



DISTORTING NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS? HOW DISINFORMATION WAS DEPLOYED IN 2023

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The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria fits almost perfectly into the words of French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, who said “the more things change, the more they remain the same”. A lot has changed in the Nigeria disinformation landscape, but a lot more has remained the same. Building on work done to improve the quality of information in the digital ecosystem in the 2019 election, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) established an Election War Room, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office of the United Kingdom, to tackle information disorder during the 2023 general election. The team monitored all major social media networks before, during and shortly after the election, publishing over 150 fact checks and dozens of explainers over the course of the project.

This report highlights key trends observed in the proliferation of disinformation before and during Nigeria’s 2023 election. It argues that false and misleading information on social media has the potential to affect voter behaviour which in turn can lead to voter apathy, suppression, election interference, and a general distrust of the electoral system.

It details the tactics used by political actors and supporters to get this distorted information into circulation. It argues that for the first time in Nigeria’s recent electoral history, we saw the use of fact checks from credible organisations to campaign against their opponents, leveraging the trust the voting public has in fact-checkers to improve their chances at the polls. We also saw, in a continuation from previous polls, the use of synthetic and manipulated media to drive disinformation campaigns and an evolution of the sophistication of audio leaks was also observed, with manipulated audio used to construct conversations between politicians to push certain narratives.

The quest for credible information was complicated by parody and imposter accounts. Used to disseminate false information these accounts, often posing as credible sources of information, used their appearance to gain trust from unsuspecting users. The report also documents an increase in the number of new online ‘news’ websites that propagated political and ethno-religious disinformation in the build-up to Nigeria’s 2023 general elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission was a major target of misinformation and disinformation, with efforts to discredit it a feature of all leading political parties’ digital campaigns. Spokespersons of all the leading political parties were also to the fore in such efforts, deliberately and continuously alleging, insinuating, and outrightly spreading false claims against candidates of opposing political parties. They, and party supporters, were also adept at creating narratives that did not clearly point in a particular direction but subtly suggested it, getting people to interpret issues based on their pre-existing beliefs and biases.



The response to this deluge of disinformation from social media companies continues to be limited. They were largely absent, or very slow, in responding to the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation during the 2023 elections. In an effort to propose ways forward the report concludes with some suggested recommendations that focus on greater proactive and collaborative engagement from social media companies, continued fact checking, wider public education efforts and more responsive and transparent official communication.





BACKGROUND

Nigerians went to the polls in February and March 2023 to vote candidates into 1,489 elective positions from the presidency to the state house of assembly. Nigerians voting in the 2023 elections seem to have chosen a different path forward for their politics. In the 2015 and 2019 elections, only the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and former ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) received more than a percentage point; the other 12 parties in 2015 and 71 parties in 2019 could not poll more than a single percentage point of the votes cast. The states won were split between these two parties, and the contest was effectively a two-horse race. However, the February 2023 presidential results painted a very different picture of Nigeria's future. Besides the dominant APC and PDP, Rabi'u Kwankwaso's New Nigeria People's Party and Peter Obi's Labour Party carried major states.

The National Assembly polls in March also produced greater political plurality, with seven parties represented in the incoming senate and eight in the next house of representatives. With 33 seats yet to be declared, owing to inconclusive declarations and yet unscheduled supplementary elections, no party can lay claim to an absolute majority in the 360-seat house of representatives. Contestation also remains over the electoral outcome itself with the second and third placed presidential candidates contesting the credibility of the process and the outcome in the courts.

Following on from the 2023 elections it remains clear that Nigerian politics is dominated more by personalities than party ideologies. Furthermore the 2023 elections saw a much greater focus on ethnic and religious identities than in previous polls, with the three leading candidates for the presidency split between the country's three largest ethnic groups. Information disorder built on this political context, weaving narratives designed to mislead the public or to advance a particular candidate's cause.





2023 DISINFORMATION TRENDS

Free and fair elections are a crucial component of democratic societies. They can boost legitimacy and acceptance of government as well as ensure accountability. But an increasing threat modern democracies must grapple with to ensure credible polls is disinformation. Disinformation, the willful dissemination of false and misleading information with the intent to deceive or manipulate, is increasingly being used to attempt to subvert the credibility of elections and electoral processes. False and misleading information proliferating effortlessly on social media has the potential to affect voter behaviour. This, in turn, can lead to voter apathy, suppression, election interference, and a general distrust of the electoral system.

The campaign

Following the amendment to the Electoral Act in 2022, Nigerian politicians had a longer span for the campaign period during which their supporters could sell their candidates ideology and manifesto for the February and March 2023 general election. But they focused more on personal attacks on rivals instead of issue-based campaigns. Verbal clashes between spokespersons of leading political parties were laced with misinformation about political opponents and the candidates they were supporting. This was further aided by the fact that three of the four frontline candidates in the presidential election were PDP members until a few months before the general election.

Although both Rabiun Kwankwaso (NNPP) and Peter Obi (Labour Party) defected from the PDP to stand on the ticket of other parties prior to the polls propagandists played on this arrangement and circulated various media files that both Kwankwaso and Obi had stepped down for Atiku Abubakar as election day approached. A video of Peter Obi campaigning for Atiku, which dated back to 2019 when he was Atiku's running mate surfaced online and was shared widely. Similarly, many anticipated that Kwankwaso would bow to pressure from northern leaders¹ and drop his candidacy in support of Atiku. It was believed that the candidate of northern pedigree stood a better chance if either of them stepped down for one another. Propagandists capitalised on this narrative to misinform voters that the leader of the Kwankwaso movement had stepped down for Atiku Abubakar.

Another notable pre-election trend worth mentioning was the partisan conduct of some traditional media organisations. Before the general election in 2023, Nigerian media outlets were urged to report impartially². However, because so many news outlets are influenced by various political interests, with some owned by prominent political figures, they were unable to conceal their political allegiance. For example, the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) sanctioned TVC News for not offering equal coverage to other political parties besides from the

¹ <https://independent.ng/northern-leaders-optimistic-kwankwaso-will-step-down-for-atiku/>

² <https://von.gov.ng/2023-election-media-urged-to-be-non-partisan/>



APC – TVC is owned by Bola Tinubu. Use of highly biased language and coverage that violated the NBC code of conduct was also proven in several instances.

The NBC also sanctioned TV stations³ for jettisoning professionalism, allowing politically-inciting language, and displaying partisanship towards either of the frontline presidential candidates. Arise News was reprimanded after it shared a false press release that claimed that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was probing a court case involving APC presidential candidate Bola Tinubu in the United States without first verifying the authenticity of the letter, which turned out to be false. Guests or commentators on these channels were also found in regular breach of standards. For example, during the broadcast of the PDP presidential rally in Sokoto state, Dino Melaye referred to the vice-presidential candidate of APC, Kashim Shettima as GCOB, meaning Grand Commander of Bandits. NBC regarded this as a breach of the body's code of conduct and sanctioned Arise TV.

Election day

While disinformation is particularly rife during the campaign and is the focus of many fact-checking campaigns, election-day disinformation is relatively under-examined. There was a deluge of information surrounding the election process on the day itself, much of it laced with disinformation, and designed to change a voters mind at the last minute or reinforce narratives that the election was rigged. Falsehoods included reports that former President Olusegun Obasanjo⁴ barred the entry of approximately 1.5 million Chadian citizens who attempted to enter Nigeria to vote for the APC presidential candidate; that elections did not take place in "Biafra-land" in the country's southeast; or that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission had raided the home of APC presidential candidate Bola Tinubu⁵ to investigate possible vote-buying.

As citizens began reporting results at the polling unit level some shared incorrect results that did not originate from their polling units online. One falsified results sheet, re-shared by Dele Momodu,⁶ a PDP spokesperson, averred that the Labour Party presidential candidate's running mate, Datti Baba-Ahmed, received just five votes in his polling unit. This was part of a strategy to foretell Labour's defeat and undermine Datti's political clout in the north. The verified INEC results showed that he actually received 54 votes in his unit. In general, as election results were still being collated nationwide, each party sought to create a narrative that it was leading the race to be president to give basis to the narrative that malpractice was the only way they would be denied victory. Linked to this, and to discredit the results being uploaded on the INEC's result viewing portal (IREV), one party influencer claimed that the portal had been compromised. This was investigated and proven to be false.⁷

³ <https://punchng.com/broadcast-code-nbc-fines-arise-tv-tvc-n2m/?amp>

⁴ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=18992>

⁵ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19024>

⁶ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19081>

⁷ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19102>



TROUBLING TACTICS

The politics and politicisation of fact checking

Most of the misinformation and disinformation making the rounds online during the 2023 elections was created to favour candidates of either the APC or LP based on analysis of the 150 fact checks published by the CDD War Room during the election campaign, 114 of which had party-driven political undertones. Our analysis found that 52.6% originated from LP members or supporters, 28.1% were pushed by the APC, and another 19.3% were from the PDP.

The data shows that APC spent more time promoting itself than attacking opposition, while the reverse was the case for PDP, which spent more time attacking the opposition than promoting its own candidate. The LP appeared to take a more balanced approach. Our analysis finds that 25% of false claims made by the LP were designed to promote Peter Obi, its presidential candidate, while 25% aimed to discredit the APC and the PDP candidates, with more attention given to the former than the latter. The other 50% targeted a delegitimising of the electoral process and its results. 23% of false information shared by the PDP and its supporters was aimed at promoting Atiku Abubakar, while 64% was aimed at discrediting the LP or APC – both the parties and their presidential candidates. In the case of APC 25% of claims fact checked by CDD aimed to delegitimise LP, while only 12.5% were aimed at Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. About 9% of incorrect claims made by PDP was aimed at delegitimising the process. An estimated 34% of false information shared by the APC was to promote the party and its candidate, Bola Tinubu. APC was the only one of the three major parties to share disinformation in an attempt to legitimise the electoral process.

In general, our analysis finds that 36.8% of the misinformation circulated by parties during the election was to delegitimise an opponent, while 34.2% was targeted at promoting their party's own candidate. Just 13.2% of the disinformation and misinformation aimed to undermine the electoral process. Social media influencers in support of all three parties peddled most of this false information online rather than party members who supported its circulation to varying degrees.

It was also notable how politicians sought to take advantage of the fact checking work of reputable organisations in the 2023 general election to further discredit political opponents. CDD's Election War Room reported several instances where political handlers and campaign council members cherry-picked our fact-checks to show political opponents sharing misinformation to discredit their candidacy. Days before the presidential elections, a social



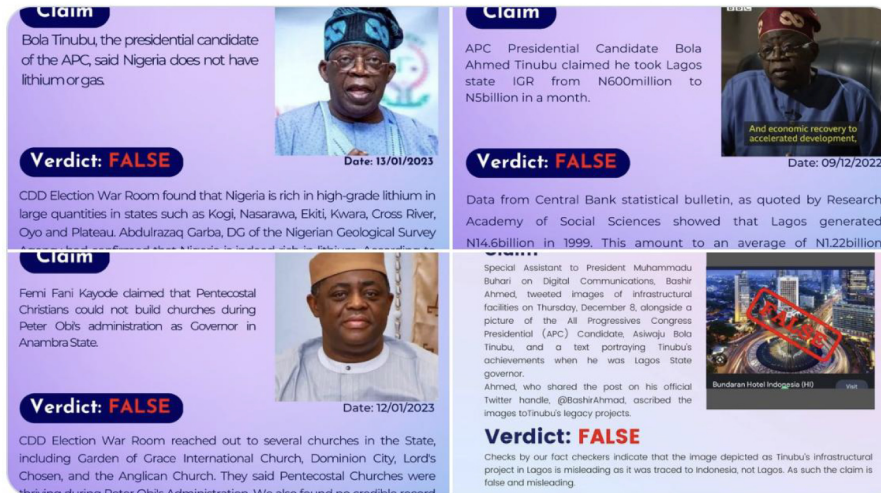
media influencer and staunch supporter of Peter Obi, shared eight of our fact checks⁸ alongside the caption “What APC [All Progressives Congress] cannot lie about, does not exist.” The tweet, which was seen by nearly 600,000 people, sought to leverage the trust the voting public has in independent fact checkers for political gains.



Rinu Oduala 🗳️🇳🇮🇵🇸
@SavvyRinu



What APC cannot lie about, does not exist.



9:07 AM · Feb 12, 2023 · 598.8K Views

5,098 Retweets 180 Quotes 9,467 Likes 187 Bookmarks

The same approach was used by the APC, who used fact checks to try and discredit the candidate of the PDP. Festus Keyamo, a spokesperson of the APC Presidential Campaign Council, shared multiple fact checks made in response to statements made by, or stories about, PDP aspirant Atiku Abubakar. In one instance,⁹ he said “Atiku caught pants down in another lie! A case of wanting to lie your way to the Presidency!”. We noted many other cases of politicians using fact checking as a tool for delegitimising their opponents and promoting their candidate. This is a trend to watch out for in future elections.

Parody and impostor accounts

With the anonymity of the internet, it's easy for anyone to create an identity and disseminate false information. The use of parody and imposter accounts to disseminate false information is growing as a result with these accounts often posing as credible sources of information, using their appearance to gain trust from unsuspecting users.

A parody account is an account that uses someone else's name or likeness to mock, ridicule, or otherwise lampoon them. An imposter account is an account that pretends to be someone else to deceive others. Both types of accounts can be used to spread misinformation. For example,

⁸ <https://twitter.com/savvyrinu/status/1624681579300761605?ts=48&ct=WmIQ0veeEFNX4xq01M8MVA>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/fkeyamo/status/1617181227907272705>





if there is a political candidate who is very divisive a parody account might be created in their name with the intention of spreading false or inflammatory information. An imposter account might also be created posing as a supporter of the candidate to make them seem more popular than they are. In either case, the goal is to undermine reality.

At the height of the 2023 presidential election campaign, CDD Election War Room noticed a surge of multiple social media accounts claiming to be prominent figures who could in some way alter or shape the election to suit their narrative. On Facebook, we found 77 parody accounts claiming to be one of the three top candidates in the presidential elections. These accounts disseminated claims and twisted narratives to suit their agenda and in doing that, they lured unsuspecting voters into believing them.

Other prominent Nigerians were also the targets of impostors. On 2 January 2023, a Twitter account with over 81,000 followers, that looked like it belonged to former military leader, Ibrahim Babangida, was used to post a number of [tweets](#)¹⁰ expressing support for former president Olusegun Obasanjo's endorsement of the LP presidential candidate, Peter Obi.

"Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo will forever be a true elder statesman and a boss in the military. No serving General in the Nigerian Army today joined the military earlier than 1982. By then, Obasanjo had already finished his military career. I respect him a lot, with his endorsement"

The tweet gained over 20,000 likes and more than 800,000 interactions and views. Its reach was amplified by LP supporters who banked on the fact that a prominent figure had endorsed their principal. It changed the dynamic of the playing field as word spread both offline and online that two former military heads of state had endorsed Obi, the candidate of what was viewed as a 'minority' party. However, the account had 'parody' written in its bio. But this either went unnoticed or ignored by staunch Obi supporters.

Another such occurrence happened after the 2023 presidential election. Femi Fani-Kayode, spokesperson of the APC Presidential Campaign Council, quoted a tweet allegedly made by the LP vice-presidential candidate, Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed. The tweet claimed that LP won the presidential elections in 19 states, and what INEC had announced was false. Fani-Kayode, on the basis of the tweet, called for the arrest of Baba-Ahmed using discriminatory language. But the tweet was from a parody account¹¹ that had nothing to do with the LP vice-presidential candidate.

¹⁰ https://twitter.com/General_Ibbro/status/1610046403039961088?s=20

¹¹ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19354>





Synthetic and manipulated media

Synthetic and manipulated media entails the use of simple or sophisticated tech tools to edit images, videos and audio files, for the purpose of manipulating or changing their original meaning. Various political camps and affiliates shared videos or audio-visuals of ‘supposed plots’ with tags such as ‘alleged’, ‘leaked’, and ‘revealed’. These supposed plots when fact-checked nearly always came out ‘doctored’ or ‘manipulated’; an example of deception carefully planned and executed.

On the eve of the presidential elections, audio ascribed to Atiku Abubakar the presidential flagbearer of the PDP began making rounds online. The audio allegedly showed Atiku, alongside his running mate, Ifeanyi Okowa and the governor of Sokoto state, Aminu Tambuwal, discussing how to rig the election. But when the CDD Election War Room **analysed the audio-visual**¹² it found it to be an ensemble of various audio files containing the voices of the persons in question but edited to spread a false narrative. Another example from just a few days before the election was a **viral audio-visual**¹³ which claimed to be a leak, showing how Nyesom Wike, the governor of Rivers state, planned to sway election results in his favour by compromising INEC staff. However, the leaked audio was traced to a YouTube clip from six years ago that had nothing to do with the 2023 elections.

Manipulated visual media was also widely used pre and post-election to distort information. Peter Obi was the **victim**¹⁴ when Adamu Garba, a former presidential aspirant and member of the APC accused Obi of affinity with the defunct republic of ‘Biafra’. On 26 January Garba posted a distorted photo of Obi eating a Nigerian delicacy with drinks said to carry the Biafran trademark. Like many other false claims, CDD Election War Room found **the image to be manipulated**.¹⁵ Whilst following the presidential polls, former president Olusegun Obasanjo was said to have arrived at the INEC collation centre in Abuja with the original result sheets of the 2023 election. The images, when **fact checked**¹⁶, and although they were revealed to be original images, they had been manipulated to fit the postulated narratives.

New online ‘news’ websites

False information is spread through online media **four times as much**¹⁷ as it is spread via traditional media. In recognition of this major political actors have adopted online news media as an instrument used to push narratives that suit their interests. In our monitoring of the pre-election information ecosystem, CDD’s Election War Room found an increase in the number

¹² <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=18954>

¹³ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19208>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/adamugarba/status/1618013905154080770?s=20>

¹⁵ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=17983>

¹⁶ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=19134>

¹⁷ <https://onlinedegrees.und.edu/masters-cyber-security/tips-for-students-on-how-to-identify-fake-news/>





of new online ‘news’ websites that propagated political and ethno-religious disinformation in the build-up to Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

But this political strategy of creating news websites ahead of the elections did not start with the 2023 elections; it is a recurring feature of Nigerian politics. In 2011, 2015, 2019 elections, online newspapers were created for the sole purpose of politicking; ahead of the 2015 election, the minister of petroleum floated a newspaper called **The Union**¹⁸ which strongly supported then president, Goodluck Jonathan, but after Jonathan lost and the minister was out of office, the ‘newspaper’ folded. In situations where the financial backer of such news outlets fails in the elections, the newspaper is seen to have served or failed in its purpose, and as such, it loses relevance.

Table 1: Newly established online media

S/N	News Website	Date Created	Created By	Candidate supported	Social media followers
1.	Lagos Today	January, 2022	Imonitie Aregbeyen (Kaduna)	Bola Tinubu	2,000
2.	Reportera	July, 2022	Reportera NG (Imo)	Peter Obi	11,000
3.	The Link News	July, 2022	Adams Yahaya (FCT)	Bola Tinubu	1,400
4.	Prose Nigeria	July, 2022	Unknown (FCT)	Atiku Abubakar	1,000
5.	Gist Digest	September, 2022	Unknown (FCT)	Peter Obi	-
6.	Igbo Times Magazine	November, 2022	Unknown (Iceland)	Peter Obi	141,000
7.	Podium Reporters	Created earlier but repurposed in August, 2022	Unknown (US)	Bola Tinubu	7,200

Lagos Today was created by Imonitie Aregbeyen, a web developer in Kaduna state. The address used for the registration was the Nigerian Union of Journalists office in the state. Reportera, which was notorious during the election for partisan fact-checking, did not register its website with anyone’s name but used the organisation's name. The address used is Owerri, Imo state, in southeast Nigeria. Two of these websites were registered in the United States and Iceland suggesting potential diaspora involvement.

¹⁸ <https://dailypost.ng/2013/10/23/allison-madueke-establishes-the-union-newspaper-to-pay-reporters-n250000-monthly/>



Igbo Times Magazine, the Icelandic registered entity that was renamed in October 2022 having previously been called “**King Ejiblinks**¹⁹”, published some of the most viral and divisive disinformation shared throughout the election cycle. For example, it claimed that N400 billion of the new naira notes were found in the home of the APC candidate a few days before election, a claim that was **found to be false**²⁰. While these websites did not have significant following on social media, apart from Igbo Times Magazine, the parties involved pushed whatever disinformation they came up with across social media platforms to reach millions of people online. It is likely that a majority of these new, ‘news’ websites will fold up before the end of 2023. Those that do make it past the six month mark will be repurposed to serve other functions, such as revenue generation. Reportera has already begun its pivot into a lifestyle website. But they have already served their primary purpose.

The distortion of facts was a major way through which online news websites contributed to the disinformation that shaped the 2023 general elections. They were used to churn out reports containing photos and videos from incidents taken out of context or made to push entirely false narratives. These include footage from previous election seasons being reported as though it was recent and unrelated incidents tilted toward the 2023 elections. There were several instances where key players in the political arena were falsely quoted as **having made certain statements**²¹, some of which were against the positions of such persons in the 2023 race. The reports were widely circulated without verifiable and credible sources but often went viral because they tapped into the existing biases of different political groups. The NBC does not regulate the online space in Nigeria meaning that there are no sanctions for online newspapers and blogs who create and spread falsehoods.

Spokespersons as vehicle of disinformation

One of the trends observed by the CDD Election War Room during the elections is the increased rise in the spread of disinformation by official spokespersons of the various political parties. Spokespersons should help in the spread of legit, verifiable information to aid the peaceful process of the elections. However, leading political spokespersons are significant shapers of the fake news ecosystem. Spokespersons of the various political parties deliberately and continuously alleged, insinuated, and outrightly spread false claims against candidates of opposing political parties. Up until the day scheduled for the presidential and senatorial elections, these spokespersons continued to peddle misinformation and disinformation via their various personal social media platforms. And they have continued to do so in its aftermath with hard to measure, but likely significant, impacts.

¹⁹ https://web.facebook.com/actoredochie/about_profile_transparency

²⁰ <https://www.efcc.gov.ng/efcc/news-and-information/news-release/8915-efcc-did-not-raid-tinubu-s-home>

²¹ <https://cddfactcheck.org/?p=18202>





Barely two months after his appointment as the official spokesperson of the PDP, Dino Melaye posted an old video²² of LP presidential candidate Peter Obi ‘begging’ Nigerians to vote for the PDP. The war room fact-checked the video²³ and found out that it was from 2019 when Obi was on the same ticket as Atiku. Dele Momodu, Director of Strategic communications of the PDP, continuously peddled misinformation against the APC and its candidates to his more than 800,000 Instagram followers. In December 2022, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was invited to Chatham House where he gave a lecture and answered questions from the audience. However, in answering these questions, Tinubu deferred to some members of his team to provide answers, a response that sparked criticism, mockery, and in the case of Momodu, outright falsehoods. He claimed that a ‘political analyst’ affiliated to Chatham House had described this as a “red flag and absurd” and that this was the first time in his career he saw a situation where a presidential candidate, who should be selling himself to his country and the world, could not answer the questions himself. There is no evidence to support these claims.

APC officials deployed a similar strategy. In January 2023, Festus Keyamo tweeted²⁴ that Peter Obi was considering stepping down for Atiku Abubakar, the presidential candidate of the PDP. Femi Fani-Kayode, who served as the director of special media projects and new media of the Tinubu/Shettima Presidential Campaign Council, was also involved in the sharing of falsehoods appearing on television he made countless claims, including that Peter Obi, who is Catholic, made sure Pentecostal Christians could not build churches in Anambra state while he was governor. The claim was found to be incorrect. Barely two weeks before the presidential election, both Festus Keyamo and Fani-Kayode shared photos which they claimed were from an APC rally in Sokoto state. Checking the images using Google Lens, the CDD War Room discovered that the picture was a viral image first posted in 2021 by aerial photographer Colin Hinkle²⁵ at the Lollapalooza Musical Festival in Chicago, United States.

LP spokesperson, Kenneth Okonkwo, was no different. He shared multiple pieces of disinformation to enhance the position of his party’s candidate. Before the polls, he claimed non-Yoruba names were being removed from the INEC register in Lagos, a claim CDD fact checkers found to be false. Post-elections, he also shared multiple claims about election results that **turned out to be false**²⁶.

The think-for-yourself theory

In the 1994 book “Descartes Error”, neuroscientist António Damásio describes humans²⁷ as “not thinking machines but feeling machines that think.” Damásio was trying to explain that

²² https://twitter.com/_dinomelaye/status/1586518192771457027

²³ <https://cddfackcheck.org/?p=17153>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/fkeyamo/status/1617910389727199233?s=20&ct=bKKzNxoThsCmtZsT9L9Rjw>

²⁵ <https://africa.businessinsider.com/news/a-photo-showing-the-mostly-maskless-crowd-at-llollapalooza-2021-is-being-compared-to/76xbj7h>

²⁶ <https://cddfackcheck.org/?p=19158>

²⁷ <https://instituteofpr.org/part-one-not-thinking-machines-feeling-machines-think/>





the human brain uses emotions as stamps and lifts that not only enable them to remember and reference situations but also to distinguish good and bad as well as draw up conclusions. Emotions are often formed through personal experiences or the experiences of others and thus can be a strong basis for bias. One very dangerous but subtle narrative being pushed by political actors in this election is what CDD's Election War Room has called the "think-for-yourself" theory. This narrative relies on the strength of perceptions, knowing that Nigerians already have biases on certain issues. Using this to their advantage, political actors create a narrative that does not clearly point in a particular direction but subtly suggests it.

During the 2023 political season we saw this approach being employed by various political actors against their opponents. A good example of this surrounds the identity of the LP Lagos governorship candidate, Gbadebo Rhodes Vivour. When he began gaining momentum as a worthy opponent, narratives focused on his ethnicity emerged. He was accused of being Igbo, when he is in fact Yoruba, although his wife and mother are both Igbo. This was part of a concerted effort by supporters of the ruling candidate to tap into sentiments, circulating widely, that Yoruba natives were the only group with the right to govern the state. In this and other cases, an influencer can share information that is outrightly false, but when the information begins gaining traction, they delete it, although the information keeps spreading, with no apparent tie to the said influencer.

Another example was a tweet shared about Peter Obi allegedly giving N2 billion to church leaders to support his candidacy. The story immediately went viral, but the source tweet was deleted and although the claim was found to be false, the religious and political bias in the minds of the people continued to spread the disinformation that the influencer created. The same applies to photos of the vice president-elect, Kashim Shettima, eating on a mat with five men whose appearance resembled that of Fulani herdsmen. The picture generated reactions that accused him of working with terrorist groups. Despite this being fact checked²⁸ and ultimately dismissed for lacking evidence the perception of Shettima being a terrorist apologist still holds amongst many Nigerians. The think-for-yourself theory can be more effective than a blatant accusation as it can permeate into the way people interpret other issues based on their beliefs and biases.

²⁸ <https://dailytrust.com/fact-check-did-shettima-dine-with-boko-haram-terrorists/>





ABSENT SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

The number of active social media users in Nigeria rose from 27 million, in 2019, to 36 million ahead of the 2023 elections. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok all contribute significant numbers of registered users to that total. With more people using social media as their go-to place for information about almost everything, including politics, and its increasing overlap with offline media means that the social media space plays a big role in how Nigerians interpret elections. However, our conclusion for the 2023 Nigeria's general elections has been that the social media companies were largely absent in responding to the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation.

In August 2022, the team at Twitter Africa team had helped in tackling misinformation on the platform during the general election in Kenya. They **labelled false election results**²⁹, and other forms of misleading and dangerous information on the platform. For the Nigerian election six months later, nothing of sort was done although there were extenuating circumstances. Just before the election, Elon Musk bought Twitter and fired more than half of its employees, including most members of the Africa office, which was set up about a year before the takeover. Limited capacity was perhaps to explain for the platform's lack of prompt public facing action in response to CDD Election War Room's reporting of hundreds of handles and tweets we found to be misleading around the elections. Despite making several hundred reports only three Twitter accounts were suspended, and six accounts saw select Tweets deleted.

For instance, we reported an account and tweet falsely claiming one candidate in the presidential election had stepped down for another. We reported the tweet several times, with the last report on 24 February 2023 – a day before the presidential poll. Twitter only responded over three weeks later on 21 March to state that the tweet was in violation of its user guidelines and that action had been taken against the tweet and account. But by this time the disinformation had served its purpose. Other content was subsequently removed, but only after the election had been concluded.

TikTok held major town hall-style conversations on the election and promised collaboration with the players in the ecosystem, including INEC, the National Orientation Agency, and Africa Check. But CDD flagged numerous TikTok video sharing misinformation during the election, that were not actioned by the platform. This was a familiar issue encountered in our monitoring of the responsiveness of platforms throughout the election campaign period which could be characterised as limited at best. Slow or non-existent responses from social media

²⁹ <https://citizen.digital/news/twitter-flags-top-kenyan-leaders-over-potentially-misleading-election-information-n303821>



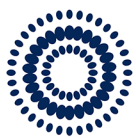


companies meant that a lot of misinformation continued to circulate in ways that affected the general elections.

KEY LEARNINGS

Based on our observations of the election disinformation ecosystem and the tactics being deployed the following steps can be taken to combat misinformation and support the implementation of a free and fair election:

- By disseminating accurate official information in a timely fashion, government agencies can close the communication gap between itself and the populace, which reduces the space for disinformation to flourish. For example, INEC needs to be more responsive to misinformation and disinformation about the election and to work in partnership with media and fact checking partners to set the narrative.
- Citizens should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify false information as they are the primary vehicles for disinformation dissemination. Making more citizens informed and discerning consumers of information can reduce the proliferation of falsehoods.
- Fact checking efforts are most effective when they begin operating well ahead of an event, like an election, as this ensures they understand the political landscape and can start flagging trends and false narratives for voters to look out for before voting takes place. They can also build trust with citizens as a credible source for information.
- Partnerships and sustained engagements between fact checkers, civil society and major social media platforms is essential for combating information disorder on the platform. A clear channel for local actors to communicate directly with social media companies to support quick action on dangerous and misleading posts can mitigate threats that do emerge. Local experts' greater understanding of a country's context, and language, is vital in improving weak content moderation efforts.



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