

## Structured Deliberative Gossip and the Nigerian Government in the Digital Era

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### Abstract

*Active citizen participation in governance, openness and prompt provision of adequate information for the public to make informed decisions is crucial for any meaningful development. Unfortunately, governance in Nigeria is shrouded in secrecy, lies, half-truths, gossip, and rumours, which generally negate some of the cardinal precepts of democracy. Since opportunities for citizen engagement are lacking, it is common for Nigerians to resort to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp and Blogs to access and share information, which may result in cyber-gossip or cyber-rumour peddling, especially on burning national issues. This research, therefore, examines structured deliberative gossip and the Nigerian government in the digital era. The study uses a simple random sampling technique and 385 sample size drawn from Taraba State for analysis and discussion using tables and simple percentages anchored on structured deliberative gossip theory. Findings reveal that the Nigerian government engage in gossip and rumours as ways of gauging public opinion and testing their popularity before they are implemented, thereby serving as a precursor for policy formation. However, this research recommends that citizen participation, adequate information provision, openness, and transparency can help reduce the propagation of gossip by the government. Also, since gossip and rumours can affect the government negatively, there is a need for the government to control rumour propagation by releasing official Rumour-Refuting Information (ORI).*

**Keywords:** Digital era, Nigerian government, rumour, structured deliberative gossip

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## **Introduction**

Globally, citizen participation in governance has become one of the cardinal principles of democracy, especially in developed countries. Sadly, in nascent democracies such as Nigeria, the nature of political actors and policy makers has over the years eroded the power and responsibilities of citizen in the decision-making process (Akanni, 2019). The lack of public accountability and transparency, the rise in corruption charges, the government's lack of responsiveness to the people, resource allocation bias, and other reasons have all been blamed for this (Akanni, 2019). However, the development in information and communication technology (ICT) as well as the internet is fast changing the narratives as citizens now have ample opportunities to participate in governance through various online or social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Blogs, WhatsApp etc. According to Fung (2015), effectiveness, legitimacy, and social fairness are three democratic government ideals that might be advanced through citizen engagement. However, growing demands for individual participation, tightening restrictions on the public sector, and the advantages of digital technology have opened the door for participatory innovations that aim to improve governance. The increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to new forms of interactions between the government and the populace as well as a progressive change in the type and degree of public participation (Mukhtarov et al., 2018).

The obligations of citizens in Nigeria are outlined in Chapter 2 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 constitution (as amended), and citizens' rights are outlined in Chapter 4. In accordance with Section 14 of the constitution, "Nigeria is a country based on the principles of democracy and social justice." According to Karl Deutsch's 1970s communication paradigm in politics, democracy, social justice, and social integration rely significantly on information and enlightenment, awareness creation, and sensitisation through the media and other reliable avenues of information transmission (Abang & Okon, 2018). Consequently, "the media being so strategically located in the scheme of things in the society has an important role to play in the society... from increasing public awareness to collecting views and information about issues as well as fighting against corruption, nepotism, cronyism of institutional machinery and carrying out relentless campaign against them" (Suntai & Ishaku, 2017 p.1).

In any democratic society, information serves a wide range of purposes, including aiding in political involvement, decision-making, nation-building, education and awareness-raising, conflict management and resolution, and intra- and international interactions. Information is used in these societies to guide and

coordinate human activities toward the achievement of predetermined goals and make decisions in a chain-link and network of communication channels. This helps to explain why it is so important for rights, freedoms, and liberties to be protected by the constitution and generally acknowledged in modern democratic countries (Ikpe, 2015). Thus, information acquisition in governance is critical and beneficial for both citizens and the government in the areas of voting, government policy formulations, programmes and infrastructural developments. The belief is that without adequate and continuous exchange of information, deliberation, knowledge and values between the citizens and the government, no meaningful development or progress would be achieved. This corroborates the postulation of Hague and Harrop (2003, p. 95) that "the main business of governance and of leadership is the ability to communicate and influence people's opinions, as well as the ability of the government to communicate their agenda, policies and strategies to the citizens using the media."

According to Obarisiagbon and Obarisiagbon (2022), gossip and rumours which are frequently used in our daily conversations, refer to two different types of unofficial information learned through everyday interactions and discussions among people... Such discussions might centre on other people's lives, recent events, relationship developments, and changes in leadership, among other topics. Based on the foregoing, since gossip and rumours have been proven to have the potential for change in leadership, this study examines whether or not gossip can influence government decisions and policy formulation in Nigeria. However, according to Keane (2018), politicians do disorient and destabilise people, and in order to effectively subdue individuals, they (politicians) aim to harness people's self-doubts, impair their sense of reasoning, and demolish their potential for making judgements.

However, while information provision in Nigeria is shrouded in secrecy and bottlenecks, opportunities for deliberation and discussion, and citizen participation in governance are lacking. Government policies are often not always palatable for the ordinary person. For instance, the recent policies on the naira redesign, which brought about a cash crunch and untold hardship on Nigerians, and the immediate removal of fuel subsidy by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu on the assumption of office, which made prices of commodities skyrocket, have the tendency to make Nigerians resort to peddling rumours, gossips, half-truths, speculations and even fake news. Rumours and gossip are social phenomena that are widely known to human civilisations. Hence, there is no question about their existence. In actuality, man has always had the inclination to be surrounded by a sea of rumours, gossip, hearsay, half-truths, fake news, and guesses (Obarisiagbon & Obarisiagbon, 2022).

Be that as it may, the government, especially in Nigeria, can send out information about unpopular/unfair policies in the form of rumours or grapevine to the public domain through either their press agents or social media platforms in order to gauge peoples' opinions and decide whether to stop or continue with the implementation of such policies. Onobe, et al. (2023) corroborate that

Uncertainty drives anxiety and desperation sometimes in people as well as governments. In the latter, the tangle comes off as a neck-breaking exercise, much of the time attempting alchemy with self-imposed private ideas intended to impress and sedate society to tow authority's path and line of reasoning, in most climes.

Against this backdrop, this study examines whether the Nigerian government uses gossip as a precursor for policy formulation and as well, ascertain the implication of government utilization of gossip in Nigeria.

## **Literature review**

### **Gossip as a government tactic for policy formation in Nigeria**

According to Okocha and Agbele (2023), because democracy allows for public engagement, it has developed into a form of government that is crucial to global politics. Consequently, the relationship between democracy, popular opinion, and public policymaking in Nigeria has been demonstrated in several academic works (Kingdom, 2003; Stimson, 2014; Akande, 2014; Ogoloma, 2016). While some of these studies suggested that the government and policymakers disregard the public's opinions, others have demonstrated that they actually do. Still, other studies have shown that the elite class actually manipulates public opinion to serve their own narrow, selfish and parochial interests. Public policy does not merely appear in the public domain (Obiam, 2021). The strategy, conditions, procedures, techniques, activities, relationships, and stages through which policies are formed are the public policymaking process (Ikelegbe, 2006) since they involve many processes. He further asserts that the policymaking process involves numerous individuals, groups, and organisations in various activities, interactions, tactics, and strategies. It comprises organised phases for formulating, creating, implementing, getting input from people, and evaluating policies (Ugumanim, 2014).

According to Obiam (2021), the fundamental responsibility of every representative democracy is to make sure that a forum for public opinion is established so that it can influence governmental decisions. Jega (2003)

corroborates that one of the key components of every political system is the formulation and execution of governmental policies. Given that democracy offers freedom, more individual viewpoints have a better chance of emerging in the political system. In a democracy, decisions about public policy should be influenced by popular opinion. However, because of the nature of the modern world, democratic public policy-making has grown a little more complicated. While this situation has made government officials to engage in gossip as a tactic for policy formation as conceptualised by Onobe et al. (2023), Ikelegbe (2006) further asserts that the policy-making process is one that involves numerous individuals, groups, and organisations in various activities, interactions, tactics, and strategies. This shows that public opinion, gossip and rumour can be seen as some of the tactics and strategies that the government or its agents can use.

Be that as it may, scholars, especially ethicists, have revealed that many government policies fall outside the confines of morality (Onobe et al., 2023). This becomes true especially when one examines some policies of Nigerian government which, as a result of their anti-people nature, continue to keep the ordinary people in perpetual hardship. According to Orwell (1946/2001), politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. Oftentimes, public office holders or politicians, especially in developing countries such as Nigeria, conjure up what can be regarded as executive fabrications, which usually come in the form of indecision before being released piecemeal either as gossip or rumour (Onobe et al., 2023). Sadly, many politicians take advantage of the media's availability to explore the complacency (Saul, 2012) of society's humanistic tendency through what Levine (2014) refers to as a condescending assumption, made either actively or passively, that another person's communication is based on honesty. According to Clementson (2017), this assumption is distinct from actual honesty.

### **Cases or instances of government-instigated rumours in Nigeria in the digital era**

Politics the world over is complex and multifaceted, and so is communication. Aside from those complexities, the use of propaganda, lies, deceit, gossip and rumours by the government or its agents to achieve particular and often selfish goals makes governance or politics even more complex than one can imagine. Propaganda, rumours and lies are like conjoined twins which are inseparable as the explanation of one concept brings the existence of the other to the limelight. Since gossip and rumour are multifaceted (Oyewo, 2009), and as social phenomenon permeates every human interaction (Obarisiagbon & Obarisiagbon, 2022); there is every tendency for government to engage in them (Onobe, et al., 2023).

Aside from the fact that both individuals and governments engage in gossip and rumour peddling in a natural or physical setting, gossip and rumour can also manifest in what Kwon & Rao (2017) called cyber-rumour or cyber-gossip, especially with the development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the internet. In this vein, Zhang, et al. (2016) observe that an increase in alternative communication avenues are made possible by the numerous social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Blogs and other online platforms. It, therefore, means that social media, especially Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, are increasingly being used as tools for gathering information in today's society; it has made them into a potent weapon (Diapkoulos 2012, as cited in Obarisiagbon & Obarisiagbon, 2022). Interestingly, these online media platforms are highly preferred and used by individuals, governments, or agents because of their unique speed, interactivity, hypertextuality, and immediacy features. According to Onobe et al. (2023, p. 333):

Uncertainty drives anxiety and desperation sometimes in people as well as governments... The means of doing that is often sheathed in lots of indecipherable ornaments of spins, free flying, in the shape of rumour, either as convenient construct of 'truths', or emotive lies and shiny actions and even inactions that model a discretize reality that people barely remember to question the inner drive of the anticipated goal of the dispatched gossip...

Globally, different dispensations and regimes have used the technique of gossip or rumour for one reason or another. Oyewo (2009) claims that when the president of the United States was allegedly having an affair with a White House intern at the beginning of 1998, a flood of rumours, speculation, and insinuations broke out. Also, much rumour has been peddled about President Vladimir Putin's integrated schemes (the first time to evolve a fair and speedy procedure to settle dispute) in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Brandt & Wirtschafter, 2022). Be that as it may, it will be instructive, therefore, to state that, since different governments around the world have instigated rumours using both physical and virtual (online) mediums at their disposals, there is a need to explore some of the specific instances where Nigerian government instigated rumours and gossip. For instance, General Ibrahim Babangida, who became Nigeria's military leader in 1985, secretly established Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Aitah, 2020) which was first peddled as a rumour and later came to stay. Similarly, during General Sani Abacha's junta in Nigeria in the

1990s, there was a characteristic display of that mantra when the world rose to condemn the hanging and execution of the playwright and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the 'Ogoni eight'. In the words of the Economist (December 9, 1995 issue), cited in Ngoa (2011, p. 246), the Abacha's government "blithely floated on waves of its own phantasmagorical propaganda of being victim of a global conspiracy."

Furthermore, up to his passing away, former president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's grave sickness was kept a secret from Nigerians. While ex-President Muhammadu Buhari's health status has continued to remain a mirage, President Ahmed Bola Tinubu's health is either unknown to Nigerians or, at best, has become a subject of rumours and gossip despite the fact that a catheter has been spotted on his arm several times. The removal of fuel subsidies and subsequent increase in petroleum product prices is another case in point where the government used rumours to sample and gauge public opinion even before the assumption of office of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and his immediate decision and implementation. Another illustration is the recent currency redesign of 2023, which brought untold suffering to Nigerians. This is because almost everyone was taken aback by the sudden announcement of the plan and its swift implementation. Sadly, governments in developing countries, according to Onobe et al. (2023) take advantage of the sporadic levels of understanding of their supporters and further numb them with one cover-up after another to persuade people to go along, even though the plan is shrouded in secrecy and lies.

Another classical and recent instance where the Nigerian government has instigated rumour was when, according to Muhammad Shehu, chairman of the Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC), pay for public servants, judges, and politicians will be increased by 114% (Emmanuel et al., 2023). However, when this issue of salary increment for politicians, judges and public office holders was peddled as a rumour and reported by both the conventional and social media, and having realised that there was adverse public opinion on the issue, the presidency through RMAFC refuted the story. The narrative, according to the Presidency, was "contrived to create bad will for the new administration, slow down the upward momentum and massive goodwill the Tinubu-led administration is currently enjoying among Nigerians as a result of its fast-paced, dynamic, and progressive policies" (Alake, 2023).

Gossip and rumours in the Nigeria political landscape can be considered as means or strategy for gauging public opinion before a particular policy is implemented. Often times, the government at different levels especially in Nigeria used to release pieces of information through its agent(s) in order to observe public

reactions before deciding whether the issue should be implemented or discarded altogether. Although, the government sometimes used to gauge the opinion of its citizenry before implementing a particular policy, there are indications that, at other times, even if there is adverse public opinion on an issue; the government may from time to time, implement issues that may not be favourable to the public in as much as it satiates the interest of the government and its agents. Hence, this study examines whether gossips and rumours are some of the tactics or strategies that the Nigerian government usually employ to assess the popularity (acceptance) or otherwise of its policies.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is anchored on Structured Deliberative Gossip (SDG) theory as propounded by Onobe et al. in 2023 in their magnum opus "*Handbook of Research on Deconstructing Culture and Communication in the Global South.*" According to the proponents of this model, "ideas and government policies, whatever they are, are ventilated on step-motherly ration and fanned as 'gossip', sometimes, to test their popularity or otherwise before they are implemented" (p. 332). Structured deliberation depends on bargaining aptitude and talents, sometimes regardless of the method used. Despite the clear socio-economic and political repercussions, society, particularly in capitalist cultures, has warmed up to embracing the game as the norm, which is rife with deception, deceit, etc., riding on the wave of gossip and rumour (Peters, 1987; Strudler, 1995; Srou, 2021).

SDG theory is viewed as a kind of charming soft-power strategy due to the fragility of those who are thought of as the ruled. As a dynamic of the truth-default theory, submission to political rulers and politicians imposes on the lead a mental and psychological condition of nearly hypnotic confidence (Onobe et al., 2023). However, according to Mearsheimer (2011), when the overriding interest is unquestionably the good of the public, strategic lying is explored as a vantage valve for only emergency initiates in decent cultures, especially in some of the developing nations of Africa, including Nigeria where there are lax restrictions on political correctness (Levine et al., 2010). Be that as it may, the core assumptions of SDG theory according to Onobe et al. (2023) are: the livewire of gossip/rumour is the sign of the first mandate, and it is a veritable condition for political manipulation if the information is rationed with tact and every morsel of gossip/rumour, with the colouration of authority's sponsorship, is an emissary of the authority's agenda. Furthermore, the narrative of the rumour/gossip does not have to look like the agenda; it is just a distraction while reactions of people are symbolic cues and codes that feed intelligence to authority's timing of the actual



manifestation of agenda. Additionally, rumours or gossip serve as superstructure tools that can create either beneficial or detrimental conditions for the public. Those who trust are always more vulnerable than those who are trusted. Tact, stealth, and strategic doublespeak will continually endear those who artfully use instruments of deception to mislead a truster (Zannettou, Sirivianos, Blackburn & Kourtellis, 2019).

SDG theory is relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding why the government occasionally conceals its intentions behind statements or actions that it did not make, as well as why the government occasionally engages in gossip and rumours in order to ascertain public opinion prior to making decisions or formulating policies. According to SDG theory, the government's integrated use of rumours and gossip indicates a deeper essence.

## **Methods**

The study adopted the survey research design since survey research is deemed to be effective and simple and allows for anonymity and generalisation of data from a broad population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). According to Asemah et al. (2012), survey research is a method of gathering and analysing social data using a highly organised and often well-structured and comprehensive questionnaire in order to gather information from a significant number of respondents, considered to be representative of a selected population. Be that as it may, the population of the study is Taraba State, with a projected population of 3,609,800 people, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022). The sampling frame is the local government household register from which the sample of the population was adult (18 years and above) residents was drawn from the sixteen (16) local government areas of Taraba State. To be eligible for inclusion, all respondents that were randomly selected were automatically included in the analysis because they appear to be conversant with Nigerian politics. Furthermore, probability sampling with a particular interest in simple random sampling technique was adopted with a sample size of 385, which was determined using the Raosoft Online Sample Size Calculator with a margin error of 0.5% and confidence level of 95%. The measurement instrument adopted for the study is the 5-point Likert Scale structured questionnaire, which were distributed, collected and analysed using tables and simple percentages. For ethical consideration, the researchers ensured that the participation in the study (survey) was voluntary. Also, in order to ensure data quality, the researchers double-checked and proofread the data using data validation rules and standardized data entry processes.

**Data analysis and presentation****Table 1:** Demographic data

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Variable Classification</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Age</b>	18 – 24	67	17.4
	25 – 34	84	21.8
	35 – 44	139	36.2
	45 – 54	73	18.9
	55 – above	22	5.7
<b>Gender</b>	Male	243	63.1
	Female	142	36.9
<b>Highest qualification</b>	First Leaving School Certificate (FLSC)	40	10.4
	Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE)	52	13.5
	National Diploma (ND) and National Certificate in Education (NCE)	65	16.9
	Higher National Diploma (HND) and Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.)	186	48.3
	Postgraduate	42	10.9
<b>Place of settlement</b>	Urban Settlement	283	73.5
	Semi-urban Settlement	81	21
	Rural Settlement	21	5.5

**Source:** Field survey, 2023

Based on the analysis in Table 1 above, 223 (58%) respondents fall within the ages of 25 – 44; 243 (63.1%) respondents are male; 251 (65.2%) respondents had tertiary education ranging from ND to B.Sc. while 283 (73.5%) respondents were residents of urban areas. These findings reveal that while most of the respondents are of age and are predominantly male, they are also well-educated urban settlers who are in tune with the societal happenings and can relate to the subject matter while giving their opinions.

**Table 2:** Summary of responses from questions 1 to 8 based on the 5-point Likert Scale

S/N	Question Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
Frequency (Percentage)						
1.	Gossip and rumours are unofficial, informal, and unverified sources of information for both individuals and the government, and they can take place online and offline.	131 (34%)	155 (40.3%)	41 (10.6%)	38 (9.9%)	20 (5.2%)
2.	Nigerian government engage in gossip and rumours.	185 (48%)	151 (39.2%)	17 (4.4%)	19 (4.9%)	13 (3.3%)
3.	These gossip and rumours can come from the government or its agents through the conventional media such as TV or radio.	143 (37.2%)	178 (46.3%)	44 (11.4%)	12 (3.1%)	8 (2%)
4.	Sometimes gossip and rumours can come from the government or its agents through social media platforms such as WhatsApp,	201 (52.2%)	86 (22.4%)	48 (12.5%)	27 (7%)	23 (5.9%)

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Twitter, Facebook and Blogs						
5.	The government use gossip as a precursor for policy formation in Nigeria.	195 (50.6%)	139 (36.1%)	21 (5.5%)	14 (3.6%)	16 (4.2%)
6.	Before the government in Nigeria formulates a particular policy, they often release gossip piecemeal to assess public acceptance and/or rejection.	188 (48.8%)	147 (38.1%)	10 (2.6%)	7 (1.8%)	33 (8.6%)
7.	Government engagement in gossip is not a good idea and can slow or retard its developmental strides, thereby affecting democratic processes.	179 (46.5%)	133 (34.5%)	47 (12.2%)	17 (4.4%)	9 (3.3%)
8.	Government gossip is good for national development and entrenching democracy, which should be encouraged in Nigeria.	28 (7.2%)	23 (6%)	43 (11.2%)	76 (19.8%)	215 (55.8%)

**Source:** Field survey, 2023

Table 2 above shows the summary of responses from questions 1 to 8. 286 (74.3%) respondents think that gossip and rumours are unofficial, informal and unverified sources of information for both individuals and government with the propensity to take place online and offline. 336 (87.2%) respondents believe that the Nigerian government engage in gossip and rumours, and 321 (83.5%) attest that these gossips and rumours can come from the government or its agents through the conventional media such as TV or radio. 287 (74.6%) respondents agreed that gossip and rumours can sometimes come from the government or its

agents through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Blogs. 334 (86.7%) respondents strongly assume that the government use gossip as a precursor for policy formation in Nigeria. However, before the government in Nigeria formulates a particular policy, they often release gossip as the first piece of material to assess public acceptance and/or rejection based on the views of 335 (86.9%) respondents. According to 312 (81%) respondents, government engagement in gossip is not a good idea and can slow or retard its developmental strides, thereby affecting democratic processes. Consequently, 291 (75.6%) respondents disagree that government gossip is good for national development and entrenching democracy, and such should be encouraged in Nigeria. These findings imply that the respondents believe that the Nigerian government do engage in rumours and gossip so as to gauge public opinion on issues, even though this gossip can slow or retard its developmental strides, thereby affecting democratic processes.

**Table 3:** Instances where Nigerian government engage in gossip

S/N	Question items	SA	A	N	D	SD
		<b>Frequency (Percentage)</b>				
1.	2023 fuel subsidy removal	199 (51.7%)	126 (32.7%)	7 (1.8%)	32 (8.3%)	21 (5.5%)
2.	2023 Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) naira redesign	187 (48.6%)	143 (37.1%)	25 (6.5%)	13 (3.4%)	17 (4.4%)
3.	2023 issue on the increment of salaries of public office holders, judges and politicians by 114% by the presidency.	231 (60%)	93 (24.1%)	28 (7.3%)	16 (4.2%)	17 (4.4%)

**Source:** Field survey, 2023

Table 3 above shows the instances where the Nigerian government engaged in gossip. 325 (84.4%) assume that 2023 fuel subsidy removal is one of the instances where the Nigerian government engaged in gossip prior to the removal. 330 (85.7%) gave 2023 CBN naira redesign as other instance, while 324 (84.1%) confirmed the issue of salary increment of public office holders, judges and politicians by 114% by the presidency as another classic example of how the Nigerian government engage in gossips. Therefore, findings show that the 2023

fuel subsidy removal, CBN naira redesign, and the salary increment of public office holders, judges, and politicians by 114% by the presidency can be considered as instances where the Nigerian government engaged in gossip.

**Table 4:** Factors responsible for gossip by the Nigerian government

S/N	Question items	SA	A	N	D	SD
		<b>Frequency (Percentage)</b>				
1.	Gauging/sampling public opinion on issues	164 (42.6%)	153 (39.7%)	34 (8.8%)	10 (2.6%)	24 (6.2%)
2.	Serving as a pilot test for policy formation	177 (45.9%)	132 (34.3%)	22 (5.7%)	33 (8.6%)	21 (5.5%)
3.	Redirecting public attention to other issues and/or serving as diversionary tactics for the government	244 (63.4%)	106 (27.5%)	9 (2.3%)	13 (3.4%)	13 (3.4%)

**Source:** Field survey, 2023

From Table 4 above, 317 (82.3%) respondents confirm that gauging/sampling public opinion on issues is one of the factors responsible for gossip by the Nigerian government. Serving as a pilot test for policy formation was another factor found based on the responses of 309 (80.2%) respondents. In comparison, 350 (90.9%) respondents also think that redirecting public attention to other issues and/or serving as diversionary tactics for the government is another factor responsible for Nigerian government gossip.

**Table 5:** Implications of government utilisation of gossips in Nigeria

S/N	Question items	SA	A	N	D	SD
		<b>Frequency (Percentage)</b>				
1.	Only good government policies may be formulated after their cost-benefits are determined	5 (1.3%)	6 (1.6%)	12 (3.1%)	119 (30.9%)	243 (63.1%)
2.	Sometimes, public acceptance and/or rejection of an issue	132 (33.3%)	164 (42.6%)	19 (4.9%)	37 (9.6%)	22 (5.7%)

	peddled by the government as gossip determines its implementation or otherwise					
3.	Through gossip, the government may set an agenda for public discussions in Nigeria	211 (54.8%)	132 (34.3%)	25 (6.5%)	11 (2.9%)	6 (1.5%)

Source: Field survey, 2023

Table 5 above shows some of the implications of government utilisation of gossip in Nigeria. 362 (94%) respondents do not believe that only good government policies may be formulated after determining their cost-benefits. 296 (75.9%) respondents assume that, sometimes, public acceptance and/or rejection of an issue peddled by the government as gossip determine its implementation or otherwise, while 343 (89.1%) respondents believe that, through gossip, the government may set agenda for public discussions in Nigeria.

**Table 6:** Ways to mitigate government gossip in Nigeria

S/N	Question items	SA	A	N	D	SD
		<b>Frequency (Percentage)</b>				
1.	Government being transparent, open and accountable to the public	188 (48.8%)	153 (39.7%)	8 (2.1%)	21 (5.5%)	15 (3.9%)
2.	Proper and realistic government information and feedback mechanisms where public opinion can be accessed and used	222 (57.6%)	109 (28.3%)	33 (8.6%)	16 (4.2%)	5 (1.3%)
3.	Prompt and frequent organisation of town hall meetings	128 (33.2%)	143 (37.1%)	53 (13.9%)	32 (8.3%)	29 (7.5%)
4.	Guarantee freedom of speech and citizen participation in	175 (45.5%)	137 (35.5%)	10 (2.6%)	42 (10.9%)	21 (5.5%)

governance						
5.	Punitive measures/punishments should be meted out to any government official(s) found to be engaging in gossip	196 (50.9%)	150 (38.9%)	21 (5.5%)	10 (2.7%)	8 (2%)

**Source:** Field survey, 2023

Data presentation and analysis in Table 6 show some of the ways to mitigate government gossip in Nigeria. 341 (88.5%) respondents affirm that the government being transparent, open and accountable to the public can help mitigate government gossip in Nigeria. Proper and realistic government information and feedback mechanisms where public opinion can be accessed and used may also help to reduce government gossip in Nigeria based on the responses of 331 (85.9%) respondents. While 271 (70.3%) respondents agree that prompt and frequent organisation of town hall meetings help to mitigate government gossip, 312 (81%) respondents believe that freedom of speech and citizen participation in governance is another way to reduce government gossip. Similarly, 346 (89.8%) attest that punitive measures/punishments should be meted out to any government official(s) found to be engaging in gossip. This way, the level of government gossip can be reduced drastically.

## Discussion

Results show that (87.2%) respondents think the Nigerian government actually engages in gossip and rumours. Gossip and rumours are unofficial, informal and unverified sources of information for both individuals and government. This corroborates the postulation of Obarisiagbon & Obarisiagbon (2020) that rumors and gossip are social phenomena that are widely known to human civilisations; hence, there is no question about their existence. In actuality, man has always tended to be surrounded by a sea of rumours, gossip, hearsay, half-truths, fake news, and guesses. Similarly, those who like having power and want to utilise it to further their interests may manufacture and disseminate rumours and gossip (Perice, 1997). This finding is also in line with the assertion of Onobe et al. (2023, p. 332) that "ideas and government policies, whatever they are, are ventilated on step-motherly ration and fanned as 'gossip', sometimes, to test their popularity or otherwise before they are implemented." This finding implies that since gossip and rumours are unofficial, informal and unverified sources of information, a



government that engages in that will likely give its citizens opportunity to peddle rumours that could bring chaos and anarchy in the society.

Among the respondents (86.7%) believe that the Nigerian government uses gossip as a precursor for policy formation. This aligns with the postulation of Onobe et al. (2023) that every morsel of gossip/rumour, with the coloration of authority's sponsorship, is an emissary of authority's agenda. However, the result negates Fung's (2015) observation that effectiveness, legitimacy, and social fairness are three democratic government ideals that might be advanced through citizen engagement. This means that citizen engagement is key to government policy formation, not the use of gossip and rumours. Karl Deutsch's 1970s paradigm of communication in politics supports that democracy, social justice and social integration rely significantly on information and enlightenment, awareness creation, and sensitisation through the media and other reliable avenues of information transmission (Abang & Okon, 2018). Similarly, Hague & Harrop (2003, p. 95) opine that "the main business of governance and of leadership is the ability to communicate and influence people's opinions, as well as the ability of the government to communicate their agenda, policies and strategies to the citizens using the media." This finding implies that, policies that the government formulates based on rumours and gossip without consideration for active citizen participation and deliberation may be counterproductive, thereby giving room for pro-elitist and anti-citizen policies.

The survey result shows that (84.4%) respondents confirm 2023 fuel subsidy removal, CBN naira redesign and the increment of salaries of public office holders, judges and politicians by 114% by the presidency as some practical instances where the Nigerian government engaged in gossip. This validates the report of Emmanuel et al. (2023) that the presidency, through the Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) plans to increase salaries of public office holders, judges and politicians by 114%. However, when the issue received adverse public opinion, the presidency, through RMAFC refuted the story (Alake, 2023). This coincides with Onobe et al. (2023, p. 333) position that

uncertainty drives anxiety and desperation sometimes in people as well as governments. In the latter, the tangle comes off as a neck-breaking exercise, often attempting alchemy with self-imposed private ideas intended to impress and sedate society to tow authority's path and line of reasoning, in most climes.

Aitah (2020) gave an instance of how General Ibrahim Babangida, who became Nigeria's military leader in 1985, secretly established Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which was first peddled as a rumour and later came to be true. This finding implies that, whenever there is a rumour about Nigerian government decision on a particular issue(s), there is likelihood that the decision so peddled as a rumour can be true. Also, sometimes, once the government decision attracts adverse public opinion, the decision so peddled as a rumour may be reversed vice versa.

The survey result shows that (82.3%) of the respondents affirm that gauging and sampling public opinion on issues, serving as a pilot test for policy formation and redirecting public attention to other issues and/or serving as diversionary tactics for the government are some of the factors responsible for gossip by the Nigerian government. This validates the position of Keane (2018) that politicians do disorient and destabilise people, and in order to subdue individuals effectively, they (politicians) aim to harness people's self-doubts, impair their sense of reasoning, and demolish their potential for making judgements. Mearsheimer (2011) corroborates that when the overriding interest is unquestionably the good of the public, strategic lying is explored as a vantage valve for only emergency initiatives in decent cultures, especially in some of the developing nations of Africa (Nigeria is one of them) where there are lax restrictions on political correctness (Levine et al., 2010). According to Onobe et al. (2023, p. 339), "severally, plans with infinitely long-term implications on stakeholders have been executed with impunity of playing mum to the rest of the moderating arms of governance." Therefore, political communication in Nigeria is unsettling because public speech is frequently unheard. People sometimes just need to read between the lines to see if the objective on the chessboard of assumptions is brilliant or not. This finding implies that the attention of the public is usually redirected to trivial and unimportant issues by the government through the tactical release of gossip to allow the government to orchestrate its selfish agenda and avoid public scrutiny and questioning.

The survey result shows that (75.9%) of the respondents observe that, sometimes, public acceptance and/or rejection of an issue peddled by the government as gossip determines its implementation or otherwise and that through gossip, the government may set an agenda for public discussions in Nigeria. On the contrary, public policy does not merely appear in the public domain. Every representative democracy's fundamental responsibility is to make sure that a forum for public opinion is established so that it can influence governmental decisions (Obiam, 2021). It comprises organised phases for formulating, creating,

implementing, getting input from people, and evaluating policies (Ugumanim, 2014). According to the assumption of structured deliberative gossip theory, governments in developing countries take advantage of their supporters' sporadic levels of understanding and further numb them with one cover-up after another to persuade people to go along, even though the plan is shrouded in secrecy and lies. On ways to mitigate or reduce Nigerian government engagement in gossip, the findings show that (88.5%) of the respondents agreed that the government should be transparent, open and accountable to the public; there should be proper and realistic government information and feedback mechanisms where public opinion can be accessed and used; there should also be prompt and frequent organisation of town hall meetings and freedom of speech and citizen participation in governance should be guaranteed while ensuring that punitive measures/punishments should be meted out to any government official(s) found to be engaging in gossip.

### **Conclusion**

Rumour and gossip are the by-products of confusing circumstances, doubts, and paradoxes. It is, helpful to know that rumours and gossip, whether they go from the periphery to the centre or the other way around, cause fright, progress and exuberant triumphalism, which is to say, they change history. Rumour and gossip have been described as a collective problem-solving technique, especially when people find themselves in ambiguous situations and attempt to construct a coherent interpretation of the issue. A situation's truth is frequently sought via rumours and gossip rather than departing from it. This means that rumours and gossip are open to different interpretations, contextualisation and complex analysis. Be that as it may, recent happenings in Nigeria have reawakened the consciousness on the need to examine the relevance of structured deliberative gossip theory as it pertains to the Nigerian government's statutory responsibilities to the society and its information dissemination mechanisms. Interestingly, transparency, openness, accountability, prompt government information provision, and citizen participation in governance are some of the important ingredients of democracy that the Nigerian government should imbibe. Through this, the public and the government will not be involved in gossip, rumours, grapevines, insinuations and half-truths; rather, the public will have access to a wide range of information to help them make informed decisions.

Furthermore, realistic government information and feedback mechanisms should be provided where public opinion can be accessed and used. This way, the government will understand some of the issues that could breed rumours and gossip due to its actions or inaction. Also, this will help the government to know

some of the society's yearnings and track its developmental efforts. Freedom of speech and citizen participation in governance should be guaranteed. This is because democracy cannot thrive without freedom of speech and active citizen participation. Punitive measures/punishments should be meted out to any government official(s) found to be engaging in gossip and rumour peddling. Finally, gossip and rumours can affect the government negatively. Consequently, to avoid political, social and economic losses, governments need to control rumour propagation by releasing official Rumour-Refuting Information (ORI) to dispel the rumours (Zhang, Xu, & Wu, 2020).

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