



Malinformation as A Topical Journalism Challenge: Ethical, Political, and Social Dimensions

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Abstract- Malinformation has become a significant issue in contemporary journalism, distinct from misinformation and disinformation. While misinformation involves false information shared without harmful intent, and disinformation is deliberately deceptive, malinformation involves the dissemination of truthful content with the intent to cause harm. This study explores malinformation in the context of information disorder, in which the traditional boundaries between truth and harm are increasingly blurred. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ethical, political, and social dimensions of malinformation, with a focus on its implications for journalism practice and communication education. Key ethical issues, such as the tension between truth-telling and minimising harm, are discussed alongside political concerns regarding the weaponisation of truth for political gain. Socially, malinformation contributes to the erosion of public trust and the deepening of societal divisions. This paper highlights the need for stronger ethical reflexivity among journalists, updated journalism norms to address the digital age, and further academic inquiry into the dynamics of malinformation. The study is relevant to communication and journalism studies, as it provides crucial insights into the evolving media landscape and the challenges journalists face in maintaining ethical standards while serving the public interest.

Keywords- Malinformation, journalism ethics, political propaganda, social cohesion, media regulation

I. Introduction

Malinformation has emerged as a pressing concern within contemporary journalism and communication scholarship. Unlike misinformation, which involves false or misleading information shared without intent to harm, and disinformation, which refers to deliberately false information created to deceive, malinformation involves the dissemination of genuine information that is shared to cause harm, often by taking facts out of context or releasing private material into the public domain (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; First Draft, 2019). This category includes practices such as doxing, the publication of hacked materials, and the strategic leaking of authentic documents for political or reputational damage (Douglas, 2016; Darnton, 2022).

In digital media environments characterised by rapid news circulation and networked audiences, the distinction between truth and harm has become increasingly complex. Empirical research shows that online content spreads rapidly through social media networks, often propelled by emotional and political incentives rather than verification norms (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). Within this context, journalism faces a dilemma: the profession is committed to truth-telling and public-interest reporting,



yet it must also grapple with the ethical implications of amplifying harmful yet factual information.

The relevance of malinformation to modern journalism lies in its intersection with professional norms and democratic accountability. Normative theories of the media emphasise journalism's obligation to serve the public good while minimising harm (Christians et al., 2009; Ward, 2015). Professional ethical codes similarly stress accuracy, responsibility, and the avoidance of unnecessary harm (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). However, the digital transformation of news production and distribution has altered the environment in which these norms operate.

Strategic media manipulation, coordinated political campaigns, and network propaganda demonstrate how authentic information can be selectively framed or amplified to polarise publics and undermine democratic processes (Benkler et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In African contexts, studies show that disinformation and related practices have affected media trust and electoral processes in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In Nigeria specifically, election-related disinformation and digital political campaigns have revealed how online operations can distort political communication (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023). Malinformation, therefore, presents not only an epistemic problem but also a political and social challenge.

Aim

This study aims to critically examine malinformation as a contemporary challenge in journalism by analysing its ethical implications, political uses, and social consequences within digital and emerging media environments.

Significance

Addressing malinformation is vital because it complicates the traditional journalistic commitment to truth by introducing the problem of harm caused through the circulation of accurate but weaponised information. In rapidly evolving media systems, particularly within tropical and emerging contexts where digital adoption is expanding faster than institutional safeguards, the misuse of authentic information can weaken public trust, intensify political division, and expose individuals to privacy violations. Examining this issue equips communication scholars and practitioners with the conceptual and ethical tools needed to balance transparency with responsibility, strengthen professional standards, and support democratic discourse in complex information environments.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Clarification: Understanding Information Disorder

The contemporary media ecosystem is increasingly characterised by what scholars describe as information disorder. This concept was developed to provide a clearer analytical framework for understanding the range of problematic information circulating across digital and traditional media platforms (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Rather than treating all problematic content as fake news, the framework distinguishes between different types of false and harmful communication.



The urgency of this framework is reinforced by research showing that online networks enable rapid, large-scale dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate content, often driven by emotional engagement and network dynamics rather than by professional verification (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). In such an environment, harm may stem from fabrication, manipulation, or the strategic use of truth.

Information disorder is generally categorised into three interrelated but distinct forms: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information shared without the intention to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It often arises from misunderstanding, weak verification practices, or the rapid sharing culture of social media. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals frequently share inaccurate claims because they fail to assess source credibility or because the content confirms their existing beliefs (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). In this case, the defining feature is the absence of malicious intent, even though the consequences may still be damaging.

Disinformation, by contrast, involves deliberately false information created and disseminated with the intention to deceive, manipulate, or cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is closely linked to political propaganda, strategic communication, and coordinated influence campaigns. Studies of network propaganda demonstrate how organised actors exploit digital platforms to amplify misleading narratives and shape public discourse (Benkler et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Research further indicates that false political stories can spread widely online, particularly when they evoke strong reactions (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Disinformation, therefore, represents calculated deception embedded within political and communicative strategy.

Malinformation differs from the two categories above. It refers to genuine and truthful information shared with the intention of causing harm, manipulating public opinion, or damaging reputations (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), malinformation often involves the strategic release of private or sensitive information into the public sphere. Unlike misinformation and disinformation, the problem here is not falsity but harmful intent combined with the weaponisation of truth.

Key Distinctions

The differences among these three categories can be clarified along three main dimensions.

1. **Truth value.** Misinformation and disinformation are false or inaccurate. Malinformation is factually true but deployed in ways that create harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).
2. **Intent.** Misinformation lacks deliberate harmful intent, whereas disinformation and malinformation both involve conscious efforts to deceive, manipulate, or injure (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).
3. **Purpose.** Malinformation weaponises truth for strategic, political, or social harm. It often seeks to undermine credibility, influence electoral behaviour, or provoke emotional responses rather than contribute to informed public debate.



Defining Malinformation

Scholarly definitions describe malinformation as authentic information used maliciously to inflict harm on individuals, institutions, or societies (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The harm may result from selective disclosure, contextual distortion, or the strategic timing of release to shape public perception. Privacy theory reinforces this concern by arguing that information shared outside its original context can violate contextual integrity, even if the information itself is accurate (Nissenbaum, 2010). Thus, malinformation raises ethical questions not about truthfulness but about proportionality, privacy, and intent.

Characteristics of Malinformation

Several features typically characterise malinformation.

First, it involves the use of verifiable or factual information. The material may include authentic documents, recorded conversations, or personal data. Second, its dissemination is intentional and intended to cause harm. The actor releasing the information seeks reputational damage, political advantage, or social disruption (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In addition, it often entails a breach of privacy or confidentiality. Doxing, defined as the publication of private personal information online to expose or intimidate individuals, exemplifies this breach (Douglas, 2016).

Furthermore, malinformation frequently involves strategic timing, particularly during election periods or moments of political tension. Studies of Nigeria's 2023 elections show how digital operations amplified sensitive materials and framed authentic documents to influence voter perceptions (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023). Lastly, it generates emotional or reputational impact. Even when the information is true, its release can intensify political division, erode trust, or provoke harassment.

Examples of Malinformation

Common examples illustrate how truthful information can be transformed into a tool of harm.

1. Leaks of private emails or confidential documents may involve authentic material obtained through hacking or unauthorised access. Although the documents may be genuine, their release can serve strategic political purposes rather than public accountability (Darnton, 2022).
2. Doxing involves publishing private addresses, phone numbers, or family details online. While the data may be accurate, its exposure places individuals at risk of harassment or intimidation (Douglas, 2016).
3. Revenge pornography, which involves sharing intimate images without consent, relies on authentic content but causes profound personal harm and violates privacy norms. Legal frameworks, such as Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act, address aspects of digital abuse associated with such practices (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015).
4. Politically motivated disclosures are evident in Nigerian electoral contexts, where sensitive personal or financial details about candidates are circulated strategically during campaigns. Reports indicate that digital actors have used such disclosures to shape narratives and influence public perception (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023).



5. Selective release of truthful but contextually misleading information is another example. Authentic data may be extracted from broader reports and presented without the necessary context, creating distorted impressions. In highly polarised political climates, such selective framing can heighten mistrust and division, even though the underlying facts are not fabricated.
6. Within journalism, malinformation presents a complex challenge. Journalism is grounded in commitments to truth, verification, and the public interest (Christians et al., 2009; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Professional codes also emphasise minimising harm (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). When information is factually accurate but ethically questionable for publication due to privacy concerns or disproportionate harm, journalists face difficult decisions. Malinformation, therefore, occupies a grey area where legality, truth, and ethical responsibility may not coincide. Understanding this distinction is essential for analysing contemporary journalism in environments marked by rapid digital transformation and political contestation.

Theoretical Framing

To examine malinformation as a challenge for journalism, it is necessary to ground the discussion in established communication and media theories. The dynamics of truthful yet harmful disclosure cannot be fully understood without reference to normative and effects traditions within media scholarship. Three theories are particularly relevant: the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Framing Theory.

1. Social Responsibility Theory of the Press

Social Responsibility Theory emerged from the Hutchins Commission report in 1947 and was later elaborated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). The theory was developed as a response to libertarian press doctrine and argues that freedom of the press must be accompanied by accountability to society. Its basic assumption is that the media have an obligation to provide truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent accounts of events while avoiding content that may harm social order or individual dignity. The press is expected to serve the public interest, represent diverse viewpoints, and uphold ethical standards.

Critics argue that the theory is vague about who determines the public interest and may justify state intervention under the guise of responsibility (McQuail, 2010). Others note that it assumes institutional stability and professional autonomy, conditions that are not always present in emerging democracies.

The relevance of Social Responsibility Theory to this study lies in its insistence that truth alone is not sufficient. Malinformation involves factual content that may nevertheless cause harm. The theory provides a normative framework for evaluating whether publication advances democratic accountability or undermines social welfare. It reinforces the need for journalists to balance disclosure with restraint.

2. Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory was first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their study of the 1968 United States presidential election. The central proposition is that the media



may not tell people what to think, but they significantly influence what people think about. By selecting certain issues for prominence, the press shapes public priorities and perceptions of importance.

The theory assumes that repeated and prominent coverage increases the salience of issues in the public mind. Subsequent developments introduced second-level agenda setting, which focuses on attribute salience and the prominence of specific issue characteristics (McCombs, 2004). Critics contend that agenda setting may underestimate audience agency and overlook the influence of interpersonal communication and digital networks (McQuail, 2010).

In relation to misinformation, agenda-setting highlights how the selective release and repeated coverage of truthful yet damaging information can elevate particular narratives in public discourse. When journalists strategically amplify disclosed content, they may inadvertently prioritise issues framed by political actors. Thus, malinformation does not merely harm individuals but can shape collective attention and political agendas.

3. Framing Theory

Framing Theory builds on the work of Goffman (1974), who described frames as interpretive structures that organise meaning. In communication research, Entman (1993) refined the concept, arguing that framing involves selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative text. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies.

The theory assumes that how an issue is presented influences audience interpretation. Critics suggest that framing research sometimes lacks conceptual precision and that causal effects are difficult to isolate (McQuail, 2010). Despite these critiques, framing remains central to understanding media influence.

Malinformation is closely linked to framing processes. Even when information is accurate, selective presentation or contextual omission can shape interpretation in particular directions. The release of authentic but partial documents, for example, may frame a political actor negatively without altering factual content. Framing theory, therefore, explains how truthful information can be organised to produce reputational harm or political advantage.

Taken together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analysing malinformation. Social Responsibility Theory offers normative guidance, Agenda Setting Theory explains issue salience, and Framing Theory clarifies interpretive influence. Their integration strengthens the conceptual foundation of this study and situates malinformation within established traditions of media scholarship.

III. Malinformation as A Journalism Challenge

Malinformation in News Production

Malinformation complicates routine news production because it often involves the publication of private but truthful information. Within the framework of information disorder, malinformation refers to authentic material shared with the intention to cause



harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In practice, this may include leaked emails, confidential policy documents, recorded conversations, or personal data that enter the public sphere during politically sensitive moments. While journalism has long depended on whistleblowing and investigative disclosures to expose corruption and abuse of power, the ethical evaluation of such material depends on context, method, and intent (Darnton, 2022). The release of hacked or strategically timed information may serve partisan interests rather than the public good.

Normative theories of the press stress that journalism has dual obligations to truth and to minimising harm (Christians et al., 2009). Professional codes similarly emphasise accuracy, fairness, and responsibility in handling sensitive information (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The challenge arises when truthful information risks violating privacy or producing disproportionate reputational damage. Malinformation, therefore, forces journalists to ask not only whether information is factual, but whether its publication serves a legitimate public interest.

Digital Media and the Amplification of Malinformation

Digital media platforms have intensified the circulation of misinformation. Research shows that online networks enable rapid, widespread information diffusion, often driven by emotional engagement and novelty rather than verification (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). Social media reduces traditional barriers to publication, enabling private materials to circulate before professional journalists can contextualise or verify them (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Citizen journalism and user-generated content further diffuse gatekeeping authority, creating a participatory but fragmented information space.

In politically charged environments, these dynamics can amplify strategically released truths. Analyses of Nigeria's 2023 elections indicate that digital operations used online platforms to circulate sensitive materials and frame authentic documents to influence public perception (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023). In such contexts, the speed-verification dilemma becomes acute. News organisations face pressure to respond quickly to viral disclosures to maintain relevance, yet rapid publication may inadvertently legitimise material released for manipulative purposes.

Professional Gatekeeping Under Pressure

Traditional editorial controls have weakened in the digital era. The shift from print and broadcast monopolies to networked communication systems has reduced the ability of established newsrooms to act as sole gatekeepers. At the same time, commercial pressures linked to digital advertising models reward visibility and engagement, sometimes incentivising the publication of sensational or controversial content (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025). Political actors also exploit media routines to insert strategically framed narratives into mainstream coverage, a phenomenon documented in studies of network propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018).

These commercial and political pressures place journalists in constrained environments where ethical reflection competes with economic survival and competitive urgency. When truthful but harmful material circulates widely online, refusing to publish it may result in a loss of audience share, whereas publishing without adequate context may



contribute to manipulation. Malinformation, therefore, exposes the fragility of contemporary gatekeeping and underscores the need for renewed commitment to editorial judgement, contextual reporting, and professional responsibility in emerging media systems.

IV. Ethical Dimensions of Malinformation

Journalism Ethics and Truthful Harm

Malinformation places journalism in a difficult ethical space because it involves truthful information that can still cause harm. Within the information disorder framework, malinformation refers to authentic material that is deliberately shared to cause harm or manipulate perception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For journalists, this creates tension between the obligation to publish verified facts and the responsibility to consider consequences. Normative theories of the media emphasise that journalism in democratic societies must balance truth with social responsibility (Christians et al., 2009). This balance is further complicated in digital contexts where exposure can be rapid and permanent.

Scholars highlight that journalism ethics operate within social and contextual constraints rather than abstract principles alone (Oso et al., 2024). In Nigeria, where political contestation and digital activism intersect, the publication of truthful but sensitive material can escalate tensions or irreversibly damage reputations. Privacy theory underscores that information removed from its original context can violate expectations of consent and dignity even if it is factually correct (Nissenbaum, 2010). Doxing and the exposure of private data illustrate how authentic information may be weaponised to intimidate or humiliate individuals (Douglas, 2016). Thus, truthfulness does not automatically justify publication. Journalists must consider proportionality, consent, and the human consequences of disclosure.

Ethical Dilemmas in Reporting Malinformation

Reporting malinformation often requires navigating the tension between public interest and individual rights. Investigative journalism relies on leaks and whistleblowing to uncover corruption and wrongdoing. However, the strategic release of documents may be politically motivated rather than accountability-driven (Darnton, 2022). Research on misinformation sharing in Nigeria shows that audiences engage with sensational disclosures in ways shaped by social and behavioural patterns, thereby amplifying harm beyond the initial publication (Adeniran & Oso, 2023). In such circumstances, journalists must determine whether publishing leaked but truthful material genuinely serves democratic oversight or merely advances partisan interests.

The dilemma extends to national security and public accountability. Network propaganda research demonstrates how political actors exploit media systems to circulate strategically framed content (Benkler et al., 2018). In Nigeria's electoral context, digital operations have used online platforms to amplify sensitive materials and influence voter perception (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023). While some disclosures may expose legitimate concerns, others may heighten polarisation or undermine institutional trust. Ethical judgment, therefore, requires



contextual evaluation of timing, intent, and impact rather than reliance on factual accuracy alone.

Ethical Codes and Regulatory Frameworks

Professional codes of ethics attempt to guide journalists through such dilemmas. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics instructs journalists to seek truth and minimise harm (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). In Nigeria, the Nigeria Union of Journalists and the Nigerian Press Council outline similar commitments to accuracy, fairness, and respect for individuals' rights and dignity. Scholarship notes, however, that ethical practice is often constrained by social realities, institutional pressures, and political contexts (Oso et al., 2024).

Existing ethical guidelines have limitations in the face of digital dissemination. Research shows that online platforms enable rapid spread of content beyond newsroom control, complicating editorial oversight (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Legal frameworks such as the Cybercrimes Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act address aspects of privacy and digital harm. Yet, they do not fully resolve the ethical complexities of publishing truthful but harmful information (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015, 2023).

Malinformation, therefore, exposes gaps between established ethical codes and contemporary media realities. While truth remains central to journalism, the ethical management of truthful harm requires contextual sensitivity, stronger editorial judgement, and renewed engagement with principles of dignity and proportionality within emerging media environments.

V. Political Dimensions of Malinformation

Malinformation as a Political Weapon

Malinformation operates as a political instrument by weaponising truthful information for strategic advantage. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define malinformation as genuine information shared with the intent to cause harm, often by exposing private or sensitive material. In political contexts, such disclosures are rarely neutral. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) demonstrate how networked communication systems enable actors to amplify narratives that damage opponents, even when the underlying information is authentic. The strategic timing and framing of disclosure can transform truthful content into a persuasive political tool.

In Nigeria, recent electoral cycles illustrate how information has been mobilised to influence voter perceptions. Reports on digital operations during the 2023 elections document coordinated dissemination of both fabricated and authentic materials aimed at shaping public opinion (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). Hassan (2023) similarly notes that electoral communication has involved the circulation of selective information to delegitimise political actors. From a Nigerian scholarly perspective, Oso, Soremekun, and Jimoh (2022) argue that democratic processes are increasingly shaped by the manipulation of digital communication flows, including the strategic use of harmful content. Although propaganda has historically relied on



falsehood, malinformation shows that factual material can be equally potent when deployed with partisan intent.

State Actors, Media, and Power

The political dimension of malinformation also involves the relationship between state actors, media institutions, and power. Government leaks and selective disclosures can serve multiple purposes. They may expose wrongdoing and promote accountability, yet they may also be used to distract from controversy or undermine opponents. Darnton (2022) highlights the ethical challenge of assessing provenance in the age of digital leaks, where motives may be concealed. Journalists must therefore scrutinise not only the authenticity of documents but also the strategic context of their release.

Media complicity becomes a concern when news organisations reproduce selective disclosures without adequate contextualisation. Oso, Adeniran, and Arowolo (2024) observe that journalism ethics in Nigeria are shaped by structural pressures, including political interference and commercial competition, which may weaken independent editorial judgement. Benkler et al. (2018) show that polarised media systems can amplify partisan narratives, reinforcing divisions rather than fostering deliberation. In contexts marked by political contestation, such dynamics intensify polarisation and reduce the space for balanced reporting.

Malinformation and Democratic Processes

Malinformation has significant implications for democratic stability because it affects public trust and civic engagement. Studies of media trust in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa indicate growing scepticism towards news institutions in environments characterised by information disorder (Wasserman & Madrid Morales, 2019). When truthful information is deployed strategically to damage opponents or inflame public sentiment, citizens may struggle to distinguish legitimate investigative reporting from partisan manoeuvre. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) caution that information disorder undermines shared factual foundations necessary for democratic deliberation.

Journalism occupies a critical position within this environment. Normative theories emphasise the press as a pillar of democratic accountability and public reasoning (Christians et al., 2009). Oso et al. (2022) contend that Nigerian journalism must balance freedom of expression with responsibility in order to sustain democratic processes. The challenge is not merely to verify facts but to assess the broader consequences of publication. If malinformation erodes trust and deepens polarisation, journalism's stabilising function is weakened. Conversely, careful contextualisation and ethical restraint can reinforce democratic resilience. The political dimension of malinformation, therefore, underscores the need for reflective and principled journalism in emerging media environments.

VI. Social Dimensions of Malinformation

Social Harm and Public Perception

Malinformation produces social consequences that extend beyond individual targets to the wider community. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define malinformation as truthful information shared with the intent to cause harm, often by exposing private or sensitive



content. When such material circulates online, reputational damage can be swift and enduring. Douglas (2016) explains that practices such as doxxing involve the publication of personal information with harmful intent, frequently leading to harassment and intimidation. In digital environments where information spreads rapidly, individuals may be subjected to coordinated abuse that resembles mob justice rather than reasoned public debate.

Nigerian scholarship highlights the fragility of social cohesion in the face of harmful information flows. Oso, Soremekun, and Jimoh (2022) argue that the spread of harmful content during democratic processes intensifies hostility and weakens civic trust. Similarly, Adeniran and Oso (2023) find that patterns of misinformation sharing in Nigeria are shaped by social behaviour and group dynamics, indicating that audiences do not merely consume content but actively participate in its circulation. When truthful information is weaponised for reputational harm, it can inflame existing divisions and erode norms of mutual respect.

Cultural Contexts and Vulnerable Groups

The social impact of malinformation is mediated by cultural and political contexts. In societies characterised by ethnic diversity and political contestation, selective disclosure of authentic yet sensitive information may exacerbate tensions. Wasserman and Madrid Morales (2021) observe that disinformation and related forms of information disorder in the Global South are embedded in local political cultures and social inequalities. Gendered and ethnic targeting often intensifies harm, particularly when private information is released to shame or silence individuals. Douglas (2016) notes that online harassment frequently relies on the exposure of personal data, a practice that disproportionately affects vulnerable groups.

Within developing societies, the consequences of reputational damage may be severe because legal remedies and digital literacy resources are limited. Oso, Adeniran, and Arowolo (2024) contend that contextual pressures, including political polarisation and uneven institutional support, shape journalism ethics in Nigeria. In such environments, the release of truthful yet harmful information may reinforce social stigma and marginalisation rather than promote accountability. The social dimension of malinformation, therefore, requires sensitivity to local realities rather than reliance on abstract principles alone.

Public Trust in Journalism

Malinformation also affects public trust in journalism. Studies of media trust in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa show declining confidence in news institutions amid concerns about information disorder (Wasserman & Madrid Morales, 2019). When audiences encounter truthful information deployed strategically to cause political or personal harm, they may struggle to distinguish responsible reporting from partisan manipulation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) caution that information disorder undermines shared factual foundations necessary for democratic deliberation.

Normative theories of journalism emphasise the press as a cornerstone of democratic life (Christians et al., 2009). However, repeated exposure to harmful or sensational disclosures can foster scepticism and media fatigue. Adeniran and Oso (2023)



demonstrate that audience behaviour in Nigeria reflects patterns of selective engagement and distrust, particularly in digital spaces. If journalism appears complicit in amplifying harmful disclosures, its credibility diminishes. Conversely, careful contextualisation and ethical restraint may help restore confidence. The social dimension of malinformation thus underscores the interdependence between ethical journalism, social cohesion, and democratic stability.

VII. Implications for Journalism Practice and Communication Education

Implications for Journalists

Malinformation necessitates that journalists adopt stronger ethical reflexivity in their everyday practice. Because malinformation involves truthful information deployed to cause harm, conventional verification alone is insufficient (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Journalists must interrogate not only whether information is accurate but also why it has surfaced, who benefits from its circulation, and what consequences publication may generate. Scholarship emphasises that journalism ethics operates within social and contextual constraints, meaning that ethical judgement must account for political pressures, audience expectations, and institutional realities (Oso et al., 2024).

Responsible reporting frameworks should therefore integrate proportionality, context, and harm assessment into editorial decision-making. Normative theories of the media stress that journalism in democratic societies carries obligations to truth and social responsibility (Christians et al., 2009). Professional codes similarly instruct journalists to minimise harm while seeking truth (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). In practice, this may require withholding certain private details, carefully contextualising leaked materials, or clarifying the origins and timing of disclosures. In politically sensitive environments such as Nigeria's electoral context, where digital operations have amplified selective disclosures (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023; Hassan, 2023), reflexive and contextual reporting becomes essential to avoid reinforcing manipulation.

Implications for Communication Education

For communication education, the rise of information disorder necessitates curricular adaptation. UNESCO's handbook for journalism education calls for systematic teaching on fake news, disinformation, and verification practices (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). However, malinformation extends the conversation beyond falsity to include truthful harm. Communication programmes must therefore teach students to distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation and to understand the ethical and social consequences of each (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Research demonstrates that audience engagement with problematic content is shaped by behavioural patterns and social contexts (Adeniran & Oso, 2023). This underscores the importance of integrating media literacy and ethical reasoning into communication training. Students should be equipped not only with fact-checking skills but also with the capacity to assess intent, context, and potential harm. Ethical education must move beyond abstract principles to applied case analysis rooted in local realities.



Policy and Institutional Responses

Policy and institutional responses are also central to addressing malinformation. Legal instruments such as the Cybercrimes Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act seek to regulate aspects of digital harm and privacy violations (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015, 2023). At the global level, guidelines for digital platform governance advocate multi-stakeholder approaches to safeguarding freedom of expression while mitigating harm (UNESCO, 2023). These frameworks recognise that platform accountability is crucial in an environment where information spreads rapidly beyond newsroom control.

Research on online dissemination indicates that digital networks enable rapid amplification of content regardless of editorial oversight (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Consequently, effective responses require collaboration between media institutions, regulators, educators, and technology companies. For journalism practice and communication education alike, the challenge is to uphold democratic values while addressing the ethical complexities of truthful but harmful information.

VII. Discussion

Synthesis of Ethical, Political, and Social Dimensions

The challenge of misinformation cannot be understood through a single lens, as its ethical, political, and social dimensions are closely intertwined. Ethically, malinformation tests journalism's commitment to truth and harm minimisation. Politically, it functions as a strategic tool capable of influencing elections, shaping narratives, and weakening opponents. Socially, it affects reputations, public trust, and patterns of civic engagement. These dimensions do not operate independently. Rather, they reinforce and shape one another in complex ways.

When truthful but sensitive information is released during politically charged moments, ethical dilemmas quickly become political controversies and social crises. A disclosure that may appear to serve transparency can also be timed to disrupt electoral processes or inflame partisan divisions. Journalists must therefore assess not only the factual accuracy of material but also its political context and likely social impact. Failure to consider one dimension can intensify the others. For instance, publishing private information without adequate contextualisation may contribute to public outrage, online harassment, or polarisation, thereby eroding trust in media institutions.

The political environment also influences ethical judgment. In polarised settings, media organisations may face pressure from political actors or audiences to publish damaging information quickly. This pressure can narrow the space for careful ethical reflection. At the same time, social attitudes towards privacy, reputation, and accountability shape how disclosures are interpreted. In societies where trust in institutions is fragile, the repeated circulation of strategically framed truths can deepen scepticism and weaken democratic dialogue. The interplay between ethics, politics, and society, therefore, transforms malinformation from a newsroom issue into a systemic challenge.

Challenges and Gaps

Journalists face several practical challenges in addressing malinformation. One major difficulty lies in distinguishing between legitimate whistleblowing and strategically



engineered leaks. Truthful information may carry public value, yet its origin and timing may reveal manipulative intent. The pressure to report quickly in digital environments further complicates careful assessment. Economic constraints and competition for audience attention can also limit the time available for contextual verification.

Policymakers encounter their own dilemmas. Legal responses designed to curb digital harm risk infringing on freedom of expression if drafted too broadly. At the same time, weak enforcement mechanisms can render data protection and cybercrime laws ineffective. Regulatory frameworks often focus on false information, leaving less clarity on how to address harmful but truthful disclosures.

For the public, the main challenge is interpretive. Citizens must navigate a complex information environment in which truthful content may still be weaponised. Repeated exposure to contested disclosures can foster cynicism or fatigue, reducing engagement with legitimate journalism.

There are also gaps in existing research. Much scholarship on information disorder has concentrated on misinformation and disinformation, with comparatively less attention to malinformation as a distinct phenomenon. Further empirical work is needed to examine how audiences interpret truthful but harmful disclosures, particularly in developing societies. Additionally, regulatory debates often overlook the ethical grey areas faced by journalists when handling authentic yet sensitive material. Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary engagement that integrates ethical theory, political communication analysis, and socio-cultural perspectives.

Malinformation ultimately highlights the limits of simple solutions. It demands sustained reflection, institutional reform, and public education if journalism is to uphold both truth and responsibility in an evolving media landscape.

VIII. Conclusion

This study has examined malinformation as a distinct and pressing challenge within contemporary journalism. Unlike misinformation and disinformation, malinformation involves truthful information that is deliberately deployed to cause harm. The analysis has shown that its complexity lies not in falsity but in intent, timing, and consequence. By situating malinformation within the broader framework of information disorder, the study clarifies how ethical considerations, political strategies, and social realities intersect to shape its impact on news production and public discourse.

Ethically, malinformation forces journalists to confront the tension between truth-telling and harm minimisation. Politically, it functions as a strategic instrument capable of influencing elections, shaping narratives, and deepening polarisation. Socially, it affects reputations, weakens trust, and can contribute to harassment and division. These dimensions are interconnected. Decisions taken in the newsroom reverberate within political systems and social communities. As such, malinformation is not merely a technical problem of verification but a structural challenge to democratic communication.



The findings underscore the need for stronger ethical reflexivity among journalists. Verification must be accompanied by contextual judgement, sensitivity to privacy, and careful assessment of public interest. Journalism norms should be revisited and adapted to digital realities in which truthful information can be weaponised and rapidly amplified. Communication education must also equip future professionals with the analytical tools required to navigate these dilemmas responsibly.

Finally, further academic inquiry is essential. More empirical research is needed to explore audience interpretations of malinformation, particularly in developing societies. Interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges ethics, political communication, and media sociology will deepen understanding of this evolving phenomenon. Addressing malinformation requires sustained reflection and institutional commitment if journalism is to maintain credibility and serve democratic life effectively.

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