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Information Vacuum and Information Disorder in Conflict Zones: An Exploration of the Lake Chad Basin

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Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin (LCB) is an important freshwater lake straddling four countries in the Sub-Saharan region: the northern part of Cameroon, western Chad, south-east Niger, and north-eastern Nigeria. Its channels formerly encompassed 40,000 square kilometres with hundreds of small islands and surrounding areas that offered different opportunities, including fish to eat and trade and fertile soil for cultivation for the communities there. Despite the challenges associated with demographic tracking, the most accurate estimate of the region's current population is roughly 30 million ([Humanitarian Practice Network, 2017](#)).

The LCB is regarded as one of the world's most [complex and protracted conflict zones](#), cutting across Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, marked by dangerously high levels of violence. According to a [2022 UNDP Conflict Analysis report](#) on the LCB, the countries around the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) have faced a variety of security issues for many years, such as livestock rustling, banditry, kidnapping, and highway robberies. The report further emphasised that the Boko Haram situation continues to be the LCB's biggest security concern, with violent extremism impacting the associated countries and hampering their capacities to provide human security.



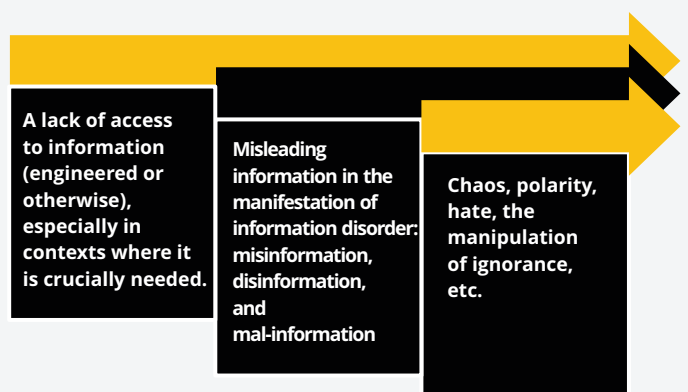
Furthermore, in the past 14 years, according to Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), more than [17 million people have been affected](#) by the crises within the Lake Chad region, with at least [6 million](#) of them displaced according to January 2024 figures by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). In line with our [earlier research](#) which found that the crises have been multifaceted and have gone far beyond the use of arms, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) maintains that the enduring nature of the conflict that has continued to [pose significant strains](#) on the livelihood, economy, and general safety of the population in the area is also intensified by this harmful information [spread on digital platforms](#). This is further compounded by the additional layers of [climate change](#), human rights abuse ([Ehiane and Ayuba, 2021](#); [Isah and Bitrus, 2021](#)), and, ultimately, the [complex state](#) of the existing information ecosystem in the quadrangle. Information, weaponized to manipulate, deceive, and propagate diverse harmful narratives, has been found to be a subtle, yet potent arsenal in the hands of non-state actors and sometimes, state actors ([Turk, 2018](#); [Desouza et al., 2020](#)). To effectively explore the extent to which deficiencies in the information ecosystem impact the persisting LCB crises, it is important to first understand the two main areas of concern: information vacuum and information disorder, as well as the link between the two.

Information Vacuum and Information Disorder

Information vacuum generally refers to a lack of access to information (engineered or otherwise), especially in contexts where it is crucially needed. This absence often worsens the severity of a given situation and may lead to the spread of incomplete, misinterpreted, or entirely false pieces of information. Within the [information](#)

[disorder ecosystem](#), information vacuum is rarely regarded as a part of the nexus, but what is undisputed is the existence of a causal link between information gaps and one or all of the three manifestations of information disorder: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information.

Although the concept of information vacuum is often discussed in relation to corporate crisis communication, it has been acknowledged that the same principles apply to various situations, including conflict contexts. For example, Verified, a UN initiative, in collaboration with Purpose, a social impact agency, “to cut through the noise around global crises and deliver critical fact-based advice and information,” defines an information vacuum as something that occurs when “there isn’t a clear consensus around an issue.” [IGI defines it](#) as “a lack of information which may exacerbate and increase the severity of a crisis and may induce rumor and gossip”. [Greenwood \(2014\)](#) explains that when there is an information vacuum, it is not benign. Instead, it is alive all the time, and by allowing it to thrive, a room for “filling in the blanks” is created. This leads to imagining, recalling, and drawing conclusions that explain the missing information. This may result in decisions based on any number of the following: error, apathy, stonewalling, or perception - most of which rely on the unavailability of facts.



Access to information is a [right](#) enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the information vacuum is a threat to that right. More so, lack of access to quality, reliable information, in a timely manner (which can be a consequence of information vacuum) is widely regarded as detrimental to the proper functioning of societies because it erodes democracy, transparency, and accountability ([Colomina, et al., 2021](#)). It also disempowers both citizens and governments from gaining access to reliable information critical to [sound decision-making](#). These detriments become even more consequential in conflict contexts because information not only shapes the actions of involved conflicting actors but also directly affects the well-being of the civilian population and influence the actions of non-combat actors like non-governmental charity organisations ([Rozanov, et al., 2021](#)).

More broadly, in the context of the agenda-setting role of the media, information available in a particular conflict can influence the policy actions of governments and institutions domestically and internationally. When gaps in the coverage of conflict persist, there is a likelihood that those gaps will be filled with speculation, assumptions, and rumours, all of which amount to information disorder. Hence, the persisting crises developing in the Lake Chad region remain a cause for concern. As such, in order to tackle them effectively, it is imperative to better understand the different causes and sources of information disorder as it relates to the crises in the region. Therefore, further research is necessary to understand the role of the information vacuum in the proliferation of information disorder and the issues the Lake Chad region is currently facing. These issues include dwindling coverage of conflict in the LCB, destruction of communication infrastructure in the LCB, literacy rate, lack of government transparency, and displacement of the region's population.

Dwindling Coverage of Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin

According to the [Centre for Information, Technology and Public Life \(CITAP\)](#), the rapid death of local journalism across the world in recent years is a major contributor to the spread of disinformation. Izquierdo Labella (2010) defined local journalism as “that which is carried out from, for, and by the same citizen environment”. [Jerónimo and Esparza \(2022\)](#) posit that this type of journalism implies a pact between the local or regional media and a clearly defined identity associated with a particular location. The community that comprises the information suppliers and receivers in that territory may be urban or rural. They are absorbed into this community and are a part of it. They have a connection to this community. Local knowledge supports this identity by giving community members the know-how they need to act as responsible citizens in this setting. In this way, local media [foster cohesion](#) in local and regional communities, inform the public about their leaders, policies, and viewpoints, and work together to fulfil the essential [duty of keeping these public office holders to account](#).

Hence, communities that lose consistent news coverage from a variety of reliable sources may experience different consequences from the knowledge void that results. Information regarding local government, elections, and other civic activities is largely collected and disseminated through local news sources. In the absence of a local news source, individuals in the community rely mostly on social media for their news, which makes them susceptible to disinformation and increases polarisation, [which puts democracy at risk](#). This is even truer for the Lake Chad region, where millions of people have been displaced, and the economic activities have been significantly depleted.

According to a media analysis carried out by [Musset \(2020\)](#) on the international coverage of the Lake Chad Basin, there was only scanty reporting of the crisis by the international media, and in cases where there was significant coverage, the scope of coverage by all media outlets was narrow. Often, the newspapers' primary focus is on attention-grabbing terrorist actions carried out by large groups and their immediate aftermath. Instead of focusing on more comprehensive systemic problems in the area, like the underlying environmental problems and inadequate local and displaced population governance, which worsen already-existing humanitarian crises and foment internal conflict. There is also a lack of emphasis on local voices and opinions in articles by most of the media channels. This is further compounded by the protracted nature of the conflict, which has made the public, as well as journalists covering the region, now suffering from compassion fatigue, having little to no desire to engage with more news about the conflict. Other factors, such as infrastructure damage, have also worsened the situation.

Destruction of Communication Infrastructure in the Lake Chad Basin

As [reported by Humangle](#), infrastructural destruction is a key part of the acts of terrorism carried out by armed groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast. The targets often include communications infrastructure like telecom towers, communication masts, and base stations. According to Onuoha (2013), over 150 base stations have been damaged by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, most of which, as reported by [Humangle](#) in 2021, have still not been rebuilt. Alongside that is the damage to

electricity, transport, and government infrastructure. In addition to that, the Nigerian military is reported to have shut down telecommunication services as part of their clampdown on terrorists in the region. This was reported by Premium Times in [2013](#) and, more recently, by Dubawa in [2021](#). This does not only curtail the work of local media organisations like radio stations, but it also hampers journalists in gathering accurate information and timely dissemination of information.

Literacy rate in the Lake Chad Basin

According to [Albright \(2016\)](#), the national education systems have already proved inadequate in terms of the services they provide to the Lake Chad region. In 2018, UNICEF [issued a warning](#), estimating that over 3.5 million children were at risk in the Lake Chad Basin, with about 1,000 schools closed or rendered inoperable as a result of violence or disturbance in north-eastern Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Other reports have it that 95.8% of adults in the region are illiterate, with 62% of children not in school, and elementary school classes typically having 75 students.

Over time, literacy levels have been shown to correlate with media literacy levels, as skills necessary to function well in one are the same as those in the other. Media literacy involves essential reading and writing skills, as well as critical thinking skills. These vital skills need to be improved upon to ensure an already dire information ecosystem in the Lake Chad Basin is not worsened.

Government lack of transparency

Since the outbreak of violence in the Lake Chad Basin over a decade ago, the need for greater transparency from both the Nigerian government and military has increased significantly. [Lavigne, et al \(2022\)](#) argue that the degree of government transparency about government actions and their results influences the public's view of transparency. However, due to people's media consumption habits and underlying beliefs about the current government or the subject, perceived openness might differ greatly from actual transparency. According to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), there are competing narratives on the counter-terrorism efforts in the northeast- This, they argue, is a result of a lack of official transparency and media access. This lack of transparency helped breed a lack of trust among members of the public, who then attempt to fill the information vacuum with rumours, conspiracy theories, and half-truths. In 2021, the [Guardian reported](#) that the lack of transparency in Nigerian military procurement resulted in assumptions and conjectures about other military actions, which also enabled a fertile environment for seeds of disinformation to be sown by insurgent groups.

Displacement

The Lake Chad region has seen decade-long conflicts, and as a result, a huge swathe of the local population has been displaced. The [International Organisation for Migration \(IOM\)](#) puts the number of those displaced at 4.5 million, across the countries of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. Ordinarily, people who are local to a particular community tend to be more knowledgeable about occurrences in their

locality and are therefore privy to subtle changes in complex contexts and are then able to offer nuanced perspectives. However, in the unfortunate event of forced displacement due to conflict and insurgency, journalists (local or otherwise) lose an important perspective that can only come from this group. Conversely, displaced communities tend to need to be more informed about their new environment. In a bid to fill the information gap, there might be an increased tendency to engage in the spread of disinformation.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how an information vacuum or lack of access to accurate information contributes to the already challenging information ecosystem in the conflict-ridden region. The exploration found an important relationship between information vacuum and information disorder. It also identified and discussed ways through which this relationship manifests.

In order to mitigate the effects of information disorder caused by these various issues relating to information access, there is the need for a cross- partnership involving government, community leaders, youths, CSOs, journalists, and all-other relevant stakeholders to address the multifaceted challenges faced by communities in the region. This is crucial because no single approach, be it military, humanitarian, or education will suffice on its own. It is a complex problem, which requires a complex solution.

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About CJID

The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) is a West African media innovation and development think-tank. Founded in 2014 as a non-governmental organisation in Nigeria, and initially known as the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), the Centre has been a leader in investigative journalism, innovation, open data, verification, promotion of the welfare and safety of journalist, elections, the freedom of information and expression. In 2020, the CJID expanded its footprint beyond Nigeria and moved into specific niches in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia. This expansion has extended to parts of Francophone Africa, including Cameroon, Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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