

## Misinformation and Social Cohesion – Evaluating the Treats to Community Trust and Cooperation

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, the impact of misinformation on harmonious co-existence, social cohesion, community trust, and cooperation with many surrounding issues cannot be underestimated. Emerging academic inquiry has explored the impacts on a more comprehensive, societal scale. Notwithstanding, its influence on the community trust and cooperation across the world has remained relatively unacknowledged. This paper highlights how these impacts can affect the peace of communities, and harmonious-coexistence focusing distinctly on trust between leaders and citizens and the overall social and political dynamics and cohesion demonstrated through broader impacts. It examines the vertical versus horizontal and subjectivity versus objectivity impact of misinformation and social cohesion. The study also brought the relevance of Grimalda and Tänzer (2018) empirical work on the determinants of social cohesion and its effects on other key variables for policy making in community trust and cooperation. It found out that the proliferation of false news has potential of benefiting certain factions of the society unjustly, whether in politics, economic, or psychological domains. The paper recommended amongst others that the general public should always accept the mainstream media as an unbiased and reliable source of their information; civil society and the government should take centre-stage and bottom-up initiatives in the campaign against misinformation; community growth and development inclusivity, and improvement in reciprocal tolerance across different ethnic and social groups.*

**Keywords:** Misinformation, Social Cohesion, Community Trust, Cooperation

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## 1. Introduction

Reports of bad economic and financial news dominate the media. Even as leaders work their way out of these difficult times, the stage is set for growing anger, distrust, and revenge in the workplace— all of which can undermine change management efforts (Bies, 2010).

The rate at which social cohesion, community trust, and cooperation are disappearing in the 21st century is alarming. This situation in the view of Matema and Kariuki (2022) is due to the increased utilization of social media, which has however, also resulted in the sharing and spread of misinformation that has negative implications on the attainment of social cohesion. Misinformation comes in various forms but the most common are “fake news and cyber-propaganda” which possesses the potential of community mistrust, causing societal fragmentation and exclusion with far-reaching consequences. In precise terms, Di Napoli Dolce and Arcidiacono (2019) noted that community trust is a composite indicator used to measure community opportunities, as perceived by citizens, in addition to discovering their local culture. However, Africa is amenable to this threat of misinformation posed by social media due to poor infrastructure to support, maintain and control the quality and efficacy of information management practices on social media platforms and this has been the major challenges to social cohesion (Adegoke, 2018).

As Stockdale and Jones (2024) asserted the concepts of fake news and misinformation have recently become widely discussed—especially in the context of national politics. Suffice to say that this development is not strange. However, their impact is being increasingly felt within the world of business and management due to the increased connectedness between the business world and social media, where recent data demonstrates that 40% to 60% of adults in developed countries are now adopting as information gathering platforms (Pew Research Center, 2023; Stockdale and Jones, 2024).

It is fundamental to understand how information, when well managed, becomes the principal factor of intelligence and competitive advantage of any given formal and informal community or setting. Hence, Langdon, Pennycook, Ren and Zuckerman, (2021) posited that information management makes an essential contribution to achieving the organization's mission and strategy, affirming its business or area of operation, making its human resources and tangible resources profitable. They further added that information is so indispensable to the organizations that they often structure and classify it based on its organization, its functions and activities, that is to say, based on documentary production, information flows between departments, archiving and proof that this information constitutes. In 21st century communities and organizations, where the digital paradigm is omnipresent, it's crucial that the information manager be aware that misinformation and disinformation are real threats to quality information and that can jeopardize the success of effective information management. Through the literature review, we intend to reflect on various theoretical issues, highlighting ideas and good practices to combat the danger of this negative reality. These include the need for all employees of an organization to have media literacy skills, which can be fostered and formally provided by the institution through

lifelong learning.

In another development, Social cohesion is an important tool that ensures social, political, economic, and religious governance globally. It encompasses both an “objective” component – i.e. the tendency by individuals to connect with others and participate in political and civic activities – and a subjective component – i.e. the perceptions that others can be trusted and relied upon in case of need. “Others” encompass both other citizens and the government (Grimalda and Tänzer, 2018).

There is growing perception that social cohesion is decreasing, particularly in Western developed countries. Social divisions triggered by income, ethnicity, political parties, caste, language, gender differences or other demographic variables (Grimalda and Tänzer, 2018) thwart social cohesion. Rising levels of inequality and increased immigration undermine social cohesion, if these processes are not properly handled. Existing indicators of social cohesion show relative stability in aggregate, which is reassuring. Nonetheless, some worrying trends emerge analyzing its underlying components, particularly for what concerns acceptance of diversity and trust in governments.

Accordingly, fostering social cohesion requires dealing with both its objective and subjective components. It involves correcting individual stereotypes over other groups in society, particularly immigrants and racially diverse others, improving tolerance between social and racial groups. These are goals difficult to achieve, because stereotypes and discrimination are rooted into individuals’ basic psychological attitudes, which lead people to categorize and draw distinctions across groups. Improving social cohesion also requires facilitating participation in associations and the undertaking of community work and the implementation of policies for inclusive growth (Grimalda and Tänzer, 2018). These challenges require a comprehensive and integrated approach.

From the foregoing background, this article shall discuss the concept and implications of Misinformation and Social Cohesion, community trust and cooperation; the determinants of social cohesion and its effects on other key variables for policy making in community trust and cooperation, and vital recommendations.

## **2.0 Conceptual Clarification**

### **2.1 Misinformation and Social Cohesion**

According to Neubronner (2017), traditionally, “fake news” refers to the deliberate fabrication of information, with the intention to deceive. However, the Trump administration has labeled content that the mainstream media produces as “fake news”, regardless of factual integrity, simply because the news that was being reported portrayed the president in an unfavourable light.

Grimalda and Tänzer (2018) argued for conceptualizing social cohesion Originating from the Latin word ‘cohaerere’ (to stick, to be tied together), social cohesion refers to the sense of community and the solidarity exhibited by people of a society. Building on seminal work by

Tönnies (1887) and Durkheim (1897), a cohesive society can be defined as being “characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community and a pronounced focus on the common good” (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2013: 12). Accordingly Grimalda and Tänzer (2018) identifies and describes two different dimensions of social cohesion from literature to include:

- i. **Horizontal Vs. vertical:** The horizontal dimension looks at inter-individual relationships – such as how much trust people put in others, or the willingness to join associations. The vertical dimension focuses on relationship between the individual and a superordinate institution, such as state and government, looking for instance at how much trust citizens put in their governments.
- ii. **Subjective (or cognitive) Vs. objective (or behavioral):** Social cohesion encompasses both the perceived sense of belonging of a member to her group (subjective dimension), as well as the concrete manifestations of her attachment to (or embeddedness into) the group (behavioural dimension) (Bollen and Hoyle 1990). The perceived intimacy of a relationship is as important for an individual as the “objective” number of relationships that a person holds (Williams and Solano 1983).

Grimalda and Tänzer (2018) noted further that literature also discusses whether some shared values across community members and groups are necessary to define a society as cohesive. Although it is undeniable that all people should at least recognize the rule of law, and recognize the equal dignity of other citizens (see International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) (2018): Chapter 2), for a society to be said to be fully established and functioning, we believe that it would be problematic to incorporate the component of shared values in the definition of social cohesion. It would be controversial both to identify which set of values is foundational for the society, and to appraise the extent to which such values are shared. We emphasize instead that tolerance and respect toward the values held by different social, racial and ethnic groups is an important constituent of social cohesion. In abstract, one may also do away with the requirement of tolerance (Chan et al., 2005). One could think that a society in which two groups live segregated from each other and one dominant group imposes on the other the respect of its own values is to some extent “cohesive” – in the sense of being cohesive within each sub-group. However, we embrace the view that this type of society should be morally reprimanded in the 21st century, and therefore we also put tolerance as a necessary component of social cohesion (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2013).

From the perception of Bertelsmann (2013) and Chan et al. (2005), social cohesion components is pictured in the tale below.

**Table 1: Social Cohesion Two-by-Two Framework**

	Subjective component	Objective component
Horizontal dimension	General trust in other citizens Willingness to cooperate and help other citizens Sense of belonging to the community and identification Acceptance of diversity	Memberships in associations, trade unions, clubs etc. Community work, donations Respect for social rules
Vertical dimension	Trust in institutions Trust in leaders and public figures Perception of fairness	Civic and Political participation

**Source:** Chan et al. (2005); Bertelsmann Foundation (2013).

## 2.2 Community Trust and Cooperation

According to Kuipers (2022), humanity is made up of individual humans, the agents who make decisions about how to act. Humans organize themselves into societies. Early in human evolution, societies were small isolated bands of hunter-gatherers (Tomasello, 2019). Since then, societies have grown larger, more complex, nested and overlapping in various ways. A society gets resources from the efforts of its individual members, and the individual members are supported and protected by the physical and cultural strength of the society (Wright, 2000; Christakis, 2019). Thus, the term community can be referred to as everybody, the statutory/voluntary/business, the whole gamut, everybody who lives and works [together]." Jewkes and Murcott (1996) also sees the concept from the point of clusters of people who share certain characteristics with others e.g. residence, ethnicity, and age group. They said, the community is lots of different people, it can be a street or a social group or an age-group or whatever.

Among the assets of a society are bodies of accumulated cultural knowledge that are distributed among its individual members. This includes a great deal of "how-to" knowledge such as how to prepare specific foods and how to build specific artifacts (Henrich, 2016). The shared body of cultural knowledge also includes the ethics of the society, which helps to direct individuals away from possibly-tempting action choices, and toward actions that are better for the society in the long run, and therefore also better for the individual (Beauchamp and Childress, 2009; Fedyk,

2017).

We observe important similarities and striking variation in the content of the ethical knowledge in different societies, both across historical and pre-historical time, and across the different societies and cultures that exist around the world. Within a given society, knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next through a variety of mechanisms including imitation and explicit teaching. These imperfect learning methods introduce variations, some of which fade away while others grow, persist, and displace other beliefs. The structural similarities with Darwinian evolution suggest that cultural evolution is a real and important process complementing the properties of genetic evolution (Dawkins, 1976; Richerson and Boyd, 2005; Pinker, 2011; Buchanan and Powell, 2018).

A society gets resources from the efforts of its individual members, but those efforts can be multiplied through cooperation. Mechanisms for cooperation include teamwork, specialized expertise, division of labor, economies of scale, military organization and discipline, markets, capital investments, common infrastructure, and many others. Cooperation benefits the society as a whole, as well as the individuals directly involved (Curry et al., 2016; Curry et al., 2019). Trust and trustworthiness are widely recognized as important to the successful functioning of society (Fukuyama, 1995). A particularly important role for trust is the support of cooperation, which involves vulnerability to one's cooperative partners. Another important role of trust is to reduce complexity and uncertainty, making it feasible to make plans by focusing on only a few possible alternatives (Luhmann, 1979; Nissenbaum, 2001).

One role of the ethical principles of a society is to help individual members of the society know how to be trustworthy, and how to recognize when others are trustworthy.

**Figure 1: The Relationships among Ethics, Trust, Cooperation, and Resources for Society**



Source: Kuipers (2022).

Figure 1 summarizes some of the relationships among ethics, trust, cooperation, and resources

for society (this is not to argue that support for trust and cooperation are the only functions of ethics).

The ethical principles of a society determine what it is to be trustworthy, and thus who or what is trusted. Trust enables cooperation which produces more resources. Trusted social norms can be counted on, saving resources. The nature and degree of trust in the society determines whether the society will have a shortage or plenty of resources, and hence whether it thrives or not in future generations.

Given the centrality of trust to the processes that provide resources for society (as shown in Figure 1), if trust is eroded, society is threatened. Lack of trust decreases both willingness to cooperate and confidence in social norms, making it harder to meet threats or exploit opportunities, resulting in scarcity of resources. As societies get larger and more complex, they increasingly rely on trust—of individuals, of institutions, and of social norms. Erosion of trust and loss of resources can bring a successful, complex society to the point of collapse (Tainter, 1988; Diamond, 2005; Kuipers, 2022).

### 3. Basic Analysis

The beneficial effects of social cohesion are two-fold. Social cohesion has a direct positive effect on the quality of institutions, and thus on socio-economic and political growth and development. Hence, Summer (1988) concluded that federal intervention policies have created elaborate and complex interdependencies among state and federal governments, the private sector, and communities, and that community development requires a sociology that maps these relationships and provides explanations for changes in them. Besides, feeling included in the society and knowing that one will not be left behind in case of need has a positive effect on individual well-being, both subjective and objective.

The modern public domain is influenced by media more generally and social media more specifically (Matema and Kariuki, 2022). The implications misinformation has on social cohesion, community trust, and cooperation are therefore manifold. Ideally, the roles of media are to provide both local and international platforms for the production, dissemination, negotiation and consumption of societal meaning (Jakubowicz, 2007). According to Curran, Morley and Walkerdine (1996) and Matema and Kariuki (2022). Since the media are, in essence, tools of mass communication in any society, media is neutral, meaning it can be utilized to promote either social cohesion or fuel social conflict.

Grimalda and Tänzer (2018) paraphrased the empirical work on the determinants of social cohesion and its effects on other key variables for policy making in community trust and cooperation to include the following.

- i. **Racial diversity:** The existence of cleavages across ethnic and racial lines is often considered as the main obstacle to social cohesion. Such cleavages are based on what the social psychology literature – particularly Social Identity – identifies as a key

component of human psychology, i.e. the tendency to categorize people into groups, to identify with one group and to draw comparisons across groups. Racial diversity offers a very strong group demarcation. At the cognitive level, identification of race occurs even faster than identification of gender or age in human brains.

- ii. **Economic Inequality:** This demonstrate a generally negative impact of income inequality on horizontal trust. This result may be due to lack of optimism that one will benefit from societal progress. Interestingly, evidence has been provided that immigration has a negative effect on social cohesion only in countries with high levels of economic inequality.
- iii. **Education:** A positive relationship between education and social cohesion has been empirically confirmed. The reason is that creating a mutual identity and facilitating cooperation within the society is one of the main purposes of public education.
- iv. **Historical Events:** In line with the idea that cultural values may be very persistent over time, there is also evidence that historical events influence social cohesion in the long term. Nowadays trust is still lower among ethnic groups in Africa which were most affected by slave trade in the past. Likewise, Northern Italian cities with more inclusive political structures in the medieval still possessed higher levels of social capital nearly a thousand years later.

From the foregoing analysis, there is substantial societal consequences of fake news during major events like politics and major national debate on existential issues. Thus, Plikynas, Rizgeliene and Korvel (2025), pictured the political events like the US 2016 elections and Brexit, with a specific emphasis on their potential threat to democracies. They argued from literature that:

...dissemination of misinformation can heavily influence democratic discussions, leading to societal confusion and potential instability. The spread of fake news on platforms, particularly during major events like the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, carries notable societal ramifications, including financial, political, and emotional. Instances like the anti-vaccine misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the importance of addressing the challenge of fake news.

The broad challenges posed by fake news include “the potential to shift genuine news dynamics, influence public perceptions, and even affect tangible events such as elections. Events such as the “Pizzagate” tweets during the US elections provide tangible evidence of the consequences of misinformation. The proliferation of false news can potentially benefit certain factions unjustly, whether in political, economic, or psychological domains.”

#### 4. Suggestion for further Studies

The challenges with misinformation and social cohesion as treats to community trust and cooperation calls for the removal and putting an end to the spread of factually wrong

information by the media, which often feed into divisive stereotypes of the society which this study did a limited work, thereby creating the need for a further research. Though this is also a difficult task, due to the possibility of endangering personal and press freedom of expression, individual judgment is often affected by values and stereotypical beliefs.

## **5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

The importance of engaging in a public dialogue with the media, in order to discard the transmission of the so-called “fake news” cannot be relegated to the background. This is consequent upon the fact that credible information ensures social cohesion and eliminate treat to community trust and cooperation. Moreover, the rapid diffusion of social media has strongly aided the dissemination of the so-called “fake news” – the artefactual diffusion of false facts, mainly to shift national socio-economic, political and electoral harmony. However, defining strategies to intervene on this issue is complicated because of the risk of limiting freedom of expression. Hence, the Better Internet Campaign (BIC), the review and amendment of broadcasting laws, and the introduction of the Cybersecurity Professional Scheme will better prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. Nevertheless, preventing the spread of misinformation will also require understanding the effects of disseminating news or information that is not properly validated. Consequently, understanding how to discern and negotiate issues viewed online and actively engaging in fact-checking will help prevent the misalignment of perspectives, assist in impeding the spread of malicious content and also the spread of misinformation that could strain inter-community, racial and religious ties.

Based on the events occurring elsewhere in the world, fake news and the spread of misinformation online will continue to pose even greater treats to community trust and cooperation. Therefore, to safeguard the social cohesion, community trust and cooperation the necessity for new dialogues and the initiation of more germane ideas to tackle the challenges of misinformation are required. Following the above therefore, the recommendations are put forward.

- i. The general public are counselled to accept the mainstream media as an unbiased and reliable source of information henceforth. Institutions of public informations should build on their foundations as credible information platforms and uphold probity standards in a rapidly changing news landscape.
- ii. In many cases, civil society and bottom-up initiatives should take center stage, while governments take on a subsidiary facilitating role on ensuring the above suggested recommendation campaign.
- iii. There should be emphasis and compliance with a strategy of inclusive growth. This is a situation where development-benefits are designed;
  - to benefit all economic and social groups in the population, leaving no one behind;
  - as a comprehensive notion of well-being that is not limited to income but looks at

other aspects of objective and subjective well-being, such as in particular individuals' inclusion in the society.

Several variables like access to education at all levels and reduction in economic and social inequality are conducive to inclusive growth and determinants that improve social cohesion.

- iv. There should be facilitation of the opportunities for citizens' political engagement and improvement of the institutional reception to bottom-up initiatives. The underlying assumption is that individuals derive a positive sense of inclusion from actually taking part in democratic activities, particularly voting.
- v. There should be improvement in reciprocal tolerance across different ethnic and social groups.

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