



LIBRARIES AS FACT-CHECKING HUBS AND INFORMATION GATEKEEPERS: BALANCING MISINFORMATION CONTROL AND FREEDOM OF ACCESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

In the digital age, misinformation and disinformation have become widespread problems that affect democratic processes, public opinion, and decision-making. Library, educators, and researchers must provide individuals with the digital literacy and fact-checking abilities they need to traverse an increasingly complicated information ecosystem successfully. This research examines several tactics to counter false information, such as library-led projects, digital literacy interventions, and lateral reading practices. A thorough analysis of the body of research reveals best practices and new developments in information literacy initiatives, fact-checking instruction, and the function of public libraries in promoting critical thinking. The results highlight how crucial it is for educators, librarians, and legislators to collaborate to create efficient frameworks for reducing false information. It is recommended that libraries and information institutions adopt evidence-based strategies and practical applications derived from this research to strengthen information integrity and improve their capacity to manage misinformation effectively.

Keywords: Misinformation, Disinformation, Digital Literacy, Fact-Checking, Information Literacy, Libraries, Lateral Reading, Media Education

Introduction

The rise of digital and social media has fuelled the widespread spread of misinformation, influencing public opinion and decision-making. Libraries are increasingly recognized as key players in addressing this issue by promoting information literacy, providing access to reliable sources, and offering fact-checking resources (Vintilă, 2024; Young et al., 2020). As Adewojo et al. (2024) highlight, librarians play a vital role in teaching users how to critically evaluate information and navigate the challenges of the digital age. However, how libraries can effectively educate the public about misinformation remains unanswered (Young et al., 2020). More research is needed to help public libraries develop effective programs, equip librarians with the necessary resources, and navigate financial and political constraints. By serving as community hubs for education and fostering critical thinking, libraries have the potential to be powerful allies in the fight against misinformation and fake news (Vintilă, 2024; Batchelor, 2017).

Libraries actively adapt to combat disinformation by implementing digital literacy programs, providing fact-checking resources, and collaborating with organisations. They serve as community hubs for civic engagement and education, helping individuals recognise and challenge false information. Public university libraries play a key role by offering open-access resources that promote fact-checking and critical thinking (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021). However, questions remain about the most effective strategies for educating communities on misinformation (Young et al., 2020). To address this, libraries employ various approaches, including curating reliable sources, fostering information literacy, and encouraging community participation. In today's digital landscape, librarians are instrumental in equipping people with the skills to critically evaluate information. Overall, libraries are positioning themselves as vital defenders of information integrity, working toward a more informed public in the fight against digital disinformation (Adewojo et al., 2024).

According to Adewojo et al. (2024), fighting misinformation while upholding intellectual freedom presents a significant challenge for libraries. As guardians of information integrity, they play a crucial role by implementing strategies such as community outreach, technological innovations, and educational initiatives to combat the spread of false information. Many libraries have developed online resources, interactive tutorials, and workshops to help users recognize and critically assess misinformation (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains uncertain, highlighting the need for further research

into developing better tools and educational programs to address misinformation effectively (Young et al., 2020). Sullivan (2019) argues that traditional library services often do not account for the cognitive effects of misinformation, making them insufficient in fully addressing the issue. This underscores libraries' need to evolve their approaches and collaborate with researchers to develop more effective strategies against disinformation while staying true to their core mission of promoting intellectual freedom.

Understanding Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News

The rise of digital media has accelerated the spread of false information, which can generally be categorised into three types: misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, scholars have identified key distinctions.

Misinformation refers to inaccurate or misleading content shared without the intent to deceive. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) explain that this can result from misunderstandings, poor journalism, or the unintentional spread of falsehoods. For libraries and information professionals, misinformation poses a significant challenge, as it is often shared by individuals who believe it to be true, making it difficult to correct and contain.

Disinformation, on the other hand, is deliberately false or manipulated information spread with the intent to mislead (Fallis, 2015). It is commonly used for political propaganda, social manipulation, or financial gain. Unlike misinformation, disinformation is designed to deceive and may involve advanced tactics such as deepfake technology, altered images, or fabricated statistics. This makes it particularly dangerous in academic and scientific spaces, where accuracy and credibility are essential.

The term "fake news" is a more recent and politically charged concept that refers to intentionally misleading content designed to mimic legitimate journalism (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). It often relies on emotional appeals, sensationalist headlines, and fabricated sources to manipulate public perception. While fake news is a form of disinformation, its specific purpose is to appear as credible journalism, making it especially challenging to detect in digital environments.

The Role of Social Media and Digital Platforms in Spreading Misinformation

Social media platforms have transformed the way information is shared, making it easier to disseminate both expertise and false information (Greeshma R et al., 2024). Their engagement-driven algorithms prioritise sensational content, often at the expense of diverse perspectives,

creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs (Anshul Jain, 2023). Research suggests that different platforms have varying effects on news consumption. At the same time, Reddit users tend to encounter a broader range of viewpoints with more moderation; Facebook users are more likely to shift toward partisan sources, albeit with exposure to a broader set of information (Kitchens et al., 2020). Additionally, Acemoglu et al. (2021) state that strong homophily within social networks accelerates the spread of misinformation, as users tend to share content primarily with like-minded individuals. Acemoglu et al. (2021) believe that in pursuing higher engagement, social media companies may unintentionally promote extreme content to users who already hold similar beliefs, further deepening these echo chambers and facilitating the spread of misinformation. This dynamic poses significant threats to public trust in institutions and democratic processes while creating challenges for fact-checking initiatives (Anshul Jain, 2023).

Greeshma et al. (2024) state that due to their extensive reach and rapid dissemination capabilities, social media platforms play a central role in the spread of misinformation. Unlike structural factors or influential figures, the virality of false information is primarily driven by homophily and polarization within user networks (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014). High homophily in sharing networks creates self-reinforcing echo chambers that facilitate the unchecked circulation of misinformation (Acemoglu et al., 2021). Social media algorithms that emphasise user engagement can exacerbate this issue by amplifying extreme content among users who share similar views, reinforcing misinformation cycles (Acemoglu et al., 2021). Furthermore, social engagement metrics such as likes and shares make users more susceptible to believing and spreading false information (Avram et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a combination of media literacy initiatives, technological interventions, and regulatory measures (Greeshma et al., 2024). According to Avram et al. (2020), research suggests that social media platforms must reassess how engagement metrics are displayed to curb the rapid spread of unreliable content.

The spread of misinformation during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, presents serious threats to public health and societal stability. The rapid and widespread dissemination of accurate and misleading information through social media has complicated efforts to manage the pandemic (Baker et al., 2020). False narratives have undermined public health initiatives and vaccine campaigns, contributing to confusion and hesitancy (Aiyer et al., 2022). While social media companies have implemented fact-checking mechanisms and content moderation policies, these measures alone are insufficient to counteract misinformation's impact fully

(Chou et al., 2020). Since misinformation extends beyond health crises to include political events and natural disasters, a comprehensive approach is needed, one that involves collaboration among scientists, public health organisations, governments, and digital platforms (Sadiq, Muhammed, & Mathew, 2022). Beyond fact-checking, effective misinformation mitigation requires understanding the social, cognitive, and emotional factors that influence its acceptance and spread (Chou et al., 2020).

Libraries play a vital role in addressing misinformation through fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy programs. By providing reliable sources, fostering critical thinking, and promoting information literacy, public libraries are increasingly recognized as key actors in the fight against misinformation (Vintilă, 2024). According to Nazim et al. (2024), librarians are instrumental in helping young people develop media and information literacy skills by teaching them to evaluate online content critically. Many libraries have adopted digital strategies to support users in identifying misinformation, including open-access resources for self-education and fact-checking tools (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021). However, questions remain about the most effective ways for libraries to educate the public on misinformation. To address these gaps, researchers have proposed initiatives focused on designing effective educational programs, developing resources to support librarians, and navigating the political and economic barriers that may hinder libraries from addressing controversial topics (Young et al., 2020).

The Impact of Misinformation on Research, Education, and Decision-making.

Misinformation threatens democracy by undermining public trust and obstructing informed decision-making (Levitt & Grubaugh, 2024; Roozenbeek et al., 2023; Washington, 2023; Warin, 2024). The rapid spread of false information, amplified by social media algorithms, weakens democratic institutions and disrupts societal cohesion (Warin, 2024). Researchers have proposed several strategies to address this challenge, including enhancing critical thinking skills, implementing automated content labelling systems, debunking misinformation, and using behavioural nudges to promote accuracy (Roozenbeek et al., 2023). One crucial approach is equipping primary and secondary school teachers with the necessary tools to teach media literacy, fostering a generation of discerning and well-informed citizens (Levitt & Grubaugh, 2024). Additionally, integrating AI technology with media literacy education offers a promising solution to mitigate the effects of misinformation (Washington, 2023). AI-driven tools can help users critically assess content by identifying patterns of misinformation and providing contextual information.

However, combating misinformation effectively requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach involving educators, policymakers, technologists, and social media platforms. Key measures include developing AI-powered systems to detect and counter false information, increasing transparency in information dissemination, and strengthening digital literacy initiatives (Warin, 2024; Washington, 2023). By combining technological solutions with educational interventions, societies can build resilience against the growing influence of misinformation.

The Impact of Misinformation on Research and Education in Nigeria

Misinformation and fake news have significantly disrupted Nigeria's political communication, civic engagement, and education (Abiodun, 2024; Ugwu & Ugwuanyi, 2024). The spread of misleading information has eroded public trust in institutions, deepened societal divisions, and hindered informed decision-making (Abiodun, 2024). Several factors contribute to this growing problem, including media sensationalism, government manipulation, profit-driven motives, and inadequate internet regulation (Ugwu & Ugwuanyi, 2024). These challenges have far-reaching consequences, such as heightened social tensions, increased mortality rates, and widespread public anxiety (Apuke & Omar, 2020).

To combat this issue, researchers advocate for a comprehensive, multimodal approach that integrates technological solutions, media literacy education, and regulatory reforms (Anyanwu, 2022; Ugwu & Ugwuanyi, 2024). Raising public awareness through conferences, workshops, and targeted campaigns can help social media users identify and prevent the spread of misinformation (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Additionally, improving fact-checking mechanisms and promoting critical thinking skills are essential strategies for building resilience against false information (Anyanwu, 2022; Ugwu & Ugwuanyi, 2024). Addressing misinformation in Nigeria requires a collaborative effort involving policymakers, educators, media professionals, and technology platforms. By implementing robust fact-checking initiatives and fostering a culture of critical engagement with online content, Nigeria can mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and promote a more informed society.

Frameworks for Fact-Checking in Libraries

Library fact-checking frameworks have become essential in combating misinformation and promoting information literacy. Academic libraries integrate fact-checking into research support services, emphasising faculty collaboration and the critical evaluation of sources (Brasley, 2008). Librarians play a pivotal role in addressing misinformation through information literacy programs, framework development, and public education on digital navigation (De Paor & Heravi, 2020). Fact-checking curricula within information literacy instruction helps students critically assess digital content while tackling issues related to civic engagement and digital polarisation (Addy, 2020).

To enhance fact-checking mechanisms, researchers propose a comprehensive framework that incorporates emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, prioritises digital literacy education, and fosters collaboration between fact-checkers, social media platforms, and academic researchers (Dey, 2024). These strategies aim to strengthen the effectiveness of fact-checking processes by adapting to the evolving digital media landscape. By integrating technological advancements and expanding educational initiatives, libraries can reinforce their role as trusted information gatekeepers. Promoting digital literacy and fostering partnerships across sectors will contribute to a more reliable information ecosystem, ensuring that fact-checking remains a robust defence against misinformation.

Effectiveness of Library Fact-Checking Models

Libraries play a vital role in combating misinformation and deception through a range of strategies, including information literacy training, fact-checking workshops, and access to verified databases (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021; Adewojo et al., 2024). Librarians support information integrity by curating reliable sources, fostering critical thinking, and promoting community engagement (Adewojo et al., 2024). Academic libraries have developed fact-checking courses to enhance students' digital literacy and evaluation skills, addressing polarisation and civic participation (Addy, 2020). Effective misinformation interventions, such as prebunking and debunking strategies, have also been incorporated into library education and outreach programs to better equip adults and university students with the ability to critically analyse content in an increasingly complex information landscape (Goodsett, 2023; Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021).

Public libraries have also emerged as key players in promoting digital literacy and countering misinformation. By guiding users in evaluating information and selecting credible sources, they contribute significantly to public knowledge and civic engagement (Adewojo et al., 2024).

Many libraries have launched initiatives integrating community outreach, technological advancements, and educational programs (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries acted as verification agents by offering online seminars, video tutorials, and resource repositories to help users identify and challenge misinformation (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021). As a result, libraries are increasingly recognised as central hubs for fostering critical thinking and ensuring the accurate dissemination of information (Vintilă, 2024). Despite their growing importance, libraries continue to face challenges such as staffing shortages and the need for improved methods to assess community needs and measure the effectiveness of their initiatives (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019). Nonetheless, their evolving role in advancing information literacy and strengthening democratic participation in the digital age underscores their significance as defenders of truth and reliable knowledge (Vintilă, 2024).

Challenges in Implementing Fact-Checking Initiatives

Implementing fact-checking programs to combat misinformation poses significant challenges for libraries. Limited resources, particularly in developing countries, restrict access to advanced tools and specialised training necessary for effective fact-checking (Haque et al., 2018). Public scepticism toward information interventions means libraries must carefully balance objectivity and transparency to maintain trust (Adewojo et al., 2024). While librarians may hesitate to address politically sensitive misinformation, effective search literacy strategies can help build user confidence in their guidance (Tripodi et al., 2023). Libraries employ active and passive interventions to tackle misinformation, yet resource shortages often constrain their efforts, the pressure to remain neutral, and limited outreach initiatives (Paris et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, libraries play a crucial role in promoting information literacy and fostering community engagement, helping to build resilience against misinformation in the digital era (Adewojo et al., 2024).

Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in libraries presents both opportunities and challenges. AI-driven tools can enhance data analytics, personalise recommendations, and improve information retrieval, making library services more efficient and user-friendly (Gajbhiye, 2024). However, concerns about algorithmic bias, privacy, and ethical implications must be addressed to ensure responsible AI implementation (Coleman, 2020; Gajbhiye, 2024). Libraries must critically engage with AI to align its use with their core values and user needs (Coleman, 2020). Successful AI adoption requires collaboration with experts, researchers, and policymakers and ongoing staff training and development (Mallikarjuna, 2024). Additionally,

libraries must actively involve their staff in the transition process and address resistance to technological changes (Mallikarjuna, 2024). While AI offers promising solutions for enhancing efficiency, a user-centred approach remains essential. By addressing these challenges and leveraging AI's potential, libraries can enhance their operations and services, ultimately improving resource accessibility and the overall research experience (Gajbhiye, 2024; Mallikarjuna, 2024).

Balancing Information Freedom and Credibility

Libraries are increasingly recognised as vital players in the fight against misinformation, balancing the need for information freedom with the responsibility to uphold credibility. Adewojo et al. (2024) position libraries as guardians of information integrity, emphasising librarians' crucial role in fostering information literacy and encouraging community engagement. Similarly, Vintilă (2024) highlights the role of public libraries as community hubs that combat misinformation and promote critical thinking, particularly in the digital age. Das and Tripathi (2022) underscore the importance of media literacy as a fundamental skill, drawing attention to strategies in the Global South, such as India's legislative efforts to curb misinformation. Addressing the ethical dilemmas surrounding disinformation, Froehlich (2021) argues that libraries must take an active stance against misinformation, particularly in politically sensitive contexts, rather than remaining neutral. Collectively, these perspectives reinforce the indispensable role of libraries in preserving intellectual freedom while navigating the moral and legal complexities of false information (Adewojo et al., 2024; Vintilă, 2024; Das & Tripathi, 2022; Froehlich, 2021).

In today's digital landscape, libraries are critical in combating misinformation. They are essential defenders of knowledge integrity by curating reliable sources, fostering critical thinking, and promoting information literacy (Adewojo et al., 2024). Public libraries are increasingly recognised for providing fact-checking tools, educational resources, and community outreach initiatives to counteract fake news (Vintilă, 2024). To enhance their impact, libraries can adopt various strategies, such as developing targeted programs, equipping librarians with resources to track misinformation trends, and addressing financial and political constraints (Young et al., 2020). Their role as verification agents became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when they offered virtual training sessions, online lectures, and curated collections of credible information. Academic libraries have also taken the lead in media literacy initiatives, providing open-access resources to empower individuals with self-

learning and fact-checking skills (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021). These efforts reinforce the essential function of libraries in fostering a well-informed and resilient society.

Conclusion

Libraries play a vital role in safeguarding the integrity of information and promoting information literacy in the face of rising misinformation. Through educational programs, technological innovation, and targeted community outreach, libraries equip users with critical evaluation skills to navigate today's complex digital landscape. Academic institutions increasingly integrate information literacy into curricula, while public libraries focus on local engagement and accessible fact-checking resources. These efforts are supported by various digital tools and programming, such as video tutorials, seminars, and open-access materials, to enhance public awareness and analytical thinking.

However, fact-checking as a core strategy is not without its challenges. Limited funding, public resistance, and systemic constraints hinder effective implementation. Moreover, existing approaches often focus narrowly on short-term corrections rather than addressing the deeper structural and cultural dynamics that sustain misinformation. Automated fact-checking technologies, while promising, raise concerns around trust, transparency, and the influence of personal values. The complexity of determining factual accuracy, especially in diverse sociopolitical contexts, adds to these difficulties. Despite these obstacles, fact-checking remains valuable in combating misinformation, fostering accountability, and enhancing transparency. Moving forward, it is essential to broaden research contexts and invest in sustainable strategies that empower libraries to become enduring agents of truth, democratic engagement, and civic resilience in the digital age.

Recommendations for Future Library Practices

Integrate Fact-Checking into Digital Literacy Training

Libraries should embed structured fact-checking modules within existing digital literacy programs. This includes teaching users how to verify information using lateral reading techniques and encouraging them to evaluate the credibility of content by consulting multiple external sources rather than relying solely on the original webpage. Workshops, simulations, and gamified activities should be incorporated

to make fact-checking engaging and accessible across age groups. Librarians must be trained in these methods to effectively lead such programs, ensuring that users develop critical evaluation skills to navigate today's complex information environments.

Redesign Information Literacy Approaches

Traditional methods of teaching information literacy must be adapted to reflect how people consume and assess information online. Libraries should revise their programs to go beyond keyword searching and citation formatting, focusing instead on developing analytical skills to detect false or misleading information. This may include identifying emotional manipulation, sponsored content, and algorithmic bias. Programs should also address misinformation's psychological and social dimensions, helping users understand how digital media influences beliefs.

Establish Collaborative Networks with Academic Institutions and Technology Providers

Libraries should seek partnerships with universities, media literacy experts, and technology developers to co-create verification tools and training curricula. Such collaborations can enhance librarians' capabilities with access to advanced resources and verification platforms. Through institutional research and joint initiatives, libraries can remain current on misinformation trends and technological innovations in information verification.

Develop Community-Focused Misinformation Awareness Campaigns

Libraries should serve as public hubs for media literacy by hosting community discussions, public seminars, and exhibitions focused on misinformation awareness. These initiatives should involve civil society organisations, schools, and local leaders and aim to reach vulnerable groups most affected by disinformation. Libraries can be critical in promoting open dialogue and shared responsibility in countering information disorder.

Expand Use of Technology-Enhanced Fact-Checking Tools

Libraries should provide users access to verified fact-checking tools and browser extensions to assist them in making informed judgments about online content. Training sessions on using these tools should be integrated into public programming and academic support services. Libraries should also maintain curated lists of reliable sources and debunked claims on their digital platforms, ensuring patrons can access easy and practical information.

Secure Institutional Support and Policy Alignment

Library management should advocate for institutional policies that recognise and support libraries' role in combating misinformation. Budgetary allocations should include training, content acquisition, and public programming focused on digital literacy and information integrity. Formal policies will reinforce the library's role in promoting evidence-based knowledge dissemination and public trust.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact of Misinformation Programs

Finally, libraries should implement systems to monitor the effectiveness of their misinformation interventions. This includes collecting feedback from program participants, tracking resource usage, and measuring improvements in users' ability to identify and reject false information. Evaluation results should inform future strategies, ensuring efforts remain responsive to evolving challenges in the information ecosystem.

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