

# EndSARS Protests, Social Media and Public Opinion

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## Abstract

*Prior to the digital age in Nigeria, it was relatively easy to protect the sanctity of journalism and information dissemination to forestall unintended consequences. With the proliferation of the cell phone in the early 1980s and the internet in the mid-1990s, however, information dissemination became an all-comers' game and everyone that owns a phone can use it effectively on the internet as information merchant. The advantage of this development is that information sharing is democratised and the freedom to publish anything is now in the hands of digital content creators. On the flip side, however, it offers the opportunity to peddle falsehood, share fake news and hate speech with the intended and unintended harmful impact on peaceful co-existence, unity of the nation and the essence of democracy itself. This paper, through the review of literature, examines the implications of the widening incursion of every Tom, Dick and Harry into the information space as exemplified in the consequences of the reportage of the 2020 endSARS protests across the nation. Hinged on Technological Determinism theory, the paper concludes that indiscriminate posting of information by all and sundry on the internet portends danger for the society far more than whatever its worth.*

**Keywords:** Digital age, cell phone, endSARS, false news, hate speech

## Introduction

The mass media landscape has witnessed a revolutionary turnaround with the emergence of the internet. The hitherto monopoly of information processing and sharing enjoyed by journalists through the traditional medium of communication has been whittled down by the internet technology. The media is now democratised in a manner that everybody is free to join the information mill as active content producer rather than a mere consumer. The nature of the internet encourages this as it provides some form of privacy and anonymity to users as it also costs next to nothing to put one's voice in the digital space (Internet society, 2012). As a technology that eases communication bottlenecks, it has grown to become an avenue where people can interact through social networking.

Social media sites as the visual interface of the internet on web 2.0 allow freedom of interactivity, virtual communication and interaction in a reminiscence of Habermas's public sphere (Habermas, 1991)

Social media came on the internet with the launch of Six Degree sites in 1997 to open a floodgate for others to join later (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Others like LinkedIn in 2003, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube Google+, Instagram, Telegram, to mention a few joined later. They have become veritable platforms for sharing information among people in the social networking group using them. More than that, they have become alternative channels, albeit competitors, to the traditional media of radio, TV, and prints in disseminating information. However, the ease of linking people together through internet

connectivity has also ensured that communication system associated with legacy/mainstream media through gatekeeping is bypassed by users of social media (Ziolkowski, 2001). The resultant effect of information liberalisation is that facts may no longer be sacred as any unverified or concocted information can be transmitted to millions of social media users (Ukwuru & Nwankwo, 2020). Social networking and social media may appear mutually exclusive, but they are two related terms sharing close affinity with each other. Mcttanoy as cited in Achugbue (2015) explains their differences in terms of 'who' and 'what' to show that social media are tools for social networking, a platform where users consume and create user-generated contents. Nigerians have also embraced the new information age occasioned by the internet technology. The internet penetration in the country as at January 2021 was put at 122 million subscribers with about 39 million of that on the Social media (NCC, 2021). Nigerians are on many social media platforms too with the popular ones shown to be *Whatsapp* leading with 93%. *Facebook* is second at 86.2%, *Youtube* 81.6%, *Instagram* 73.1% and *Twitter* 61.4% (Varella, 2021). Some of these platforms were actively used during the #endSARS protest with divergent textual and visual information freely disseminated. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) verification story on some of these posts will be the focus of this paper.

### **End Special Anti-Robbery Squad (endSARS) Protests**

The #endSARS protests were held in most Nigerian cities between October and December 2020 to force the government disband anti-crime police outfit, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). It rode on the back of social media to gain popularity among the people. Different social networking sites were used by the organisers, followers and their sympathisers to disseminate information of different degrees and truth. The protests were largely carried out by youths who claimed the outfit had outlived its usefulness as a result of several abuses levelled against it over the years. While the protest was

physically carried out on the streets, the social media became the virtual-public space to disseminate information among the protesters and also the rallying point for all.

### **Information Disorder**

Information disorder has become another amorphous terminology with many names. Scholars have seen it as "fake news" (Lazer et al., 2018; Zhou & Zafarani, 2018), "false news" (Vosoughi et al., 2018), "digital misinformation" (World Economic Forum, 2018), "disinformation" (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017), "rumours" or "false information" (Kapantai et al., 2020). What is generally agreed on by all is that the word denotes a new phenomenon in global information ecology that portends evil for the right of citizens to consumption of accurate and factual information.

Information in mass media could be in form of news, opinion, analysis or features. As news, it is story that is new, factual and based on verifiable evidence. Anything short of this will be unfit as news, the basis for Joe Thiole's conclusion that "if it's fake, it's not news" (Basson, 2017) a position also taken by Kapantai et al. (2020). As features, it can come as an interesting story on topical issues that may not necessarily be new, but should be interesting to the target audience. On a social platform like *Twitter*, it could be a short post on anything that includes individual opinion. What is important in any informative material is the fact in context. Anything short of this will fall into Information disorder categorisation. The generic usage of 'fake news' for all misleading information may therefore appear narrow in the context of this paper where individual posts on social media constitute the population of study as secondary data.

While 'fake news' has been put out of contention based on the reality that any information that is not factual cannot be called "news", the issue in this paper will focus on any misleading or non-factual content published in the media space as information. This has been categorized into three: Misinformation, Mal-information and Disinformation

(Ireton & Posetti, 2018) used in this study to address the #endSARS stories in the social media as verified by BBC.

Misinformation has been described as misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent while mal-information is seen as any form of information that is based on reality that is used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisations or country. Disinformation refers to false, inaccurate or misleading information which the author knows to be false but done with a malicious intent to confuse or manipulate people (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). They are usually designed and promoted by imposters/faceless individuals whose objectives are premeditated to “cause public harm or for profit” (European Union, 2018) or with personal goals in mind.

Disinformation may be in textual format or as Audio-visual manipulation (AVM) stories. Audio-visual manipulation aims at creating deception either through audio, photographs or video. They have been identified under disinformation to be either ‘Deep Fakes’, a process that relies on computational techniques and ‘Cheap Fakes’ that could be created through basic photo editing software.

Paris and Donovan (2020) listed examples of visual manipulations under **Deep Fakes** as: *virtual performances* where the original video is faked and passed on to the public as real, *face swapping* where someone’s face is morphed unto an actor’s face in a performance, *lip-synching* and *voice synthesis*. **Cheapfakes** include *photoshopping*, *lookalikes*, *recontextualisation* and *Speeding & slowing moving images*. Visual manipulation techniques have become globalised and localised to pose a high negative opinion on those on the receiving end. Victims are known to have been used “to settle personal vendetta, exact blackmail and trick people into participating in personalised financial scams” (Paris & Donovan, 2020). They could face a hard time trying to repair their damaged image. The merchants of disinformation are believed to have seen in the strength of

social media the ‘vulnerability or partisan potential of recipients’ of their falsehood to make them accomplices in spreading the information through individuals’ “propensities to share information for a variety of reasons.” (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p.8).

### **Public opinion**

Public opinion has been described as a multifaceted phenomenon with many definitions (Ziolkowski, 2001). It is often taken on its face value as a collection of individual opinions on an issue of public interest. A general aggregation or consensus reached by the multiplicity of these divergent views lead to an acceptable opinion to the majority that assumed the ‘public opinion’ tag. Davison (1968) explained that “these opinions can exercise influence over individual behaviour, group behaviour, and government policy” (as cited in Ziolkowski, 2001, p.183).

It is however believed that individual opinion may be based on ‘emotion with a prejudiced point of view’ that when such enters the public place it needs several other opinions that are based on logical reasoning arguments based on public interest to defeat. Lipman (1922) came up with the term ‘stereotype’ to indicate that the process of opinion formation is often based on ‘the pictures in our heads’. Where majority of the individual point of views are largely prejudicial, then the emerging public opinion may end up not in public interest but a triumph of a vociferous individuals with hidden agendas.

### **Review of Literature**

The business of information distortion and manipulation is not new to humanity but the internet technology appears to have digitalised it. Academic interest in this new information disorder the mass media is currently experiencing, social media specifically, seem to revolve around what many agree as ‘fake news’ which Kapantai et al. (2020) considered “overloaded’ as information is more than news. Information is all encompassing as it embraces all types of stories presented on mass media platform. Interestingly, most researched articles have

focused on the prevalence of this form of information disorder on the social media with their attendant impact on the society and the possible motives of their creators. World Economic Forum (2013) had warned of the danger posed by the emerging social media as vehicles for spreading misleading information. This belief is based on the popularity of Social media as avenues for people to access information with minimal restrictions. These features made them irresistible to many thereby increasing their vulnerability to disinformation. The report of Pew (2017) indicated that 67% of the 4, 971 American adults surveyed get their news from sites like *Facebook*, a growing trend that has spread to many parts of the world (Gottfield & Shearer, 2017).

A Reuters Digital News Report for 2020 from six continents revealed that 40% of the respondents are more wary of SM as channels for misleading information compared with three others (News sites/Apps 20%, Messenger Apps 14% and Search engines e.g *Google* 10%) A breakdown analysis country by country varies on the specific but in South Africa (Nigeria not included in the research), *Facebook* 30% and *WhatsApp* 23%, while Kenya had *Facebook* leading at 29% with *WhatsApp* following at 25% (Newman et al., 2020).

The growing reliance of people on social media for information is with mixed feelings. Bruns et al. (2020) highlighted how social media (*Facebook*) was used to spread the rumours that Corona virus was manufactured in a factory in Wuhan or the linkage of the virus to the emerging 5G mobile telephony technology at the peak of the pandemic in 2020. Many people on social media must have fallen for the falsehood that 5G generates radio frequency harmful to human DNA that could cause cancer, premature ageing and possibly corona virus through a weak immune system. Such unverified “conspiracy theory” claims on social media have been excused by Eaton (2020) as cited in Ponomo (2020) as a form of “emotional support for frightened people during a time of uncertainty” (p.2). Wasserman and Madrid-Morale (2019)

came up in their study with a high prevalence of false information in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa and the likelihood of most social media users in these countries spreading information they know may not be true. Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) concluded that the motivation to share would be based on the topic among other reasons. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2021) also identified a sense of ‘moral/civic’ responsibility on the part of most social media audience “to share information and to create awareness” (p.20).

A number of reasons have emerged to explain the rationale behind the information disorder phenomenon. Peterson et al. (2018) identified political partisanship of a purveyor to mobilise against a political opponent. Others may be for commercial or ideological (Hirst, 2017); or malicious motives to promote preset beliefs (Kapantai et al., 2020).

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is premised on Technological determinism based on a conceptual assumption that sees technology as a driving force in the socio, political, cultural and economic development of the modern society. Technological Determinism is a reductionist theory, one which does not replace or absorb an older one but reduces it to more basic terms. The term is believed to have been coined by an American Sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, who lived between 1857 and 1929 and the theory itself was believed to be elaborated upon by the German philosopher and economist, Karl Marx (An internet of everything, n.d, para. 40).

This theory presumes that a society’s technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. Beard (1927, p. 4) provides a metaphorical explanation of the theory by saying that technology marches in seven league boots moving from one revolutionary conquest to the other, tearing down old industries and factories and rapidly flinging up new processes. Echoing this position, Croteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 345) believe that Marx’s

idea that fast-changing technologies alter human lives is all pervasive.

Technological Determinism is a theory that tries to show that technical developments, media or technology as a whole is the key mover in history and social change (Kunz, 2006, p. 2). Technological determinists view technology as an autonomous force, beyond direct human control, and see technology as the prime cause of social change (Chandler, 1995, para. 4). Growth occasioned by technology is often not gradual but in leaps over time. Toffler (1971) graphically lays out the philosophy of the technological determinists after citing copious examples of accelerated economic growth thus: "Behind such prodigious economic facts lies that great, growling engine of change-technology". He goes on to ascertain that while it might not be possible to deny the fact that technology works in tandem with other factors to bring about economic growth, it still remains the major force (p. 25). There are, however, multiple faces of technological determinism (Bimber, 1990, pp. 333-351). The first two of such faces are the dystopian and utopian opinions on technology, and the third is the instrumentalists'. The utopian determinism is the view that technology is a positive force that will eventually uplift humanity, and overtime, eliminate or at least mitigate most, if not all, of the ills afflicting humanity. The works of Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Toffler (1971) are expressions of utopian determinism. Marshal McLuhan's popular axiom "the medium is the message" (pp. 1-18) and Alvin Toffler's creative work: *Future Shock*, provide some of the best examples of utopian determinism. By McLuhan's axiom, it is meant that the medium through which a particular message is relayed is so powerful as to trigger a chain of mental consequences in the audience which will in turn colour the message or heighten or diminish its credibility.

Utopian determinism could either be hard or soft. Hard determinism views technology as the sole panacea to social, economic and physical problems. Technology, independent of other factors, creates the forces required to regulate social activity and its meaning and we only organise ourselves to meet the needs of technology with outcomes that are beyond our control (Ellul, 1964). Another scholar thought to be a hard determinist is Theodore J. Kaczynski (the Unabomber) who claims that material factors are the principal determining factors in the evolution of social systems (Surry & Farquhar, 1997, p. 6). Soft determinism takes a rather passive standpoint of the way technology interacts with socio-political situations. Soft determinism acknowledges the active role people play in the outcome of a situation even though it believes that technology is still the guiding force in our evolution.

The dystopian determinists like Ellul (1964) and Orwell (1949) believe that technology is evil and dehumanising and will inevitably lead to the moral, intellectual and physical destruction of human kind. Taking a mid-position between the utopian and dystopian determinists are the technological instrumentalists who view technology basically as a tool.

The first two of the six laws of technology as written by Kranzberg (1986) seem to be capable of laying to rest the controversies arising from the standpoints of the three faces of technology: "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral, invention is the mother of necessity" (p. 41). The instrumentalists (Levinson, 1996, pp. 301-313; Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011, pp. 235-241) often cite the knife to illustrate their position. A knife, just like technology as a whole, is a tool which can be deployed for a good or bad use. To them, therefore, technology remains under human control and the most powerful instrument of change is not technology but social conditions and human aspirations. Change, to the instrumentalists, is gradual or evolutionary and not in leaps (Levinson, 1996, p. 310).

Scholars like Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999, pp. 19-21), however, believe that technology can be neutral only if it has never been used before or if people do not know to what use it can be put. Green (2001, p. 15) also holds a similar view that such a society where the use of a technology that has already been invented is not known does not exist. If anyone believes that technology is neutral, she opines, they will be disregarding the cultural and social conditions that technology has produced (which of the theories serve as foundation or roots to your study and in what way ?).

### Method

Four of the stories that went viral while the protests lasted became subjects for verification by Mwai (2020) for the *BBC* which now constitute the focus of this study. The stories are content analysed and classified either as Disinformation or Misinformation based on the typology of Information disorder discussed at the onset of this paper.

#### Disinformation 1:

Ugwu Blessing Ugochukwu, a lady protestor from the South East of Nigeria, was claimed to have lost her siblings to the SARS on *Twitter*. Her photograph sitting on a statue initially appeared innocuous like any other protestor until some people started adding information that the BBC fact check discovered it to be made up. It turned out as a clear example of disinformation believed by some to justify the brutality of the security outfit in the eye of the storm.



FIG1: BBC

#### Disinformation 2:

Another photograph on *Twitter* showing Nigerian Catholic bishops supposedly marching in support of the endSARS protest. BBC discovered that this photograph has been used out of context. It was originally taken in March 2020 (seven months before the #endSARS) when the bishops had a street protest in Abuja against killings and kidnappings in the country.



FIG 2: Twitter (now X)

**Misinformation 1:**

Claim that soldiers cannot shoot someone holding the national flag. The story went viral on almost all the SM platforms (*Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Facebook, Telegram*). It was circulated to be an unwritten military code which made all the protesters to start caring a handy Nigerian flag as a weapon of passive resistance against any possible military assault. Lekki protesters believed this unverified claim and that most probably must have boosted their resolve to disobey the curfew ordered by the state government. It turned out to be a misleading piece of information swallowed by many protesters who appeared to rely more on online news and other media of communication other than the traditional media. The BBC said that there was no extant law to support this claim.

**Disinformation 3:**

A trending video of Presidential spokesperson, Femi Adesina, on October 14, 2020, calling on *Channels TV*, a news oriented media outfit with headquarters at the outskirts of Lagos that the #endSARS protest is a “child’s play”. The post was preceded with a text that clearly set its objective going by the additional text, “if you are not angry

enough, I hope this video helps you #EndPoliceBrutalityinNigeria #EndSWAT.” Fact checking by BBC revealed that the video was an old interview clip on another protest that was not connected to #endSARS. The video was deliberately used out of context on the social media.



FIG 3: Twitter (now X)

All the cases cited were originated by people without any identifiable identity. This highlights negative usage of internet anonymity and lack of gatekeeping associated with the new media and it also validates the construct that technology could be put to a dystopian use in Technological Determinism.

**Discussion**

The BBC story has shown the extent to which information that lacks the editorial policing of the traditional media can be produced and circulated on social media. One of the misinformation that emanated from the #endSARS protest was the **Arise cable TV** news story of a sniper on the last floor of Access Bank in Lekki whom the bank, in a rebuttal, claimed to be a maintenance man carrying out maintenance work on the day of the Lekki shooting (<https://nigeriannewsdirect.com>). That singular story went viral and was accepted by many of the protesters to be factual to the extent that it propelled them to go after the bank’s property, burning and looting about 30 of its branches ([www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com)). The online story was

eventually dropped by the Tv station after the emergence of facts negating the belief.

The story cited above is just one out of many, some with equal, near equal or even greater magnitude, that were circulated during the End SARS protests with far reaching consequences on life and property. The democratisation of information processing and sharing has its several advantages but it also has a flip side that disproportionately outweighs the advantages. The fact that the youths of the country have a collective mind that is easily manipulated by the social media should call for the concern of every well-meaning Nigerian.

Guy Berger while considering the quick spread of disinformation identified why it appears easy for people to use social media to peddle falsehood:

The purveyors of disinformation prey on the vulnerability or partisan potential of recipients whom they hope to enlist as amplifiers and multipliers. In this way, they seek to animate us into becoming conduits of their messages by exploiting our propensities to share information for a variety of reasons (as cited in Ireton & Posetti, p. 2018).

One of the ways to reverse the above situation and circumvent the problem it brings is to educate the masses, one, to the evil of peddling false information and, two, to the danger of acting on it without due verification of the source, intent and veracity.

Disinformation may have negative impact on the society as a whole. Kapantai et al. (2020) claimed that disinformation has several repercussions ranging from political propaganda to election manipulation with the dire consequences on democracy. A public that is constantly fed with wrong information will find it difficult to build any sound judgement on logical reasoning. Falsehood inhibits any society having any useful public opinion that will be beneficial to good governance.

Another major step to take now to redirect the country back on the path of sanity is to make the disinformation trend a non-profitable venture for those peddling it and remove other incentives being enjoyed by those involved. Media literacy has been identified as a good starting point that will allow consumers of information on social media to scrutinize online contents and ascertain their wholesomeness. Media consumers must be engaged and enlightened to spot factual information from falsehood. (Anderson, 2019; Ireton & Posetti, 2018)

Social Media are putting up measures to verify the veracity of contents posted on their sites and Google has a number

of verification tools like Google Reverse for the verification of images online. All that is a welcome development and a giant step in the right direction. They can still do more, however, as the promoters of disinformation are not relenting in using technology to avoid detection all the time.

## Conclusion

From the constructs of the theory- Technological Determinism - on which this paper is premised, it is clear that technology is like a double-edged sword which, depending on the use to which it is put, could be viewed as either being good or bad. We would be living in a world of illusion if we failed to acknowledge the fact that the internet has come to stay with us and so has the cell phone. The evil that the internet-enhanced phone brings comes concomitantly with its advantages and this is why the technology cannot be easily discarded. The panacea to disinformation, misinformation or information disorder generally is to adequately educate the disseminating and receiving publics and enact a law with an appropriate degree of bite to punish erring citizens.

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