# Redefining Fake News; Media Octopus

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***Background****: One of the challenges of the digital era is the dissemination of false information which is variously referred to as fake news, disinformation, misinformation and deceptive news. Several solutions are being utilized to combat the 'infodemic' rather than establishing a correct title to address the phenomenon. This article is directed towards tackling how the ambiguous and overly misused 'fake news', to define false and deceptive information is compounding the problem. Initial study indicates that most authors define 'fake news', inadequately and the rush to address the problem might be the reason for the unsatisfactory problem definitions. These ambiguous and mixed meanings culminate to lack of proper problem definition leading to wrong, insufficient and erroneous results. **Methodology***: This study uses thematic analysis.*
***Conclusion:*** *Using the thematic analytical approach, the study demonstrates and concludes that fake news is an inadequate and improper term for academic purposes and that the false information dissemination phenomena need to be addressed and defined as disinformation, it also addresses the role of the digital era in spread of disinformation and proffers recommendations.*
***Key Word****: Fake news; Disinformation; Infodemic; Digital era, Thematic Analysis*

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## I.    Introduction

The ongoing information phenomena mostly titled "fake news" also goes by various names ranging from false news, misinformation, yellow journalism and deceptive news, to mention a few hence. It is, to say the least, a widespread information disease or infodemic likened in this article to an Octopus many dimensions, extensions and global implications. Over the years, there has been an ongoing debate amongst journalists as to what constitutes news. In the quest or a suitable definition, this study defines news as the true, veritable and factual reportage of information which is of interest and if information does not meet the journalistic requirement of news values, such information is not news in the first place. The terminology "fake news" therefore becomes invalid by acting as an oxymoron that is putting two contradictory words side by side. What is seen as disinformation is much larger than what it is taken to mean. Fake means not genuine, imitation or counterfeit and seeing that news cannot be counterfeit in the sense of jewellery or coins but instead may contain exaggeration, bits of truth and lack the central idea, it should not be called fake. They may not include any veritable facts or sources while some present only viewpoints. Fake news has been an issue in the media even before the digital age. However, the professionals within the media have failed to allocate an appropriate identity a sine qua non to resolving the so-called fake news imbroglio. The authors of this article are of the view that a problem known is half solved and are inclined to prescribe that the most effective title for fake news should be disinformation.

Despite the fact that disinformation is not a new phenomenon, advances in technology have constructed a fertile environment for the spread of disinformation successfully driven by foreign actors, citizen journalists, talk shows and television programs with culpability on both the mainstream and alternative media. From common miscommunication to deliberate manipulation of messages, disinformation is present. The concept known as "disinformation" during the world wars and as freak journalism or yellow journalism during the Spanish wars, can be traced to 1896 (Campell 2001); Crain (2017). Yellow journalism was also known for publishing factually incorrect content, with no evidence. Disinformation however exceeds the concept of fake news, as it involves numerous forms that go well beyond anything resembling news (HLEG, 2018, p.10).

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Disinformation can be seen as the delivery of false or dishonest information to the public. They are machineries of propaganda strategy to device, mislead, confuse and coerce people to influence and further an agenda. Disinformation and propaganda have been features of human communication since at least the Roman times of Anthony and Cleopatra. Octavia forged a propaganda campaign against Anthony which was focused at smearing his reputation. He did this in form of "sharp, short slogans" written upon coins, the slogans painted Anthony as a womanizer and drunk, implying that he had become Cleopatra's puppet, having been corrupted by her. Octavia eventually became Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. From a distinct point of view, one could say that things propagated by Octavia were not necessarily false but were not completely true, so can we place that within the confines of "Fake News"? Such becomes disinformation because it could be seen as "half-baked" truth. Although regarded as fake news, a proper example of disinformation is a well-documented video report touting a conspiracy that President Muhammadu Buhari who in his first term suffered illness and long absences had in fact died and replaced by a Sudanese double, Jibril. Calling such fake news is improper as Buhari was truly sick that period as, although the other quota of the truth is false, there is some atom of truth to the story. So, could such be regarded as counterfeit? Simply put this is disinformation at its finest. The consequence of the above is that disinformation risks eclipsing the role of journalism. When journalism becomes a vector for disinformation, it reduces public trust and promotes the cynical view that there is no distinction between different narratives within journalism acclaimed news paradigms on the one hand, and narratives of disinformation on the other.

## II. Fake News "Octopus"

Accuracy is a critical part of information quality and dissemination. The audience may acquire false beliefs about the world as a result of inaccuracy which may result in severe consequences regardless of the intent surrounding such information, whether it was a honest mistake or not. So how do we proffer solution to this multi-dimensional problem? Simpliciter, the solution remains a mirage until media scholars brace up to the pre-requisite challenge an appropriate descriptor for the phenomenon. What people regard as Fake News is not as simple as it seems, it stretches into various areas ranging from false information to hoax messages and so on, hence it can be compared to an octopus which is a sea animal with eight long arms. This article suggests that the title "Fake News" is not a suitable name to address the phenomenon but a more satisfactory title would be "disinformation" octopus. This paper examines the various facets of the phenomenon and they include;

- **False Information**
  False information refers to inaccurate information without regards for intent. It is information that is not in accordance with the truth or facts. It has been observed that Facebook has replaced its regular use of fake news with false information.

- **Yellow journalism**
  Yellow journalism refers to contents which use shocking headlines, exaggerating facts, or rumors to catch the audience attention. It should be noted that the content in yellow journalism may be real but the headlines may be blown out of proportion and this may mislead the audience. So, should information obtained from sites that practice yellow journalism be described as fake news since they sometimes carry half-truths?

- **Junk Journalism**
  Although often referred to as "Junk News", this article views the title as inappropriate because we believe news cannot be likened to trash. Hence, we will call it "Junk information". The concept of junk information describes when news is massively disseminated with content of propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan or political information with hidden conspiracies. "junk" is used to describe such information since its contents are as useless as trash.

- **Pseudo-Information**
  Pseudo-information reports a non-existent story. The whole story is simply fabricated. This differs from mere false information because some details that false information carries may be true or partially true but for pseudo-information nothing said is accurate. Pseudo-information indicates that the story does not exist, it may simply be the figment of the writer's imagination.

- **Hoax Information**
  Hoax information refers to information that contains humorous or malicious deceptions. However in some cases hoax information is deemed a joke such as April fool hoaxes.

- **Propaganda**
  Propaganda information is a paid report containing propaganda messages that disguise as news. However, propaganda usually reports a real but prettified fact. News media receive sponsorship to deliver propaganda messages. The audience cannot be sure that the news is not a normal news report since it doesn't disclose the source, the funding provider and the motivation. Propaganda should not be misplaced for advertorial since they are both paid messages because propaganda usually looks like news report.

- **Alternative fact**

  An alternative fact doesn't mean a fact instead it is the mis-statement of a fact. This is one of the trickiest forms of disinformation to identify as it contains the word fact and fact means a proven truth. It can be described as when a fact is adulterated. For example, 100 people attend a function that's a fact but a report says 100 showed up for the function but only 99 attended such becomes an alternative fact. Nevertheless, an alternative fact is based on truth but a mis-statement of the truth hence it could also be called half-baked truth.

- **Post truth**

  Post truth doesn't mean the truth. Post truth refers to a political concept that with the disappearance of shared objective standards of truth, the message is regarded as true but is considered false according to scientific enquiries.

### III.    Misinformation v Disinformation

Misinformation is false information spread regardless of intent to mislead.  The spread of false information happens often than not in our everyday life. We all make mistakes; we forget things we mishear or misremember details. The real issues arise when the conventional media take this false information from various "fake news" websites and disseminate to the public. Misinformation refers to inaccurate information or content that is unintentionally or mistakenly shared.

Disinformation on the other hand does not care about intent and so is simply a term that could be used to describe a kind of wrong and false information. Disinformation is a relatively new word, first recorded in 1965/70, it translates from the Russian word dezinformatsiya meaning to misinform. Disinformation is very powerful, destructive and deceptive and is a common tool of espionage. Since time immemorial, countries have often taken interest in spreading false information to rival nations as in the case of the Soviet Union and United states did during the "Cold War". A total understanding of what constitutes disinformation is so broad that this article cannot exhaust it all, from silence on reporting certain issues, to over coverage of a particular story, disinformation exists all around us.

According to Southwell, Disinformation is not a 21st century phenomenon. When you have lack of correct information by means of half-baked truths, controversial reportage of information, and an anxious population with a lot at stake, disinformation is going to thrive. When humans are worrying and searching for answers, somebody has to provide solutions and capitalize on it financially or politically. All in all, regardless of whether it is disinformation or misinformation, it is vital to understand that it is faulty and should not be relied upon. According to Southwell, some characteristics peculiar to disinformation includes:

- If such information seems too good to be true
- If said story radiates extreme emotional attachments, either positive or negative.
- If it has been noticed that data appearing in said story was not properly sourced or stats appear out of date.

### IV.    Disinformation in the Age of Digital Media

According to Burkhardt, the existence of disinformation within the media is not a new phenomenon, instead it is the speed in which it travels and the global reach of technology that spreads it that are unprecedented. The Alternative media such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the mainstream journalists through faceless platforms tend to disseminate whatever information they please without adequately fact-checking information. In the age of the digital media, the everyday man is a journalist even without proper understanding of how much power information holds. The everyday man categorizes information that does not suit his taste as "Fake News" and this media illiteracy has cost people to remain ignorant. Citizen journalists have no idea on the depth of the infodemic. They can say "well I'm not lying so it's real" but with a proper understanding of what constitutes disinformation people can protect themselves against the vicious circle of false information.

The infodemic may also be fueled by our various cognitive biases. For instance, Lanre hears on the news about Covid-19 he is a teacher and upon arriving at school the following day everyone including the proprietor is on a mask, Lanre still harbors disbelief regarding the virus, he also sees people around him on the bus on masks. Upon getting home his close friends invite him to a party and the party no one puts on a mask, no one believes in C0VID-19 to Lanre. COVID automatically translates to false information. This is cognitive bias at its finest and is what may happen to even the best of us when we stumble upon news on the internet. Cognitive bias is a strong, preconceived notion of something or someone based on information we have perceive to have or lack. One of the most popular influences of cognitive bias in modern times is the internet and stories posted by citizen journalism. These biases lead us to avoid information that may be unwelcomed or uncomfortable rather than investigating the information that could lead us to more accurate outcomes. Humans tend to take news delivered on the internet and the likes hook, line and sinker because we believe the citizen journalists are somehow closer to us. Modern technology by way of citizen journalists amplifies these biases in

a harmful way by leading us to information that strengthen these biases and share it with others thus beginning the circle of disinformation. We see information that support our biases, we like them and we share to others who may share our feelings and they also share to others.

While having access to information is vital, the advent of the digital media has made information dissemination seamless and this has also increased the spread of disinformation. Therefore, it has become paramount to children and young people develop their critical thinking to spot the differences between fact and fiction online.

## V.    News and News Values

The word news is derived from the Latin word "Nova" meaning new. It is tough to define news in any one way as any Tom, dick and harry can have his or her own definition. Many aspects of news form are clearly related to pursuit of objectivity in the sense of factualness (touch man, 1978). But for this article, we will define news according to Joseph Pulizer (Saint Louis Post dispatch and New York world) who said that news is anything original, distinctive, thrilling, unique, curious, and odd.

The criteria of what makes event news has been an ongoing debate and an object of considerable research among academic and practitioners of various background: sociologists, linguistics, psychologists, practicing journalist and anthropologists. News is anything that is new, that is happening. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, it is a report of recent events or previously unknown information. News is the end product of a complex process which begins with systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories (Stuart Hall in Fowler 1991:12). News is one of the best commodities in today's world. Everyone who understands a language and has access to the mass media recognizes it. It is considered by a few as an acronym for the four sides of the world-north, east, west and south.  The concept of news has existed long before the advent of the mass media. For any information to be accurately termed as news, such information must be factual, new and interesting. There must be facts to report, facts are defined as things that are known to be true; therefore, if there are no facts to report there can be no news or such information cannot be regarded as news. It is important that these facts also be new to the listeners, viewers and readers. Again, for any information to be regarded as news, it must satisfy all elements present in the 5Ws and H that is, it must answer the following;

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?

News values on the other hand, give journalists and editors a set of rules to work, plan and execute the content of a publication or a broadcast. News values are intangible, informal, almost unconscious elements from which the planning and execution of the content of a publication or a broadcast are carried out. News values are described as themes which have been shown to ring a bell with media target audience. The story with most news values gets the placement of primary lead. News values provide the criteria inside the ordinary exercise of journalism, which enables newshounds, editors and newsmen to decide robotically and often which stories are newsworthy and which is not. These are the qualities of news, which determine the selection of news from the myriad events that occur in the environment, and these are also qualities that maintain readers' interest in the news. These news values include:

- **Timeliness**

  This is a great factor in deciding news. In order for something to qualify as news, it must be new. An incident that occurred one month back will not make news for today's newspaper. However, timelines differ from publication to publication. For a newspaper, events that happened on the previous day is news. But for a weekly newspaper, events of the previous one week can make news. While for a television stations, every second is a deadline.

- **Proximity**

  Proximity means the closeness or nearness of an event or an incident to the audience and this has tremendous values for reporters as well as the audience. Proximity could be emotional and geographical. For instance, Ebola affecting hundreds of people in Nigeria may not make news for people in England. They may read it but not worry about it because it's not in their proximity. But it will definitely make news for people living in Nigeria.

- **Prominence**

  If a prominent person is involved in any event, it will definitely make news but if an ordinary persons car breaks down and he has to wait for ten minutes on the roadside till the vehicle is repaired it makes no news.

- **Impact**

The impact of an event decides its newsworthiness. It means how the news will affect the reader's life. It establishes the importance of the piece to the reader and also inherently explains the consequences of the news itself. When the corona virus struck several parts of the world, thousands of people were affected and it became major news for the whole world. But if a cyclone kills 20 people in Bangladesh, it may not have any impact on other parts of the world.

- **Human Interest**
  Stories of human interest appeal to emotion and makes good news items because people want to read stories about other people. They often disregard the main rules of newsworthiness; for example, they don't date as quickly, they need not affect a large number of people and may not matter where in the world the story takes place.

According to this study, fake news is an inadequate term to refer to describe false information because the values coherent in the description of news cannot be counterfeit or non-genuine, so it goes to say that fake information is not "news" at such false information, deceptive information should be described as disinformation. Misinformation is false information spread regardless of intent to mislead. The spread of false information happens often than not in our everyday life. We all make mistakes; we forget things we mishear or misremember details. The real issues arise when the conventional media take this false information from various "fake news" websites and disseminate to the public.

## VI. Disinformation; Causes and Effects

A problem known is a problem half solved but in the case of the so-called fake news, prescribing relevant solutions may remain an illusion as academics and media professionals are yet to identify a common and befitting title. As a result, this study prescribes that the infodemic (a combination of the words "information" and "pandemic" which refers to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information) can be contained through media literacy on the part of the audience and be titled disinformation. Disinformation goes beyond the Fake News title which addresses reporting counterfeit news to prove that firstly counterfeit news does not exist, and false information is only one tentacle of the metaphorical *octopus* of disinformation. One of the major causes of disinformation is lack of knowledge as to what constitutes disinformation, is it simply reporting false information or propagating propaganda messages? With this shallow understanding of disinformation, the solutions still appear miles away. This article suggests that disinformation goes way beyond authentic or inauthentic truth, nothing is simply black or white, and some may be grey. As a result of this what constitutes disinformation may include half-baked truths, reporting one sided story, silence on stories or reports, and so on.

Causes of disinformation include the "speed over accuracy" syndrome. Conventional and citizen journalists have the habit of posting stories without going through the necessary fact checking procedures with the aim to be relevant and to attract traffic. Everyone wants to break the news but no one wants to verify the story. There is no time for verification as news becomes stale at much shorter timelines than where ever contemplated by practitioners and trainers. The audiences who are supposed to be the receivers now take over the duty of fact checking in self-defense. Disinformation has been projected as a great menace and has gradually snowballed into a moral panic in the information environment. Given the fact that this false information is targeted at the audience it therefore has certain implications. Disinformation is false or misleading stories disseminated for a host of selfish reasons and with its spread comes a certain degree of pain. Some of the intent of disinformation includes: political influence, increasing group polarization, reducing trust, and generally undermining civil society.

Research has also shown that exposure to disinformation can lead to attitude change within the audience. For example, when stories circulated that COVID-19 was associated with 5G people began attacking telecommunications masts, this led to mass hysteria. Ebeleke shows how in India, about 6 people were killed as a result of disinformation disguised as prank messages. At times, the audience may make rapid decisions based on heuristics and peripheral cues, meaning that audience may find themselves in a do now think later situation as a result of disinformation. Another example was when information spread that salt could be used to keep Ebola at bay the price of salt skyrocketed because of the audience spontaneous reaction to the information Disinformation may fuel audience cognitive bias. Humans are biased information-seekers; we prefer we receive information that confirms our existing views. For example, if a person already believes COVID-19 doesn't exist then such person comes across information on the media that COVID-19 isn't real it will further fuel the persons disbelief and instead of taking preventive measures, such a person will stay in ignorance. Disinformation most often leads to confusion, tension and even the tendency to be suicidal depending on the person or institution as the case maybe.

As a result of information disorder thriving within the media, there has been a rise instigated tension, confusion and overall, it has become extra hard for reporters to cover massive news stories.

## VII.  Combating Disinformation; An Endless Battle

The truth remains that as long as information exists, there will be disinformation. Then the real solution becomes protecting oneself from the infodemic. And this could be done by manner of media and information literacy. Firstly, Consumers need to have a philosophical understanding pertaining to the nature of news. They need to understand that genuine news does not necessarily represent the entire "truth" (that is something best approximated based on human interactions with one another and with reality through the years). Hence, participants, students and journalists should understand that journalism ought never to perpetuate what is false, but in the course of dispensing their duties, truth may not necessarily be fully conveyed and this should not automatically translate to "fake news" instead, should be viewed as disinformation.

It is also important that audience understand that disinformation may not always appear as false even to the media practitioners themselves. For example, if the media is silent on an issue affecting the masses it should be regarded as disinformation of some sort. So, it is paramount that both media practitioners and the audience enlighten themselves on the concept of disinformation.

Another important aspect to consider in combating disinformation is fact checking. Fact checking involves verifying information before publishing it and even after receiving it. It is worth mentioning that although it appears to be a new phenomenon that has developed with the rise of online media fact checking has existed before in traditional media although with a slightly different approach. The work of fact checkers helps the public better understand not only the factual accuracy of published information, but also the context, the framing, and the reasons why information is presented in certain ways. In Accordance with Jamie Angus, the director of BBC World service group, he endorsed people to fall back on the most trusted news brands out there. He additionally encouraged improved standards of education and media literacy worldwide

## VIII.  Conclusion

In summary, this article has discussed extensively the reasons why fake news is not an appropriate name to describe false and misleading information rather disinformation is a more appropriate term for the phenomenon. It also evaluates what makes "news" news, although disinformation can possess some of the news values, it is next to impossible for such information to possess all thus should not be categorized as news. This paper also explores the role digital media plays in the spread of disinformation among the audience, how we let our various bises get the better of us thus beginning the circle of disinformation and how the spread may affect the audience. Although disinformation is a never ending infodemic, this article explored some appropriate guidelines to combat disinformation in the society.

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