

Artificial Intelligence and the Crisis of Electoral Integrity in Nigeria: Emerging Threats of Disinformation

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies have significantly transformed the landscape of political communication, introducing sophisticated tools capable of generating and disseminating disinformation at an unprecedented scale. This study examines the implications of AI-driven disinformation on electoral integrity in Nigeria, with specific focus on the 2023 general elections. Using a qualitative research design, the paper draws insights from expert interviews, official reports, and verified online sources to explore how AI-generated content such as deepfakes, synthetic audio, chatbots, and algorithmically amplified fake news shaped public perception, influenced political discourse, and eroded trust in electoral institutions. The findings reveal that politically motivated actors exploited AI tools to manipulate information ecosystems, distort facts, and spread propaganda, thereby undermining the credibility of electoral processes. Moreover, institutional responses by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), and related agencies were largely reactive, constrained by limited technical capacity, weak coordination, and absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework. The study argues that safeguarding electoral integrity in the digital era requires proactive governance measures, including the establishment of an electoral cybersecurity task force, stronger collaboration between government institutions and technology platforms, and the development of national AI and data governance policies. It further emphasizes the importance of civic education, digital literacy, and continuous research to build societal resilience against emerging AI threats.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Disinformation, Electoral Integrity, Democracy

Introduction

Elections are widely regarded as the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders and influence policymaking. Election is a viable mechanism for perfecting representative government and voting is the main form of political participation in a democratic society (Tsuwa, et al, 2020). However, the credibility of electoral outcomes is significantly shaped by the integrity of the information gotten from the environment in which the elections take place. In recent years, the digital transformation of political communication amplified by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has created new challenges for safeguarding electoral integrity (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). AI technologies, particularly those that produce synthetic media such as deepfakes, algorithmically generated fake news, and bot-amplified disinformation campaigns, have introduced novel threats to the transparency, fairness, and legitimacy of democratic elections (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

One of the most pressing concerns is the deployment of AI-generated disinformation, which includes manipulated videos, texts, and social media activity designed to deceive the public, distort facts, and manipulate public opinion (Tsuwa, et al, 2020). These tactics not only threaten to misinform voters but also pose a serious risk to democratic norms and institutional trust. In countries like Nigeria, where the democratic culture is still evolving, such threats are particularly acute.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria offered a vivid example of this phenomenon. There was widespread circulation of misleading and harmful contents on social media platforms, much of which bore the hallmarks of AI-generated manipulations. Deepfakes portraying candidates in compromising situations, fabricated news articles, and automated tweets from bot accounts were widely disseminated, especially during the presidential and gubernatorial campaigns. These developments contributed to public confusion, voter apathy, and growing mistrust in the credibility of both the electoral process and the institutions mandated to oversee it (Nwankwor & Ojebode, 2023). Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine the extent and implications of AI-generated disinformation on electoral integrity in Nigeria.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence: Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to systems capable of executing tasks requiring human-like cognition, such as natural language processing, pattern recognition, and decision-making. In Nigeria, AI is emerging as a tool not only in digital campaigning and fact-verification but also as a means of information manipulation. As Tajudeen (2025) examines, AI adoption in Nigeria's electoral ecosystem has both promising and hazardous consequences its use hinges crucially on regulatory oversight by bodies such as INEC. On the counter side, Gwadi and Igbashangev (2024) highlight how AI-enhanced fact-checking tools are transforming the verification of election-related content, though they emphasize challenges posed by Nigeria's linguistic and infrastructural diversity.

Disinformation: Disinformation is falsely constructed information disseminated deliberately to deceive or manipulate audiences. In Nigeria, political actors and shadow networks exploit AI-driven platforms bots, fake accounts, and manipulated multimedia to spread harmful narratives. Olaniran (2022) thesis highlights how coordinated disinformation campaigns polluted Nigeria's 2019 presidential campaign, drawing on millions of tweets to trace narratives engineered to erode trust. Similarly, Alade and Ayeni (2023) document the prevalence of fake news in the 2023 presidential election, suggesting emerging evidence that exposure alters voter behaviour.

Electoral Integrity: Electoral integrity entails adherence to democratic principles like transparency, fairness, and legitimacy. In the digital era, the integrity of elections depends critically on the information ecosystem. Itodo (2024) emphasizes that AI systems can both bolster electoral trust, through voter registration and anomaly detection and threaten it, by enabling deepfake dissemination and algorithmic impersonation. Okolo (2024) further underscores that generative AI enables propaganda in Africa, urging the adoption of regulatory safeguards, civic literacy, and multi-stakeholder engagement. Election integrity can be described as any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle." (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2012). Without electoral integrity, leaders and

officials lack accountability to the public, confidence in the election results is weak, and the government lacks necessary legitimacy. Electoral integrity allows for peaceful resolution of conflict, open dialogue, debate, and information sharing among leaders and the public. Integrity depends on public confidence in electoral and political processes. It is not enough to reform institutions; citizens need to be convinced that changes are real and deserve their confidence. To ensure that elections have integrity, other factors outside of the electoral institutions themselves need to be taken into account and strengthened. Election officials, the judiciary must have independence that is respected by politicians.

Artificial Intelligence and Political Communication

The intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and political communication has redefined how political messages are created, disseminated, and received. Emerging AI tools such as ChatGPT, GPT-4, DALL·E, and deepfake generators have introduced new capacities for producing hyper-realistic but misleading content. These technologies are capable of synthesizing human-like voices, generating lifelike images and videos, and producing highly persuasive narratives that mimic authentic political discourse.

AI's application in political communication is not inherently negative; it offers innovative tools for civic engagement, political marketing, and public service delivery. However, when weaponized for disinformation, these same technologies become tools of manipulation. According to Bradshaw and Howard (2022), AI has become a cornerstone of computational propaganda, a strategic use of algorithms, automation, and digital platforms to influence public opinion and behavior at scale. Their global inventory reveals that political actors, both state and non-state, increasingly rely on AI-generated content to target voters with tailored misinformation, suppress dissent, and distort democratic dialogue.

In the Nigerian context, these developments are particularly consequential. As digital access expands, political actors and interest groups have turned to AI-enhanced tools to shape public narratives during election periods. For instance, Orakwe (2024) notes that during the 2023 general elections, several AI-generated political videos, synthetic tweets, and manipulated voice notes were circulated on platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter. These materials often exploited ethnic, religious, or partisan fault lines to influence voter emotions and behavior, thereby undermining the integrity of the electoral process.

AI systems such as deepfake generators pose a direct threat to political communication by eroding trust in audio-visual evidence. Videos that appear to show candidates making inflammatory statements or endorsing false policies can go viral before being verified, misleading large segments of the population. This trend has been described by Ojo and Fasakin (2023) as "algorithmic disinformation," where the manipulation is not only in the content but also in the targeting, timing, and repetition patterns enabled by machine learning algorithms.

Moreover, the use of AI-driven chatbots and comment bots to flood online spaces with coordinated narratives has skewed public opinion, creating an illusion of consensus or popularity around certain candidates or ideologies. Heinrich Böll Foundation (2022) observed that a significant number of social media followers of top Nigerian presidential candidates in 2023 were bots automated accounts designed to amplify specific political content, drown dissenting voices, and manipulate trending topics. These developments challenge traditional models of political communication and raise fundamental questions about voter autonomy and informed consent.

The ability of AI to manipulate not just the content but also the context of communication by microtargeting individuals based on their digital footprints raises concerns about the erosion of the public sphere. As scholars like Floridi and Cowls (2019) argue, the ethical deployment of AI in democratic societies must balance innovation with transparency, accountability, and human dignity. In electoral settings, this balance is even more critical to prevent manipulation and uphold electoral integrity.

AI-Driven Disinformation and Voter Perception and Electoral Behaviour

In Nigeria's evolving digital electoral landscape, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools such as bots, deepfakes, and synthetic messaging are increasingly being deployed to influence voter perception and manipulate electoral behavior. These tools form part of a broader strategy of AI-enhanced disinformation, which operates by exploiting digital communication platforms to spread falsehoods and distort democratic discourse.

Social media bots have emerged as central actors in the dissemination of electoral disinformation. These automated accounts are used to amplify content, simulate public consensus, and push particular political narratives. In the build-up to the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, research by the Heinrich Böll Foundation (2022) revealed that a significant portion of Twitter followers of major presidential candidates were bots 17.1% of Bola Tinubu's followers and 26.6% of Peter Obi's followers, respectively. This artificial amplification created false perceptions of popularity and public support, thereby influencing voter sentiment. Such practices mirror broader trends observed globally, where bots play a critical role in making low-credibility content go viral, especially in the early stages of information circulation.

Alongside bots, the rise of deepfakes and synthetic media has further complicated the Nigerian electoral information environment. According to Orakwe (2024), AI-generated images and videos falsely linking candidates to extremist groups or criminal networks were widely circulated ahead of the 2023 elections. These deepfakes were strategically crafted to incite ethnic and religious divisions, ultimately undermining public trust in both candidates and institutions. The psychological impact of such visual disinformation is particularly potent, as deepfakes can bypass critical reasoning and provoke emotional reactions, often before fact-checking mechanisms can respond.

The consequences of AI-driven disinformation on voter behavior are well documented in empirical studies. Obono and Diyo (2021) found a strong relationship between exposure to social media disinformation and changes in voting decisions during the 2019 presidential elections. Their content analysis highlighted how coordinated false narratives targeted candidates and parties to shape public opinion. More recently, research by Shalgan and Obateru (2025) in Plateau State demonstrated how low levels of media and digital literacy made voters more susceptible to online disinformation during the 2023 elections. Many participants accepted false claims as truth, with some even altering their voting preferences based on unverified content encountered online.

Despite these challenges, efforts to counter disinformation have gained momentum. Fact-checking organizations such as Dubawa and FactCheckHub employed AI tools to verify and debunk misinformation throughout the 2023 elections. The International Center for Journalists (2023) reports that techniques such as live transcription analysis, reverse image searches, and real-time social media monitoring helped combat the spread of audio and video fabrications including falsified clips attributed to presidential candidates. These interventions were supported by collaborative efforts from the Nigerian Fact-Checkers' Coalition, which

established digital “war rooms” and launched pre-bunking campaigns to educate the electorate and enhance information resilience.

Overall, the literature underscores that AI-driven disinformation poses a multi-dimensional threat to electoral integrity by distorting voter perception, influencing behavior, and eroding democratic trust. However, it also reveals that strategic fact-checking, civic education, and institutional collaboration offer promising countermeasures in building electoral resilience.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Agenda-Setting Theory by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw (1973). The Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media may not dictate what people think, but it significantly influences what people think about. McCombs and Shaw, in their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, found a strong correlation between the issues the media emphasized and the issues voters considered important. The central assumption is that media outlets shape public priorities by giving more coverage to certain topics, thereby increasing their perceived importance in the minds of the public.

In the context of the digital era, particularly during elections, this theory extends beyond traditional media to include social media platforms and algorithm-driven digital content. Artificial intelligence tools such as bots, deepfakes, and auto-generated posts can amplify certain narratives and suppress others, essentially setting the "agenda" of public discourse. These AI-enabled tools can push disinformation into the mainstream, influencing what voters consider urgent or legitimate even if the information is false or misleading.

One of the major criticisms of the Agenda-Setting Theory is its assumption of a passive audience. It tends to overlook the role of individual agency, media literacy, and selective exposure factors that influence how people interpret and respond to media content. In the digital age, users often actively select and engage with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (a phenomenon known as confirmation bias), which limits the theory's explanatory power regarding diverse audience reactions.

Secondly, the theory does not fully explain how the agenda-setting effect varies across different cultural or political contexts. In countries like Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, and regional identities strongly influence political behavior, the impact of media agenda-setting may be shaped by more localized or identity-based factors.

The Agenda-Setting Theory is highly relevant to this study on AI-Generated Disinformation and Electoral Integrity in Nigeria. It provides a framework for understanding how AI-powered disinformation campaigns can influence voter perceptions by controlling the visibility and salience of certain narratives during elections. When AI tools are used to amplify disinformation such as fabricated stories, manipulated videos, or misleading statistics they effectively push those narratives to the forefront of public consciousness, often at the expense of factual information.

In Nigeria's 2023 general elections, AI-driven disinformation influenced political conversations on social media, shaped voter priorities, and potentially affected electoral outcomes. By applying Agenda-Setting Theory, the study explores how the manipulation of the digital information environment through AI alters the issues voters deem important, thereby undermining electoral integrity and informed democratic participation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the role of AI-generated disinformation in shaping electoral integrity in Nigeria. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate for unpacking the nuanced of political, social, and technological complexities surrounding this emerging issue. It provides space for an in-depth exploration of experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices that are not easily captured through quantitative methods.

To gather data, the study relied on a combination of in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. Interviews were conducted with a purposive selection of knowledgeable individuals, including officials from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), experienced media professionals, representatives from fact-checking bodies such as DUBAWA and FactCheckHub, as well as cybersecurity analysts engaged in monitoring electoral misinformation. These respondents were chosen based on their expertise and active participation in Nigeria's 2023 general elections or in digital information governance.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate open-ended discussions, enabling participants to share detailed insights into the prevalence, patterns, and perceived impact of AI-driven disinformation. The discussions also delved into the effectiveness of existing institutional responses, including regulatory frameworks, fact-checking initiatives, and media literacy efforts aimed at countering digital deception.

In addition to oral testimonies, the study also reviewed a range of documentary sources to complement and validate interview findings. These included official reports from INEC, media publications, election observation summaries, disinformation tracking records, and verification outputs from civil society organizations. This triangulation of sources helped provide both empirical depth and context to the qualitative data.

The data collected from both interviews and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved systematically coding the information, identifying meaningful categories, and grouping these into broader themes that aligned with the study's objectives and theoretical framework, particularly the Agenda-Setting Theory. The themes that emerged focused on how AI tools such as bots and deepfakes are being used to spread falsehoods; the resulting influence on voter behavior and public trust; and the institutional measures being taken to address these threats.

By combining firsthand expert accounts with verified secondary materials, the study achieves a richer, more credible understanding of how AI-generated disinformation is affecting Nigeria's democratic processes and the capacity of institutions to respond.

Findings of the study

The findings of this study reveal that AI-generated disinformation has emerged as a potent and rapidly evolving threat to electoral integrity in Nigeria. The study's evidence suggests that artificial intelligence particularly in the form of deepfakes, synthetic voice cloning, and large language models has introduced a new and sophisticated dimension to disinformation campaigns, with significant implications for democratic governance. Unlike traditional forms of fake news, AI-generated content can mimic real individuals with remarkable accuracy, making it harder for voters, journalists, and electoral bodies to distinguish between truth and fabrication.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria served as a critical case in point. During the electoral process, several pieces of AI-generated content circulated widely on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. These included altered video clips of presidential candidates appearing to make inflammatory or controversial remarks, fabricated social media posts purporting to be official statements, and AI-generated voice recordings of political leaders. Such manipulations were not merely incidental they were strategically timed to sow confusion, inflame ethnic and religious divisions, and shape voter perceptions. The sophistication of these techniques meant that even tech-savvy individuals struggled to verify their authenticity, indicating a fundamental shift in the nature of electoral disinformation.

The study also revealed that the threat of AI-generated disinformation was amplified by the weak digital infrastructure and low levels of institutional readiness among Nigerian electoral stakeholders. Key regulatory agencies, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), were largely unprepared for the speed and scale at which these disinformation campaigns unfolded. The absence of AI-detection mechanisms within these institutions made real-time response virtually impossible. Even where suspicious content was identified, there were no standardized procedures for content takedown, source tracing, or public clarification. This created a vacuum in which false information could circulate unchecked for extended periods, sometimes altering the political discourse in irreversible ways.

Equally the Nigeria's legal and regulatory framework remains outdated in the face of this new challenge. Current laws governing elections, cybercrime, and media regulation do not explicitly address the use of AI for disinformation purposes. This legal ambiguity has emboldened bad actors, both foreign and domestic, to deploy AI tools with minimal fear of prosecution. In some cases, politically motivated groups used these tools to launch coordinated disinformation attacks against opponents, with little accountability. As such, the study underscores the urgent need for legislative reform that specifically accounts for the dangers of AI-generated disinformation in electoral contexts.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the low level of digital literacy among the Nigerian electorate exacerbated the problem. Many citizens lacked the critical thinking skills or technical knowledge necessary to assess the credibility of AI-generated content. This created a fertile ground for disinformation to thrive, especially in rural areas and among older or less educated populations. The emotional and sensational nature of AI-fueled propaganda made it more likely to be believed and shared, further distorting public opinion and undermining informed decision-making during elections. The study also notes that traditional media outlets, instead of debunking such falsehoods, occasionally echoed them, thereby adding legitimacy to manipulated content.

These trends have far-reaching implications for democratic stability in Nigeria. When voters lose confidence in the authenticity of information, the transparency and credibility of elections are called into question. When disinformation targets electoral bodies or the judiciary, it erodes institutional legitimacy. When political actors rely on AI-driven propaganda instead of issue-based campaigns, it weakens democratic accountability and polarizes the electorate. All of these outcomes, as observed in the 2023 elections, point to a potential crisis of democratic trust if proactive measures are not taken.

In response, the study recommends a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. First, Nigerian electoral and regulatory institutions must invest in AI-detection technologies,

training, and partnerships with tech companies to monitor and flag harmful content. Second, legal reforms must be introduced to criminalize the deliberate creation and distribution of AI-generated disinformation in electoral contexts. Third, digital literacy campaigns should be integrated into civic education programs to empower citizens to critically evaluate online content. Lastly, political parties and candidates should be held to higher standards of digital ethics, with penalties for those found complicit in disseminating false information using AI tools.

The study finds that while AI presents powerful opportunities for innovation and development, its misuse in the electoral process poses a grave and immediate danger to the integrity of Nigeria's democracy. If not urgently addressed through a combination of institutional strengthening, legal reform, and public education, AI-generated disinformation could undermine free and fair elections and erode public trust in democratic governance for years to come.

Conclusion

The AI-generated disinformation poses a serious and rapidly evolving threat to electoral integrity in Nigeria. The proliferation of sophisticated artificial intelligence tools, such as deepfakes, AI-generated texts, and voice clones, has created new avenues for the manipulation of public opinion, the spread of fake news, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. The 2023 general elections revealed a worrying lack of institutional preparedness and regulatory oversight to manage the risks associated with this emerging threat. Without adequate responses, these technologies could further polarize the electorate, undermine voter confidence, and delegitimize electoral outcomes.

Recommendations

In view of the above findings, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The Federal Government should established a National Electoral Cybersecurity taskforce which will be responsible for monitoring, investigating and responding to cyber threat targeting the electoral process.
- ii. the Federal Government should strengthen the existing laws to address synthetic media and digital manipulation.
- iii. INEC should be equipped with modern tools and trained personnel to detect and analyse AI generated disinformation.
- iv. The Federal Government in collaboration with INEC should carryout literacy programs to sensitize citizens on the dangers of AI-driven disinformation. This will avert its dangers on electoral processes in Nigeria.

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