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Smart Democracy: Leveraging Artificial Intelligence to Combat Election Misinformation in Nigeria

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Abstract: The increasing use of digital communication technologies has transformed democratic participation in Nigeria, but it has also accelerated the spread of election misinformation through social media and other online platforms. False political information, manipulated digital content, and coordinated disinformation campaigns have continued to undermine electoral credibility, public trust, and informed voter decision-making. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a promising tool for detecting misinformation, verifying online content, identifying coordinated inauthentic behavior, and supporting evidence-based electoral communication. Despite these opportunities, there is limited empirical evidence on how AI can be effectively integrated into Nigeria's electoral communication system to strengthen democratic governance. This study examines the role of AI in combating election misinformation and promoting smart democracy in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates the prevalence and patterns of election misinformation, assesses stakeholders' awareness and adoption of AI technologies for misinformation detection, examines the opportunities and challenges associated with AI deployment, and proposes communication strategies for responsible AI use during elections. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews involving electoral officials, journalists, fact-checkers, communication experts, and registered voters. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data will be analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for policymakers, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), media organizations, technology developers, and civil society organizations on leveraging AI to enhance electoral transparency, improve information integrity, strengthen public trust, and promote democratic participation in Nigeria. The study contributes to the growing literature on artificial intelligence, development communication, digital governance, and democratic innovation in Africa.

Keywords: *Smart Democracy, Artificial Intelligence, Election Misinformation, Development Communication, Electoral Integrity, Digital Governance, Nigeria.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

➢ *Background of the Study*

Accurate and reliable information is a necessity for democracy to thrive. For proper electoral decision, access to correct, timely and dependable information is very fundamental in every political system. Informed judgment is a product of informed minds founded on accurate data or reliable information. However, the rapid growth of digital communication technologies and social media has increased the spread of misinformation and disinformation. False information, manipulated images, and misleading political messages circulate quickly on digital platforms, making it difficult for voters to distinguish between truth and falsehood (Akinola et al., 2024). The same technologies that promoted accuracy in information equally facilitated the rapid production and dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and manipulated multimedia content that threaten the integrity of democratic elections (UNESCO, 2023). Election misinformation has become one of the most significant threats to democratic governance in both developed and developing countries.

Nevertheless, in Nigeria, there is a significant increase in the use of social media for political communication and civic engagement. Digital platforms have improved political participation and citizen engagement, and has become channels for spreading election-related misinformation. During the 2023 general elections and subsequent state elections, misleading political content, fabricated election results and fake news were widely shared across social media platforms (Omoruyi et al., 2025). The increasing spread of election misinformation threatens the very objective of democracy because it weakens informed decision-making,

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creates political polarization, and reduces public trust in electoral systems (Akinola et al., 2024). Electoral periods have also witnessed widespread circulation of false information through platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube. These developments have raised concerns among policymakers, journalists, civil society organizations, and electoral management bodies regarding the protection of electoral integrity and democratic stability.

Nonetheless, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most important technological innovations in communication. AI-powered systems can analyze large volumes of digital content, identify misleading information, detect fake accounts, verify online information, and support real-time fact-checking. AI-powered tools have enhanced the efficiency of journalism, strengthened fact-checking mechanisms, and improved the capacity of electoral stakeholders to monitor digital information flows. These capabilities provide opportunities for governments, electoral bodies, journalists, and fact-checking organizations to combat misinformation before it reaches large audiences (Nwodu et al., 2025).

Globally, scholars have argued that AI can strengthen democracy through automated fact-checking, misinformation detection, media monitoring, and public information verification. AI itself has emerged as a potential solution. There are AI-enabled fact-checking systems, automated content verification, bot detection, and real-time misinformation monitoring that provide promising opportunities to strengthen election communication and protect democratic processes. However, they also caution that AI can be misused to create deepfakes, synthetic videos, and other forms of political propaganda if not properly regulated (Okolo, 2024). Hence, recent communication studies have shown that AI is increasingly being applied in journalism, media monitoring, content verification, and misinformation detection.

Moreover, from a Development Communication perspective, the application of AI extends beyond technological innovation to encompass citizen empowerment, inclusive participation, media literacy, transparency, and accountable governance. Development Communication emphasizes the strategic use of communication to facilitate social change, enhance public participation, and improve institutional responsiveness. Integrating AI into electoral communication therefore requires not only technological capability but also ethical governance, public trust, regulatory oversight, and stakeholder collaboration. On this lane, Nigerian communication scholars have observed that although AI research is growing, its application in election communication and democratic governance remains limited and requires more scholarly attention (Ogunbadejo et al., 2025). Despite the growing interest in AI, there is limited empirical evidence on how AI can be effectively integrated into Nigeria's electoral communication system to reduce misinformation and improve public trust in elections.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to AI and journalism, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding the adoption, effectiveness, governance, and societal implications of AI for combating election misinformation in African democracies. Most existing studies have concentrated on Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, leaving limited empirical evidence from Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries. Furthermore, few studies have integrated Development Communication theories with AI governance to explain how technological innovations can strengthen democratic participation while safeguarding freedom of expression and electoral credibility. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how Artificial Intelligence can be strategically leveraged to combat election misinformation in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the determinants of AI adoption among electoral stakeholders, evaluates citizens' perceptions of AI-assisted fact-checking, explores ethical and regulatory considerations, and proposes a Development Communication framework for responsible AI deployment during election campaigns. This study therefore seeks to examine Smart Democracy: Leveraging Artificial Intelligence to Combat Election Misinformation in Nigeria, with the aim of exploring how AI can strengthen democratic communication, improve electoral information integrity, and promote credible elections.

- *Statement of the Problem*

Election misinformation has become one of the greatest communication challenges facing democratic governance in Nigeria. The increasing use of social media has made it easier for false political information to spread rapidly before, during, and after elections. Fake news, manipulated videos, false election results, and misleading political narratives influence public opinion and create confusion among voters (Akinola et al., 2024). Although electoral stakeholders, journalists, and independent fact-checking organizations continue to verify political information, the speed at which misinformation spreads is very high. Consequently, many citizens encounter false information before accurate and reliable news become available. This situation reduces public confidence in elections and weakens democratic participation (Nwodu et al., 2025).

However, Artificial Intelligence has demonstrated considerable potential in detecting fake news, identifying suspicious online activities and verifying digital content. Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers new opportunities for strengthening democratic communication through automated fact-checking and fake news detection Though this AI-powered technologies have already been adopted in several countries to improve election information integrity and support responsible digital communication, but the adoption of AI-based misinformation detection within Nigeria's electoral communication system remains limited. Its application in Nigeria still remains at an early stage, with limited institutional adoption, inadequate policy frameworks, insufficient technical capacity, and low public awareness of AI-enabled verification tools (Okolo, 2024).

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Moreover, existing studies have mainly focused on the effects of fake news on democracy, with fewer studies examining AI as a strategic communication tool for combating election misinformation in Nigeria (Ogunbadejo et al., 2025). Existing studies have largely focused on the causes, prevalence, and effects of fake news on elections, political participation, and public opinion. Comparatively few studies have examined how AI can be integrated into development communication strategies to improve electoral transparency, protect information integrity, and strengthen citizens' trust in democratic processes, particularly within the Nigerian context (UNESCO, 2023). Hence, development communication literature has paid limited attention to the integration of AI into democratic communication strategies for promoting electoral transparency, citizen trust, and informed political participation. This represents an important knowledge gap in both development communication and digital governance literature. Herein, there is a knowledge gap regarding the practical application of AI in strengthening democratic governance through effective communication.

It is against this background that this study investigates how Artificial Intelligence can be leveraged to combat election misinformation and promote smart democracy in Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide useful recommendations for electoral management bodies, communication practitioners, policymakers, journalists, and technology developers on the effective use of AI to improve information integrity during elections. This study seeks to examine how Artificial Intelligence can be leveraged to combat election misinformation and promote smart democracy in Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence that will assist policymakers, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), media organizations and technology developers.

➢ *Objectives of the Study*

- *General Objective*

✓ To examine how Artificial Intelligence can be leveraged to combat election misinformation and promote smart democracy in Nigeria.

- *Specific Objectives*

✓ To identify the major forms and sources of election misinformation in Nigeria.
✓ To assess the level of awareness and adoption of Artificial Intelligence tools for detecting election misinformation among relevant stakeholders.
✓ To examine the effectiveness of Artificial Intelligence in reducing election misinformation and improving information integrity.
✓ To identify the challenges affecting the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Nigeria's electoral communication system.
✓ To propose communication strategies for integrating Artificial Intelligence into democratic governance and election management.

➢ *Research Questions*

- What are the major forms and sources of election misinformation in Nigeria?
- What is the level of awareness and adoption of Artificial Intelligence tools for combating election misinformation?
- How effective is Artificial Intelligence in detecting and reducing election misinformation?
- What challenges hinder the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Nigeria's electoral communication system?
- What communication strategies can enhance the use of Artificial Intelligence for promoting smart democracy in Nigeria?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➢ *Introduction*

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has contributed immensely in the growth of political communication, democratic governance, and development communication. There is an improved citizens' access to political information, public participation, and opportunities for civic engagement courtesy of digital innovations. However, the same digital communication platforms have enhanced the spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly during election periods, thereby posing serious threats to electoral integrity and democratic stability (Akinola et al., 2024; Okolo, 2024). The World Economic Forum (2024) identifies misinformation and disinformation among the most severe global risks because of their potential to undermine democratic institutions, social cohesion, and public confidence.

Moreover, for citizen participation, transparency, and good governance. Effective and reliable communication is indispensable. Recent development communication literature emphasizes that communication is central to sustainable development, Effective and reliable communication enables citizens to make informed decisions, participate in governance, and hold public officials accountable (Ogbonnaya, 2024; Erondu & Erondu, 2024). This is exactly why scholars have increasingly advocated the integration of AI into democratic processes to improve information verification, monitor online political discourse, detect misinformation, and strengthen electoral transparency.

Nigeria presents a particularly important context for examining these issues. As Africa's most populous democracy, the country has experienced rapid growth in internet penetration and social media use, making digital platforms central to political campaigns and election communication. However, empirical studies focusing on the application of AI to combat election misinformation within Nigeria's democratic environment remain limited. This literature therefore reviews existing scholarship on Smart Democracy, Artificial Intelligence and democratic governance, as well as development communication and democratic participation, with the aim of identifying current knowledge and existing research gaps.

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➢ *Concept of Smart Democracy*

Smart Democracy refers to the application of modern digital technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), digital platforms, and information and communication technologies (ICTs), to improve democratic governance, citizen participation, transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. Unlike conventional democracy, which depends mainly on periodic elections and physical participation, Smart Democracy promotes continuous interaction between governments and citizens through digital communication technologies. Smart Democracy seeks to make democratic decision-making more inclusive by integrating technological innovations into governance while preserving democratic values such as transparency, accountability, fairness, and public participation. (Ovadya et al, 2024).

In the Nigerian context, Smart Democracy has become increasingly relevant because digital technologies are now widely used for voter education, election monitoring, political campaigns, and civic engagement. Civic technology initiatives have demonstrated that digital innovation can strengthen governance by improving communication between citizens and public institutions and increasing accountability (Zisengwe, 2024). Nevertheless, scholars caution that Smart Democracy also faces significant challenges. AI technologies may facilitate the production of deepfakes, automated propaganda, and algorithmic manipulation if they are poorly regulated. Consequently, successful Smart Democracy requires effective AI governance, ethical standards, digital literacy, and collaboration among governments, technology companies, media organizations, civil society, and citizens to ensure that technological innovations strengthen rather than weaken democratic institutions (Okolo, 2024).

➢ *Artificial Intelligence and Democratic Governance*

Artificial Intelligence refers to computer systems capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence, including learning, pattern recognition, decision support, language processing, prediction, and content analysis. It has become one of the most influential technologies shaping public administration, governance, and democratic processes. In democratic governance, AI is increasingly applied in public service delivery, policy analysis, election management, misinformation detection, and citizen engagement.

Recent studies indicate that AI can improve democratic governance by enhancing government efficiency, increasing transparency, supporting evidence-based policymaking, and strengthening communication between governments and citizens. AI-powered technologies enable governments to analyze large volumes of public information, detect misinformation rapidly, monitor digital conversations, and improve service delivery (Tjondronegoro, 2024).

In electoral communication, AI contributes to automated fact-checking, identification of fake social media accounts, detection of coordinated misinformation campaigns, and verification of digital content before it reaches wider audiences. These capabilities are particularly important in countries where misinformation spreads rapidly through social media platforms (Okolo, 2024).

Despite these opportunities, AI also presents important governance challenges. Algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, privacy concerns, weak regulatory frameworks, and the emergence of AI-generated deepfakes have raised concerns regarding the integrity of democratic communication. Scholars therefore emphasize that AI should complement rather than replace human judgment in democratic decision-making. Effective governance requires ethical regulations, institutional accountability, public oversight, and responsible AI implementation to ensure that technological innovations promote democratic values rather than undermine them (Ovadya et al., 2024). For Nigeria, strengthening AI governance will require investment in digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, media literacy, and legal frameworks that encourage innovation while protecting electoral integrity and public trust.

➢ *Development Communication and Democratic Participation*

Development communication is the planned use of communication processes and media to facilitate social change, promote citizen participation, improve governance, and support sustainable development. Rather than merely transmitting information, development communication encourages dialogue, collaboration, empowerment, and community participation in decision-making processes. Within this perspective, combating election misinformation requires more than technological interventions; it also demands investments in media literacy, civic education, community engagement, ethical journalism, and institutional transparency.

But recent scholarship has reaffirmed that development communication remains an essential instrument for democratic governance because it strengthens public awareness, promotes civic education, facilitates policy dialogue, and enhances citizens' participation in governance. Ogbonnaya (2024) argues that development communication enables governments and communities to exchange information that supports inclusive development, accountability, and social transformation. Similarly, Erondu and Erondu (2024) observe that media, ICTs, and digital communication networks have significantly expanded opportunities for political participation by providing citizens with greater access to public information, government activities, and electoral processes. Digital communication platforms enable citizens to express opinions, monitor government performance, and engage in democratic discussions beyond traditional media channels.

However, the effectiveness of development communication depends largely on the credibility and accuracy of information circulating within the public sphere. The widespread dissemination of misinformation during elections weakens informed participation, encourages political polarization, reduces public trust in democratic institutions, and limits the developmental role of

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communication (Akinola et al., 2024). Consequently, integrating Artificial Intelligence into development communication offers significant opportunities for improving information verification, monitoring misinformation, supporting fact-checking, and strengthening public trust in electoral communication. AI-enabled communication systems can assist governments, journalists, and civil society organizations in providing citizens with accurate and timely electoral information, thereby promoting informed participation, electoral transparency, and sustainable democratic development in Nigeria. Artificial Intelligence can strengthen Development Communication by supporting real-time fact-checking, enhancing journalists' investigative capacity, improving public access to verified information, and enabling evidence-based electoral communication.

- *Political Communication and Election Misinformation*

Political communication refers to the creation, dissemination, and exchange of political information among governments, political parties, the media, civil society organizations, and citizens. It enables political actors to communicate policies, campaign messages, and governance activities while providing citizens with information needed for informed electoral participation. The emergence of digital media has transformed political communication by increasing the speed, accessibility, and interactivity of political information. However, it has also created opportunities for misinformation, disinformation, and political manipulation (Abiodun, 2024).

Nigeria's 2023 general elections demonstrated both the benefits and challenges of digital political communication. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube became important channels for campaign communication, voter mobilization, and civic engagement. At the same time, these platforms were flooded with false election results, manipulated images, fabricated statements, and misleading videos that influenced public opinion and increased political polarization (Akinola et al., 2024).

Studies examining the 2023 elections found that information disorder was not limited to anonymous social media users. Political campaigns also engaged in practices such as debunking, prebunking, fake-news tagging, and, in some instances, amplifying misleading narratives against political opponents. These activities complicated voters' ability to distinguish verified information from political propaganda (Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2025). Furthermore, exploratory research on electoral disinformation in Nigeria indicates that misinformation circulating on social media frequently migrated into mainstream media, thereby increasing its credibility and reinforcing ethnic, religious, and political divisions. The study concluded that weak regulation, low digital literacy, and the rapid dissemination of unverified online content continue to threaten electoral integrity and democratic accountability.

Moreover, recent advances in generative AI have accelerated both the creation and detection of misinformation. On one hand, large language models can generate persuasive but false political narratives, while deep learning algorithms can produce highly realistic deepfake videos and cloned voices. On the other hand, AI-driven verification tools can automatically compare textual claims with verified databases, detect manipulated visual content, identify bot-driven amplification, and analyse patterns of coordinated online behaviour (OECD, 2024). This dual nature of AI underscores its role as both a source of risk and a strategic solution in protecting democratic processes.

From a development communication perspective, election misinformation undermines citizens' right to accurate information, weakens informed political participation, reduces trust in electoral institutions, and limits the contribution of communication to democratic development. However, AI-enabled fact-checking represents more than a technological innovation; it is a communication strategy that promotes informed citizen participation, transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. Development Communication emphasizes dialogue, participation, and access to credible information as prerequisites for sustainable development. Therefore, integrating AI into election communication should strengthen citizens' ability to make informed electoral decisions while preserving fundamental democratic rights. Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate integrating Artificial Intelligence into election communication through automated fact-checking, misinformation detection, content verification, and digital media monitoring to strengthen electoral transparency and public confidence (Tajudeen, 2025; Okolo, 2024).

- *Empirical Review*

Recent empirical studies consistently demonstrate that election misinformation has become a significant challenge to democratic governance, particularly in emerging democracies where social media has become a major source of political information. Akinola, Adewumi, and Ijaiya (2024) qualitatively examined the implications of fake news for Nigeria's democratic process. Their findings revealed that political misinformation influences voter attitudes, weakens public trust in democratic institutions, increases political polarization, and threatens social cohesion. The authors concluded that stronger media regulation, digital literacy, and institutional collaboration are essential for protecting electoral integrity.

Moreover, Abiodun (2024) investigated the impact of fake news on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria. The study found that misinformation reduces citizens' confidence in political information, encourages political apathy, and weakens informed participation in democratic processes. The study recommended improved fact-checking mechanisms and public media literacy programmes to strengthen democratic communication.

Furhtermore, Gwadi and Igbashangev (2025) evaluated Artificial Intelligence applications for fact-checking social media content during elections in Nigeria. Their analysis showed that AI-powered verification tools can rapidly identify misleading information, evaluate content credibility, and improve public access to verified information. However,

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the study also identified challenges such as inadequate technological infrastructure, limited institutional adoption, and insufficient AI literacy among stakeholders.

Similarly, Tajudeen (2025) assessed the potential impact of Artificial Intelligence on Nigeria's electioneering process. Using the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, the study concluded that AI has considerable potential to improve voter education, election monitoring, and information verification. Nevertheless, without appropriate regulation and ethical governance, AI may also facilitate the spread of deepfakes, synthetic media, and automated propaganda capable of undermining electoral credibility.

Moreover, Okolo (2024) expanded this discussion by examining AI-generated propaganda across African democracies. The study highlighted emerging cases of AI-assisted political manipulation and emphasized the importance of responsible AI governance, digital literacy, and collaboration among governments, civil society, technology companies, and fact-checking organizations. The author argued that AI should be viewed both as a potential threat and as an essential instrument for protecting democratic information ecosystems.

In summary, recent empirical evidence suggests that while Artificial Intelligence presents significant opportunities for combating election misinformation, its effectiveness depends on supportive policies, ethical regulation, institutional capacity, and public awareness.

- *Research Gap*

Although recent studies have examined fake news, political misinformation, Artificial Intelligence, and democratic governance, several important knowledge gaps remain. Most Nigerian studies have focused on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of election misinformation, with relatively limited attention to Artificial Intelligence as a strategic development communication tool for combating misinformation during elections. Existing research also tends to examine AI from technological or governance perspectives without adequately integrating development communication principles such as citizen participation, dialogue, empowerment, and informed decision-making. previous studies have concentrated primarily on the technological capabilities of AI in detecting misinformation, with comparatively less attention to communication processes, stakeholder adoption, public trust, ethical governance, and citizen participation. As a result, the interaction between AI technologies and Development Communication principles remains insufficiently explored.

Furthermore, few empirical studies have investigated how AI-driven technologies—including automated fact-checking, misinformation detection, digital content verification, and social media monitoring—can be systematically incorporated into Nigeria's electoral communication system to strengthen public trust and democratic participation. This gap is particularly important following the information challenges experienced during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. There is limited empirical evidence explaining how AI can be effectively leveraged to combat election misinformation within African electoral contexts, particularly Nigeria.

Therefore, this study contributes to existing literature by integrating Artificial Intelligence, development communication, and political communication into a single analytical framework. to address these gaps. This study adopts a Development Communication perspective to examine how Artificial Intelligence can strengthen electoral integrity in Nigeria. It examines how AI can be responsibly leveraged to reduce election misinformation, improve information integrity, enhance electoral transparency, and promote Smart Democracy in Nigeria.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- *Theoretical Framework*

This study is anchored on the Development Media Theory and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI). These theories provide a suitable framework for understanding how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can support democratic governance, promote informed political participation, and combat election misinformation in Nigeria.

- *Development Media Theory*

Development Media Theory was developed by Dennis McQuail (1987) to explain the role of the media in promoting national development, social progress, and democratic participation, particularly in developing countries. The theory argues that communication should not only entertain or inform but should also contribute to national development by promoting public enlightenment, participation, and social transformation. The theory emphasizes that the media should provide citizens with accurate, reliable, and timely information that enables them to make informed decisions about issues affecting their lives and society. Within democratic governance, development media support transparency, electoral education, citizen participation, and responsible leadership. Consequently, the media have a social responsibility to discourage misinformation, hate speech, and communication practices capable of threatening democratic stability.

Thus, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence has expanded the capacity of development communication by providing automated systems capable of detecting fake news, verifying digital content and identifying disinformation. AI-powered fact-checking technologies can therefore strengthen the developmental role of communication by improving information credibility and protecting citizens from election misinformation. Applying Development Media Theory to this study suggests that AI should be integrated into Nigeria's communication ecosystem as a strategic tool for promoting credible elections, informed voting, electoral transparency, and democratic accountability. The theory therefore explains the developmental significance of AI in strengthening Smart Democracy through improved communication and information integrity. However, critics argue that Development Media Theory may encourage excessive government influence over media operations if not balanced

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by media independence and freedom of expression. Therefore, AI-assisted communication should operate within democratic principles that protect press freedom, human rights, and ethical communication.

➢ *Diffusion of Innovation Theory*

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory was developed by Everett M. Rogers (2003). The theory explains how new ideas, technologies, and innovations are introduced, adopted, and spread within a social system over time. According to him, the adoption of any innovation depends largely on five characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Artificial Intelligence represents an important technological innovation within electoral communication. Its successful adoption by electoral management bodies, media organizations, journalists, fact-checking agencies, civil society organizations, and government institutions depends on stakeholders' perceptions of its usefulness, reliability, ease of use, and compatibility with existing democratic processes.

In Nigeria, AI adoption for election monitoring and misinformation detection remains relatively low despite its potential benefits. Factors such as inadequate digital infrastructure, limited technical expertise, weak regulatory frameworks, insufficient funding, and low AI literacy continue to affect its diffusion. Diffusion of innovation theory therefore provides an appropriate explanation for why AI technologies are adopted at different rates across institutions involved in electoral communication. Hence, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory is relevant because it helps explain the factors influencing stakeholders' willingness to adopt AI-powered fact-checking systems, automated misinformation detection tools, and digital verification technologies. It also provides a framework for understanding how communication strategies, policy support, institutional capacity, and public awareness can accelerate AI adoption to strengthen Smart Democracy in Nigeria.

Together, Development Media Theory and Diffusion of Innovation Theory complement each other. While Development Media Theory explains the communication role of AI in promoting democratic development, Diffusion of Innovation Theory explains how AI technologies can be successfully adopted by institutions and citizens to improve electoral integrity.

➢ *Relevant Smart Democracy Concepts*

- *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems that are designed to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and language processing. AI technologies utilize algorithms and data to recognize patterns, make predictions, and automate complex processes. In democratic governance, AI supports election monitoring, misinformation detection, automated fact-checking, and public information management, thereby enhancing transparency and citizen engagement (Okolo, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

- *Automated Fact-Checking*

Automated fact-checking is the use of Artificial Intelligence and computational tools to verify the accuracy of claims, statements, images, videos, and other forms of digital content. Unlike traditional fact-checking, which relies heavily on human verification, automated systems can analyze large volumes of information rapidly and identify potentially false or misleading content. This capability is particularly useful during elections when misinformation spreads quickly across digital platforms (Graves, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

- *Machine Learning*

Machine Learning (ML) is a subfield of Artificial Intelligence that enables computer systems to learn from data and improve their performance over time without being explicitly programmed for every task. Machine learning algorithms analyze patterns in large datasets to predict outcomes and detect anomalies. In election communication, ML is widely used to identify fake news, detect coordinated disinformation campaigns, and classify political content circulating on social media platforms (Russell & Norvig, 2022; Feng et al., 2024).

- *Natural Language Processing (NLP)*

Natural Language Processing (NLP) is an AI technology that enables computers to understand, interpret, and generate human language. NLP facilitates the analysis of textual and spoken communication by identifying keywords, sentiments, narratives, and misinformation patterns. During elections, NLP can be used to monitor political conversations, identify misleading content, and support automated fact-checking processes (Jurafsky & Martin, 2023).

- *Image and Video Verification*

Image and video verification is the process of determining the authenticity of visual content shared online. With the rise of deepfakes and digitally manipulated media, AI technologies have become essential for detecting alterations, identifying inconsistencies, and confirming the origin of images and videos. Effective verification helps prevent the spread of deceptive political content during elections (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2022; Okolo, 2024).

- *Digital Literacy*

Digital literacy refers to the ability to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies. It includes the skills needed to critically assess online information, identify misinformation, and use digital tools responsibly. High levels of digital literacy empower citizens to make informed political decisions and resist manipulation by false information (UNESCO, 2023; Livingstone & Third, 2022).

- *AI Awareness*

AI awareness refers to the extent to which individuals understand the nature, functions, benefits, risks, and applications of Artificial Intelligence. Public awareness of AI is essential for promoting informed adoption, ethical use, and responsible engagement with AI-powered systems in governance and electoral communication (Dafoe, 2023).

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- *Electoral Transparency*

Electoral transparency refers to the openness and visibility of electoral processes, including voter registration, voting procedures, vote counting, and result dissemination. Transparent elections allow citizens and stakeholders to monitor electoral activities and verify the credibility of election outcomes (Norris, 2022).

- *Informed Voter Participation*

Informed voter participation occurs when citizens make electoral decisions based on accurate, credible, and verified information. It is a fundamental component of democratic governance because it enables voters to evaluate candidates, policies, and political issues objectively (Dahl, 2022).

- *Information Integrity*

Information integrity refers to the accuracy, reliability, consistency, and authenticity of information throughout its lifecycle. High information integrity ensures that citizens receive trustworthy information and reduces the influence of misinformation and manipulation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2023).

- *Reduced Election Misinformation*

Reduced election misinformation refers to the decline in the creation, dissemination, and influence of false or misleading political information during electoral periods. AI-driven verification systems, media literacy programs, and responsible communication practices contribute significantly to reducing misinformation (Akinola et al., 2024; Okolo, 2024).

- *Public Trust*

Public trust is the confidence citizens have in democratic institutions, electoral processes, media organizations, and government authorities. Trust is strengthened when information is accurate, elections are transparent, and institutions operate responsibly and accountably (Norris, 2022).

- *Democratic Accountability*

Democratic accountability refers to the obligation of elected leaders and public institutions to explain their actions, justify decisions, and remain answerable to citizens. Accountability promotes transparency, responsiveness, and good governance, which are essential for democratic development (McQuail, 2022).

IV. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design which integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because it provides a comprehensive understanding of how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be leveraged to combat election misinformation and promote Smart Democracy in Nigeria. Quantitative data provided measurable evidence on the prevalence of election misinformation, awareness of AI technologies, and citizens' perceptions, while qualitative data will offer in-depth insights into the experiences and opinions of key stakeholders involved in electoral communication.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), mixed-methods research combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches to enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of research findings. The convergence of both data sets enables the researcher to compare, validate, and interpret findings from multiple perspectives.

➢ *Study Area*

The study will be conducted in Nigeria, focusing on stakeholders involved in electoral communication and democratic governance. Nigeria provides an appropriate context because of its growing use of digital communication technologies, increasing dependence on social media for political communication, and recurring challenges of election misinformation during national and state elections.

➢ *Population of the Study*

The study consists of two populations.

- *Quantitative Population*

The quantitative population comprises:

✓ Registered voters;
✓ Journalists covering politics and elections;
✓ Staff of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC);
✓ Civil society organizations engaged in election observation;
✓ Political communication practitioners.

- *Qualitative Population*

The qualitative population comprises key informants with expertise in electoral communication, including:

✓ Senior INEC officials;
✓ Editors and political journalists;
✓ Representatives of fact-checking organizations;
✓ Artificial Intelligence specialists;
✓ Development communication scholars;
✓ Civil society leaders working on election monitoring.

➢ *Sample Size and Sampling Technique*

- *Quantitative Sample*

A sample of 400 respondents was selected using Cochran's (1977) sample size formula for large populations. This sample size is considered adequate for generalization and statistical analysis.

A multistage sampling technique was employed. First, selected states representing Nigeria's six geopolitical zones was purposively chosen to ensure national representation. The selected states are Enugu State, Oyo State, Nasarawa State, River state Kaduna State and Borno State. Secondly, respondents were selected using stratified sampling based on stakeholder categories. Finally, simple random sampling was used to select individual participants within each stratum.

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- *Qualitative Sample*

Approximately 20–25 key informants were purposively selected because of their professional knowledge and experience in election management, political communication, journalism, Artificial Intelligence, and democratic governance. Sampling continued until thematic saturation is achieved.

➢ *Data Collection*

The study utilized both primary and secondary data.

Primary data was collected through:

- Structured questionnaire
- Semi-structured interview guide.

Secondary data include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles;
- Government publications;
- INEC reports;
- Reports from fact-checking organizations;
- UNESCO publications
- Academic books;
- Conference proceedings.

➢ *Research Instruments*

- *Questionnaire*

The quantitative instrument is a structured questionnaire divided into six sections:

✓ Section A: Demographic information.
✓ Section B: Exposure to election misinformation.
✓ Section C: Awareness of Artificial Intelligence.
✓ Section D: Adoption of AI-enabled verification technologies.
✓ Section E: Perceived effectiveness of AI in combating misinformation.
✓ Section F: Challenges and recommendations.

Most questionnaire items was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

- *Interview Guide*

A semi-structured interview was used to obtain detailed opinions from key informants regarding:

✓ Nature of election misinformation;
✓ Current fact-checking practices;
✓ AI adoption in election communication;
✓ Opportunities and risks of AI;
✓ Institutional preparedness;
✓ Policy recommendations.

➢ *Validity of the Instrument*

Validity refers to the extent to which a research instrument measures what it is intended to measure. The questionnaire and interview guide underwent face validity and content validity. Experts in Development Communication, Political Communication, Artificial Intelligence, and Research Methodology reviewed the instruments to ensure clarity, relevance, and adequacy. Their recommendations was incorporated before the instruments are administered.

➢ *Reliability of the Instrument*

A pilot study involving 30 respondents from a state outside the main study area was conducted. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was be determined using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 was considered acceptable, following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2022).

- *Procedure for Data Collection*

The researcher obtained ethical approval and relevant permissions before commencing data collection. Questionnaires was administered partly physically and mostly electronically using secure online survey platforms where appropriate. Research assistants was trained on ethical procedures, confidentiality, and questionnaire administration.

Semi-structured interviews was conducted face-to-face and virtually through secure online communication platforms, depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, interviews which was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

➢ *Method of Data Analysis*

- *Quantitative Analysis*

Data analysis was descriptive statistics which comprises Frequency, Percentage, Mean and Standard deviation. Hypotheses was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

- *Qualitative Analysis*

Interview transcripts was analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022):

✓ Familiarization with the data.
✓ Initial coding.
✓ Searching for themes.
✓ Reviewing themes.
✓ Defining and naming themes.
✓ Producing the final report.

Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns, perceptions, and experiences relating to Artificial Intelligence, election misinformation, and Smart Democracy.

➢ *Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*

After analyzing both datasets independently, findings were integrated during interpretation using the convergent mixed-methods approach. Areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity between quantitative and qualitative findings was identified to provide a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under investigation. This

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integration strengthens the credibility of the study by combining statistical evidence with expert insights.

➢ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical principles guided every stage of the research. Participants received clear information about the purpose of the study before providing informed consent.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents may withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing personal identifiers from the dataset. Data was securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

The study also adhered to ethical principles relating to data protection, privacy, responsible use of Artificial Intelligence, and respect for participants' rights throughout the research process.

V. RESULT/FINDING

➢ *Quantitative Findings*

- *Response Rate*

Table 1 Response Table

Questionnaires	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Distributed	400	100
Returned and valid	360	90
Invalid/not returned	40	10
Total	400	100

➢ *Major Forms and Sources of Election Misinformation*

Table 2 Misinformation Table

ITEM	MEAN	DECISION
Fake Election Result	4.52	Agreed
Manipulated Video	4.39	Agreed
Fake Political Statement	4.33	Agreed
Fabricated Opinion Polls	4.21	Agreed
Fake Social Media Account	4.28	Agreed
Overall Mean	4.35	Agreed

The overall mean score of. 4.35 which fall under agree means that the respondents generally agreed that these items are the dominant forms of election misinformation during Nigerian election.

- *Level of Awareness and Adoption of Artificial Intelligence for Combating Election Misinformation*

Table 3 Awareness Table

Variable	Respondents	Percentages (%)
Very High	108	30
High	144	40
Moderate	72	20
Low	36	10
Total	360	100

70% of respondents reported the combined percentage of high and very high of their awareness of AI technology.

- *Effectiveness of Artificial Intelligence in Reducing Election Misinformation*

Table 4 Perceived Effectiveness

AI FUNCTION	MEAN	DECISION
Automated Fact-checking	4.54	Highly Effective
Fake News Detection	4.49	Highly Effective
Bot Identification	4.31	Effective
Social Media Monitoring	4.42	Effective
Image Video Verification	4.47	Highly Effective
Overall Mean	4.45	

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The overall mean of 4.45 which fall under highly effective suggest that respondents believe that AI can substantially improve electoral information integrity.

- *Challenges that Hinder AI adoption in Combating Election Misinformation*

Table 5 Table of Challenges

Challenges	Mean
Weak Government Policy	4.48
Inadequate Digital Infrastructure	4.40
Limited AI Expertise	4.38
Low Public Digital Literacy	4.33
Ethical and Privacy Concern	4.21

These findings indicate that institutional and infrastructural challenges remain major obstacles to AI adoption.

➢ *Qualitative Findings*

Twenty-two key informants comprising INEC officials, journalists, AI experts, fact-checkers, and development communication scholars participated in the interviews. Four major themes emerged.

- *Theme One: Election Misinformation is Increasingly Sophisticated*

Participants agreed that election misinformation has become more difficult to detect because of advances in digital technology. One participant stated: "Political misinformation is now professionally produced. Many citizens cannot distinguish between genuine information and manipulated digital content."

- *Theme Two: Artificial Intelligence Improves Fact-Checking*

Most interviewees emphasized that AI significantly improves the speed and accuracy of verifying political information. According to one fact-checker: "AI enables us to identify suspicious content within minutes instead of several hours."

- *Theme Three: Institutional Readiness Remains Limited*

Respondents observed that Nigeria lacks sufficient institutional capacity to deploy AI effectively. Common concerns included inadequate funding, shortage of AI professionals, poor digital infrastructure, and weak policy implementation.

- *Theme Four: Public Education is Essential*

Nearly all participants stressed that AI alone cannot eliminate misinformation without improving citizens' digital literacy. One communication scholar explained:

"Technology must be supported by media literacy because citizens remain the final decision-makers regarding what they choose to believe."

➢ *Discussion: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*

The quantitative and qualitative findings complement one another. Survey respondents overwhelmingly perceived Artificial Intelligence as an effective tool for reducing election misinformation, while interview participants explained the mechanisms through which AI enhances fact-checking, detects coordinated misinformation campaigns, and supports electoral transparency.

Both data sources also identified similar barriers, including inadequate policy support, weak institutional capacity, low digital literacy, and limited AI expertise. These converging findings suggest that although Artificial Intelligence offers considerable opportunities for strengthening Smart Democracy in Nigeria, its effectiveness depends on investments in technology, regulatory frameworks, public education, and collaboration among electoral institutions, media organizations, civil society groups, and technology providers.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that responsible adoption of Artificial Intelligence has the potential to improve information integrity, increase citizens' trust in electoral processes, reduce election misinformation, and strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

VI. PRACTICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for governments, electoral management bodies, media organizations, technology companies, civil society organizations, and academic institutions seeking to strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

Firstly, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should integrate AI-powered tools into election management processes, particularly for monitoring digital political communication, detecting misinformation, and supporting real-time fact-checking during election periods. Such technologies should complement existing electoral monitoring mechanisms while maintaining transparency and accountability.

Secondly, policymakers should develop comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks governing the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence in elections. These frameworks should establish standards for transparency, accountability, privacy protection, algorithmic fairness, and responsible AI deployment while addressing emerging threats such as

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deepfakes, synthetic media, and coordinated online disinformation campaigns.

Thirdly, government agencies, universities, and professional organizations should invest in capacity building by training journalists, election officials, communication professionals, and fact-checkers in AI applications for media verification and election monitoring. Strengthening technical expertise will enhance institutional readiness and improve the effective adoption of AI technologies.

Fourthly, development communication strategies should place greater emphasis on digital and media literacy. Public education campaigns should equip citizens with the skills needed to identify misinformation, verify information sources, and engage responsibly with political content on digital platforms. An informed electorate is less susceptible to manipulation and contributes to healthier democratic participation.

Fifthly, stronger collaboration should be encouraged among INEC, the National Orientation Agency, media organizations, technology companies, civil society organizations, and independent fact-checking organizations. Coordinated efforts can improve information sharing, enhance rapid responses to misinformation, and strengthen public confidence in electoral communication.

Finally, future public policies should recognize Artificial Intelligence as a strategic component of democratic governance rather than merely a technological innovation. Integrating AI into broader national digital transformation and governance strategies can improve information integrity, electoral transparency, citizen participation, and public trust. When supported by effective regulation, ethical safeguards, and inclusive communication policies, AI can become a valuable instrument for promoting Smart Democracy and strengthening democratic resilience in Nigeria.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be leveraged to combat election misinformation and promote Smart Democracy in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that while digital communication technologies have expanded opportunities for political participation and civic engagement, they have also accelerated the spread of misinformation, disinformation, manipulated multimedia content, and other forms of information disorder that threaten electoral integrity and democratic governance. These challenges became particularly evident during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, where digital platforms served as important channels for political communication but also facilitated the rapid dissemination of false electoral information.

The study further established that Artificial Intelligence offers significant opportunities for strengthening democratic communication through automated fact-checking, misinformation detection, social media monitoring, bot identification, and digital content verification. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that AI can improve information integrity, enhance public trust in electoral processes, and support informed political participation when deployed responsibly. However, the effectiveness of AI depends on supportive public policies, institutional readiness, ethical governance, digital infrastructure, and citizens' digital literacy.

The study also concludes that technological innovation alone cannot eliminate election misinformation. Effective democratic communication requires collaboration among electoral management bodies, media organizations, technology companies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and citizens. AI should therefore complement human expertise rather than replace it. Fact-checkers, journalists, communication professionals, and election officials remain essential in interpreting, validating, and communicating verified information to the public.

From the perspective of Development Media Theory, the study confirms that communication remains a strategic instrument for promoting democratic development, transparency, accountability, and informed citizen participation. Similarly, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory explains that successful AI adoption depends on stakeholders' willingness to embrace technological innovation and the availability of enabling institutional conditions.

In summary, the study holds that Smart Democracy is achievable when Artificial Intelligence is integrated into democratic governance through responsible regulation, ethical implementation, institutional collaboration, and sustained investment in digital literacy. Such integration has the potential to strengthen electoral transparency, reduce election misinformation, improve citizens' confidence in democratic institutions, and contribute to sustainable democratic development in Nigeria.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study contributes to the growing literature on Artificial Intelligence, development communication, and political communication, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses primarily on Nigeria; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other African countries with different political systems, media environments, and technological capacities. Comparative studies involving multiple African democracies would provide broader insights into AI adoption for electoral communication.

Second, the study relies on survey responses and interviews, which reflect participants' perceptions and experiences. Such data may be influenced by individual opinions, recall bias, or social desirability bias. Future studies could complement these approaches with computational analyses of social media datasets, AI-generated misinformation, and digital communication networks.

Third, because Artificial Intelligence technologies evolve rapidly, new applications, governance frameworks,

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and misinformation techniques may emerge after the completion of this study. Longitudinal research is therefore recommended to examine how AI adoption and election misinformation change over time.

Future researchers should also investigate the effectiveness of specific AI applications—including generative AI detection systems, deepfake identification tools, multilingual fact-checking systems, and predictive misinformation monitoring—in supporting election management across Africa. Additional studies examining the ethical, legal, and regulatory dimensions of AI governance will further enrich the literature on Smart Democracy and responsible digital governance.

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