



# The Utilization of Theological Foundations to Address Digital Space, Social Media, and Misinformation in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation explores the theological foundations for addressing the complex issues of digitalization, social media, and misinformation in Zimbabwe. As the country grapples with the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of theology in promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible communication. This exploratory study utilized a thorough online search strategy to collect pertinent literature on navigating Zimbabwe's digital terrain, social media, and misinformation. Leveraging Google Chrome, the study employed targeted keywords, such as "Social media and digitalization in Zimbabwe" and "Misinformation in Zimbabwe," to identify relevant sources. The search results yielded a corpus of articles and documents published between 2013 and 2024, providing valuable insights into the complex issues surrounding digital media and misinformation in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, using a critical discourse analysis approach, this presentation examines the intersection of faith, technology, and media in Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on the impact of social media on the dissemination of information and the spread of misinformation. The presentation draws on biblical principles and values, as well as insights from Zimbabwean theologians and church leaders. It further provides recommendations for theological education, faith-based content creation, and online community building that contribute to a more informed and discerning public in Zimbabwe. This study provides a unique contribution to the understanding of the complex issues of digitalization, social media, and misinformation in Zimbabwe, and offers practical recommendations for promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recognizing media as a divine gift is a crucial starting point for theological reflections on communication. As a communicator, God reveals Himself through creation and Scripture, endowing humanity with the capacity for communication and innovation. The emergence of social media platforms has transformed the communication landscape, enabling users to create, share, and interact

with content.<sup>1</sup> This shift has democratized communication, allowing recipients to become active participants. Theologians and Christians should harness the potential of social media to engage with others and promote public theology. The intersection of technology, social media, and religious life is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has significantly impacted public theology. Technology's Impact on Religious Life came through digital religion.<sup>2</sup> The rise of digital technologies has transformed traditional religious practices, giving birth to digital religion. This encompasses online worship, digital evangelism, and virtual communities, which have become essential components of modern religious life.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, technology has altered the way religious authority is constructed and exercised. Online platforms have enabled new forms of religious leadership and have challenged traditional authority structures.<sup>4</sup> Digital technologies have also made religious content and resources more accessible to a wider audience, allowing people to engage with faith in new and innovative ways.

Prominent scholars in the field of digital theology, such as Campbell and Cloete, among others, acknowledge that digital religion has become a central area of conversation in religious studies, essential for understanding the role and perception of religion in a global society.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Campbell and Tsuria noted that digital religion is primarily concerned with how religion engages with, is shaped by, and is located in digital culture and media.<sup>6</sup> However, the insights gained from this area of inquiry can inform and shape other forms of reflection, such as theological engagement with digital cultures from within a particular religious community or tradition. Digital religion provides theologians and religious communities with valuable tools for self-reflection on their use of digital and media culture. Be that as it may, digital theology must also acknowledge the risks associated with social media, including the spread of misinformation and the potential for conflict. As Du Toit notes, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation threatens human progress and necessitates critical attention.<sup>7</sup>

This study, therefore, seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the intersection of technology, media, and faith in Zimbabwe, with a focus on promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible communication. Drawing on biblical principles, theological insights, and expert recommendations, this research aims to contribute to a more informed and discerning public in Zimbabwe.

## METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study employed a comprehensive online search to gather relevant articles and documents on navigating the digital landscape, social media and misinformation in Zimbabwe. The study was conducted using Google Chrome with specific keywords, including 'Social media and digitalization in Zimbabwe' and 'Misinformation in Zimbabwe.' The search yielded relevant articles and documents published between 2013 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen because it coincides with the significant growth of mobile telecommunications subscribers in Zimbabwe, leading to an increase in social media usage and digitalization process in different facets of sectors.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the period saw notable social media threats to national security, particularly during the 2013 general elections. The selected articles and documents comprised research articles (2), state media online news articles (5), independent media online news articles (12), documents from human rights-based non-

<sup>1</sup> Bimbo Fafowora and Rahab Nyaga, "The Media," in *African Public Theology*, ed. Sunday B. Agang., H. Jurgens Hendriks, and Dion A Foster (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Publishers, 2020), 307–24.

<sup>2</sup> Sonny Eli Zaluchu, "Digital Religion, Modern Society and the Construction of Digital Theology," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 41, no. 4 (October 2, 2024): 285–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788231223929>.

<sup>3</sup> Zaluchu, "Digital Religion, Modern Society and the Construction of Digital Theology."

<sup>4</sup> Mookgo S Kgatle, "Social Media and Religion: Missiological Perspective on the Link between Facebook and the Emergence of Prophetic Churches in Southern Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (2018): 1–6.

<sup>5</sup> Heidi A Campbell, "The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies," *Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum* (Brill Leiden and Boston, 2023); Anita L Cloete, "Unstoppable: A Critical Reflection on the Socio-Economic Embeddedness of Technology and the Implications for the Human Agenda," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Heidi A Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*.

<sup>8</sup> Media Institute of Southern Africa, "MISA in Zimbabwe's Main Aim Is Advocacy Work for a Free Press and Offering Support to Provide Legal Assistance to Journalists.," December 2017.

governmental organizations (2), and a report from a commission of inquiry (1). By incorporating articles from both state and independent media channels, this study aimed to provide a balanced analysis of social media and digitalization in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, published books were also used to gather information in the process of writing this article. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between faith, technology, and media in Zimbabwe and provide recommendations for theological education, faith-based content creation, and online community building.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Digitalization and social media have transformed the way people access and share information in Zimbabwe. However, this increased connectivity has also led to the spread of misinformation, which can have serious consequences for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. This literature review will explore two key concepts, namely digitalization and social media, in order to situate this paper in its proper context for the benefit of the reader.

### Digitalization in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has experienced rapid digitalization in recent years, with the number of internet users increasing from 1.4 million in 2010 to 7.2 million in 2020.<sup>9</sup> This growth has been driven by the expansion of mobile phone networks and the increasing availability of affordable smartphones. The integration of digital technologies in education has gained momentum globally over the past few decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, highlighting the need for innovative solutions to mitigate the risks associated with remote learning.<sup>10</sup> The rapid adoption of digital technologies has also introduced new challenges, including cyberattacks and data breaches.

On the other hand, the rise of digital religion, encompassing both online religious information and online religious practices, has given birth to novel forms of community that diverge from traditional offline communities. Online communities are primarily formed through individual choice, driven by personal needs and preferences, and are often characterized by fragile commitment, as members can easily leave at any time. In contrast, offline communities are shaped by contextual factors and situatedness, rather than personal choice.<sup>11</sup> While online communities can complement offline ones, they can also actively resist traditional forms of community. Online religious communities tend to empower users, granting them more authority, whereas offline communities often operate based on power vested in individuals or institutions. As a result, online communities can be more self-serving than focused on serving others. Furthermore, online communities often blend different religious traditions, reflecting individual choices and resulting in what some term "broccoli spirituality."<sup>12</sup> The impact of technology on society and daily life is not straightforward, and the development of sophisticated technology demands ongoing constructive engagement to foster a deeper understanding of technology as a medium that mediates life. As people begin to grasp the profound impact of technology on the essence of being human, both enhancing and diminishing it, such reflection becomes increasingly urgent.

In Zimbabwe, the government has prioritized the use of smart technologies in education, as outlined in the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1). However, the country still faces significant challenges in integrating digital technologies into the curriculum, particularly at the tertiary level.<sup>13</sup> The introduction of Education 5.0 has provided a new framework for innovation and industrialization

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<sup>9</sup> Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, "Monitoring Covid-19 Impact on Households in Zimbabwe.," July 24, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Lidong Wang and Cheryl Ann Alexander, "Cyber Security during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *AIMS Electronics and Electrical Engineering* 5, no. 2 (2021): 146–57, <https://doi.org/10.3934/electreng.2021008>.

<sup>11</sup> Anna. L. Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection. ," *HTS Theological Studies*, 71 No 2 (2015): 1–7. 71, no. 2 (2015): 1–7.

<sup>12</sup> Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection. ."

<sup>13</sup> Aniefiok Oswald Edet and Uduak Imo Ekpoh, "Administrative Challenges of Academic Heads of Department in Tertiary Institutions in Cross River State," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (March 28, 2017): 129–35, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2017.v8n2p129>.

in Zimbabwe's education sector.<sup>14</sup> This new approach emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation, which are essential skills for the digital age.<sup>15</sup> However, the adoption of digital technologies in Zimbabwe's education sector is not without its challenges. Many academic staff and students lack the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively use digital technologies.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the country's infrastructure and access to digital technologies are limited, particularly in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> To address these challenges, it is essential to provide training and support for academic staff and students to develop their digital skills.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, there is a need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to digital transformation in higher education, including the development of digital pedagogy and the creation of accessible and inclusive digital learning environments.

### Social Media in Zimbabwe

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are widely used in Zimbabwe, with many people relying on these platforms for news and information. A study by the Zimbabwe Media Commission found that 71% of Zimbabweans use social media to access news and information.<sup>19</sup> Social media has been defined in various ways, but one of the most widely accepted definitions is that of Boyd and Ellison, who describe it as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of connections, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others."<sup>20</sup> Other definitions, such as those by Kapoor et al and Kaplan and Haenlein, focus on the networking and interactive aspects of social media, as well as the creation and exchange of user-generated content.<sup>21</sup>

Social media has been credited with providing opportunities for self-expression and interaction with others.<sup>22</sup> It has also been recognized as a powerful tool for social change, particularly for women. Studies have shown that social media has enabled women to challenge traditional norms and demand greater accountability and transparency from those in power.<sup>23</sup> In particular, social media has been identified as a key platform for women's empowerment. Kapoor et al found that social media sites have given women a voice and enabled them to lead and shape society.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Kumari and Sinha argued that women are using social media to access information and connect with others, both locally and globally.<sup>25</sup> O'Donnell and Sweetman suggested that digital platforms have enabled women to lead and amplify their voices on important issues such as sexual harassment and toxic masculinities. They also noted that social media has created new opportunities for women's rights activism and organizing.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Guvhu and Loveness Museva, "Exploring Management Styles of University Department Chairpersons in Improving the Quality of Education in Zimbabwe," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3713833>.

<sup>15</sup> Silvanos Chirume, "Sustainable Professional Development of Primary School Mathematics Teachers in Zimbabwe Through Philosophy of Education 5.0: Challenges and Prospects," *Sumerianz Journal of Social Science*, no. 312 (December 1, 2020): 150–61, <https://doi.org/10.47752/sjss.312.150.161>.

<sup>16</sup> Vitalis Ndume, F N Tilya, and H Twaakyondo, "Challenges of Adaptive E-Learning at Higher Learning Institutions: A Case Study in Tanzania," *International Journal of Computing and ICT Research* 2, no. 1 (2008): 47–59.

<sup>17</sup> Tabitha Kiriti Nganga and Mary Mbithi, "The Digital Trade Era—Opportunities and Challenges for Developing Countries: The Case of Kenya," 2020.

<sup>18</sup> David Mhlanga, Varaidzo Denhere, and Tankiso Moloi, "COVID-19 and the Key Digital Transformation Lessons for Higher Education Institutions in South Africa," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 7 (July 4, 2022): 464, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070464>.

<sup>19</sup> Zimbabwe Media Commission, "Media Press Statement.," <https://mediacommission.co.zw/press-statement-media-integrity/>, November 24, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Danah M Boyd and Nicole B Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2007): 210–30.

<sup>21</sup> Kawaljeet Kaur Kapoor et al., "Advances in Social Media Research: Past, Present and Future," *Information Systems Frontiers* 20, no. 3 (2018): 531–58; Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (January 2010): 59–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>.

<sup>22</sup> Dhiraj Murthy, "Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations," *Social Media+ Society* 4, no. 1 (2018): 2056305117750716.

<sup>23</sup> Anne Bartlett-Bragg, "Reflections on Pedagogy: Reframing Practice to Foster Informal Learning with Social Software," 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Kapoor et al., "Advances in Social Media Research: Past, Present and Future."

<sup>25</sup> Archana Kumari and Nibha Sinha, "Professionally Skilled Women and Social Media: A Study of Select Group of Women," *Journal of Advance Research in Journalism and Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (2014): 18–26.

<sup>26</sup> Amy O'Donnell and Caroline Sweetman, "Introduction: Gender, Development and ICTs," *Gender & Development* (Taylor & Francis, 2018).

However, despite these benefits, access to social media is not universal. The digital divide, cited by Chetty et al, exists in varying measures across different countries and communities, with women from poorer and less developed communities being disproportionately affected.<sup>27</sup> In some societies, women's participation online is also limited by traditional norms and beliefs. Johnson noted that women in some cultures face significant barriers to online participation, including a lack of access to technology and societal expectations around their roles and behaviors.<sup>28</sup> Despite these challenges, studies have shown that social media can be a powerful tool for women's empowerment. Thacker and Mathur found that social media platforms have enabled women to voice their opinions and ideas, and to connect with others who share their concerns.<sup>29</sup> Overall, the literature suggests that social media has the potential to be a powerful tool for women's empowerment, but that access to this technology is not universal, and that women's participation online is often limited by traditional norms and beliefs.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Having gleaned through the literature review that informed this study, the following were found to be the findings in this paper that shall be discussed under the given subheadings: Influence and impact of digitalization and social media, which is discussed on both the positive and negative impact of social media in Zimbabwe. The influence of fake news is also found to be misleading the country in many ways. The study also discusses the role of theology in combating misinformation and provides recommendations for theological engagements.

### The Influence and Impact of Digitalization and Social Media

The use of social media has soared with increasing Internet access and increasingly affordable mobile phone technology. Social media platforms are used by individuals and by communities to increase their visibility and present themselves in a favourable light. They are also used to reach out to and establish online and sometimes face-to-face relationships with people with similar interests. Like all things human, social media can be a great good or a great evil, or a mix of both.<sup>30</sup> Digitalization and social media have transformed the way Zimbabweans consume information, interact with each other, and engage with faith-based content. However, this has also led to the spread of misinformation, propaganda, and fake news, which can have severe consequences on individuals and society as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Social media has become an integral part of our lives, bringing a paradigm shift in communication and information sharing. Zimbabwe has not been left behind in this technological advancement. This presentation will delve into the impact of social media on the country, looking at both the positive and negative effects.

### The Positive Impact of Social Media

Social media has enabled Zimbabweans to get access to information that was previously hard to come by. The internet has made it possible for people to share their experiences, ideas, and thoughts freely.<sup>32</sup> This has helped the country to become more democratic, with citizens being able to express their opinions without fear of victimization. Social media platforms have also been instrumental in bringing people together. Zimbabweans are using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as tools for networking, marketing, and advocacy. Social media has helped to create online

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<sup>27</sup> Krish Chetty et al., "Bridging the Digital Divide in the G20: Skills for the New Age," *Economics: The Open-Access, Open-Assessment E-Journal* 12, no. 2018–24 (2018): 1–20.

<sup>28</sup> Genevieve Marie Johnson, "Internet Use and Child Development: The Techno-Microsystem.," *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology* 10 (2010): 32–43.

<sup>29</sup> Pallavi Thacker and Mathur Himendu Prakash, "Symbolic Action on Social Media and Women Empowerment," *Jharkhand Journal of Development and Management Studies*. 16, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Kgatle, "Social Media and Religion: Missiological Perspective on the Link between Facebook and the Emergence of Prophetic Churches in Southern Africa."

<sup>31</sup> Cormac Moore, *Fake News and the Battle over the Irish Border*. (The Irish News., 2024).  
<https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/cormac-moore-fake-news-and-the-battle-over-the-irish-border-6OHVSPE5YBGI7A7RPOIWBVQ6AU/>

<sup>32</sup> Kunle Badmos, "Effect of Social Media on the Church," in *2014 Annual Conference of Theological Friends and Fellows, the Redeemed Christian Bible College Lagos, Nigeria*, 2014, 4–6.

communities where people can connect and interact, regardless of their geographical location.<sup>33</sup> Another positive impact of social media is that it has allowed businesses to reach out to their customers directly. Companies are now able to use social media data to tailor their products and services to meet the needs of their customers better. This has not only improved customer satisfaction but has also helped businesses increase their revenue. Social media has also proved valuable in coordinating social action to help victims of disasters or to protest government policies. In Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, many churches have embraced social media and have their own Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts to connect their members and reach out to others. Mainline churches, Pentecostals are not left behind. Social media platforms give people an opportunity to be enriched with gospel messages wherever they are. The interaction on these platforms allows Christians to comment on issues of public theology and join in discussion on them with other believers and theologians.

The contextual perspective of the positive impact of the digital religious landscape is seen in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, where its strategic integration of content creation has offered a substantial opportunity for enhancing outreach engagement and financial stability. The employment of digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and podcasts with their capacity to connect with diverse congregations and broader communities has enabled the church to fulfil its mission amidst a dynamic cultural context.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the engagement of the Communications Officer has enabled the church to maximize the use of digital platforms such as Facebook, radio and TV sermons, YouTube and podcasts, which started during the advent of Covid-19. Though the church at some point had to shut its doors for physical interactions during the peak of COVID-19, it never closed the propagation of the gospel through digital channels, and the church survived and managed to adapt to the new environment.<sup>35</sup>

Critiquing technology is challenging due to our deep dependence on it. Paradoxically, while technology provides a sense of independence, it actually increases human reliance on it.<sup>36</sup> The benefits of technology are undeniable, particularly during the COVID pandemic, where it enabled remote work and saved countless jobs. This has led some to hold a Messianic view of technology, believing it can rescue people from various challenges.<sup>37</sup> Technology is often associated with progress and order.<sup>38</sup> Initially, its role was defensive, but with advancements in genetic engineering and nanotechnology, its focus has shifted to creating new entities. Herzfeld avers that modern technology not only shapes nature but also replaces it.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, technology's role is to seek satisfaction and authorization in contemporary culture.

Technology encompasses not only gadgets and tools but also techniques, processes, and methods. These elements are crucial for understanding technology's complex production and usage processes. Humankind often views technology as mere products, overlooking the inherent values and intentions behind their creation. Moreover, the production process typically involves a select few, leaving consumers with limited input.<sup>40</sup> Yates and Rice further argue that no technology is entirely novel, as it addresses existing needs and desires, albeit in unexpected ways.<sup>41</sup> This can lead to a reevaluation of existing values. However, technology is not neutral, and its utilization reflects humanity's values. The interplay between technology development, acceptance, and usage demonstrates a cyclical tension between technological determinism and neutrality.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Abhishek Bhati and Diarmuid McDonnell, "Success in an Online Giving Day: The Role of Social Media in Fundraising," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2020): 74–92.

<sup>34</sup> Handbook Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, "Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds.," in *Communication Research Trends*, ed. Jim. McDonnell, vol. 33 (Harare: Connexional Bookshop, 2014), 37.

<sup>35</sup> The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, "Minutes of Conference Held At (ZITF)," in *Minutes of Conference*, 2021, 12–14.

<sup>36</sup> Cornel W Du Toit, "Artificial Intelligence and the Question of Being," *HTS: Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 1–10.

<sup>37</sup> Du Toit, "Artificial Intelligence and the Question of Being." 10.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value*.8.

<sup>40</sup> Simeon Yates and Ronald. E. Rice, *The Oxford Handbook of Technology and Society*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Yates and Rice, *The Oxford Handbook of Technology and Society*. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin, 2015).

## The Negative Impact of Social Media

Despite its many benefits, social media has also had its negative impact on Zimbabwe. One of the most significant negative impacts is the spread of misinformation. Social media has made it possible for fake news and propaganda to be disseminated quickly, causing confusion and panic.<sup>43</sup> Social media has also made Zimbabweans vulnerable to cyberbullying, harassment, and online scams. Such bullying can drive people to suicide. Christians, including pastors and theologians, must speak out against cyberbullying and emphasize the Christian values of love and respect. Christians have to love both their neighbours and enemies. There is also a need to work to repair the damage caused by such bullying, which undermines self-confidence. Scammers and confidence tricksters use social media to target and defraud the vulnerable. These fraudulent acts may even be done under the guise of Christianity. Gullible Christians may forward posts encouraging others to donate to fraudulent causes. Ongoing education is needed to alert people to these dangers and to direct them to look for confirmation if they suspect that a message is fraudulent. Young people, in particular, are exposed to all kinds of online dangers, including peer pressure and negative influences on their behavior.<sup>44</sup> Another negative impact of social media is the erosion of traditional values and cultural norms. Social media platforms are often used to promote malicious ideas and behaviors that are against the country's culture and customs.<sup>45</sup>

## The Influence of Fake News

In today's digital age, the dissemination of information has become effortless, with social media platforms allowing users to share content with a single click. However, this ease of sharing has also led to the proliferation of fake news, which can have devastating consequences. The practice of spreading misinformation is not new, with the first recorded instance of fake news dating back to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:4-3:24). Fake news can be found in various fields, including religion, medicine, science, and politics.<sup>46</sup> The effects of fake news can be disastrous, leading to the spread of preventable diseases, attacks on healthcare workers, and the manipulation of public opinion. In some cases, fake news is created to generate clicks and advertising revenue, while in others, it is used to promote a particular agenda or opinion.<sup>47</sup> To combat fake news, it is essential to understand what constitutes it. According to Claire Wardle, fake news can be classified into six categories:

- (i) False Connection: When headlines, visuals, or captions do not match the content of the article.
- (ii) False Context: When news reports are presented in the wrong context, leading to misinterpretation.
- (iii) Manipulated Content: When information is presented in a way that is designed to manipulate public opinion.
- (iv) Misleading Content: When information is presented in a way that is intended to deceive or mislead.
- (v) Imposter Content: When fake news is published on a fake website that mimics a legitimate one.
- (vi) Fabricated Content: When the story being circulated is entirely false.<sup>48</sup>

## The Role of Theology in Combating Misinformation

In today's digital age, the spread of misinformation has become a significant challenge. Christians are called to be bearers of truth and light in a world often clouded by deception and darkness. Theological foundations can play a vital role in promoting media literacy and combating misinformation in Zimbabwe. To address this challenge, humanity must cultivate wisdom and discernment, guided by biblical principles and values.<sup>49</sup> Society must learn to critically evaluate information, ask questions, seek multiple perspectives, and rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By developing these skills, one can become more resistant to the influence of misinformation and better equipped to navigate the

<sup>43</sup> Tendai Marima, "Social Media in Zimbabwe: A Toxic Tool or a Future Bridge to Peace?," *Policy Brief*, no. 51 (2019).

<sup>44</sup> Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Pauline Hope Cheong et al., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures* (Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Lutheran World Federation Consultation, "Between Faith and Fake News.," November 2020.  
<https://lutheranworld.org/news/between-faith-and-fake-news>

<sup>47</sup> Lutheran World Federation Consultation, "Between Faith and Fake News."

<sup>48</sup> Claire Wardle, "Fake News. It's Complicated," *First Draft* 16 (2017): 1–11.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Dawson, *Mind Control, Manipulation, Deception and Persuasion Exposed Human Psychology Createspace*, 2nd Edition (South Carolina: Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

complexities of the digital age. As followers of Jesus, Christians are responsible for seeking and speaking the truth in love (John 8:32, John 16:13, Ephesians 4:25-27). Leaders must encourage others to do the same, even when it requires having difficult conversations. Speaking the truth in love is essential, especially in a world where misinformation can have serious consequences. People must also pray for wisdom and guidance to navigate the challenges of the digital age.<sup>50</sup> Regular prayer and engagement with the Holy Spirit and God's Word are essential for successfully and responsibly using social media.

Furthermore, members of the body of Christ are endowed with a prophetic role to play in advocating for truth and holding those in power accountable.<sup>51</sup> The community must speak out against the spread of misinformation, support responsible journalism and fact-checking initiatives, and push for greater transparency and accountability in the development and deployment of social media technologies.<sup>52</sup> Finally, humanity must foster a culture of empathy and understanding, actively working to build meaningful relationships and create space for genuine dialogue and connection. Through doing so, one can help break down the barriers that divide humanity and create a more just and compassionate society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issues of digitalization, social media, and misinformation in Zimbabwe, theological engagement is crucial. There is a need to provide theological education and training on digital literacy, media studies, and critical thinking to equip individuals with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape. Furthermore, there is a need to encourage the creation of faith-based content that promotes responsible communication, media literacy, and critical thinking. Facilitate online community building around shared values and interests to promote dialogue, reflection, and responsible communication. Representatives of the media in Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, must act with professionalism and with fear of God and of the people; they have the power not only to end an era of widespread corruption but also to bring about positive changes. Theologians should stand alongside journalism at the forefront of the fight against misinformation, which is the thrust of this article, to close the knowledge gap.

## CONCLUSION

Through engaging with the theological foundations of digitalization, social media, and misinformation in Zimbabwe, individuals and communities can promote responsible communication, media literacy, and critical thinking, ultimately contributing to a more informed and discerning public. Digital gadgets and social media should be used and not misused in Zimbabwe to propagate the values that truly represent and present Christ as the answer to the issues that plague humanity. The intersection of faith, technology, and media in Zimbabwe presents both opportunities and challenges. As Zimbabweans navigate the digital landscape, it is essential to acknowledge the role of theology in promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible communication. By means of cultivating wisdom, discernment, and empathy, individuals can effectively combat misinformation and promote a more just and compassionate society. Theological education, faith-based content creation, and online community building are crucial in fostering a culture of responsible communication and promoting positive change in Zimbabwe.

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