



Fake news and the political economy of the media: A perspective of Ghanaian journalists

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PUBLISHED ONLINE

Volume 42 (2) December 2023

Pages 55-63

Submitted September 2022

Accepted May 2023

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v42i2.1500>

ISSN

Online 2957-7950

Print 0259-0069

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Abstract

The enduring rate at which fake news is disrupting the political economy of the media is the subject of this study. Using a largely qualitative instrument of intensive interviews with 18 journalists purposively selected for the study, we discovered that fake news is one of the banes of journalism in Ghana. Fake news's notorious role in the political and economic realities of the country is not uncommon, as it has created uncountable political controversies. With several of the country's media owned by politicians or persons with a vested interest in politics, it became a practice for players to utilise fake news as a propaganda tool to outwit their competitors through the media. For these architects to fully achieve their goal, social media and affiliated mainstream media were used as instruments to propagate fabricated content against their opponents, especially during the 2020 general elections. This paper also identified the use of artificial intelligence and robotics in the creation of fake news content. The study recommends the need for media organisations in the country to seek the services of fact-checkers as a means of verifying stories, as well as to intensify education on the identification of fake news and possible flagging.

Keywords

Fake news, Ghana, Journalists, Media, Political economy, Propaganda

INTRODUCTION

Current debates over disinformation, misinformation and fake news have rekindled an interest in the critical political economy of the media because, in this epoch, the paradigm of news production is blurred, creating credibility challenges for journalists. Some people believe every piece of journalism is fabricated to serve capitalists' intent, and thus, "only a critical political economy approach can adequately deal with the assertion that capitalism relies on mass ignorance for its survival" (Hirst, 2017:91). This article contributes to the paucity of literature on the political economy of the media in Ghana in the digital age, and in particular the global South, where scholarship has not adequately addressed issues of fake news. Secondly, through its engagement with journalists, it intends to outline the factors that lead to the proliferation of fake news. Thirdly, it presents the understanding of fake news from the perspective of African journalists operating in fragile democracies. Lastly, it examines the economic and political motives for the production and publishing of fake news in Ghana.

Fake news diminishes the credibility and integrity of the ideal media institution that is meant to act as a watchdog in society. In the context of African countries that are historically infamous for choking media freedom, fake news has the potential to defend and resuscitate draconian measures that states may

subject the media to. Although receiving much academic attention globally, the subject of fake news has been insignificant in Ghana, except for a few studies, such as those by Ahiabenu, Ofori-Peasah & Sam (2018), Jamil and Appiah-Adjei (2019), and Sanny and Selormey (2020). Given this paucity of studies on fake news, none of the studies identified focused on the experiences journalists have had with fake news.

While this study is adding existing literature on fake news in Ghana, recent arrests, detention and prosecution of some journalists and other citizens in Ghana over the publication and dissemination of fake news make this study timely. In November 2021, Nhyiraba Paa Kwesi Simpson, a journalist with a Takoradi-based Connect FM was arrested in connection with the publication of fake news. Again, Kwabena Bobbie Ansah, a journalist with an Accra-based Power FM, was also arrested in February 2022 for the publication of false information. Other citizens arrested for similar offences include Mensah Thompson, a civil activist, and Kwame Baffoe, a politician, who were all arrested in February 2022 for the publication of false information (Myjoyonline, 2022). All these arrests, detentions and prosecutions were in terms of the country's Electronic Communications Act (Act 775, section 76, of 2008) and the Criminal Offences Act of 1960. Journalists in this context operate in a political economy that criminalises the production of fake news; if this legal development can be used to yield quality news, on the downside, it can also threaten decades of democratic gains by Ghanaian media. Ghana, in July 2001, repealed the criminal libel and seditious laws which had hitherto been used to detain and jail journalists for doing their jobs (Asamoah et al., 2014). The repeal was much celebrated by journalists and media watchers who adjudged the country's media as the freest in the African continent, but that was short-lived. Recent developments where journalists are being arrested, harassed and detained for the publication of fake news is deemed undemocratic, as such practices tend to gag and limit freedom of expression. This form of criminalisation of speech is putting the country's democracy in reverse gear (Kwode et al., 2023).

Fake news and the political economy of the media in Ghana

Fake news has a long history, which implies it is not a recent phenomenon. Many scholars have proposed various definitions of fake news. Barclay (2018) sees fake news as a form of propaganda intentionally created to achieve either political, organisational or commercial purposes. He indicates that fake news is a subset of propaganda where interested parties can intentionally produce and disseminate any information to achieve their goals. McGonagle (2017) posits that fake news can be any fabricated and deliberate dissemination of information with the aim of misleading others to believe in falsehood or doubt verifiable facts. To this extent, any information created by an individual or groups of people with an intention to profit from it financially, politically or ideologically can be regarded as fake news. This implies that disinformation, which is information deliberately created to achieve a certain purpose, either political, ideological or commercial, can be classified under this definition.

McQuail and Deuze (2020) indicate that the political economy of the media approach focuses on the economic activity that leads to the media commodity. They described the primary media commodity in the political economy to be the 'audience' – the main product to be sold to advertisers. In a Geopoll analysis of media ownership in Ghana (2017), it was revealed that media ownership in the country was highly affiliated politically, which has the tendency of swaying the media towards a certain political interest rather than the public interest. This could be the reason why contagious fabrications and propaganda news stories appear in some media outlets in the country. It would be unthinkable if such stories were published to satisfy their paymasters, in disregard of the canons and time-tested ethics of journalism.

This study explored the ownership structure of the *Daily Graphic*, *Daily Guide*, *Ghana News Agency*, *TV3*, *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation* and *JoyFM*, as these institutions constitute our subject of interest. It is instructive to note that the *Daily Graphic*, *Ghana News Agency*, and *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation* are state-owned media, responsible for discharging their responsibility fairly by giving opportunity to citizens to express their divergent views and opinions (The Constitution, 1992). This public service requirement expects the state-owned media to provide equal opportunity to all persons and groups to express their views. Again, the *Daily Guide*, *TV3* and *JoyFM* are private media organisations that operate as private businesses. Their owners are known affiliates of either the New Patriotic Party (NPP) or the National

Democratic Congress (NDC), both leading political parties in Ghana. This could have a significant impact on the content they produce, as these parties are major political opponents in Ghana. In the view of Akpojivi (2018), the media in Ghana is politically and economically aligned. This feeds into the ownership structure, where the media and its owners stand to gain from the political and economic system.

Research Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative procedure where in-depth interviews were conducted with selected news editors and journalists in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. A total of 18 journalists and news editors were purposively selected from the *Daily Graphic*, *Daily Guide*, *Ghana News Agency*, *TV3*, *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation* and *JoyFM*.

The narrative approach, thus, supported our goal, as narratives and stories of frontline journalists are necessary to facilitate a rich and in-depth comprehension of the issues (Bruner, 2020). We focused on respondents' experiences of fake news in their daily reporting and editing news stories, and then their perspectives on the influences and effects of fake news on journalism as a profession.

The primary data was collected with the aid of an open-ended interview guide. Each interview lasted approximately 35 minutes and was recorded. At the analysis stage, the data collected was transcribed and grouped for similarities and then classified according to the themes in the text. These themes were analysed in relation to the objectives and research questions and in line with the aim of the study (Creswell, 2014). The secondary data was gleaned from relevant published and unpublished materials by scholars.

Table 1:1 List of respondents and their media houses

Interviewee list	Media Institution
Respondents 'A' 'M' 'O' 'P'	<i>Daily Graphic</i>
Respondents 'B' 'N' 'Q'	<i>Daily Guide</i>
Respondents 'C' 'F' 'J' 'R'	<i>Ghana News Agency</i>
Respondents 'D' 'G' 'H' 'I'	<i>Ghana Broadcasting Corporation</i>
Respondents 'E' 'K' 'L'	<i>JoyFM</i>

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that fake news, as a concept, has varied meanings and definitions. Although a number of definitions of the concept have been presented in the relevant literature, respondents equally defined the concept based on their understanding of the phenomenon, which suggests that fake news is a complicated concept with different meanings. Respondent "A" defined fake news as "news that is not proven until [otherwise] we have facts to back it. Fake news to me is something that is not truthful but maybe spread by some people for an intention nobody knows". This definition has a combination of the elements of misinformation and disinformation, both of which are widely considered to be part of fake news. The definition is also similar to one offered by Lazer et al. (2018), who defined fake news as fabricated information that mimics news media content but lacks news media's editorial norms and processes for an accurate and credible ethos of information dissemination. Fake news is created for different purposes and comes in forms such as satire, parody, and advertising clickbait, as political propaganda and content manipulator or fabricator (Okon, Musa & Oyesomi, 2021), depending on the purpose of the creator(s).

For respondent "D", fake news "... is any false information that is circulated on social media and causes fear and panic among people". This gives the understanding that fake news connotes propaganda, a piece of information projected to achieve specific ideals or objectives. As a form of propaganda, it is usually calculated and targeted at political opponents either to destroy their character or policy, or to divert attention from government policy. This is affirmed by Barclay (2018), who states that fake news is a form of propaganda intentionally created to achieve either political, organisational or commercial purposes. The extension of this meaning of the low facticity of fake news is given by McGonagle (2017), Egelhofer

and Lecheler (2019), as well as Posetti and Matthews (2018), which buttresses the point that fake news is widely understood as any information which is either fabricated, concocted, twisted or maliciously created to deceive, mislead and wrongly influence people.

Respondent "E" defined fake news as "... any information or broadcast content on social or mainstream media that is not factual", which supports the earlier descriptions of fake news as any publication that lacks facts and authenticity and truthfulness. Fake news is believed to have three life cycles. The disinformation message is first created by a person or group of persons with specific intent. At the publication stage, the fake news is released into the system and this is mostly done through social media platforms. These platforms are linked to the creators, who equally have friends and other followers. The third is propagation stage, where social media users can either share the fake news, like it or do nothing at all to it, or it could be detected at this stage and stopped from being spread to other users or to the mainstream media (Jarrahi & Safari, 2022).

Economic and political motives for the production and publishing of fake news in Ghana

Respondents were unequivocal in their position that fake news is produced with several motives in mind. Some of these motives could be economic, political, social, and sometimes intended to destroy competitors. These identified themes are highlighted further to affirm our arguments that fake news is produced with economic and political intent.

Economic motives of fake news

Respondent "C" indicated that fake news is produced by people who are interested in peddling falsehood to make money. The driving force, therefore, is material motivation. "We live in an era where what is trending is what people want to read or hear and so people produce fake news in order to trend so they can make some money". This implies that fake news is intentionally created with the purpose of attracting traffic on their websites and other social media outlets and to achieve that, headlines are usually sensationalised to elicit audience readership or clicks. A number of scholars confirmed the economic motives of fake news (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Croteau & Hynes, 2019; Dahlberg, 2015; Morgan, 2018; Okon et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). They are of the view that there is extensive economic capital in fake news, which must be seen from different perspectives, namely the tangible gains in material terms and the intangible aspect in the form of ideological selling and advertising. Bakir and McStay (2018) link this economic commodity of fake news dissemination on Facebook to 2010 when it introduced Edgerank as algorithm newsfeed. This news feed tracks what users engage in on a platform, indicating what they like, comment on, share, view and click. The proliferation of fake news is meant for political and economic purposes in the digital ecology. Digital media is now gaining hugely from advertising revenue with Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Twitter (the latter now known as X) all profiting through the integration of news into their offerings. As these platforms thrive on immediacy in news delivery; they favour fake news proliferation in the public sphere as a common practice (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

As a result of the digital environment, some individuals have taken advantage of social media to make an economic living out of digital behavioural advertising. This group profits from fake news through clickbaits ((Bakir & McStay, 2018; Wasserman, 2020). This is done by creating web content to attract online advertising revenue relying on sensational headlines and eye-catching pictures to get click-throughs, shares, comments and likes. The more people read on their websites, the more money they make from advertisers.

Some people have news outlets such as websites or news portals and other ways of using social media to achieve their agenda. So they come out with it, post it on other social media outlets and once it keeps going round ... they are people who are very gullible, they don't have time to do checks and balances to check whether it is fake or genuine and the more it spreads, the more it attracts other people, and people who don't check facts at the end of the day tend to believe whatever they read because at the end of the day, it is going

round and maybe people are not questioning it. (Respondent B).

These sensationalists achieve this at the expense of truth and accuracy, which heightens fake news dissemination in the public sphere. A typical example of how individuals make money from fake news is the use of fake news websites by undergraduate computer science teenagers in Vele, Macedonia in 2016. The pro-Trump websites they created, generated several fake news stories which attracted large audiences and, in return, they gained substantially, putting them on a sound financial footing (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Croteau & Hynes, 2019). In Ghana, this economic motive is to a high degree undertaken by bloggers, as indicated by respondent F: "Bloggers are the leading cause of fake news in Ghana, because most of them are in it to make money, their motive is just to attract traffic to their sites" Similarly, other profit-making fake news websites also proliferate in health and well-being sites, sites to praise celebrities and sites promoting blockbuster movies, which indicates the widespread practice of the economic motives of fake news.

Confirming this finding, Mills et al. (2019) indicate that each of the over 100 websites created at Veles, Macedonia, leading to the 2016 US elections made as much as \$2,500 in revenue daily from ads. This was achieved with the primary driver being advertising revenue (Mills, Pitt & Ferguson, 2019). This is based on the logic that fake websites can be created by individuals and the use Google Ads in a form of programmatic advertisement to encourage the chasing of traffic using intermediaries. Aside from raising profits through adverts, another strategy used by fake news websites is to seed their content on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to attract traffic back to their sites using sensational stories and fabricated headlines to ensure visibility. This practice, as indicated by respondents, is common among fake news creators in Ghana.

The economic gains derived from the dissemination of fake news fit into Fuchs's (2018) argument that there is capitalist intent in the production and dissemination of fake news. This fits into the description of respondent "G" who says, "So they may tell you a certain rice imported from Vietnam contains rubber or is made of plastics et cetera, or a certain drug has metal pins in it, just because of economic purposes". If people rely on fake news to not only remain informed in the digital space but to boost their profit margins or make money, then there is obviously a capitalist orientation associated with the production and distribution of fake news especially. This can well be grounded in the political economy theory of the media. McQuail and Deuze's (2020) perspective of political economy is that of a critical communication approach that focuses primarily on the relationship between the economic structures and the dynamics of media industries, as well as the ideological content of the media.

Ayoung, Baada and Bugre (2022) indicate that Ghana was seriously hit with fake news in relation to the 2020 elections, causing devastating effects. This implies that the media, the economic and political systems work together in a common relationship where interdependence is expected. In such a situation, the media is expected to remain objective and independent in the discharge of its mandate. This, unfortunately, is not the case, especially where the media owners are politically and economically affiliated. As the media's economic interest grows over its interest in public service, its independence and critical role in society would be compromised, thereby failing to uplift the marginalised voices in society. McQuail and Deuze (2020) submit that the political economy of the media's approach focuses on an economic activity that leads to the media as commodity; indeed, fake news has commoditised media messages, causing the media to struggle to remain relevant in society.

Political motives of fake news

Fake news and politics are closely related, with political communication remaining a significant part of politics; in contemporary global politics, the use of diverse strategies, such as social and mainstream media campaigns, are critical components of the strategies. What is also becoming a part of this enterprise is the use of slant, fabricated and fake messages to woo voters. Posetti and Matthews (2018) indicate that fake news has always been a part of politics. They cited the use of political fake news in Roman times, where Octavian spread negative information about Antony and Cleopatra to destroy Antony, as a clear

case of propaganda which can be referred to as fake news. In relation to this, respondent "K" indicated that "there are always political motives. Sometimes political opponents of the government will always, as much as possible, try whatever they can to produce fake news that will fit into their political campaigns". In various democracies across the world, fake news is being used significantly as a political tool. Yarlikaya (2020) elaborates that fake news was used to a great extent to project Donald Trump over his contenders in the 2016 US elections. Many scholars have even argued that Trump would not have won that election but for fake news. "Today, the use of social media tools, which have important effects in shaping political processes, have become widely used for disinformation and propaganda" (Yarlikaya, 2020:184). This implies that the creators of these manipulations use strategies that steer the minds of voters towards the direction of the manipulators. Respondent "L" stated,

I think even going way back into the 2016 elections, we had perceived that the current government signed into or outsourced a PR agency that used either algorithms or a certain set of information from the local players in the political landscape, from the 2016 elections to 2020 elections to make people believe certain invectives, innuendoes and certain descriptions of key individuals in the then opposition political parties for the targeted voter population to believe it, and so I believe has been used widely, particularly if you look at the tagging of the main opposition leader (John Mahama) as incompetent; it was consistently used and it was a trending slogan in social media and then into mainstream media and became well publicised phrase or adjective for the description of the opposition leader or the performance of his government at the time which was also replicated in the 2020 elections.

Croteau and Hoynes (2019) also affirmed the power of fake news in politics and the larger effect on democracy. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) observed that fake news has a strong influence on politics and on voters, comparable to one commercial television ad. This implies that the production and dissemination of fake news has a positive outcome for politicians who can utilise it to their advantage.

Respondent "C" raised concerns about the ownership structure of media organisations in Ghana, suggesting that some of the media owners influence fake news publication. He stated,

Some of these media outlets are owned by politicians.. They channel stories that may hurt their political opponents in order to gain advantage over them. There are media outlets like that used to champion political advantage. The *Daily Guide* and The *Enquirer* are guilty of that, and other papers affiliated with the National Democratic Congress. Both the NDC and the NPP have media affiliated to them and these media houses are often used to spread fake news.

Some media institutions in Ghana are polarised to a great extent because of their political and ideological perspectives. Their ownership structures have often been questioned by media lovers and some civil society organisations. They are either owned by or affiliated with some individuals in the NDC or the NPP – two major political parties in Ghana. As political tools, these affiliated media institutions are used to sometimes peddle falsehood and disinformation to discredit their opponents. These arguments are in sync with the political economy theory advanced by Fuchs (2018), Murdock (2016) and Wasko (2014). In contemporary times, the variants of Marx's inspired version of the critical political economy of the media, where class struggle is the basis of the analysis, indicate that there is a direct link between the economic structures, ownership of the media and the production content. Proponents of the political economy of the media approach always see the legitimacy of their stand on class struggles by looking at the concentration of media in the hands of a few capitalists or entrepreneurs who not only control the flow of capital in media organisations, but the content as well.

The proliferation of fake news in mainstream media correlates with media ownership. On this score,

the media in Ghana has direct and indirect relationships and affiliations with political and partisan groups and individuals. Most media in Ghana are either owned by politicians or have a vested interest in political personas and ideologies and a concentration of power (Geopoll, 2017). It is no wonder that the political interest rather than the public interest would override the content of the public sphere of the media in Ghana. The Geopoll report, which also named the faces behind most of the print, TV, radio and online media organisations in Ghana, raised concerns about the objectivity and diversity of media content. This explains why some people can manufacture false content to either destroy or tarnish the image of their rivals in politics.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has generally confirmed that fake news features frequently and regularly in Ghana. Reasons for the high rate of fake news have largely been attributed to the availability of social media platforms, political and economic reasons, as well as the poor media literacy rate in society. A major recommendation to curb fake news is self-regulation, which is a normative practice in the media. To ensure professional standards, media organisations either abide by the Ghana Journalists Association's (GJA) code of conduct, or comply with in-house ethical procedures used as a self-regulatory mechanism (Okon, et al., 2021). "Responsible journalism in Ghana would require accountability and the willingness of information producers to build and sustain trust and confidence in the citizenry" (ibid.). In the absence of a specific policy or regulations on fake news, self-regulation is the obvious option for journalists in Ghana to safeguard the public sphere. Despite the non-existence of a clearly defined law or policy regulating fake news, the country passed the right to information legislation in 2019 and cyber security law in 2020, both of which failed to consider misleading, distorted and fabricated information disseminated in the public sphere as major issues in the digital era.

What is worrying is the fact that most of the journalists indicated that their media organisations do not have sophisticated facilities enabling them to scientifically verify information prior to publication. Some of them relied on the gate-keeping processes that exist in their media houses to authenticate stories prior to publication, though this may not be foolproof. However, there exists a credible fact-checking organisation in Ghana, known as Fact-Check Ghana, established by the Media Foundation for West Africa. Fact-Check Ghana is a technology-driven model with a team made up of experienced journalists and researchers dedicated to countering fake news and misinformation in public discourse by politicians and public figures. It is part of a civil society movement aimed at projecting objective and responsible journalism in the public sphere for decent discourse. Their services could be extended to the media in general through the GJA as a buffer against fake news. This is where content regulation is pertinent to this discussion (Garbe, Selvik & Lemaire, 2021), as it will compel the media and technology companies and platforms to be held responsible if their platforms are used for abusive publications and fake news.

The need for media organisations to set up independent professional fact-checking teams as part of their media production processes or, affiliated with their media organisations, or rely on fact-checkers to debunk fake news is critical in curbing fake news (Saldaña & Vu, 2021). This is quite clear with the number of fact-checking organisations in the global community increasing by the day – to a staggering 188 – and more still being set up to debunk fake news. Some of these fact-checking organisations are established by non-profit organisations, while others are either set-up by governments and media organisations. With the decreasing financial fortune in the media industry caused partly by fake news and the digital evolution, it may appear to be an unprofitable venture for a single media organisation to establish a fact-checking unit in the country, but teams of media or the GJA could raise resources to provide professional fact-checking services for the media in the country generally. Respondent "E" suggested the need for less resourced media houses to be given periodic training to identify and flag fake news, since most of the media outlets lack the resources required to carry out such training.

Fake news can easily be detected and identified (Jarrahi & Safari, 2022). Its authenticity can be verified by looking at the evidence presented in the news story, focusing on whether it serves the public interest. The fake news can thus be detected early, at the propagation stage, before it is spread to a larger group of

people. The fake news life cycle begins at the creation stage, proceeds to the publication stage and then the propagation stage, where the falsification will either thrive or become extinct. At the creation stage, one or more authors come together to produce the content for specific reasons. At the publication stage, fake news is injected or disseminated to the public mostly through social media and linked to the users and followers who see it, and their online friends. Then follows the propagation point, where users can either share the fake news, like it or do nothing at all to it. This is the stage where fake news spreads, but it can also be stopped when detected at an early stage, and that means the fake news life cycle has been curtailed (Jarrahi & Safari, 2022). This can best be achieved through education on the subject.

Respondents indicated that, with a little bit of scientific investigation and much media literacy training, media organisations and individuals who continue to engage in fake news would be detected and those that may fall foul of the law should face its full rigour. "The training[s] we had to take journalists through fake news and after that training, we realised that media houses were now being cautious as to what they carry out in their media houses or the media space. So fake news was reduced to the barest minimum", said respondent "D" in response to the significance of media literacy training as a plausible solution to fake news. Adjinn-Tettey (2022) submits that media literacy training to spot fake news is imperative in detecting and debunking fake news. Still, such a solution should be complemented by refresher training and retraining to aid long-term recall and productivity (Ayoung et al., 2022).

Since this empirical study was largely qualitative and limited to journalists, it is suggested that extensive study could be undertaken using multiple designs and a larger sample size on various topics regarding fake news.

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