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INFORMATION, MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

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ABSTRACT

This is a review paper that explored the concepts of information, disinformation and misinformation. The role of social media in facilitating the dissemination of information, disinformation and misinformation was carefully examined. The social media categories include Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn; Media sharing networks such as Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube; Discussion forum such as Reddit, Quora, Digg; Bookmarking & content curation networks including Pinterest, Flipboard; Consumer review networks such as Yelp, Zomato, Tripadvisor; Blogging & publishing networks such as Wordpress, Tumblr, Medium; and Social shopping networks such as Polyvore, Etsy, Fancy. These categories of social media expose their users to solicited and unsolicited unverified information from diverse sources. The paper identified the criteria for siphoning reliable information from misinformation and disinformation on the social media to include: The purpose of the information, the target audience, authority and credibility of the author, accuracy and reliability of the information, currency and timeliness, objectivity or bias of the information; reputation of the publisher or sharer of the information. The paper recommended that social media users should regard information from social media as fake until it has been verified and proven otherwise; Government should prioritize digital literacy education rather than regulating social media; while librarians, communicators and educators should embark on public enlightenment campaign to promote digital literacy as the world moves towards socio-digital immersion.

Keywords: Disinformation, Fake News, Information, Misinformation, Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information is anything that conveys meaning and help resolves uncertainty which can be recorded in a medium. As far as human beings are concerned, anything that can stimulate any of the senses is information (Elias, 2000). The information profession has changed dramatically over the past few years as a result of information explosion made possible by innovative technologies. Through digital sources, there has been a tremendous increase in the level of information availability on the internet and its applications such as the social media. Information is now at the fingertips of anyone who surfs the net. In same vein, the amount of disinformation and misinformation has tremendously increased. The major challenge facing the information user in the digital age is the ability to find reliable information on one hand, and the ability to detect the difference between information, disinformation and misinformation on the other hand. This is important because information has news value so also misinformation and disinformation. But certainly, they are not the same.

Firstly, disinformation and misinformation are the spread of fake and often divisive information through a medium with the intention of deceiving the receiver. Disinformation is fakenews or information created and spread purposefully to deceive people or instigate action capable of causing crisis. It can be out of malice (for example, to spread fear, suppress voting, create chaos). It can also be as satire, or for financial gain. A person who “disinforms” is aware that the “information” being disseminated is “fake” yet he/she spreads it. On the other hand, misinformation is fake information spread unknowingly. An example of this is a shared post that is fake but the person that shared it is quite oblivious of the authenticity of the message. The latter is common as every social media user is at the risk of it. Disinformation and misinformation have terrible consequences. According Lazer (2017), disinformation is dangerous because of its ability to affect public opinion and discourse. According Lazer (2017) it can enable discriminatory and inflammatory ideas to enter public discourse and be treated as fact. Once embedded, such ideas can in turn be used to create scapegoats, to normalize

prejudices, to harden us-versus-them mentalities and even, in extreme cases, to catalyze and justify violence (Lazer, 2017). Disinformation furthermore triggers hatred and incivility, division, and exploit the worst aspects of our culture such as hatred, intolerance, racism, and sexism as well as diverting public conversations away from solutions and constructive action, and into attacks and accusations (Elias, 2020). West (2017) observed that disinformation peddlers intended to mislead the public, attract people to their page, instigate people, or spread hatred.

Objectives

1. To explore the concepts of information, disinformation and misinformation
2. To examine the role of social media in facilitating the dissemination of information, disinformation and misinformation
3. To determine the criteria for evaluating information obtained from social media.

2. The Social Media

The term ‘Social media’ is an umbrella term that encompasses websites and applications which focus on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. They cut across internet-based Forums, micro-blogging, social networking, social bookmarking etc. They are primarily used by some to stay in touch and interact with friends and family, while others use it to communicate with different communities. Many corporate organizations and businesses use social media to market and promote their ideas, products and services. Social media has become larger and more accessible as a result of explosion of mobile applications. Anyira and Udem (2020) categorized social media applications into the following:

1. Social networks: Facebook, Twitter, Whats App, LinkedIn
2. Media sharing networks: Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube
3. Discussion forums: Reddit, Quora, Digg
4. Bookmarking & content curation networks: Pinterest, Flipboard
5. Consumer review networks: Yelp, Zomato, Tripadvisor
6. Blogging & publishing networks: Wordpress, Tumblr, Medium
7. Social shopping networks: Polyvore, Etsy, Fancy

Social media have emerged as a powerful source of information dissemination in global scale. Information in social media can spread faster than the speed of light. The social media has made it easy for a wide range of actors to create content in a variety of formats or multimedia including text, photos, videos, infographs, memes, bots, gifs, etc. and to disseminate it swiftly and globally. In same vein, it also aids the spread of fake news. According to West (2017), checking for information on online platforms whether through Google, Twitter, Facebook, major newspapers, or newspapers websites, has become ubiquitous, and smartphone alerts and mobile applications bring the latest developments to people instantaneously around the world (West, 2017). As of 2017, 93 percent of Americans say they receive news online (Pew Research Center, 2017, 1). 35 percent of these Americans use social media to keep up to date with news (Pew Research Center, 2017, 2).

Before now, majority of the populace depended on the conventional centres to meet their information needs. Conventional sources such as library materials, newspapers, magazines, radio, television etc. To a great extent, these sources of information are more reliable as they usually pass through a stringent editorial and review process to ensure their authenticity. This is not the case with evolving media such as the social media. Surprisingly however, a recent study cited that 51% of people with online access currently rely on social media as a news source (Askew, 2021). There is the need to be apprehensive over this change in the way people are now receiving their information. With these figures set to increase as social media platforms continue to grow in popularity, there is the danger that fake news has come to stay. This is because social media has the capacity to fuel fake news. For instance, people could Tweet about a piece of information (and a tweet doesn’t just reach your friends list, but the world). They could add comments underneath the information; send the information to their friends with the click of a button. They could even influence all their friends on Facebook by sharing certain news. People no longer had to write to the editor and hope for a featured opinion. Anybody’s opinion could now be everywhere. Anyone could even start a blog, with just his opinion (Ohio State University, 2020).

3. Conceptual Review

Over the years, people tend to trust what they read on printed and electronic sources. Until recent times,

information was perceived to have originated from reliable sources. This is no longer the case. Though the paradigm has shifted, but attitude of information seekers have not changed. A good number of information seekers still read and believed any news without verifying the source. The same sensationalism that makes gossip go from one neighbor to the next, until the whole village knows, is the same that made misinformation or fake news travel the world in a matter of minutes. Since the emergence of social media as a powerful source of news and information, so many devastating fake information have been peddled and spread in a matter of minutes. Instances abound of some celebrities in Nigeria such as in recent times have been rumoured to be dead and then resurrected several times, as fans and sympathizers have sent their condolences all over social media before finding out that it was a rumor, not a fact. Examples include the rumored death of veteran actor Olu Jacobs, OdunladeAdekola among so many others. In many occasions in Nigeria, fake election results trended on social media even before the election is actually held sometimes leading to widespread jubilation and even violence at other times.

According to the Ethical Journalism Network (2017), disinformation or fake news refers to a piece of information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts. Actually, it is disinformation that is presented as, or is likely to be perceived as, news. Fake news is by no means a new phenomenon. It is as old as public opinion. The press, particularly the partisan press, has always peddled biased opinions and on occasion, stories that lack factual grounding (McGonagle, 2017). Whether and to what extent biased and fictitious reporting should be regulated is a perennial question that concerns the public watchdog role of the media in a democratic society. Fake news has become an over-used phrase in Nigeria for some time now. To state the least, it is often blamed for having a disruptive impact on almost every event or occurrence at the moment. It has also been blamed for fuelling propaganda against the government and “hate speech” and even violence. Given all its antecedents, it is simply obvious why fake news has emerged as a major preoccupation and debate for international organizations, national and states assemblies, the media and media actors, civil society and academia just as we are discussing in this conference.

The social media network operators perform key gatekeeping functions in the media ecosystem (Leerssen, 2015). They determine the availability, accessibility and prominence of content and thus wield enormous power over the dissemination of fake news. This explains why their role is coming under increased scrutiny and why they are being put under increasing pressure to prevent and/or stop the flow of fake news around the globe. Even recently, on the 4th of June precisely, the presidency announced the suspension of the operations of twitter in Nigeria citing the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria’s corporate existence. In a situation where fake information or hate speech thrive, it is tempting for the government to deal with offensive content by forbidding or regulating the media that facilitated such. For instance, the ban/suspension of Twitter operations in Nigeria, and the subsequent threat of the government to overly regulate all social media platforms in an open society such as ours, sets a dangerous precedent and can encourage authoritarianism and stifle constructive criticism. This will restrict global freedom of expression and generate hostility to democratic governance (West, 2017). Democracies that place undue limits on speech, risk legitimizing authoritarian leaders and their efforts to crackdown basic human rights. It is crucial that efforts be made to improve news quality, but not weaken freedom of expression (West, 2017).

Criteria for Evaluating Information on Social Media: It is expedient to first of all recognize that the internet is a system of networks and a communication tool, and not a source of information. The quality of information available on social media vary significantly. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze any source, but especially web resources, for content validity and appropriateness. Unlike journals or books, web pages frequently lack editors or publishers who filter out misinformation or disinformation. As a social media user, you will be having access to solicited and unsolicited information. it is important to evaluate each source to determine the quality of the information accessible to you. Common evaluation criteria include: purpose and intended audience, authority and credibility, accuracy and reliability, currency and timeliness, and objectivity or bias (Mandalios, 2013; Burkhardt& MacDonald, 2010; Brock University Library, 2021). Each of these criteria will be explained in detail below:

1. Purpose and intended audience: what is the purpose of the source? For example, is it to provide information, to persuade or advocate, to entertain, to sell a product or service (e.g., advertising or marketing materials on a company website) etc. you need to also find out who is the intended audience? For example, is it intended for Scholars and academic researchers with specialized knowledge, or the general public (without specialized knowledge), or students in high school, college or university etc.
2. Authority and credibility: who is the author? Is it a person? Is it an organization such as a government agency, nonprofit organization, or a corporation? What are the qualifications of the author? What is the

author's occupation, experience, or educational background? Does the author have any subject matter expertise? Is the author affiliated with an organization such as a university, government agency, Political party, nonprofit organization, or a corporation? Who is the publisher? For websites, is it an organizational website, or a personal blog?

3. Accuracy and reliability: Is the information well researched? Are there references (e.g., citations, footnotes, or a bibliography) to sources that will provide evidence for the claims made? If the source includes facts or statistical data, can this information be verified in another source? If the data was gathered using original research (such as polling or surveys), what was the method of data collection? Has the author disclosed the validity or reliability of the data?
4. Currency and timeliness: When was the information published? For books and articles, you should be able to easily verify the publication date. For websites, try to determine the date the web page was created or updated.
5. Objectivity or bias: Does the source contain opinions or facts? Is the information presented in the source objective (unbiased) or subjective (biased)? Does the information promote a political, religious, ethnic or social agenda?
6. Who is the publisher or sharer of the post? If the source is published or shared by a reputable person/organization, it is likely to be correct. However, being reputable does not always guarantee quality (Cornell University, 2021).

4. Conclusion

Everyone has a responsibility to combat the scourge of misinformation and disinformation on social media. This has to do with improving digital literacy among the information seeking public. In the online world, particularly social media, readers and viewers should be skeptical about information sources. In the quest to attract people to their page or embrace their opinion, many social media users resort to misleading or sensationalized headlines. They emphasize the provocative or the attention-grabbing, even if that information is intended to mislead or deceive the receiver. Social media user must be suspicious of every piece of information they find. Indeed every information should be assumed fake until it has been evaluated and proven otherwise. Acquiring information and digital literacy protect oneself from aiding and abating the creation and dissemination of disinformation and misinformation on the social media.

Recommendations

1. Social media users should regard information from social media as fake until it has been verified and proven otherwise.
2. Government should prioritize digital literacy education of the public rather than regulating social media.
3. Librarians, communicators and educators should embark on public enlightenment campaign to promote digital literacy as the world moves towards socio-digital immersion.
4. Conventional media organizations should effectively engage the social media in publicizing their news to enable the public verify trending news.
5. There is need for social media platforms to strengthen online accountability through stronger policies and enforcement against fake accounts.
6. Technology firms should invest in algorithms and crowdsourcing technologies to detect fake news and protect users from their effects.

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