

*Full Length Research*

# Effect of Information Misuse in an Era of New Media Technologies and Nigeria's Democratic Experience: Role of Library Professionals

<sup>1</sup>Martins Dodo and <sup>2</sup>Ismaila Buba

<sup>1</sup>Nigerian Law School, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria. Email: [martinsdodo133@yahoo.com](mailto:martinsdodo133@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup>Nigerian Law School, Yenagoa Campus, Bayelsa, Nigeria. Email: [bubaismaila01@gmail.com](mailto:bubaismaila01@gmail.com)

Accepted 21 June 2023

In this era of new media technologies where access to information and the distribution of same have become very easy, there is an increase in the spread of malicious and harmful information product which tend to pose a threat to the existing democratic experience. Since the return of democracy in 1999 after its disruption a couple of times by the military, it is spanning over 22 years now of continues democratic journey uninterrupted, freedom of speech has been in place, so is the quantity of information in circulation. This paper identifies different forms of information misuse such as misinformation, malinformation, disinformation, hoaxes, propaganda, and fake news etc and they are inimical to Nigeria's democracy. The peddlers of information misuse aim at gaining political advantage, malicious intention to cause crises, to become famous, for economic gains and above all, to destroy democratic structure. The consequences highlighted include; erosion of trust among the people, manipulation of public opinions, weakening democratic established institutions, polarization of the society, etc. To curb these, librarians' role as information professionals include; providing citizens' enlightenment and engagement, leading digital literacy and online safety training, teaching fact-checking techniques and collaboration with other professional bodies. Finally, it is recommended that librarians should brace up with new technologies and win the confidence of the people through the provision of accurate and reliable information, laws should be enacted to sanction the perpetrators and there should be deliberate effort at building libraries that are accessible all over the country.

**Keywords:** Information misuse, democracy, library professionals, new media, Nigeria

**Cite This Article As:** Dodo, M., Buba, I (2023). Effect of Information Misuse in an Era of New Media Technologies and Nigeria's Democratic Experience: Role of Library Professionals. *Inter. J. Acad. Lib. Info. Sci.* 11(5): 118-123

## INTRODUCTION

This is an era where information is easily accessible by all, especially via the new media technologies. New media technologies often referred to as Web 2.0- encompass a wide variety of web-related communication technologies, such as blogs, wikis, online social networking, virtual worlds and other social media forms (Friedman & Friedman, 2008). The new media unlike the old media (television, newspapers, magazines, radio, etc) are flexible channels for content creation and dissemination. Availability and accessibility of these

pieces of information has given rise to a wave of concern, if not a threat to the continued existence of democracy around the globe. This quantum of information at the finger tips of the netizens has been misused for many reasons, but particularly for self interest.

Information misuse connotes the unethical use of information usually with the intention to manipulate, mislead or cause harm to an individual, group or an organisation. It is an intentional or deliberate distortion or misrepresentation of a factual content with the aim of achieving predetermined outcome. Santos-D'amorim and Miranda (2021) associated misused concepts of

misinformation, disinformation and malinformation to words such as; bias, propaganda, retracted papers, conspiracy theories, misleading representation in maps, charts and graphics, fake news, click bait, hoax, satire or parody, imposter website, fake reviews, phishing, filter bubbles, and echo chambers.

In the last few years, false and misleading information has caused or contributed to a wide range of harm to individuals and groups across Africa from vigilante violence unrest and civil unrest in Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc (Cunliffe-Jones, et al. 2021). Originally, information is meant to enlighten and to dispel ignorance leading to well mannered and well behaved society. However, for political self interest, the original purpose has been corrupted, and it is now used as a weapon of mass destruction in our society.

The system of government that has given rise to the rampant misuse of information is democracy. The word "Democracy" comes from ancient Greek: *demos* meaning 'the people' and *Kratein* which means 'to rule' (Harrison & Boyd, 2018). Democracy is a system of government in which the people decide a course of action through elective representation in all tiers of government. This system is preferred largely (especially where it works) because it is flexible and gives room for public opinion. However, freedom in most supposed democracies is relative, depending on the type of society one finds oneself. In Nigeria, we have witness suppression of the press, abuse of the rule of law, deliberate disregards to court orders, unscrupulous sanctions meted on media houses whose mission is to be truthful and objective.

On the face of strong presence of fake new in electoral periods, it is difficult for the public to filter, refine and select what they receive (Santin & Pra, 2021). The ability of the populace to filter through the ubiquitous generated content which comes in form of text, pictures, graphics, videos and the likes is equally as important as the quality of decision they will make.

Information as a product is the oil that lubricates the joints that keeps democracy working and the growth therein. However, it must be used rightly. By misrepresenting reality with traces of truth, there is a distortion of entire collective imaginary and manipulation of public opinion which in turn leads to major problems politically, socially and economically (Satin & Pra, 2021). Information misuse gain prominence through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Google, Youtube, and other social media platforms. This paper aims at alerting the conscience of the citizens on the dangers of information misuse and to chat a way out of the menace.

### Forms of information misuse

In a democracy, various forms of information misuse could be identified which are capable of undermining

democratic process if not properly curbed. In order to be able to identify and avoid information misuse, the following must be properly checked.

**Misinformation:** Misinformation according to Wardle and Derekhshan (2017) is information that is false, but is not created to cause harm. While it is not created to cause harm, the consequences can only be determined by the recipient who may be emotionally affected in the long run. Santin and Pra (2021) opined that in the face of the different sources of information that are present in everyday life, because of constant technological evolutions, it is possible to see the production and distribution of different kind of information and content in accelerated manner, which makes it increasingly difficult to identify sources and to filter the messages received through the different media platforms.

The creators of misinformation as studied in Africa by Cunliffe-Jones (2022) includes; traditional media and politicians, public institutions, business leaders, traditional and religious leaders, special interest groups, offline community networks and ordinary social media users. Misinformation occurs when people hold incorrect factual beliefs and do so confidently (Jerit & Zhao, 2020). The political cultural beliefs in Nigeria's political landscape have helped in this direction.

**Disinformation:** Disinformation is information that is false and is deliberately created to cause harm (Wardle & Derekhshan, 2017). European Commission, cited in Colomina, Margalef and Youngs (2021) defined the concept of disinformation as 'verifiable false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm. Disinformation undermines human rights and many elements of good qualities of democracy, but counter-disinformation measures can also have prejudicial impacts on human rights and democracy (Colomina, et. al. 2021).

**Malinformation:** With a little difference from disinformation is mal-information which is information that is based on reality, but is misused to cause harm on innocent individuals or an entire country. Malinformation requires both intention and equivalence and often involves a repurposing of the truth value of information for deceptive ends (Baines & Elliott, 2020). Everybody knows the value of drugs, but prescribing an overdose of whatever kind could harm the patient. That applies to the way information is misapplied to the audience. People must understand the gravity and implication of malinformation and avoid it for the betterment of our society.

**Propaganda:** Propaganda involves a systematic dissemination of biased information in order to shape

public opinion towards a particular agenda. It carefully crafted in form of emotionally charged language, distorted representation of facts, and manipulation of video or images. Propaganda is a popular weapon of political manipulation in this part of the world.

**Fake news:** Fake news refers to fabricated or deliberated misleading news story presented as factual information. It mimics the appearance of a legitimate news article, making it extremely difficult for the audience to verify its authenticity.

**Rumours and hoaxes:** These are largely false and misleading information often conceived and spread by busy bodies whose aim is to cause distractions. Though harmless, but has the capacity to cause distrust and loss of confidence on people.

**Manipulated media:** Media content can be distorted easily with the advancement in technology. Content such as digital videos, audio recordings and images can be manipulated to look real in order to spread misinformation, create false evidence or discredit individuals.

**Conspiracy theories:** This involves narratives that attribute significant event to secretive, malicious or hidden group. They rely on speculations and lack credible evidence to whatever they profess. They operate on unfounded claims that often pose a red signal to the sensibilities of all and sundry.

It is very important for people to think critically, verify carefully and be careful about the information they consume or use in order to ameliorate the spread of information misuse.

### **Consequences of information misuse in a democracy: Case of 2023 elections in Nigeria**

The growing issue for concern in this era is the fact that people easily believe what they read and listen to in various media channels. Digital platforms of most relevance during elections include website such as Google and Yahoo; open social media and micro-blogging sites such as Facebook and Tweeter; shared news websites such as Reddit; photo sharing sites such as Instagram and Snapchat; video sharing sites such as YouTube and close messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger (Johns, 2019). They are veritable political tools.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria had these platforms fully utilised by the citizens to disseminate or receive information concerning the elections. However, many people used those platforms to spread information capable of truncating the continued existence of a democracy in Nigeria. Misguided utterances through

those platforms sparked ethnic and tribal chauvinism. Some digital platforms were used to promote religious hegemony by the clergy of the various religious groups in the country.

The electoral umpire in the country, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) had before the elections, doused the fears of the more than 90 million registered Nigerians eligible to cast their votes, the number that is considerably bigger than electorates of West Africa's fourteen other countries combined (International Crisis Group, 2023). However, the outcome of the elections was flawed by not keeping to the terms of the electoral Act, in which case INEC failed to upload the presidential election result to the IReV. That singular breach did not go down well with Nigerians and it sparked media outrage. The consequences of information misuse in many quarters are discussed below.

First, information misuse leads to erosion of trust among the people. When people are constantly exposed to misinformation or disinformation, they become skeptical about the information emanating from their leaders. Over the years, Nigerian politicians keep recycling political agenda to the point that an ordinary Nigerian knows exactly what the politicians would promise in the next political campaigns, which has always been failed promises though.

Secondly, information misuse has the capacity to manipulate the opinion of the public. The deliberate distortion of information about something or somebody can sway the opinion of the public towards a particular person or group of persons. During the electioneering campaigns of the 2023 elections, character assassination, names dragging and concoction of misleading information about one candidate to another was in full display. These could undermine, distract and distort democratic process.

Third, misuse of information can weaken democratic established institutions in the country. Democratic institutions such as the judiciary, law enforcement institutions, electoral umpire, legislature and the likes, could easily be undermined. As pointed above, there is so much disdain and distrust on those democratic institutions in Nigeria. The citizens have lost hope on the independence of INEC, judiciary and the legislature. This is so because the mentioned institutions are not free from the grip of misinformation.

Furthermore, information misuse can polarise the society. Manipulative information often leads to divisiveness, setting people coexisting against each other contrary to the social demands of peaceful relationship. The 2023 Nigeria 'selection was deeply polarised- tribe against tribe, religion against religion, region against region, etc. These factors are not healthy for a peaceful democracy.

Also, it could also lead to suppression of minority groups in the country. Misuse of information could be used as tool suppression of dissidents, minority voices or

groups. There are several sections of this country that have not future at the national stage because they are minority. Their failure to emerge out of that circle is because of spreading hate speech, violence incitement, intimidation or suppression of minority voices.

Sixth, freedom of expression would be threatened with continued misinformation. Although democracy has given everyone the opportunity to express themselves, the same system has given room for the propagation of misleading information. However, there are millions of people with genuine and credible information that would find it difficult express themselves for the fear of being arrested by agents of misused information who often disguise as people in authority.

In addition, information misuse can inhibit policy-making. Any institution or individual that depends on misleading information can never make the right decision. Inaccurate or ineffective policies may be implemented based on false narrative resulting in negative consequences for the community. The president of a country can be misled into signing contracts, documents or projects that are based on disinformation.

Finally, powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple and social networks dramatically amplify falsehood peddled by states, populist politicians and dishonest corporate entities as they are shared by uncritical publics (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). This is in line with Butcher (2019) who affirmed that online disinformation is deliberately false or misleading material, often masquerading as news content, which is designed to attract attention and exert influence through online channels.

The twists and turns of politics torch on religious, tribal and cultural believes of the people, especially in Nigeria. Exploring such avenues, politicians and their supporters use religion and tribal sentiments to stir up violence around the country. For instance, there were videos in circulation on social media of tribal bickering. Such actions led to voters' suppression and apathy. Although violence has always been part of the electioneering in this part of the globe, this time around it towed the tribal and religious dimension fueled by information misuse.

### **Reasons for misinformation and disinformation**

In a democratic society, one thing stands distinct among politicians- interest! In this clime, most politicians work hard to ensure the protection of their interest even to the detriment of the citizens. Information misuse are motivated by political gains or interest and are facilitated by the media into the itching ears of the audience who gulp this type of information hook, line and sinker without proper verification. According to Lewis and Marwick (2017) research has identified a variety of motivations behind disinformation, including financial or political interests, state actors' agenda, trolling and disruption

along with even the desire for fame. Other reasons include the following:

**Gaining political advantage:** During electioneering campaigns, politicians spread misinformation to carve a space for misbehaviour by their opponents. They pass information that will make the electorates dislike their opponents. They misinform the public to cause hatred for the opposition and thereby gaining advantage of having supporters.

**Malicious intent to cause crisis:** Crises are always imminent before, during and post elections in Nigeria. The February 25, 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria spread a lot of tension before the announcement of the winner. Comments from politicians and their supporters stirred up violent responses during the elections which led to ballot box snatching, burning of ballot papers, brutalization of voters by thugs and other forms of crisis. That is dangerous and capable of causing voters apathy and may result to conflict.

**For the purpose of gaining popularity:** Many a politician gain popularity through mischief making using the social media. They fabricate wrong narrative about their opponents and circulate same on the media. Most of their appearances on the media stations are meaningless, but they want their names to be popular. Like bad news, wrong information travels faster than anyone can imagine.

**Destruction of political or democratic structure:** Information is capable of disrupting peaceful coexistence of the people. It can lead to disharmony among people and institutions. It can even ignite full scale war which is not just to destroy the structure, but the human race.

**Creating avenue for personal economic gain:** Skit makers are millionaires because the content they share attracts millions of viewers. People are always eager to watch clips conveying bad new such as crisis, violence, murder, flooding and so on. Some politicians use these content creators to spread misleading information (Adeyemi & Sodiq, 2023).

### **Role of librarians in curbing information misuse**

Libraries are public places for creativity, learning, research and leisure. The cardinal responsibility of librarians is to make available the right information and teach how to access them. Cunliffe-Jones, et al. (2021) reports that media literacy, even in the broadest sense, was barely taught in six out of the seven countries they studied in June 2020 and no form of misinformation literacy was taught at all except in one province in South Africa. In the Library Schools, information literacy skills

are taught and that places the librarians at a vantage point to assist other users. Therefore, below are some of the activities librarians do to curb information misuse.

**Citizens' enlightenment and engagement:** Providing enlightenment to the teeming unsuspecting Nigerians that are always falling prey to the web of misinformation and disinformation is one of the responsibilities of librarians. It is achieved by organising seminars, symposium, and conferences through physical meetings, webinars, Zoom, Google classroom or Skype.

**Digital literacy and online safety training:** Librarian should educate the public on how to identify legitimate sites and also to provide guidance on privacy protection, online security, and ability of the users to identify potential risks associated with sharing personal information online. Digital literacy will help those who are not digital natives to approach online content with much understanding.

**Fact-checking techniques on the sources of information:** Before disseminating any piece of information, proper verification of the source is very crucial. Check the background of the disseminator. Search other sources if the same information is reported with accuracy. Read comments below the link. If it is on social media, scroll through the informant page to see their previous activities.

**Collaboration with professional fact checking organisation:** There are organisations that tackle misinformation through fact checking. Libraries can partner with such groups in order to arrive at the information that is accurate and thereby debunking misinformation. Examples of such organisations are; Africa Check, Dubawa and Fact Check Hub who use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to expand the scope of search (Technopedia, 2018). Filter bubble can cause users to get significantly less contact with contradicting view points, causing them to become intellectually isolated (Mavridis, 2019).

**Packaging accurate, reliable and factual information for future use:** Librarians curate and develop collections that prioritise accuracy, diversity, ensure that information that is packaged is accurate enough to dispel any misleading or misinformation. Information can be packaged in books, CDs, PDF doc, ebooks, flyers, bulletin, websites, blogs, etc. The crux of information profession is getting to the public the right information not only for their immediate needs, but also for the future.

**Checking and encouraging ethical use of information:** Information being disseminated should conform to ethical standard required. Check bias, spellings, punctuation, grammar, structure and other

mechanics. Users could be educated about plagiarism, intellectual property rights, copyright and user information protection requirements.

**Collaboration with other institutions:** Librarians can collaborate and sign Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with educational institutions, private institutions of interest, as well as government agencies for sponsorship and implementation.

When librarians fulfill these roles, the citizens could have a better understanding on how to navigate the information landscape without resulting information misuse and its consequences. Also, they could properly evaluate and determine the right information to make informed decisions.

## CONCLUSION

The role of the media in a democracy is to ensure a well informed, empowered and engaged citizenry capable of participating in a democratic system based on sincere, accurate, reliable and complete information. Obviously, too much information is in circulation and the channels of conveying it are just at the tip of the citizens' fingers. Information misuse has been identified as anti-democratic and should be countered if democracies must survive. Librarians are saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that the right information goes out and wrong ones countered. The people need to know how to fact-check information before sharing. People should be enlightened on the appropriate channels to access information, because even the conventional information channels are faced with menace of misinformation and disinformation. Libraries are credible and reputable institutions whose contents are not in doubt, therefore should champion the course of dispelling information misuse in our society.

## Way forward

The following are the way forward

1. Librarians should work hard to win the confidence of the people through provision of accurate and reliable information dissemination.
2. Public libraries should be built in every part of the country to enable the citizens to have access to the right information always.
3. Library workers should be up to speed with technology and use their social media handles to disseminate reliable information and to also counter misused information in the media.
4. Information misuse should be considered a serious offence. Laws should be enacted to sanction the perpetrators.

5. Social media website owners should properly monitor the kinds of information being circulated to the public and should be ready to take down any information that is capable of causing problem in the society.

## REFERENCES

- Adeyemi A. & Sodiq O. (2023, February 16). How presidential candidates pay influencers to peddle fake news on social media, by CDD report. [www.guardian.ng](http://www.guardian.ng).
- Baines, D. & Elliott, R.J.R. (2020). Defining misinformation, disinformation and malinformation: An urgent need for clarity during the Covid-19 infodemic. Discussion papers. 20-26.
- Butcher, P. (2019). Disinformation and democracy: The home front in the information war. *European Politics and Institutions Programme*. European Policy Centre.
- Colomina, C., Margalef, H.R. & Youngs, R. (2021). The impact of disinformation on democratic Processes and human rights in the world. Policy department, Directorate- General for External policies. European Union.
- Cunliffe-Jones, P. et al. (2021). *Misinformation policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: From laws and Regulations to medical literacy*. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book53>.
- Friedman, L.W. & Friedman, H.H. (2008). The new media technologies: Overview and research Framework. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2-29. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1116771.
- Harrison, K. & Boyd, T. (2018). Democracy: Understanding political ideas and movements. Retrieved from: [manchesteropenhive.com](http://manchesteropenhive.com).
- International Crisis Group (2023). Mitigating risk of violence in Nigeria's 2023 elections. Africa Report: 1050 Brussels, Belgium.
- Ireton, J. & Posetti, C. (2018). Journalism, fake news and misinformation: Handbook for Journalism education and training. UNESCO.
- Jerit, J. & Zhao, Y. (2020). Political misinformation. *Annual Review of Political Science*. Department of Political Science, Stony Brook University: New York, USA. Retrieved From: [www.annualreviews.org](http://www.annualreviews.org)
- Johns, K. (2019). Online disinformation and political discourse: Applying a human rights Framework. *International Law Program*, 1-64.
- Lewis, R. & Marwick, A. (2017). Taking the red pill: Ideological motivations for spreading Online disinformation, in understanding and addressing the disinformation ecosystem, *Annenberg School for Communication*, December, 2017.
- Mavridis, G. (2019). Fake new and social media: How Greek users identify and curb Misinformation online. Malmo University, Faculty of Culture and Society.
- Santin, J.R. & Pra, M.D. (2021). Fake news, Misinformation and civil and political fundamental Rights. *International Journal of Law and Public Administration*, 4(1), 12-20.
- Santos-D'amorim, K. & Miranda, M.K.F. (2021). Misinformation, disinformation, and Malinformation: Clarifying the definitions and examples in disinformation times. *Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*, 26, 01-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5007/1518-2924.2021.e76900>.
- Technopedia, (2018). What is a Filter Bubble? - Definition from Technopedia. [Online] Available at: <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28556/filterbubble> [Accessed 15 February 2023].
- Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Towards an interdisciplinary frame Work for research and policy-making. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/information-Order-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/16>.