

Information Manipulation and Societal Instability: Challenges to Achieving a Sustainable Democratic Processes

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Abstract

Democratic governance is characterized by citizens' participation, equality, political tolerance, accountability, transparency, bill of rights, human rights, and multi-party system, among others. These underpinning principles are most germane for a society that is desirous of robust development. There is a popular slogan that 'politicians can promise to build bridges where there is no river' and can justify why a relationship or bilateral agreement need not be sustained. This is consequent upon language usage and determination by speakers and situation principal actors. This paper adopted qualitative research method to discuss major issues in information manipulation in the political space. It discusses the key term of language and information manipulation and debated how it interfaces with politics, national and international relations. The study recommended among others that the political class should stop the manipulation of information to divert public attention and opinion from issues to inconsequentiality; the strengthening of the courts and anti-corruption institutions to tackle the hydra-headed challenge of deception of the electorates by the members of the political class during the electioneering campaign; strong advocacy for civic and value re-orientation to suppressing this political ill; protection of the electoral management mechanism and structure from partisanship to reduce the high level of discredited election results, electoral politicization to enshrining legitimacy; and press freedom to allow for free operation so as to engender socio-political engineering.

Key Words: *Democratization, Information Manipulation, Politics, National and International Relations*

1. Introduction

The developed and developing democracies of the world have witnessed the resurgence of domestic pressures for developed democratization and political reforms following the upsurge of political reforms and democratic change witnessed across the world. In Nigeria for instance, the consequences of these pressures led to the dismantling of previously autocratic regimes and replacement with constitutionally elected leaders through multi-party politics and periodic elections since 1999 to date. With the increase in the number of countries imbibing liberal

democracy behind the United States of America (USA) since then, liberal democratic principles appear to have been accepted as *sine-qua-non* to the endemic and protracted political crises in Africa at large, Nigeria and the United States of America in particular.

In West Africa for example, Ogbodo (2023) asserts that the rebirth of constitutional rule in the early 1990s was dramatic because it was against the background of repressive military regimes and one-party dictatorships that had held sway in the sub-region. He noted further that the enthronement of constitutional rule, anchored on broad-based participation, rule of law, multipart, and periodic elections, among others, therefore, created some hope that the time had come for the countries in the sub-region to restore a stable political environment for sustainable development (North et al, 2009; Ntomba, 2015). Regrettably, the expectations for adherence to the true principles and tenets of democratic practices in the form of a steadfast political atmosphere and campaign, credible elections, hitch-free political transition, good governance, and nation building are yet to materialize. This is because from political, social, and environmental point of view, information and its usage which has been considered as a strong vehicle and instrumentality of fellowship, fraternization and effective communication is often turned downward. Suffice to say that it is also observed as a major conveyor and denominator of culture, ideology, norms and customs among nations at all times. Against this background, Anyanwu (2007) says, information “is a social phenomenon and as such it is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of the society.” Accordingly, the necessity to learn a language does not only lies in reaching out to others but to maintain a variety of the social bond, a shared sense of values and communal awareness, thereby making it a system; a set of elements, each of which has a capacity of contributing to the workings of the whole (Grande & Dressler 1992 cited by Danladi, 2013).

Further to the above however, Nigeria is blessed with natural resources and rich linguistics heritage but battered by the electioneering system of misinformation that informs its structures of leadership. Nigerian information management situation can be inferred to have heightened the nature of the Nigerian politics because all languages are significant. The significance diversity of people’s language can be said to be one of the reasons Nigeria cannot adopt one of the indigenous languages as a national language with real national functions; language naturally signifies identity, culture and uniqueness.

It can be said from the foregoing that information is power and as a result, its manipulation has brought poor and chaotic electioneering campaign, with poor orientation of what it takes to usher in a good and development-oriented governance, accountability, and responsible leadership through a free, fair and credible election. The case for information manipulation in politics and election management can be deduced from the fact that language is the primary means of effectively communicating knowledge and culture which serves as “the link between all the realms that make up a community: wealth, power, value and self-definition and evaluation of a community” Ngugi (2008) cited by Omachonu (2008).

Since independence of many advanced democracies of the world, the attainment of a sustainable

democratic political system has not been “a tea party” as there “has been struggling without success to return to a [real] democratic form of government; as political parties, presidential candidates, economic reform programmes, and top military officers have come and gone (in different forms)...without end” (Diamond, Kirk-Greene & Oyediran, 1997). The effect of language usage in the practice of political activities in Africa is not entirely different from political processes in other climes of the world. Consequently, Thomson (2016) posited that key components of politics include power acquisition, ideological issues, resource control and distribution, conflict management and resolution, and governance affairs. The US and Nigeria has advanced so well politically that information becomes inevitable, and when communication is discussed, language in all its ramifications, assume prominence. Thus, Nigeria politics for example is as complex as its complicated linguistic situation. According to Mustapha (2007);

...events in Nigeria since 1983, such as the *No Nation! No Destiny!* broadcast of the FRCN Kaduna; the acrimonious and chauvinistic campaigns associated with the 1983 elections; the incessant disputes over the question of Federal Character; and the debacle over Nigeria's affiliation to the Organization of Islamic Countries, tend to suggest that the unity of the country cannot be taken for granted.

The above statement pictured a correlation between language and power which determines the relationships that exist among the international communities at large. The socio-political control of people by government is made possible, in a way, by the instrument of information. In this paper, the concept of information manipulation shall be related to politics with specific references to its implications on the national and international relations.

It is against this background, therefore, that this paper seeks to cross-examine the impact of information manipulation on sustainable democratization processes and governance with a view to establishing its challenges and making appreciable recommendations. The far-reaching objective of the paper is to specially expose how information manipulation and has led to societal instability and poor democratization and democratic governance. The understated are the specific objectives of the paper, which is to:

- i. Sustainable democratization through credible electioneering;
- ii. examine the description of political language manipulation and misinformation
- iii. Suggest appreciable recommendations that will entrench credible democratization processes through effective political information dissemination.

2. Methodology

The research is anchored on a “longitudinal research design.” This type of design is hinged on the observation of several variables for a period of time (Ugwu and Eze Val, 2023). According to

Ogbodo (2023), a longitudinal study sees the same variable being repeatedly observed over a period. He added that this enables researchers to observe and measure changes in variables over time and associate them with causal factors. With longitudinal studies, changes, trends, and patterns in human behavior are easily described and quantified. Hence, longitudinal research studies the development, and transformation of natural history and course of events. With these advantages, a longitudinal design is regarded as superior to a cross-sectional design. In applying longitudinal design to our study, our verification of proposition which involved in the reconsideration of some relevant variable in party politics and democratization which is language determination and misinformation in the electioneering campaign of the United States and Nigeria to ascertain how it influences societal stability and democratic processes over time.

The study relied on documentary methods to generate the relevant secondary data for this study. The documentary method is relevant to the study because the information or data required for the study are already in the public domain. What is needed is to refine, interpret, evaluate, and analyze them. It is not the kind of information elicited through interviews and questionnaires (Adesola and Abimbola, 2014; Val, 2023). The study shall adopted the documentary method because what is required for the analysis of the issues is verifiable data, which are already available in written documents, and not personal opinions of individuals.

Since the study utilized textual qualitative content analysis rooted in systematic logical deductions. Content analysis was used to organize and synthesize the large volumes of qualitative data that were generated for this study to draw inferences and conclusions.

3. Sustainable Democratization through Electioneering

Although it is pertinent to acknowledge that no democratic nation has achieved a state of perfect democracy; however, the trajectory toward this destination should instill optimism within the populace (Chibuzor and Amanda, 2023). An exemplary democratic election is characterized by its adherence to principles of freedom, fairness, and transparency, while affording every citizen equal and equitable opportunities to engage in the electoral process. According to Egwu (2019), democratic governance is a vital instrument and social condition necessary for the facilitation and enhancement of a democratization process. This provides a veritable platform for a robust atmosphere which allows for political, socio-economic and socio-cultural development of society. This practice provides the citizens with equal opportunity to participate in the political process in any capacity.

Blühdorn (2011) sees democracy as always an emancipatory tool which always centres on the enhancement of rights and (material) living conditions. It is not really suited to restricting the rights or material conditions affecting the majority – unless, as with the rule that red traffic lights must be observed, the benefits are immediately tangible. The question of the sustainability of democracy has two dimensions: first, that of the sustainability of democracy itself, which has been debated ever since the “crisis theories” of the 1970s; (Jürgen, 1975). Secondly is the question of whether democratic structures are capable of managing the sustainability crisis,

which is most commonly associated with the finiteness of natural resources and the phenomenon of climate change, but also has a whole range of other aspects. The first dimension as Blühdorn (2011) noted has recently received much attention. In the light of globalisation, political cynicism and diminishing trust in democratic institutions, there has been much talk about the coming of “postdemocracy”.

According to Chibuzor and Amanda (2023), elections are one of the fundamental pillars of democracy. The Electoral Law contains provisions that govern and clearly define both the organization of these elections and the process for counting and assigning the votes to the corresponding seats. There are two types of electoral rights: active and passive. Active electoral rights allow citizens to vote, while passive electoral rights enable individuals to run for office. In most cases, the electorate can exercise both types of rights (Becker and Raveloson, 2008). However, conducting elections alone does not automatically qualify a state as democratic. There are other forms of government that use elections. For an election to be considered democratic according to Becker and Raveloson (2008), it must meet certain requirements:

- i. Democratic elections are free when citizens have the right to choose from several candidates or parties that can run for the election without any restriction. They must also be free to decide whether they want to use their right to vote or to abstain from doing so, if they prefer.
- ii. Democratic elections must be equitable in that it must ensure that every citizen who is eligible to vote has access to a vote, and that their vote is valued equally regardless of their origin, gender, language, income, wealth, occupation, social class, sexual identity, education, religion, or political affiliation."
- iii. In democratic elections, there must be no way of knowing for which political party or for which particular candidate a citizen has voted. They are then secrete, when each citizen can put his ballot in an envelope, without having been either watched over or influenced, in the secrecy of the polling booth, and when he/she is also able, in the same way, to put his/her envelope inside the ballot box afterwards.
- iv. Democratic elections are characterized by their transparency and openness to the public. This implies that every citizen has the right to observe the vote counting process when the ballot box is opened. Additionally, the entire process of vote counting, from the insertion of ballots into the box to the final calculation that determines the distribution of seats, can be closely monitored by interested parties.
- v. Apart from the aforementioned requirements, holding regular elections is crucial for ensuring a functioning democracy. This allows citizens to be informed about the date of upcoming elections in advance, providing them with enough time to prepare. Regular elections also enable the electorate to hold their government accountable and remove it from power if necessary. It's essential that the electorate represents the entire population,

and no particular group should be excluded, except for those who are underage.

- vi. And finally, the electorate's votes should be final, meaning that the election results should be enforced effectively, which implies that they must be accepted as legitimate.

The election process is characterized by two distinct systems: the absolute majority vote and the proportional vote. Both systems are crucial in shaping the political structure and forming the political will of the nation. The decision to adopt one system over the other should be made based on a consideration of political traditions, historical situations, and social conditions. The internal regulations of the party, relations between parties, and the relationship between the government and the parliament are all parameters that may vary based on the choice of electoral system (Becker and Raveloson, 2008). It is essential to ensure that the electoral system is not manipulated, as this undermines the primary function of an election and leads to a loss of legitimacy for the elected organs.... (Chibuzor and Amanda, 2023). The challenges are enormous and they include the following. These are leadership failures; massive corruption; ethnic marginalization; electoral umpire partisanship; patron-client politics; press censorship, among others.

4.0 A Discussion of Information Manipulation

4.1 Political Language and Misinformation

The [US and Nigeria] may be unique stages on which political transactions are carried out, but the actual processes themselves have... similarities to, than differences from, those on other continents. Note, for example, how ideology (the Soviet Union, for instance), issues of ethnicity and class (Belgium and Britain, respectively), military *coups d'état* (Portugal), state collapse (Yugoslavia), newly formed democracies (Spain) and one-party states (East Germany) have all been features within European politics during the same post-colonial period under scrutiny (Thomson, 2016).

From the above position, we define politics as activities that an individual or group of persons engaged towards winning and sustaining the political powers of a given society. It involves those activities that concern with the administration and governance of an organization or a country. Typically, politics involves convincing the electorates about the manifestoes of a given party as against the other opposition party. Politicians go to any length to persuade citizens to vote for them and because of the desperation at winning people over, they adopt several styles of language manipulations.

The fulcrum upon which political activities take effect on the populace is language. Hence, language and how it is used is paramount in any debate. Politicians tend to know how to speak to the electorates in luring styles that may confuse, misinform, contradict, etc. with various oratory skills. Inferably, the underlining fact is that they all have the decisions of the electorates,

contenders, and a lot of other stakeholders to influence and language manipulation, and misinformation is their tool for achieving that goal. The Language of Politics is often propagandist in nature. It is usually with certain word selections that are meant to cover the truth which listeners know or are aware of. It is against this background that Orwell (1946) cited by Baci (2014) and Stepanyan (2016) opined that “political language of all political parties...is designed to make lies sound truth and murder [the truth] respectably and to give an appearance of solidarity to pure wind.” Hence, the following are some of the features that are common in political discourse. PAUL, Igono and Apeh (2021) identified the following as ways through which this manipulation are manifested. They are:

Rhetoric

English Oxford Dictionary defines rhetoric as a language coined to have a persuasive or impressive effect, but which is often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content. It can also be said to refer to the art of effective and persuasive speech which involves translating thought into language and getting the message across to the target audience.

With specific reference to the Nigerian politics, rhetoric also refers to a speech that sounds fine and important but is usually insincere and empty. This is what depicts politicians’ speeches today in Nigeria. They have been largely non-committal, so full of appeal to prejudice, snobbery, greed, fear, insincerity and also lacking substance that most of the time people react to them with levity – lack of substance.

Selection

This is a situation where a politician carefully selects his language and words in line with his fore-knowledge of the subject matter under consideration. The subject matter could be religious, economic, cultural, academic etc. and appeals to his audience based on the traditional or ritual knowledge of such. This made Birk & Birk (1999) to assert that “we depend on a store of knowledge, acquired in the past or being acquired through research...[and] larger information.” Omachonu (2008) expresses the influence of language in this regards thus: “the spirit...in any society, it must be noted, are deep rooted in the language...”For example, word such as *embellishment*, *thuggery*, *political machineries*, *nepotism*, *money laundry*, *impersonation*, *forgery*, *rigged elections*, *bribery*, *injustice*, *blood-day robbery*, *ballot box snatching*, *vote buying*, etc. are often, used in politics because of the fore-knowledge of corruption.

These terms are used extemporaneously. Obviously, politicians and journalists make use of these words anytime issues that depends on corruption and irregularities are being addressed unconsciously which makes such statements and speeches stale and valueless.

Slanting

This can be inferred to mean a deliberate communication of fore-knowledge either consciously or unconsciously with certain charged language and charged words. Charged language, according to Birk & Birk (1999) is when “facts or words, or emphasis or any combination of the three significantly influences feelings towards or judgment of a subject.” Charged language can be suggested to underline facts or words in such a manner that sense of judgment of a subject is influenced by the projected emphasis. Politicians adopt this language usage to deviate from talking about obvious facts.

Glittering Generality

This language is used to invoke a deep feeling or patriotism in order to make the populace agree with or without the merits of the argument being considered. For example, *open-door policy, our fatherland, truth and justice, our constitutional rights, rule of law, new dawn, service to humanity, education for all, shelter for all, salary for all unemployed youths, free meals in schools at the elementary levels, my fellow citizens* etc. are appeals to feelings rather than expressions of realities. For instance, some of the *open-door policies* were not made with the masses necessarily carried along; *education for all* is a political expression because a whole lot of children of school age are not enrolled; others such as *shelter for all, free meals, salary for all unemployed youths etc.* are only beautiful on papers.

Propaganda

Merriam-Webster defines propaganda as “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of hurting or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person”. It is characteristic of politicians to formulate allegations that do not have any constructive bases with the intension to spoil the political career of the opponent. The dictionary of vocabulary puts it that:

The word propaganda is often used in a negative sense especially for politicians who make false claims to get elected or spread rumours to get their way. In fact, any campaign that is used to persuade can be called propaganda.

This usage is also common in the Nigerian Political context. Negative reports about the opponent that are not verifiable are spread almost on daily basis. This challenge both qualitative and quantitative reporting (Forsyth, 2003). Although “some cases of misinformation are deliberate and amount to propaganda, cases of inadvertent misinformation are just as problematic in affecting the beliefs and behavior of democratic citizens” (Brown, 2018:194).

The language of political debate is often a mixture of archaism and contemporary language. It combines a number of various features such as religion, law, the media and advertisement. Language of politics entails jargons; technical terms of idiom of special group for special activities. Political language uses jargons in their second sense which is related to its evasiveness.

Slogans or Catch-phrases

Slogans are non-committal. Also common in political language are some of these attention-grabbing phrases but which are ambiguous. The implication of ambiguity in this context is that if the promises fail, nobody will be held accountable. However, these ambiguous, catchy slogans appeal to voters' emotions. It also beclouds their sense of judgment.

In most cases voters take such acts of rhetoric by politicians on the surface without its deep semantic and political implications. They are statements meant to control the minds of voters. Al-Gublan (2015) quoted Van Dijk (1985) who contended that this mental control of the people is the real definition of "power." But it should be known, however, that it is not a rule for politicians to abide by this language peculiarity of politics; rather, it is a tendency occasioned by need to market their political ideologies. Against this background, Al-Gublan (2015) identified the manipulative nature of language that allows its adoption and stylistic usage in politics as follows:

- i. **Variability:** This is possible because language generally is productive. Speakers can make new meanings by producing new expressions and utterances. By extension, linguistic signs (whether oral or written) can be put together to form sequences that may never have been produced before. While this may effortlessly happen, hearers may have little difficulty understanding them. The human language is a soft tool which can be manipulated into varieties of possibilities for decision making.
- ii. **Negotiability:** This property of language denotes lack of strictness when it comes to language usage. Here, choice of language usage is made not "mechanically or strict rules or fixed form-functions relation, but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies."
- iii. **Adaptability:** This is about the possibility of language being adaptive. A user of language can always fine-tune it to communicate his concepts. These three properties observed above are often inter-related and reflect the productivity of language.

4.2 The Understanding of Language Manipulation and Politics

The influence of language could be so powerful that it shapes perception or world view of the recipient. That is why governance is possible among men as we chat and agree on policies for an ideal society. Apart from the well-known political discourse which is to get the citizenry informed, another ultimate goal of political discourse is that political parties in power and the opposition parties also desire to get hold of the power themselves too at the next election.

Language shapes our perception of realities. The exact language we use and the emphasis we give to certain words, as observed above have the tendency to influence someone's judgment. People are susceptible to propaganda. One of the major goals of language in politics is to appeal to the interest of the listeners in order to win their favour against the opponent. To achieve this purpose, politicians select the appropriate language and have certain words foregrounded. On this basis it is convenient to say that there is an active connection between language and politics which makes one independent of the other.

In another development, politicians know how to play the linguistic games of politics. A careful observation of political statements reveals that there are really more to grab after the speech than the immediate meaning of their words. Along this notion, Crystal (1977) cited by Nura (2015:56-57) said, "the best way to know what the politicians say is by asking certain questions" which bothered on:

The identity question that interrogates statements' consistency with the party's policy so as to authenticate its validity with the party's programme;

Personal consistency that connotes exactness of present and former statements in order to test the stability in values of the words given; and

The credibility question that checks the relationship between words and action thereby situating it in both principles and practices (*to know who is fooling who*).

From the foregoing, the following key factors are measures towards evaluating possible truth and authenticity of political speeches.

i. **The Ideology Benchmark:** A political ideology is, inferably, the identity that makes the party unique. A politician is expected to be a representative of a political ideology which is beyond an individual's political self- image. If a political speech is a total deviation from the party's ideology, then the speaker may not be saying the truth. Here, it would be easy to indicate that there is a disconnect between what the politician says to his audience and the party's policy. However, this disconnect may points to some level of sincerity if he passes the evaluation of the remaining two benchmarks below. In this light, political statements can be authenticated, to some extent, if they tally with the party's

manifestoes and vice versa.

ii. **The Question of Personal Consistency:** This is a question of if what a politician has just said is the same or connotes sameness with his previous statements on key issues. In other words, if his deviation from the general party ideology is intended to present truth, then, such must be seen to be consistent with earlier stance on same issues in the past. A politician is unstable if what he says now is different in value from what he said last time.

iii. **Credibility Factor:** This checks the nexus between words and actions. In a situation where what is being said is different from what is being done, then, the speaker is playing on the intelligence of the people.

4.3 Political Correctness and Effective Communication.

The term *Political Correctness* is over used in the contemporary political parlance and as such has a broad sense associated with. Political Correctness is generally known as a way of using language to convey ideas, behaviour, and policies etc. in less offensive manner to gender, race, culture, age or identity of another group.

The negative aspect of this concept of correctness is that politicians hide the truth because they have public figure to monitor. This fact gives another handle on the other end of communication. That is, truth in effective communication is sacrificed in attempt by politicians to be seen as being politically correct. In order to be politically correct, for instance, **Genocide** is not called its real name. **Terrorists** are called **Avengers**; **Thugs** are known as **Boys**, and **Armed Robbers** are referred to as **Men of the Under-world**, etc.

Language in any creative mind can be dragged in any direction depending on the user. The choice of language of a politician is either made for him by the context; shared values of his political party or by himself. Either way, “all options are embedded in language system: the system is a network of options deriving from all the various functions of language” (Halliday 1971 cited by Osundare, 2003). It must be understood that much of the linguistic twists by the politicians is made possible, partly, by the variable, adaptable and creative nature of both language and politics. The consequence of the symbiotic nature of language and politics is that they will continue to evolve into new nuances and technicalities that would necessitate discourse analysis for better understanding at all levels of political relationships in the society.

From the foregoing, politics affects both national and international relationships in all their ramifications. Therefore, such phenomenal human activity should be an avenue for engaging the electorates and institutions of governments for better human co-existence. The language of its ideological marketing, national orientations and dialogues must be clear and profound in such a manner that all stakeholders would understand for stronger relationships at all levels in the society.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Suffice to argue that democratization has been flawed overtime as successive political practitioners have trapped the state and subjected the citizens to brownnosing within the political scenery. They have failed in paying attention to socio-political and economic realities and peculiarities. More often as the practice and principles of democracy are watered-down, there will be hallucination in the development needs and yearnings of the citizenry. To this end therefore, Egwu (2019) said, “Being caught up in this quagmire, there is an ardent need to redress the ugly trend to guarantee democratic governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. This is because; the citizens have high expectations on the political leadership in governance. However, the democratic state holds good prospects if the political leaders would demonstrate political will governance within the arrays of democratic governance, development which has been elusive has equally subjected the citizens to poverty and hardship.”

However, on the nexus between democratic governance and sustainable development, the paper posits that governance has been abused through information manipulation which has caused socio-political instability, leadership failures; massive corruption; racial and ethnic marginalization; electoral partisanship; patron-client politics; interference on local and county administration; and the compromised press and media outlets among others. Following the above debate, recommendations are given that:

- i. The political class should stop the manipulation of information to divert public opinion and hence continuously pursues public good in harnessing and sustaining economic and human resources for national development;
- ii. The anti-corruption institutions should be strengthened to tackle the hydra-headed challenge of deception of the electorates by the members of the political class during the electioneering campaign;
- iii. There should be advocacy for civic and value re-orientation to suppressing ethnic and racial marginalization by placing national interest above the identified leanings of ethnic, religious, and race;
- iv. The electoral management mechanism and structure should be insulated from partisanship to reduce the high level of discredited election results, electoral politicization, thereby enshrining legitimacy;
- v. There should be prohibition of patron-client politics to reduce monetization of electioneering processes; and
- vi. Press freedom to allow for free operation so as to engender socio-political engineering that will restructure the dampened societal public opinion status.

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