



To Be Charged Again: Spotting of Fake News by Television Stations in Kenya

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Abstract

Fake news is a major threat to credibility, trust, and speed of real news owing to its ability to spread fast, camouflage real news, spur ethnic conflicts, sabotage businesses and mislead voters. While there is empirical evidence that dissemination of fake news on social media and enactments of anti-fake news laws are on the rise globally, most of the empirical studies on fake news continue to focus on its political impacts and presence on social media. News television stations work under the premise of trust, credibility and speed now threatened by fake news hence the need to explore how they spot it. The specific research question was: How do news television stations in Kenya spot fake news?. The Gate keeping theory aided conceptualization of this study. The study adapted a relativist-constructivist/interpretivist philosophical paradigm hence qualitative approach and multiple case study method. The target population comprised of reporters and editors. A sample size of 16 participants from two television stations was selected using purposive sampling technique. Data was generated through in depth interviews and observations. Data was analysed thematically and presented in narrative form based on themes. The findings show that television stations spot fake news through counterchecking and verification, instinct, delays, online reverse search, calling the source, evaluating source's credibility, chains of gate keepers, and editorial social media groups. Despite the numerous spotting practices fake news had permeated and aired on television resulting in court charges, fines, apologies and sacking of journalists. This study concludes that practices of spotting fake news by television stations in Kenya are incoherent, informal and weakly anchored on policy documents thus insufficient. Therefore, recommends that editorial boards establish standard and well documented practices for spotting fake news to arrest its growing threat to trust in news and journalism.

Keywords: Fake news, journalism, television, spotting, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Television stations in Kenya have been charged in court and fined for disseminating fake news posing a serious threat to credibility, trust of news and journalism practice (Muthoni, 2019). This comes at the backdrop of passing of the Computer Misuse and Cyber Crime bill in 2019 by the Kenya National Assembly. The term fake news has raised interest in media and governments not only in Kenya but across the globe following its alleged influence in 2016 general elections in the United States of America (US) (Vamanu, 2019). Wahutu (2019) affirms that there has been heightened fear of fake news globally as a result of panic by news media in the US following the 2016 general elections. Concepts like disinformation, mal-information and misinformation have therefore become common in discussions of fake news. Additionally, the term 'post truth' was chosen as the 2017 word of the year by Collins's dictionary (Silverman, 2016). Alcott and Gentzkow (2017:5) define fake news as "news stories that have no factual basis but are presented as facts". Although

fake news lacks essential components of news like being truthful and not being of benefit to people, Alcot and Gentkov believe that fake news is news and the only variation is that it is not factual. This paper explores how television journalists are responding to the challenge of spotting fake news through a multi-case study of two news television stations in Kenya.

Problem Statement

There has been a declining trust in conventional media as sources of factual news information (Swift, 2016). It is asserted that 70% of the people in the world are worried about fake news and that the average person has no knowledge of telling fake news from real news (CNBC, 2018). Consequently, there has been an increase in uncertainty about credibility of news and news sources (Daniels, 2017). In Kenya, both print media like Nation Newspapers and broadcast media like KTN and NTV have been charged, prosecuted, fined and forced to apologize by courts of law for airing fake news. Cases in point is Nation Newspaper which was prosecuted and fined eight million shillings for publishing fake news on death of city tycoon Jimmy Wangi's wife in 2019. NTV was also charged for airing fake news about the death of Honorable Njenga Karume. The issue of trust in media has been further eroded by senior political leaders who trash all news that does not favor them labeling it 'fake news'; a narrative that has been popularized by President Trump of US (Wahutu, 2019). In several occasions, the current president of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta has trashed newspapers as 'just meat wrappers' (Mkawale, Ngeno & Kimutai, 2015, p.3). Accordingly, 87% of Kenyans had seen fake news about 2017 general elections prior to the voting date (Geopoll, 2018). Unfortunately, most of the studies on fake news are focused on anti-fake news legislations and social media. Since people rely on news information in making essential decisions about health, finance, spirituality, and academics, reliance on fake news results in ills like divorce, suicides, defeats in political contests, soiling of journalists and TV stations' names, and ethnic conflicts.

Research Question

This study sought to answer the question of how news television stations in Kenya spot fake news.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2014, Zimbabwe woke up to racism claim stories that shocked the world. For instance, fake news that, Zimbabwe had announced ambitious plans for a final solution to white racism (Workman, 2017). The article became a world buzz in September, 2014 making rounds in social media. This fake news alleged that the President of Zimbabwe the late Robert Mugambe had announced holocaust plans on all whites living in the country. Further, there were allegations that this declaration was made at a meeting with other African heads of states, international observers and was attended by 10,000 Zimbabweans. However, this was fake news as no such statement was made by President Robert Mugabe. This created fear in the country and even resulted in white settlers flying out of the country (Workman, 2017).

In July 2016, South Africa fake news went viral that Chinese restaurants in Pretoria had been licensed to sell dog meat. The online report said that the Chinese had successfully argued their case of violation of cultural and religious rights through the banning of dog meat. Further, the report said the Chinese restaurant would then slaughter, consume, and vendor dog meat with a limit of slaughtering a maximum of 35 dogs in a week. The only caution was that these dogs were to be slaughtered in a humane way (Green, 2017). However, there was no such licensing by any government

agency hence this was fake news. Nonetheless, the report elicited great uproar from citizens arguing that it was against the South African culture (Green, 2017).

In Nigeria, a story emerged on Aljazeera report clip website that Nigeria's President Muhammad Buhari was poisoned but survived. This story was shared on the internet and further circulated by other fake news websites. This came at a point when true and untrue stories were making rounds in news concerning President Buhari's health. Since the president's health was worsening and it was common knowledge to the citizens, a good platform for all sort of fake news was watered. This elicited controversy amongst the followers and political opponents (Workman, 2017).

According to Muthoni (2019) the Nation Meida Group (NMG) that owns Ntv was fined eight million shillings for airing fake news about death of city tycoon Jimmy Wanjigi's wife. Although the defense from Nation Media argued that the obituary was placed by a stranger, the judge ruled that the Nation Media benefited financially from the advert and had the responsibility of verifying and airing only factual information (Muthoni, 2019).

Media Council of Kenya (MCK) report of 2018 indicated that websites were the major sources of fake news in Kenya at 35 %, Face book was second at 31% and Twitter followed at 19% (MCK, 2018).

Fake news was highly featured during the run up to 2017 general elections in Kenya. The major coalitions Jubilee and NASA had fake news creators whose main agenda was to create and share lies (MCK, 2018).

The Gate Keeping Theory

Conceptualization of this study was aided by the Gate keeping theory by Kurt Lewin that posit that in news media, editors decide on news items to publish or discard (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Editors and reporters on the ground receive volumes of news items but have to decide on what to let to the public based on their editorial policies, culture, style and personal judgment. This theory indicates that editors and reporters exercise authority over what is aired on media. However, personal, cultural, political and financial biases may interfere with the independence of editors creating loopholes for fake news. As a result, fake news has found its way to television screens (Dentith, 2017). Since this was a qualitative enquiry, this theory was not used to guide the study but aided its conceptualization (Creswell, 2009). The Gate keeping theory helped conceptualize the way fake news purveyors, editors and reporters in newsrooms filter certain news and how they decide on items to circulate and discard. This theory fitted well in conceptualizing the study of fake news spotting since reporters and editors in television act as gates opening and closing to certain news. Although fake news in form of satire is fun, propaganda, hoaxes and trolls have resulted in life threatening illnesses, injuries, death, loss of elections, and loss of property by individuals in various parts of the world.

METHODOLOGY

This study adapted the relativist-interpretivist philosophical paradigm. Creswell (2009) defines a research paradigm as a set of beliefs held by a researcher based on a set of shared assumptions, concepts, values and practices. This study adapted a qualitative approach because of several reasons; to begin with qualitative approach was consistent with the philosophical paradigm in this study; the relativist-interpretivism. Secondly, this approach allowed the voice of the subject to be heard in their natural settings as

advised by Miller and Crabtree (as cited in Hancke, 2009). Therefore, the participants' views and experiences were crucial in this approach.

A multiple case study method was also applied. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) argue that case studies investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real live context relying on multiple sources of evidence. The study was conducted in the newsrooms of two television stations in Kenya; the Nation Media Group (Nation TV) and Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC TV). These are national news television stations in Kenya and have a national reach. The target population for this study included reporters and editors from the two news television stations.

Purposive sampling specifically judgmental-purposive sampling which was non-probabilistic worked well with my qualitative approach. A Sample size of 16 participants was targeted in this study. Since this was a qualitative study that primes working with small samples, this sample size was considered large enough to generate the data required until a level of data saturation was realized. Interviews were conducted with 16 journalists from the two news television stations: reporters, digital-editors, sub-editors, chief editors, associate editors, and managing editors. Selection of these respondents was based on their roles, experience, and expertise in fake news. Data was generated through in-depth interviews conducted through variation of the sequence of questions from the interview schedule. Overt observation was also done. Different data generation techniques were used for purposes of triangulation of various data from different sources. Participating reporters and editors were physically visited for interview after making successful booking through the departments and individuals in advance.

Data from these participants was recorded with their consent for transcription purposes. Thematic data analysis involved making sense of the data, assigning categories and putting together emerging issues in to themes in an attempt to answer my research question (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The following stages of qualitative data analysis were invoked; transcription of the data, re-familiarization with the data, first phase coding, second phase coding, third phase coding and producing a report as advised by Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011).

Table 1: Symbols Used to Indicate Sources of Data

A1- Interview with Editor-in-Chief from television station A
A2- Interview with Business Editor from television station A
A3- Interview with Sports Editor from television station A
A4- Interview with Senior Online News Editor from television station A
A5- Interview with Editor General News from television station A
A6- Interview with Sports Reporter/Anchor from television station A
A7- Interview with General News Reporter/Anchor from television station A
A8- Interview with Business News Reporter from television station A
B9- Interview with Managing Editor from television station B
B10- Interview with Head of News from television station B
B11- Interview with Business Editor from television station B
B12- Interview with General News Editor from television station B
B13- Interview with News Reporter/Anchor from television station B
B14- Interview with Children News Reporter from television station B
B15- Interview with Digital Video Editor from television station B
B16- Interview with Digital Editor from television station B

Ethical considerations were also made as participants were furnished with truth, accurate and detailed information about the research. Their consent, confidentiality and anonymity were also assured.

RESULTS

Analysis of data for the question involved a combination of all data collected mainly through in-depth interviews and direct observation. In the analysis, the study inferred heavily from the literature reviewed. Data was presented in narrative form anchored by direct quotations, paraphrased statements from the research participants and summaries.

Participants in this enquiry identified various fake news spotting practices that were used in their television stations. These practices include; counterchecking and verification, natural instinct, delay tactic, online reverse search, calling the source, source credibility, structured editorial chain of gate keeping, editorial social media groups.

a) Counterchecking and Verification

Participants from both television stations had strong stand on spotting of fake news through counterchecking and verification. Reporter gathering news from the field countercheck facts and verify statements before sending news to the newsrooms for editing. Verification also involves physical visits to the source and objects of reference in news. However, participant feared that fake news may be a challenge during live reporting since there is no time for verification and counterchecking what sources say in direct on-air transmission. As A1 narrated;

You know when you bring news, general news, or whatever, you countercheck. If someone says ten people died before you go on air you are able to go to the mortuary, you go to the police, you confirm that information. The danger is live reporting (A1).

b) Judge by Instinct

Participants also used instinct to spot fake news. Through natural instinct they would judge whether certain news was factual or fake. Reliance on God and brain power helped them avoid being sued for fake news. Others would weigh the degree of fact based on experience acquired over the years. The order in which certain things happen would make them smell disinformation if forfeited. Whenever that happened, then their instinct would alert of possibility of fake news in certain stories.

We say, if you are not sure, and because, you can smell something because God has given you some brains you can smell something. If you smell, raise with me (A1).

Through instinct you can just know because there are certain things that are not supposed to happen in a certain way (B9).

c) Online Reverse Search

Use of online reverse search technology was also common with online editors. Participants would upload materials they thought was fake news online and search back to find out if it had been used before, where and when. This technology enabled journalist trace back the news presented as current and factual. Use of old news presented as current and immediate news was common where some correspondents would pick images use long time ago and position them as their work and send them to newsroom for dissemination. Unknowingly, and out of trust on in-house correspondents, editors would fall prey to these tricks and publish the material. However, reverse search technology helped trace images to the source and time. In other instances, fake news purveyors would pick images from other geographical locations and position them as images from the proximity of unsuspecting audiences.

Reverse search is basically through Google. You Google through Google image search. In the portal, if at all it was uploaded online before, you can upload the photo and do search on it and if it was used before you can get it and when it was used. It is kind of tracing back where it came from (B16).

d) Fact-check the Source

Participants also said that they spot fake news through finding facts about the source. This involved; reaching out to the source, cross checking with multiple sources and evaluating the credibility of the source.

i) Reaching Out to the Source

Participants valued direct contacts with the original source of news and the persons mentioned in a news story. Acquiring sources contacts was one of the cardinal duties of reporters sourcing for news on the ground. Editors were also keen to ask reporters on the ground to directly conduct interviews with the person involved in particular news to confirm the correct versions of the statements they held. If the editor was suspicious of fake content in news sent from the field by the reporters, they cross-examined them to find out how the story was realized. Moreover, if the editor was not satisfied by the explanations given by the reporters, they pick the contacts of the source and called them directly.

By asking the reporters before they send the report to make sure that they talk to the person whom they are reporting about and confirm before they send it to us (A3).

If possible, you have the contacts of that person so that the editor can call? (B9).

ii) Multiple Sources to Cross Check News

Another practice of spotting fake news was cross-checking news with multiple sources. Participants would rarely rely on a single source in news deemed very important or sensitive. Variation of the sources enabled journalist to cross-check for facts in information given by a certain source. Journalists therefore interviewed various sources like the government official, police and eye witnesses.

I cannot go on a single source on a story like that. So, you have to get multiple sources because if it is in Garissa there, we have that person, the government official on the ground so it's not like you just go with what the government said (B12).

iii) Evaluating the Credibility of the Source

Credibility of the source was also a key issue in spotting fake news in television stations in Kenya. Television stations have laid down procedures for evaluating the credibility of sources. Sources that were known to give fake news repeatedly do so hence the importance of having knowledge of the source. There were websites that were notorious for fake news. There were also bloggers known for purveying of fake news.

We have laid down checks and balances for every story we get; we have to get it from an established source, verify that source, we have to countercheck it after verifying (B12).

Source, is it credible or otherwise? (B13).

f) Data Management Systems and Editorial Social Media Groups

Television stations had opened editorial social media groups for purposes of verifying authenticity of news. Participants informed that all members of the editorial from the reporters to the editors to the editor-in-chief had membership to the group. There were also Data Management Systems (DMS) that television newsrooms had acquired to aid

group verification of incoming news. Whenever a reporter of journalist came across a piece of news information that they were not sure of its authenticity or claim they put it in the social media group and the DMS for other journalist to preview and assist in fact finding. Reporters and editors could verify news posted in the group and inform others that it was fake news hence drop it.

...these stories that it is an SMS is sent to you, a tweet, you see something on social media and you carry it, so we said, the first entry point is who has received the information? It can be a reporter, an editor or whatever. So, you put it in the can. We use something called DMS (Document Management System). So, you get information you go to the system, you put it there or you go to our WhatsApp group for newsroom, you put, I have received this information, kindly check (A1).

g) Delay Tactic

Participants also revealed that they used delay tactics to ensure that they could spot elements of fake news in stories that looked very interesting. Editors would sometimes stop reporters from going on air with stories that looked newsworthy when they were suspicious. However, most of the participants were not worried of the speed of news and were willing to be the last in breaking news than the first with fake news. Participants opined that fake news destroyed the reputation of their TV stations hence the need to take time in verifying news.

We have said you better be the last to go live with information because we are in competition in broadcasting. I better be the last... but I get it right? ... not even right but be factual (A1).

There is worry about speed but facts are sacred (B10).

DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that television stations had put in place both proactive and reactive measures to spot fake news. To this edge, TV stations had a variety of spotting practices to fake news that guided reporters and editors. However, I realised that fake news spotting practices in television stations in Kenya were primarily informal and unanchored on formal documents like editorial policies. For instance, practices like counterchecking and verification, use of natural instinct, delay tactics, online reverse search, calling the sources, editorial social media groups (WhatsApp), and evaluating source's credibility.

According to B9, not all stories got to the green colour code which implied that a news story had passed through all the editors to the managing editor or editor-in-chief. As B9 informed, most of the TV bulletins go on air at colour yellow which indicates that it has only received first editing and it is not "sensitive" or very "important". These findings affirmed those of a 2019 study on media accountability policies and practices. In their qualitative study, Obuya and Ong'ondo (2019) found that although media houses had various accountability policies and practices, their implementation was weak and inconsistent. These findings also contravened the recommendations of Berinsky (2017) that, media experts like reporters and editors should do listings of data experts that they could consult in case of news information whose truthfulness or falseness they were not sure of before dissemination. It is important to make several consultations about all news that comes to the newsroom before disseminating it. Rating some news as of low importance hence not editing it well creates room for fake news to permeate the editorial system.

Findings that TV stations used a chain of gate keepers to verify news aligns to the gate keeping theory. According to the gate keeping theory, it is important that news go through structured stages of editing and verification. Since human beings have social, political, economic and religious inclinations, processing of information to spot fake news may be varied and biased. This affirms Zaryan's findings of a 2017 qualitative study titled "Truth and Trust: How Audiences are making sense of fake news" (Zaryan, 2017). Zaryan explored the relationship that news media and trust had in individual audiences. Through her qualitative study with a sample of 12 transnational participants, Zaryan found that audiences interpreted the term fake news based on levels of facts, political inclinations and ethical perspectives. We can therefore infer that various journalists should be engaged in verifying similar news to win the process of personal biases in spotting fake news.

Verifying the source was good practice in spotting fake news as Bluemle (2018) informs. This affirmed assertion by Berinsky (2017) that, news television stations could develop pointers to sources. Berinsky (2017) further pointed out to the fact that, source pointers were important verification agents that enables journalists trace back the sources of information and verify their originality before picking the news. Evaluation of sources to understand their intention for giving out certain news was also a key factor in spotting fake news. The practice of evaluating the source was affirmed by Verstraete, Bambauer and Bambauer (2017) who assert that communicators could identify fake news by looking at whether the author intended to misinform, and whether the motive of the misinformation was financial. These findings on counterchecking the sources intentions to spot fake news arguments the findings of a March 2018 study by Jessica Johnson published on, "The Self-Radicalization of White Men: "Fake news" and the Affective Networking of Paranoia" (Johnson, 2018, p.1). As realized in this study, Johnson's study found out that rather than the individual pathology, paranoia was an ecology that was affectively networked by state and non state actors resulting in processes of digital communication in a way that radicalization of white men ended up in physical and structural violence (Johnson, 2018).

The study also realised that journalist in television stations in Kenya used natural instinct in distinguishing fake news from real news. Reporters and editors spotted fake news through instinct. Although the practice of using natural instinct to spot fake news was largely informal and un-supported by policy documents from television stations, it was common. Natural instinct enables human beings make judgement on certain sensitive issues. Findings on intuitive evaluation of fake news echo those of Graaumanns in a 2017 qualitative study of, "Fake news in the online world: An experimental study on credibility evaluations of fake news depending on information spotting" (Graaumanns, 2017). In this study, Graaumanns came up with two ways of spotting information, "type I intuitive spotting and type II deliberative spotting" (Graaumanns, 2017, p.4). He realized that there was lower credibility evaluation at ($p < .05$) when people processed information in an intuitive way compared to deliberative spotting (Graaumanns, 2017). This implies that the practice of spotting fake news through instinct that was used widely in television stations in Kenya could not yield better results compared to deliberative spotting. Therefore, we infer that fake news infiltrate to the screen as TV journalist use instinct to spot fake news in Kenya. The facts that Graaumann was a positivist while I am relativist, used a quantitative approach while this study adapted a qualitative approach but we ended up with similar findings is informative on how use of instinct in judging fake news leads to lower credibility evaluation of fake news. The practice of using instinct was also informal and unsupported by policy documents like the editorial policy hence no evidence of use or reference (Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2019).

Television journalist in Kenya also used delay tactics to spot fake news. This was another informal practice of spotting fake news as seen with the interviews with A1, B9 and B10. It is important to take time to verify news when spotting fake news. Television stations and journalists had been charged in court for fake news as they competed to break unverified news first. These findings also supported those of Graumans (2017) that, speed was a determining factor on whether a journalist would use the central route (deliberative) or the peripheral (intuitive) route in identifying fake news. As his study found out, the current study affirmed that speedy practice of spotting fake news results in errors and is not reliable.

Online reverse search was another fake news spotting practice in use in television stations in Kenya. This involved tracking back the route and roots of a particular fake news. Tracing back the source of news is important in identifying whether it is fake or factual. Fake news follows certain online algorithms that can be traced back (Bluemle, 2018). Since only few people could do this, most of the fake news in image form spread fast and was difficult to spot. This happened to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general elections in the US where fake news letters were shared by opponents and received more views than real news (Silverman, 2016). In Kenya a fake birth certificate that indicated that Barrack Obama was born in Mombasa also made rounds in social media (Workman, 2016). Online reverse search of images helped in spotting fake news that came in form of online images.

CONCLUSION

Television stations in Kenya appreciate the growing demand for spotting fake news across the globe and have put in place varied practices. However, the practices of spotting fake news by TV stations are highly inconsistent. Although, TV journalists are able to identify fake news, some still bypass the gate keepers resulting in loss of jobs, apologies, court charges and fines. Live reporting and stage-managed fake news are the new frontiers for fake news and are a great threat to the trust of journalism profession in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For TV stations to consistently spot fake news, the editorial boards of management in consultation with journalists should come up with standardized practices and anchor them on editorial policies. Journalists should also be trained to handle modern frontiers of fake news like stage managed fake news and live reporting.

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