Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 across the world has wrecked havoc in almost every facet of life. One industry that has felt the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the media sector. Following a number of COVID-19 restrictive measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus, a number of media houses across West Africa have lost revenue due to reduction in advertisements, non-payment of advertisements done before COVID-19, and drops in sales in the case of newspapers. The situation has resulted in the retrenchment of journalists and other media workers.

Beyond the economic challenges, one issue that the media and other stakeholders have had to deal with following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is fake news (including misinformation and disinformation) about the virus, its spread and treatment. Across West Africa, as in other parts of the world, there have been several publications, especially about the disease which have proven to be false. For instance, prior to the record of the index case of COVID-19 in Africa, there were already viral messages making rounds that due to some geographical conditions on the continent, the virus could not thrive. However, as at July 31, 2020, Africa had recorded a total case count of 770 421 cases according to the WHO.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, fake news was already an issue in a number of countries in the region. However, there has been an exponential rise in the phenomenon from the time of the first case(s) announcement in the respective countries.

This report briefly examines the phenomenon of fake news in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Anglophone West Africa. It specifically addresses the following areas: fake news trends; how the phenomenon has impacted the work of the media and the fight against the pandemic; measures taken so far (by government, media, development partners, others) to address the spread of the phenomenon; and recommendations on the way forward.

Fake News Trends around COVID-19

Several news items have been reported in a number of mainstream and new media about the COVID-19 pandemic that have proven to be false. Some of the misinformation even started before some countries recorded their first cases of the virus. Even though some fake news items have been found in traditional media, majority have been via social media, especially, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. In a number of instances, such false information are generated/produced and uploaded online by citizen journalists with clickbait headlines. In some instances, some government officials and political spokespersons have also been found to be guilty of spreading fake news.

Unfortunately, people keep forwarding such messages out of fear and sometimes panic about the spread of the virus. Some also do so with the hope of warning family and friends to stay safe, but without recourse to the source or any due diligence to be sure that the information is accurate before forwarding or sharing.

The subject matter of many of the fake news items about COVID-19 in Anglophone West Africa has been around false cures, anti-vaccination propaganda, conspiracy theories around 5G, and relationship with COVID-19 patients, among others. However, false information that dominated social media platforms in the early stages of the pandemic were about denying the existence of the virus in Africa. Some false reports also highlighted the fact that due to some geographical conditions on the continent such as warm temperatures, the virus could not thrive on the continent. In Liberia for example, there was the generally held belief that "COVID-19 does not exist", "black people don't get infected" and that the "government is doing all it can to extort money from foreign nations or big giving philanthropists."

Fake news around possible remedies, as well as fake vaccines were also frequent on social media. In Ghana, for example, Ebenezer Amankwah, a journalist with OTEC FM based in Kumasi, indicated that "one of the most popular fake news shared on social media was that standing in the sun can cure the COVID-19.".

Unfortunately, such inaccurate pieces of information have had varied implications on the media, the fight against the virus and the public at large, as detailed below.

Implications of Fake News on the Media and the Fight Against COVID-19

The upsurge in fake news about the Coronavirus disease has created a number of challenges for the media industry, the fight against the virus and the general public at large. Although not all the misleading or false information about COVID-19 may be directly harmful, some pose serious challenges as they create false hopes and mislead people.

To some extent, the spread of fake news has had mixed impact on the media industry – while the phenomenon has affected the trust levels of media content, it has also pushed journalists to do more. The rise in the peddling of rumours and false news has increased the already existing mistrust about media outputs in the region. In The Gambia and Nigeria, for instance, the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has further created confusion and mistrust about news and information coming from mainstream media. People are uncertain about which information to believe: information from legacy media or social media; and some also are unable to differentiate between social media information and news reports generated by traditional media. Given the very low media literacy in the region, the belief is that any information coming from the media is from

journalists. This has further engendered mistrust for media content and journalists as a whole.

In Liberia, right from the beginning of the outbreak, there was a generally held belief that 'COVID-19 does not exist,' and that 'black people do not get infected.' This perception made it difficult for people to trust news and information disseminated by the media about the virus. Journalists on radio stations in Liberia, especially talk show hosts, have overly been confronted with denials of COVID-19 by their listeners. This has compounded the work of the media as they constantly have to try to debunk fake news and provide accurate information to their audiences.

Also, because information on social media platforms spread faster with the aid of the internet, by the time traditional media institutions are able to crosscheck facts and provide accurate reports, the public may have already viewed, listened to, or read false news. Thus, the media, while competing to break news in a timely manner, also have the onus task of crosschecking and making sure that their news reports are factual, accurate and credible.

Some traditional media have also been blamed for the spread of fake news about the COVID-19 disease. This could in part be attributed to the fact that for a number of journalists across the region, this is their first time of covering a pandemic in their journalism career. For a country like Nigeria, the last known pandemic which affected the country was the Spanish Flu of 1918 to 1920, by which time many of the practicing journalists currently in newsrooms were not born. Thus, journalists themselves were caught up in misreporting sometimes as they lacked adequate knowledge and information, especially during the early stages of the outbreak of COVID-19. The media, particularly journalists, including those with no background in health reporting were, thus, under a lot of pressure to cover COVID-19 stories factually, while dealing with the challenge of prompt and regular debunking of fake news.

The media's situation was further compounded by the fact that they had not invested much in training journalists on how to fact-check issues. Unfortunately, during the early stages of the pandemic when many media houses were loosing revenues especially as a result of lockdowns and other restrictive measures, many media houses could not commit funds to build the capacity of journalists on fact checking. This has made it difficult for a lot of media houses to fact-check and correct misinformation circulating mainly on social media.

Another worrying development in the fight against fake news and misinformation by the traditional media is the fact that some journalists are abused by state security agents when they try to gather first-hand information on a number of issues. In Nigeria for example, state security officers denied some journalists access to some communities and assaulted others for taking pictures, making enquiries or covering lockdown and social distancing observance, among others. This generally hinders the ability of journalists to get information from primary

sources to generate fact-based reports or even contribute to debunking some false news.

Implications of Fake News on Public Health Messaging about COVID-19

Beyond the media, fake news has also impacted the frantic effort by governments, health workers and other stakeholders against the virus. The peddling of false news has, at some point, undermined and impeded public health messaging as people tend to use unsubstantiated and unapproved prescriptions and medications which may be harmful to their health. In Nigeria for example, health personnel identified numerous cases of Chloroquine overdose after alleged news from the media claimed its efficacy for the treatment of COVID-19 (Busari and Adebayo, 2020)[1].

Fake news also drowns up public health messaging about the virus and hygiene protocols that can help stop or minimise the spread of the disease. This affects perceptions and how people take precautionary measures thereby stalling efforts aimed at limiting the spread of the disease. Fake news also puts people at risk of patronising fake products and services. It gives people a false sense of security (e.g. misleading information about treatments) and sometimes makes people suspicious about official guidelines[2] and undermines them.

Indeed, although not all fake news may directly be harmful, some have had seriously negative implications on people. Given the low literacy levels across the region and the fact that many people are unable to crosscheck and separate facts from fiction, false information about the virus is likely to be accepted as truth and create unnecessary fear, panic and worry in people. Such information also leads people to take actions that may be detrimental to their lives and that of others. In Sierra Leone, at least one woman died from cardiac arrest on March 19, 2020 following some fake news that circulated on social media claiming that school children in Freetown were being injected with a strange Corona vaccine. Mrs. Mantie Tina Turay, a mother, who had a health condition, died of cardiac arrest after running some distance to check on her child at school around the Met Chem area, Goderich, west of Freetown. According to her husband, Aruna Turay, she was rushed to the Emergency Hospital where she was pronounced dead shortly after."[3]

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[1] www.frontiersin.org
[2] https://www.europol.europa.eu/covid-19/covid-19-fake-news
[3] http://www.ayvnewspaper.com/index.php/2020/03/23/woman-dies-over-corona-injection-fake-news/#:~:text=Mantie%20according%20to%20the%20husband,the%20fake%20Corona%20injection%20news.

Measures undertaken by the Media to address the Spread of Fake News

Despite the direct impact of fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 on media and journalists themselves, traditional media have generally received pressure from both state and non-state actors to help combat the pandemic of fake news around the Coronavirus disease. The media have responded to this call in diverse ways. To ensure that news content is factual and accurate, a lot of the media houses across the region have resorted to the use of health experts as their main sources of information. They have also been using information provided by officialdom through statements, press briefings, and information provided on the websites and social media pages of state institutions charged with communication around COVID-19. The media also use information from such sources to crosscheck and verify viral messages making rounds on social media and some news outlets.

A number of programmes have also been institutionalised by a number of radio and television stations to counter fake news and misinformation about COVID-19. These initiatives have not been led by the media alone, but also media groups, associations and media CSOs/NGOs. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) together with the Independent Radio Network (IRN) broadcast radio and television talk shows around COVID-19. The daily COVID-19 talk shows bring on board medical practitioners and other experts to give factual and accurate information about the Coronavirus disease. The programmes are in two forms: the daily 'Leh Wi Dreb Corona' [Let's Drive Corona Away] and the weekly 'Corona Tok' [Talk] simulcast programmes.[4] On their part, newspapers also publish stories and infographics on the need to avoid fake news.

In the case of The Gambia, one of the very first steps taken was to engage known professionals and officials and give them airtime and space in the news media to debunk misinformation from social media. Many radio and television stations have also produced their own informative jingles based on facts and information from bodies like the WHO. The jingles are occasionally played on air to sensitise people and provide accurate information about the virus.

In Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been working with 50 radio stations across the country to disseminate fact-checked reports about COVID-19, and false and misleading information that make rounds in the country. The radio stations also sensitise the public about COVID-19 protocols and other measures put in place by the government. They also produce myth-busters to dissuade the public from following some myths about the spread, cure and association with Coronavirus patients. Some of the fact-checked reports, 'Corona Facts' and myth-busters are also published in some of the leading newspapers in the country.

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[4] SLAJ @ 49, Statement by the President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, Friday, 5th June 2020

The MFWA has also been working with its partner organisations in all the 16 countries in the region to provide in-country situational reports about how the Coronavirus is impacting the operations and viability of the media. The country reports provide empirical information and insights to inform and guide stakeholders who may initiate media sector support interventions at national or regional levels.

For Liberia, The Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) and the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) have taken steps to help in the fight against fake news and misinformation in the country. CEMESP is implementing a special COVID-19 news fact-check initiative, "the COVID-19 Media Content Monitoring and Awareness Project." The project is aimed at monitoring media and social media content to identify fake news or publications that require fact-checking or further verification. The monitoring reports are then discussed on radio where experts and relevant duty-bearers address them to aid in factual and accurate news reporting about COVID-19.

On its part, the PUL has published the first in a series of reporting guidelines for Liberian journalists on covering COVID-19 in the country. The PUL Vice President, Daniel Nyankonah, has indicated that two more versions will be launched soon. The COVID-19 guidelines are meant to ensure credible news reporting that brings facts, credibility and genuine reporting to the coverage of the pandemic.

Similar to the work CEMESP is doing in Liberia, the International Press Centre (IPC) in Nigeria has been contributing to the fight against fake news and misinformation through media monitoring. Through the monitoring, the IPC provides records of incidents of fake news and profiles perpetrators as a means of discouraging the practice.

Some newsrooms have also put in place internal measures to contribute to curbing the spread of false information about the virus. For Example, the News Director of private radio station, Prime FM, in Monrovia, Liberia, Jutonu Y. Kollie said, "we have instituted several measures to guard against fake news in the face of the new Coronavirus. One of the measures is that we don't carry stories about dreams or vision that COVID-19 is not real and is meant for money making." According to Jutonu Kollie, his newsroom "no longer carries stories about politicians with unverified reports and inaccurate accounts on the virus," but instead, the newsrooms "deal with expert opinions and views of relevant authorised health authorities." "We also do research," Kollie added.

Fact-checking initiatives and networks have also complemented the work of the media in combatting false news by fact-checking statements by public figures and officialdom, as well as viral hoaxes making rounds on social media. In Ghana, the MFWA's Fact-CheckGhana project has been fact-checking claims, statements and myths about COVID-19 and providing some basic facts about the virus and how to prevent further spread. Africa check, CrossCheck Nigeria, FactCheck Nigeria

and DUBAWA – being fact-checking organisations – have been dedicated to exposing fake news and preserving the reputation and credibility of well-researched and honest journalistic work.

Measures taken by Government and Other Stakeholders Against Fake News

Across the region, the surge in the spread of fake news became a source of concern to many, including governments, civil society organisations in the media sector, the media themselves, development partners and the general public at large. As a result, a number of interventions were carried out by the different stakeholders to contribute to curbing the menace.

In a number of countries, there were fears that governments were going to introduce regulatory measures to mitigate fake news and misinformation which could further limit the right to free expression. In some countries, such regulatory measures were implemented, while in others, threats and warnings were given for the use of already existing measures to counter fake news and misinformation around the Coronavirus disease. In Nigeria, some States used the COVID-19 outbreak to pass laws which criminalise giving false information. The Kano State Public Health Infectious Diseases Regulations 2020, for example, empowers the Governor to "sanction and prosecute any individual or organisation perceived to be spreading fake news about the pandemic in the State," Nasiru Yusuf Ibrahim of Abubakar Rimi Television (ARTV) reported.

There were also fears that pending Bills such as the National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill, and the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and other Related Offences Bill could be passed with the aim of mitigating the spread of fake news about COVID-19 in Nigeria. In fact, Mohammed Sani Musa, a Senator from Niger State who was sponsoring the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, argued that false information related to the Coronavirus was an example of the need for the legislation. However, none of the bills had been passed at the time of finalising this report.

In The Gambia, a threat was made to invoke the law on false publication for false or misleading information published or broadcast about COVID-19. The threat was made at one of the regular press briefings of the Ministry of Health when a member of the National COVID-19 Response Team warned journalists that they would not hesitate to invoke the law on false publications if journalists published or broadcast information about COVID-19 that are not correct or misleading.

In Ghana, sections of the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (clauses 75, 76) which talk about the transmission of false information or communication knowingly were highlighted in the media and social media to warm people to

desist from the practice. As at the time of finalising this report, no one had been charged with breaching the said clauses.

Also, in Sierra Leone, due to the rise in fake news and misinformation about COVID-19, the Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, indicated that government was contemplating passing a law to crackdown on fake news. "Fake news is definitely undermining the fight against COVID-19….," the Minister explained.

Apart from these regulatory measures and threats of applying existing laws against the publication of false information, there have been other interventions undertaken to counter fake news about COVID-19 in a number of countries. In almost all the countries in the region, officialdom used press briefings to counter false information about the disease. At some of the press conferences, health professionals were present to debunk fake news and dispel myths about the virus.

In The Gambia for example, both governmental and non-governmental actors produced factsheets with information from authentic bodies and disseminated to the public. The National COVID-19 Response Team of The Gambia use social media platforms to counters fake news peddled on such platforms. The Team opened groups and pages on all major social media platforms to give national update, but also to share facts and new developments about the virus.

In Sierra Leone, the media regulatory body, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), engaged media institutions about the danger of publishing and broadcasting fake news. This followed the threat by the Minister of Information and Communication about considerations of introducing a new law to deal with fake news. The engagements mainly focused on sensitisation and education for the media and not punitive actions. However, the IMC has a Code of Practice which warns against the publication and broadcast of inaccurate stories, a breach of which will result in a fine of One Million Leones (about $100).

Another approach that has been used to minimise fake news about COVID-19 is training of journalists. Although a number of journalists had relatively little knowledge about health issues in general, and the COVID-19 disease in particular, the onus fell on them to be reporting about the outbreak. To help deal with this, a number of media associations and development partners offered orientation and training workshops for the media in the respective countries.

In The Gambia, the Media Academy for Journalism and Communication, the training arm of the Gambia Press Union (GPU), from the time of the index case in the country tried to equip journalists in the country by piloting an online training for journalists on coverage of COVID-19. The GPU also produced an information sheet on safety tips for journalists covering COVID-19 or other events under pandemic conditions.

In the case of Ghana, the CSO platform on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) organised a training workshop for selected journalists across the country. The training, which was supported financially by GIZ, focused on how journalists could report factually and ethically on the COVID-19 outbreak.

For Sierra Leone, the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) have provided some orientation for journalists across the country on issues of fake news. Also, the European Union and the SLAJ have signed an agreement to support nationwide radio and television programmes aimed at addressing fake news around COVID-19 circulating on social media and messaging platforms. The support is also intended to support the media so they can provide the public with accurate and factual information and increase social media literacy and responsible communication among the public.[5] Again, the UNDP, through the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), offered some capacity building for journalists in response to improving their understanding to identify, check and debunk fake news on COVID-19 and equipping them with guidelines for reporting during emergencies.

In Liberia, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Liberia Office and Internews have held training workshops for journalists. Others like the USAID have also supported local organisations to conduct sensitisation about the virus to counter misinformation.
In the case of Nigeria, the International Press Centre has partnered with Africa Check to organise trainings for journalists on fact checking as a means of combating fake news. Also, international organisations provide some support for capacity to those engaged in building counter-narratives on fake news.

Also in Nigeria, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and Prevention set up a crisis communication team to share accurate information to the public, and debunk misinformation circulating on Nigerian's WhatsApp channels and on social media. The NCDC and the Ministry of Health also teamed up with popular Nigerian Actress, Funke Akindele Bello, to produce and share video with information on hygiene and sanitation protocols.

The Nigerian Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, launched a National Campaign against Fake News in July 2018 in Abuja. While the national campaign succeeded in putting the issue of fake news and hate speech on the front burner of national discourse, the menace is yet to go away.

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[5] Joint press release the European Union and Sierra Leone Association Of Journalists (SLAJ) launch radio/television programme to fight fake news/disinformation on COVID-19

Conclusion and Recommendations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease triggered exponential rise in the creation and spread of fake news, particularly about the virus, its mode of transmission, treatment and/or cure. Even though fake news was prevalent in almost all West African countries prior to COVID-19, the pandemic made the situation worse. The information overload about the disease has fuelled speculation, fear and panic among the general public, leading to one death in Sierra Leone. It has also affected trust levels about media content, drowned public health messaging and caused the general public to subscribe to unapproved medication and the patronage of fake products and services.

Legacy media have since been under pressure to provide counter narratives and debunk fake news making rounds, even though the media themselves have had their fair share of the negative implications of fake news. Generally, the media have risen to the occasion by undertaking a number of measures to help debunk fake news and dispel myths about the virus. Some of the measures undertaken include institutionalised programmes on COVID-19, use of only health professionals and government sources for news, and publication of infographics about the disease, among others.

Regional and national level media organisations and associations, and development partners have also supported a number of interventions to help manage the menace. Some of the measures undertaken include radio and television programming and publications in newspapers to debunk fake news, and training of journalists on how to identify, fact-check and debunk fake news. These and other interventions have been used to curb the excesses of fake news about the Coronavirus disease. Fortunately, with the exception of a few, many countries in the region have not introduced new laws to counter the spread of fake news, neither have they applied existing laws arbitrarily as part of measures to fight the menace.

Following the various interventions undertaken, the spread of fake new about the disease has relatively gone down, but the phenomenon is still prevalent. In almost all the countries in the region, however, it is not too clear what clear-cut strategies governments, media regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders have to thoroughly deal with the phenomenon. Looking at the negative impact fake news has had, and could have on the media, the fight against the pandemic, and the general public as a whole, the following recommendations are made:

1. Governments in the respective countries in the region should put in place systems, budgets and trained personnel to combat fake news in all its forms while respecting rights and freedoms.
2. Governments and development partners should support media literacy efforts on the proper use of social media, as well as legacy media, to help curb the spread of fake news.

3. State institutions charged with civic education, the media and other relevant stakeholders should sensitise the general public on the ramifications of fake news.
4. Governments, health professionals and other relevant stakeholders should always be proactive with credible information disclosure to avoid speculation and rumour mongering which often triggers the creation and spread of fake news.
5. State security agents who harass journalists in their line of duty should be brought to book to dissuade others from the practice. This will encourage journalists to go all lengths to gather credible information from primary sources.
6. Media owners and managers should invest in journalists by building their capacity in fact-checking and reporting on pandemics to help minimise inaccurate reporting about public health emergencies and other health-related issues.
7. Civil society groups and development partners should partner with the media to engage in more fact-checking and correction of fake news.