

The Politics of Media and Pandemic Misinformation: Librarians' Role in Validation and Retraction of Conflicting Information

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Abstract

The fundamental notion held by the public about librarians is their dexterity in getting the right and reliable information; and giving the public the confidence to authoritatively use such information for their intellectual and personal pursuits. However, the media and publishing sites in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic are being criticized of hoarding information, spreading fake information, or not saying anything at all concerning conflicting issues. Since the trusted information managers seek to remain relevant to both the masses and the trend of events; an opportunity lurks for librarians to play their role in influencing the validation and retraction of conflicting information resources or ideas. The objectives of this opinion research were to address the issue of media and pandemic misinformation and the role of librarians in validation and retraction of conflicting. Systematic literature review was used to ensure that most relevant literatures were sourced and utilized for the study. The result of the study shows that librarians can validate information on COVI-19 pandemic by ensuring access to correct, true and current information and repackaging and sharing of same to the public. Retraction of information is possible through building of effective monitoring mechanism to detect fake news as well as partnering with government and organizations in building a technological system for detection of misleading information and its possible withdrawal from circulation.

Keywords

Misinformation, Validation of information, Retraction of information, Conflicting Information, Media Politics, Social Media

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State Chapter

Introduction

Whenever there are pandemic outbreaks, the public is normally panicked and traumatized especially as they are bombarded with a barrage of unverified and misguiding information as advice. The Covid-19 pandemic misinformation has penetrated almost every facet of human beliefs, health and politics. UNESCO (2020) laments that disinformation has characterised every area of COVID-19, starting from the origin through the prevention and responses by the government and non-governmental bodies and individuals. All these have provided fertile ground for acceleration of fears of uncertainties about human survival in the pandemic situation. The big risk is that any

single falsehood that gains traction can negate the significance of a body of true fact. Hence, when misinformation is recurring and amplified even by famous and influential people, the danger is that information which is based on facts, truth and certainty ends up ignored, rejected, and having only negligible impact.

Misinformation and disinformation are sometimes used interchangeably. Distinguishing the two terms, Bickert (2020) states that misinformation occurs when someone shares false information, usually unknowingly; while disinformation is intentionally trying to mislead the public. It can be said that misinformation results from sharing products of disinformation.

Disinformation is normally sponsored and financially motivated; involving evil practices such as using fake accounts and buying likes. However, “misinformation is a much trickier problem”, Bickert revealed. However, the media has exponentially given everyone a voice by providing a platform for disseminating information in various kinds, irrespective of its veracity.

The media, discussed in the present study involves, the News Media (newspapers, television and radio broadcasting stations); Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram); and Research Media (Online Journals and Texts, Academic Publishing and Hosting Sites). However, until recent years, there have been stances and positions of these media firms that they are only platforms for disseminating information, and not the actual owners and publishers, and therefore are not directly responsible for whatever that is published on their platforms (Popat, 2020). Even with the freedom of information bill and rights to voicing self-opinions, allowing such contradicting misinformation on the basis of freedom of expression can infect public ideas, beliefs and decision making, hence harmful when disseminated.

Some misinformation about COVID-19 abounds, and is speedily spread out. This starts from the various conspiracy theories on COVID-19 as a biological weapon in economic power tussle between China and America, through the deployment of 5-G network to reduce the population of the world, to the use of locally manufactured drugs and herbs to cure the virus, and a lot of information flying around. Armstrong and Naylor cited in Brindha, Jayaseelan, and Kadeswara, (2020) posited that “misinformation could be deliberately promoted or accidentally shared on social media. It can spread rapidly as anybody can say almost anything to anyone, with billions of individuals online each day, it has become pervasive with multiple digital sources

without editorial oversight and could easily be trusted or taken seriously”..

Calls, mandates, and directives have been given to media agencies (news media, social media, and research media) and firms to fight misinformation and fake news by searching, validating and retracting false information from circulation. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b) partnered with the UK Government to start up joint **Stop the Spread** campaign in May-June 2020, which encouraged the use of trusted sources such as WHO and national health authorities for accurate COVID-19 information. Furthermore, Levush (2019) for the Library of Congress Law also summarized some Government’s responses to disinformation on social media platforms thus:

*“In **Australia**, during the lead up to the May 2019 federal election, one political party asked Facebook to remove posts containing false information, claiming that the party planned to introduce a “death tax.” In **Germany**, a criminal complaint was filed in 2016 by a Green Party politician against the operators of a Facebook page and unknown persons for displaying her picture with a fake quote expressing compassion for a refugee who killed a student. As compared with allegations made by politicians or political parties in countries like Australia and Germany, claims of the online spread of rumours, fake news, and disinformation were made by the governments of **China, Egypt, Russia, and the United Arab Emirate** (p.8)*

However, irrespective of these calls, there is still need for validations and retractions of these hoaxes to reduce the misinformation rate. Validation involves checking of truth proofs and evidences or facts; and retraction means revoking, rescinding, or withdrawing a decision, statement, documentation on erroneous, mischievous, or manipulative

basis. Librarians have a strong weapon to wield against misinformation over the media. For instance Facebook, according to Bickert (2020) have “leveraged a network of more than 60 fact-checking organizations...but basically the approach is, if they tell us something is false, then we label that information, we put the fact-checker’s information next to it, and then we dramatically reduce the distribution of that content”. In the same vein, other media firms have followed suit in validating and retracting fake information, but how well do they carry out these sensitive operations when they are not trained in that direction? Hence, the question that comes to mind is, what roles should librarians play in validation and retraction of conflicting information in a pandemic situation?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. To examine relationship between the politics of media and pandemic misinformation.
2. To identify librarians’ role in the validation of conflicting information resources in a pandemic situation.
3. To find out librarians’ role in the retraction of conflicting information resources in a pandemic situation.

The Politics of Media and Pandemic Misinformation

Pandemics and Covid-19 misinformation have obviously thrived well with the help of the media, especially for political interests. Considering the power and impact the media exerts on disseminating information about the pandemic; it has recently earned a lot of criticisms on either hoarding or silencing information, spreading fake information, or not saying anything at all when it should, concerning conflicting issues. With people fully at home glued to their phones and other electronic gadgets, wanting to hear something about the pandemic in respect of

how far it has gone, how many cures or medications have been developed, and how best to stay safe, etc.; it unfortunately became time for some people to start playing politics with such trivial information. Information that determines the lives of people, their economic and employment status; with their health, feeding, education, future hopes and plans all hinged on the same thin thread.

Long before the outbreak of the virus, UNESCO (2020) has been warning the public on the impacts that mode of exchange of information have had on the political, technological, economic, and social transformation in recent years as orchestrated by some misinformation groups whose interest is to taint or mar the image of people or nation. However it is understood that everyone or faction is playing the politics of convincing, justifying or usurping any information that either coincides with or contradicts their respective lines of thought and interests. Lozanov and Spassov (2011) stated that the politicization of media content remained a stable trend, adding that in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic, the confusion bestowed on people makes them believe the media is biased, and that the pandemic and the information it comes with are based on conspiracy theories.

Some conspiracy theories on COVID-19 have been floating around the media. Areeb & Shujhat, (2020) noted that as COVID-19 turns into full-fledged public health crisis, multiple theories regarding the virus’ origin took hold on the internet, which all had common theme which states that “the virus was artificially created in a lab by a rogue government with an agenda”. Other theories see Covid-19 as a biological weapon in economic power tussle between China and America; Bill Gates trying to roll out vaccines and technologies to control the world; the deployment of 5-G network to reduce the population of the world, and the use of locally manufactured drugs and herbs to cure

the virus, etc. All these have kept, and are still keeping the public in utmost confusion to this day (Lynas, 2020). In his work, Abbas (2020) stated that history proved that pandemics were politicized and used for ideological and political interest. In fact, some political gladiators used the opportunity to start apportioning blames on whom, how and where the pandemic started or originated from. Abbas also noted that politicizing pandemics encourages ethnic and racial discrimination among different people, societies, and countries. Misinformation and manipulative claims started becoming the order of the day, as conspiracy theory claims started spreading among nations. This, for obvious reasons will only lead to discrimination and stigmatization of some people and countries.

The world Health Organization announced that the novel coronavirus was accompanied by an “infodemic” which is an overabundance of both accurate and inaccurate information, hence resulting to difficulties in finding trustworthy sources and reliable guide (WHO, 2020). In support of this, Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, *et al* (2020) opined that the term “infodemic” has been coined to showcase the perils of misinformation phenomena during the management of virus outbreaks, since it could even speed up the epidemic process by influencing and fragmenting social response. Since the media is a depiction of the society and how it works, any political influence and manipulation results to outrageous reactions from the masses.

The social media has been a powerful means of broadcasting information during the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. The media have been following every step of this journey with multiple fake and real stories, incessant headlines, and continuous updates all politically engineered. Statistically, Brennen, Felix, Philip, and Rasmus (2020) reported that in terms of sources of misinformation in covid19 pandemic, top-

down misinformation from politicians, celebrities, and other prominent public figures made up just 20% of claims but accounted for 69% of total social media engagement. They also pointed out that majority of misinformation on social media came from ordinary people, although such posts generate far less engagement than from politicians. Hence, there is need for validation and retraction of this politically engineered misinformation about the virus by librarians.

Librarians’ Role in the Validation of Conflicting Information Resources

There have been arguments concerning the role of librarians in combatting the flooding of conflicting information and its consequent misinformation through the media. Obviously, validating every information seen about covid-19 has continued to be an area where librarians can grasp to reduce to the barest minimum, issues of misinformation and hoaxes. AFLIA (2020) posited that “misinformation thrives more where there is illiteracy, especially the inability to understand and evaluate information itself as well as the source(s). Africa is lagging behind in world’s averages on literacy levels. This makes the continent a fertile ground for misinformation about COVID-19”. Hence, AFLIA proposes that this is the time for librarians to carve a space for themselves in the frontlines against the persistent march of the virus, “by disseminating correct, reliable, relevant information that will make Africans concerned without instigating panic and bursting myths and disinformation that can help the pandemic wax strong in the continent”.

A lot of libraries and librarians are doing their bits in pursuing this course. For instance, Blevins, as cited by Whitaker (2020) said that they find and synthesize the best evidence available. This evidence provides answers to questions that support decisions made by the leaders. She further stated that her team uses annotated bibliographies to share its

research with health experts, who then review and verify the evidence before communicating with leaders and health care providers. Also, AFLIA (2020) suggested that librarians need to re-educate themselves on the virus, preventative measures and pass on the information in as many spaces as possible. Hence, they need to understand what the virus is, how it spreads and how it

can be contained through hygienic practices. As a librarian, they need access to current, true, and relevant information about the pandemic in their respective countries so they can confidently repackaging, share and broadcast to their relatives, friends and user communities through the media. Some authentic sites to get information for some African countries are listed below:

Country	Website	Facebook	Twitter
Cameroon – Ministère de la Santé Publique du Cameroun	https://www.minsante.cm	Ministère de la Santé Publique du Cameroun	@MinsanteC
Cote D'Ivoire –	http://www.gouv.ci/	Ministère de la Santé et de l'Hygiène Publique	@Gouvci
Congo DRC	https://www.minisanterdc.cd/	Ministère de la Santé RDC	
Ethiopia – Ministry of Health	http://www.moh.gov.et/ejcc/	Ministry of Health, Ethiopia	@FMoHealth
Gambia – MOH	http://www.moh.gov.gm/	Ministry of Health The Gambia	@MohGambia
Ghana – DSD	https://ghanahealthservice.org/COVID19/	Disease Surveillance Dept_GHS	@DSD_GHS
Kenya – Ministry of Health	http://www.health.go.ke/covid-19/	The Ministry of Health	@MOH_Kenya
Namibia- MHSS	http://www.mhss.gov.na/	Ministry of Health and Social Services-Namibia	–
Nigeria – NCDC	https://ncdc.gov.ng/	Nigeria Centre for Disease Control	@NCDC
Sierra Leone – MOH SL	http://health.gov.sl/	Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Sierra Leone	@mohs_sl
South Africa – NICD	https://www.nicd.ac.za	National Institute for Communicable Diseases	@nicd_sa
Tanzania	https://www.moh.go.tz/en/		@AfyaTz
Uganda -UVRI	http://uvri.go.ug/	Uganda Virus Research Institute	@UVRIug
Zambia – Ministry of Health	https://www.moh.gov.zm/	Ministry of Health Zambia	@mohzambia
Zimbabwe – Ministry of Health and Child Care	http://www.mohcc.gov.zw/	Ministry of Health and Child Care	@MoHCCZim

Source: AFLIA Website

Importantly, Readfearn (2020) suggested five ways to fight misinformation and fear about Covid-19 pandemic:

Consider the Source: Who is making the claim? What is the source of the information? Is the post from a reputable organization such as the World Health Organization or is it based on a post by an individual who heard

something that someone else told them? Who funds that organization? Do they stand to make a profit from the information they are sharing? Listen to key sources of authority – for example, chief medical officers; and check the intention of the person that puts it there.

Beware of Primary Scientific Findings: Under normal circumstances, new findings in science come at us through a long process of research, peer review and academic publishing that can take years to develop. Findings from research that's made public without being checked by other experts could "change dramatically" after peer review has been carried out, and it is better to discourage the public from sharing this kind of information. "If you do want to share it, perhaps include a note that it is preliminary work and has not been reviewed and scrutinized by independent experts" (Readfearn, 2020).

Remember that stress affects decision making: We are in the middle of a pandemic, some of us or some of our friends have experienced; with our screens filled with frightening content. When the cognitive loads become overwhelming, inconsistencies in decision making sets in. At this point it is advisable to pause and take a break from the "overwhelming emotional content" to reduce the tendency of panicking and making rash decisions.

Think about the consequences before taking action: prevention is always better than cure. Never argue against some decisions like washing your hands, increasing social distancing, and isolating self when sick. Arguing these facts will not lead to any achievement

Remember that information and assumptions can change: Information comes with uncertainties and is loaded with assumptions that may change, be wrong or be incomplete. Since none of us have experienced a threat like this personally

before, and we don't know how long this will last, extrapolations and predictions are hard, especially as everything is changing; including the information itself.

Carvin and Brookie (2020) also emphasized the following as librarians' role in fighting misinformation through information validation: consider the source, and consider the source's source; ask yourself if you are being constructive; be emphatic, but also empathetic; remember that anxiety is natural, but it is also viral.

Librarians' Role in the Retraction of Conflicting Information Resources

Since the challenge of misinformation and hoaxes have taken over the media forms of online and physical newspapers, radio and TV stations, social media, and academic research media; there is need for librarians to step up their services into the tasking process of information retraction to save humanity. Tripathi, Dwivedi, Sonkar, and Kumar (2018) opined that the "removal of controversial published articles in subsequent issues is termed as retraction; it may be due to infringement of professional ethical code, such as multiple submissions, bogus claims of authorship, plagiarism, and fraudulent use of data". Elizabeth, & Maria, (2016) defined retraction as a permanent means of maintaining the integrity of the scientific literature and necessary to alert the reader to serious problems identified with a published article. Over the years there have been criteria for retraction, especially of academic publications.

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) published retraction guidelines version 2 in 2019, listing publications due for retraction: "Publications whose findings are unreliable either as a result of major errors, fabrication or falsification; Publications that constitutes plagiarism; Publication whose findings have previously been published elsewhere without proper attribution to previous sources or disclosure to the editor, permission to

republish, or justification (ie, cases of redundant publication); Publication that contains material or data without authorization for use; Publication whose Copyright has been infringed or there is some other serious legal issue (eg, libel, privacy); Publication with unethical research report; Publication that is published solely based on a compromised or manipulated peer review process; Publication that author(s) failed to disclose a major competing interest (conflict of interest) that, in the view of the editor, would have unduly affected interpretations of the work or recommendations by editors and peer reviewers”.

Since it has been confirmed that “corrective information often fails to change the false or unsupported belief in question” (Flynn *et al.*, 2017); research have consistently found that retractions rarely, have the intended effect of eliminating reliance on misinformation, even when people believe, understand, and later remember the retraction” (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2012). This is because the speed at which the information is shared and cited is outrageously faster than the speed of retraction. Perry (2019) noted that even when scientific articles are retracted, they continue to be cited, indicating that retraction has limited impact in curtailing the persistent dissemination of erroneous information. In fact, according to Retraction Watch (2016) several retracted papers are cited more often after retraction than before; also there are few signals to readers that an article has been retracted. Hence, it is in rare cases that retractions become 100% successful. However, librarians have to try and contribute their quota. The little efforts put in, still matter. Sullivan (2018) citing Ecker *et al*, asserts that individuals remember the incorrect information, but not that it is incorrect, and so recall it as valid information. This is particularly true when individuals are more familiar with the misinformation than the correction, and thus

recall the former more easily, in which case it may be misremembered as true over time.

Librarians must question and validate the messages, articles and videos they come across, to search if there are issues about hate, violence, fake covid-19 ideologies; and not be in a hurry to share. In the area of social media, Pazzanese (2020) highlighted that there is need to run “effective communication surveillance of social media to monitor which rumours, ideas, and issues are most worrying to the public, what is understood and misunderstood about various diseases and treatments, and what myths are circulating or being actively promoted in the community. And they need to have a strategy in place to counter them. Librarians can flag them or report them; or redirect them to the truth and facts from the authorized health agencies. Ahinkorah, Ameyaw, Hagan, Seidu, and Schack (2020) stated that organizations and librarians as well could partner with government to task technological (natural language processing/ text-mining) companies in partnership with health institutions to “build a centralized system that identifies abusers of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter”; to detect and report misleading advertisements, including video messages that provide fake and/or unrealistic (i.e., false) medical claims to project misinformation about COVID-19, for appropriate retraction.

Some issues, as pointed out by Tripathi, Dwivedi, Sonkar, and Kumar (2018) can lead to retraction, such as “omissions and commissions, infraction of ethics, integrity, and norms of scholarly communication, plagiarism, deliberate or inadvertent use of falsified or fabricated data, misreporting research or selective reporting as per convenience/preference, data fraud”. Every time there is breach in research ethics, the editors and authors curtail the damage by withdrawing tainted documentary or published paper immediately and this process of withdrawal is known as retraction

(Tripathi, Dwivedi, Sonkar, & Kumar, 2018). Sometimes authors may self-decide to retract their articles and communicate the same to the editors. Librarians can partner with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) to track editors of journals and hold them responsible for authenticity of information published in their journals. Even AFLIA (2020)'s second recommendation supported retraction by stating that "librarians should stop the flow of misinformation by not immediately forwarding or sharing any news or information received on the COVID-19 pandemic".

Conclusion

The research has tried to identify the different forms through which the media can impact negatively in the wellbeing of society through the spread of misinformation. Furthermore, the roles of librarians in the validation and retraction of conflicting information that heightens the level of psychological, emotional and social imbalance in the lives of people were highlighted. It is therefore argued that librarians, by virtue of their training are in a vantage position to be a part of the efforts aimed at curtailing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring that the general public gets the right information. As the medical and other health professionals are making efforts in combating the infection, librarians on their part, should ensure the validation and retraction of misinformation by serving as watch dogs and ensuring that verified and cogent information overrides fake news in this politically manoeuvred world.

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