

Fact-checking and Political Polarization in an Emerging Democracy

Authors : Eric Agyekum, Dominic Asitanga

Abstract : Ghana is widely considered as a beacon of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. With a relatively free media, the country was ranked 30th in the world and third in Africa on the 2021 Press Freedom Index. Despite the democratic gains, it is one of the most politically polarized nations in the world. Ghana's political division is evident in the current hung legislature, where each of the two dominant political parties has 137 members, with an independent member occupying the remaining one seat. Misinformation and fake news thrive in systems with acute ideological and political differences (Imelda et al, 2021; Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2018; Spohr, 2017) and Ghana is no exception. The information disorder problem has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant conspiracy theories and speculations, making it difficult for the media and fact-checking organizations to verify all claims and flag false information. In Ghana, fact-checking agencies like Ghana Fact, Dubawa Ghana, and some mainstream news media organizations have been fact-checking political claims, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and many others. However, it is not clear if the audience consumes and attaches prominence to these fact-checked stories or even visit the websites of the fact-checking agencies to read the content. Nekmat (2020) opines that though the literature on fact-checking suggests that fact-checked stories can alter readers' beliefs, very few studies have investigated the patronage and the potential of fact-checks to deter users from sharing false news with others, particularly on social media. In response to Nekmat, this study has been initiated to examine the perception and attitude of the audience in Ghana towards fact-checks. Anchored on the principles of the nudge theory, this study will investigate how fact-checked stories alter readers' behavioural patterns. A survey will be conducted to collect data from sampled members of the Ghanaian society.

Keywords : fact-checking, information disorder, nudge theory, political polarization

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