



**.ASSESSING THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN COMBATING  
HEALTH MISINFORMATION DURING PANDEMICS IN MINNA  
METROPOLIS**

**Leah Yebo Gana**

Federal University of Technology, Minna  
tsadoleahyebo@gmail.com

**Chisom Emeka**

World Health Organization  
chisome80@gmail.com

**Abdulsalam Mohammed Madaki**

Federal University of Technology, Minna  
a.madaki@futminna.edu.ng

**Miriam Ayinda Salubuyi (Ph.D)**

Federal University of Technology, Minna  
m.salubuyi@futminna.edu.ng

**Abstract**

*The adverse effects of misinformation on societal progress, particularly in the realm of health, are well-known. Librarians, as guardians of information, have vital role in disseminating accurate information to the public. This research paper explores the potential of the field of librarianship in countering health misinformation. The study examines existing literature on the societal role of librarians in combating misinformation. Additionally, interviews were conducted with all librarians from tertiary institutions in Minna metropolis to investigate their roles in disseminating factual information during the Covid-19 outbreak. The research explores the strategies employed by librarians to combat misinformation, the challenges they faced in this endeavour, and assesses the impact of these strategies on mitigating Covid-19 misinformation. The study delves into both the misinformation encountered by the community and the persisting beliefs in misinformation. Furthermore, it investigates the channels through which communities receive health information. The paper outlines effective initiatives within the Library and Information Systems (LIS) profession, emphasising recommendations for librarians to enhance their role in the digital age and*

*contribute successfully to the field of public health. Seven librarians from all tertiary libraries in the Minna metropolis were interviewed. Additionally, One Hundred (100) residents from ten communities were randomly selected to fill out questionnaires to ascertain the impact tertiary libraries have on misinformation in the communities. Only librarians from health institutions attempted to educate the communities, with little impact felt.*

**KeyWords:** *Covid-19 outbreak; Librarians; Libraries: Health-misinformation; Minna Metropolis; Role;*

## **Introduction**

Omeluzor et al 2022 claimed that the establishment of libraries as information centres at strategic locations in different communities, cities and academic institutions for the purpose of providing information services to support the information needs of patrons was put to the test during the discovery and spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in late 2019. During the COVID-19 outbreak, a lot of misinformation was noticed. There was a gap in how librarians could support public health by providing accurate information to the general public to reduce the tension caused by the growing misinformation

A crisis of truth is first and foremost a crisis of trust, signalling a socio-political breakdown even before an epistemic one (Cosentino, 2020 as cited in Revez, & Corujo 2021). Misinformation is a serious menace not only to democratic societies but to health as well. Fake news is a serious threat to information ecosystems, as truth is no longer related to authority, expertise or real facts, but to interpretation, perception, emotions and sentiments.

The emergence of Internet and the proliferation of social media have worsened the situation as information users now receive and communicate information without any restriction making total eradication of fake news absolutely impossible. Librarians cannot stop the spread of fake news. However, there are roles that librarians can play to help reduce or control the spread of fake news (Ebhonu & Onobrakpor 2021). Data showed that most people use social media today to get information. This is where fake news is easily spread. Librarians, especially in public and health libraries, can take advantage of social media platforms to develop interactive and engaging information dissemination strategies to provide accurate information.

Although Young et al (2021) asserted misinformation has explored across social media platforms and communities over the past few years with grave social and political implications, misinformation is still wildly spread in communities in Nigeria even off the media platforms.

### **Roles of Librarians in handling misinformation**

Ali and Gatiti (2020) itemised three dimensions of a librarian's role in a pandemic as: Promoting public health awareness by creating and disseminating information relating to preventive measures. Supporting research team, researchers and faculty by providing information regarding the latest developments, researches and literature and meeting the core needs of regular library users. According to Kaur and Kaur (2021), India is a country where libraries play a key role in promoting health information literacy and addressing gaps in health information provision. Ottosen et al. (2019) emphasised that librarians and information professionals can improve health literacy by focusing on collaboration and capacity building. Herrero-Diz and Lopez-Rufino (2021) stated the need for libraries to offer a range of resources and activities to help users' spot fake news. Health sciences librarians have a responsibility to dispel misinformation by providing accurate resources and promoting health information literacy (Dehghani, 2023)

### **Misinformation**

Misinformation has exploded across social media platforms and communities in recent times posing a public health threat to communities. Misinformation has driven misconceptions across a wide range of areas including health (Young et al 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) admitted that the coronavirus outbreak and response pandemic was accompanied by an enormous surplus of information with some being factual and some imprecise information. Albeit misinformation about is not new, many policy makers, journalists and academics emphasised the significant and devastating public health risks misinformation poses (WHO 2020: Uwalaka 2023).

### **Strategies librarians can employ in handling misinformation**

Librarians and information experts try to counteract this by only sharing reliable information. Trustworthy information may be shared with library users through institutional and personal social media accounts and platforms try to control rumours and fake news (Ali & Gatiti 2020).

Librarians can support medical staff, academics, research teams and paramedical staff by drawing attention to the latest developments regarding vaccination, diagnosis kits and relevant studies published in medical journals. All the well-known databases provide free access to articles relating to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) literature production rate has also increased during the Covid-19 pandemic phase (Ali & Gatiti 2020).

Librarians can provide virtual support to their users, such as provision of references, document delivery, literature searches and systematic reviews. Some libraries have initiated online webinar and sessions to keep in touch with their users via Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, Skype or Zoom (Ali & Gatiti 2020).

Librarians play a crucial role in countering health misinformation, particularly during a pandemic (Chieppi 2021). Various authors have highlighted strategies libraries can

employ to moderate misinformation. Tripodi et al 2023 suggested that librarians can combat misinformation by focusing on building patrons' trust and teaching effective search literacy practices. Paor and Heravi (2020) defined information literacy and community education as important means by which librarians can counter fake news. In addition, health sciences librarians have a responsibility to dispel misinformation by providing accurate resources and promoting health information literacy (Dehghani, 2023). Misinformation can be avoided by sharing reliable and necessary information to users (Chieppi, 2021). Using reliable Internet sources and organising training sessions for users to recognise false information can equip librarians to handle consumer's health questions (Benedetti, 2002). Goodsett (2023) recommended incorporating prebunking and debunking techniques into information literacy education and outreach programs. Faix and Fyn (2020) stressed the need for a comprehensive approach that includes critical thinking and source evaluation skills, as outlined in the ACRL Framework. Young (2020) suggested a research agenda to aid public libraries in developing effective community education about misinformation, which includes designing programs, creating tools and implementing interventions within political and economic contexts.

Young (2020) reiterated the need for more research on how libraries can create effective community education about misinformation, including the design of programming, development of tools and interventions in political and economic contexts. Sullivan (2019) highlighted the potential of utilising the trust in libraries to fight misinformation on social media, though this method still needs more researches.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researchers identified the limitations as follows: the sample size of 100 respondents may not be representative of the entire population of Minna metropolis. Randomly selecting residents from ten communities might not capture the diversity of the entire Minna metropolis, leading to response bias

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The role of librarians as custodians of information is to provide accurate and timely information to their communities. In times of health crisis such as disease outbreaks, librarians have a critical responsibility to communicate factual information to combat health misinformation. Although some libraries attempted to combat misinformation in certain locations, libraries were notably absent in providing these services during the last outbreak in Minna metropolis. Since libraries did not provide factual information to the community, it is important to assess the health misinformation that persists concerning COVID-19 in order to take appropriate measures to address any remaining misinformation within the communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation, disinformation, and information overload posed significant challenges to libraries, especially health sciences libraries, in their efforts to combat the crisis by providing accurate resources and health information

literacy (Dehghani and Harris, 2023). Gaps remain in understanding how libraries can create effective community education strategies to counter misinformation, as highlighted by Young et al. (2021). Given the impact of health misinformation during pandemics, this research is necessary to explore the role libraries played during the COVID-19 pandemic and to initiate an empirically grounded conversation about how libraries can enhance their efforts in combating misinformation during future health emergencies and Covid-19 misinformation still believed by communities in minna metropolis.

### **Research Questions**

This research is guided by Four (4) research questions:

1. What health misinformation did the community encounter during the COVID-19 outbreak and still believe?
2. Was there any source of information available to enlighten the community about Covid-19?
3. What specific challenges did librarians face in Minna while addressing health misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What strategies and methods did librarians in Minna employ to combat COVID-19 misinformation within the communities?

### **Methods**

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this study. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data for research question 1 and 2 from the community regarding the misinformation encountered and the communication sources from which the communities obtained information. One Hundred (100) people were randomly selected from ten (10) communities in Minna metropolis and questionnaires were administered to ten (10) participants in each community.

Interviews were conducted to gather open-ended responses from librarians regarding the strategies they employed to combat misinformation and challenges encountered, addressing research question 3 and 4. Purposive sampling was utilised to interview seven librarians from all the tertiary institutions in Minna metropolis. The Libraries include; Federal University of Technology Minna Library, National Library Niger State, Public Library Minna, School of Health Technology Library, School of Midwifery Library, New Gate University and College of Education Library.

## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

### **Research Question One**

**Table 1: Health misinformation encountered during the Covid-19 outbreak?**

<b>Misinformation</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Covid-19 virus does not exist	17	17%
Covid-19 was created to depopulate Africa	17	17%
There is no cure for Covid-19 virus	10	10%
I do not trust health workers	2	2%
Bathing salt and applying shea butter can cure the virus	53	53%
Drinking alcohol can cure the virus	1	1%
Inhaling steam cures covid-19	0	0%
Antimalarial drugs can cure covid-19	0	0%

From table 1 data reveals a significant amount of misinformation and various misconceptions about COVID-19 among the respondents. The belief that bathing salt and applying shea butter can cure COVID-19 is the most widespread misinformation, with 53% respondents holding this view. The beliefs that COVID-19 does not exist and that it was created to depopulate Africa are equally held by 17% respondents each, indicating a significant presence of conspiracy theories among the respondents. 10% of the respondents believe that there is no cure for COVID-19, reflecting a perception of the virus as an incurable disease. Only 2% respondents expressed distrust in health workers, suggesting that this particular mistrust is not very common within this group. Just 1% respondent believes that drinking alcohol can cure COVID-19, indicating that this misinformation is relatively rare. This data addresses part of research question one, identifying the misinformation that existed during the COVID-19 outbreak. These were examples of misinformation circulating that librarians were expected to develop strategies to counter by providing factual information. This serves as a blueprint for possible scenarios that may arise in the future. Developing strategies to properly educate the community is essential.

**Table 2: What Covid-19 information do you still believe?**

<u>Misinformation</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Covid-19 virus does not exist	48	48%
Covid-19 was created to depopulate Africa	18	18%
There is no cure for Covid-19 virus	8	8%
I do not trust health workers	7	7%
Bathing salt and applying shea butter can cure the virus	18	18%
Drinking alcohol can cure the virus	0	0%
Inhaling steam cures covid-19	1	1%
<u>Antimalarial drugs can cure covid-19</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0%</u>

The data about Covid-19 in Table 2 suggests significant levels of misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 among the respondents, with the most significant belief being the denial of the existence of the COVID-19 virus, held by 48% of respondents which signifies a widespread denial of the existence of the virus. 18% of the respondents still believe in the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was created to depopulate Africa, and the same number believe in the effectiveness of an incorrect remedy (bathing salt and applying shea butter). A minority of 7% of respondents have a distrust in health workers. Misinformation such as drinking alcohol, inhaling steam, or using antimalarial drugs to cure COVID-19 is not widely believed among the respondents.

Table two aims to understand the misinformation that still exists and is believed by communities in Minna metropolis. When comparing table two to table one, it is evident that even after the COVID-19 pandemic, many respondents still believe that COVID-19 does not exist. This suggests that in the event of a new health emergency, such as monkeypox, there may be a tendency for people to doubt the existence of such outbreaks.

Librarians should consider strategies to effectively educate and convince the public of the potential dangers posed by their disbelief, as it may prevent them from taking necessary precautions. Additionally, the conspiracy theory held by some respondents that “COVID-19 was a strategy to depopulate Africa” presents a challenge, as this belief may lead to resistance against outbreak responses such as vaccinations and isolation measures.

## Research Question Two

**Table 3: Did you get any source of information to enlighten you about Covid-19?**

Source of information	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	98	98%
No	2	2%

From Table 3, majority of the respondents, 98% reported having sources of information to enlighten respondents about Covid19. This suggests that most respondents have access to information or have been exposed to information about the Covid-19. Only a minority, 2%, indicated they did not have sources of information. This implies that majority should have been properly educated. This is a good response because it shows that almost all of the respondents had access to information.

**Table 4: What were your sources of information?**

Source of information	Frequency	Percentage
No source	2	2%
Radio	30	30%
Television	6	6%
Social media	43	43%
Library	2	2%
Fliers	1	1%
Jingles from government	0	0%
Multiple Sources	16	16%

From Table 4, the most utilised source of information is the social media, this highlights the significant role social media plays in information dissemination. The data also suggests radio which is a traditional source of information still holds importance with 30% of respondents indicating it as a major source of information. Librarians could utilize the most popular information sources to spread their knowledge throughout communities. They could use social media, radio, and television to circulate factual information, reducing misinformation using these communication channels.

## Research Question Three

What specific challenges were faced by librarians in Minna, while addressing health misinformation during the covid-19 pandemic?



Among the seven librarians interviewed, five reported that they encountered no challenges during the pandemic. One librarian highlighted funding as a significant issue, while another noted a low turnout of community residents due to their fear of vaccination. This is a problem that the librarians could have addressed with different strategies, but no extra effort was made to educate the communities.

Funding is often cited as a challenge to achieving success, but in this case, funding was not an issue for six out of the seven libraries. Only one library reported funding as a challenge. This suggests that it is possible to sensitize communities with little or no funds. However, librarians did not view the task of sensitization through various communication channels as their responsibility.

#### **Research Question Four**

What strategies and methods did librarian in Minna employ to combat covid-19 misinformation within the communities?

Seven librarians were interviewed, and based on their responses, five out of the seven reported that no interventions were made to address misinformation regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

The School of Health Technology Library conducted community engagement sensitization, which included definitions of COVID-19, symptoms of the virus, and preventive measures.

In contrast, the School of Midwifery Library focused solely on raising awareness among its own students. No community engagements or other communication strategies were employed to sensitize the wider community; only the students of the institution were briefed during lectures and on social media.

Contrary to the literature, the libraries in Minna Metropolis performed poorly in countering misinformation as custodians of knowledge. Only one out of the seven librarians interviewed attempted to sensitize the communities, and that attempt was inadequate since it only reached the students of the institution.

#### **Discussion and Recommendations**

This study shows that libraries and librarians played an insignificant role in combating health misinformation during the COVID-19 outbreak in Minna metropolis, as only 2% of the residents obtained information about COVID-19 from the libraries. This further reveals that the impact of libraries in circulating health information is quiet low, thus, not an effective tool in managing health misinformation and demands urgent attention. Despite librarian's responsibility of being custodians of information, only 2 out of 7 libraries attempted to curb COVID-19 misinformation in the Minna metropolis. The librarians that attempted to get rid of Covid-19 misinformation were librarians of health

institutions. It is therefore recommended that librarians should be more responsible in guiding the health information needs of people especially public and national libraries.

The researcher explored the impact libraries had on the communities by distributing questionnaires randomly to residents of 10 communities and discovered 93% of residents had attended one or more level of education which shows it will be easier for librarians to educate the community should need arise. Only 2% of respondents indicated libraries as sources of information. Public and National libraries can boost their patronage from the communities when they publicize themselves by attending to information needs of the community. It is therefore recommended that librarians should support circulating accurate information.

All the respondents encountered one or more forms of misinformation including conspiracy theories during the crisis. Which points to the need for librarians to intensify community sensitization during cases of public health outbreaks. Librarians should be proactive in handling misinformation.

Librarians still need to do more work, as 45% of the respondents still believe the COVID-19 virus does not exist. 18% still believe the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was introduced to depopulate Africa and that wrong treatment methods, such as bathing with salt and shea butter, were used.

The majority of people have a source of information, which indicates that librarians can use various sources of information to educate communities. The most common sources of information were social media and radio. Librarians can take advantage of social media to publicise genuine information.

In conclusion, while the community shows high educational attainment and access to information, substantial efforts are needed to improve the effectiveness of misinformation countermeasures and ensure accurate knowledge dissemination. Libraries and other information custodians must enhance their roles in combating misinformation to better educate the public and promote health information for informed decision-making. Like Young 2020 stated, there is a need for more research on how libraries can create effective community education about misinformation, including the design of programming, development of tools, and interventions in political and economic contexts (Young, 2020). Sullivan 2019 also proposed that future library proposals for combating misinformation must be developed and tested within a broader contemporary misinformation research program (Sullivan 2019).

Faix and Fyn (2020) anticipated Librarians can address the growing problem of misinformation by often focusing on approaches tied to the frame" Authority Is Constructed and Contextual" from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. The Framework,

however, encompasses a much more comprehensive range of skills, abilities, knowledge practices, and dispositions that can be used to recognize and avoid misinformation in today's complex media environment.

## **References**

- Ali, M. Y., & Gatiti, P. (2020). The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: reflections on the roles of librarians and information professionals. *Health information & libraries journal*, 37(2), 158-162.
- Benedetti, J. A. M. (2002). Strategies for consumer health reference training. *Health Care on the Internet*, 6(4), 63-71.
- Chieppi, M. (2021). Biblioteche e bibliotecari in sanità tra Compassionate Computing e fake news. *Biblioteche oggi*, 39, 6-13.
- De Paor, S., & Heravi, B. (2020). Information literacy and fake news: How the field of librarianship can help combat the epidemic of fake news. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 46(5), 1022-18.
- Dehghani, M., & Harris, L. (2023). Current issues and status of mis/disinformation in the health library context: a rapid literature review. *Journal of Health Information and Libraries Australasia*, 4(3), 9-25.
- Ebbonu, S. I., & Onobrakor, U. D. (2021). Combating Fake News (FN) in the Society: The Roles of Librarians.
- Faix, A., & Fyn, A. (2020). Framing fake news: Misinformation and the ACRL framework. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 20(3), 495-508.
- Goodsett, M. (2023). Applying Misinformation Interventions to Library Instruction and Outreach. *J. New Librarianship*, 8, 78.
- Herrero-Diz, P., & López-Rufino, C. (2021). Libraries fight disinformation: An analysis of online practices to help users' generations in spotting fake news. *Societies*, 11(4), 133.
- Kaur, N., & Kaur, S. (2021). Role of Libraries in Promoting Health Information Literacy in India. In *Handbook of Research on Knowledge and Organization Systems in Library and Information Science* (pp. 366-383). IGI Global.
- Omeluzor, S. U., Nwaomah, A. E., Molokwu, U. E., & Sambo, A. S. (2022). Dissemination of information in the COVID-19 era in university libraries in Nigeria. *IFLA journal*, 48(1), 126-137.
- Ottosen, T., Mani, N. S., & Fratta, M. N. (2019). Health information literacy awareness and capacity building: Present and future. *IFLA journal*, 45(3), 207-215.

- Revez, J., & Corujo, L. (2021). Librarians against fake news: A systematic literature review of library practices (Jan. 2018–Sept. 2020). *The journal of academic librarianship*, 47(2), 102304.
- Sullivan, M. C. (2019). Leveraging library trust to combat misinformation on social media. *Library & Information Science Research*, 41(1), 2-10.
- Tripodi, F. B., Stevenson, J. A., Slama, R., & Reich, J. (2023). Libraries combating disinformation: From the front line to the long game. *The Library Quarterly*, 93(1), 48-71.
- Uwalaka, T. (2023). ‘Abba Kyari did not die of Coronavirus’: Social media and fake news during a global pandemic in Nigeria. *Media International Australia*, 188(1), 18-33.
- Young, J. C., Boyd, B., Yefimova, K., Wedlake, S., Coward, C., & Hapel, R. (2021). The role of libraries in misinformation programming: A research agenda. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 53(4), 539-550.