

The 2019 Nigerian presidential elections and the resurgence of the magic bullet theory of media effect

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the continued relevance of Magic Bullet Theory, also called Hypodermic Needle Theory. It adopted the applied and survey research methods. The sample had 1,265 respondents. A qualitative analytical approach was used to discuss how the Magic Bullet Theory has remained a relevant interpretative tool for assessing the behaviour of media audiences during the election period. The theoretical framework was anchored on Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien's Knowledge Gap Theory. The paper argued that the impactful use of media propaganda (particularly fake news on social media) during Nigeria's 2019 elections has demonstrated the continued relevance of the theory in media studies, especially as it was observed that members of the main competing parties and aides of election contestants used fake news on social media to influence voters' electoral judgments. Internet-based rumors of President Muhammadu Buhari's demise and his "Islamisation" agenda, for instance, created such great concern that his party, the All Progressive Congress, exerted many efforts during its campaigns to debunk these allegations. Findings from the study concluded that media content substantially influenced the voters' choice on who to support, and this vividly showed in the party's dismal electoral performance in the Christian-dominated South-East, South-South, and North-Central geopolitical zones.

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1. Introduction

Behaviourism, also known as behavioural psychology, has had a great influence on the development of mass communication theorisation and practice. The behaviourists have mostly affected the positions taken by many psychologists, sociologists, media anthropologists and early communication theorists on how human beings respond to environmental stimuli. The behaviourists' stance had made these theorists to see man as a rational being whose actions are largely determined by external rather than internal/mental stimuli against the earlier argument of mentalist psychologists. The behaviourist approach has the basic assumptions that every behaviour is learnt from the environment and that behaviour is the result of stimulus-response. Early communication scholars, in particular, used behaviourism to argue that the media are providing some of the key stimuli that trigger immediate responses by audience members. These early communication scholars, illustrated their position with a number of evidences, such as the use of cinema to project the Bolshevik ideology after the Russian Revolution of 1917 [1], the use of propaganda during the World War [2], and the Nazi propaganda films of 1930s used to spread anti-

Semitism in Germany [3]. For instance, the powerful and ugly images of the Jews as immoral, greedy and parasitic race as portrayed in the Nazi films presumably had the effects of eliciting audiences' negative attitudes towards the Jews. German audiences' repeated exposure to these images was believed to have had the potential to condition them to have negative perceptions and attitudes towards the Jews [4],[5],[6]. Similar to the 1930s Nazi films, the famous "Panic Broadcast", otherwise called the "War of the Worlds" broadcast, added to justify communication theories anchored on behaviourism. The "Panic Broadcast" was an incident which happened in the US on October 30, 1938, in which a radio broadcast purporting that some supposed residents of Mars had smashed into a New Jersey farm and were viciously attacking humans had profound effect on the behaviour of the American audience. The broadcast, which was an adaptation of a science fiction novel by H. G. Wells, elicited mass hysteria among the audiences who, believing they were under attack by these Martians, "flooded newspaper offices and radio and police stations with calls asking how to flee their city or how they should protect themselves from 'gas raids'". Many of them were reported to have sought medical treatment for "shock and hysteria" [7].

Thus, in line with the behaviourist approach, many early communication theorists advanced theoretical postulations which recognise the all-powerfulness of political propaganda, particularly political propaganda's immense ability to penetrate most people's defences and predispose them to adopt behavioural patterns useful to the propagandists. One of such theoretical postulations is the Magic Bullet Theory, otherwise called the "Hypodermic Needle" Theory, which stipulates that media propaganda is powerful enough to spur audiences into acting in ways that are beneficial to the propagandists [8]. As indicated by its name, the Magic Bullet Theory is a metaphor made to represent the powerful effects of mass media messages on audiences. The theory graphically assumes that mass media messages are like bullets fired from mass media's gun. The theory also uses the metaphor of the syringe to imply that mass media messages are like the fluid of a syringe injected into the brains of (passive) audiences. Such injected fluids are bound to determine the behaviour of media audiences in a more or less uniform way. As explained by Chandler and Munday [9], the Hypodermic Needle Theory is a feature of the behaviourist stimulus-response rhetoric "in which the mass media were argued to have direct effects on their audiences, particularly behavioural effects". Also, as explained [10], the theory sees the audience as impressionable and open to manipulation. [11] further explains the implications of this theory. According to him, the mass media are seen as having "a direct, immediate and powerful effect" on the audience; and that they can "influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response".

Although backed by a number of evidences, the Magic Bullet Theory had been rooted more on assumptions than in empirical conclusions. A number of studies, as early as 1953, had made huge efforts to disprove the theory. One of such studies was Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet's work titled "*The People Choice*". This work examined the role of the media in the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and actually revealed that inter-personal channels of communication rather than media-based campaigns were more influential in shaping voters' behaviours during the election, thus reversing the dominant mass communication paradigm that held sway during that period. As a result of this study, the authors introduced the Two-step Flow Communication Theory. Similarly, [12] did a study on the famous "Panic Broadcast" and claimed that although 1.7 million believed and 1.2 million were frightened out of 6 million listeners that heard the broadcast, audiences' reactions to the broadcast were diverse and largely informed by situational and attitudinal attributes of the listeners such as lack of critical ability, self-confidence and emotional security. Cantril had thus claimed that the mass media could not have played an all-powerful role in the behaviour of audience members who were exposed to the "Panic Broadcast". Besides these and more studies which have sought and succeeded to disprove it, the Magic Bullet Theory has many other weaknesses, some of which include the facts that (a) it is too simplistic and (b) it faultily overlooks the fact that audiences are more sophisticated or complex.

In view of the aforementioned, the Magic Bullet Theory has for some years now been a subject of controversy. A good number of communication scholars consider it to be unpopular and doubtful, if not misleading [13]. And this is not surprising as theories are generally never perfect. Indeed, the tendency in mass communication research is that models and theories are dynamic and can be modified or discarded. This, therefore, explains the position of [14] that models, and by extension

theories, are “inevitably incomplete, oversimplified and involve some concealed assumptions. There is certainly no model that is suitable for all purposes and all levels of analysis....”

In line with this fact, the Magic Bullet theory has, in many academic quarters, been discarded to the benefit of what is technically referred to as “limited effect theories”, notably the Two-Step Flow Communication Model and the Agenda Setting Theory, among others. These limited effect theories all reject the all-mightiness of mass media and tend to explore the power and uses of the mass media with a declining level of deference. However, in spite of its clear unpopularity, the Magic Bullet Theory has continued to be considered as relevant or given credence by a number of scholars. Phenomena such as celebrity-based advertisement and fan-following waves have come to give some credence to the Magic Bullet Theory. As noted [15], the Magic Bullet Theory has recently made resurgence in the sense that more and more studies have demonstrated that people tend to believe whatsoever the media report. As he puts it, the Magic Bullet Theory is “an odd mix, but it can help to explain why at least some people simply believe whatever they are told”. This is, to an extent, true as could be seen in the effects the Nigerian media had on some Nigerian audiences during the recently held Nigeria’s 2019 general elections. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which this position is plausible through critical observations and a systematic review of relevant literature.

The traditional media have been the major source of communication and information in Nigeria but the advent of social media has changed the face of communication not only in Nigeria but all over the world. The emergence of the new media has provided the audience with diverse channels of information reception and assimilation which brings invariably diverse influence on the audience. The Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Theory implies that mass media have a direct, immediate and powerful effect on their audiences. The theory suggests that mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by shooting or injecting them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response.

However, several scholars led by Paul Lazarsfeld have countered this theory as having a wrong impression of media effect on the audience. New assessments that the bullet theory is not accurate and, to a very large extent, misleading have emerged. These opposing scholars have come up with other media theories which tend to establish the fact that media do not have an all-powerful effect on the audience but that the audience has the power to make decision on how to utilise media content [16], [17]. However, with the emergence of the new media, there seems to be a possibility that the Magic Bullet Theory may have found revived relevance in modern age. This is in the light of several events that took place before the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria that had a significant effect on the audience. One of such was the rumour that a certain Jubril from Sudan was cloned to impersonate the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The media frenzy and the reaction of majority of Nigerians irrespective of class was a testimony that the Magic Bullet Theory is still relevant. This is because people did not pause to consider the truth behind the media propaganda, which arose from the broadcast made by the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu.

With the recent development in the media environment, there is the likelihood that the total condemnation of the Magic Bullet Theory may no longer be tenable after all. This paper, therefore, seeks to critically evaluate the situation and fill up the gap, if any, that may have existed in the application of the theory.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Knowledge Gap Theory, proposed in 1970 by Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue and Clarice Olien formed the theoretical framework for this paper. This theory stipulates that people have different levels of acquiring information in the society. [17] explains that there are two major aspects to this theory: one is concerned with “the general distribution of aggregate information to

society between social classes” and the other relates to “specific subjects or topics on which some are better informed than others.” This paper is more interested in the second aspect.

With an aim of examining the continued relevance of the Magic Bullet Theory, also called Hypodermic Needle Theory, this study needed to ascertain the extent to which members of the society know about the continued relevance of the subject matter, especially as “high expectations have been generated by the coming of web-based news information” [17]. From all indications, the reason that people of higher socio-economic status have better communication skills... etc., as adduced by Tichenor *et al*, seemed not to hold sway, considering that many people nowadays, as seen during the 2019 Nigerian General Elections, no matter their economic and educational status, accepted and believed what they were told by the media whether such information was the truth or not.

For this study, the applied and survey research methods were adopted. [18], cited in [19], states that applied research is used to examine “specific practical issues” and also, in some cases, “it is conducted to solve a specific problem.” As stated by [20], this type of research entails “the application of established theories ... to test the empirical content or the validity of a theory under certain conditions.” Also, [21], cited in Asemah *et al*, sees applied research as explaining or exposing “a situation in order to enable the researcher understand it better, hence, it is often regarded as explanatory research or expository research.” The applied research method was aptly used since the paper set out to examine the “empirical content” of the Magic Bullet Theory as well as to test the validity of its claims; and this is exactly what applied research is expected to accomplish when used in any research exercise.

Survey method, on the hand, was used because it is a specific type of field study that involves the collection of data from a sample of elements drawn from a well-defined population through the use of questionnaire or any other instrument for data collection. For this study, a Google Forms questionnaire was used to contact respondents within the North-Central, South-East and South-South geo-political zones of Nigeria through different groups on *WhatsApp* and *Telegram* social media chat platforms out of which 1,265 persons responded by the deadline; and this constituted the sample for the study. The respondents were distributed thus: 312 students (24.67%), 307 tertiary institution lecturers (24.27%), 259 civil servants (20.47%), 114 politicians and political office holders (9.01%), 103 professionals – doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, etc. (8.14%), 97 media practitioners – journalists, broadcasters, bloggers, etc. (7.67%), and 73 business owners/operators (5.77%).

The two research methods were, therefore, used with the qualitative analytical approach to show how the Magic Bullet Theory has continued to be a relevant interpretative tool for discussing the behaviour of media audiences during the 2019 general election period.

3. Results and Discussion

Media propaganda during the 2019 Nigeria’s General Election took various forms. One of its most notorious forms was fake news, particularly spread through the social networks with the view of influencing Nigerian voters’ attitudes during the election. It is so far hard to find scholarly definitions of the term “fake news”. However, most authors who use the concept view it as the act of generating and spreading false information, photo(s) or video(s) for the purpose of confusing, misinforming or influencing the judgments of the general public. Fake news is also described as stories that are entirely made up or shared out of context. The effects of this fake news on the Nigerian electorate during this period were really immense. They illustrate the manipulative power of the social media (the media in general) and even bring to mind the Magic Bullet Theory of media effect [22]. This will be illustrated in the following paragraphs of this section.

The spread of fake news during 2019 electoral period was not a completely new thing given the fact that preceding Nigerian elections had witnessed this typology of propaganda. If there is any new

development, it should be the fact that fake news, as a form of media/political propaganda, seems to have reached an unprecedented level putting the Nigerian democracy in serious danger. This observation should actually be given some credence if one considers the many misleading fake news that circulated particularly on social media before and during the 2019 electoral period. Some of them are discussed here:

3.1. The rumoured demise of the President and his being cloned

The President's health and his frequent medical trips to London fuelled the rumour that President Buhari had died and was replaced with a look-alike from Sudan. *Tweets*, *Facebook* posts and *YouTube* videos claiming that President Buhari had been cloned by a man called "Jubril" were viewed and shared repeatedly. The leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu was the chief propagandist of this fake news. According to him, "the man you are looking at on the television is not Buhari; he is Jubril from Sudan" (*Africanews*, 2018). Unfortunately, due to the president's prolonged absence from the country and lack of information from the Presidency, several Nigerians bought into this propaganda.

The rumour had profound effects in the minds of the Nigerian electorate; so much so that, much of All Progressive Congress' efforts during the 2019 presidential campaign was aimed at debunking this particular rumour. In many of his addresses to the electorate during the campaign, President Muhammadu Buhari found himself compelled to re-assure Nigerians that he was not a clone. One of his tweets published during the electioneering campaign reads, "This is the real me" [23]. The tweet went on to dismiss the allegations of Buhari's death as "ignorant rumours".

3.2. Herders-farmers conflict

Another notable occurrence used in the media as a propaganda weapon was the conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, which centred mostly in the Middle Belt region of the country but had spread southwards, and resulted in the loss of many lives and destruction of properties. Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa States in North Central geographical zone and the adjoining Adamawa and Taraba States in North East Zone were mostly affected. The conflict – a fundamentally land use contest between farmers and herders – had taken a dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions since most of the herders are from the traditionally nomadic Muslim Fulani stock who make up about 90 percent of Nigeria's pastoralists while most of the farmers are Christians of various ethnicities.

The poor handling of this problem by the Federal Government fuelled the rumour that the President, himself a Fulani man, was unleashing his "brothers" on hapless Nigerians. As the killings persisted, political actors in the opposition came up with the propaganda that this was a case of ethnic cleansing just as what happened in the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu. Many Nigerians, especially Christians from the South and North Central, accepted this media propaganda as the truth and this deepened their anger and caused a widespread disenchantment with President Muhammad Buhari. The dismal electoral fortune of the President in the 2019 elections from these targeted areas testifies to the magic bullet effect the propaganda had on the electorate.

3.3. Allegation of President Buhari's "Islamisation" Agenda

There was also the allegation that President Muhammadu Buhari, over the years, had been supporting and working towards the "Islamisation" of the country. Many Nigerians use the President's earlier condemnation of his predecessor in office, Dr Goodluck Jonathan, for waging a war against and killing members of the "Boko Haram" terrorist group as the basis for this allegation. Another reason was the President's apologetic stance on the application of Sharia Law in Nigeria. He was quoted as having said: "I will continue to show openly and inside of me the total commitment to the Sharia movement that is sweeping all over Nigeria. God willing, we will not stop the agitation for the total implementation of Sharia in the country" (*News24*, 2001). Also, the President's lopsided appointments of core northerners and Moslems as security chiefs, such as the Minister of Defence, Minister of Interior, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Air Staff, Inspector-General of Police, Director-General of the Department of State Services, National Security Adviser, and Comptroller-General of Customs, helped to compound the situation. All these were seen by prominent Nigerian Christian elders, such as former President Olusegun Obasanjo and ex-Minister of Defence, retired General Theophilus Danjuma, as a massive design to further emasculate Christians in Nigeria and subsequently "Islamise" the country.

3.4. Other similar cases of fake news

The All Progressive Congress did not, however, only suffer the asphyxiating effects of fake news, some of its members actively used it as a weapon in various attempts to sway the hearts of the electorate. A case in point is President Muhammadu Buhari's special assistant on social media, Laurretta Onochie, who spread false claims on *Twitter* that President Muhammadu Buhari had built a road, which carried a picture of a road that was actually in Rwanda. This claim, like most typical tweets, attracted thousands of likes and re-tweets by sympathisers.

The All Progressive Congress was, however, not the only party affected by fake news during the 2019 general elections. The leader of the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) also suffered the effect of various attempts by the rival political parties to discredit him through fake news. A case in point is the false claim Laurretta Onochie (Buhari's close aide) made on *Twitter* purporting that opposition candidate, Atiku Abubakar, shared food and money in one of his campaign rallies. Onochie's tweet was an image of food packs with money attached to them. The image was accompanied by a phrase saying: "Keep them in poverty, then give them hand-outs. Atiku Abubakar in Sokoto yesterday" [24]. The claim was investigated by a coalition of journalists and found to be false. Onochie issued an apology but research is yet to ascertain the effects such a tweet had had on the Nigerian electorate during the elections.

From the 1,265 persons whose responses were received by the deadline, the following data in table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' knowledge of fake news used against President Buhari

Fake news items	Frequency	Percentage
Rumoured death of President Buhari and cloning by one Jubril	1.219	96.4
Purported sponsorship of the herdsmen-farmers' conflict	1.007	79.6
Allegation of Buhari's "islamisation" agenda	996	78.7

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2020

Table 1 confirms that at least 78.7% of the respondents heard of the various allegations made against President Muhammadu Buhari in the build-up to the 2019 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

Table 2: Respondents' primary source of information as regards the fake news

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Through the mass media (radio, television and newspapers)	56	4.4
Through the social media	1.103	87.2
By word of mouth from friends and acquaintances	106	8.4
Total	1.265	100

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2020

In Table 2, it is shown that 4.4% of respondents got the fake news through the traditional media, and 87.2% through the social media, making a total of 91.6%.

Table 3: Rate of believability of any of the fake news by respondents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly believed the stories	624	49.3
Somewhat believed the stories	334	26.4
Never believed the stories	307	24.3
Total	1.265	100

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2020

This table (3) shows that a total of 75.7% Nigerians strongly and somewhat believed the fake stories as churned out by President Buhari's opponents.

Table 4: Extent of media's influence on believability of the fake news by respondents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	106	10.7
High	692	70.3
Low	85	8.6
Very low	102	10.4
Total	985	100

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2020

Based on those who strongly believed (624) and somewhat believed (333), totalling 985, Table 4 shows that 81% of the respondents believed the stories because of the very high or high influence of the media.

Table 5: How the news influenced respondents' vote during the 2019 Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage
My vote was strongly influenced by the news	465	36.8
My vote was somewhat influenced by the news	396	31.3
My vote was not influenced by the news	404	31.9
Total	1.265	100

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2020

Table 5 shows that a total of 67.1% of the respondents were strongly or somewhat influenced by the fake news in the choice of presidential candidate they voted for during the election.

We had set out two research questions for this study: (1) To what extent did the Magic Bullet Theory, through media content, influence the result of the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria? (2) To what extent has the theory continued to remain relevant as an interpretative tool for discussing the behaviour of media audiences? These questions are going to, therefore, be discussed and answered here.

Social media have arguably redefined mass communication as well as its impact. The argument therefore that the Magic Bullet Theory gained prominence when it was postulated because only few people had access to television has also continued to gain popularity. This is specially so in this age of social media. The difference between the 1930s and the contemporary digital age seems to be the glory of the Magic Bullet Theory as countless number of people now have access to television programme contents through their laptops, iPods and cell phones. It suffices, therefore, that many more people ought to be influenced by the persuasive media contents.

This notion is supported by the data obtained from Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5. These data show that 91.6% of the respondents got the news through the media – 4.4% from traditional media and 87.2% from social media. Also, 75.7% of them believed the stories while 81% of these did so because they were influenced by the media; and they showed it in 67.1% of them making the choice of who to vote for based on this influence.

We can confirm from all these that the availability of social media has added to the powerful effects of the media which the Magic Bullet Theory projects. The 2019 general elections in Nigeria provided a platform to, once again, showcase the powerful effect of the Magic Bullet Theory of mass media as could be seen in the rumoured cloning of President Buhari by a Sudanese national known as Jubril, the purported “Islamisation” agenda of the administration as well as the alleged ethnic cleansing by the regime against the predominantly Christians in the North-Central, South-South and South-East geo-political zones of Nigeria. The traditional media as well as the social media through *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *WhatsApp* went viral with these stories; and many Nigerians, not minding their socio-economic status, believed them to be true and it showed in the polling results that came out from those areas. Although President Buhari, according to the results released by the Independent National Elections Commission (INEC), won the election, his electoral fortune in those three geo-political zones disastrously pummelled as depicted below:

Table 6: Results of 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election in South-East Geo-political Zone

Name of State	President Buhari/APC		Atiku Abubakar/PDP		Remark
	Votes scored	Percentage	Votes scored	Percentage	
Abia	85.058	26.31%	219.693	67.96%	Buhari lost
Anambra	33.298	5.5%	524.738	86.63%	Buhari lost
Ebonyi	90.726	25.26%	258.573	72%	Buhari lost
Enugu	54.423	12.93%	355.553	84.45%	Buhari lost
Imo	140.463	27.46%	334.923	65.47%	Buhari lost

Source: BBC, 2019

Table 7: Results of 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election in South-South Geo-political Zone

Name of State	President Buhari/APC		Atiku Abubakar/PDP		Remark
	Votes scored	Percentage	Votes scored	Percentage	
Akwa Ibom	175.429	30.31%	395.832	68.39%	Buhari lost
Bayelsa	118.821	36.93%	197.933	61.51%	Buhari lost
Cross River	117.302	27.8%	295.737	70.1%	Buhari lost
Delta	221.292	26.67%	594.068	71.59%	Buhari lost
Edo	267.842	47.77%	275.691	49.17%	Buhari lost
Rivers	150.710	23.47%	473.971	73.81%	Buhari lost

Source: BBC, 2019

Table 8: Results of 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election in North Central Geo-political Zone

Name of State	President Buhari/APC		Atiku Abubakar/PDP		Remark
	Votes scored	Percentage	Votes scored	Percentage	
Benue	347.668	47.7%	356.817	48.95%	Buhari lost
Kogi	285.894	54.87%	218.207	41.88%	Buhari won
Kwara	308.984	67.22%	138.184	30.06%	Buhari won
Nassarawa	289.903	49.92%	283.847	48.87%	Buhari won
Niger	612.371	71.88%	218.052	25.59%	Buhari won
Plateau	468.555	45.28%	548.665	53.02%	Buhari lost
F.C.T. Abuja	152.224	35.91%	259.997	61.33%	Buhari lost

Source: BBC, 2019

The tables (6, 7 and 8) clearly show that in South-South, the president lost in all the six states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Rivers, and the APC-controlled Edo; in South-East, he lost even more pathetically in all the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo; and in North-Central, he lost in two of its six states – Benue and Plateau – as well as the strategic Federal Capital Territory of Abuja [25]. From the data described above, the first research question, which sought to determine to what extent Magic Bullet Theory, through media content, had influenced the result of the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria, has thus been answered. This conclusion is in line with the result of a media study conducted by [26], which assessed the influence televised presidential debate had on the electoral performance of candidates in the 2011 election in Lagos State. Their research finding revealed that indeed, “the influence of the presidential debate reflected in the election results.” Our next task under this discourse is to answer the second research question: To what extent has the theory continued to remain relevant as an interpretative tool for discussing the behaviour of media audiences?

As was noticed during the 2019 Nigerian General Elections, the proliferation of fake news on social media did not only affect prominent political candidates. Even small candidates and a number of new entrants saw their reputation tarnished by fake news. An egregious example is pop star-turned politician, Bankole Wellington, also known as Banky W, whom a tweet presented as very corrupt. This tweet specifically purported that Bankole had received bribe. Bankole gives his impressions and describes his predicament thus:

It was completely false, no proof just a random tweet and in 10 minutes, we had a thousand re-tweets of people saying 'yes! I knew he was corrupt!'.... Nobody is looking for proof, it is not about what is true anymore (Busari, 2019, para 7).

In the light of Bankole's complaint, it could rightly be argued that the effects of fake news on the electorates bring to mind the Magic Bullet Theory. In most cases, fake news is absorbed by the audiences as gospel truth as depicted in Table 3 where a total of 75.7% of the respondents believed the stories. These audiences often tend to be uncritical and do just accept whatsoever is told them on the social media as the gospel truth. No doubt, [27] observes that “everyone who has read news on social media would probably fall victim to fake news. Even the mainstream media are not spared. In an attempt to remain relevant in the face of the obvious threat posed by social media to their very survival, they fall victim to fake news”. Adavize adds that:

The frightening aspect of fake news on social media is that, while it travels faster than the truth, the vast majority of people take them as prophetic revelation especially when it serves their very interests without questioning the validity. Far from the truth. Fake news is a poison that divides society, blinds the mind, reinforces sentiments and plunges society into unending conflicts that hinder development and create unstable global community (p. 34).

The Internet and the social media are such loose media that any information that is disseminated through them is supposed to be digested with much caution [28]. In effect, citizen journalism has given the opportunity to anybody to be capable of publishing just anything on social media and the Internet [29]. Such a libertarian inclination was supposed to compel Nigerian electorates to apply high level of media literacy when they consumed information circulated online in connection with Nigerian elections or political candidates. Unfortunately, the tendency has been for Nigerian electorates to uncritically believe whatever information that is in line with their political interests or suspicions. In the light of this, it could be argued that the pertinence of the Hypodermic Needle Theory was somehow established by the attitudes and perceptions of Nigerian electorates during the 2019 elections. Communication is a process and audience reaction to mass media contents also qualifies as a process. The incidents considered in this paper, therefore, give credence to the continued relevance and potency of the Magic Bullet Theory which powerful effect influenced, to a great extent, a large part of the Nigerian public to believe the information dished out to them without verifiable evidence. Influence, according to [30], is determined by the interrelations between the media, its audience and society. Human beings, therefore, are a product of their environment and are influenced by their environmental realities in the effort to change their attitudes and perceptions. There is, therefore, no denying the fact that there was the resurgence of Magic Bullet Theory effect on the electorate through the information that emanated from the various media platforms during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

4. Conclusion

The Hypodermic Needle Theory of the Media has been criticised on various grounds, two of which are (1) its simplistic nature and (2) the fact that it seems to overlook the complex and highly sophisticated nature of the audiences. The theory has specifically been criticised on the ground that it tends to faultily see the audience members as very passive and malleable by messages dished out by the media. In spite of the numerous criticisms made against it, the Hypodermic Needle Theory has been given some credence in recent years in line with responses made by audiences to social media messages. Incidences of the propagandists' use of data mining and fake news on social media, particularly during election periods, have come to justify the continued relevance of Hypodermic Needle Theory. Issues such as fake news-based propaganda have come to show how manipulative and powerful the media could be, particularly during election period. Audiences in both big democracies (such as the United States) and growing democracies (such as Nigeria) have not been immune of the effects of fake news propaganda. In brief, new forms of media propaganda (particularly those that are aided by the Internet and social media) have come to justify assumptions that recognise the "omnipotence" of the media – the belief that the media can do and undo – which is the very essence of the Magic Bullet Theory. This paper sought to show how the Magic Bullet Theory has continued to be a relevant interpretative tool for discussing the behaviour of media audiences during election period. The researchers particularly argued that the impactful use of media propaganda (particularly fake news on social media) during Nigeria's 2019 elections has demonstrated that the Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Theory has continued to be a relevant theory in mass media studies. In effect, during the election, it was observed that members of the main competing political parties as well as aides of contesting candidates used fake news on social media, and the audience members, not minding their social status and the level of academic attainment, passively reacted to these media contents thereby being influenced by them. The issues used and data generated in this study support the continued relevance of magic bullet media effect. Also, the fact that social media have expanded the scope of human's interactions through user-generated contents and wide social presence has effectively added to the powerful effect of the media.

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