Disinformation During Elections: A Comparative Broadcast Regulation Effectiveness in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Broadcast media remain the most trusted and widely accessed source of political information for the Nigerian electorate, which makes their regulation during election periods central to democratic stability. This paper examines the effectiveness of broadcast regulation in curbing election-related disinformation, using Benue State a Middle Belt state with a long history of ethno-religious and herder-farmer tension as a case study, and situating it within a comparative review of regulatory approaches in Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa. Adopting a qualitative, document-based comparative design, the paper analyses provisions of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code as enforced by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), NBC advisories issued around the 2023 and 2027 election cycles, and secondary literature and monitoring reports on election-period disinformation in Nigeria. The paper argues that while Nigeria's broadcast regulatory framework is formally comprehensive, its effectiveness is undermined less by weak rules than by uneven enforcement, limited subnational monitoring capacity, and the blurred boundary between broadcast and social media content in conflict-prone states such as Benue. Comparative evidence from Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa suggests that regulatory independence, pre-election fact-checking coalitions, and clear appeal mechanisms matter more for outcomes than the mere existence of anti-disinformation statutes. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening state-level monitoring desks, newsroom fact-checking partnerships, and cycle-specific enforcement in Benue State and comparable subnational contexts.

Keywords: broadcast regulation, disinformation, elections, Benue State, National Broadcasting Commission, comparative media policy

Introduction

Radio and television remain the dominant channels through which most Nigerians, particularly in rural and semi-urban states, receive political information during election campaigns. Their combination of wide reach, oral accessibility and perceived institutional credibility gives broadcast content an influence on voter perception that

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social media platforms, despite their virality, have not fully displaced. This influence, however, cuts both ways: broadcast platforms can consolidate credible civic information, but they can equally amplify and legitimise falsehoods that originate on less regulated platforms once such claims are picked up by radio and television presenters, phone-in programmes or political jingles.

Nigeria's regulatory response to this risk is anchored in the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), established to license and regulate radio and television stations and to enforce the Nigeria Broadcasting Code, which prohibits the transmission of false, misleading or inciting content (National Broadcasting Commission, n.d.). Ahead of successive election cycles, the NBC has repeatedly issued advisories reminding stations of code provisions on balance, truth, decency and the prohibition of unofficial election result projections, and has warned of sanctions for presenters who present personal opinion as fact or who air content capable of inciting communal or political tension (The Guardian Nigeria, 2026; Tribune Online, 2026). Ahead of the 2027 general elections, the Commission went further, barring presenters from airing personal opinions altogether and warning that neutrality violations would be treated as serious offences (Reuters, 2026).

Whether these formal provisions translate into consistent practice at the subnational level is a separate and under-researched question. Benue State offers a particularly instructive case. As a Middle Belt state defined by recurring herder-farmer conflict and ethno-religious tension, Benue has repeatedly been cited among the states where fake news and inflammatory content have been linked to communal clashes (Al Jazeera, 2023). This paper therefore asks how effectively broadcast regulation functions in a state where the human cost of disinformation is unusually high, and how Nigeria's approach compares with regulatory models elsewhere on the continent.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria possesses one of the more elaborate broadcast regulatory frameworks in West Africa, yet election cycles continue to be marked by disinformation that broadcast stations either fail to intercept or, in some documented cases, actively amplify. Independent monitoring of the 2023 general elections found that hate speech and fake news were among the principal drivers of election-related atrocities nationally, with political and public figures cited for statements that incited violence or discrimination (The ICIR, 2024). Reports on the same election cycle observed that even mainstream media outlets occasionally reproduced unverified claims that later had to be retracted (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The problem is compounded in Benue State by two intersecting conditions. First, the state's long-running herder-farmer and ethno-religious tensions create fertile ground for disinformation to translate quickly into real-world violence, as has been documented in relation to comparable crises in neighbouring Middle Belt and northern states (Institute for Global Change, 2022). Second, NBC monitoring and enforcement capacity is heavily centralised in Abuja, with limited evidence of dedicated, state-specific monitoring desks for conflict-prone states, even though critics of the Commission's approach note that enforcement of the Broadcasting Code has historically been uneven across the federation (Reuters, 2026). It remains unclear, in the absence of state-level empirical study, whether the sanctions regime that exists on paper is applied with any consistency to broadcast stations operating within Benue State, or whether the Code's traditional broadcast-only scope can meaningfully address disinformation that increasingly originates on social media before being rebroadcast, referenced or

amplified by radio and television presenters. This gap — between a nationally comprehensive regulatory text and its uncertain subnational application — constitutes the central problem this paper addresses. This paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. What provisions exist within Nigeria's broadcast regulatory framework for curbing election-related disinformation, and how have they evolved across the 2023 and 2027 election cycles?
2. To what extent do available records and monitoring reports suggest consistent enforcement of these provisions by broadcast stations operating in Benue State?
3. What factors constrain effective enforcement of broadcast disinformation regulation in a conflict-prone subnational context such as Benue State?
4. How does Nigeria's broadcast regulatory approach compare with regulatory models in Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa in addressing election-period disinformation?

Literature Review

Conceptualising Disinformation and Broadcast Regulation

Disinformation is generally distinguished from misinformation by intent: while both refer to false or misleading content, disinformation is deliberately fabricated and disseminated to deceive, whereas misinformation may be shared without an intent to mislead (Hassan, 2023). Broadcast regulation, in this context, refers to the statutory and administrative mechanisms — licensing conditions, content codes, monitoring and sanctions — through which a state seeks to hold radio and television operators to standards of accuracy, balance and public responsibility, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as elections.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on social responsibility theory of the press, which holds that media freedom must be balanced against an obligation to serve the public interest, with regulatory bodies empowered to intervene when self-regulation fails to prevent harm (Siebert et al., 1956). Applied to broadcasting, the theory suggests that regulators such as the NBC are justified in restricting content that threatens public order, provided such restriction remains proportionate and does not become a pretext for suppressing legitimate political debate. The paper also draws on McQuail's (2010) account of media accountability, which distinguishes between accountability achieved through law and regulation and accountability achieved through market and professional self-discipline — a distinction useful for comparing Nigeria's statutory model with the more independent or self-regulatory models found elsewhere in Africa.

Nigeria's Broadcast Regulatory Architecture

The NBC was established by Decree No. 38 of 1992, now an Act of the National Assembly, and is mandated to license and regulate radio and television broadcasting and to enforce the Nigeria Broadcasting Code (National Broadcasting Commission, n.d.). The Code requires political advertisements and coverage to meet standards of truth, decency, fairness and balance, and prohibits content likely to incite violence or deepen ethnic, religious or political division. Ahead of the 2027 election cycle, the Commission reiterated these obligations, explicitly barring the broadcast of unofficial election results or projections and reminding stations of the statutory campaign silence period preceding polling day (The Guardian Nigeria, 2026; Tribune Online, 2026). In April 2026 the

NBC further restricted presenters from airing personal opinions on air, a measure some political actors criticised as constraining free expression, while the Commission maintained that it was responding to a documented rise in code violations (Reuters, 2026).

Empirical Evidence of Election Disinformation in Nigeria

Existing research on Nigeria's information environment during elections points to a media ecosystem in which social media, traditional broadcast media and word-of-mouth channels are mutually reinforcing rather than separate. Hassan's (2023) exploratory study, based on interviews and focus group discussions across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, found that social media content actively shapes traditional media coverage and exacerbates pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions. Independent forensic analysis of the 2023 general elections identified hate speech, fake news and voter suppression narratives as major drivers of documented election atrocities, implicating both political actors and the media platforms that carried their statements (The ICIR, 2024). Reporting from the same election cycle noted that unverified claims — including allegations against candidates — spread rapidly enough that even professional newsrooms occasionally had to retract stories after initially reporting false claims as fact (Al Jazeera, 2023). Analysts have also linked the escalation of communal clashes in Middle Belt states, including Benue, to the circulation of fake news and political propaganda in the period surrounding national elections (Institute for Global Change, 2022).

Benue State: A Peculiar Risk Environment

Benue State's socio-political context distinguishes it from many other Nigerian states in ways directly relevant to disinformation risk. The state has experienced sustained herder-farmer conflict linked to competition over land and grazing routes, compounded by the proliferation of small arms and governance failures, tensions that intensified in the years preceding the 2023 general elections (Wikipedia, 2023). In an environment already primed by intercommunal distrust, unverified claims broadcast or rebroadcast without adequate verification carry a materially higher risk of triggering violence than similar claims would in a less volatile state. This context makes Benue a demanding test case for the practical effectiveness of a broadcast regulatory framework that was designed at the national level but must be enforced locally.

Comparative Regulatory Models in Africa

Comparative evidence across the continent suggests that the formal existence of anti-disinformation rules is a weak predictor of their effectiveness. A review of eleven African countries found that laws and regulations targeting 'false news' nearly doubled between 2016 and the early 2020s, with little identifiable reduction in the harm caused by misinformation, partly because what counts as 'false' and how harm is proven remain poorly defined across these frameworks (Africa Check, 2021). Kenya regulates media through the statutory but nominally independent Media Council, established under the Media Act of 2007, which oversees journalists' conduct; Kenya's 2022 election also benefited from a broad coalition of fact-checking organisations, community radio networks and platform partnerships that worked ahead of polling day to pre-empt falsehoods rather than merely correct them after the fact (Jamlab, 2021). Ghana's National Media Commission has similarly called for a more comprehensive democratic regulatory framework, while civil society and fact-checking coalitions have taken a leading role in countering election-period disinformation given gaps in formal enforcement (CybAfriqué, 2024; The RedTech Group, 2022). South Africa's

Independent Communications Authority operates within a legislative framework that includes clearer appeal mechanisms than are available in Kenya, a structural feature researchers have identified as strengthening accountability (Jamlab, 2021). Continental analysis further suggests that digital literacy investment and cross-border monitoring of disinformation networks are emerging as more consequential interventions than statutory sanctions alone (Institute for Security Studies, African Futures, 2025). Read together, this literature suggests that regulatory independence, pre-election preparedness and civil-society partnership are more strongly associated with effective outcomes than the stringency of the underlying broadcasting code a proposition this paper tests against the Nigerian, and specifically the Benue State, experience.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, comparative document-analysis design. Primary regulatory texts the Nigeria Broadcasting Code and NBC public advisories issued around the 2023 and 2027 election cycles were purposively sampled alongside secondary sources comprising peer-reviewed literature, independent election-monitoring reports, and reputable news coverage of broadcast conduct and disinformation incidents in Benue State and comparable Nigerian contexts; these were then read against comparative regulatory instruments and secondary literature on media regulation in Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa. The documents were analysed thematically, with codes developed around regulatory scope, enforcement mechanism, monitoring capacity and reported outcomes, allowing the Nigerian and Benue-specific material to be systematically compared with the African regulatory models reviewed in the literature; because the design relies on secondary and documentary evidence rather than original interviews or newsroom monitoring conducted by the author, its findings should be read as a synthesis of the best currently available evidence rather than as a first-hand audit of broadcast conduct in Benue State, and the paper accordingly recommends the primary fieldwork outlined in the conclusion as a necessary next step.

Discussion of Findings

The evidence reviewed suggests that Nigeria's broadcast regulatory framework is, on paper, reasonably comprehensive: the Nigeria Broadcasting Code addresses truth, balance, decency and incitement, and the NBC has progressively tightened its election-period advisories, most recently barring presenters from airing personal opinions and prohibiting the broadcast of unofficial result projections (Reuters, 2026; The Guardian Nigeria, 2026). Yet the same reporting that documents these advisories also records that enforcement has historically been uneven across the federation, and that the Commission's own justification for tightening the rules in 2026 was a documented rise in violations rather than evidence that prior rules were being effectively enforced (Reuters, 2026). This gap between rule-making and rule-enforcement is consistent with the broader African pattern identified by Africa Check (2021), in which an expanding body of anti-disinformation law has coincided with little measurable reduction in harm.

For Benue State specifically, the available evidence points to a compounding risk rather than a resolved one. The state's herder-farmer and ethno-religious tensions mean that disinformation which might be merely embarrassing elsewhere can translate quickly into communal violence, a pattern analysts have already linked to fake news circulating around national elections in Middle Belt states (Institute for Global Change, 2022). Because NBC monitoring capacity is concentrated centrally, and because the

Commission's most visible enforcement actions tend to follow high-profile national controversies rather than routine subnational monitoring, there is no strong evidence in the literature reviewed that broadcast stations physically operating within Benue State are being monitored or sanctioned any differently from stations in less volatile states — despite the materially higher stakes. This is precisely the kind of uniform, one-size-fits-all enforcement model that the comparative literature suggests is least effective: Kenya's stronger 2022 outcomes are attributed less to the stringency of its Media Act than to a proactive coalition of fact-checkers, community radio networks and platform partners working ahead of the vote, rather than to after-the-fact sanctions (Jamlab, 2021).

A second finding concerns the boundary problem between broadcast and social media content. Hassan's (2023) research indicates that social media content actively shapes what traditional broadcast media subsequently cover, and Al Jazeera's (2023) reporting on the 2023 election cycle found that even professional newsrooms sometimes rebroadcast unverified claims before retracting them. A broadcasting code written primarily to regulate what a licensed station originates does not straightforwardly address the practice of presenters reading out, discussing or lending credibility to claims that originated on unregulated social media platforms — a gap that is especially consequential in a state like Benue, where rumours about intercommunal attacks can move from a phone video to a radio phone-in segment within hours. Comparative evidence from jurisdictions that legislate directly against disinformation, rather than regulating broadcast conduct alone, suggests that these jurisdictions still struggle to define what counts as false and to prove resulting harm in a way that survives legal or political scrutiny (Africa Check, 2021).

Finally, the comparative material suggests that institutional independence and appeal mechanisms shape perceived legitimacy and, by extension, compliance. South Africa's regulatory framework includes clearer appeal mechanisms than Kenya's, a structural difference researchers associate with stronger accountability outcomes (Jamlab, 2021), while Ghana's National Media Commission has itself acknowledged that the country liberalised its broadcast environment without building the accompanying regulatory and policy framework needed to manage the risks that followed (The RedTech Group, 2022). The NBC, by contrast, remains a government-established and government-funded body whose director-general is appointed by the state, a structural feature that — regardless of the technical adequacy of the Broadcasting Code — leaves it exposed to the perception, voiced by political actors during the 2026 rule-tightening episode, that enforcement can be applied selectively for political ends (Reuters, 2026). For a state such as Benue, where public trust in institutions is already strained by years of conflict, this perception risk may itself weaken the deterrent effect that broadcast regulation is intended to achieve.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper set out to examine how effectively Nigeria's broadcast regulatory framework curbs election-related disinformation, with particular attention to Benue State and a comparative reading of regulatory models in Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa. The evidence reviewed suggests that Nigeria's Broadcasting Code is formally comprehensive but that its effectiveness is constrained by uneven enforcement, centralised monitoring capacity that does not appear to be calibrated to the heightened risk profile of conflict-prone states such as Benue, and a regulatory scope that struggles to address disinformation that originates on social media before being amplified through broadcast platforms. Comparative evidence indicates that the stringency of a

broadcasting code is a weaker predictor of effective outcomes than regulatory independence, pre-election fact-checking partnerships and clear appeal mechanisms.

On this basis, the paper recommends that the NBC establish dedicated, adequately resourced monitoring desks in conflict-prone states, including Benue, ahead of and during election cycles, rather than relying primarily on centralised, Abuja-based monitoring; that broadcast newsrooms operating in Benue State be supported to form structured partnerships with established Nigerian fact-checking initiatives to verify claims before they are aired, particularly during phone-in and vernacular-language programming where verification pressure is highest; and that future NBC advisories explicitly address the rebroadcast of unverified social-media-originated claims, closing the boundary gap identified in this review. Given the documentary, secondary-source basis of this study, the paper further recommends that subsequent research undertake primary content analysis of Benue-based broadcast output during a live election cycle, alongside key-informant interviews with NBC zonal officers, station managers and civil society monitors, to test empirically the enforcement gap this paper has identified through the existing literature.

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