



REPORT ON WEST AFRICA REGIONAL COUNTERING DISINFORMATION PROGRAM

INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT AHEAD OF 2024 EDO STATE OFF-CYCLE ELECTION

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SEPTEMBER 2024

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Executive Summary

In the lead-up to the Edo State governorship election scheduled for September 21, a comprehensive information ecosystem assessment conducted by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) War Room revealed a range of information manipulation strategies aimed at influencing public perception and undermining the electoral process. These strategies, often targeted at political figures, government institutions, and vulnerable groups, are designed to foster distrust and sway voter behaviour.

One notable disinformation narrative falsely claimed that Governor Godwin Obaseki had taken the Oba of Benin to court, which was leveraged to exploit cultural sensitivities and create a voting backlash. Other narratives accused the governor of re-bagging Federal Government rice for distribution as state-provided palliatives, further sowing doubts about his governance. Gendered disinformation also emerged, targeting women in politics, particularly Edo's First Lady, Betsy Obaseki, who was subjected to misogynistic attacks to undermine her influence.

Information manipulation was not limited to individuals but extended to regional biases and electoral integrity. For instance, claims of government neglect in certain areas and misleading reports about damaged voting machines sought to question the preparedness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and discourage voter turnout. Political parties, including the Labour Party, highlighted how false narratives are used to disrupt candidates' campaigns and manipulate public opinion.

Civil society groups and women's organizations raised concerns about the institutionalized marginalization of women in politics, exacerbated by entrenched patriarchal norms and information manipulation targeting female leaders. Additionally, the accessibility of reliable information for marginalized groups such as Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) remains a challenge.

INEC, alongside other stakeholders, acknowledged the spread of false information through social media as a critical issue and emphasized its efforts to combat disinformation through public education, collaboration with security agencies, and inclusive electoral practices. However, gaps remain in addressing these challenges, particularly in rural areas where internet access and political education are limited.

Overall, the assessment underscores the need for stronger legislative frameworks, media literacy, and collaborative efforts between political parties, media, and civil society to curb the damaging effects of information manipulation on Edo State's electoral process.

Background

The challenge of information manipulation has assumed an increasingly worrisome dimension, especially in the context of the threats it poses to democracies all over the world. Across the region of West Africa, recent democratic reversals were preceded by elaborate information manipulation and foreign influence campaigns. Learned findings have shown that in West Africa, several actors both online and offline typically create and disseminate fake misinformation and disinformation.

These include individuals, the state, foreign actors, diaspora communities, the media, specialist consultancy firms, online influencers, and automated bot networks.¹ In the view of information integrity experts, some of the actors engaged in peddling disinformation do it for financial gain, while others engage in spreading disinformation for political influence. Yet another perspective is that there are actors who are part of the wider efforts to maintain authoritarian systems.²

Information is one of the critical inputs, which shapes the democratic process. If manipulated without concerted efforts to counter the narratives peddled, it could affect the electoral processes and the important activities of various stakeholders. As a corollary, the power of the voter and the constitutional imperative, which promotes the notion that sovereignty belongs to the people, would be seriously undermined. Nigeria's democracy and the entire electoral process are already hobbled by several challenges, which have severely constrained the participation of the people in political and governance processes. Information manipulation is therefore a major threat that needs to be addressed to safeguard democracy.

At the sub-national level, information manipulation affects the robust participation of the electorate. As the final build-up to the September 21, 2024, off-cycle governorship election in Edo State draws the attention of Nigerians and the international community, addressing the threat of disinformation remains a critical aspect of ensuring the credibility of the electoral process. The Edo governorship poll is the fourth off-cycle state governorship election to be conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), since the 2023 general elections. With the conclusion of political party primaries and full-blown political campaigns already underway, the political actors have been engaging in various activities to engage the electorate to present various governance options.

In the context of the political contests, the information environment is a critical component of the entire electioneering process, especially as offline and online media spaces become avenues for = political contestants to market their ideas while pushing to assert their dominance in the political terrain. Like the patterns witnessed during the 2023 general elections, the information ecosystem in Edo State has been characterized by a variety of narratives driven by various dimensions of identity. As such, a good deal of the disinformation, which has been peddled in the build up to the election has sought to deploy identity politics as key actors in the space seek to win the partisan advantage through narratives, which could appeal to the base instincts of voters.

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¹ See Gabriel Moti, presentation at CDD-NDI Conference on information manipulation in West Africa, July 2024.

² Ibid

Given the seriousness of the challenge posed by information manipulation, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD West Africa) with support from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted a pre-election assessment of the information ecosystem in Edo. The primary objective of the assessment was to evaluate the information landscape and identify its potential vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns, such as social media platforms, news outlets, or communication channels.

A critical aspect of the information assessment was to establish contact with relevant stakeholders, including government officials, electoral authorities, media organisations, and civil society groups, to coordinate efforts to combat disinformation. Equally crucial to the efforts to combat disinformation and all other strands of information manipulation was the need to provide training, especially for fact-checking initiatives at the community level. The information assessment therefore enabled CDD to identify the knowledge gaps to provide training and resources to local fact-checkers and journalists to effectively identify and counter false information.

Information Assessment Methodology

The process of collecting data about the information manipulation trends prevalent in the electoral process involves documenting the realities and lived experiences of the people on the ground. In line with the datasets required, the assessment methodology leveraged on Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews. In the course of this assessment, the CDD Team conducted several interviews with relevant stakeholders in the state including the state office of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA).

The assessment also facilitated robust engagements with political parties, gender-based organisations, journalists, sociocultural youth bodies, and civil society organisations. The data collected brought to the fore the most widely shared and damaging false claims, which combined with identity-driven political rhetoric by politicians to confuse voters and undermine information integrity.

Importantly, in the course of this information assessment, the data collected pointed at the respective roles being played by bad actors, including the origins of disinformation campaigns, such as social media accounts, websites, or individuals spreading false information. The information assessment was similarly able to document the trends and patterns of disinformation, especially in the context of how false narratives evolve and spread. Amongst others, it also revealed the demographics that are more susceptible to disinformation and the gendered nature of it.

Pre-Election Information Manipulation Trends in Edo State

The pre-election period in Edo State has been marked by noticeable trends, including tactics mean to undermine rival opponents, verbal attacks aimed at

undermining the participation of women, and the targeting of less dominant political parties with narratives, which weaken their ability to have their voices heard in the electoral process. As evident in the close analysis of the fact-checks produced by the CDD War Room, these trends have combined to undermine the integrity of the information space. Diverse insights and perspectives have been gleaned from the information environment assessment carried out in the state ahead of the September 21 election. These trends encompass a range of strategies, being deployed by the peddlers of disinformation to have their vice-like grip over the information ecosystem. Their strategies are aimed at influencing public perception, undermining political stakeholders on the opposing side of the partisan divide, and in other cases, sowing distrust in the electoral process.

Several claims checked by the CDD Countering Information Manipulation War Room targeted political stakeholders and government institutions. For instance, one of the dominant narratives in the pre-election period was the allegations, which emerged that Governor Obaseki had taken the Oba of Benin to court. The peddlers of this piece of disinformation leveraged on it as an attempt to stir cultural tensions, knowing that the personality of the Oba of Benin, is highly revered, both as a traditional and spiritual leader of the Benin Kingdom, Edo South Senatorial Zone. By peddling the claim that the sitting governor was disrespecting a hallowed traditional institution, the narrative found a typical entry point for political expediency and brinkmanship.

The likely desired outcome of the information manipulation campaign is the voting backlash against the political party of the governor. While there is truth to some ongoing legal disputes, the claims exploited cultural sensitivities for political gain.

Disinformation also extended to accusations about lack of transparency and accountability in public resource mismanagement. A claim in this mold circulated first online and later offline, to the effect that Governor Obaseki re-bagged rice provided by the Federal Government for public distribution as palliatives and presented the items as they originated from the Edo State government. Although rice deliveries were confirmed, the lack of concrete evidence regarding re-bagging left the claim unverified. The disinformation created space for distrust in the governor's handling of public resources and fed into the perception of alleged corruption and widespread governance failure.

Gendered Disinformation

The build up to the election itself has exposed subtle forms of gendered disinformation, which have to be meticulously analysed. Notwithstanding the fact that the participation of women as candidates in the September 21, 2024 Edo State governorship election has been low, the attempts to undermine women's participation have remained rife. From verbal attacks to misogynistic remarks, some political actors in the already men-dominated political terrain have been having a field day hurling abuses and insults at women trying to get their voices heard in the political process, even if from a disadvantaged position.

This information assessment documented one of such moments of gendered disinformation in the exchange between former Governor (now Senator) Adams

Aliyu Oshiomhole and the wife of the Edo State Governor, Mrs. Betsy Obaseki. Oshiomhole sparked outrage after describing the Edo State First Lady as being childless. Describing a woman as childless in the Nigerian and African cultural context is pejorative, and suggests the woman should not be involved in the political process, but rather should be at home trying to find solution to the alleged lack of children. Given the cultural sensitivity of the issue, former Governor's controversial statement has sparked moral outrage, resulting in protests by women's groups, which have widely condemned the statement as an affront to the dignity of women.³

Similarly, female political figures, especially those in leadership positions, have been targeted with narratives aimed at undermining their credibility. An instance is the viral claim, which again focused on the Edo governor's wife, Betsy Obaseki, where she was said to be involved in the sale of prepaid meters, a legal initiative confirmed to be true, but negatively framed to question her integrity and motives as a woman in power. This pattern comes across as a deliberate attempt to discourage women's participation in politics and leadership, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes, constraining entry into the space, and continuing the domination of the political space by men to the detriment of women.

During key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this assessment, women's groups expressed concerns about how the Constitution fails to adequately reference or represent women. These groups believe that the marginalization of women has been institutionalized, as the Constitution appears to view citizens primarily through a masculine lens. Respondents further emphasized that gendered disinformation is perpetuated by societal practices rooted in religion, tradition, and economic circumstances. Many participants argued that cultural norms reinforce the exclusion of women, keeping them on the side-lines of the political process when they should be actively contesting and participating in mainstream efforts to access political power.

For key informants who responded from civil society organizations, one of the issues highlighted was the gendered aspects of disinformation, particularly how it marginalises women in politics. It was stressed that like in many parts of Nigeria, patriarchal structures limit women's political participation. CSOs therefore emphasised the need for mentoring and empowering young women to take on leadership roles. One of the CSO respondents, was of the view that while internet access has improved, particularly among youth, it has also facilitated the spread of trivial and misleading information targeting women.

She said: Representation in the State House of Assembly is also sparse, with only a few women present. The only area where women are somewhat represented is in government appointments, where they occupy some positions. However, in rural communities, women are typically relegated to roles like women leaders or dancers—positions with no real power. She added that women were often seen as passive recipients, waiting for small monetary handouts and accepting whatever policies were handed down to them. She stated that certain misinformation about women's leadership was common, adding that community leaders in rural areas often believe that educating women politically will lead to the breakdown of families.

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³ See report of exchange: 'Gutter politics' — Oshiomhole under fire for saying 'Obaseki's wife has no child' | TheCable

She asserted that tradition, religion, and economic background among other factors had contributed to the stereotypes that women faced.

Identity in the Information Ecosystem

This information ecosystem assessment also collected data showing how identity-based narratives were also employed to target political actors. This is being done in ways that resonate with regional biases. False claims made by one of the governorship aspirants about the lack of health and educational facilities in Orhionmwon LGA were used to suggest that the government in power neglected certain parts of the State, despite evidence to the contrary. These exaggerated narratives sought to influence the perception of the electorate and portray the government as failing to deliver essential services. Another trend involved claims aimed at undermining the credibility of the electoral body and processes. A widely circulated report suggested that over 4,000 BVAS machines, critical for the voting exercise, had been damaged by flooding. Although the claim was true, its spread was likely aimed to instil doubt in the preparedness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), potentially undermining voter confidence.

CDD West Africa tracked narratives wherein those spreading disinformation focused on distorting the achievements of political candidates. For example, a claim circulated that the All Progressives Congress (APC) gubernatorial candidate, Monday Okpebholo, had not sponsored any bills during his time in the Senate. This false claim was aimed at discrediting his legislative contributions and presenting him as ineffective, a common tactic used to undermine candidates' qualifications and competence to govern. Similarly, the false claim that Asue Ighodalo had been disqualified as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate was likely intended to create confusion among voters and weaken his campaign. In addition, the thin line between disinformation and legitimate policy critiques was observed in the course of the assessment. There was the debate around economic issues, with the narrative that Edo State's debt profile had soared to an unsustainable level, positioning the state as the third most indebted in Nigeria. Although accurate in terms of debt figures, state media were quick to counter the critique by stating that the framing was designed to provoke concerns over the state's financial future.

Disinformation And Its Effects On Political Parties

This information assessment also took due cognisance of how information manipulation affects political parties. In the crowded political space, where the major political parties hold a dominance over others looking to get their voices heard and compete for votes, information manipulation has become a tool of choice for the bigger parties. Although the team could not get the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) to weigh in on the issues, the perspective of the Labour party were nonetheless instructive.

The party provided insights on its experiences on the Edo political terrain and how political parties with no access to state resources at the state and federal level cope in the face of the challenge of information manipulation. The LP Secretary in Edo

State acknowledged the significant challenge disinformation poses, and the constraints within political parties in tackling the challenge or debunking narratives, which seek to undermine their participation in the process through the spread of politically harmful narratives. The party stated that the unpredictable nature of political narratives means that false information can spread easily and rapidly, especially with the advent of social media. Using practical experiences faced by the LP as a template for assessing the situation, the LP Secretary stated that during the last election, opposition forces sent misleading broadcast text messages to voters, falsely claiming that their (LP) candidate had stepped down. This act, it was noted, disrupted the candidate's chances in the election process, as it occurred just a few hours before voting, making it impossible to debunk the false information in good time.

When asked about the primary sources of disinformation, the Labour Party mentioned that political parties were major culprits, often using media outlets as tools. Also worthy of note is the point about the existence of factions within media organisations, such as those aligned with the Labour Party, APC, or PDP. This was highlighted as a normal occurrence, and was validated by the lack of consensus on basic issues by various branches of the media during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

Within the parties too, there are internal divisions. In Edo State, there are claims that the Labour Party is divided into three factions. Although those claims have been firmly denied by the party, other factions or individuals are apparently aggrieved over party nominations or primary election processes. There have also been concerns about the role of social media influencers who engage in discussing politics, and because they support specific candidates, they take on the roles of unofficial spokespersons of their chosen candidates. Such confusion often arises from individuals who are not party officials, but support specific figures within the party like Peter Obi. According to the Secretary:

"Some civil servants who previously supported Obi have since returned to their original parties, and have fuelled these misconceptions. They are not card-bearing members, and they don't even know anything about the party."

Addressing the issue of hate speech and disinformation targeted at women, an incident in Akoko-Edo was cited where a woman was attacked within the party by aggrieved members. However, external attacks were noted to be uncommon.

On the other hand, INEC was criticized for allegedly misleading followers by not enforcing the necessity of obtaining tax clearance for candidates.

The party emphasised its efforts through a dedicated media team that works tirelessly to disseminate accurate information. The discussion concluded with a call for stronger legislation to tackle misinformation, emphasising that the legislative branch has a crucial role in addressing the issue. The need for repercussions for spreading false information was highlighted, alongside concerns about the judiciary's role in allowing facts to be twisted, leading to a culture of impunity.

In terms of the role of political parties, the representative of the National Conscience Party underscored the manipulation of information by political elites, and religious fanatics, which is exacerbated by widespread ignorance among the populace. The need was therefore stressed for political education to combat the influence of disinformation. Other political parties were also emphatic that media literacy is even more critical at a time when state agencies themselves allegedly dish out narratives that are not accurate. Instances were provided where state-owned media, particularly the Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS), sometimes fuelled misleading narratives.



Key Issues Identified by Stakeholders Engaged in Edo State

During this information assessment, the CDD-West Africa team met with key stakeholders in Edo State. These stakeholders include political parties, INEC, the Police and the National Orientation Agency. The discussions highlighted several key trends in the political and information ecosystem in Edo state, emphasising the pervasive issue of disinformation, especially during elections. Political actors, media outlets, and social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Twitter, were identified as key drivers of false information.

Media outlets, both government-run and factional, often overlap with political interests, while social media amplifies disinformation, making it difficult to control. Vulnerable groups, including women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and the

youth, were identified to be particularly affected by disinformation. Women are frequently targeted with narratives that discourage political participation, reinforcing gender stereotypes. PWDs struggle with accessing voter information, despite some inclusive efforts by INEC. Meanwhile, the youth, though digitally connected, are often exposed to trivial and false stories online. The state's free internet provided by the state government was criticised by some members of the focused groups for political motivations and lack of effective functionality.

Electoral processes also suffer from misinformation, particularly regarding results and the electoral system, such as misunderstandings around the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). INEC and other stakeholders stressed the role of misinformation in misleading the public about candidate legitimacy. Efforts to combat disinformation face challenges in information dissemination. NOA employs public education strategies but struggles to overcome gaps, particularly among uneducated communities. Civil society groups and media also play roles in combating disinformation but are limited by infrastructure and political biases. The accessibility of reliable internet, especially in rural areas, is a significant barrier. Social and cultural barriers, including entrenched patriarchy and educational gaps, further complicate political engagement. Patriarchal structures stifle women's political roles, while widespread ignorance and lack of political education leave the general population vulnerable to disinformation.

The NOA emphasised its role in public enlightenment, stressing that its non-partisan stance prevents it from classifying or debunking political disinformation unless directed by its headquarters. They described their media engagement efforts, which include collaborations with media organisations in the state and their weekly publication initiative known as The Explainer, which addresses issues both at the state and national levels. Their public engagement strategy includes door-to-door information sharing and maintaining a presence in every Local Government Area to effectively communicate government policies in various local dialects. While pointing out the challenges posed by the uneducated populace, who are most susceptible to information manipulation, they called for more effective collaborations and recommended the establishment of fact-checking hubs to curb the spread of misinformation.

For INEC, disinformation in the Edo State context poses several risks, especially in the context of inducing voter apathy. The INEC state office is optimistic about the various initiatives it has implemented to curb information manipulation. These include public campaigns, voter education, and close collaboration with security agencies and community leaders. This assessment also found that INEC has also taken steps to improve the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) during elections.

The Commission identified social media as a primary source of disinformation, often propagated by anonymous accounts. It however called for closer cooperation with observers and CSOs to address and debunk false information effectively.

In terms of disinformation, which circulated about the loss of 4000 Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), the Commission was quick to reassure that it has sufficient BVAS devices for the forthcoming election. It also expressed confidence in

online and offline operational systems as such network issues would not affect the credibility of the election. Speaking on the issue of inclusivity for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), INEC similarly explained that while there are no designated voting points for them because they reside in different locations. However, preference would be given to individuals with disabilities, pregnant women, and the elderly on Election Day.

Conclusion

As the 2024 Edo State governorship election approaches, the political landscape has been characterised by the challenge of information manipulation particularly within the electoral context. The prevalence of disinformation is with a focus on identity politics, gendered disinformation, and economic manipulation. These campaigns leverage both online and offline platforms to influence voter behaviour, with significant potential to mislead voters, deepen societal divisions, and undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Marginalised groups, including women and ethnic minorities, are particularly vulnerable to these tactics. While efforts are being made by various institutions, including NOA, INEC, and CSOs, to combat the spread of false information, there is a need for more coordinated and proactive measures.

Recommendations:

- <u>Strengthening Fact-Checking Initiatives</u>: There is a need for more robust fact-checking efforts, particularly at the community level, to counter the spread of disinformation, with periodic training for field officers of government agencies like the NOA, INEC and Police.
- Strengthen Media Literacy and Public Awareness Campaigns:
 - Targeted Media Literacy Programs: Develop tailored media literacy programs aimed at educating the public, especially vulnerable groups like women, youth, and rural communities, about the dangers of disinformation. This can be achieved through workshops, social media campaigns, and local language content to enhance awareness.
 - Collaborate with Community Leaders and CSOs: Use trusted figures such as religious leaders, traditional rulers, and civil society organizations to help dispel false information and promote factual narratives, especially in rural areas where trust in state-run media is low.
- Gender-Focused Counter-Disinformation Initiatives:
 - Combat Gendered Disinformation: Launch initiatives that directly counter misogynistic narratives targeting women in politics. This can include social media campaigns, public service announcements, and fact-checking reports that emphasize the contributions of women in leadership.

- Implement programs that challenge patriarchal norms, empower women in politics, and ensure that both men and women are protected from gendered disinformation.
- Empower Women Through Leadership Training: Initiate mentorship programs for women interested in leadership positions and politics, empowering them to counter gendered disinformation by building a network of women leaders who can speak out and mobilize against these narratives.
- <u>Regulation of Media Outlets</u>: Regulatory bodies should enforce stricter penalties for traditional media outlets that distort facts and fuel unfounded narratives.
- <u>Improve Inclusivity for PWDs</u>: Ensure that PWDs have better access to reliable information and are included in voter education initiatives.
- Promote Gender Equality:
- <u>Expand Internet Access and Infrastructure</u>: Improve Internet connectivity in rural areas to facilitate access to accurate information and ensure fair participation in the electoral process.
- <u>Collaboration with Social Media/Tech Platforms</u>: Engage with the tech giants to develop effective monitoring and takedown procedures for disinformation

ABOUT CDD

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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This publication can be requested or downloaded at no cost at www.cddwestafrica.org
Cover Image: commonwealthbc





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