

SIERRA LEONE'S

FAKE NEWS

ECOSYSTEM

AN OVERVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2020 internet penetration in Sierra Leone was 25% and there were an estimated 700,000 active social media users, with Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp the most used applications. These new media platforms act as both sources and enablers of fake news. The internet has also influenced news gathering and content production in the sense that some media institutions now directly copy and paste contents from the internet and other online media sources, bringing them into the traditional media realm.

This study offers an assessment of Sierra Leone's fake news ecosystem drawing primarily on qualitative data. Fourteen key informant interviews were conducted with key actors, social media influencers, traditional media practitioners, government officials, fact-checkers and media monitors, civil society experts and academics. In addition, three focus group discussions were conducted in Freetown and Bo in June 2021 with social media users comprising youth, the elderly and women. A review of available literature and online searches of websites and social media further supplemented and contextualised the findings.

The findings show that the major area fake news spreads in the country's information ecosystem is around politics. The country is broadly divided along ethno-political lines with supporters of the two leading political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), fervent in their belief in messages that originate from their party leaders and supporters.

There is little space left for a nuanced middle ground. While there is misinformation by people who just 'copy and paste' information, there are also those with political interests who aim to disinform.

What is also clear is that growing internet connectivity has increased the spread of misinformation and disinformation in several ways. The first is that it has created new media platforms which can also act as sources of fake news. But more importantly, the internet has also influenced news gathering and content production. Some media institutions directly copy and paste contents from the internet and other online media source, bringing them in to the traditional media realm. Social media rumours also penetrate offline information networks that historically have been, and still are, key enablers of the circulation of information in the country.

The study concludes by arguing that fake news is a growing and serious problem that needs to be addressed in Sierra Leone. It recommends, among other things that, political parties should develop, and adhere to, codes of conduct for social media use and that there should be improved and continuous media and information literacy in the country using radio and other online media platforms as part of a nationwide campaign to reduce the impacts of misinformation and disinformation on national discourse.





INTRODUCTION

In August 2014, during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, residents in different parts of the country received phone calls, texts, WhatsApps, and even messages from town criers, instructing or encouraging them to bathe with hot salt water.¹ This rumour circulated across the country and was accompanied by the suggestion that anybody who heeded this advice would be cured of, or prevented from

catching, the deadly virus. Hundreds of Sierra Leoneans took this advice. But the information was inaccurate. The World Health Organization (WHO), responding on Facebook in 2014, wrote that “bathing with salt and warm water, drinking water with salt does not cure Ebola”.

Sierra Leone has over 400 registered media institutions - radio, television, newspapers

Misinformation, disinformation and “fake news”

Misinformation involves the spread of falsehoods without a deliberate attempt to mislead whilst disinformation is manipulated narrative or facts—propaganda deliberately intended to mislead. Both are more commonly captured under the term ‘fake news’, a term used in this report as a catch all term. These kinds of information pose a significant threat to liberal democracy because as they are allowed to spread and flourish, they disinform and misinform people about a range of civic issues from voting to political accountability, and corruption.

Seeking to shape a civic process using falsehoods is not new. Before the internet, people shared disinformation and misinformation through word of mouth and rumour networks, with information spreading slowly from one person to the other before diffusing through communities. Traditional media and propaganda outlets also broadcasted or published news meant to mislead people and promote agendas.

Although the internet did not start the spread of fake news it has further enabled it. The availability of the internet has made it far cheaper and easier to produce and disseminate fake news to a wider audience and much harder to sort fact from fiction. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, alongside messaging applications like WhatsApp, have served as popular conduits. With these platforms enabling people to share a myriad of information in a range of audio, text and visual formats.

1. Fofana, U. (2014). ‘Sierra Leone hot salt water bath’. Politico SL. Available at <https://www.politicosl.com/articles/sierra-leone-hot-salt-water-bath>





and magazines – as well as an ever growing online community. Increasingly, the traditional media are not the only sources of information with Facebook and WhatsApp carrying a significant share of the information contents that are eventually published or broadcast. On one hand this is a positive development in that it is opening the media space to all, but at the same time these platforms are being exploited by some users as an avenue to spread misinformation and disinformation. Some individuals “just wake up, create and disseminate stories through various social media platforms”.² The impact is that almost everything that happens in the country today has the “true and false versions”.³ With fake news, an increasingly serious problem in Sierra Leone, calls for regulation of social

media have grown stronger.

This study used qualitative tools to collect and analyse data on the fake news ecosystem in Sierra Leone. Fourteen key informant interviews were conducted with key actors, social media influencers, traditional media practitioners, government officials, fact-checkers and media monitors, civil society experts and academics were undertaken. In addition, three focus group discussions (FDGs) were conducted in Freetown and Bo in June 2021 with social media users comprising youth, the elderly and women. A review of available literature and online searches of websites and social media further supplemented and contextualised the findings.

UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

The last decade has seen a growth in the proliferation of both the traditional and new media platforms. This growth has led to an increasing spread of misinformation and disinformation. But these are not new phenomena. Prior to the proliferation of social media, falsehoods were circulated through word of mouth, community meetings, at relaxation points like bars and *atayah* bases⁴ and by town criers. With the lack of media presence in most parts of the country before the decade long civil war, which lasted from March 1991 to January 2002, people regularly resorted to “bush radio”⁵ – essentially rumour mills. According

to the findings of the 2004 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, “when the conflict broke out in 1991, the majority of Sierra Leoneans relied on rumour to determine its progress. A culture of misinformation laid the foundation for gossip and popular myth to dominate people’s impressions of the conflict - a phenomenon known as the ‘den say’ [literally they said] syndrome”.⁶ In 2021 a lot of Sierra Leoneans remain susceptible to rumour and propaganda spread through ‘den say’. This is in part due to the failure of the traditional media to provide accurate and unbiased reporting and to reach out effectively to

2. Key informant interview with Ibrahim K Musa, Vice President of the Sierra Association of Journalists. 3 June 2021.

3. Focus group discussion with youth. June 2021.

4. A place where young people converge to drink tea and discuss various issues, including politics.

5. Victor Suma, 2018 quoted in Sowa, F (2021). The role of the media in conflict and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone -in the text Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa: Conceptual and Empirical Considerations: Oxon: Routledge.

6. Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. (2004). Volume Three, Chapter Two.





residents living in more remote rural areas.

Sierra Leone has seen a significant increase in the number of traditional media outlets since the end of the conflict with over 200 registered newspapers⁷ and magazines and more than 200 licensed radio and television stations and direct-to-home services.⁸ However, only 13% of Sierra Leoneans had access to newspapers in 2015. Low circulation, high costs and low literacy levels explain why, despite their long history, newspapers have never gained mass readership.⁹ Outside of the capital, Freetown, newspapers circulate only in major towns like Makeni and Bo. Furthermore, many are open to influence from various political and economic interest.¹⁰ This was particularly the case during the civil war, with the TRC report describing some newspapers of being “in danger of becoming little more than scandal sheets, relying on provocative and, at times, dishonest headlines to promote sales”.¹¹ But it is a growing concern two decades on. While just a few media institutions are owned by politicians, the ability of political actors to influence media houses to push certain narratives or run stories is increasingly pronounced. For instance, the content of the *Awareness Times* and *Global Times* newspapers are perceived to be politically influenced by the APC and SLPP respectively.

Radio is undoubtedly a key platform for the dissemination of information in Sierra Leone, but it too has been involved in the spread of inaccuracies. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) banned the SLPP station, *Radio Unity*, and the APC station, *Rising Sun* in 2009.¹² “These were ‘hate stations’ that

were simply fanning the flames of tribalism, sectionalism and disunity in the country. They were pushing the country to the brink of another conflict which this country can ill-afford,” argues Michael George, a political analyst.¹³ Though there remains some politicising of radio ownership in Sierra Leone the more recent democratisation of the airwaves has fuelled a new avenue through which falsehoods can flow. The opening of phone lines for discussions on radio stations has been a source for the spread of fake news in the country with some guests on radio programmes using the platforms to spread falsehoods.¹⁴ The arrival of the internet has provided yet more space for these ‘citizen voices’ to be heard.

In January 2020 internet penetration in Sierra Leone was 25% and there were an estimated 700,000 active social media users.¹⁵ Improved internet connectivity has paved the way for access to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The creation and dissemination of content now takes place on these platforms, which account for much of the fake news in circulation. WhatsApp and Facebook are the key social media platforms that dominate the information sharing space. There are also a growing number of Tik Tok users in the country, but what is clear is that “fewer and fewer people now get information from traditional media: radio, television and newspaper. Most people go online in search of information”¹⁶ argues Willette James, head of the mass communications department at Fourah Bay College. The growth and spread of ‘fake news’ and mis-information in the media ecosystem of Sierra Leone is related to

7. At least of half of the registered newspapers according to the Independent Media Commission, the country's media regulatory body, are not functional.

8. Independent Media Commission (IMC) data, July 2021. The IMC is the country's media regulatory media body established by the IMC Act 2020 (now repealed and replaced with the IMC Act 2020).

9. Wittels, A. & Maybanks N. (2016). ‘Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analysis of Media and Mobile Audiences’. BBC Media Action.

10. Key informant interview with Victor Karimu, communication specialist. 12 June 2021.

11. Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. (2004). Volume Three, Chapter Two.

12. Lansana, F. (2009). Banned Opposition Radio Station Goes to Court. Inter Press Service News Agency. Available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/09/sierra-leone-banned-opposition-radio-station-goes-to-court/>

13. *Ibid*

14. Key informant interview with Dr. Willette James, Fourah Bay College. 13 June 2021.

15. Kemp, S. (2020). ‘Digital 2020 Sierra Leone’. DataReportal. Available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-sierra-leone>

16. Key informant interview with Dr. Willette James, Fourah Bay College. 13 June 2021.





the steady increase or growth in the purchase and use of internet friendly mobile phones [45.2% of women and 64.8% of men aged 15-49 own a mobile phone]¹⁷ but also the cost-effective and simplified nature of messaging apps like WhatsApp and Facebook – both of which create the space for citizens to freely express their views on societal issues using audio.

The arrival of the internet has also changed the operations of the traditional media institutions. Major media houses like the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, Africa Young Voice (AYV), Radio Democracy, Politico, Awoko, Calabash and Concord Times have websites, and Facebook and/or Twitter pages where they post content and provide spaces for readers to comment. In some instances, the contents are published or broadcast directly. For example, AYV and Radio Democracy receive direct feedback from the audiences which are read as text messages during current affairs programmes. Almost all media houses use social media as a source for stories. According to a FGD respondent, some media institutions are just publishing and broadcasting contents from social media platforms, “when people write certain things most of the newspapers do not have the time to crosscheck them and confirm whether they are true or not. They will just take it from various platforms and post it”.¹⁸ One leading media practitioner agrees with that characterisation arguing that “[some media] people do not engage in thorough research”.¹⁹ But others argue that whilst fake news has influenced mainstream media, “editorial control and independence

has made it less impactful”.²⁰

What is clear is that growing internet connectivity has increased the spread of misinformation and disinformation in several ways. The first is that it has created new media platforms which can also act as sources of fake news. But more importantly, the internet has also influenced news gathering and content production. Some media institutions directly copy and paste contents from the internet and other online media sources, bringing them in to the traditional media realm. Social media rumours also penetrate offline information networks, that as previously illustrated, have been illustrated, have been, and still are, key enablers of the circulation of falsehoods. “We get information from Adebayor’s [a leading social media influencer based in the diaspora who is seen to be politically affiliated with the APC] audio broadcasts online which people listen to and then explain the contents to us” agreed several of the female traders who participated in a FGD. Once circulating, Adebayor’s audios can be shared without internet connections through Bluetooth and played in communities, in addition to being relayed through these word of mouth networks. Audios are used extensively in the Sierra Leonean context because of the low levels of literacy, particularly in rural areas.²¹

Outside urban centres, the country’s smartphone penetration is poor, network coverage is limited, and literacy levels are low. 83% of social messaging users live in urban areas with 69% of those residing in Western Area Urban, the district which contains Freetown.²² But, people who live in

17. Statistics Sierra Leone. (2017). ‘Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey’

18. Focus group discussions with youth in Freetown, June 2021.

19. Key informant interview with Ransford Wright, senior media practitioner. 18 June 2021.

20. Key informant interview with Victor Suma, Fourah Bay College. 2 June 2021.

21. According to UNESCO data the breakdown is as follows: 15-24 years, 66.6%; 15 years and older, 43.2% and 65 years and older, 4.6%

22. Wittels, A. & Maybanks N. (2016). ‘Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analysis of Media and Mobile Audiences’. BBC Media Action.





urban centres can also bring the information offline and have it shape discussions and influence opinions in their own villages. Rumours and propaganda reached wide audiences as messages are rapidly forwarded, or “culled”, from one WhatsApp group to another.²³ There are many WhatsApp groups in the country in which people only communicate through local languages using voice notes. In this way the news flows from online platforms, offline with a hard to estimate, but significant multiplier reach. As one interviewee noted, “one man gets the information online in the village and then passes it on to all the others [residents]”.²⁴ The smartphone, in this case, acts like a village radio.

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...people who live in urban centres can also bring the information offline and have it shape discussions and influence opinions in their own villages.

KEY ACTORS AND ENABLERS

Sierra Leone has a growing number of politically affiliated ‘influencers. Those perceived to be working for, or to support the cause of APC, include Adebayor, the APC Global Media Network, Tagmen, Evangelist Samson and Gibrilla Bangura. HOT GOOSE Network Salone, Alpha Saidu Bangura and Atilla, who was a sacked deputy minister that served in the former APC government, are some of the leading SLPP online activists. These social media influencers “are mostly surrogates of political parties.... who are either pro-government or anti-government”.²⁵ These actors will come up with information, that often contains some half-truths, that they would have cooked up or manufactured just

to create some issues. “They create information, mainly using voice notes, that people follow up and run without crosschecking”²⁶ in the view of one FGD respondent. Another described it as “almost like cyber warfare”²⁷ with attacks and insults regularly used against individuals who seek to refute what has been posted.

Increasingly the thug tradition in some political parties is moving online. “The discussion has moved from the offline to the online space and the thugs are sharing all sorts of messages there” according to leading civil society figure Marcella Samba-Sesay.²⁸ Although political parties tend to shy away from officially identifying with them,

23. Ibid.

24. Key informant interview with Khalil Kallon, Independent Media Commission. 21 June 2021.

25. Key informant interview with Ransford Wright, senior media practitioner. 18 June 2021.

26. Focus Group Discussion with youth. June 2021.

27. Key informant interview with Ransford Wright, senior media practitioner. 18 June 2021.

28. Key informant interview with Marcella Samba-Sesay, Campaign for Good Governance. 15 June 2021.





these actors propagate the interests of the parties. To do this they deliberately spread false information to advance their party's political agenda. When the mis/disinformation is created and shared on online platforms, people who may not have engineered the fake news, but who are sympathetic to the political view, help to share it. Information from these social media posts is discussed on radio and television debate shows and in offline meeting places. Youth who spend time in *atayah* bases, at markets and transport hubs discuss these falsehoods enabling them to penetrate well-established offline rumour networks. In some cases, they do so deliberately but in other instances the level of sophistication associated with the falsehood can mean that well-intentioned forwarding can be spreading inaccurate

information that has been designed to dupe by politically aligned social media operatives.

Political narratives are also embedded in perceptions of the information provided by the government. It utilises both online and offline media platforms to share information and press releases, but these are rarely seen as neutral by political opponents. In fact, there is a growing trend of lack of trust in information put out by the government or the main opposition party. In short, Sierra Leone's information ecosystem is increasingly polarised with supporters of one political party diligently questioning the credibility of information produced by its main opponent, and vice-versa. This provides an environment in which fake news can flourish in the country.

GENDERED ABUSED ONLINE

There is still less access to the internet for majority of the women in Sierra Leone. But for those women that are online, attacks are common. "There are a lot of attacks against women on social media platforms".²⁹ Prominent women like Marcella Samba-Sesay, who heads a leading CSO in the country, and the Mayor of Freetown Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, have both been the targets of online vitriol.³⁰ The way women are sometimes attacked online can also explain, in part, why they are less present online discussing issues of national development argued Samba-Sesay. "It is not that women don't have things to discuss, but some people always bring the gender dynamics into it. You are woman and you should not talk like this. Fake news has motive, which is a political manipulative tools for purpose of propaganda. And women are not into that"³¹

29. Key informant interview with Mabinty Kamara, Politico Newspaper. 22 June 2021.

30. Focus group discussion with women. June 2021.

31. Key informant interview with Marcella Samba-Sesay, Campaign for Good Governance. 15 June 2021.





FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

During the 2018 elections, there were simultaneous celebrations by supporters of both the APC and the SLPP as fake results circulated claiming that both parties had won the elections. At a time when the partial results announced by the National Electoral Commission (NEC) made a second round run-off almost the only plausible scenario - the two leading candidates were separated by less than 1% - a falsified report, containing several inaccuracies, including a published date of November 2018 - over six months in the future - began to spread on WhatsApp. It claimed that the opposition SLPP's candidate, Julius Maada Bio, had secured enough votes to win outright with 56.3%, just above the 55% threshold for victory. This report was widely shared, was cited in discussions on street corners, and even made its way into some radio and television studios.³² But it was false, Bio won 43.3% in the first round, before defeating his rival in a run-off.

Falsehoods driven by political imperatives can also shape events outside of an election period. In July 2020 a riot over the removal of an electricity generator plant in Makeni, Bombali district – a stronghold of the opposition APC - was sparked by series of fake news contents by three online actors - Adebayor, Evangelists Sampson and Gibrilla Bangura. All three of them released audio notes that were shared on WhatsApp asking residents of Makeni to prevent the removal

of the generator claiming that it was a ploy by the ruling SLPP to deprive residents of electricity. At least four people, including a teenager, were killed and 10 wounded when police and soldiers opened fire on protesters. Ten others were admitted to hospital with bullet wounds after hundreds gathered to try and block the movement of the generator. Protestors took to the streets after rumours began to circulate claiming that not only was the government taking generator from Makeni, but that it was moving it to Bo or Kenema – cities considered to be political strongholds of the SLPP. In fact, the generator was to be moved to neighbouring Port Loko

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...during the 2018 elections, there were simultaneous celebrations by supporters of both the APC and the SLPP as fake results circulated claiming that both parties had won the elections...

32. Hitchen, J (2018). The WhatsApp rumours that infused Sierra Leone's tight election. African Arguments. Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2018/04/the-whatsapp-rumours-infused-sierra-leone-tight-election-social-media/>





district, which is also considered a stronghold of the APC, suggesting that there was no overtly political motive behind the relocation and that the online influencers had simply created a narrative to serve political ends.

However, the rumour easily spread in the country because of the entrenched political lines on which the country is broadly divided. Supporters and loyalists from either of the parties often believe any information that comes from their party leaders or members of the parties without question. Almost all governance issues are politicised and there are various versions of what has happened depending on who you are talking to. What social media has done is to create platforms that further amplify these politically oriented fake news stories. But falsehoods are not confined to the political realm in Sierra Leone.

As the WHO has noted, the Covid-19 pandemic and response has been accompanied by a massive 'infodemic' - an over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.³³ This was, and still is, the case in Sierra Leone. At the start of the pandemic a lot of people stopped going to hospitals because there were stories that if they did so, they would be infected with the virus. A similar situation occurred during the Ebola outbreak. With Ebola, the number of medical doctors and other medical personnel who got infected and died of the virus, increased people's fears that the virus was coming from hospitals and health centres.

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...an over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not, makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance...

Many Sierra Leoneans are refusing to take the Covid-19 vaccine because they doubt both the virus exists and that the vaccine provides a remedy. A survey conducted in July 2021 by the Institute of Governance Reform on vaccine uptake and hesitancy in Freetown shows that 88% of the respondents had not yet taken the vaccine.³⁴ 33% of the respondents stated that they 'had no time or don't know where to get it'; 23% were 'afraid of side effects/some people sick and die after vaccination'; 9% stated that 'Covid-19 is a hoax or not a serious threat'; 4% stated that 'my family is against the vaccine' and 3% stated they had 'no confidence in the vaccine.'³⁵ According to FGD participants rumours shaping these opinions include that "an opposition forum said the vaccine is killing their members and they are therefore advising their members not to take the vaccines"³⁶ and that it causes women not to give birth".³⁷ The impact of these fake news stories, predominantly posted and circulating on social media platforms, has been to reinforce vaccine hesitancy in Sierra Leone.

33. World Health Organization. (2020). 'Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13'. 35. Hassan, I & Hitchen, J. 2020. "Driving division? Disinformation and the new media landscape in Nigeria". Centre for Democracy and Development.

34. Institute for Governance Reform. (2021). 'Covid-19 Vaccine Uptake and Hesitancy in Freetown'.

35. [Ibid](#)

36. Focus group discussion with youth. June 2021.

37. Focus group discussion with women. June 2021.





EXTERNAL SHAPERS

None of the respondents had examples of regional and international actors, government or individuals playing a direct role on fake news in Sierra Leone. China, for instance, has business interests in Sierra Leone, but there is no evidence that it spreads deliberate falsehoods. The most influential external actor is the Sierra Leonean diaspora.

“Owing to the fact that those in the diaspora have access to technology, it is easy for them to just play around the fake news”³⁸ argued one respondent. As a result, people in the diaspora who support either the APC or SLPP are some of the leading contributors to the fake news ecosystem in Sierra Leone. Most

of them are (in)formally connected to the political parties and their aim appears to be to destabilise the political machinery of the opponent. As one social media influencer, who is based in Sierra Leone, explains “people [in the diaspora] sent messages to me to post for them content with an offer of \$500. When I went through the piece, I would tell them that I would not post such because I don’t want to spend a night at the Criminal Investigations Department for the fake and unethical information. That is how people in the diaspora most times try to influence me”.³⁹ But in many instances they are able to, directly or indirectly, significantly shape discussions and narratives on political issues in Sierra Leone from afar.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

In April 2020, the Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, said that the government was contemplating passing a law to crackdown on fake news, noting that “fake news is undermining the fight against Covid-19”.⁴⁰ Following renewed consultation and debates in 2021, on the 23 June parliament passed into the law ‘The Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021’ with some amendments. The Act provides that a person, including a corporation, partnership, or association, who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means

of a computer system or network that he knows to be false, for the purpose of causing inconvenience, danger commits an offence and can be liable upon conviction to fine or term of imprisonment.

The Ministry of Information is also trying to close the communication gap between the government and the people. It is working on authenticating all government press releases with a seal and serial number through a web based system. “There will be a data centre at the ministry which people will call to verify fake information”⁴¹ a ministry official noted.

38. Key informant interview with Ransford Wright, senior media practitioner. 18 June 2021.

39. Key informant interview with Hawa Konneh, social media influencer. June 2021

40. Nyallay, M. (2020). ‘New law to crackdown on fake news in Sierra Leone’. Politicos SL. Available at <https://www.politicosl.com/articles/new-law-crackdown-fake-news-sierra-leone>

41. Key informant interview with Emmanuel Turay, Ministry of Information. June 2021.





Notwithstanding the creation of a verification system, the ability of the government to generate accurate information on certain issues that is free from political bias remains a challenge regardless of who is in power.

The media is also doing more to improve the standards of its information output. The IMC has a media code of practice that seeks to ensure professional standards of reporting are upheld. However, it is currently limited to media institutions registered with the IMC and as such does not extend to online media platforms in or out of the country that are not registered with it. There are also ongoing efforts to improve the way media reports to avoid the amplification of falsehoods.

Before, and after, the first case of Covid-19, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists together with the Independent Radio Network designed, produced and broadcast radio and television talk shows on prevention measures on the pandemic.⁴² BBC Media Action, the Media Reform Coordinating Group, IMC and a host of other institutions around the country have also conducted seminars for journalists on how to avoid the publication and broadcast of fake news. “A lot has been done in term of media literacy by various sections of the media”⁴³ that has helped radio and television stations and newspapers to avoid spreading fake news argued one respondent. “Journalists now make effort to crosscheck information before sharing”.⁴⁴ However, most people who create fake news contents are not members of media institutions.

In July 2021 fact-checking site, Dubawa, which is also operational in other West African countries, was launched in Sierra Leone. However, it and other fact-checking initiatives in the country – such as one run by Initiatives for Media Development - are not yet effectively popularised. A lot of people still believe what they hear, see or read first, even when it is found to be inaccurate. Furthermore, most of the fact-checking initiatives publish their findings on the same social media platforms where the information is found. But these are not available and accessible in most parts of the country and the ability of fact-checks to penetrate the same offline rumour networks and even traditional media programming as viral rumours remains weak. A final challenge is that when fact checks concern politics, those on either side of the political divide view the fact-check as denial of what they believe as the truth and refuse to believe it.

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A lot has been done in term of media literacy by various sections of the media that has helped radio and television stations and newspapers to avoid spreading fake news...

42. Nasrallah, A. (2020). ‘Sierra Leone Association of Journalists at 49: Statement by the President’.

43. Key informant interview with Ransford Wright, senior media practitioner. 18 June 2021.

44. Key informant interview with Lamrana Bah, Sierra Leone Reporters Union. June 2021





CONCLUSION

Fake news is a growing and serious problem that needs to be addressed in Sierra Leone. What has emerged from this study is that the spread of fake news is mostly influenced by political considerations, influences and interests. While there is misinformation by people who just 'copy and paste' information, those with political interests aim to disinform to push a particular political agenda or narrative.

In response, initiatives to tackle to fake news in the country are still at their embryonic stage. The newly enacted Cyber Security and

Crime Act 2021 may help to reduce the spread of fake news. But beyond punitive measures more can also be done to improve digital literacy and the quality of information in circulation if Sierra Leone is to move beyond the increasingly polarised narratives that shape online and offline discourse.





RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations that are derived from the study:

- 1 Political parties should develop codes of conduct for social media use that they sign up to. This will help guide the political parties for the effective use of social media platforms.
- 2 Political parties must dissociate themselves from all posts, publications and broadcasts containing mis/disinformation which their actors, supporters and sympathisers share.
- 3 There should be improved and continuous media and information literacy in the country using radio and other online media platforms to address the low level of public knowledge on the requirements for accurate news and information contents. This can be done in local languages to increase reach.
- 4 There should be capacity building for media professionals on the use and danger of mis/disinformation. This will enable them to undertake the issues and to take necessary steps to curtail its spread within media institutions.
- 5 National media organisations like the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the Media Reform Coordinating Group should continue to identify and document key actors and social media influencers willing to support efforts to tackle fake news in the country.
- 6 A module on misinformation and disinformation should be developed, popularised and utilised in schools and tertiary institutions teaching journalism and communication.
- 7 There should be further studies on the flow of information within the fake media ecosystem in the country given the complexities highlighted by this study.





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