

Disinformation; Mainstream Media V Digital Media

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Background: Media is constantly changing and each technological change results in new forms of media being created. The changes in the media rather than witness the deaths of newspapers, radio or television have found a new scope on the internet which further aggravates the prevalence of disinformation. As a result, much premium has been placed on accurate information by the public and national security agencies. This study “Disinformation; Mainstream Media v Digital media” examines the extent to which disinformation has plagued the media and the roles each play in the dissemination of disinformation.

Methodology: The thematic review and synthesis of literature pertaining to the roles mainstream and digital media play in the dissemination in the spread of disinformation reveals the reasons for, and prevalence, of such coverage per media type. The research indicates that most people hear about so called fake news stories not from fake news/ Propaganda websites but through their coverage in mainstream news outlets. Thus far, only limited attention has been directed to the role of mainstream media in the dissemination of disinformation.

Conclusion: This article successfully synthesized literature to debunk the popular opinions associated with digital media as the sole propagators of disinformation. Literature reveals that the mainstream media also contributes their quota in disseminating disinformation to the audience either through propaganda, news drawn from various disinformation websites or even through conspiratorial silence on paramount issues affecting the public. The article affirms that disinformation brings with it, various negative impacts on the audience ranging from confusion and tension to mass-hysteria.

Key Word: Mainstream; Propaganda; Fake News Websites; Digital Media

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I. Introduction

The problem of disinformation is age-old and has been growing with each technological advancement, the digital era, variously described by some scholars as the fifth estate of the realm or alternative media has not merely displaced mainstream media but is growing in leaps and bounds. This has been attributed to the massive technology that permits content delivery instantaneously in the fraction of a second at optimal costs. Mass audiences have a huge availability of varied content to choose from. There is a rise in the ability of the common man to become citizen journalists and this has made the audience view the digital media as the sole propagators of disinformation but alas the mainstream media contributes its own quota to the ‘infodemic’ despite the gate keeping. With the advent of digital media channels, there has been advancement in the need to compete for audience attention in news dissemination and the growing influence of the alternative media as well as political and economic factors have led to the rise in disinformation propagated by the mainstream media. The mainstreams find themselves broadcasting disinformation and as a result, the truth becomes the victim. This article aims to examine the roles mainstream and digital media play in information disorder and the reasons for such coverage.

Flowing from the above, the term Fifth Estate of the Realm is now a socio-cultural reference to groupings of outlier viewpoints in contemporary society, publishing in non-mainstream media outlets, and the social media or "social license". It is an extension of the three classical Estates of the Realm (clergy, nobility and commoners) and the mainstream press or Fourth Estate. The use phrase "fifth estate" debuted in 1960s counterculture vide an underground newspaper first published in Detroit in 1965. Nimmo and Combs assert that political pundits constitute a Fifth Estate. Media researcher Stephen D. Cooper argues that bloggers are the Fifth Estate. William Dutton has argued that the Fifth Estate is not simply the blogging community, nor an extension of the media, but 'networked individuals' enabled by the Internet (social media) in ways that can hold the other estates accountable. Blogs have potential and real influence on contemporary policy-making, especially in the context of elections, reporting from conflict zones, and raising dissent over corporate or legislative policies. They describe the weblogs as a "fifth" estate and ascribes to them potential and real influence on contemporary

policy-making in the context of elections, reporting from conflict zones, raising dissent and thus suggests that stepping beyond traditional thinking to a broader perspective in which anyone with access to a computer or hand-held digital device and the internet can contribute to the global discourse.

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 a very powerful, destructive and deceptive and 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.

II. Digital Media as the Principal Disseminator of Disinformation

The digital media acts as a double-edged sword in a way of consuming news. On one side, its ease of access, popularity and low-cost distribution channel attracts audiences but on the other hand, it is seen as the major conveyor of disinformation. and its extensive spread impacts the society negatively. 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 infodemic is a 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 further 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 COVID-19 to Lanre. COVID automatically translates to false information. This is cognitive bias as its finest and is what happens 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.

While having access to information is vital and the advent of the digital media together with the help citizen journalists has made information dissemination seamless, this has also increased the spread of disinformation. This false information is usually generated by outlets masqueraded as actual media sites but promulgate false or misleading accounts designed to disseminate disinformation among the audience. Therefore, it has become paramount to children and young people develop their critical thinking to spot the differences between fact and fiction online. Overtime, the digital media and citizen journalists have been viewed as the sole disseminators of disinformation to the audience as a result of lack of obvious gate keeping principles, but this article aims to discuss the roles mainstream media also play in the dissemination of disinformation alongside citizen journalists, it aims to explain how all hands are on deck with regards to disinformation propagation.

III. Mainstream Media and the Rise of Disinformation

Although times and technologies are different, history can give us insight into the causes, consequences and features of the phenomenon of ‘information disorder’ and the features of the communications ecology. The spread of Gutenberg’s printing press from the mid-15th century onwards was indispensable to the rise of professional journalism, but the technology also enabled amplification of propaganda and hoaxes which sometimes implicated media institutions as perpetrators. Broadcasting took possibilities for propaganda, hoaxes and spoofs to a new level as, inter alia, the now infamous War of the Worlds radio drama demonstrated in 1938. The rise of international broadcasting also often saw instrumentalisations of information beyond the parameters of professional and independent news, although purely ‘invented’ stories and direct falsifications have generally been more the exception than the rule in the narratives of different players. The late 2020s has seen the proliferation of powerful new technological tools along with the character of social media and messaging platforms that have limited quality control standards for determining what constitutes news, make it easy to counterfeit and mimic legitimate news brands, engineer audio and video in order to make it appear that a particular individual said or did something in some place, and to pass this off as an authentic record. These are in many instances blatantly or underhandedly sponsored by governments, corporations, public relations companies and faceless commentators under contract to political or commercial actors without disclosing that they are paid to do so. who seek to affirm, discredit or intimidate in online fora. Whatever the intention, the consequence of all this is that digitally fuelled disinformation, in contexts of polarisation, risks eclipsing the role of journalism and obfuscating the fault lines between mainstream and counterculture media.

While the phenomena of political actors actively spreading misleading information are well known and discussed, the role of traditional news media, who are supposed to be bearers of truth and factual accuracy, is less well understood. In this article, we argue that traditional news media are in fact a part of the problem, and play a somewhat paradoxical role with respect to disinformation and its dissemination. As a result of the instantaneous flow of news via the internet, journalists within the mainstream media are left with no choice but to publish news as soon as possible leading to a publish first and verify later situation. For example, on July 5th 2018, the front-page headline of a reputable national newspaper carried that “Court orders national assembly to begin impeachment of Buhari”. This is a classic example of how the mainstream media contribute in the spread of disinformation.

One important reason why mainstream media report disinformation is due to the basic principles of their profession. And one of these core principles is the need to seek the truth and to expose what is not true. Therefore, the mainstream media perceive that an important part of their professional duty is to correct manipulation and disinformation. By so doing this, they may find themselves contributing to the propagation of false information. Another reason why mainstream media report disinformation is because to become news, a story must not only meet the criteria of news worthiness and fit into journalist role perception but must first of all be noticed by reporters and editors. From this context, journalists visit online media platforms to get news about their beat. Some news organizations have even developed special beats focused on what’s happening on social media (Broersma &Graham 2012). As result of this, it becomes inevitable for disinformation from online media platforms to trickle down and make news. There is also the need to be the first to publish a particular story by the mainstream media and this need drives them to publish any and everything found on the internet without further investigating the reliability of such story. The mainstream in collaboration with some elements within the digital media sometimes disseminate outright lies, half-truths, propaganda and all manner of disinformation and this has brought about a negative effect on the media profession as media audiences now find it difficult to separate disinformation from real news, information from misinformation and credible news from those that are not trustworthy. Journalists in the mainstream media perceive disinformation as an ideological construction that sets boundaries for what is journalistic and what is not. These journalists also accuse citizen journalists of being amplifiers and magnifiers of disinformation when they are indeed part of the problem.

Through mainstream media political actors in a democratic system are able to propagate various propaganda messages. These political actors understand that people trust information derived from mainstream media, so they see them as veritable means of sending out such messages to the public without questioning. These propaganda messages disseminated by the traditional media may harbour disinformation within them. It is safe to presume that although the digital media serves as the principal disseminators of disinformation through citizen journalists, fake news websites and the likes; the mainstream media also plays its own part in the flow of disinformation to the audience.

IV. Impact of Disinformation on the Audience

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. For example, 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. Also, the audience find themselves blindly trusting the mainstream media even when they disseminate messages with strong propaganda undertone because we view such news sources as highly credible.

Disinformation most often leads to confusion, tension and even the tendency to be suicidal depending on the person or institution as the case maybe. It also diminishes the efforts of mainstream media coverage making the work more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories.

V. How to Detect and Arrest Disinformation Conclusion

In recent years, the prevalence of disinformation, particularly through social media, and its fundamental impact on electoral integrity further amplifies the need to identify the fault lines. Is social media fundamentally different from traditional media and in what way? The scope of this study is to and the question in order to address the vector responsible for the disinformation, including their motivation and intended audience. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon and perhaps the only way to dissipate the amount of malarkey disseminated is through consumers finding the best defence to protect themselves against the 'infodemic'. A great deal of work is required to understand disinformation, how it works, and what can be done about it beginning with locating responsibility for proliferation of falsity. This the scope of this article.

According to Tucker, agents include "... conspiracy theorists, disinformation websites, partisan media, politicians, foreign governments, influential bloggers, activists or government officials, and ordinary users gathered en masse." Their intents and targets vary; for example, domestic partisan agents may use disinformation to win campaigns through smear tactics, hostile foreign state or nonstate authoritarian agents may intend to structurally undermine democracy by increasing intolerance and polarization, and disaffected anarchic agents may intend to dismantle state institutions and social order. While many are primarily concerned at the moment with automated/inauthentic means of amplifications, there is a growing need to also start addressing the role played by parties, politicians and hyper partisan media in creating, disseminating and "endorsing" disinformation and divisive contents.

A variety of approaches exist to identify fake news. By conducting a systematic literature review, we identify the main approaches currently available to identify fake news and how these approaches can be applied in different situations. Paskin defines fake news as "particular news articles that originate either on mainstream media (online or offline) or social media and have no factual basis, but are presented as facts and not satire". Fake news is not a new concept as Stein-Smith (2017) posits that before the era of digital technology, it was spread through mainly yellow journalism with focus on sensational news such as crime, gossip, disasters and satirical news. There are many available approaches to help the public to identify fake news and this paper aims to enhance understanding of these by categorizing these approaches as found in existing literature.

In this section of the article, we list the categories of approaches that are used to identify fake news. We also discuss how the different approaches interlink with each other and how they can be used together to get a better result. Consumers of information are guided on the following approaches to identifying and avoiding disinformation;

- **Consider the source**

The audience should endeavour to visit websites and tune into stations that have proven to fact check information they post. It is important they shy away from websites or media stations flooded with propaganda messages, stories that appear too good to be true and even those that stay silent on issues of importance.

- **Check your biases**

Although this may be difficult, it is also important that sometimes we be realistic when it comes to news stories we find. Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that confirm their belief

and discount information that doesn't, thus they may see the real information and tag it false and vice-versa. so it is important to check your biases.

- **Read beyond the headline**

If a provocative headline drew your attention, read a little further before you decide to pass across the shocking information. Even in legitimate news stories, the headline doesn't always tell the whole story.

- **See who else is reporting the story**

and ask yourself whether any else has picked up on the story? What do other sources say about it?

Even professional global news agencies such as Reuters, CNN and the BBC with their rigorous editorial guidelines and extensive network of highly trained reporters may be biased because anyone can make a mistake; so keep looking. The following categories of approaches for fake news detection also come in handy: (1) language approach, (2) topic-agnostic approach, (3) machine learning approach, (4) knowledge-based approach, (5) hybrid approach.

- **Language Approach:** This approach focuses on the use of linguistics by a human or software program to detect fake news. Most of the people responsible for the spread of fake news have control over what their story is about, but they can often be exposed through the style of their language (Yang et al 2018)
- **Semantic Analysis:** (Chen et al. 2017b) explain that truthfulness can be determined by comparing personal experience
- **Deep Syntax:** Sentences are converted into a set of rewritten rules and these rules are used to analyse various syntax (Burkhardt 2017).
- **Knowledge Based Approach:** Recent studies argue for the integration of machine learning and knowledge engineering to detect fake news. The challenging problem with some of these fact checking methods is the speed at which fake news spreads on social media. Microblogging platforms such as Twitter causes small pieces of false information to spread very quickly to a large number of people (Qazvinian et al. 2017). The knowledge-based approach aims at using sources that are external to verify if the news is fake or real and to identify the news before the spread thereof becomes quicker.

In addition, there are three main categories; (1) Expert Oriented Fact Checking, (2) Computational Oriented Fact Checking, (3) Crowd Sourcing Oriented Fact Checking (Ahmed et al. 2019).

- **Expert Oriented Fact Checking:** With expert oriented fact checking it is necessary to analyze and examine data and documents carefully (Ahmed et al.2019). Expert-oriented fact-checking requires professionals to evaluate the accuracy of the news manually through research and other studies on the specific claim. Fact checking is the process of assigning certainty to a specific element by comparing the accuracy of the text to another which has previously been fact checked (Vlachos and Riedel 2014).
- **Hybrid Approach:** There are three generally agreed upon elements of fake news articles, the first element is the text of an article, second element is the response that the articles received and lastly the source used that motivate the news article (Ruchansky et al.2017).

However, since the first and second elements fall outside the scope of this article, to identify the main carriers of disinformation and understand their motives and modus operandi so as to propose a cure.

VI. Conclusion

This article has discussed exhaustively the roles digital media and mainstream media play in the dissemination of disinformation, its influence on the audience and ways to curb the menace. It successfully synthesized literature to debunk the popular opinions associated with digital media as the sole propagators of disinformation. We see from the article that the mainstream media also contributes their quota in disseminating disinformation to the audience either through propaganda, news drawn from various disinformation websites or even silence on paramount issues affecting the public. The article further discusses the various negative impacts disinformation may have on the audience ranging from confusion and tension and mass-hysteria. From all of the above one can liken disinformation to a metaphorical canker worm eating deep into the fabric of our very existence. This article further prescribes various ways the audience can detect and arrest disinformation in order to protect themselves against the menace.

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