Combating Fake News and Disinformation: Strategies for Librarians.

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Abstract

The rise of fake news and disinformation poses significant challenges in today's information landscape, threatening public trust in credible sources and undermining informed decision-making. Librarians, as custodians of information, play crucial roles in combating these issues by equipping users with the tools to critically evaluate information. This paper explores strategic approaches libraries can adopt to address the spread of false information, including the implementation of media literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, and digital resource curation. Additionally, it highlights the importance of librarian training in identifying disinformation trends and collaborating with external fact-checking organizations. The discussion emphasizes the value of fostering a culture of critical inquiry and promoting ethical information-sharing practices among library patrons. By adopting proactive strategies, libraries can reaffirm their role as trusted centres for knowledge dissemination and contribute to creating an informed, resilient, and media-savvy society. notice of the students the necessity of subjecting their work for plagiarism check and the need for them to comply with the law of the school pertaining plagiarism.

Keywords: Fake News, Disinformation, Media Literacy, Fact-checking initiatives, social media

Introduction

The widespread use of online platforms and social media has made it easier for misleading, false, or altered information to circulate, complicating the task of identifying truth from fiction. In today's digital world, fake news and disinformation have emerged as serious issues, affecting public perception, influencing political systems, and eroding confidence in mainstream media.

Fake news is a form of misinformation that can be produced for various purposes, such as to deceive, entertain, express strong beliefs, gain influence or power, or generate profit. It often appears as intentionally crafted disinformation, hoaxes, or falsehoods that are presented as legitimate news through mainstream media or social platforms. Disinformation, on the other hand, involves the intentional distribution of false or distorted facts, often as part of a manipulative narrative or propaganda effort, aimed at achieving specific goals.

Negi (2018), writing for the World Economic Forum, identifies the spread of fake news through social media as one of the most pressing global issues. This trend has severe impacts on both developing and developed nations, including those in Africa. In Nigeria, for example, social media platforms have become a breeding ground for the unchecked dissemination of false information—ranging from fake messages and doctored images to misleading audio clips and outdated or unrelated videos—all of which are frequently shared within numerous social media groups across the country. The widespread distribution of such deceptive content has turned into a societal problem, sparking panic, fear, mistrust, tension, and social unrest (Anderson, 2019). As noted by the UNDP (2021), fake news is now a common issue with serious consequences, including the distortion of knowledge and awareness, and the manipulation of public sentiment through selectively presented, twisted, or completely fabricated content. Beyond national implications, fake news has broader global consequences affecting public health and democratic systems.

Fake news and disinformation pose significant threats to various aspects of society, including public health and democratic systems, as they undermine citizens' ability to make informed voting decisions and access accurate information—exposing deeper, systemic issues. At its core, a crisis of truth is fundamentally a crisis of trust, signalling a breakdown in social and political institutions before it becomes a question of knowledge or belief (Cosentino, 2020). This perspective is echoed by numerous stakeholders—political leaders, educators, and media professionals—who argue that fake news exacerbates existing structural issues in the information landscape, such as unequal access to information and difficulties in understanding complex or unfamiliar content. Most critically, fake news threatens the integrity of information systems by shifting the basis of truth away from authority, expertise, and factual accuracy, and toward personal interpretation, perception, emotion, and sentiment (Cooke, 2018). In response, libraries and librarians could play a pivotal role in helping rebuild trust and guiding users toward credible information.

Within this framework, librarians hold a vital position in the fight against fake news and disinformation by promoting information literacy, encouraging critical thinking, and ensuring access to trustworthy sources. They act as frontline defenders by helping individuals become more media and information literate. Through access to dependable information, instruction in research and fact-checking methods, and the curation of credible content, libraries support informed decision-making. Many institutions also run programmes and workshops that teach people how to assess news critically, detect bias, and identify misinformation. By fostering lifelong learning and analytical skills, libraries strengthen communities' ability to navigate today's complex media landscape. Garcia (2020) supports this view, noting that libraries, as socially integrated institutions within diverse communities, should engage in collaborative efforts to build the public's capacity to effectively use and safeguard information. This aligns with Goal 16 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes access to justice and strong institutions.

Furthermore, this goal emphasizes that librarians are dedicated to fostering data literacy skills, ensuring that data is accurately used and interpreted. They are also responsible for establishing rigorous standards regarding information ethics and promoting digital inclusion by providing access to information and communication technologies. With the support of trained professionals, librarians help users develop new digital skills. Additionally, they oversee the processing, preservation, and accessibility of information, ensuring users can acquire the resources they need efficiently (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021).

Given that scholars have examined fake news and disinformation in different sectors such as health and politics, there is a dire need of literature regarding the strategies for combating fake news and disinformation by libraries and librarians. Consequently, this is the problem which this paper aims to address.

Attributes of Fake News and Disinformation

Fake news is a form of misinformation that can be produced for various purposes, such as to deceive, entertain, express strong beliefs, gain influence or power, or generate profit. It often appears as intentionally crafted disinformation, hoaxes, or falsehoods that are presented as legitimate news through mainstream media or social platforms. According to Ebhonu and Onobrakpor (2021), misleading news can come in several forms, including clickbait, orchestrated information campaigns, sponsored articles, biased or partisan reporting, satire, pseudoscientific claims, and conspiracy theories. When individuals accept fake news as truth, they become misinformed, which can result in poor decision-making. This misinformation contributes to societal issues such as frustration, division, confusion, fear, distrust, cynicism, and disengagement, ultimately preventing communities from making informed choices and addressing critical problems effectively (Theodora, 2022). People tend to believe and spread fake news for several reasons, including limited critical thinking skills and a tendency to seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs. Biased reporting on cable news networks contributes to the "filter bubble" effect, where audiences are exposed only to perspectives that align with their own views (Anyanwu, 2022). Social media further

amplifies this by allowing users to share content that supports their opinions, often without verifying its accuracy. Combating fake news requires individuals to consider diverse perspectives and reframe narratives to encourage dialogue and find shared understanding. "Disinformation" refers to intentionally false or deceptive information. However, it is sometimes knowingly spread by individuals who believe the content to be true and share it within their networks to confuse or mislead others.

Misinformation can gain traction when posts receive a high number of likes or shares, giving them an illusion of credibility. Although the content is misleading, this perceived trustworthiness encourages further dissemination. Turcilo and Obrenovic (2020) define misinformation as false information that is not created with the intent to harm. In today's digital era, social media platforms have become a significant channel for the spread of misinformation and propaganda. Unlike traditional media, social media allows rapid dissemination of content due to the absence of strict regulations and fact-checking processes before publication (Xinran et al., 2015). Social media platforms allow users to share information rapidly with others without needing approval from traditional gatekeepers like editors or librarians, who would typically verify the accuracy of content before it is published and distributed. While journalists are sometimes criticized for contributing to the spread of false information on these platforms, studies by Starbird et al. (2018) and Arif et al. (2017) highlight that journalists also play a crucial role in countering misinformation by actively debunking and disputing false claims on social media.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) attributed certain properties and contents to fake news. They are: False Connection; Misleading Content; False Context; Imposter Content; Manipulated Content and Fabricated Content.

False Connection: Ebhonu and Onobrakpor (2021) describe "false connection" as a situation where images or headlines do not accurately reflect the content they accompany. This is most commonly seen in the form of clickbait—sensational headlines designed to draw attention and encourage clicks. Due to growing competition for audience engagement, editors often resort to crafting eye-catching headlines, even if they end up misleading readers once they view the actual article. A similar tactic involves pairing visuals or captions—especially on platforms like Facebook—with content that doesn't support the impression they create. Since many users simply scroll through their social media feeds without reading the full articles, these misleading headlines and images can be particularly deceptive.

Misleading Content: This kind of content involves the strategic manipulation of information to present issues or individuals in a specific light—for example, by cropping images or selectively using quotes or statistics. This concept is explained by Framing Theory (Entman et al., 2009).

False Context: One of the problems with the term "fake news" is that it often oversimplifies the issue, as authentic content can be misleading when taken out of context and shared again. For instance, a photo taken in Vietnam in 2007 was recirculated seven years later and falsely claimed to depict the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (Pham, 2018).

Imposter Content: A significant issue arises when journalists' names are falsely attributed to articles they didn't write, or when media organization logos are used on content they never produced. For example, in the lead-up to the 2017 Kenyan elections, BBC Africa discovered a video circulating on WhatsApp that featured a doctored BBC logo and strapline (UNESCO, 2018). In response, the BBC created and shared a video on social media to alert the public and warn them not to be misled by the fake content.

Manipulated Content: Manipulated content refers to authentic material that has been altered with the intent to mislead. A notable example from South Africa involved doctored images of HuffPost Editor-at-Large Ferial Haffajee, one of which falsely depicted her sitting on the lap of businessman Johan Rupert to suggest a personal connection between them (Haffajee, 2017).

Types of Fakes News and Disinformation

Serious Fabrications: Fraudulent reporting has been observed across both traditional and digital media landscapes. Documented cases of journalistic deception, as discussed by Compton and Benedetti (2015) and Shingler (2015), serve as valuable sources for constructing fake news corpora. However, recovering original fabricated reports is often resource-intensive, and the resulting datasets may lack sufficient scale for natural language processing (NLP) research.

Large-Scale Hoaxes: Hoaxing constitutes a distinct category of intentional misinformation disseminated across mainstream and social media platforms. These deceptions are frequently framed as legitimate news, with the potential to be reproduced and unintentionally legitimized by established journalistic outlets. Brunvand (1998) differentiates hoaxes from pranks or practical jokes by characterizing them as complex, large-scale fabrications that extend beyond playful deception and often result in significant material or reputational harm. The Columbian Chemical Plant hoax illustrates this phenomenon as a coordinated, multi-platform disinformation attack exhibiting identifiable patterns of communication (Chen, 2015; Matt, 2015).

Humorous Fakes: A distinction must be made between serious fabricated news and humorous content. When audiences recognize humorous intent, they are less likely to interpret the information literally. Technological interventions can aid this process by detecting humour and clearly attributing sources, thereby reducing misinterpretation in decontextualized aggregators and platforms.

Perspectives to Fake News and Disinformation

To better comprehend what fake news is, the reasons behind its creation and spread online, and the potential effects it can have on the public, examining some prominent examples can be quite informative. A notable historical case is the 1835 "Great Moon Hoax," when the New York Sun released a series of articles claiming that life had been found on the moon. The sensational story caused the newspaper's sales to soar, but it was later exposed as a complete fabrication (Mavridis, 2019). Another well-known instance of fake news is the 2006 Flemish Secession Hoax, during which a Belgian public television channel aired a report claiming that the Flemish parliament had

declared independence from Belgium. Many viewers mistakenly believed the report to be true (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

In Nigeria, the swift circulation of false information via instant messaging platforms has emerged as a significant driver of misinformation. Apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram enable rapid sharing of misleading content related to employment, scholarships, safety, food, politics, health, and religion. These messages can be forwarded to large numbers of users within seconds, often spreading widely before their accuracy can be verified, potentially causing harm before any corrections can be made.

Effects of Fake News and Disinformation on Societal Development

The virtually unrestricted nature of social media has made these platforms especially susceptible to misuse, the spread of misinformation, and the rise of so-called "fake news." It is now widely recognized that disinformation is having a detrimental impact on the social and political development of countries globally—a challenge that transcends national boundaries. Some of the most significant negative consequences of fake news and disinformation worldwide include:

Jungle Justice: Security referred to a system designed to protect the lives and property of citizens. However, in recent years, the phenomenon known as jungle justice has been on the rise, leading to the needless loss of lives in disturbing and unusual ways. Jungle justice is a form of public extrajudicial killing, where individuals accused of crimes are humiliated, beaten, or even killed by a mob. One of the key factors fuelling the increase in jungle justice cases is the spread of fake news and disinformation. Ogbette et al. (2019) reported that in India, a dozen people were killed due to fake news about child abduction, which was spread through hoax messages on WhatsApp. Similarly, in Nigeria, many people have fallen victim to false allegations, spread by trouble-makers on social media, leading to unjust attacks.

Electoral Violence: Elections are a crucial component of a legitimate and effective democracy, fostering competitive politics, ensuring political engagement, and upholding the rule of law. McGonagle (2017) argues that, unlike other forms of information, news plays a vital role in democratic societies as it serves as a primary source of reliable information about political and social matters, shaping public opinion and the democratic process. When news is "fake," it misguides the public, corrupting the democratic discourse from its very foundation and potentially leading to the delegitimization of electoral outcomes, which can trigger public dissatisfaction and unrest.

Leadership/Public Mistrust: Ebhonu and Onobrakpor (2021) noted that fake news is often employed as a tool for gaining political advantage, particularly during election campaigns. In such contexts, political figures and their supporters spread various forms of propaganda and fabricated stories aimed at damaging the reputation of their rivals.

Roles by Librarians in Combating Fake News and Disinformation

A core responsibility of libraries is to deliver accurate and timely information to their users. This highlights the critical role of librarians, who must guide users in identifying

credible sources and distinguishing them from unreliable ones. While librarians may not be able to completely prevent the creation and spread of fake news, they can significantly contribute to minimizing its dissemination by equipping users with the tools and knowledge to recognize and avoid misinformation. Some key roles include the 3Ds—Detection, Documentation, and Debunking; Information Verification; Fact-Checking; Media Literacy; and Counter-Information efforts. Ofili (2020) highlighted several strategies for confirming the authenticity of information, which include:

Detection - This work in itself is to help detect fake news. The properties and characteristics of fake news mentioned earlier in this work will enable libraries detect fake news.

Documentation - The process of documentation is not new to librarianship. Fake news detected should be properly documented for record keeping as well as for quick referral. Such documentation should be distributed through the library's various channels to ensure that users are debunking.

Debunking–Librarians should declare such information as false. In so doing the credibility of the library and other information resources are assured and promoted.

Information Verification: The proliferation of Internet and the rise of social media as a news distribution channel, in an era when the news distribution happens mostly online and everyone have access to tools traditionally reserved to the media; Fake news and disinformation have become a frightening issue in the society. It is imperative for librarians to verify the authenticity of the information resources made available for their users, so as to guide against feeding users with information resources that is carrying fake or misleading information. Librarians have to verify information that is circulated especially on the social media. Verification of the information is important.

Strategies by Librarians in Combating Fake News and Disinformation

Librarians can contribute in combating fake news through the following strategies:

1. Teaching information-seeking skills which will include strategies for filtering out fake news. assisting researchers and educators, concerns about questionable or pseudoscientific content
2. Offer users tools like fact-checkers and back-end technologies such as blockchain to help securely obtain and verify information
3. Raise public awareness through displays in the library, websites and seminars
4. Facts Checking- While librarians do not have the ability to verify facts before publication, it is within their responsibility to assess the timeliness, relevance, and authenticity of information before it is shared with users. Ofili (2020) recommended several fact-checking tools that can be used to verify the accuracy of information in published articles, particularly those available online. These tools include: AFP Fact Check- Canada Fact Check- Domain Big Data- EXIFdata.com- FackCheck.org- FactsCan- Google Reverse Image Search- Hoaxy- InVID- Other fact checking tools include- OpenSecrets.org, Politifact, Snopes, TinEye Reverse Image Search, twXplorer, Urban Legends Online, WHOis.net and Wolfram/Alpha.

5. There is the need for librarians to improve skills and techniques in detecting, documenting, debunking, verifying and investigating the source of information and fast-checking them. This is to reduce if not totally eliminate fake news and disinformation in our society

Conclusion

Throughout history, information professionals have faced various challenges that have made it harder to provide users with information that meets their current needs. With the rise of social media, researchers are now exposed to vast amounts of information, including fake news. Detecting fake news requires a variety of professional strategies from those working in information and documentation fields. As experts, academic training equips librarians to tackle this new challenge. It is essential to emphasize the importance of training users in information literacy while also providing them with carefully curated content. Moreover, it would be valuable to offer users tools like fact-checkers and back-end technologies such as blockchain to help securely obtain and verify information. However, the issue of fake news lies at the intersection of information dissemination and economic or political interests, making it a complex and challenging problem for information professionals. Librarians believe it would be helpful to develop shared strategies among information professionals.

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