

BATTLING INSECURITY THROUGH RHETORICAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Fake news and misinformation are two factors that are capable of rousing tension and creating chaos in a community. With the invention of the internet and other digital information and communication technology, purveyors of fake news and misinformation have found the means of reaching a large audience within a short space of time and, thereby, increasing the speed and rate of causing fracas and chaos. This conceptual study reviewed related literature and discovered that fake news and misinformation are designed to manipulate the emotions of their audience. It reflected on Jamieson and Cappella's Echo Chamber Effects and Boehm's Validity Effect and concluded that when people continue to receive fake news and misinformation, they may act irrationally and become a security threat. As a result, it suggested that teaching rhetoric in Nigerian schools can help the audience discover the intention behind fake news and misinformation by uncovering the persuasive tools their creators employed. By so doing, fake news and misinformation may lose their potency and, in turn, reduce the speed of their spread.

Keywords: rhetoric, fake news, misinformation, insecurity

Introduction

Nigeria is currently plagued by insecurity. The country faces terrorist attacks in some regions and different forms of communal clashes in other parts of the country (Zubairu, 2020; Ndubisi-Okolo & Anigbogu, 2019, Ishola, 2022; Ozoigbo, 2019). For example, Nigeria is currently battling Boko Haram in the North East, bandits in the North West, and Unknown Gun Men in the South East. In addition, the North Central is

plagued by communal clashes between Fulani cattle herders and farmers or Fulani cattle herders and the original indigenes of the affected communities. This does not mean that other parts of the country are free from insecurity because cases of armed robbery, arbitrary killings, and other forms of violence occur in every part of the country. Another form of insecurity plaguing Nigeria is cybercrime, which exposes citizens to the threat of losing their properties and life savings within the twinkle of an eye. In other words, Nigeria faces physical as well as virtual insecurity.

The Nigerian government may be accused of allowing insecurity to fester, but it should be noted that it has made efforts to reduce or eradicate the problem in the country. For example, the government has enacted and adopted laws and policies that can help it battle insecurity (Adegbami, 2013). The military, police, and other security agencies have been provided and equipped with sophisticated weapons, surveillance equipment, vehicles, fighter planes and helicopters, and other world-class security infrastructure that can help them to subdue insecurity (Adegbami, 2013; Ayitogo, 2022). Arrests and raids have been carried out by several security agencies, through which many perpetrators of terrorist attacks and other forms of violent crimes were apprehended, detained, tried, and imprisoned. In the virtual world, security measures have been set up to prevent malicious cyber attacks from internet fraudsters. However, despite all these measures, the rate of insecurity in Nigeria did not reduce. Instead, the reverse is the case (Ishola, 2022; Ozigbo, 2019). This means that the adopted strategies for combating insecurity in the country are not as effective as expected. As a result, other measures should be considered and adopted in the war against insecurities in Nigeria.

This reflective paper aims to disclose how teaching rhetoric in Nigerian schools can help in battling insecurity in the country. This paper argues that one of the major causes of insecurities in the country is misinformation and fake news, which cannot be prevented with any form of sophisticated military weapon despite its ability to inflame chaos. The study upholds that the human mind, when nurtured appropriately, is a major tool that can be used to suppress insecurity in the country. As a result, the broad research question this study will

attempt to answer is, “How can the learning of rhetoric reduce the rate of insecurity in Nigeria?”

Fake News and Misinformation as Triggers of Insecurity

Fake news is false and misleading information that is deliberately created and circulated as an authentic news article and intended to convince its receivers that it is genuine (Uwalaka, 2021; Rocha et al., 2021; Uwalaka, 2022). Apuke and Omar (2020) explain that fake news is not only a piece of information that spreads falsity but also false information intended to mislead. Ecker et al. (2022) explain that misinformation is similar to fake news because both are false messages, spread to an audience with the pretence that they are authentic. As a result, this study focuses on fake news and misinformation because they both have the same negative effect on their receivers: both fake news and misinformation spread false messages that can mislead their receivers and cause chaos.

As stressed above, fake news and misinformation can trigger insecurity because they can spread hate speech and malicious misinformation, which can trigger negative emotions against the subject of the message (Umar, 2022; Ecker et al., 2022; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). In addition, the duo can lead to the establishment of a malicious belief system, which can be achieved through indoctrination with false and extremely malicious ideology (Pedrini, 2019; Apuke & Omar, 2020; Umar, 2022). When this is done, it can lead to extremism and polarisation, which can induce the polarised factions to develop negative emotions against members of the out-groups (Umar, 2021). Each of these groups may develop a cult-like bond that can alienate non-members (Apuke & Omar, 2020). If a crisis erupts among these extremely polarised factions, there is bound to be chaos. Furthermore, the extremism caused by misinformation can also create a crisis in society because it can turn people against the government as well as engineer violent protests, encourage crime, and breed terrorism (Umar, 2022; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020; Pedrini, 2019). All these are forms of insecurity that are currently witnessed in different parts of the world.

Misinformation and fake news may not exist or spread if they do not have drivers that feed their existence. Many scholars, such as Ecker et al. (2022), Umar (2022), Rocha et al. (2021), Pate and Ibrahim (2020), and Uwalaka (2021), have agreed that social media has increased the rate of

misinformation in the world. The birth of social media and other digital communication channels has made it easier and faster to create and spread misinformation and fake news continuously (Umar, 2022; Uwalaka, 2022; Rocha et al., 2021). The ease social media grants the spread of falsity enables the creators of false information to radicalise their targets easily and then use them as human tools and weapons for achieving specific aims, some of which are chaos.

Other factors that can encourage the creation and spread of misinformation and fake news include information type (whether the information is emotive, religious, political, etc.), the information source (whether it came from a role model, an in-group member, a trusted individual, an elite, etc.), partisanship, culture of the receivers, which may align and accommodate the content of the false message, and personal worldview (Ecker et al., 2022; Apuke & Omar, 2020; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). In addition, people's lack of interest in fact-checking information or questioning the source's credibility also leads to the spread and acceptance of fake news and misinformation (Ecker et al., 2022). Lack of analytical thinking (whereby receivers accept information without deliberating on it) and poor memory (especially when receivers forget the authentic information and fail to differentiate it from fake information) can also allow fake news and misinformation to linger, fester, and become destructive (Ecker et al., 2022). These factors provide enough grounds for carrying out studies, which can discover how people can be taught to analyse any information they receive to find out whether it is authentic or not.

Theoretical Backings on Fake News and Misinformation as Insecurity Triggers

Two theories that capture how fake news and misinformation can lead to insecurities are Jamieson and Cappella's Echo Chamber Effect and Boehm's Validity Effect. This section discusses these theories to disclose their propositions and how their arguments reflect what is happening in Nigeria today.

The Echo Chamber Effect

The Echo Chamber Effect was propounded by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella in 2010. They captured the theory in their book, *Echo Chamber: Lush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media*

Establishment (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010). This theory focuses on how information travels through a group without restriction (Cinelli et al., 2021; Chen, 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018). It discloses that members of a particular group only receive and share the same type of information and opinion with other in-group members. The Echo Chamber Effects captures how misinformation and fake news can indoctrinate and radicalise people.

An echo chamber, ordinarily, is a term that is used in media discourse to refer to a room that amplifies sounds by reverberating them off the walls of the room (Cinelli et al., 2021). However, Jamieson and Cappella extended the term to provide an explanation and framework for studying how media contents reverberate through human groups who are within an invisible echo chamber. The theory propounds that an echo chamber builds a form of structure to cause members of a particular social, religious, economic, cultural, or political group to share a common ideology, cluster around one another, hold a common opinion, and distrust and discredit the opinions of out-group members (Chen, 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018). The structure of an echo chamber also locks members within an invisible but firm enclosure that prevents them from accessing, relating, and communicating with outsiders (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010; Cinelli et al., 2021). It forms a cult-like structure, which focuses on the strict indoctrination of members (Chen, 2021). As the members of this group interact with one another without the interference of outsiders, there is bound to be a constant repetition of a particular piece of information or opinion, which will, in turn, ensure that their belief system and values are always reinforced (Chen, 2021). This could lead to extremism and polarisation of the members after a long period of enclosure.

As mentioned earlier, Jamieson and Cappella's Echo Chamber Effect provides a perfect view of how fake news and misinformation can cause insecurity if allowed to emerge, linger, spread widely, and permeate every corner of society. Dubois and Blank (2018) observe that misinformation within an echo chamber is considered the truth, while the truth is rejected because it is perceived as misinformation. Chen (2021) states that the issue with echo chambers is that distorted and exaggerated information is not fact-checked, debunked, or corrected. Considering that these individuals are metaphorically enclosed within a

space, which cannot be penetrated easily by external influences as a result of their leanings toward different social, economic, political, cultural or religious groups if fake news or misinformation is released within the enclosed group, the members will accept it as the truth. Their behaviours, mindsets, and worldviews will, therefore, be guided by the content of the false message. In a situation where the message contains information that can stimulate negative emotions or reactions against an individual or a group, it is unlikely that any in-group member will be able to act or react differently.

The Validity Effect

Understanding the argument of Jamieson and Cappella's Echo Chamber Effect regarding the impact of information spread within an enclosed group can help in understanding the argument of The Validity Effect. This theory was propounded by Lawrence Boehm in 1989 (Boehm, 1994). According to the theory, people tend to develop a biased acceptance of a statement that has been repeated often or one they have heard several times. Boehm (1994) states that when a statement is repeated often or circulated over a long period, whether it is factual or not, it may likely be perceived as true and valid because the receivers will forget its source. This may result in the receivers showing less interest in the credibility of the source and more in the plausibility of the information content (Boehm, 1994; Ecker et al., 2022). At this stage, the receivers will believe the source is credible, especially if the information is currently tied to a source that is respected by the group members (Boehm, 1994). If this incident occurs in an echo chamber, the effect will influence more members to become radicalised and polarised.

Another argument projected by The Validity Effect is that familiarity plays a key role in the acceptance or rejection of information. It discloses that the more familiar a piece of information is, the more likely it will be accepted (Boehm, 1994; Ecker et al., 2022). Likewise, the more unfamiliar, new, or distant such information is, the more likely it will be rejected. Ecker et al. (2022) disclose that familiarity with information can create the illusion of truth, which can motivate immediate acceptance of the message. This familiarity tenet also postulates that people tend to accept information from familiar or acceptable sources and then reject those from unfamiliar or unacceptable sources (Boehm, 1994).

This latter aspect of the Validity Effect shares the same argument with the Echo Chamber Effect because they both posit that people accept only the information that agrees with their worldview, value system, and ideology, whether as a group or as individuals. By this, the theories suggest that misinformation and fake news can be accepted and allowed to influence decisions, mindsets, and actions because of their familiarity with the receivers' ideology, knowledge, values, and belief system. This is to say that in a situation where the false message bears malicious content, no one can debunk it unless, as Ecker et al. (2022) posit, people learn how to question and judge the content and source of information immediately after they are exposed to it. This is why people should be taught to analyse information to discover the strategies used in its creation.

Understanding Aristotelian Rhetoric

Rhetoric is a type of communication that is designed to influence, persuade or manipulate. In ancient Greece, it was taught by sages as a means of expressing thoughts to persuade the audience (Doan, 2017; Torto, 2020; Murthy & Gosal, 2016). However, when Aristotle showed an interest in the concept, he began to analyse and criticise rhetoric as it was used during his time (Torto, 2020). Instead of viewing rhetoric as a communicative art, he argued that the concept is both scientific and pragmatic (Torto, 2020; Aristotle, 2008). To him, rhetoric is "the faculty of observing, in any given case, the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 2008, p. 10).

Aristotle argues that rhetoric is scientific because it is a tool of knowledge which provides a systematic approach to studying persuasion and communication through an evidence-based methodology (Aristotle, 2008; Murthy & Gosal, 2016; Torto, 2020). He argues that rhetoric is pragmatic because it studies a piece of information by considering its context of use (Torto, 2020). In other words, Aristotle believes that rhetoric should be perceived as a way of studying communication to identify its persuasive strategies and not as an art of communication. This is to say that rhetoric is the study and practice of communication to persuade or influence others. Nevertheless, this study adopts the Aristotelian perception of rhetoric,

which is the pragmatic and scientific study of persuasive communication.

According to Aristotle (2008), rhetoric has three elements or divisions which can be used to analyse communication or information. These elements consider the speaker or source of the information, the subject of the information or the message, and the receiver of the information, who is the person being addressed. Aristotle posits that the receiver of information is the element that determines how effective a message is. In other words, the receiver is the focal point of any persuasive message.

The three elements of Aristotelian rhetoric study the three modes of persuasion that may occur in persuasive communication. The first element, which focuses on the speaker, studies the credibility of the speaker as a source of information. This is the element of Aristotelian rhetoric that is known as **ethos**. When this element is used as a lens to study persuasive communication, an individual can investigate the speaker's character, socioeconomic status, socio-cultural status, educational qualifications, records, level of knowledge, and other qualities that can portray his credibility (Torto, 2020; Murthy & Gosal, 2016; Doan, 2017). Aristotle (2008) argues that a person's character determines whether his audience will find him credible or not. If he is perceived as a good man by his audience, he may most likely be able to persuade them. In extension, when the source of information is believed to be authentic, the receivers of the information are likely to accept it.

The second element of Aristotelian rhetoric focuses on the information or message that is circulated. Aristotle (2008) explains that this element aligns with the third mode of persuasion, which is achieved through the message itself and not through the credibility of the source or the manipulation done on the receiver. He posits that if a message is proven to be true or an apparent truth, it will become persuasive. This mode applies logic and reasoning through the message to achieve persuasion (Torto, 2020; Murthy & Gosal, 2016; Doan, 2017). It can provide evidence to support the argument of the message through the use of facts, figures, and events (Torto, 2020; Murthy & Gosal, 2016). It is achieved when messages appeal to the intelligence of the audience and enable them to use critical reasoning to conclude. This third mode of

persuasion and a second element of Aristotelian rhetoric is known as **Logos**.

Aristotle (2008) further explains that persuasion can be achieved by “putting the audience into a certain frame of mind” (p. 10). He refers to this second mode of persuasion and third element of the rhetoric as **Pathos** and explains that understanding and describing the emotions a speaker intends to elicit in the audience will help in determining the persuasive strategy he used. Murthy and Gosal (2016) argue that pathos studies the psychological effect of information on receivers and the reactions it may likely induce. In other words, pathos is the tool an individual can use to discover how a message intends to capture the interest of its audience through the manipulation of their emotions.

In summary, Aristotelian rhetoric provides a theoretical framework that can be used to study every form of information, but most especially persuasive communication. With the three elements proposed by the theory, an individual will be able to test and analyse information by categorising its content into ethos, logos, and pathos and, therefore, determine the intent of the message and how it is used to persuade its audience. This theory, when learned and used judiciously to analyse information, may help to battle insecurity in every community.

How Rhetoric Can Battle Insecurity

Fake news and misinformation have been identified as factors that can trigger insecurity if they are allowed to spread and fester within a community (Ecker et al., 2022; Apuke & Omar, 2020; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020; Pedrini, 2019). However, Ecker et al. (2022) argue that if an individual can study and analyse a piece of information immediately after receiving it, he will be able to judge whether it is fake or not. If he discovers the false information hidden within the message, he will not act or react to the fake news or misinformation or allow it to influence him as expected by the sender (Ecker et al., 2022). This means that people might not be indoctrinated or radicalised with falsity if they do not accept fake news and misinformation. This can help to prevent insecurities that are caused by misinformation and fake news.

Fortunately, Aristotle has identified and developed a framework that can be used to study communication to determine the persuasive

strategies used by the sender. With the Aristotelian rhetoric, the persuasive strategies used in any message can easily be detected (Aristotle, 2008; Torto, 2020; Murthy and Gosal, 2016; Doan, 2017). The three rhetorical appeals identified by the theory as existing in persuasive communication can be used as the framework for studying information. However, people have to learn this theory and how to apply its tenets before they can use it.

As mentioned earlier, Aristotelian Rhetoric identifies three appeals made by persuasive messages. These are appeals to persuade through the sender's credibility, the message being sent, and the receiver's emotions or interests. These appeals are studied through three elements or tenets of Aristotelian Rhetoric, which are ethos, logos, and pathos, respectively. With the knowledge of ethos, information receivers will be able to demand, investigate, and verify the character, personal interest, goodwill, and credibility of the sender or source of information. Knowledge of pathos will help them to analyse messages to discover the emotional manipulations the sender intends to elicit in his audience. And then, knowledge of logos will equip information receivers with the skills to search for and verify evidence or claims made in messages.

In summary, learning the Aristotelian Rhetoric will help people to study communication systematically and pragmatically immediately after they are exposed to it. They will be able to analyse messages to identify the motive of the sender and the effect of the information on the receiver. This can help in preventing radicalisation and extremism, which can lead to the perpetuation of insecurity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Fake news and misinformation have been identified as one of the triggers of insecurity in any given human community. When people hear false information severally and over a long period, they tend to believe it to be true because they will no longer remember its source. In addition, if the information is circulated within a tightly knitted group, echo chamber and validity effects are likely to take place. When such happens, radicalisation, polarisation, and extremism may occur. The individuals exposed to such will become security threats if they are indoctrinated to hold values and belief systems that can trigger negative

reactions and violence against out-group members, the government, or society at large.

To prevent fake news and misinformation from penetrating communities and causing destruction, people must learn how to analyse and judge messages they receive, especially if the messages are persuasive. One of the best frameworks for analysing communication is provided by Aristotle in the *Aristotelian Rhetoric*, by which the source's credibility, the logicality of the message, and the emotional manipulation the message will have on its receivers can be studied and identified. With the use of this framework, fake news and misinformation will become less effective on receivers.

Based on the argument of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Aristotelian Rhetoric should be taught as a subject of study in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions.
2. Researchers can pilot the teaching of rhetoric to verify its effect in discouraging the spread and potency of fake news and misinformation.

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