for verification.
Newsroom 2: Through fact checking systems.
Newsroom 3: News that breaks on Social Media is reported to senior news producers who initiate verification processes, largely with individuals or institutions involved in the mentioned story and confirming with stakeholders where appropriate (including the handle or portal that breaks the news).
Newsroom 4: We make some deductions and analysis from the story and conclude on it.
Newsroom 5: We use the manual and automated system to verify news.
Authenticity of website
Newsroom 6: Verification, double-checking and authentication from the source or the newsmaker.
Newsroom 7: Comparative analysis with other networks and editor.

To determine how healthy their systems are to achieve its intended results, 65% of the respondents consider the system to be robust whereas 35% said their system is not robust enough.

The majority of the newsrooms surveyed (81.7%) said they do not have any dedicated staff to deal with fake news and only 18.3% indicated that they did.

Newsrooms usually have written and unwritten polices and guideliness to guide their operations especially to ensure high journalistic standards. In light of this situaion, the study sought to find out in context of fake news, if there are such written policies on how to deal with them. The results of the study show that 57.1% of newsrooms do not have written instructions to serve as a guide in verifying news content before broadcasting whereas 42.9% of newsrooms purport to have some form of written guidelines. Ethical guidelines that spell the do's and don'ts is a way of ensur-

ing the stomping out of fake news. It was gratifying to note from the study that 72.7% of newsrooms have ethical guidelines in place to help their journalists in dealing with fake news.

In terms of the form of written instruction for journalists, the respondents indicated the following;

• In the form of a 2-page leaflet.
• It's not necessarily written instructions but we use our own discretion to verify content.
• Code of ethics.
• In the form of a manual.
• It is in the form of a leaflet. Just a page.
• One and half page document.
• 1 page written instruction.
• A 1 page document.
• It is in the form of a 1 page document.
• We have about 11 pager guideline book that has a page that solely guides on how to verify fake news content.
• Manual.
• We have mantra in the newsroom which all abide by: no verification, no broadcast.
• Orientation manual use.
• It is contained in our editorial policy document.
• Newsroom code of ethics and editorial policy.
• A written guideline/procedure that is used for inception training for journalists.
They have bi-weekly seminar on fake news by resource persons.
• It is stated in a policy for breaking news.
*• We have a code of conduct for our journalists.*

Another significant result from this survey was the proportion of respondents who demonstrated knowledge in the various methods of fake news information verification. 55% of respondents knew about manual methods of fake news information verification (i.e. traditional journalistic ways of verification), 35% of respondents knew of both manual and automated forms of fake verification, 2% knew of respondents knew about an automated form of fake news information verification,

whiles 8% of respondents demonstrated no knowledge of the various forms of fake news information verification.

Another interesting finding of the survey depicted in Figure 6 below, was that 94.7% of newsrooms in Ghana did not have an annual budget dedicated solely for the purpose of fake news verification whereas 5.3% of newsrooms who had dedicated budgets for fake news verification had an amount less than GH30,000 (USD6,700)


Figure 6: Percentage of Newrooms with Budget For Fake News Verification
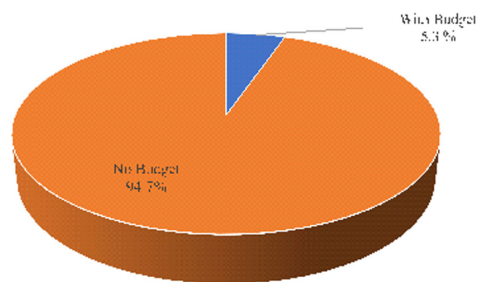
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

As depicted in Figure 7 below, a majority of news rooms (93%) verify user-generated content from social media platforms before they use it. This clearly bodes well for the news consuming public and shows the recognition by newsrooms of the need to verify content before publishing.

Figure 7: Percentage of Newsrooms Who Verify Social Media User Content Before Using It
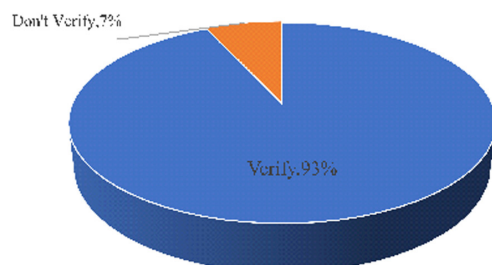
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Considering the threat of fake news to the news production cycle and credibility of newsrooms, it was worthy to find out from this study that 97.7% of respondents saw it as critical to have their capacity built to be able to

identify and also verify online news sources. Only 2.3% newsrooms in Ghana thought it was not a critical requirement as shown in figure 8.


Figure 8: Percentage of Newsrooms Who Think Learning To Verify Online Sources Is Now A Critical Requirement
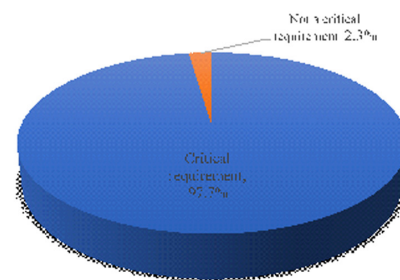
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Detecting fake news can be an onerous task that requires a lot of effort and resources. 62.1% of the respondents of this study stated that it was time-consuming to detect fake news. Quite a good number of respondents (37.9%) claimed that it was not time-consuming. and it will be interesting to find what tools they used to come to that conclusion.

Figure 9: Percentage of Newsrooms Who think A Law or Regulation by Government Can Combat Fake News
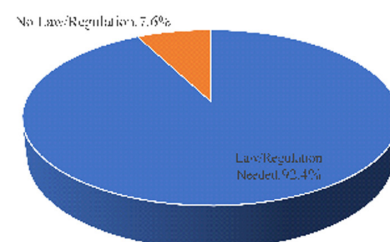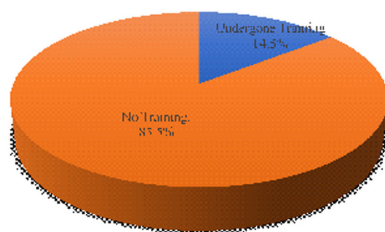
Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

Detecting fake news can be an onerous task that requires a lot of effort and resources. 62.1% of the respondents of this study stated that it was time-consuming to detect fake news. Quite a good number of respondents (37.9%) claimed that it was not time-consuming. and it will be interesting to find what tools they used to come to that conclusion.

Knowledge and the skills-set to combat fake news is now imperative given the fact that it is

now becoming a key challenge for most newsrooms as to how to deal with it. Training and education in understanding fake news, how to deal with it, and how to manage information flow is therefore a very important issue. Figure 10 below shows that 85.5% have not done any training in fake news detection within the last 6 months of the study whereas 14.5% indicated that they had benefited from such a training.

Figure 10: Percentage of Newsrooms In Ghana Who Have Undertaken Training In Fake News Detection In The Last 6 Months

Source: 2018 Fake News Survey by Penplusbytes

DISCUSSION

This study is important in a number of ways more so that it is ground-breaking in the Ghanaian context. The study provides unique insights into how newsrooms are evolving especially by moving away from a reliance on traditional sources of news to social media and user content-generated material, which opens them up to inadvertently using fake news.

Also, the results reinforce the point that as more and more digital technologies become readily available, newsrooms are using new tools in the news production process that is now the norm in most newsrooms. This development presents a greater challenge to newsrooms in the bewildering task of navigating the new news ecosystem.

Education is key to combating fake news.

However, most newsrooms that participate in the study do not have any opportunities to undertake this training in detecting and managing the challenges of fake news. This issue is significant because without educating the media, they may not be able to educate the larger public in the area of fake news detection. It comes as no surprise that most newsrooms do not have a column in their newspapers or content online or a segment on radio and television to provide fact-checking services. It is therefore imperative that newsrooms are provided with the capacity in fake news detection not only for their benefit but also to ensure that they can support the effort in keeping news factual and truthful.

According to Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018), bots are key mechanisms in the distribution of fake news. However, this study found out that most newsrooms do not deploy bots but rely mostly on humans for news production. It is important to highlight this since in the near future; bots will become a key distribution channel of fake news in Ghana as they currently are elsewhere in the world. The highlight of the results of this study is the call for regulations and laws by the newsrooms surveyed. This is very interesting because the literature points to the push-back against regulations and designing new laws to fight fake news. It will therefore be important for this issue to be investigated further in future studies and interrogated more deeply.

A self-regulating media presupposes a decentralized media environment where the government does not have overbearing authority over the content published by the media. But the media has the freedom to self-regulate final content to consumers by relying on sanctions and corrections from their peers. The final judgement should therefore be left with the consuming public to label a media house as either credible or not. Campbell (1999) however postulates that self-regulation rarely

lives up to the claims made for it as the media is not able to fully police itself. In some cases however, self-regulation has been useful as a supplement to government regulation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the evidence generated in the this study, it is now imperative to look at various strategies, policy options, as well as legal and regulatory opportunities to combat this growing challenge of fake news. One fundamental solution will be to promote media literacy and increase the capacity of all and sundry to detect fake news and generally to understand how to manage its manifestations.

The government must work with technology companies; especially social media ones to invest in tools that help identify fake news. Specifically, the government of Ghana should work with tech companies to support its effort in identifying fake news and imposing taxes on entities that profit from misinformation. Options should be considered to reduce financial incentives for those who profit from disinformation through regulatory measures. All stakeholders involved in the news ecosystem should take steps to reduce the exposure of fake news to consumers. Steps should also be taken to enable online platforms, both at the level of newsrooms and social media companies, in the use of artificial intelligence, bots and algorithms.

According to the respondents:

"Government should create an electronic platform to verify social media content. Such a platform should have social media monitoring capability that detects information which is considered fake news on both online and social media platforms."

The fight against fake news should involve a societal-wide approach in which all stakeholders including government, educational institutions, civil society actors, religious bodies, traditional authorities, technology companies, regulatory agencies and the private sector – all working together to tackle this challenge from their respective angles, especially in the promotion of digital media literacy.

The survey respondents were of the view that: "All stakeholders should come on board. Including government, owners of media, editors, Ghana Journalists Association, Ministry Of Information should ensure measures are put in place to cure this emerging canker. More so, collective voices should come into play to name and shame persistent offenders."

Supporting growth in professional journalism is a key requirement in combatting fake news. Training institutions should be well-resourced with cutting-edge technology and modern trends in newsgathering aimed to promote news literacy and strong professional journalism in the country. In addition, media houses are to provide high-quality journalism in order to build public trust and correct fake news.

The respondents of the survey recommended that:

"The capacity of journalists in newsrooms should be built to detect fake news based on international standards. Consideration should be given to certification and licensing of journalists to improve standards and increase truth in the media to minimize fake news."

"A platform should be put in place to guide journalists in dealing with fake news with information and knowledge resource capability including trusted and accredited source listings for news verification. Journalists, irrespective of media house, can use such a platform for verification."

Beyond capacity building and training, news-

rooms should have a fact-checking system for validating news as well as using their media outlets to educate the public to processes of detecting, dealing with and reporting fake news sites.

There is an important role for individuals since they suffer the most from untruths and misinformation. They should strive to consume news from diverse sources and should be encouraged to be critical of any content they come across. Roozenbeek & Linden (2018) suggest that the use of educational games shows promise as a tool to support public education against fake news. This can be considered in Ghana as an innovative tool to promote news literacy among the youth who prefer games to other tools for education.

Most of the respondents in the survey held the strong view that legal provisions can support the fight against fake news in Ghana. They provided a long list of suggestions including: "Legislation, increasing awareness of the provisions that will punish culprits who contravene the laws."
"Design and implement robust policy or enactment of laws that would sanction writers or organizations and website portals that disseminate fake news."
"I advocate for the comeback of the criminal libel law."
"There should also be sanctions for media houses who distribute fake news".

Most of the respondents alluded to the fact that government has a major role to play in instituting strong policies, regulations and must be seen to be taking actions to reduce or eliminate the prevalence of fake news in the media landscape including social media. Some of the recommendations proffered by the participants are as follows:
 "Public Education: Mass sensitization on news verification".
"National Media Commission should be empowered and well-resourced to intensify

monitoring of the airwaves and be given the mandate to sanction media houses that churn out fake news or circulate falsehoods."

"Guidelines should be given by the Media Commission to journalists and to independent broadcasters."
"As a matter of urgency, the need to pass the Right to Information bill into law to facilitate journalists in accessing authentic content to fake news".
"I think National Communication Authority must develop a software to check those contents."

Lastly, respondents suggested that telecommunication companies should play a major role:
"Restriction on the use of social media. When there is an item detected to be false, they should be able to ban the news item from circulating. E.g. WhatsApp videos can be encrypted to prevent sharing".

CONCLUSION

There is a need for more interdisciplinary research to understand the manifestation of fake news in Ghana in order to develop strategies to combat its spread. Although fake news is not a major problem today, its incidence is rising with an attendant impact on our news and online content ecosystem. There is therefore the need to work in educating and informing the public about its impact while collectively ensuring that citizens are brought on board to hold regular debates to find solutions of ensuring it does not become a norm affecting information and knowledge flow in Ghana.

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