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Revisiting Media Law in the Age of Prevalent Social Media Disinformation: Challenges, Legal Gaps, and Regulatory Imperatives

Sharifatu Gago Ja'afaru

Glorious Vision University (Formerly Samuel Adegboyega University), Ogwa, Edo, Nigeria
Correspondence: E-mail: sharifatujaafaru@gmail.com; sharifatu.gago@gvu.edu.ng

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the effectiveness of existing media law frameworks in Nigeria in addressing the growing challenge of social media disinformation. Grounded in Media Systems Dependency Theory, the research conceptualizes media as a critical information system shaping societal dependency relationships. Using a qualitative desk research methodology, the study reviews relevant legal instruments, scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports to identify regulatory gaps and enforcement challenges. Findings reveal that Nigeria's current media laws are inadequately structured to respond to the speed, scale, and complexity of digital disinformation. Weak enforcement mechanisms, limited platform accountability, and political interference further undermine regulatory effectiveness. The study argues that regulatory reforms must prioritize transparency, accountability, and inclusivity while strengthening media literacy initiatives. It recommends revising media laws to include explicit provisions on content moderation, platform responsibility, and penalties for the dissemination of disinformation. Strengthening institutional independence and public awareness is essential for protecting democratic communication processes in Nigeria.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of digital communication, the rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the dissemination of information, leading to unprecedented challenges in media law and regulation (Ja'afaru & Inobemhe, 2024). In Nigeria, the pervasive issue of disinformation on social media platforms has raised critical questions about the adequacy of existing legal frameworks and the capacity of regulatory bodies to effectively combat misinformation (Ogunleye, 2023). Traditional media laws, designed for earlier communication models, struggle to address the complexities introduced by social media, where content is created, shared, and consumed at a rapid pace, often without adequate oversight (Abiola, 2024).

Historically, Nigeria's media regulations were established to promote responsible journalism and protect the public from harmful content. However, the advent of social media has blurred the lines between professional journalism and user-generated content, making it increasingly difficult to enforce these regulations (Ojo, 2022; Ja'afaru & Inobemhe, 2024). The challenges are compounded by the democratization of information, which, while empowering individuals to express their opinions, has also facilitated the spread of false narratives that can incite violence and undermine societal trust (Inobemhe et al. 2025; Mustapha, 2023). As a result, the need for a comprehensive reassessment of media law in Nigeria is more pressing than ever.

A critical dimension of this discourse involves the legal gaps that exist within Nigeria's media regulatory framework. Many laws do not adequately address the nuances of digital communication, leaving significant loopholes that can be exploited by purveyors of disinformation (Afolabi, 2024). Furthermore, the role of social media platforms in moderating content has come under scrutiny, as these companies often operate from jurisdictions with different legal standards, complicating enforcement efforts (Nwokolo, 2023). This raises fundamental questions about accountability and the responsibilities of both users and platforms in curbing the spread of false information.

Moreover, the regulatory landscape in Nigeria is characterized by a lack of coordination among various governmental and non-governmental bodies tasked with media oversight (Adeyeye & Nwaoboli, 2023). This fragmentation hampers effective responses to disinformation and leads to inconsistent application of laws (Ibrahim, 2022). As digital communication continues to evolve, there is an urgent need for a cohesive regulatory framework that integrates lessons from both national and global contexts to enhance the resilience of Nigeria's media landscape against disinformation.

The intersection of media law and social media disinformation poses significant implications for public trust and democratic governance. As citizens increasingly rely on digital platforms for news and information, the erosion of trust due to the proliferation of falsehoods can have far-reaching consequences for social cohesion and political stability (Adetunji, 2023). Thus, fostering a legal environment that promotes responsible content creation and consumption is essential for safeguarding democratic values in Nigeria.

In light of these challenges, this study critically examines the current state of media law in Nigeria as it pertains to social media disinformation. It explores existing legal gaps, identifies regulatory imperatives, and proposes actionable strategies for enhancing the efficacy of media regulation in the digital age.

The surge of disinformation on social media poses a significant threat to the integrity of information and public discourse in Nigeria (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023; Anagu et al., 2024). While the country has established legal frameworks intended to regulate media practices,

these laws are often outdated and ill-equipped to address the challenges posed by the digital landscape. The rapid dissemination of false information can lead to real-world consequences, including societal unrest and a decline in public trust in legitimate media sources (Adebayo, 2023).

The lack of clarity in existing media laws regarding digital content further complicates efforts to combat disinformation. Many regulatory provisions do not specifically address the unique characteristics of social media, resulting in legal ambiguities that hinder effective enforcement (Olabisi, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by the reluctance of regulatory bodies to impose penalties on social media platforms, which often operate with minimal oversight (Ekene, 2023). Consequently, the responsibility to mitigate disinformation largely falls on the citizens, who are frequently ill-equipped to discern credible sources from unreliable ones. In light of these dynamics, this study is motivated by the pressing need to reassess Nigeria's media laws in response to the pervasive challenge of social media disinformation.

The objectives of this study are to:

(i)   Examine the existing legal frameworks governing media regulation in Nigeria and their effectiveness in addressing social media disinformation.
(ii) Identify the challenges faced by regulators in enforcing media laws amid the rapid evolution of digital communication.
(iii) Explore potential regulatory strategies that can enhance the integrity and accountability of media practices in the age of social media disinformation.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

This study employed a qualitative desk research methodology. It focuses on an extensive review of scholarly articles, legal frameworks, institutional reports, and policy analyses of a discourse. Desk research was selected for its ability to systematically synthesize existing evidence, enabling a thorough exploration of the challenges and legal gaps faced by media regulation in the digital age. Sources included comparative studies on media laws from various countries, analyses of the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, and examinations of public trust in media institutions.

2.1 Media Law

Media law is defined as the collection of legal principles and regulations that govern the operation of media organizations, ensuring that they adhere to ethical standards while promoting freedom of expression. Media law is fundamentally designed to protect the public interest while balancing the rights of media entities (Adebayo, 2023). This duality is critical in a democratic society, where the media serves as a watchdog for government accountability and a platform for public discourse. In Nigeria, the rapid evolution of the media landscape, particularly with the rise of digital platforms, poses significant challenges to these regulations, often exposing gaps that can be exploited by those seeking to spread misinformation.

In addition to safeguarding freedom of expression, media law also encompasses regulatory mechanisms that dictate the responsibilities of media outlets. These regulations include content moderation, licensing requirements, and the protection of intellectual property rights (Ogunleye, 2023; Ja'afaru and Inobemhe, 2024). However, the existing frameworks often lag behind technological advancements, which can lead to ineffective enforcement and a lack of accountability for media organizations. This inadequacy underscores the need for a

comprehensive review of current laws to ensure they are fit for purpose in a rapidly changing media environment.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of media law relies heavily on the engagement of various stakeholders, including legislators, media professionals, and civil society organizations. A collaborative approach is essential for creating a legal framework that not only protects freedoms but also promotes responsible journalism (Ibrahim, 2022). By fostering dialogue among these groups, it becomes possible to develop adaptive legal structures that reflect the realities of contemporary media practices, thus reinforcing democratic values and public trust.

2.2 Social Media Disinformation

Social media disinformation is characterized as the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information through digital platforms, often aimed at manipulating public opinion or inciting conflict (Nwaoboli, 2021). This phenomenon represents a significant threat to societal cohesion, as the rapid spread of disinformation complicates the public's ability to discern truth from falsehood (Ojo, 2022). This challenge is exacerbated by the algorithms that govern social media, which often prioritize sensational content over accuracy, further entrenching misinformation within public discourse (Inobemhe *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, the impact of social media disinformation extends beyond individual narratives; it can fundamentally reshape public perceptions and erode trust in institutions. As disinformation proliferates, it undermines the credibility of traditional media outlets, leading to a general skepticism toward news sources (Eze, 2021). This erosion of trust poses a critical challenge to democratic governance, where an informed electorate is essential for meaningful civic engagement and decision-making.

To effectively combat social media disinformation, a comprehensive approach is necessary, involving regulatory measures alongside educational initiatives (Nwaoboli, 2023). Collaboration among government agencies, media organizations, and technology platforms is vital for developing effective strategies to identify and mitigate disinformation (Mustapha, 2023). By working together, these stakeholders can create robust frameworks that not only address the immediate threat of disinformation but also promote a more informed and engaged public, ultimately enhancing the integrity of the information ecosystem

2.3 Regulatory Imperatives

Regulatory imperatives refer to the essential actions and frameworks necessary for overseeing media practices, especially in the context of social media disinformation. These imperatives are crucial in adapting to the challenges posed by digital communication, as many existing regulations fail to account for the rapid pace of technological change (Ibrahim, 2022). Consequently, a thorough reassessment of regulatory frameworks is needed to ensure that they can effectively address the complexities of today's media landscape.

In addition to revising existing laws, effective regulation necessitates the involvement of a diverse array of stakeholders, including governmental agencies, media organizations, and civil society. A collaborative approach fosters greater accountability and responsiveness in regulatory practices (Ogbodo, 2024). Engaging these various entities allows for the incorporation of multiple perspectives and experiences, leading to more effective regulatory solutions that can adapt to the rapidly evolving media environment.

More so, regulatory imperatives must prioritize proactive measures that promote media literacy and responsible content creation. Enhancing public understanding of media practices is essential for mitigating the impacts of disinformation (Akanni, 2022). Through investing in

educational initiatives that empower citizens to critically evaluate the information they encounter, regulatory bodies can cultivate a culture of informed engagement. Thus, a holistic approach to regulatory imperatives will be vital for enhancing the integrity and accountability of media practices in Nigeria.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW
3.1 Impact of Social Media Disinformation on Public Trust

Social media disinformation poses a significant threat to public trust in media institutions, particularly in Nigeria, where the rapid spread of false information can undermine the credibility of legitimate news sources. The ease with which disinformation spreads on social media platforms complicates the public's ability to discern credible information, leading to a generalized skepticism toward all media outlets. This erosion of trust not only affects public perception but also has profound implications for democratic participation, as an informed electorate is essential for effective governance.

Moreover, the consequences of social media disinformation extend beyond individual incidents, often resulting in societal unrest and political polarization. Misinformation can incite violence and create divisions within communities, thereby challenging the social fabric of society (Eze, 2021). In Nigeria, where political tensions are already high, the impact of disinformation can exacerbate existing conflicts and hinder efforts towards national cohesion. Thus, addressing the challenges posed by social media disinformation is crucial for restoring public trust in media institutions and ensuring the integrity of democratic processes.

Additionally, the role of media organizations in combating disinformation is paramount. Media institutions must adopt proactive strategies, including fact-checking and transparency in reporting, to rebuild public confidence (Adebayo, 2022). By actively engaging with audiences and providing accurate information, media organizations can help mitigate the damaging effects of disinformation and reinforce their role as trusted sources of news. Therefore, fostering public trust in the digital age requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to combat the pervasive influence of social media disinformation.

3.2 Legal Gaps in Media Law Addressing Digital Disinformation

The existing legal frameworks governing media in Nigeria often exhibit significant gaps in addressing the challenges posed by social media disinformation. Current media laws were largely developed in a pre-digital context, making them ill-equipped to handle the complexities of information dissemination in the age of social media (Ogunleye, 2023). These legal gaps include inadequate provisions for content moderation, insufficient penalties for disseminating false information, and a lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities of social media platforms.

Furthermore, the inadequacy of legal frameworks can lead to a culture of impunity, where individuals and organizations feel free to spread disinformation without fear of repercussions. Without robust legal mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable, the integrity of media institutions is compromised, and public trust is further eroded (Eze, 2021). This creates a vicious cycle where disinformation flourishes in an environment lacking effective regulation, thereby highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive legal reforms.

Additionally, the legal landscape must evolve to incorporate the unique challenges posed by digital communication. Media law should not only focus on punitive measures but also emphasize preventive strategies, such as promoting media literacy and public awareness campaigns (Adebayo, 2022). By addressing these legal gaps, Nigeria can develop a more

effective regulatory framework that safeguards public interest while enabling media organizations to fulfill their democratic mandate.

3.3 Regulatory Imperatives for Addressing Disinformation in Nigeria

In light of the challenges posed by social media disinformation, there is a pressing need for regulatory imperatives that can effectively address these issues in Nigeria. Regulatory bodies must adopt a proactive stance, focusing on creating guidelines that promote transparency, accountability, and ethical standards in media practices. A collaborative approach involving government agencies, media organizations, and civil society is essential for developing effective strategies to combat disinformation (Udom, 2023).

Moreover, regulatory frameworks should prioritize the establishment of clear guidelines for content moderation and fact-checking. Without such guidelines, media organizations may struggle to navigate the complexities of digital information dissemination, leading to inconsistent responses to disinformation (Okeke, 2024). By providing a robust regulatory framework, Nigeria can enhance the capacity of media institutions to respond effectively to the challenges posed by false information.

Additionally, the implementation of educational initiatives aimed at promoting media literacy is crucial for empowering citizens to critically evaluate the information they encounter online. Fostering a media-savvy public is essential for mitigating the effects of disinformation (Adebayo, 2022). Regulatory bodies should therefore invest in public awareness campaigns that equip citizens with the skills to discern credible sources from unreliable ones. Ultimately, establishing strong regulatory imperatives will be vital for safeguarding public trust and ensuring the integrity of media practices in Nigeria.

3.4 Role of Media Law in the Digital Age

The evolution of media law in the digital age is critical for addressing the unique challenges posed by social media disinformation. As traditional media laws often fail to account for the rapid advancements in technology, there is an urgent need for legal frameworks that adapt to contemporary realities. Media law must be dynamic, incorporating provisions that address the complexities of digital communication while safeguarding freedom of expression (Eze, 2021).

Furthermore, media law should promote accountability among both media organizations and social media platforms. Clear regulations regarding the responsibilities of digital platforms in curbing disinformation are essential for creating a more trustworthy information ecosystem (Ogunleye, 2023). This includes establishing guidelines for content moderation, ensuring compliance with ethical standards, and imposing penalties for non-compliance.

In addition, the legal framework must facilitate collaboration between regulatory bodies and media organizations to enhance the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms. By fostering dialogue and cooperation, stakeholders can collectively address the challenges of disinformation while reinforcing the role of media as a pillar of democracy (Adebayo, 2022). Therefore, revisiting media law in the age of social media is imperative for creating a regulatory environment that not only combats disinformation but also promotes public trust and democratic participation.

3.5 Media System Dependency Theory

The Media Systems Dependency Theory (MSD) was developed (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) to explain the relationship between audiences and mass media. MSD conceptualizes the mass media system as an information system that controls scarce and critical information

resources, leading to dependency relationships between media and other systems in society (Ball-Rokeach, 1998).

The key tenets of MSD include media control over information resources, dependency relations, a multilevel approach, and structural resources and limitations. Media have control over information resources, creating dependency relationships with individuals and other systems (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). The theory also takes a multilevel approach, examining the relationships between media and various systems, including political, economic, and social systems. Additionally, MSD suggests that individuals' behavior is contingent upon the structural resources and limitations of their environments (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Despite its contributions, MSD has faced criticisms. Critics argue that the theory may be less applicable in the current media landscape, where individuals have access to diverse information sources beyond traditional mass media (Umar, 2024). Furthermore, MSD may not adequately consider the role of social and cultural factors in shaping media dependency, such as socioeconomic status, education, and cultural background (Umar, 2024). Another limitation is that the theory focuses on media dependency but doesn't thoroughly address the question of media influence on individuals and society (Umar, 2024).

The Media Systems Dependency Theory can be applied to the study of social media disinformation in Nigeria by examining how individuals depend on media for information and how this dependency affects their perceptions and behaviors. Through analyzing media dependency relations, we can understand how social media platforms contribute to the spread of disinformation and how individuals' dependency on these platforms influences their susceptibility to misinformation. MSD can help researchers develop strategies to mitigate the spread of disinformation on social media platforms. By applying MSD to the study of social media disinformation in Nigeria, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between media, individuals, and society and develop effective strategies to address the issue of disinformation.

4. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative desk research methodology. It focuses on an extensive review of scholarly articles, legal frameworks, institutional reports, and policy analyses of a discourse. Desk research was selected for its ability to systematically synthesize existing evidence, enabling a thorough exploration of the challenges and legal gaps faced by media regulation in the digital age. Sources included comparative studies on media laws from various countries, analyses of the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, and examinations of public trust in media institutions.

The methodological approach facilitated the triangulation of insights across different geographic contexts, highlighting both universal pressures, such as the rapid dissemination of disinformation and declining public trust, and context-specific challenges, including political interference and infrastructural deficits in Nigeria. This comprehensive analysis provided a solid foundation for developing actionable recommendations aimed at reforming media law to better address the complexities of social media disinformation.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the existing media law framework in Nigeria is inadequately equipped to address the pervasive challenges posed by social media disinformation. The rapid spread of false information on digital platforms has significant implications for public trust in

media institutions. The inability of regulatory bodies to effectively manage disinformation has led to widespread skepticism toward all forms of media, undermining their role as reliable sources of information (Ojo, 2021). This erosion of trust complicates efforts to foster informed democratic engagement, highlighting the urgent need for legal reforms that address these gaps.

Moreover, the study indicates that the legal frameworks governing media in Nigeria often reflect outdated paradigms that fail to account for the dynamic nature of digital communication. Current media laws lack sufficient provisions for content moderation and accountability of social media platforms, allowing misinformation to proliferate unchecked (Ogunleye, 2023). This legal vacuum not only hampers the ability of media organizations to combat disinformation but also contributes to a culture of impunity where perpetrators face minimal consequences.

In addition, the findings highlight the critical role of regulatory imperatives in shaping a more resilient media landscape. Effective regulation must prioritize transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, ensuring that media organizations can operate independently from political interference (Udom, 2023). The study underscores the necessity for collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including government agencies, media organizations, and civil society, to develop comprehensive strategies for addressing disinformation while safeguarding public interest.

A recurring theme across the analysis is that economic sustainability alone cannot ensure the effectiveness of media regulation. The Trust Theory suggests that institutional trust hinges on credibility, impartiality, and transparency. The erosion of trust in Nigerian media institutions reflects broader issues of political bias and opaque funding. Therefore, it is imperative that any reforms to media law not only address financial models but also prioritize governance structures that enhance institutional credibility.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the viability of media law in the digital age depends on a multifaceted approach that integrates legal reforms, stakeholder collaboration, and public education. A media landscape that effectively combats disinformation must ensure not only robust regulatory frameworks but also a commitment to building public trust and credibility. In Nigeria, this challenge is particularly pronounced, requiring bold reforms that align legal protections with the realities of digital communication.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that revisiting media law in Nigeria is essential for addressing the challenges posed by prevalent social media disinformation. The findings indicate that existing legal frameworks are inadequate, reflecting a need for comprehensive reforms that enhance the regulatory landscape while fostering public trust. As demonstrated by the experiences of other countries, including the UK and the US, the interplay between legal mechanisms and public perception is crucial for the effectiveness of media regulation.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

(i) Media laws should be revised to include specific provisions for content moderation, accountability for social media platforms, and penalties for disseminating disinformation, thereby ensuring a more responsible media environment.

(ii) Regulatory bodies must prioritize transparency by clearly disclosing funding sources and implementing safeguards to maintain editorial independence, thereby rebuilding public trust in media institutions.

(iii) Educational initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy should be developed to empower citizens to critically evaluate the information they encounter online, fostering a

more informed public capable of navigating the complexities of the digital information landscape.

7. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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