

Investigating Public Perception of Government Intervention and Regulation in Addressing Misinformation Spread on Social Media

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Abstract

The growing spread of misinformation on social media has become a topic of major global concern, influencing public opinion, political decisions, and health behaviour. In Nigeria, the fast paced dissemination of wrong information has resulted in debates circled around the place of government in regulating the spread of misinformation on social media. The survey research method was used, respondents included 400 residents of Etsako West LGA of Edo State within the age range of 18 and above. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using simple percentage and frequency tables. Findings from the study revealed that while the public acknowledges the dangers associated with the spread of misinformation, a majority of respondents opposed government regulation due to fears censorship and loss of digital freedom. It is recommended that instead of government placing strict rules, they should instead operate with transparency, promote media literacy campaigns, and collaborate with credible fact checking organizations. This would help balance misinformation control with the preservation of democratic freedoms and digital rights.

Keywords: Misinformation, Social Media, Regulation, Government, Censorship, Media Literacy

Introduction

As time changes and the digital era keeps evolving, social media has come to stay and since it's existence till date, the role which the social media has played in influencing public discuss and providing platforms for people to share and receive information cannot be over estimated. Social media plays an effective role in political participation, as social media trends, messages and discourse often motivate Nigerian youths to vote (Olley et al., 2024). Hence it is evident that social media plays an important role in society. However, despite the positive impact of the media on society and the world as a whole, there are certain loopholes that serve as major threats in the social media atmosphere and one major issue is the quick spread of misinformation which has over the years been an issue of major concern as it has served as a challenge to news credibility and informed decision making just to mention a few.

The rapid spread of wrong and misleading information on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and X has resulted in a major concern about how the vast spread of misinformation has played a negative role in society in certain aspects such as decision

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making, health behaviors, democratic processes and public opinion.

The issue of misinformation has become a major issue that affects the integrity of electoral processes globally, Nigeria inclusive. Often times when electoral campaigns take place, disinformation is often used as a tool to mislead voters, influence the opinion of the public and invalidate opponents. (Olley and Eloke, 2024)

To further expand on the dangers of misinformation, in the year 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, there was a wide spread of false and misinforming information going round various social media platforms as regarding the virus, the vaccines and false was of preventing the virus and this resulted in confusion, people taking part in wrong modes of treatment and hesitation. A particular unverified information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was the use of salt water to bath that was spreading like wild fire on WhatsApp. According to a study by Allington et al. (2020), the study found that people who depended more on social media for information as regarding the pandemic were most vulnerable in believing conspiracies surrounding COVID-19, and this undoubtedly in a way affected their health behaviors.

Now while it is important and true that the intervention and regulation of government in addressing the spread of false information might go a long way in curbing the spread of misinformation, it has become a major topic for debate whether or not it is a good idea and understanding the various opinions people hold as regarding this issue is important so that effective strategies to combat misinformation would be developed while also respecting democratic values and the opinion of the public on the issue.

Vosoughi (2022) argues that government efforts to curb the spread of wrong information must be carefully balanced with the protection of the democratic freedoms and the prevention of online dangers. In like manner, according to Bartlett (2023), government intervention could either be effective, or poorly structured and as a result infringe on the freedom of speech.

While the reason behind this process might come from a genuine point in order to bring about regulatory measures that would bring down the issue of misinformation among the general public, the involvement of government in regulating this issue seem to be controversial. In a survey conducted by Mitchell and Walker (2021) it was discovered that at least about 48% of U.S. adults were in agreement with government action on curbing the spread of false information online despite the fact that it may cut down on their information freedom. This alone shows that the issue of the spread of misinformation has now become a matter of public concern unlike that past times.

However, despite the fact that Americans acknowledge the threat associated with the spread misinformation, they seem to prefer solutions that does not include government regulation and interventions as they would rather stand behind the process of self-regulation by social media platforms, and this shows that there is a reasonable amount of people value the mitigation of misinformation and the preservation of free speech (Su, 2024).

The discuss surrounding government intervention in regulating misinformation on social media is many-sided with various opinions, that involves a carefully thought plan to make a proper balance between the protection of public interest and maintaining fundamental freedom.

Objective of Study

The aim of this study is to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine whether society is welcome to the involvement of government in helping to regulate the spread of misinformation on social media platforms.
2. To identify elements that influence people to support government intervention.

3. To explore how government regulations affect peoples trust on information credibility on social media.

Research Questions

1. How do individuals react to government playing a part in the regulation of misinformation on social media platforms?
2. What are the factors that influence public reaction in terms of supporting or opposing government inclusion in intervening in the regulation of social media contents?
3. In what way can different regulatory strategies influence public trust towards social media platforms and government intervention?

Literature Review

The Landscape of Misinformation in Nigeria

The growth and evolution of the social media atmosphere has over the years experienced a significant amount of change and also influenced the sharing and dissemination of information as well as it's consumption. Although the evolving digital landscape has played major positive roles in the information process, it also has some down sides to it such as the wild spread of wrong information and this is an issue that has affected public opinion as well as and policy decisions globally (Okon, 2021). Take for instance, in Nigeria over the years, misinformation has influenced certain major factors such as political discourse, health behavior, and public trust in governance, and this among other reasons makes regulatory intervention a subject of debate (Adesina, 2022).

This falls in line with the first objective of of this study which seeks to examine societies acceptance of governments involvement in regulating the issue of misinformation. Studies have shown that misinformation tends to flourish in societies where there is little to no digital literacy, and the ability to fact check information is limited (Eze, 2020). In fact, it is safe to say that the Nigerian social media atmosphere is characterized by sensationalism, especially during election processes, where by misinforming campaigns are used to influence the opinion of the public and this can be identified as one major reason as to why there is a growing concern as regarding the involvement of government intervention in fighting against the spread of false and misleading information (Okon 2021).

This concern falls in line with the second objective of this research: identifying key factors that influence citizens support or opposition to government regulating the spread of misinformation on social media.

Also, in line with Adesina's (2022) argument, the spread of misleading information on social media is often used as a weapon to cause social unrest. Based on his study in his paper: "Misinformation, social unrest, and the Nigerian digital space: A case study of #EndSARS", the spread of misinforming information during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria revealed that wrong reports spread fast and in the process affects public perception and, in some cases, increase tensions between protesters and security agencies and the study recommended that media literacy campaigns should be hosted in order to sensitize people and serve as a preventive measure to mitigate the spread of false information rather than government control.

Global Perspective on Government Regulation

Globally, based on research the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives cannot be over stated. Also, in line with the third objective of this study, which seeks to explore the relationship between government regulation and the trust of the public, the role of social media regulations in Germany and France, shows that government intervention, when

properly structured, can regulate the spread of misinformation without infringing on free speech (Iyanda, 2023).

These findings identify areas where regulatory system in Nigeria could be improved and made to work if eventually the government should gets involved in the regulation process of misinformation spread on social media in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

According to Adebayo (2022) about 68% of the respondents are victims of false information on a daily bases. Furthermore, the study showed that misinformation to a large extent influences public perception, especially when it affects political and health-related issues.

Also, Musa and Ibrahim (2023) examined the role of WhatsApp and Facebook in spreading misinformation about COVID-19 and based on the findings of their work, it was discovered that misinformation on social media affected vaccine uptake in Nigeria, with at least 45% of respondents stating they refused to get vaccinated as a result of the misleading posts and information they came across online. Based on this grounds, the authors recommend improved digital literacy and public awareness campaigns to fight against the spread of misinformation.

Ogunleye (2024) examined the effects of Nigeria's attempt at regulating social media, in line with the proposed Social Media Bill. This study shows that not less than 53% of Nigerians support government intervention in curbing the issue of fake news, the other 47% showed worry over possible censorship and political misuse of regulations, this study points out the thin line between fighting against misinformation and preserving the freedom of speech.

Also, a study by Bartlett (2023) evaluated the regulatory strategies in the European Union, and concluded that self-regulation by social media companies, alongside legal oversight, is the most effective approach to fighting against the spread of misinformation on social media.

Theoretical Framework

The theories that would be used for this study are the Agenda Setting theory and the Social Responsibility theory of the press, both of which provide insights into the role of the media, government, as well as public discourse in addressing misinformation.

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory which can be traced back to the book of Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* in 1922 and explored the role of mass media in influencing public perceptions paved way for subsequent developments of the agenda setting theory by others like McCombs and Shaw who in the year 1972 asserted that the media has a crucial role to play in molding public perception by controlling the topics that are of importance and attracts public interest (Safran, 2024).

From this, it is safe to say that if misinformation is widely spread through the aid of social media, it can influence what people see as important issues, thereby distorting reality. In relation to this study, the theory explains how wrong information spreads fast and in the process influencing public discourse and political attitudes among other factors.

Furthermore, the theory is relevant to this study because it helps to clarify why the public might be skeptical about government intervention, meaning that if media narratives suggest that regulations are politically motivated, there is a tendency for public opposition to increase.

In addition to this, the theory highlights why misinformation regulation is controversial, as people's perception of what is true or false is shaped by dominant media narratives. By applying these theories in this study aims to analyze the intersection between media responsibility, government intervention, and public perception in addressing misinformation

on social media.

The Social Responsibility Theory

The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press postulated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, in the year 1956 in their book *Four Theories Of The Media* states that the media a vital role to play in society by providing accurate, truthful and fair information. However, the rise of the digital media has invalidated the purpose of this theory to a large extent due to the spread of wrong information. In a study conducted by Alam and Alam (2024) on how fact checking initiatives can help to bring about a fair atmosphere between government intervention and freedom of speech while also making sure regulatory actions does not directly or indirectly affect public opinion, the Social Responsibility theory was notable discussed highlighting the place of independent fact checking schemes especially organizations working hand in hand with government in order to fairly regulate information. Also, the theory suggests that when the media at any level fails to effectively carry out it's duty and avoid the spread of misinformation, government might have to step in and intervene in order to regulate the flow of misleading information to promote truth and protect public interests.

The Social Responsibility Theory of The Press in line with this study justifies government intervention in regulation media content as a means to ensure accurate information and prevent societal harm caused by misinformation. Also, the theory explains why some citizens are in support of government intervention, as they perceive it to be not just a protective but also and effective means to fight against misleading content.

Now although the theory provides that government intervention might be an option, it also highlights the risk of excessive government control, which could possibly result in censorship and suppression of free speech.

In essence, the theory helps to structure the debate on whether government regulation of misinformation strikes the right balance between protecting society and preserving democratic freedoms.

Research Methodology

This study made use of the survey research method. The population for this study included residents of Etsako West local government area within the age range of 18 and above. Based on the 2022 census estimate of Etsako west residence which summed up to 294,000, a sample size of 400 which was determined with the aid of the Taro Yamane formula was selected for the purpose of this study. Data collection was done using structured questionnaires.

Analysis of Respondents

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Gender		
Female	215	53.8%
Male	185	46.2%
Age Range		
18-25	231	57.8%
26-35	128	32%
36-45	29	7.2%
46 and above	12	6%

Source: Survey, 2025

Above is table 1, which indicates the distribution of respondents who participated in the study according to demographics. Based on this table, 215(53.8%) of the respondents are female while the other 185(46.2%) are male. There were more female respondents than male respondents in this sample.

Where as in line with the age brackets of the respondents which range from age 18 to 45 and above, the table indicates that respondents within the age of 18 - 25 were 231 in number and made up 57.8% of the total sample. Respondents within ages 26-35 were 128 in number and made up 32% of the entire population. Respondents within the age of 36 - 45 were 29 in number and made up 7.2%% of the entire sample. Respondents within the age range of 46 years and above were 12 in number and made up 3%% of the total sample.

Table 2: Frequency of social media usage

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Daily	283	70.8%
Weekly	56	14%
Monthly	37	9.2%
Rarely	24	6%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

The table 2 shows the frequency of respondents' use of social media. According to this table, 283 respondents make use of the social media daily, representing 70.8% of respondents. 56 other respondents make use of social daily, representing 14% of the respondents. 37 (9.2%) makes use of social monthly. While 24 (6%) of the respondents makes use of social media rarely.

Table 3: Do you agree with the notion that government should be in charge of regulating misinformation on social media?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Agreed	39	9.8%
Strongly agree	29	7.2%
Neutral	49	12.2%
Disagree	189	47.2%
Strongly disagree	94	23.5%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 3 indicates whether or not respondents agree with the notion of government being in charge of regulating misinformation on social media, while 39 which makes up 9.8% of the respondents agree, 29 (7.2%) strongly agree with the notion, 49 (12.2%) where neutral, 189(47.2%) disagreed, while 94 respondents which makes up the other 23.5 % of the respondents Strongly disagreed.

Table 4: Do you believe that government has a role to play in regulating social media content in order to prevent the spread of wrong information?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	261	65.2%
No	139	34.8%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey 2025

Table 4 above displays the relative numbers of respondents who believe that government has a role to play in regulating social media content in order to prevent the spread of wrong information. According to the above table, while 261 , which makes 65.2% of the respondents indicated that they believe government has a role to play in regulating social media content in order to prevent the spread of wrong information, the other 139 respondents that make up the remaining 34.8% did not believe that government has a role to play in regulating social media content in order to prevent the spread of wrong information . With this, it is safe to say that a majority of the respondents believe that government has a role to play in regulating the spread of wrong information.

Table 5: Which of the following in your perspective is more effective in controlling misinformation?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Government Regulations	35	8.8%
Advocacy to raise awareness	80	20%
Self-Regulation by social media platforms	240	60%
NGO's for fact checking	45	11.2%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 5 above shows the distribution of responses to the question of step is more effective in curtailing the spread of misinformation. From the above table, 35 respondents agree with the notion of government regulations as the most effective way, making up 8.8% of the respondents. However, 80 respondents believe that advocacy to raise awareness is a way to go about it, making up 20% of the respondents. 240 respondents indicated that self-regulation by social media platforms is yet another way to go about it, making up 60% of the respondents. While 45 respondents picked NGO's for fact checking information, which accounted for the remaining 11.2% of the respondents. These results show that most respondents perceive self-regulation by social media platforms as a better way to control the spread of misinformation.

Table 6: Are you bothered about the government overstepping it's limits in social media regulations?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Not bothered	56	14%
Bothered	305	76.2%
Can't say	39	9.8%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 6 indicates that, (56) 14% of the respondents are not bothered about the government overstepping its limits in social media regulations, 305 (76.2%) are bothered about the government overstepping it's limits in the regulations of social media. While the remaining 39 which makes up 9.8% of the respondents could not say if they were bothered about it or not.

Table 7: Will government regulations in the spread of misinformation limit freedom of speech?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	277	69.2%
No	123	30.8%
Total	400	100%

Source, Survey 2025

Table 7 above displays the relative numbers of respondents who believe government regulations in the spread of misinformation would either limit freedom of speech or not. According to the above table, 277 respondents indicated that they government involvement in the regulation of misinformation would limit freedom of speech, making up 69.2% of the respondents. While the other 123 of the respondents indicated that the involvement of government in regulating misinformation would not limit the freedom of speech on social media, making up 30.8% of the total sample.

Table 8: What is your reason for supporting or opposing governments inclusion in the fight against the wide spread of wrong information?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
The safety of the public is guaranteed if government should intervene.	34	8.5%
Government intervention would lead to censorship.	14	3.5%
If government should intervene then the accuracy of information is ensured.	154	38.5%
Digital freedom would be limited if government is involved.	198	49.5%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey 2025

Table 8 shows that 34 (8.5%) of the respondent agree with the notion that the safety of the public is guaranteed if government should intervene, 14(3.5%) agreed that government intervention would lead to censorship, 154 (38.5%) agreed that if government should intervene then the accuracy of information is ensured, and the remaining 198 (49.5%) agreed with the notion that digital freedom would be limited if government is involved. From the responses of the respondents, it is indicated that a majority opposes government's inclusion in the fight against the wide spread of wrong information.

Table 9: Do you trust the government to regulate information fairly?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
No	314	78.5%
Yes	86	21.5%
Total	400	100%

Source, Survey 2025

Table 9 above presents responses on whether the respondents trust the government to regulate information fairly. From the above table, the results indicate that 314 respondents do not trust government to regulate information fairly making 78%.5 of the entire sample. However, 86 of the respondents reported to trust government to be fair in the regulation of information, making up the remaining 21.5% of the respondents. Based on the data gathered from this table, a majority of the respondents do not trust the government to be fair.

Table 10: Will strict government regulations improve or reduce trust in the use of social media platforms?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Improve	64	16%
Reduce	300	75%
Can't say	36	9%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 10 above presents responses on whether strict government regulation would improve or reduce trust in the use of social media platforms. From the above table, the results indicate that 64 respondents trust in the use of social media will improve if government should intervene, making 16% of the entire sample. However, 300 of the respondents reported that the trust in the use of social media will dwindle if government should intervene, making up the remaining 75% of the respondents. Another 36 respondents indicated that they were not certain about their trust being influenced or not, making up the remaining 9% of the entire sample.

Table 11: Which of the following would make you support government intervention?

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Transparency	123	30.8%
Working hand in hand with independent fact checkers.	277	69.2%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

This table, table 11 shows that, 123(30.8%) of respondents chose transparency over the government working hand in hand with independent fact-checker, while the other 277 (69.2%) of the respondents picked government working hand in hand with independent fact-checker over transparency.

Discussion And Summary Of Findings

The findings of this study aimed at investigating public perception of government intervention and regulation in addressing misinformation spread on social media. Hence, it can be concluded that although government might have a role to play in the regulation of information, the responsibility to regulate the spread of misinformation should not be handed down to the government.

Research Question 1: How do individuals react to government playing a part in the regulation of misinformation on social media platforms?

The aim of the question was to investigate how individuals would react to government play a part in regulation the spread of information and based on the sum up of respondents, table 3 indicates that 189 of the respondents disagreed and 94 other respondents strongly disagreed with the notion of government being in charge of regulating misinformation on social media and this two category of respondents represent 47.2% and 23.5% of the population of respondents respectively summing up to 70.7% of the respondents. This indicates that a majority of the respondents where not in support of the government being in charge of regulating misinformation on social media.

In line with research question 1 also, table 4 which asked if respondents believed government had a role to in regulating information indicated that majority if the respondents which was 261 (62.5%) agreed that government had a role to play, while the other 139 (34.8%) of the respondents disagreed. In respect to research question 1, in table 5 distribution of responses to the question “Which of the following in your perspective is more effective in controlling misinformation” majority of the respondents 240 (60%) choose self-regulation by social media platforms as a more effective way to curtail the spread of misinformation. While 80 (20%) of the respondents choose advocacy to raise awareness. This reveals that although government might have a role to play in the regulation of information, government should not be in charge of regulating misinformation on social media and self regulation by social media platforms as well as advocacy to raise awareness are better ways to control the spread of misinformation.

This falls in line with Su(2024), who discovered that although a majority of Americans are aware about the dangers associated with the spread of wrong information, they prefer platforms to self regulate over government regulation. This findings aligns with the social responsibility theory which posits that government would intervene in media operations if the media fails to act responsibly.

Research Question 2: What are the factors that influence public reaction in terms of supporting or opposing government inclusion in intervening in the regulation of social media contents? In respect to research question 2, table 6 reveals that 305(76.2%) which is a majority of the respondents are bothered about government overstepping it’s limits in social media regulation. While table 7 indicated that 277(69.2%) of the respondents fear that government regulations in the spread of misinformation would limit the freedom of speech and finally table 8 indicated that 198(49.5%) of the respondents believed that digital freedom would be limited if government should get involved in regulating misinformation. According to this, there is a tendency for government to overstep it’s limits in social media regulation and this will most likely affect the freedom of speech and digital freedom.

This findings falls in line with that of Ogunleye (2024), who found that nearly half of the respondents expressed a major concern over the possibility of government misusing regulatory powers.

Research Question 3: in what way can different regulatory strategies influence trust towards social media platforms and government intervention? Based on the data gotten from table 11, a majority of the respondents 277(69.2%) choose government working hand in hand with independent fact checkers as the only way they would chose to supporting government intervention, with 123 (30.8%) of the respondents choosing transparency. Also, table 9 indicated that 314(78.5%) of the respondents do not trust government to be fair in

regulating information and 10 indicated that 300 (75%) of the respondents believed government regulation would reduce the trust individuals have in social media platforms. This implies that if government should work hand in hand with independent fact checkers, then the trust of individuals might remain intact.

This matches the findings of Alam & Alam (2024), who emphasized on the stance that when it comes to media governance, social responsibility depends on ideal, joint and transparent approaches.

Conclusion

Based on the finding from this study, it is concluded that although government has a role to play in the regulation of misinformation individuals are not in support of government intervening and regulating the spread of misinformation on social media as there are other ways such as self-regulation by social media platforms as well as advocacy to raise awareness about the spread of misinformation.

Finding from the study also indicate that there exist a tendency for government to overstep it's limits in social media regulation and this will most likely affect the freedom of speech and digital freedom of citizens.

Finally, the study concludes that government cannot be trusted to regulate the spread of misinformation fairly and this would lead to individuals losing the trust they have built in social media platforms over the years and the only way individuals will approve of government intervention and regulation is if the government works hand in hand with independent fact-checkers.

Recommendations

1. Transparency and Collaboration Should be encouraged in the Government: as a result of the divided opinion of the public, any efforts made by government to regulate misinformation should be conducted in transparency alongside in collaboration with independent fact-checkers. This would bring about a surge in public trust and confidence in government, and ensure that government regulation do not infringe on citizens rights to free speech, hence making government participation more acceptable.

2. Public Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns: advocacy programs directed at the public should be actively promoted in order to increase awareness about the issue of misinformation, its consequences, and how to identify wrong information. By doing this and empowering individuals with fact-checking skills, more people may be inclined to support positive government efforts directed at fighting against misinformation.

3. Public Trust Should be Built Through Balanced Regulatory Frameworks: if government must take part in regulating misinformation, it is important that such regulations be developed with safeguards that would prevent the abuse of power. Regulatory frameworks should be made to keep digital freedom in place while enhancing information accuracy. Public trust can be built if they see that government regulation will not equal censorship but instead bring about credible information in order to protect their well-being.

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