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### Fake News and Propaganda in Political Communication: Effects and Remedies

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Fake news has dominated the media debate the world over in recent times. Fake news is used in political discourses to portray the opponent as inefficient, alienated, outsider etc. Kenya had her election on August 8, 2017, during which time the campaigns were somehow dominated by fake news and propaganda. The Kenyan campaigns were highly polarized and fake news and propaganda were rife in the media; both new and traditional media. In the past elections in Kenya, months leading to elections since the 1980s have been highly charged leading to actual harm; in most cases ethnically and gender inclined. This was highly evident as political parties prepared to nominate the respective flag-bearers for different political positions and subsequent campaigns. As opposed to the campaigns of the 80s and 90s, the situation in the 2000s has been different due to proliferation of media outlets in an environment that is almost lacking in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) programs. This study aimed at analyzing the use of fake news and propaganda in political campaigns leading to August 8 elections in Kenya. We also sought to elucidate the effects of fake news in the Kenyan political landscape. This was done by collecting, viewing and analyzing fake news and propaganda in political campaign discourses leading to the August 8 general elections. Thereafter the paper recommended Media and Information Literacy as a remedy to combat fake news and negative propaganda and arrest their effects.

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where the quality and type of information we receive largely determines our choices and ensuing actions, including our capacity to enjoy fundamental freedoms and the ability for self-determination and development (UNESCO, 2011). Driven by technological advancements in telecommunications, there is also a proliferation of media and other information providers through which vast amounts of information and knowledge are accessed and shared by citizens (UNESCO, 2011; NMA, 2017). The media permeates all aspects of human life. One of the aspects of human life that is highly mediated is politics and political communication.

Politics is an art of communication to the people. Communication and politics are two inseparable human activities. Political communication as McNair (2003) quotes Denton and Woodward, is "pure discussion about the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative and executive decision), and official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes)." McNair goes ahead and gives his own definition of political

communication as "purposeful communication about politics." In essence, political communication concerns every one of us because, as Mathews (1999) opines in *Politics for People*, politics concerns every aspect of human life including the air we breathe. Given the diversity of people in terms of their location and needs, political communication is becoming increasingly mediated.

Mediated communication has been there in politics since the early days where classical media like fire, smoke and drum beats were being used by authorities to pass political messages. During these times political communication was coded in such a way that the target recipient had no problem decoding it. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century when mass media began, the media was closely guarded by state and church authorities so that the media could not destabilize the political and social arrangements of the day (Baran and Davies, 2010). The political elites and the clergy of the day had sensed mediated political communication was a phenomenon to behold.

Currently, with the proliferation of media of all sorts, authorities are facing new challenges as far as political communication is concerned. One of such challenges is *fake news*, which is a

global phenomenon that is transcending all mediated communication contexts. Fake news is a fluid concept to define and its definition may be unclear and can change depending on whom you ask (Kestler-D'Amour, 2017). Nevertheless, we will attempt the definition by inferring from what scholars have said about it. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), define fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers. According to NMA (2017), this definition fails to “capture campaign claims made by politicians, as this would chill democratic debate and inhibit the reporting of it. The definition also protects opinion, comment and lines of questioning from being similarly denounced.” Our operational definition of fake news is “any news story that has been fabricated and therefore lacking in truth and fact.” This definition will encompass falsehood in news, distortion of facts, and outright propaganda.

### **Background and history of fake news**

Fake news has gained prominence in recent years reaching climax with the US political campaigns of 2016. AFP (April 2, 2017) quotes Robert Love who opines that fake news “seems to have arisen in the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries America when a rush of emerging technologies intersected with newsgathering practises during a boom time for newspapers.” But keen reading of the mass media development would show one that the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1455 heralded the uncontrolled dissemination of news and probably the birth of fake news that relied on the conveyance of the then modern technology (Baran and Davis, 2010, McQuail 1983; & Williams, 2003). Despite that, fake news and

its kins (rumours, propaganda conspiracies and fake statements by politicians) can be traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), point out that, “Fake news and its cousins are not new. One historical example is the “Great Moon Hoax” of 1835, in which the *New York Sun* published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon.” In modern days, a sizeable population in the world believe that the US government participated in the September 11 attacks because of the fake news circulating among the people.

Early 2017 South Africa was faced with one of the bloodiest xenophobic attacks. As VOA (March 01, 2017) reports, Fake news and misinformation were the fuel to bloody xenophobic clashes in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. For the case of South Africa, the fake news that one-third of nearby Malawi’s population had immigrated to South Africa was enough to send people on a killing spree without ascertaining the truth. Such fake news tends to engulf a large majority of people and transcend individuality. A larger population after consuming fake news tend to believe without verifying the truth therein.

In Kenya, fake news is flourishing due to factors such as unprecedented media and technological advancement, poor internet space regulatory, a large population that access and generate information but with little or no information literacy and a highly polarized society. These factors combined, they give rise to a fertile ground for fake news (Moyoyo, 2017).

There have been several instances of fake news in Kenya in recent years most originating from social media and in some instances picked up by traditional media houses and disseminated

further. There have been cases fake news about the death of prominent politicians (Moi, Biwott), Celebrities (Churchill), common citizen (Cheryl Kitonga) etc. many people believed these reports and were highly shared on social media.

2017 being an election year in Kenya, it has experienced an avalanche of fake political

news. The mother of fake news was when the front page of the *Nation* newspaper was manipulated to claim the defection of Dr. Paul Otuoma from ODM and highly circulated in Busia County (Agutu, 2017). The *Nation* being one of the major and relied upon newspaper, the news was taken to be true until the nation issued a statement but harm had been caused.

**Fig 1. A manipulated campaign poster and the front page of the Daily Nation purporting that Dr. Otuoma had defected to Jubilee Party.**



### The extent of fake news

In the post-truth era, an era where campaigners continue repeating their agenda even when these are found to be untrue by mainstream media and independent experts (Preston, 2012), social media becomes the conduit of such “alternative facts.” Deacon (2016) summarised the core message of post-truth politics “as “Facts are negative. Facts are pessimistic. Facts are unpatriotic.” He added that post-truth politics can also include a claimed rejection of partisanship and negative campaigning. In this context, campaigners can push a utopian “positive campaign” to which rebuttals can be dismissed as smears and

scaremongering and opposition as partisan. In its most extreme mode, post-truth politics can make use of conspiracism. In this form of post-truth politics, false rumours (fake news) become major news topics.

Everything espoused in Preston and Deacon is being experienced in Kenyan political campaigns at the moment. Fake news which incidentally is believed by many, negativity especially on tribal lines, pessimism, unpatriotism, utopian promises within the shortest time possible etc are all witnessed and they transcend individual reasoning and groupthink permeate the citizens.

### **Demographics e.g. gender, age, social status and fake news**

As much as there is no statistics to reveal the number of people exposed, fake news is a common phenomenon in politics. Education has been pointed out by different scholars as a variable in the susceptibility to fake news. According to a discussion session organized by YaLa Academy Alumni, many people said initially they were easily susceptible to Fake News. But after attending citizen journalism class and watching a video during the discussion, they learnt valuable skills for distinguishing true news from fake news.

In the run-up to the US presidential election of 2006, fake news was more effective in swaying public opinion than a TV advert. Going by post-election research which has shown that the presidential seat was won on the strength of fake news, we are persuaded to conclude that a majority of people believe fake news.

Everyone at one time has believed in fake news. The Kenyan case has examples of people who have believed in fake news at one time or the other. Seasoned politician, Raila Odinga, was once a victim of fake news when he responded to a letter purported to have been authored by KWS which was later discovered to be fake (Mayoyo, 2017). If a person of Raila's calibre, educated, and with communication personnel at his disposal can fall victim of fake news, it goes a long way to show that a common man with little training and lacking in communication advice can fall victim. As we have mentioned elsewhere in the paper, political communication environment in Kenya is rife with fake news including the

recent letter that purported that Kalonzo Musyoka had left NASA for Jubilee (Onyango and Otieno, 2017).

All these examples raised political temperatures on the ground. Currently, it is feared that social media political communication may heighten tension among the people as Kenya approaches the August 8 elections. This fear has reached Kenyan offices tasked with peace and cohesion. Kenya News Agency (KNA, 2016) reports that "The National Commission on Integration and Cohesion Commission (NCIC) has attributed negative ethnicity peddled in social media platforms as the greatest impediment in the fight against tribalism in the country. According to the Commission's CEO, Hassan Sheikh Mohamed, curbing misuse of social media platforms to spread tribalism and hatred remains their top priority as the country prepares for the 2017 general elections." This is a clear indication that if the media, more so the uncontrolled social media, is left unchecked at critical times like campaign periods, can be a potential cause of chaos in the country.

Every user in Kenya is a political partisan. Normatively, the journalists are supposed to maintain impartiality when addressing the general audience, there are some formats in which journalists can go beyond the mere reporting of politics and move into the role of active participants (McNair, 2003). It is this partisanship that is evidenced among social media users. The liberal nature of the social media gives the fertile ground for the spread of uncontrolled information such as fake news and due to information overload online (Rogers and Allbritton, 1995), many people may fail to analyse and ascertain the truth of the

information they access thereby making the number of people who believe fake news to go up.

Though we cannot conclusively ascertain the gender and the age of most people who believe fake news, in the Kenyan political communication and fake news scene, the highest number of the generator of fake news is male. To sum up the question who believes fake news, we can conclude that anybody can be a victim. And this has been highlighted through the above literature.

### **The role of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in mitigating the effects of fake news**

In this section, we deliberate on possible ways MIL can be used to mitigate the effects of fake news and propaganda in critical times. Defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Christ & Potter 1998), media information literacy can be used to empower the citizens in the over-mediated environment so that they are smart people who don’t consume fake news blindly. Media literacy calls for a concerted effort. It is a long-term initiative and it cannot be used as an instant remedy. It calls for policy changes especially in education (elementary) so that people are raised healthy consumers of information and media content. MIL would be effective if it is stepped up through media campaigns to address the impacts of fake news. It due to the fake news problem that the University of the Philippines launched a web-based, educational television network earlier this year with the expressed purpose of fighting disinformation (Kesteler-D’Amours, 2017). Such initiatives can be adapted in the Kenyan communication environment during this time of elections so that people from different

political camps, predominantly divided along tribal and ethnic lines, coexist peacefully during and after the August 8 election.

As alluded elsewhere in the paper, fake news has already started doing rounds for different purposes. For instance, the website <http://fp-news.com> is airing materials that are completely unfounded that are maligning the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, an act that, if not checked and people informed properly, may cause political misunderstanding thus influencing the vote erroneously. The site is full of articles that are unfounded and devoid of facts an indicator for fake news. It also uses a name that closely resembles another website. Another indicator that the site is fake is the lack of physical contact details for its owners. Such details should be communicated to people in an environment that has MIL initiatives.

Media and information are not just there to be accessed. The users should have a sustained and satisfactory engagement with symbolic texts by utilizing a range of analytic competencies (Eco, 1979): Readers and viewers must be literate in the sense of being competent in and motivated toward relevant cultural traditions and values.

Despite the fact that MIL is aimed at equipping the media audience with the requisite literacy skills necessary for effectively utilizing information media, policies have to be put in place to cushion them against the harm of harmful information e.g. fake news. Although every person has the freedom of expression, this should not be misused by disseminating fake news. Different stakeholders should put measures in place to punish peddlers of fake news to act as deterrents to the vice. In line with this, in March 2017, Tanzania’s state-run broadcaster, TBC1, suspended its nine staff

after they relayed a fake story that claimed US President Trump had praised Tanzanian President John Magufuli as an “African hero” (BBC News, 2017). Policies and legislations can go a long way to boost media literacy and thus help combat the effects of fake news.

At this juncture is important to mention that MIL can also be extended to media professionals. Journalists need to understand the era that we are living in. So, if we are talking about substantiating stories, then, maybe now, you actually have to do it twice, just to be sure. This is, we agree, a remedy that can work effectively in a controlled environment. But with the proliferation of media especially social media, professionalism may be hard to maintain. Nevertheless, there is a possibility and potential of new media contributors benefitting from MIL initiatives if well organized.

## CONCLUSION

Fake news is becoming a challenge in the information era. The line between fake news and real news is getting thinner in the post-truth era. Political communication is getting complicated as fake news is swaying many people from their individual rational thinking and lumping them together and shaping their thinking through the media. This has been occasioned by information-overload due to advancement in communication technology and over-reliance on media for everything in people’s life. Fake news has negative consequences and they are likely to cause actual harm especially in a divided society like Kenya. Anybody can be affected and made to believe fake news. Despite this, the paper has mentioned that education is an important variable in fake news i.e. well-educated people

are less likely to believe in fake news. We have also alluded to the fact that fake news does not discriminate against gender but most producers of fake news are likely to be men. With an educated media audience with strong Media and Information Literacy, any democracy can flourish. Kenya being a democratic country that holds general elections after every five years, instituting a strong MIL culture can make it a stable country by holding its people together.

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