



Examining the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation and Propaganda on National Security: A Comparative Study of Select Countries

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Abstract

The growing spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda presents serious challenges to national security in today's digital age. This study investigated how these forms of information manipulation undermine public trust, disrupt democratic processes, and expose countries to both internal and external threats. The research aims to examine the role of false or misleading information in shaping security vulnerabilities and to compare its impact across different national contexts. Drawing on existing literature, reports, and case studies, the study employs the library research method to analyse patterns of information warfare, including election interference, cyber-enabled influence campaigns, and the polarisation of public opinion. The findings reveal that both state and non-state actors strategically deploy propaganda and deceptive content to weaken social cohesion and exploit political divisions. While the degree of impact varies depending on each country's political and media systems, the consequences are consistently damaging, ranging from civil unrest to weakened institutional authority. The study concludes that building national resilience against such threats requires a multi-faceted response, including improved media literacy, stronger cyber defences, and coordinated international efforts. These strategies are essential for safeguarding national security in a globally connected information environment.

Keywords: Misinformation, Disinformation, Propaganda, National Security, Comparative Study

Introduction

The 2016 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory, which falsely claimed that a Washington pizzeria was at the centre of a child trafficking ring involving prominent U.S. politicians, led to an armed individual storming the restaurant (Wendling, 2018). This incident exemplifies how swiftly online disinformation can escalate into real-world violence, with profound implications for national security. Recent data from the Oxford Internet Institute indicate that organised social media manipulation campaigns have now been identified in 81 countries, up from 28 in 2017 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In what the United Nations has termed an 'infodemic' (UN, 2020), false information spreads faster and more widely than the truth, with research showing that lies travel 70% faster than factual content on Twitter (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

In today's hyper-connected world, weaponised misinformation and state-sponsored propaganda pose unprecedented threats to national security. The European Union's 2022 *Disinformation Review* documented over 1,000 cases of Russian disinformation targeting Western democracies (EEAS, 2022), while Myanmar's military used Facebook propaganda to

incite genocide against the Rohingya minority (Stevenson, 2018). These campaigns systematically erode public trust indeed, a 2023 Pew Research study found that only 34% of Americans trust government information, down from 73% in 1958 (Pew, 2023). With NATO now classifying disinformation as a hybrid warfare tactic (NATO, 2021), the security implications extend beyond social unrest to include election interference, economic sabotage, and the paralysis of democratic decision-making.

While misinformation refers to the unintentional spread of false information, disinformation involves the deliberate creation and distribution of falsehoods to deceive (Fallis, 2015). Propaganda, by contrast, is often politically motivated and designed to manipulate public opinion or promote a particular ideology (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018). The convergence of these elements in today's interconnected world has intensified their collective impact on national security. In countries with strong democratic institutions, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, disinformation campaigns have been deployed to sway elections and deepen political divisions (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). Conversely, developing nations with weaker institutional frameworks, such as Nigeria and Kenya, have experienced how misinformation can fuel ethnic tensions, provoke violence, and undermine efforts at democratic governance (Bailard, 2018).

This study aims to examine the impact of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda on national security through a comparative analysis of different socio-political environments. By exploring how these information disorders have been deployed in both developed and developing nations, the study seeks to provide insights into the diverse ways they threaten national security. Furthermore, it will offer strategies and policy recommendations that governments can adopt to mitigate the risks posed by the spread of false information.

Statement of the Problem

The deliberate and unintended spread of false information manifesting as misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda has become a strategic threat to national security in the digital age. While misinformation may be unintentionally shared, disinformation and propaganda are often deliberately crafted by state and non-state actors to destabilise societies, manipulate political processes, and erode public trust in institutions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018). Although the global nature of this challenge is widely acknowledged, the extent and manner in which these information disorders impact national security vary across different socio-political and institutional contexts.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, weak regulatory environments, fragile institutions, and deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions have rendered the information space particularly vulnerable to manipulation often with violent or politically destabilising outcomes (Broussard & Gagliardone, 2020; Bailard, 2018). In contrast, developed democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom have experienced more sophisticated disinformation campaigns that, while not always resulting in violence, have significantly eroded democratic trust as evidenced by the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum (Bennett & Livingston, 2020).

Despite growing academic and policy interest in information warfare, there remains a notable lack of comparative empirical research that systematically explores the diverse security implications of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda across different geopolitical contexts. Existing studies often focus on single-country analyses or electoral outcomes, without adequately addressing the broader national security dimensions or cross-contextual trends. This lack of comparative insight hinders the development of nuanced and adaptive counter-strategies. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this critical gap by examining how information disorders affect national security in both developed and developing countries. Through selected

case studies, the research aims to generate deeper insights into how state capacity, media infrastructure, and socio-political contexts shape the impact of information manipulation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is spread unintentionally or without the deliberate intent to deceive. It often arises from misunderstandings, errors, or incomplete knowledge. Although not crafted to cause harm, its unintentional spread can still have significant consequences for public perception and national security (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In situations of national crisis or conflict, misinformation can lead to confusion, panic, and inappropriate responses from both the public and governmental institutions. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation regarding the virus's origin, transmission, and prevention circulated widely, resulting in public confusion and inconsistent adherence to health guidelines (Loomba, de Figueiredo, Piatek & Larson, 2021). In the context of national security, similar misinformation during times of war, terrorist attacks, or political instability can undermine governmental authority and erode public trust in institutions. In developing nations such as Nigeria where literacy levels and media regulation may be limited the spread of misinformation through informal networks can exacerbate socio-political challenges (Adedoyin, Otekunrin & Otekunrin, 2020).

Disinformation

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information intended to deceive, manipulate, or mislead. Unlike misinformation, which may result from ignorance or error, disinformation is purposefully crafted to influence public perception for political, economic, or ideological objectives. Such campaigns are often strategically deployed by state or non-state actors to destabilise governments, discredit political opponents, or sow discord within a population (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). A prominent example of disinformation is Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where state-backed operatives spread false information via social media to influence voter behaviour and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions (DiResta, Shaffer & Matney, 2018). In Nigeria, disinformation campaigns during elections frequently exploit ethnic and religious tensions, fuelling divisions that threaten national cohesion and security (Iwuoha & Nwogbaga, 2021). The intentional spread of false narratives particularly in countries with deep-seated ethnic or religious divides can incite violence, disrupt governance, and compromise national security.

Propaganda

Propaganda is a form of communication aimed at influencing public attitudes toward a specific cause or position by presenting only one side of an argument. It is often employed by governments, political organisations, and other powerful entities to shape public opinion in ways that serve their objectives. Propaganda differs from disinformation in that it may not necessarily involve outright falsehoods. Instead, it typically relies on selective truths, exaggerations, or half-truths designed to provoke emotional responses and secure public compliance or support (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018). In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, propaganda can be a powerful tool for maintaining control over the populace. It often portrays the government as benevolent and just while discrediting opposition movements or foreign adversaries (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). For instance, in North Korea, the regime's propaganda apparatus presents the ruling Kim dynasty as infallible and depicts external powers particularly the United States as existential threats (Armstrong, 2013). Similarly, during Nigeria's period of military rule, state-controlled media disseminated propaganda to suppress dissenting voices and justify repressive policies in the name of national security (Oseni, 2017).

The Intersection of Misinformation, Disinformation and Propaganda in National Security

The concepts: misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda often intersect in ways that complicate the management of national security. Each can contribute to destabilising nations by fostering division, distrust, and civil unrest. Their impact is particularly pronounced during electoral processes, military conflicts, and public health crises. For instance, misinformation can arise organically during a crisis, while state or non-state actors may simultaneously engage in disinformation to advance specific agendas. Propaganda, on the other hand, may be employed by governments either to counter misinformation and disinformation or to promote a controlled narrative that serves state interests (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018).

In developing countries, where media literacy is generally lower and regulatory frameworks for social media are weak, the boundaries between these concepts become blurred. This makes it difficult for both governments and citizens to distinguish truth from falsehood. In Nigeria, for example, political elites have utilised disinformation and propaganda campaigns to manipulate electoral outcomes, shape conflict narratives, and maintain power (Nwabueze & Ezebuonyi, 2021). In such contexts, the proliferation of these information disorders frequently leads to violence, thereby undermining internal security and straining international relations.

Implications for National Security

The implications of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda for national security are far-reaching. Firstly, they erode democratic institutions by diminishing public trust in electoral processes, governance, and the media. Secondly, they exacerbate existing societal divisions, particularly in ethnically or religiously diverse societies, thereby creating fertile ground for conflict. Thirdly, in the international arena, disinformation and propaganda campaigns orchestrated by hostile foreign actors can destabilise nations, disrupt economies, and damage diplomatic relations (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). It is therefore essential to understand the distinct yet interconnected roles of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda in order to mitigate their national security implications. This conceptual framework provides a foundation for analysing how these information disorders shape public perception, foster insecurity, and destabilise states across both developed and developing contexts.

Review of Empirical Studies

The proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda in the digital age has attracted substantial empirical attention due to their escalating consequences for public trust, institutional stability, and national security. Researchers have explored these phenomena across diverse contexts, including health, electoral processes, media consumption, and political polarisation. However, there remains a notable gap in comparative, security-oriented analyses. This review synthesises key empirical studies to highlight how these information disorders operate and what consequences they entail, while identifying areas in need of further exploration particularly within national security frameworks.

One strand of research focuses on the behavioural effects of misinformation. Loomba et al. (2021), for example, conducted survey experiments in the UK and the US to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on vaccination intent. They discovered that even brief exposure to false information significantly reduced willingness to vaccinate. While health-focused, their findings underscore how misinformation can weaken public compliance and trust in official narratives mechanisms that are also exploitable in national security contexts. Pennycook and Rand (2018) introduced the “implied truth effect,” showing that warning labels on some fake news stories inadvertently increase the credibility of unlabelled content. Based on online experiments, this study suggests that selective labelling strategies may be counterproductive. These findings are particularly relevant in conflict-prone societies, where uneven content moderation could inadvertently legitimise harmful propaganda.

Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) adopted a content analysis approach to categorise scholarly definitions of fake news into seven types, including fabrication, parody, satire, and propaganda. Their typology revealed conceptual ambiguity, posing challenges for policy-making and regulation. Their work highlights the importance of definitional clarity—something this study addresses by applying a structured typology to assess the national security implications of each information disorder. Also, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) developed a conceptual framework for understanding “information disorder,” distinguishing between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Using global case studies, they illustrated how disinformation campaigns are strategically deployed to undermine democratic institutions. Their call for cross-sectoral collaboration informs this study’s recommendation for integrated national security policies that reflect the multidimensional nature of information threats.

Electoral related studies further enhance empirical understanding. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) utilised web traffic data and surveys to examine the spread of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Their findings revealed that fake news was extensively shared, particularly within ideologically aligned networks, and had the potential to distort political outcomes. While their focus was on electoral manipulation, the implications extend to national security by demonstrating how disinformation campaigns can destabilise political systems and undermine legitimacy. Psychological studies such as Nyhan and Reifler (2015) explored why misinformation persists despite corrections. Their survey experiments showed that corrections often fail when they threaten an individual’s identity or group affiliation. This insight is critical to understanding how propaganda can deepen divisions in multi-ethnic or politically polarised states, thereby fuelling conflict and weakening social cohesion.

Similarly, Guess et al. (2020), through analysis of browser history data during the 2016 U.S. election, found that exposure to low-credibility news sources was concentrated among specific demographic groups, particularly older conservatives. Although they concluded that fake news had limited overall reach, its concentrated impact on key population segments suggested that disinformation could still be strategically deployed to destabilise public discourse especially in societies marked by ethnic or religious tensions. Collectively, these studies provide valuable empirical insights into the operation and consequences of information disorders. However, most focus on single-country contexts, short-term political events, or limited domains such as health or elections. What remains underexplored is the role of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda as long-term threats to national security particularly from a comparative perspective encompassing both developed and developing nations. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing how information campaigns affect national stability, institutional resilience, and public trust across diverse geopolitical environments.

Theoretical Framework

The examination of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda and their impact on national security can be framed within several interconnected theoretical models. These theories offer a foundation for understanding how false information spreads, influences public perception, and ultimately impacts the security apparatus of a state. Two key theoretical perspectives are central to this study: Framing Theory and Social Network Theory. Firstly, framing theory is critical in understanding how information is structured and presented to shape public perception and influence opinions. Proposed by Goffman (1974) and expanded in media studies by Entman (1993), framing theory suggests that the way information is presented (i.e., its frame) can significantly influence how the audience interprets it. In the context of misinformation and disinformation, actors intentionally frame false information to evoke emotional responses or reinforce pre-existing biases in the target population. Framing is particularly potent in matters of national security, where public opinion can be swayed to either

support or oppose government actions. For example, during elections or national crises, disinformation campaigns may frame certain ethnic or political groups as threats to national stability, thereby inciting fear, hatred, and division (Entman, 2004). In Nigeria, framing techniques have been used to heighten ethnic and religious tensions, which in turn threaten social cohesion and security (Bailard, 2018). By analysing how misinformation and propaganda are framed, we can better understand the mechanisms through which public perceptions are manipulated, leading to broader national security threats.

Secondly, social network theory provides a useful lens for understanding how misinformation and disinformation spread through both online and offline social networks. This theory posits that individuals are part of interconnected networks, where information is disseminated through ties between actors (Wasserman & Faust, 2009). Social media platforms, in particular, play a pivotal role in the rapid spread of false information due to the decentralised nature of digital networks and the tendency for information to "go viral" based on social sharing patterns (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). In the realm of national security, the ability of misinformation and disinformation to spread through these networks can be dangerous, as individuals trust information coming from their social ties, making them more likely to accept false narratives. For instance, in the context of the 2016 U.S. election, disinformation spread rapidly through social networks, influencing public opinion and voting behaviour (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). In Nigeria, misinformation during national elections or conflicts similarly spreads through social media and community networks, exacerbating political instability and violence (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015).

The two theoretical models above provide a framework for understanding the impact of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda on national security. Framing theory helps explain how information is presented to influence perceptions, while social network theory demonstrates how these frames are disseminated and accepted within a population. When integrated, these theories provide a nuanced understanding of how information disorders can destabilise societies and threaten national security, especially in diverse socio-political environments. Thus, this theoretical framework will guide the comparative analysis of how misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda influence national security across different political contexts, highlighting both the commonalities and differences in their impacts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in documentary (desk-based) research to investigate how misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda influence national security across diverse socio-political contexts. The methodological approach is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding the meanings and consequences of social phenomena through the analysis of text-based data (Creswell, 2014). The documentary research method is particularly appropriate for comparative studies that synthesise existing knowledge across multiple geopolitical settings (Bowen, 2009). The study relies exclusively on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, policy papers, and reports from reputable international organisations such as the United Nations, European Union, African Union, NATO, and the World Economic Forum. These documents were retrieved through systematic searches of academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using key search terms such as "misinformation and national security," "disinformation and political stability," "propaganda and social unrest," and "information warfare." Sources were included based on the following criteria: (1) publication within the last 15 years to ensure relevance to the digital age; (2) empirical focus on the relationship between information disorders and national security; and (3) coverage of either a developing or developed country context.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic content analysis, which allows for the identification, categorisation, and comparison of recurring themes and patterns across the selected texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes such as information manipulation strategies, state and non-state actors involved, institutional resilience, and societal consequences were coded and examined. This approach facilitated a systematic cross-case comparison of the effects of information disorders on national security in selected countries.

The comparative framework was structured to include at least one developed and one developing country per region (e.g., the United States and Brazil from the Americas; the United Kingdom and Nigeria from the Commonwealth; and Germany and Kenya from Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa respectively). Case selection was based on theoretical and empirical relevance, particularly countries that have experienced significant disinformation campaigns with documented national security consequences. The comparison focused on three main criteria: (1) the nature and intensity of the information disorder; (2) the institutional capacity to respond; and (3) the observable security outcomes, such as political destabilisation, civil unrest, or erosion of public trust. By combining documentary analysis with a structured comparative framework, this study aims to generate deeper insights into how the threats posed by misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda manifest differently across varying political systems and governance environments.

Results

The findings of this study reveal that misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda pose significant and evolving threats to national security across both developed and developing contexts. Drawing on a comparative analysis of countries such as the United States and Nigeria, the results demonstrate that the threats posed by these information disorders manifest differently depending on the strength of institutions, the level of media literacy, and the nature of societal divisions. This section presents a critical discussion of the key themes emerging from the literature, including electoral interference, erosion of public trust, weaponisation of social media, state-sponsored propaganda, and institutional responses to information disorders.

Electoral Interference and Democratic Vulnerability

One of the most prominent areas where misinformation and disinformation impact national security is in the electoral process. In both developed and developing nations, false information campaigns have become strategic tools for manipulating public perception and influencing electoral outcomes. In the United States, the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections witnessed coordinated disinformation efforts that sought to polarise the electorate and delegitimise the democratic process. Bennett & Livingston (2020) highlight how these campaigns, often backed by foreign actors, eroded voter confidence and fuelled political division. In contrast, during Nigeria's 2019 general elections, disinformation campaigns exploited ethnic and religious cleavages, inciting tension and violence (Iwuoha & Nwogbaga, 2021). The contrast between the U.S. and Nigeria illustrates how the same phenomenon—electoral disinformation—can exploit different societal vulnerabilities, with developing nations being more susceptible due to fragile institutions and pre-existing tensions.

Social Media as a Weaponised Ecosystem

The amplification of false information through digital platforms, particularly social media, has dramatically escalated the scale and speed at which misinformation and propaganda spread. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (now X) have become battlegrounds for information warfare. Guess et al. (2020) note that algorithms on these platforms often prioritise emotionally charged and sensational content, which is more likely to go viral, regardless of its veracity. In Nigeria, WhatsApp was a major vector for the spread of political fake news during the 2019 elections, often in the form of emotionally manipulative videos and memes (Edelman, 2020). In the U.S., social media platforms were similarly used to disseminate conspiracy theories, such as QAnon and misinformation about mail-in ballots, which

undermined the legitimacy of the electoral process. While both contexts experienced the weaponisation of digital platforms, the lack of media literacy and regulatory oversight in Nigeria made its effects more severe, leading to unrest and distrust in electoral institutions.

State-Sponsored Propaganda and National Narratives

Propaganda, particularly when state-sponsored, remains a potent tool for shaping public opinion and managing internal dissent. In authoritarian regimes, it serves as an instrument of state control, while in democratic societies, it may be deployed more subtly through partisan media and political spin. In Russia, for example, state-owned media are central to disseminating official narratives that justify foreign aggression and suppress dissent (Pomerantsev, 2019). Similarly, in Nigeria, government-aligned media often downplay opposition viewpoints and promote state agendas, especially during political crises. In contrast, while the United States maintains a relatively free press, partisan media outlets have contributed to the polarisation of political discourse, often blurring the line between factual reporting and ideological messaging (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). The implication is that propaganda, regardless of the political system, can distort national discourse, influence policy support, and delegitimise opposition—all of which threaten democratic accountability and social cohesion.

Erosion of Trust in Institutions

One of the most insidious consequences of information disorders is the gradual erosion of public trust in key institutions, including the media, electoral bodies, and the judiciary. As individuals are exposed to competing narratives and false information, particularly when presented by seemingly credible sources, they become more sceptical of all information, creating a crisis of epistemic authority. Nyhan & Reifler (2015) demonstrated that misinformation is resistant to correction, especially when it aligns with existing beliefs or identity groups. This effect is magnified in Nigeria, where distrust in state institutions is already high due to historical experiences of corruption and inefficiency. Disinformation campaigns during elections and security crises portray institutions as either complicit or incompetent, thereby deepening public cynicism (Iwuoha & Nwogbaga, 2021). In the U.S., the situation is equally concerning. The “Stop the Steal” movement following the 2020 election is a stark example of how misinformation can delegitimise electoral outcomes and incite violent insurrections, as seen in the Capitol riot of 6 January 2021.

Comparative Insights: Institutional Capacity and Media Ecosystem

A key comparative insight from this study is the role that institutional robustness and media infrastructure play in mediating the impact of information disorders. In developed democracies such as the United States, while disinformation has significant political consequences, institutions like the judiciary, independent media, and civil society organisations provide some degree of resilience. In contrast, developing countries such as Nigeria face structural challenges that make them more vulnerable. Limited press freedom, a weak regulatory environment, and low digital literacy rates allow disinformation to thrive unchecked. This disparity underscores the need for context-specific interventions. While the United States might benefit from algorithmic reform and greater transparency in political advertising, Nigeria requires foundational investments in civic education, media development, and institutional reform.

Institutional Responses and Limitations

Governments and technology companies have initiated various measures to combat misinformation and propaganda. These include fact-checking partnerships, content moderation, media literacy campaigns, and legal reforms. However, these efforts are often reactive and fragmented. For instance, social media companies like Meta and Twitter have faced criticism for the inconsistent enforcement of their content policies and their failure to act swiftly in high-stakes political contexts (Edelman, 2020). Moreover, the effectiveness of these

interventions is limited by the speed and scale of disinformation campaigns, the sophistication of malicious actors, and the public's entrenched biases. In Nigeria, efforts by the government to regulate online speech have sparked fears of censorship and the suppression of dissent, further complicating the landscape. This highlights a critical need for international collaboration and the development of ethical, rights-based approaches to combating digital disinformation.

Concluding Remark

This comparative study demonstrates that misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda pose significant but context-dependent threats to national security. In fragile states like Nigeria, weak institutions and low media literacy amplify the destabilising effects of false information, often leading to violence and eroded trust in governance. By contrast, developed nations such as the United States face challenges related to institutional resilience, where disinformation fuels polarisation but is partially mitigated by stronger democratic safeguards. The research reveals that propaganda remains a potent tool for authoritarian control, while social media accelerates the reach and impact of false narratives across all contexts. Crucially, the study underscores that institutional strength rather than technological sophistication alone determines a nation's vulnerability to information warfare.

Effective countermeasures must be tailored to local conditions: media literacy and grassroots fact-checking in fragile states, algorithmic transparency in developed democracies, and international cooperation to combat cross-border disinformation. Future research should explore AI-driven propaganda and institutional decay thresholds to better anticipate emerging threats. Ultimately, safeguarding national security in the digital age demands context-specific strategies that address both technological and socio-political dimensions of information disorders.

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