Online Fake News and the Resurgence of the Magic Bullet Theory: A Study of Media Propaganda during the 2019 Nigeria General Elections

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Abstract:
The paradigm stating that (media) propaganda is powerful enough to spur audiences (the electorates) into acting in ways that are beneficial to the propagandists, has been subject to controversy since the 1930s. In effect, many studies in mass communication have sought – and succeeded – to show the weaknesses of this "one-step communication flow" model/theory. Such studies have demonstrated that the media could not have the immense powers (to do and undo) as assumed by proponents of the Magic Bullet theory. Using secondary sources and critical observations, this paper shows how the magic bullet theory continues to be a relevant interpretative tool for discussing the behavior of media audiences during election period. The paper particularly argues that the impactful use of media propaganda (particularly fake news on social media) during Nigeria's 2019 elections has demonstrated that the Hypodermic Needle theory continue to be a relevant theory in mass media studies. In effect, during the election, it was observed that members of the main parties in competition as well as aides of contesting political candidates used fake news on social media to tremendously influence the electoral judgments of Nigerian voters. Internet-based rumors of Buhari's demise for instance had such great influence that the APC devoted serious efforts during its campaigns to debunk the allegations.

Keywords: Media Propaganda, Magic Bullet Theory, Hypodermic Needle, Nigeria 2019 Elections, Behaviorism, Mass Media Theories

Introduction

Since the 1930s, behaviorism has palpably influenced mass communication theorization and practice. The behaviorist movement has, in effect, made most psychologists, sociologists, media anthropologists and early communication theorists to view human beings as rational creatures whose actions are largely determined by external rather than internal/mental stimuli (as mentalist psychologists had earlier argued). The movement has equally spurred academics to believe that people are "uniformly controlled by their biologically based 'instincts' and that, they (people) generally react more or less uniformly to whatever 'stimuli' came along". Early communication scholars in particular used behaviorism to argue that the media are providing some of the key stimuli that trigger immediate responses. These early communication scholars illustrated their position with the aid of a large body of evidence, part of which

was the Nazi propaganda films of 1930s leveraged to spread anti-Semitism in Germany. In effect, the powerful and ugly images of the Jews presented in Nazi films presumably had the effects of eliciting audiences' negative attitudes towards the Jews. German audiences' repeated exposure to these images was believed to have the potential to condition them (the audiences) to have negative perceptions and attitudes towards the Jews. Similar to the 1930s Nazi films, the famous "Panic Broadcast" of 1938[1] (otherwise called the "War of the Worlds" broadcast came to justify communication theories anchored on behaviorism.

Thus, in line with the behaviorist movement, many early communication theorists advanced theoretical postulations which recognize the all-might of political propaganda, particularly political propaganda's immense power to penetrate most people's defenses and predispose them to adopt behavioral patterns useful to the propagandists. One of such theoretical postulations is the magic bullet theory (otherwise called the "hypodermic needle" theory), which stipulates that (media) propaganda is powerful enough to spur audiences into acting in ways that are beneficial to the propagandists [1, p.82]. As indicated by its name, the Magic Bullet Theory is a metaphor made to represent the powerful effects of mass media messages on audiences. The theory graphically assumes that mass media messages are like bullets fired from mass media's gun. The theory also uses the metaphor of the syringe to imply that mass media messages are like the fluid of a syringe injected into the brains of (passive) audiences. Such injected fluids are bound to determine the behavior of media audiences in a more or less uniform way. As explained by Themes, the "Hypodermic Needle Theory implies that the media has the power to inject highly influential messages directly into passive and susceptible audiences. Since those audiences have no other sources of information by which to compare the media's messages, they have no choice but to act on those messages" [2, p.65]. The main tenets of this theory include the following:

    i.   Human react uniformly to stimuli.
    ii.   Media messages are directly "injected" into the "bloodstream" of the audiences (the population) as fluid from a syringe.
    iii.   Media messages are designed with the intention to achieve well desired responses
    iv.   The effects of mass media messages are immediate, automatic and powerful enough to push the audiences to adopt or change specific patterns of behaviours.
    v.   The public is passive – that is powerless to escape media's influence.

Although backed by a considerable body of evidence, the Magic Bullet Theory is rooted more in assumptions than in empirical understandings. A number of studies have, as early as 1953, successfully disproved it. One of such studies is Paul Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog's 1940 work titled "*The People's Choice*" [3]. This work examined the role of the media in the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and actually revealed that inter-personal channels of communication rather than media-based campaigns were more influential in shaping voters' behaviors during the election. In line with the results of this study, Lazarsfeld and Herzog introduced the double-flow communication theory. Similarly, Hadley Cantril conducted a study on the famous "Panic Broadcast" and claimed that audiences' reactions to the broadcast were diverse and largely informed by the situational and attitudinal attributes of the listeners [4]. Cantril thus claimed that media could not have played an all-powerful role in the behavior of audiences who were exposed to the "Panic Broadcast". Besides the countless studies which have sought and succeeded to disprove it, the Magic Bullet Theory has many other weaknesses, some of which include the facts that (a) it is too simplistic and (b) it faultily overlooks the fact that audiences are more sophisticated or complex [4].

In view of the aforementioned, the Magic Bullet Theory has for some years now been subject to controversy. A good number of communication scholars considered it unpopular, doubtful, if not misleading [3-9]. And this is not surprising as theories are generally never perfect. As noted by O'Sullivan et al, the tendency in mass communication research has been that, old models are always "soon discarded or modified" [7, p.3]. Theories and models are "inevitably incomplete, oversimplified and involved some concealed assumptions. There is certainly no model that is suitable for all purposes and all levels of analysis" [7, p.3]. Following this truism, the Magic Bullet theory has in many academic quarters been discarded to the benefit of what is technically referred to as "limited effect theories"

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[1] The "Panic Broadcast" is an incident which happened in the US in 1938 in which, a radio broadcast purporting that some Martians have landed in New Jersey (USA) were viciously attacking humans had profound effect on the seasonally behaviour of American audiences. The broadcast elicited admeasured fears among the audiences culminating in Millions of them (audiences) adopting "absurd" survival strategies. Some fled their homes and cities while others built large reserves of foodstuff in prevision of austerity. Fear also pushed many to frantically solicit the attention of services such as local police stations, hospitals and fire-fighters.

(notably the Two-Flow Communication Model and the Agenda Setting Theory among others). These limited effect theories all reject the all-might of mass media and tend to explore the power and uses of the mass media with some profound nuances. However, in spite of its clear unpopularity, the Magic Bullet Theory has continued to be considered or given credence by a number of scholars. Phenomena such as celebrity-based advertisement and fan following waves have come to give some credence to the Magic Bullet theory. As noted by Gul, the Magic Bullet theory has recently made a resurgence in the sense that more and more studies have demonstrated that people tend to believe media contents, irrespective of the report of these media [10]. As he puts it, the Magic Bullet theory is "**an odd mix, but it can help to explain why at least some people simply believe whatever they are told" [10, p.3].** This is to an extent true to the effects the Nigerian media had on some Nigerian audiences during the recent Nigeria's 2019 general elections. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which this position is plausible through a critical observation and a systematic review of relevant literature. The paper is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a conceptual framework including the definitions two terms: fake news, and propaganda. The second section reviews previous studies done on the role of media propaganda in the election of presidents. The third part examines the role media propaganda has often played in the elections of Nigerian presidents; while the fourth and last section explores the specific case of the use of social media-based propaganda and fake news in the Nigeria's 2019 elections.

Material and methods

This discourse is a conceptual paper. It is based on the descriptive research design. By definition, descriptive research works seek to examine the state of a phenomenon at a given period o time or in a specific geographical area. They can involve the exploration of opinions about the subject under study. In this paper, the authors sought to describe the state of fake news use during elections in Nigeria. The paper relied on two methods of data collection. The first is documentary analysis which consists of extracting relevant information/data from secondary sources and using them to buttress observations made on a specific topic. In this study, the authors considered a variety of secondary sources for such documentary analysis. These sources include books, book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, newspaper articles, encyclopedias and online contents among others. In addition to the documentary analysis, critical observations were used. This critical observation consists in using senses to collect data.

Results and discussion

The Magic Bullet Theory and Media Propaganda during Presidential Elections in Nigeria

As earlier mentioned, there is a strong link between the magic bullet theory and media propaganda during (presidential) elections or other major political events in specific countries. In effect, most – nay all – studies that have tested or sought to justify the magic bullet theories have been based on media propaganda during election periods or in times of political crises. Furthermore, the terms "Magic Bullet" and "Hypodermic Needle" originate from Harold Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* and Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes*. These two books (among many others) present propaganda as magic bullet and hypodermic needle by which opinions and attitudes could be controlled. In this section, attention is given to two key things: (1) the nexus between the magic bullet theory and media propaganda during elections and (2) showing how such nexus have been established by previous studies devoted to the Nigerian experience.

By definition, propaganda is a form of persuasion generally aided by the media. It is most often aimed at furthering a specific personal, political or business agenda by evoking an emotional or obligable response from masses. Harold Lasswell defines it as "the management of mass communications for power purposes" [11, p.3]. Thus, propaganda could be viewed as a type of persuasion deployed to influenced people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. It is the spreading of ideas, information or rumors in view of helping or injuring a socio-political institution, a cause or a person. In some cases, propaganda becomes a scientific process susceptible to influence a whole nation. This attempt at influencing the whole nation often hinges on psychologically manipulating sub-cultures and individual citizens within a polity. No doubt Derrig notes that: "propaganda does not communicate ideas to a collective citizenry for the sake of persuasion. From a position of power, it bears down on the individual as a solitary bundle of fears, anxieties, vices and uncertainties. It tries to achieve collective action through disunity" [12, p.16].

Propaganda seems more evident in times of war but its use permeates our quotidian lives. Such use is often subtle, taking the form of less obvious ways to influence people's attitudes. Another context in

which propaganda is prominently used is electoral period during which political candidate fiercely compete for popularity and votes. In such a context (notably presidential elections), media propaganda is aimed at influencing a whole nation through more or less un-Catholic means such as distortions, fake news, conspiracy theories and rumors among others. A case in point is Donald Trump's alleged use of fake news and data mining-driven propaganda to win the 2016 American presidential elections. One of the thousand fake news alleged to have boost Trump's electoral chances is Pope Francis' endorsement of his candidacy. This story reached a vast majority of Americans within and outside the US and seriously influenced their electoral judgments [12-13]. In an empirical study, Bovet and Makse illustrate how Trump's use of fake news-driven propaganda enabled him sway the hearts and win the minds of the American masses during the 2016 presidential elections [14]. They note particularly that "while top influencers spreading traditional center and left-leaning news largely influenced the activity of Clinton supporters during the election, this causality was reversed for the fake news: "the activity of Trump supporters influences the dynamics of the top fake news spreaders" [14, p.1]. This same fake news characterized the 2020 US presidential elections. The Republican Party, led by Donald Trump spread series of fake news that caused baseless agitations by Republican sympathizers during the elections. A good example is the series of baseless rumors Donald Trump spread against Biden to discredit the vote counting particularly in swing States. In Pennsylvania for instance, many residents received text messages stipulating radical liberals and Democrats are planning to conduct voter fraud and steal the election. These messages spurred people into rallying on the streets. A similar situation occurred in Arizona and Michigan where conspiracy theories and rumors spread by Republicans led to the #sharpieGate movement. Through the movement, some social media users claimed that ballots voted with the Sharpie pens would not be counted. Although later clarified by election officials, the social media post fuelling the #SharrpieGate movement led to the harassment of polling station workers on the bases of misinformation and disinformation. Corroborating this observation, the Center for Digital Society underlines the Magic Bullet dimension of the fake news spread by Donald Trump and the Republican Party and their sympathizers thus:

> He [Donald Trump] repeatedly tweeted many disinformation and misinformation in his personal Twitter account that were used to rally his followers to protest on Biden's win in the election. The infamous Trump tweet "STOP THE COUNT" was also used as a basis for his supporters to disseminate online misinformation on Democrats trying to "steal" the election. With the high-stakes nature of the election and Trump's involvement in circulating fake news, social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter took extra steps to limit the amount of fake news being spread by adding fact-checking features to the tweets and labels on deceptive posts. [15, p.13]

Other empirical studies devoted to use of media propaganda and the Magic Bullet effect of such propaganda during presidential elections have been carried out in Turkey [10], Russia [16], Columbia [17] and Hungary [18] among others. The above-mentioned studies indicate that there is a resurgence of the one-step communication flow – which has much in common with the Magic Bullet theory.

The use of media propaganda to influence the attitudes and opinions of the Nigerian electorate has been observed during presidential elections in Nigeria since 1999. A number of studies (by Nigerian scholars) have sought to demonstrate this fact. Oyenuga observes that social media assisted propaganda was a popular feature of political parties' electoral campaigns during the 2015 elections [19]. The technology (propaganda) was particularly seen in parties' use of the social media to spread fake news and hate speech, in view of spurring the Nigerian electorate into adopting specific behaviors during the electoral period. Propaganda via social media was actually "an ultimate tool, utilized to launch the 2015 presidential campaign mechanism into the public domain to gain attention" [20]. In the same line of thought, Abdulgaffar and Aishat contend that media propaganda was at its peak during the 2015 Nigeria general elections as "the PDP took advantage of its opportunities as the ruling party to spread negative messages about the opposition. However, while this large and well-orchestrated propaganda have been found successful in the past, the dominance of the PDP in the propagandistic war of the last election failed to produce the desired result" [21, p.87].

Thus, media propaganda during electoral period has caught the attention of some Nigerian scholars. Unfortunately, most authors have limited themselves to describe the nature of this media propaganda without devoting serious attention to the effectiveness of such propaganda. You therefore hardly find studies that have focused on the effect of such propaganda on the electorates' behavior during the

elections. The only study available (to us) on the issue tends to negate the Magic Bullet theory. This study by Sanusi et al argues that media propaganda did not really influence the voting pattern of the electorate during the 2011 general elections in Nigeria [22]. The study also demonstrates that other factors such as peer groups, religion, ethnicity, family influence and political parties, were more responsible for voters' behavior during the elections.

Role of Online-Based Fake News and Propaganda in Nigeria 2019 Presidential Elections

Before delving into the role of online based fake news in the Nigeria 2019 elections, it will be important, from the outset, to explore social media penetration in Nigeria and show how such penetration of the digital technology has facilitated various politics-related industries in Nigeria. In line with this, the present section is divided into two sub-parts. The first sub-part examines social media penetration in Nigeria while the second focuses on the role of online fake news and propaganda in the Nigerian 2019 presidential election.

Social Media Penetration in Nigeria

Since the years 2000, social media penetration in Nigeria has, like in most African countries, remarkably increased. According to Internet Stats, Nigeria has enjoyed an Internet growth of 62.93% from 2000 to 2020 [23]. Another global telecommunication observer NoiPolls similarly reveals that Internet penetration in Nigeria is averagely high. It states that 61% of the Nigerian population has access to the Internet [24]. Given that the Nigerian population is over 150 million heads, this Internet penetration could be considered averagely high. Internet penetration is higher, if not mainly accentuated in urban areas; also, the most used social media in the country include Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp [25]. According to Statcounter [26], Facebook is the most dominant or most used social media network in the country, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Social Media Stats in Nigeria from December 2020 to December 2021 (in percent)

Rank	Social Media	Percentage of Users
1st	Facebook	83.29
2nd	Pinterest	3.22
3rd	Youtude	2.72
4th	Twitter	5.65
5th	Instagram	4.57
6th	LinkedIn	0.31

(Compiled from Statcounter (2022)

Social media explosion in Nigeria has revolutionized almost all human industries and enabled the emergence of various digital cultures, ranging from hashtagging and e-commerce to digital diplomacy and e-government. One of the industries that have seriously been revolutionised by the social media is politics, particularly political activism. Concretely, the social media have provided a fertile ground for political activism, online political propaganda and political advertising particularly during election periods in the country. Most Nigerian political parties and individual politicians have created Facebook or Twitter account through which they share political information, propaganda and strategic news in a bid to shape public opinion and ultimately win the hearts of the electorates. This political culture – the use of social media based political propaganda in electioneering period – started being perceptible in the country in 2011. But it became more accentuated during the 2015 presidential elections. Many observers even observe that the growing use of the social media to disseminate political advertising, conduct political propaganda and seek the votes or patronage of the electorates has ameliorated the conduct of elections in Nigeria as from 2011.

However, in spite of the key role they play in the success of elections in the country, social media have, in many instances, been abused by Nigerian politicians. They have in many cases facilitated the spread of spurious rumours, harmful calumnies (against rival political candidate or party) and fake news among others [27]. This development will be addressed in the light of the 2019 general election and in greater details in the subsequent section of this essay.

Online Fake News and the Nigeria 2019 Presidential Elections

Media propaganda during the 2019 Nigeria general election took various forms. One of its most notorious forms was fake news, particularly spread through the social networks in view of influencing

Nigerian voters' attitudes during the election. It is so far hard to find scholarly definitions of the term "fake news". However, most authors who use the concept view it as the act of generating and spreading false information, photo(s) or video(s) for the purpose of confusing, misinforming or influencing the judgments of the general public [15, 28]. Fake news is also described as stories that are entirely made up or shared out of context. The effects of this fake news on the Nigerian electorate during this period were really immense. They illustrate the destructive power of the social media (the media in general) and even bring to mind the magic bullet theory of media effect. This will be illustrated in the following paragraphs of this section.

The spread of fake news during 2019 electoral period was not a completely new thing given the fact that preceding Nigeria elections have witnessed this typology of propaganda. If there is any new development it should be the fact that fake news (as a form of media/political propaganda) seems to have reached an unprecedented level putting the Nigerian democracy in serious danger. This observation should actually be given some credence if one considers the fact that one of the most misleading fake news circulated particularly on social media before and during the 2019 electoral period was the rumor of the demise of incumbent Mohammadu Buhari. This rumor had profound effects in the minds of the Nigerian electorates; so much so that, much of APC's efforts during the 2019 presidential campaign was aimed at debunking this particular rumor. In many of his addresses to the electorates during the campaign, President Mohammadu Buhari found himself compelled to re-assure Nigerians that he is not a clone. One of his tweets published during the campaign reads "This is the real me" [28]. The tweet goes not to dismissing allegations of Buhari's death as "ignorant rumors". The APC did not, however, only suffer the asphyxiating effects of fake news. Some of its members actively weaponized it in various attempts to sway the hearts of the electorate. A case in point is president Buhari's special assistant on social media, Lauretta Onochie who spread false claims on Twitter that president Buhari had built a road that was actually in Rwanda. A claim which, like most typical tweets attracted thousands of likes and re-tweets by sympathizers.

The APC was however not the only party affected by fake news during the 2019 general elections. The leader of the opposition party PDP also suffered the effect of various attempts by its rivals to discredit him through fake news. A case in point is the false claim Lauretta Onochie (Buhari' close aid) made on Twitter purporting that opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar shared food and money in one of his campaign rallies. Onochie's tweet was an image of food packs with money attached to them. The image was accompanied by a phrase saying: "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday". The claim was investigated by a coalition of journalists and found false. Onochie issued an apology but research is yet to ascertain the effects such a tweet has had on the Nigerian electorates during the elections.

The proliferation of fake news on social media did not only affect prominent political candidates. Even small candidates and a number of new entrants saw their reputation tarnished by fake news. An egregious example is pop star-turned politician Bankole Wellington, aka Banky W, whom a tweet presented as very corrupt. This tweet specifically purported that Bankole has received bribe. Bankole gives his impressions and describes his predicament thus: "It was completely false, no proof just a random tweet and in 10 minutes, we had a thousand retweets of people saying 'yes! I knew he was corrupt!' ... Nobody is looking for proof, it's not about what's true anymore." [28]

In the light of Bankole's complaint, it could rightly be argued that the effects of fake news on the electorates bring to mind the magic bullet theory. In most cases, fake news is absorbed by the audiences as gospel truth. These audiences often tend to be uncritical and to just accept whatsoever is told them on the social media. No doubt Adavize observes that "everyone who has read news on social media would probably fall victim to fake news [30]. Even the mainstream media are not spared. In an attempt to remain relevant in the face of the obvious threat posed by social media to their very survival, they fall victim to fake news". Adavize adds that:

> The frightening aspect of fake news on social media is that, while it travels faster than the truth, the vast majority of people take them as prophetic revelation especially when it serves their very interests without questioning the validity. Far from the truth. Fake news is a poison that divides society, blinds the mind, reinforces sentiments and plunges society into unending conflicts that hinder development and create unstable global community. [30, p.34]

The Internet and the social media are such loose media that any information that is disseminated through them was supposed to be digested with a pitch of salt. In effect, citizen journalism has given the opportunity to anybody to be capable of publishing just anything on social media and the Internet [31]. Such libertarianism was supposed to compel Nigerian internautes (Nigerian electorates) to apply high level of media literacy when they consumed information circulated online in connection with Nigerian elections or political candidates. Unfortunately, the tendency has been for Nigerian electorates to uncritically believe whatever information that I in line with their political interests or suspicions. In the light of this, it could be argued that the pertinence of the hypodermic Needle theory was somehow established by the attitudes of Nigerian internautes during the 2019 elections.

Conclusion

The Hypodermic Needle theory of the media has been criticized on various grounds two of which are (1) its simplistic nature and (2) the fact that it seems too overlook the complex and highly sophisticated nature of the audiences. The theory has specifically been criticized on the ground that it tends to faultily view the audiences as very passive and malleable by media messages. In spite of the numerous criticism made against it, the Hypodermic Needle theory has been given some credence in recent years in line with a number of cyber cultures. Incidences of the propagandist use of data mining and fake news on social media particularly during election periods have come to instead justify the Hypodermic Needle theory. Issues such as fake news based propaganda have come to show how destructive and powerful the media could be, particularly during electoral period. Audiences in both big democracies (such as the US) failed democracies (such as Nigeria) have not been immune of the effects of fake news propaganda. In brief, new forms of media propaganda (particularly those that are aided by the Internet and the social media) have come to justify assumptions that recognize the "omnipotence" of the media – that is the belief that the media can do and undo (the magic bullet theory).

In this paper the author has sought to show how the magic bullet theory continues to be a relevant interpretative tool for discussing the behavior of media audiences during election period. The author particularly argued that the impactful use of media propaganda (particularly fake news on social media) during Nigeria's 2019 elections has demonstrated that the Hypodermic Needle theory continue to be a relevant theory in mass media studies. In effect, during the election, it was observed that members of the main parties in competition as well as aides of political candidates used fake news on social media to tremendously influence the electorates. Internet-based rumors of Buhari's demise for instance had such great influence that the APC devoted serious efforts during its campaigns to debunk the allegations.

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