МЕДИЙНЫЕ РАМКИ РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ И ЭТНИЧЕСКИХ КОНФЛИКТОВ

MEDIAFRAMES OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Misinformation and disinformation in ethno-religious conflicts: a comparative study of media in Ghana and Nigeria

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Abstract. Misinformation and disinformation are receiving momentous global attention largely because of the risks they pose to almost every sector. Also, it deepening hate among ethnic groups, particularly, in Ghana and Nigeria. Lately, the most critical is the consistent manufactured lies in the semblance of news which have further threatened the fragile ethno-religious fabric in these two West African nations. In view of this, the study explores the intricate interconnection between misinformation, disinformation, and their impact on intensifying ethnoreligious conflicts in Ghana and Nigeria. The propagation of inaccurate or deceptive information across various mediums has been observed to play a substantial role in exacerbating tensions, deepening divisions, and magnifying animosity among diverse ethnic communities. The primary objective of this research is to establish a wide-ranging comprehension of how misinformation and disinformation contribute to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts, thereby shedding light on potential strategies to mitigate their detrimental consequences. Employing a qualitative approach of in-depth interview, the study uncovered the mechanisms through which misinformation and disinformation disseminate, shape perceptions, and contribute to the fragmentation of communities in Nigeria and Ghana unity. By highlighting these dynamics, the study seeks to offer valuable insights to policymakers, media professionals, and community leaders, enabling them to confront the predicament of misinformation and disinformation, ultimately cultivating a more unified and harmonious Nigerian and Ghanaian societies.

Keywords: West Africa, media frames, Ghana and Nigeria societies, ethnic groups

Неточная информация и дезинформация относительно этнорелигиозных конфликтов: сравнительное исследование медиа Ганы и Нигерии

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Аннотация. Неточная информация и сознательная дезинформация привлекают внимание исследователей из-за рисков, которые они представляют во всех сферах. Существенно влияние дезинформации на усиления ненависти среди этнических групп, в том числе в Гане и Нигерии. В последнее время наиболее опасной является сфабрикованная ложь в новостях, она угрожает хрупкой этнорелигиозной структуре этих двух западноафриканских стран. Распространение в средствах массовой информации неточной или вводящей в заблуждение информации играет существенную роль в обострении напряженности, углублении разногласий и усилении враждебности внутри различных этнических сообществ. Цель исследования – установить системное понимание того, как дезинформация и неверифицированные новости способствуют эскалации этнорелигиозных конфликтов. Предлагаются потенциальные стратегии по смягчению пагубных последствий. Посредством качественного подхода углубленного интервью выявлены механизмы распространения неточной и фейковой информации; показано, как формируются мнения, способствующие разобщению социума в Гане и Нигерии. Даны рекомендации политикам, специалистам СМИ и общественным лидерам по противостоянию проблемам, связанным с дезинформацией, и формированию единых гармоничных сообществ Нигерии и Ганы.

Ключевые слова: Западная Африка, фреймы СМИ, общества Ганы и Нигерии, этнические группы, фейки

Introduction

Ethnic conflicts pose a significant challenge in Africa, leading to a focus on ethnicity in African studies (Venkatasawmy, 2015; Adisa et al., 2016). Etefa (2019) highlight a lack of understanding of the root causes of ethnic conflict, often overlooking grievances towards the state. In Nigeria, ethnic conflicts threaten peace, unity, and governance due to its diverse ethnic groups and religious divide between the north and south. Similarly, Ghana experiences ethno-religious tensions, particularly between Christians and Muslims.

The rise of misinformation and disinformation, amplified by social media, exacerbates these conflicts. In Nigeria, false information spread via platforms like Twitter and Facebook[1] has fueled tensions surrounding issues like Boko Haram[2] and farmer-herder clashes. Hassan and Hitchen note an unprecedented volume of disinformation circulating in Nigeria, worsening existing ethnic and religious tensions[3].

In both Nigeria and Ghana, misinformation exploits historical grievances and reinforces stereotypes among different ethnic and religious groups. Despite growing recognition of this issue, there is a research gap in understanding its nuanced consequences. Chiluwa and Samoilenko (2018) call for more in-depth studies to analyse the multifaceted repercussions of misinformation on society.

Local variations and cultural factors influence the impact of misinformation in African contexts (Adisa et al., 2015; Vraga, Bode, 2020). Comparative analyses across African countries are needed to understand the differential impacts of misinformation on ethno-religious conflicts and inform region-specific strategies. Overall, addressing misinformation is crucial in mitigating ethnic tensions and promoting peace and unity in Africa.

Misinformation and disinformation present formidable challenges in Nigeria and Ghana, particularly intensified by the proliferation of social media platforms (Au et al., 2022). These phenomena contribute to societal polarization, instability, and democratic threats (Tandoc et al., 2018). Disinformation, prevalent on social media, exacerbates social divisions and jeopardizes security, as evidenced during

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[1] Facebook is part of Meta, which is recognized as an extremist organization and banned in Russian Federation.

[2] The organization is recognized as a terrorist and its activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

[3] Hassan, I., & Hitchen, J. (2020, October 6). Nigeria's disinformation landscape. *Social Science Research Council*. Retrieved December 15, 2023, from https://items.ssrc.org/disinformation-democracy-and-conflict-prevention/nigerias-disinformation-landscape/

events like the 2020 #EndSARS protests, spotlighting the media's influence on public opinion. Nigeria and Ghana face similar issues, where disinformation exploits grievances, undermining national unity and coexistence[4]. Combating these challenges necessitates ethical media practices and promoting critical thinking to mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation[5].

The intersection of ethnic and religious diversity with misinformation and disinformation has garnered scholarly attention, notably in Nigeria and Ghana. In Nigeria, conflicts like the Biafra war often carry ethno-religious nuances, influenced by these factors (Achi, 2021). Similarly, Ghana faces conflicts with religious and ethnic undertones, such as market clashes and land disputes. The persistence of ethno-religious distinctions fuels conflicts exacerbated by misinformation and disinformation, undermining unity and coexistence. Guess et al. (2019) highlight misinformation's role in shaping political beliefs within diverse communities, while divisive misinformation escalates tensions, threatening social cohesion. Understanding and addressing the impact of misinformation within ethno-religious contexts are crucial for promoting harmonious coexistence in Nigeria and Ghana.

Social media's influence on misinformation and disinformation amplifies tensions and spreads falsehoods in ethno-religious conflicts. Pennycook et al. (2018) explore how ethnic and religious diversity affects misinformation spread on platforms like Facebook[6] and Twitter, noting susceptibility to false information due to echo chambers. Vosoughi et al. (2018) stress social media's dual role as an amplifier of both accurate and misleading information. In Ghana, platforms such as WhatsApp and others serve as conduits for rapid misinformation dissemination, further complicated by limited media literacy. This challenges religious literacy advancement, as social media fosters both educational opportunities and conspiratorial echo chambers (Henry, 2021). Absence of traditional editorial oversight in social media exacerbates challenges in discerning accurate information from falsehoods.

Echo chambers, where like-minded individuals reinforce beliefs, significantly contribute to misinformation in diverse societies like Nigeria and Ghana (Cinelli et al., 2020). These chambers are reinforced through social interactions and have a profound impact on information dynamics, especially in ethnically and religiously diverse populations (Arthur, 2018). Achi's study (2021) emphasizes how ethno-religious nuances amplify misinformation dissemination, affecting unity and tolerance. Social media platforms intensify echo chambers, making diverse networks susceptible to false information (Pennycook et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Limited media literacy exacerbates echo chambers' impact, leading individuals to accept biased information. Understanding the interplay between echo chambers and ethno-religious diversity is vital for combatting misinformation and promoting unity in diverse societies.

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[4] Ibrahim, H. (2023, June 5). How disinformation deepens hate among Nigerians. *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.* Retrieved December 15, 2023, from https://fesmedia-africa.fes.de/news/how-disinformation-deepens-hate-among-nigerians/

[5] Disinformation is on the rise in Nigeria. (2023, May 9). *The Guardian.* Retrieved December 15, 2023, from https://guardian.ng/news/disinformation-is-on-the-rise-in-nigeria/

[6] Facebook is part of Meta, which is recognized as an extremist organization and banned in Russian Federation.

Methods and materials

The qualitative research employs an in-depth interview approach to explore ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and Ghana, aiming to understand misinformation dynamics. The interviews were conducted in Nigeria between October 3rd and September 10th 2023, while that of Ghana were carried out by S.K Segbefia, who is based in Ghana between October 15th and September 21st respectively.

Purposively sampled informants, including community leaders and policymakers, share personal experiences and observations, ensuring confidentiality. Reflexivity addresses biases, following Creswell's guidelines (2012), with thematic analysis revealing recurring themes. NVivo 14 software aids data storage and analysis, facilitating the iterative coding framework development.

Informants' privacy and confidentiality rights are respected through informed consent and code name anonymization. For example, Community Leaders from Ghana were code named Inf. GhaCL while that of Nigeria identified as Inf. NigCL. Similarly, Policymakers from both Ghana and Nigeria; Inf. GhaPM, and Inf. NigMP. As for the Media Professionals from Ghana and Nigeria; Inf. GhaMP, and Inf. NigMP, ensuring anonymity throughout the analysis.
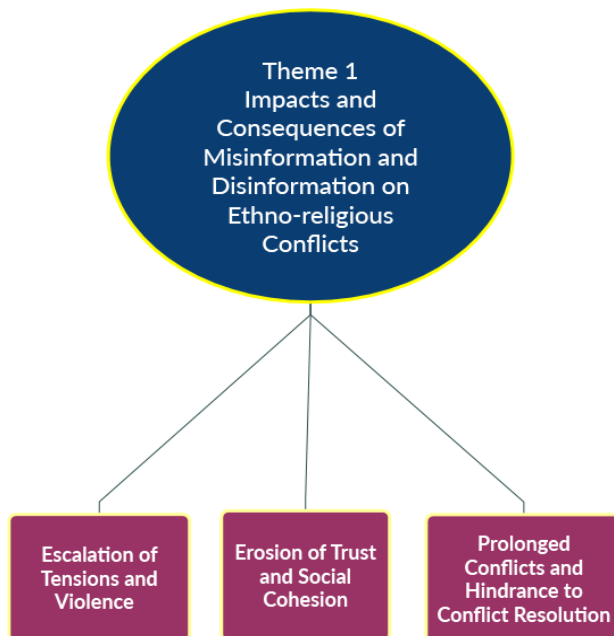
Results and discussion

Theme 1. Impacts and consequences of misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts *(Figure 1). Escalation of tensions and violence.* The findings underscore the pervasive and detrimental impact of misinformation on social harmony, inter-community relations, and overall peace. The recurring theme across the sources demonstrates how false narratives, whether disseminated through social media, videos, articles, or manipulated images, have tangible and often severe consequences. For instance, the first source highlights how false messages on social media led to heightened tensions and clashes within a community event, illustrating the potential for misinformation to incite immediate conflict thus, Inf. GhaPM 1, "Last year, false messages circulated on social media claiming that a particular ethnic group was planning a violent uprising. This led to heightened tensions, and unfortunately, clashes erupted during a community event". Similarly, Inf. GhaCL 2, emphasizes the amplifying effect of a misleading video, creating an atmosphere of hate speech endorsement among religious leaders, "There was a case where a misleading video was shared, suggesting religious leaders were endorsing hate speech. This escalated tensions, and it took considerable effort to quell the resulting conflicts".

The Inf. NigCL 9, illustrates how false reports about a religious leader's remarks led to clashes, "False reports about a religious leader making derogatory remarks led to clashes between followers. Misinformation directly contributed to the escalation of tensions and violence". The Inf. NigMP 10 however, reveals the political ramifications of misinformation.

The eleventh and twelfth sources from Nigeria show the alarming consequences of a viral video and misleading messages, "A viral video falsely depicting an interfaith event as an act of disrespect led to widespread outrage and violence. It's alarming how misinformation can distort events and trigger real-world consequences".

Other 10 sources from Ghana and Nigeria underscored the urgent need for robust strategies to counteract the spread of misinformation. The consequences outlined by these sources demonstrate that misinformation is not merely a distortion of facts but a potent force that can actively contribute to the escalation of tensions, violence, and prolonged conflicts within communities.

Figure 1. Impacts and consequences of misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts

Source: performed by Rasaq M. Adisa, Samuel K. Segbefia, Sadiq Mohammed, Galina N. Trofimova.

Erosion of trust and social cohesion. Another finding on impacts and consequences of misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts paints a vivid picture of the pervasive and damaging impact of misinformation on trust, social cohesion, and community bonds. The consistent theme across the sources underscores how the relentless spread of false narratives has not only eroded trust but has also created a climate of fear, suspicion, and division within these societies. For instance, Inf. GhaPM 1 highlights, "The constant barrage of false stories erodes trust between communities. People become suspicious of each other, making it difficult to build the social cohesion necessary for peaceful coexistence". Similarly, Inf. GhaCL 2 emphasizes thus, "Misinformation has created a climate of fear and suspicion. Trust between neighbours and even within families has been compromised, making it challenging to foster a sense of community". Other sources which include Inf. GhaPM 3, and Inf. GhaMP 4 expand on the idea that, Communities that once coexisted peacefully now harbor deep distrust due to persistent misinformation.

Echoing similar views, Informants from Nigeria highlight how the erosion of trust at various levels is creating ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. These was the perceptions of Inf. NigCL 9, Inf. NigMP 10, Inf. NigPM 11, and Inf. NigPM 12.

Prolonged conflicts and hindrance to conflict resolution. The finding also underscores the detrimental role of misinformation in perpetuating and prolonging

conflicts. The finding highlights how false narratives, stereotypes, and misconceptions fueled by misinformation contribute to the entrenchment of positions, hinder dialogue, and act as substantial barriers to conflict resolution. Confirming this, Inf. GhaPM 1 emphasizes that, "Misinformation has prolonged conflicts by perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions. It becomes challenging to find common ground for resolution when the narrative is distorted". Other informants from Ghana among whom are Inf. GhaCL 2 and GhaPM 3 also variously described misinformation as a roadblock to conflict resolution efforts.

Among the informants, Inf. NigCL 9 echoes the sentiment that, "Misinformation sustains conflicts by perpetuating false narratives and deepening divisions. It becomes a barrier to finding common ground for resolution". Similarly, Inf. NigMP 10 and Inf. NigPM 11 reinforce how the persistence of misinformation sustains conflicts.

Theme 2. mitigation strategies for misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts *(Figure 2). Strengthening media literacy and critical thinking skills.* In the course finding mitigation strategies for misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts in Ghana and Nigeria, the informants interviewed suggested various strategies. For instance, Inf. GhaPM 1 discloses that, "One effective strategy is investing in educational programs that enhance media literacy. By teaching people how to critically evaluate information, we empower them to discern between credible and misleading sources". Similarly, Inf. GhaCL 2 and Inf. GhaPM 3 claim that critical thinking skills in schools can be a game-changer. Corroborating the earlier source, Inf. GhaMP 4 and other sources highlight strengthening media literacy at a young age.

Among the strategies coming from Nigerian informants, Inf. NigCL 9 suggests, "Critical thinking skills need to be emphasized in educational institutions. The ability to question and evaluate information is a powerful tool in countering the impact of misinformation". Inf. NigPM 11 calls for a comprehensive media literacy campaign, while Inf. NigPM 12 suggests continuous awareness campaigns on misinformation.

Figure 2. Mitigation strategies for misinformation and disinformation on ethno-religious conflicts

Source: Rasaq M. Adisa, Samuel K. Segbefia, Sadiq Mohammed, Galina N. Trofimova.

Responsible journalism and fact-checking. Another strategy recommended by informants from both Nigeria and Ghana is the need for responsible journalism and fact-checking. According to Inf. GhaPM 1 who claims, "Responsible journalism is our first line of defense. News outlets must prioritize accuracy over sensationalism and commit to fact-checking before publishing any information." Inf.

GhaCL 2 wants fact-checking initiatives to be more prominent in newsrooms. Emphasizing the importance of ethics Inf. GhaPM 3 wants journalistic ethics to prioritise accuracy and truth, while Inf. GhaCL 6 stresses on stringent editorial policies on fact-checking.

Buttressing the previous views, Inf. GhaCL 7 and Inf. NigPM 12 highlight that fact-checking should be non-negotiable standards in newsrooms to counter the spread of false narratives. Inf. NigCL 9 suggests media houses must prioritize accuracy over speed.

Engaging social media platforms in countering false information. On this finding, the informants highlight a range of strategies, emphasizing collaboration, technological advancements, and community engagement. For instance, Inf. GhaPM 1 recommends that, "Social media platforms should take a proactive approach to identify and flag misinformation". This aligns with the Inf. Gha 5 who advocates thus, "Social media platforms should invest in artificial intelligence for content moderation". In view of this, Inf. GhaCL 2 and Inf. GhaCL 6 emphasizes collaboration between social media and fact-checking organizations. Other sources from Ghana also suggested proactive measures by social media platforms to combat misinformation.

Taking it further, Inf. GhaCL 7 reiterates, "Social media platforms need to be more proactive by implementing algorithms that detect and flag misinformation". Inf. NigCL 9 emphasizes, "A community-driven approach to report suspected misinformation". Echoing, Inf. NigMP 10 calls for, "Features like pop-up reminders, like in Facebook[7], to verify information before sharing". Other sources from Nigeria stress the need to join forces to fight against misinformation.

Theme 3. Community engagement and dialogue (Figure 3). *Fostering inter-ethnic communication and understanding.* The finding underscores the importance of fostering inter-ethnic communication and understanding. The informants suggest ingenuities aimed at breaking down stereotypes, promoting positive interactions, and building bridges between individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to Inf. GhaPM 1, "To foster inter-ethnic communication, we need open dialogues to share perspectives and build mutual understanding". To Inf. GhaCL 2, "Creating platforms for cultural exchange events is crucial to breaks down stereotypes and promotes better understanding". Advocating for joint community projects Inf. GhaPM 3 said, "Inter-ethnic communication can be strengthened through joint community projects". Other sources suggest the establishment of inter-ethnic dialogue clubs in schools, promotion of cultural festivals that celebrate the diversity, aiming to inspire others to look beyond ethnic differences.

Among the sources from Nigeria, Inf. GhaCL 7 suggests, "Inter-ethnic communication should start in schools to encourage students from different ethnic backgrounds to interact fosters understanding from a young age". Echoing the importance of cultural exchange events at the community level are Inf. Nig 8 and Inf. NigCL along with other sources from Nigeria suggest the establishment of inter-ethnic dialogue clubs in universities.

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[7] Facebook is part of Meta, which is recognized as an extremist organization and banned in Russian Federation.
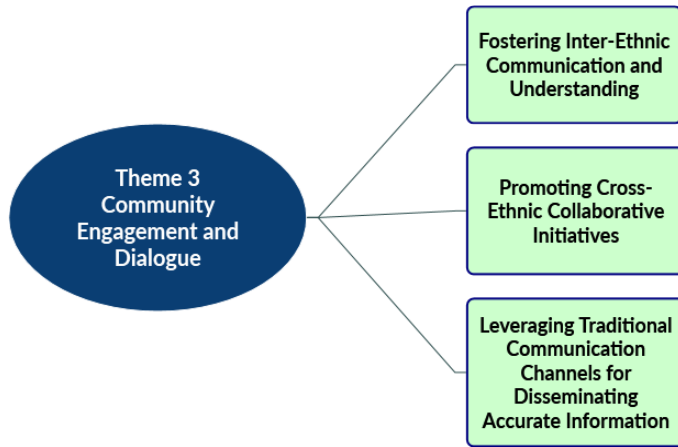
Figure 3. Ways to engage the community in dialog

Source: performed by Rasaq M. Adisa, Samuel K. Segbefia, Sadiq Mohammed, Galina N. Trofimova.

Promoting cross-ethnic collaborative initiatives. The data from Informants in Ghana and Nigeria reveal the importance of cross-ethnic collaboration and offer various strategies and initiatives to promote unity, foster understanding, and break down ethnic divides. According to Inf. GhaPM 1 who emphasizes, "common goals, community development projects and shared objectives to promote unity". Similarly, Inf. GhaCL 2 suggests, "Encouraging diverse teams and partnerships as innovative solutions to breaking down ethnic divides". However, Inf. GhaPM 3 and Inf. GhaCL 7 propose that educational institutions should implement exchange programs between students from different ethnic backgrounds. Other sources from Ghana expressed divergent views on the need to promote cross-ethnic collaborative initiatives.

Reinforcing this, Inf. NigCL 9 notes, "NGOs can organise cross-ethnic workshops and seminars for diverse ethnicities to collaborate on projects that can contribute to unity". In view this, Inf. NigMP 10 proposes, "Government policies should incentivize businesses to form diverse partnerships".

Leveraging traditional communication channels for disseminating accurate information. The findings on leveraging traditional communication channels highlight crucial role of traditional communication. For instance, Inf. GhaPM 1 emphasises, "Traditional leaders can play a pivotal role in disseminating accurate information and dispelling rumours". Similarly, Inf. GhaCL 2 suggests that, "Community radio stations, a traditional communication channel, should prioritize fact-checking and responsible reporting". Also, Inf. GhaPM 3 proposes, "Utilizing town criers for accurate information dissemination can be effective".

Buttressing the idea, Inf. GhaCL 7 claims that, "Traditional leaders should be involved in disseminating accurate information. Their influence can be harnessed to counter misinformation". Reiterating this, Inf. Nig 8 discloses that, "Community radio stations are essential in reaching remote areas where misinformation can have severe consequences". Inf. NigCL 9 suggests, "Town criers, a traditional communication method, can be effective in conveying accurate information". Giving further suggestion Inf. NigPM 11 recommends, "Local cultural events should incorporate information dissemination sessions. Using traditional

platforms to share accurate information aligns with established communication channels within the community". Highlighting, Inf. NigPM 12 and other sources noted that community meetings is effective way to disseminate accurate information which leaders can use to address misinformation, ensuring that accurate information reaches every member of the community.

The analysis of finding reveals a shared understanding across sources from both regions on the effectiveness of traditional communication methods and leaders in countering misinformation.

Conclusion

Misinformation fuels tension, clashes, and violence in Nigeria and Ghana, with urgent strategies needed, especially during elections. False narratives erode trust and social cohesion, fostering fear and division within societies, hindering conflict resolution. Misinformation perpetuates conflicts by fueling false narratives, hindering dialogue and resolution efforts, shaping perceptions and creating barriers to negotiation.

Informants advocate for investing in educational programs to bolster media literacy and critical thinking, focusing on discerning credible sources. Strategies include promoting critical thinking in schools, workshops on media literacy, and integrating it into the curriculum. Responsible journalism and fact-checking are vital, prioritizing accuracy, stringent editorial policies, and continuous journalist training. Collaboration between social media platforms and fact-checking organizations is crucial, with suggestions like investing in algorithms, AI content moderation, and public awareness campaigns to combat misinformation.

Promoting inter-ethnic communication involves community forums, cultural events, and dialogue clubs. Educational institutions can facilitate exchange programs, while media campaigns highlight positive cooperation. Cross-ethnic collaboration in community projects and businesses is encouraged, along with government policies supporting diverse partnerships. Traditional leaders aid in accurate information dissemination, with fact-checking prioritized in community radio and town criers utilized. Cultural events and meetings incorporate information dissemination, leveraging traditional communication channels for effective outreach.

The findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to counteract the spread of misinformation and disinformation in Nigeria and Ghana. Misinformation is not merely a distortion of facts but a potent force that actively contributes to the escalation of tensions, violence, and prolonged conflicts within communities. The recommended strategies encompass a multi-faceted approach, involving education, responsible journalism, collaboration with social media platforms, and community engagement initiatives. Implementing these strategies is crucial for restoring trust, fostering social cohesion, and mitigating the harmful effects of misinformation in these ethno-religious contexts.

Policy makers should launch public awareness campaigns in Nigeria and Ghana to educate communities on the dangers of misinformation and promote fact-checking. Responsible use of social media and regulatory measures should be considered to curb false narratives. Media professionals must prioritize accuracy, fact-checking, and ethical journalism. Governments should conduct media literacy

campaigns to promote critical thinking. Social media platforms should invest in identifying and flagging misinformation. Community leaders should establish forums for inter-ethnic dialogue and utilize traditional communication methods to counter misinformation.

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