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CENTRE FOR JOURNALISM INNOVATION & DEVELOPMENT

Exploring the Impact of Information Disorder on Crises in The Lake Chad Region:

Unveiling the Shift from Arms to Information Warfare

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About CJID

The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), formerly the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), is a West African media innovation and development think (and do) tank. Founded in 2014 as a non-governmental organisation in Nigeria. The Centre has been a leader in investigative journalism, civic technology, open data, verification, safety of journalists, elections and freedom of information and expression. It has a presence in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia.
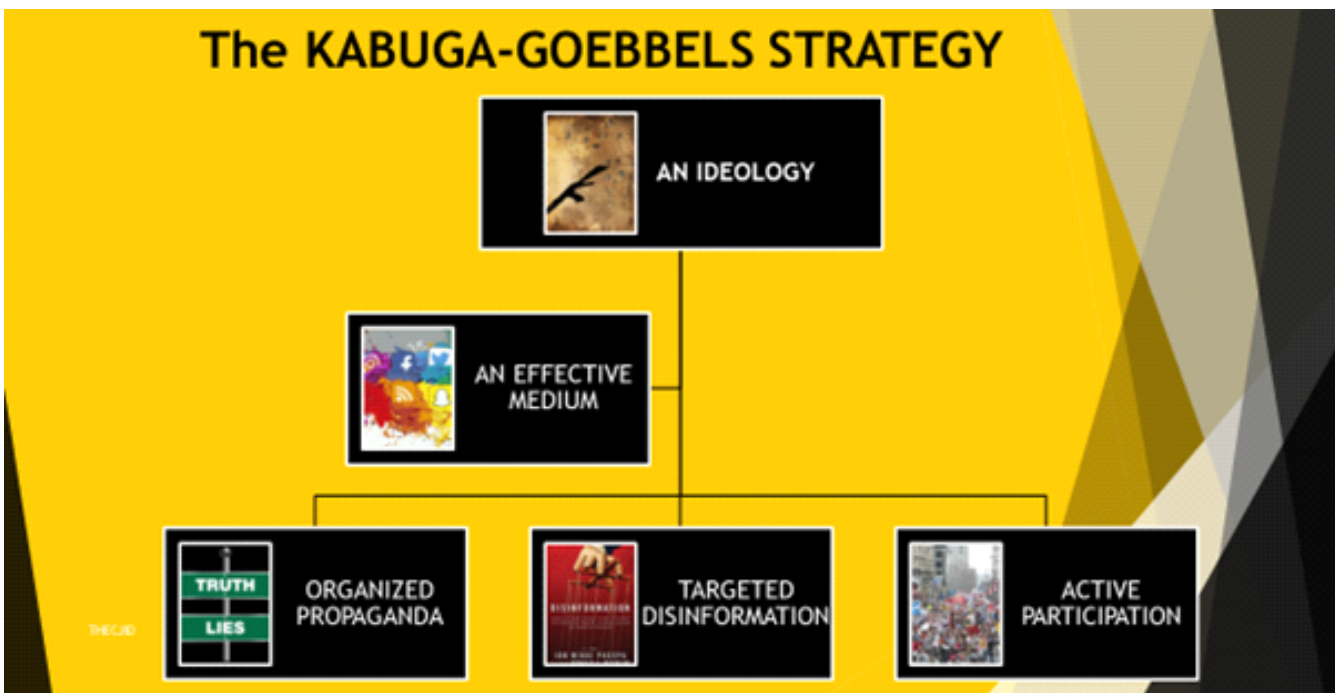
1.0 Introduction

The evolution of many crises lays within the intricate web of ideologies disseminated through distorted or "propagandised" information. As elucidated by Umar (2020), the purpose of such weaponised information is to sway public discourse, stoke animosity or division within society, and ultimately advance a particular agenda. Historical examples like Felicien Kabuga's broadcasts on radio during the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 or the propaganda machinery of Hitler through newspapers in the 1930s vividly illustrate how manipulated information has constituted the spark for igniting crises.

Understanding this recurrent pattern, Pennycook and Rand (2021) expound that while truthful information wields influence, information infused with falsehoods possesses an even more formidable power. This sentiment is echoed by Emerson (2023), who underscores the pivotal role of information disorder as a strategic tool wielded by some entities, whether for noble causes or otherwise. He further characterised information disorder as the propagation of misinformation and disinformation towards setting off crises, such as the ongoing tensions in the Lake Chad Basin. Hence, a once tranquil region is now trapped in intense turmoil primarily stoked by the onslaught of an "ideological clash," waged with both weapons and through information disorder. While the former (weapons/arms) shapes the external form of the crisis, the latter (information disorder) constitutes its very core. Take, for instance, the Boko Haram insurgency, which emerged as a dire threat to human security across Africa, particularly

Image 1.1 **Most crises start with an ideology spread through propaganda and disinformation via an effective medium. Both Joseph Goebbels and Felicien Kabuga used this strategies to trigger historical crises that led to the loss of many lives.**

in the Lake Chad region. Its genesis goes back to Nigeria in 2002, with the message "Western education is forbidden," eloquently rendered in the Hausa language as "Boko Haram." The group's disinformation of hate, infused with extremist ideology to mislead devout Muslims, was propagated under the official moniker, "Jama'atu Ahlis Suna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad" (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). Yet, despite being labelled as deceptive by most Islamic scholars, the group, initially buoyed by the charismatic sermons of the late Yusuf Muhammad, has recruitment and expansion.

Yet, amidst these multifaceted issues, information disorder emerges as the pivotal factor – a tool branded by the researchers as the most potent instrument in the arsenal of terror groups for recruitment purposes.

This insight finds resonance in the research of Chen et al. (2022), who employed a blend of machine learning and content analysis to probe the link between information disorder and terrorism. Their study, involving 39 instances of terror attacks, substantiates the existence of a nexus between these phenomena. Chen and colleagues further note a surge in the dissemination of fake news before or following a terror attack, suggesting that the propagation of falsehoods (i.e., information disorder) amplifies the social repercussions and aftermath of such acts of terrorism on local communities. This is a theme that this article seeks to delve into within the context of the Lake Chad region.

Indeed, the presence of information disorder undoubtedly plays a significant role in the crises unfolding in the Lake Chad region. As we explored in an earlier publication titled, "Information Ecosystem in the Lake Chad Region: unravelling the multifaceted sphinx of information disorder," we substantiated this assertion by dissecting several contributing elements, such as the influence of social media and the pervasive confirmation bias. However, it is imperative to delve deeper into the direct repercussions of information disorder in the crises shackling the Lake Chad region, which we found to include:

2.0 Impact on Social Cohesion and Tranquillity

The Lake Chad Basin region is currently grappling with a range of social, economic, and political challenges, including ethnic and religious tensions, resource scarcity, and conflict. Information disorder has exacerbated these issues by disseminating false narratives, amplifying grievances, and sowing mistrust within communities. Misinformation concerning communal conflicts, religious disparities, or government actions has further deepened existing divisions and, potentially, even incited violence. According to Menma and Dienel (2023), the Lake Chad area is dominated by various social groups categorised by their sociocultural statuses as close migrants, far migrants, and distant migrants. Unfortunately, these groups have become part of the problem rather than the solution, as they harbour differing ideologies and beliefs that are perpetuated by certain actors aiming to maintain hegemony. These actors peddle disinformation to stoke these differences. Thurston (2016), who delved into the religious and political worldview of Boko Haram and other terror groups in the Lake Chad Region, highlighted their strident messages intertwined with disinformation, thereby aggravating intra-Muslim tensions and deteriorating Muslim-Christian relations in the region. Memna and Jenna (2023) also concur that the Lake Chad area exhibits all the characteristics of a region profoundly vulnerable to organised crime and violent extremism, primarily due to the exploitation of cultural and social biases as channels for spreading misleading information that fosters an "Us-Against-Them" mindset. Onuoha (2014), who examined the motivations behind youth involvement in Boko Haram, found that itinerant preachers capitalise on the diversity of the Lake Chad region by propagating an extreme version of religious teachings and conveying a distorted narrative portraying the government as weak and corrupt. Consequently, the dangerous impact of information disorder in the Lake Chad region leads to the propagation of hate-fuelled messages underpinned by falsehoods, causing social polarisation.

3.0 Security Concerns

It is not news that the Lake Chad Basin region has been besieged by the Boko Haram insurgency, which has engendered extensive insecurity and displacement. Information disorder has significantly complicated security endeavours through the spread of false reports about the activities of militant group, which confuses civilians and security forces. Furthermore, misinformation has impeded effective communication and coordination among various security agencies, potentially allowing extremist groups to exploit the situation (Adinoyi & Zhizhi, 2022). A typical example occurred on 17 October, 2014, when Nigerians were jubilant over the

federal government's purported announcement of a ceasefire deal with Boko Haram. Shortly after, Boko Haram attacked Abadam Village in Borno State, claiming a resident's life. The following day, they killed eight more people in Dzur Village in Borno, effectively dashing any hope of a truce.

It took another two weeks for the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau, to unequivocally state that there was no ceasefire and that the initial announcement was a lie. In a video released on 31 October, 2014, he declared, "We have not made a ceasefire with anyone. What is our business with negotiation? We did not negotiate with anyone... It's a lie; it's a lie. We will not negotiate." Nevertheless, the initial false information had already led to loss of life and raised false hopes.

4.0 Impact on the Humanitarian Situation

The region has confronted significant humanitarian challenges, including displacement, food insecurity, and limited access to essential services. However, disseminating false information about humanitarian aid, disease outbreaks, or relief efforts has impeded the effectiveness of relief organisations and exacerbated the suffering of vulnerable populations. In addition, it has also discouraged donors and volunteers from contributing to relief efforts. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross' Humanitarian Law and Policy blog, malicious actors exploit the information environment to disrupt or derail humanitarian activities by launching defamation campaigns against humanitarian organisations, thereby tarnishing their image. HumAngle's report validates this phenomenon within the Lake Chad region, finding instances where online trolls, propaganda channels, and questionable associations propagate disinformation and misinformation campaigns. These campaigns shift the blame for the conflict to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In 2019, a surge of unsubstantiated claims alleged that NGOs were supplying food and medications to an "outlawed armed group." Borno South Senator Ali Ndume even made baseless allegations that some NGOs aided Boko Haram insurgents in Borno State. The result of this disinformation campaign has increased the risk of providing aid and bred distrust of life-saving aid organisations among the public. These unverified claims have directly impeded the ability of NGOs to operate effectively and provide essential services to affected communities in the Lake Chad region.

5.0 Impact on Health and Public Health Efforts

In the context of public health, misinformation about diseases, treatments, and preventive measures has yielded dire consequences. The Lake Chad Basin region has encountered health challenges such as cholera and malaria outbreaks. The circulation of erroneous health information has led to ineffective responses, poor adherence to health guidelines, and the dissemination of preventable diseases. According to a Medicins Sans Frontiers report, misinformation is a leading factor hampering cholera response in the Lake Chad region. Individuals attach myths and unfounded beliefs to the issue, therefore exacerbating the situation. Others perceive medicines and vaccines as part of a Western plot to depopulate Africa. Ede and Kalu (2023) confirm this notion, observing that one of the reasons Africans question Western health interventions is the fear that vaccines could alter human DNA and reduce fertility in women, thus serving as a tactic to depopulate the continent. These narratives, primarily rooted in misinformation, constitute the crux of the challenges affecting health matters in the Lake Chad region.

6.0 Impact on Political Stability and Governance

Information disorder has eroded political stability through the dissemination of false rumours about the actions, policies, and intentions of government within the Lake Chad region. This erosion has led to a decline in trust in institutions, disruption of governance processes, and impediments to public participation in democratic mechanisms. Misleading information on social media recently suggested that the Nigerian Army was enlisting former Boko Haram repentants into the army. This cast doubt on the military among most Nigerians, fostering the perception that the institution was compromised and no longer trustworthy. Furthermore, a viral video alleged that Boko Haram had acquired new armed vehicles to combat the army in the Lake Chad region. However, a Humangle report revealed that the video was a year old and the incident occurred in North-Western Nigeria, where the terror group is inactive. The lasting impact of such narratives ultimately undermines citizens' trust in the government, particularly concerning security and defence matters.

7.0 Conclusion:
Towards a Multi-faceted approach to Mitigating the Impacts of Information Disorder in the Lake Chad Basin

A comprehensive approach is essential to alleviating the impacts of information disorder in the Lake Chad Basin. Fostering media literacy and critical thinking skills is crucial for enabling individuals to discern and question false information. Beyond military interventions and humanitarian efforts, prioritising media literacy is imperative to countering the influx of information disorder in the Lake Chad region.

Although governments, NGOs, and journalists often seem at odds on specific issues, deliberate collaboration is necessary among all stakeholders to combat misinformation in the region. These collaborative efforts include fact-checking initiatives, accurate information dissemination, and awareness campaigns. Addressing the issue of citizens' lack of trust in government institutions and sometimes the media is also crucial. Both actors need to uphold transparent and accountable practices. This entails open communication from the government and accurate reporting from the media, which collectively build trust and counteract the propagation of false information (Heise, 2022). Grygiel and Brown (2019) additionally propose that social media and tech companies should proactively identify and remove false content online. Algorithmic adjustments, user reporting mechanisms, and content moderation can all diminish misinformation's virality, particularly in crisis areas like the Lake Chad region.

8.0　References

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