

FAKE NEWS IN WEST AFRICA

FLOWS, FACILITATORS AND FIXES

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
How Information Flows In West Africa	3
Who are the key spreaders of falsehoods? And what impact do rumours have?	5
Response to Fake News	13
Recommendations	17

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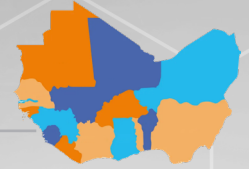
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The spread of falsehoods across information ecosystems in West Africa is growing. Although enabled by increasing access to social media and the internet across the region, the flow of fake news is not simply confined to online spaces but moves between offline and digital environments with regularity and ease. A rumour that is started by an online influencer on Facebook, once trending, can become a topic of debate and discussion for television or radio talk shows, broadening its audience. These debates, in turn, are then discussed and debated in gathering spots such as markets, atayah bases, okada stages or grins enabling them to disseminate through well-established word of mouth rumour networks. Completing the circle, these offline rumours can then be transposed back online and can either be further skewed to disinform or simply reinforce an already circulating falsehood.

The way information flows between online and offline networks is critical for understanding how fake news spreads and influences actions across West Africa. So too is trust. Information that a recipient deems to be from a trustworthy source – be that the original source of the information or the individual who last shared it – remains fundamental to decisions about what is true and what is not, along with whether the information aligns with existing beliefs and biases. These factors are increasingly well understood by those involved in the purposeful spreading of falsehoods online across West Africa particularly on issues relating to politics and health.

This report draws on the findings of 15 studies undertaken in 2021 covering all members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Information was gathered through desk-based research, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and the authors' experiences of using social media platforms. This regional report draws out some of the key trends from those studies. It highlights the individuals or organisations involved in the spread of falsehoods, the tactics they seek to employ, and the influence and impact that they are having. It then draws attention to the range of approaches adopted so far to respond to the 'fake news' threat. It concludes by offering recommendations to key stakeholders about what more can — and should — be done.

The country studies highlighted seven key actors that are engaged in the spread of falsehoods and the impacts that they can have or are having in the areas of politics, health and societal cohesion. These are political activists, online influencers, the state, media enterprises, specialist consultancy firms, the diaspora and foreign states. Whilst

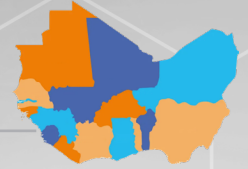
the links between media ownership and politics in West Africa has always made it a space where skewed narratives can thrive, the growing numbers of social media users across the region gives increasing prominence to online influencers and the diaspora who command a large and often receptive digital audience. During elections, the battle for influence over this online audience is amplified, with political actors increasingly recruiting domestic 'cyber warriors' or regional and international communication specialists to give them an electoral advantage.

Responses to the growing proliferation of fake news in the information ecosystem are challenged by the fact that the state is not only not an impartial actor, but that it also engages either in the spread and creation of falsehoods or in the self-serving restriction of online information flows. But examples of more socially beneficial state interventions in the information ecosystem also exist. During the Covid-19 pandemic examples of states making efforts to be more transparent with information about public health initiatives were observed.

However, in a much larger set of cases, states have sought to clamp down on fake news by limiting the space, either through platform or internet shutdowns or through updating existing — or creating new — legislation to deal with digital disinformation. The fact that internet shutdowns regularly occur at the same time as popular protests or elections, and the way that legislation has been used to silence government critics, suggests that digital regulation in the region is still primarily used as a political tool rather than as a framework for advancing improvements in the digital sphere. Yet regulation can be part of the solution to tackling falsehoods, but only if overseen by a credible and independent arbiter.

More important however, is improving the digital literacy of ordinary citizens through public awareness campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and revised education curricula. Indeed, a generally more educated citizenry will be better positioned to arbitrate between true and false when encountering new information either online or offline. This, along with more pressure on social media companies to effectively moderate their platforms for hate speech and falsehoods, will have a transformative impact on reducing not just the fake news in circulation in the region, but the degree to which falsehoods are embraced by its citizens.





INTRODUCTION

What Ellis describes as “pavement radio”¹ or Odunfa as “the great rumour mill”² have supported the flows of false information for decades in many contexts across West Africa. The pathways through which “fake news” is shared on social media platforms has built upon these pre-existing networks, enhancing the speed at which they can convey messages to an ever-growing audience. Social media has also amplified the importance and impact of such networks within the wider web through which information is shared and consumed. But it is important to note that the implicit link between the perceived credibility of a piece of information and the source of that

information – be that the original creator or the person directly sharing it – remains integral to understanding what is believed and why across West Africa.

This study draws upon and builds on the findings of country-level reports for each of the 15 members of ECOWAS to highlight regional trends, variations, and common challenges related to fake news in the sub-region. It also recognises that country contexts are critical in shaping how information ecosystems operate and flow and how content is received; what may circulate widely in Nigeria, may gain little to no traction in Guinea, for example.

Misinformation, disinformation and “fake news”

Misinformation involves the spread of falsehoods without a deliberate attempt to mislead whilst disinformation is manipulated narrative or facts — i.e. propaganda — that is 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, allowed to spread and flourish, they disinform and misinform people about a range of civic issues from voting to political accountability and corruption.

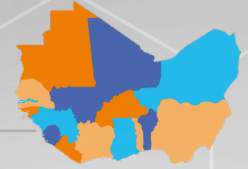
Seeking to shape a civic process using falsehoods is not new. Before the internet, traditional media and propaganda outlets broadcasted or published news meant to mislead people and promote agendas. Individuals also shared disinformation and misinformation through word of mouth and rumour networks, with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

Although the internet did not start the spread of fake news, it has further enabled it. The availability of the internet has made it easier and sometimes cheaper 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, enabling people to share a myriad of information in a range of audio, text, and visual formats.

1. Stephen Ellis. ‘Tuning in to pavement radio’. *African Affairs*. 88, 352 (1989). p.321-330.

2. Sola Odunfa. 2009. ‘Lies, politics and Nigeria’s great rumour mill’. BBC News. 2 December. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8389020.stm>





Each study reviewed available academic literature and media reporting; undertook extensive key informant interviews with digital activists, stakeholders from civil society, media professionals, and government officials; held focus group discussions with different demographics; and was informed either by an informal review of select social media activity in the country or by authors' own in-country experiences of using digital platforms. This is not to say that fake news is purely a digital phenomenon. In fact, as highlighted above – and as the papers affirm — the way content moves from online to offline spaces, and vice-versa, is critical to understanding the information eco-system.

Drawing on this improved understanding of how information flows in the sub-region, this study highlights who is at the forefront of spreading falsehoods and demonstrates the impacts that fake news can have on political events or in response to societal and development challenges. It concludes by highlighting what is already being done to stem the tide of mis/disinformation in West Africa stressing what could or should be done to support an improved information ecosystem in which the prevalence of falsehoods is significantly reduced.

HOW INFORMATION FLOWS IN WEST AFRICA

As 2021 data shows the percentage of West Africans directly accessing social media remains limited – on average 17.3% of a country's population.³ However, there is significant variation between countries, with Cape Verde having more than 50% of its population on social media, whilst in Niger it is less than 5%. However, across the board, the numbers of users are growing. The region saw a 22% increase in the number of new social media users between January 2020 and January 2021.⁴ Yet these figures do not tell the whole story about the influence and importance of social media in the wider information eco-system.

Social media content is not confined to the online realm and recognising and understanding the ways in which it spreads, infiltrates, and influences traditional media and word of mouth networks is vital for an improved understanding of information

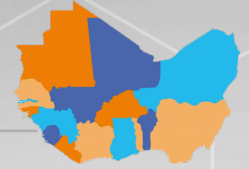
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3. See Simon Kemp. 2021. 'Digital 2021: Global Overview Report'. Data Reportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report>

4. Ibid.





across the sub-region. The increasingly blurred line between traditional media content, social media posts, and even word of mouth information networks means that content moves between online and offline spaces in ways that are not always easy to track but are critical to recognise, given the ways that they influence and reinforce one and other.

Strong oral traditions in countries across the region mean that gathering places for debates and discussion – male-dominated *grins*, *atayah* bases and motorcycle taxi ranks and more female-dominated markets – continue to be key nodes for news sharing. Oral messages resonate widely as they are often in languages that audiences are most familiar with. Knowing the individual sharing the information, even if they are not the ones with direct knowledge of the event, is critical and can explain why people are more likely to believe what they hear in these spaces, irrespective of whether it turns out to be true or not. The rise of WhatsApp – and its voice note function in particular – has provided a platform for this more intimate oral transmission of information to continue online, in a way that increasingly replicates radio. Twitter Spaces, although a more elitist platform, is also becoming an important online space for the dissection of social issues that builds on oral traditions in contexts like Nigeria. In these digital discussions, disinformation is rampant with little moderation; meaning that users are not reprimanded by the platform for spreading falsehoods.

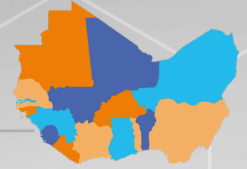
The source of information is also a critical part of understanding what gets widely circulated and what does not. Whilst less than a fifth of West Africans are social media users, it is generally the case that those who are online, are among the most influential and respected members of society: religious leaders and community heads in rural areas and political activists, journalists and social commentators in major urban centres. These are the types of people who would conventionally shape

political debate across traditional media and in word of mouth spaces. Online spaces are also offering a space for younger — though still predominantly male — voices to debate with and influence peers. Each have an audience and authority which ensures that messages, both true and false, penetrate online, but importantly offline as well.

Traditional media outlets are increasingly recognising the power of being online and of the need to engage with ‘trending’ social media content. Segments of television and radio shows that are devoted to discussions about what is circulating on social media often report verbatim what people are saying on online platforms. In Ghana, Citi FM – with an audience of over 2 million – runs a popular show called #CitiTrends exploring popular topics through commentaries about them on social media. Television shows in Nigeria – including the ‘Morning Show’ on Arise, Africa Independent Television’s Kakaaki and Channels TV’s Sunrise Daily a– share tweets, sometimes of questionable provenance, from social media as part of their discussions about current events. In addition, many media outlets across West Africa determine what will be discussed on their show, and who should be invited as panelists, through monitoring social media. But the flow of information is not just from online to offline.

The overlaps between traditional and new media have led to a “symbiotic” relationship in which news reported in traditional media is shared on social media at the same time as journalists reporting for traditional media houses regularly follow and use social media pages to gain news stories and talking points for their radio and television programmes. In Liberia, and in several other contexts, this has led to an “epidemic of breaking news” with outlets primarily focused on being the first to report the story, before they verify its accuracy or veracity.





Conventional media outlets use social media channels to share their reporting with a new and engaged audience or for livestreaming coverage of key events as they seek to compete with the growing numbers of online publications, bloggers and social media influencers. Beyond sharing through the formal handles of traditional media platforms, segments of television or radio interviews with key political figures are spread by activists and supporters through their own digital networks to either boost or attack the individual in question. These can even be edited and manipulated to present a narrative that is different from the one conveyed on the traditional media programme. The impact of this flow of information can be seen in relation to the coup d'état that took place in Guinea in September 2021. Videos of deposed President Alpha Condé quickly circulated across traditional and social media, including WhatsApp, pushing a narrative that the coup was irreversible and that citizens should be

ready to accept the new reality.

Where information comes from and how it is presented are all part of how people decide what is true and what is not. But this is increasingly difficult to discern on social media as fake news becomes more sophisticated and harder for the average user to unravel. The recent documentation of high quality deepfake news videos circulating in Mali are an indication of the increased sophistication with which falsehoods are being created.⁵ Since this content can quickly become embedded in other offline networks through which news and information is circulated, it cannot be seen as being isolated from the wider information eco-system. Social media is not only shaping and influencing the way information flows, but also reshaping how conventional media operates. And with the numbers of online users growing significantly, these changes are likely to be sustained.

WHO ARE THE KEY SPREADERS OF FALSEHOODS? AND WHAT IMPACT DO RUMOURS HAVE?

There are two main groups of falsehoods spreaders. Those who create the content with the intention to disinform and those who amplify this created content, not always with the intention to mislead, but because they believe it to be true – often as a result of pre-existing biases or because of who they receive the information from. This section focuses predominantly on the former, but also highlights the way they think about engaging – formally or informally – these amplifiers as part of their disinformation approach. The country studies highlighted seven key actors

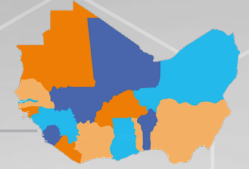
that are engaged in the spread of falsehoods and the impacts that they can have or are having in the areas of politics, health and societal cohesion.

Political activists

Political actors, directly and indirectly, are increasingly relying on “cyberwarriors” – a term used in Benin, Mali, Liberia, Ghana, The Gambia and Nigeria – to support electoral bids and to push their wider political agenda. For instance, The Buhari Media Centre (BMC), a presidential campaign affiliate organisation

5. Derek Thomson. 2022. “Deepfake news videos circulate in Mali amid tensions with France”. France 24. 31 January Available at <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20220131-deepfake-news-videos-circulate-in-mali-amid-tensions-with-france>





linked to the 2015 and 2019 aspirant of the All Progressive Congress party, Muhammadu Buhari, came to the fore ahead of Nigeria's 2019 election. Using a network of WhatsApp groups – covering all 36 states and 774 local government areas – they sought to promote his presidential bid, encourage voter turnout among supporters and attack political rivals who they perceived as a threat.⁶ Their attacks on rivals, in particular, often relied on spreading false information. After the election, BMC has continued to be used to coordinate attacks on political opponents who speak out against the Buhari administration on social media. A similar approach was employed by President Barrow and his social media army of supporters in The Gambia in the run-up to the December 2021 election. Operating under the banner of Barrow's Media Empowerment, they set up influential Facebook pages that

promoted propaganda, and even created falsehoods, in favour of his presidential bid.

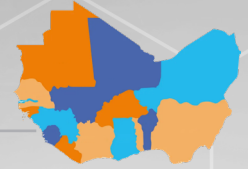
It is not just presidential candidates running national campaigns who are recruiting online activists to bolster their bids. Legislative candidates in Mali, Liberia and Nigeria have also taken to using digital "attack dogs" to bolster their own standing and secure electoral victory at all costs. These social media activists are sometimes paid – in kind with mobile phones or data or in small amounts of cash – to undertake this work whilst others stand to benefit from more lucrative positions or a government contract if their candidate is elected. Many leading influencers already have significant followings online and essentially sell their audience and influence to the highest political bidder.

Liberia's 'cyber warriors'

In Liberia, the 'Hon. Thomas P. Fallah T-5 Cyber Warriors' - a Facebook page created on 11 July 2020 - was linked to supporters of Thomas P. Fallah, the candidate of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change in the 2020 Montserrado senatorial election. It describes itself as a 'group of professionals, battle tested and well-schooled propagandists'. Similarly, a Facebook group, 'Dillon's Cyber Team,' linked to supporters of Abraham Darius Dillon, the candidate of the opposition Collaborating Political Parties in the same election, defined its objective as 'to defend and protect the legacy of Senator Dillon'. During the 2020 senate elections, 'cyber warriors' supporting candidates in the various counties produced and circulated multiple fake election results on Facebook - purporting that they were released by the National Elections Commission - that put their candidates in the lead. These fake results created anxiety and confusion among the public about the true outcome of the polls. In doing so these 'cyber warriors' caused deep polarisation and widened political and social divides.

6. See Idayat Hassan et al. 2019. 'WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 election: Mobilising the people, protecting the vote'. Centre for Democracy and Development





Whilst it remains difficult to categorically measure their impact, the growing use of social media activist by politicians indicates that they perceive it to be important. Reflecting on the 2020 elections in Côte d'Ivoire a journalist noted that, "around the elections everyone was using fake news to destabilise their opponents. This was very, very widespread".⁷ But there remains recognition that social media alone cannot win elections and that having an effective 'ground game' remains critically important. Nonetheless there is a growing belief that social media campaigns can boost favourable turnout and/or reduce support, and votes, for opponents, even if those voters do not switch side but simply abstain from the process. Driving disillusionment through the spread of political disinformation about the voting process or candidates is not a positive development for the democratic trajectory of the sub-region.

Online influencers

Social media activists do not need to be formally aligned to political aspirants or parties to be influential. Chris Yapi, an Ivorian avatar whose identity remains unknown despite rumours of links to prominent political actors, has over half a million Facebook followers with whom he shares analysis and insights on political happenings in the country. As one respondent interviewed for the Côte d'Ivoire study noted, "Yapi is so popular that people watch this guy on Twitter more than they watch the news or the government – even in villages people are always looking to see what Chris Yapi says".⁸ His posts are discussed at the highest levels of government, in the cabinet office and by foreign diplomats, which only lends further to his credibility. The success of avatars like Yapi also comes from the fact that there is a dearth of information coming from the government itself.

When the death of former Ivorian Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko was announced in March 2021, Yapi propagated the idea that the brother of President Ouattara, Téné Birahima, had poisoned him. Yapi argued this was a move by Birahima that would allow him to take up a significant position in the administration and pave the way for an easier transition when Alassane Ouattara's presidency ends in 2025. When Birahima was made defence minister shortly after Bakayoko's death this only served to lend credibility to the narrative. Its influence extended to impacting the ability of the new defence minister to do his job effectively, as many officials in the armed forces had heard and believed Yapi's narrative and having been close to Bakayoko, did not want him to succeed.

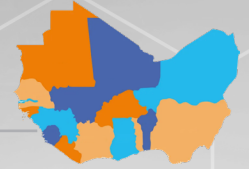
In Sierra Leone, where political polarisation is broadly drawn along ethnic lines, the ongoing entrenchment of divisions online through social media influencers is a concern for wider social cohesion. For example, individuals like 'Adebayor' – a Sierra Leonean in the diaspora who is aligned with the political opposition – drops a WhatsApp audio almost every day to share his thoughts on current events in a way mimicking a daily radio or television broadcast, which is then countered by influencers such as 'Atilla' who work to push the narrative of the ruling party.

This category of influencers, which can extend to include leaders in both the offline and online space like Nnamdi Kanu in Nigeria, take a public approach to shaping narratives. But there is also increasing evidence of more subtle influencer campaigns where the agenda that is being promoted appears more organic even though it is carefully curated, and even financially motivated, behind the scenes. In West Africa, an investigative piece by BuzzFeed drew attention to an influencer

7. Interview with an Ivorian journalist by Jessica Moody, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.

8. Ibid.





led campaign to tweet in support of Alex Saab – an alleged money launderer who worked with the Venezuelan government – after he was arrested in Cape Verde. Prominent Nigerian’s were alleged to have been paid as part of an attempt to shape public opinion and court proceedings.⁹ In Kenya, 2021 research from the Mozilla Foundation uncovered a network of influencers paid to tweet for as little as US\$15 a day in an effort to undermine the country’s judiciary.¹⁰ These examples highlight the growing threat posed by paid political propaganda and influencer campaigns across social media.

The state

Governments themselves are also responsible for the increased spread of falsehoods. This is not just through the information they do share – though they still do propagate falsehoods in many instances – but in the silence that often descends over political sensitive issues, including security or the health of a prominent political figure or leader. In 2021, the Burkinabé government – prior to the January 2022 coup d’état – banned media reporting from areas of the country where internally displaced persons were living, having been forcibly moved by the ongoing insurgency. But this approach simply fuelled rumours about why the government wanted to speak on behalf of the individuals and further contributed to mistrust of statements that the government did issue in relation to its efforts to contain the insurgency.

Silence has been the response to rumours of health issues relating to leader figures in Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire and Niger in recent years. But the approach of states to say little or nothing publicly does not tend to make the story go away. Rather, their enduring silence provides a gap which can be filled by rumours and falsehoods, which when left

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unchallenged can become the dominant narratives that are hard to shift. Some Nigerians still believe that Buhari did not return from treatment in the UK in 2019 and was replaced by a Sudanese clone – Jibrin – despite his public denial of the fact.

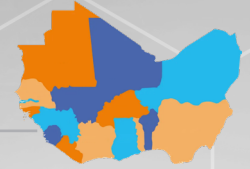
This scepticism partially stems from the fact that when government officials do speak, they are not immune from peddling falsehoods to serve their own political agenda. The Nigerian state has continued to deny the accuracy of multiple eyewitness and video reports — further confirmed by a judicial panel of inquiry convened to look into the events — of the way the military attacked and killed peaceful #EndSARS protestors in Lagos in October 2020. Information Minister, Lai Mohammed, described the panel’s report as “riddled with errors, inconsistencies, discrepancies, speculations, innuendoes, omissions and conclusions that are not supported by evidence”.¹¹ In fact the #EndSARS protests supplied various examples of state sponsored disinformation, as efforts were made through offline and online actions to portray the protestors as violent and a threat to the public; a justification for which the use

9. Craig Silverman. 2021. “Why do a bunch of Nigerian Twitter influencers want this alleged money launderer to go free? They are being paid”. BuzzFeed News. 8 April. Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/nigerian-twitter-campaign-alex-saab>

10. Vittoria Elliot. 2021. “Disinformation influencers for hire, only \$15 a day”. Rest of the World. 2 September. Available at <https://restofworld.org/2021/kenya-disinformation-bbi-judiciary/>

11. Ayodeji Adegboyega. 2021. “#EndSARS: Lagos panel report filled with errors, Lai Mohammed claims”. Premium Times. 23 November. Available at <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/496947-endsars-lagos-panel-report-filled-with-errors-lai-mohammed-claims.html>





of force could be made.

Both approaches — the silence or the use of propaganda — only serve to reaffirm existing mistrust in authorities to provide credible information to the citizens they serve. This contributes to encouraging them to look elsewhere for information they can trust.

The media

Media outlets engage in the spreading of falsehoods indirectly by poor reporting, not verifying stories before they publish them, or by being paid to print press statements or stories that are heavily politicised. This is increasingly driven by the need to raise revenue and 'break news' to compete with the plethora of online media houses. But they are also involved in directly spreading falsehoods when directed to do so by financial backers, who are often politically affiliated. The idea that traditional media outlets have not and do not pursue an agenda driven by their financial backers – be that private owners or in many cases the state – would be a gross misrepresentation of reality.

A 2017 Media Ownership Monitor report in Ghana asserted that every third media outlet in the country has an owner with political interests.¹² These figures are likely to be broadly similar across West Africa. As a result, these channels are not immune from sharing politically motivated falsehoods, with allegations continuing to emerge of top media houses taking bribes to subvert the truth. In 2021, the Ghana Journalist Association lamented the levels of 'money taking' by journalists to publish sometimes one-sided reports on issues of political or business interests. State-run media outlets are even more susceptible to promoting a particular political agenda. In Senegal, the state-operated radio, television and press agency, as well as national daily newspaper

Le Soleil, have their heads appointed by the President. As a result, and with good reason, opposition parties and civil society actors accuse them of being subservient to their political appointer in their coverage.

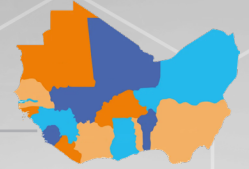
Media is also targeted by political activists as an avenue through which they can spread disinformation. In the run-up to the 2020 elections in Ghana several 'fake news websites' emerged that replicated credible and conventional sites, but which had slightly altered URLs and contained content that was in no way affiliated to them but aimed to use their audience and trust to push a political agenda. This has also been observed in northern Nigeria, with unofficial Facebook pages called 'BBC Hausa' having tens of thousands of followers but no affiliation or links to the actual BBC, and in Cape Verde, where individuals Facebook pages are designed to look like those of professional media outlets. In northern Nigeria *sojojin baki* (soldiers of the mouth) are deployed by political actors to local radio phone-ins and television talk shows with the aim of spreading specific narratives – many of which are false and already circulating online – about political opponents or government programmes. These examples highlight the continued importance of traditional media to the information ecosystem, but also highlight the ways in which it is increasingly susceptible to influence from social media.

Diaspora

Diaspora activists are influential online actors and shapers of narratives given the widely held perception among residents that their 'abroad education and experience' provides them with increased knowledge and insight. This has come to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic with diaspora communities often behind misinformation about the severity of the pandemic, the availability of treatments,

12. Media Ownership Monitor. 2017. 'Who owns the media in Ghana? Political Affiliations'. Available at <https://ghana.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/political-affiliations/>





and the credibility of vaccines.

In Cape Verde, where diaspora representation extends into the legislature, prominent external voices have been key drivers of anti-Covid-19 vaccination narratives on Facebook. Providing commentary in Creole on public addresses by government health officials, individuals like Alexandre Évora have tapped into narratives about government's failure to provide basic services to question why it should be expected to deliver on the rollout of vaccines. In May 2021, the online newspaper *A Semana* reported that according to a study conducted by the National Health Service, one in every five Cabo-Verdeans were refusing to take the vaccine.¹³

Politics is another area where diaspora have influence beyond voting which they have the right to do in less than half the ECOWAS countries. In The Gambia, the diaspora has been, and continues to be, influential in shaping the political narrative. Previously those based outside the country were key mobilisers in the fight against Yahya Jammeh's dictatorship in the country. But since his time in power was brought to an end in 2016, activism against the regime has transformed into more partisan political views, which are widely circulated through Facebook Live discussions and WhatsApp groups, often with the intention to mislead or to promote a favoured candidate or party. Their voices were particularly noticeable during the presidential elections in December 2021.

Similarly in Guinea Bissau internet blogs – *Ditadura de Consenso* based between Bissau and Portugal, *Didinho*, *Doka International*, *Guineendade* and *Intelectuais Balantas na Diaspora* – are diaspora run key sources of information for everyday news about the country. Unregulated by state control and often hidden behind a cloak of anonymity,

they can discuss the complicated politics in Guinea Bissau more freely than those in the country. But these platforms are also utilised to spread falsehoods and rumours into the wider information ecosystem that promote a specific political agenda or narrative. Diaspora members are also leading proponents of secessionist agitations in Nigeria,¹⁴ with online narratives driving and supporting offline actions in eastern parts of the country.

These diaspora influencers can share sensitive or inciting content and information, most often through Facebook and WhatsApp but also through online blogs and newspapers, without the same repercussions that national residents may face for doing so. This combined with the perception, among a significant percentage that their 'outside' experience, makes them a more credible source means the diaspora is an increasingly influential player in the information ecosystem across the sub-region.

Specialist consultancy firms

International consultancy firms have been a part of election campaigns in Senegal, Côte D'Ivoire, Niger, Nigeria and even Togo. It is likely that this is not the extent of their involvement, but many of the deals struck between political actors and these firms are not made public which makes them difficult to detect. Often, it is only when coordinated disinformation campaigns are uncovered and shutdown – as occurred in the case of Israeli firm Archimedes in 2019¹⁵ – that the information becomes public knowledge. In most instances, these firms work closely with in-country partners who already have a strong grasp of the political landscape and access to key political figures and mobilisers. Three Nigerian firms spoken to for a 2020 study, admitted to having worked on the

13. A Semana. (2021). 'Covid-19: Um Em Cada Cinco Cabo-Verdianos Rejeita Tomar Vacinas e Pedir Mais Informação', 7 May.

Available at <https://www.asemana.publ.cv/?Covid-19-Um-em-cada-cinco-cabo-verdianos-rejeita-tomar-vacinas-e-pede-mais&ak=1>

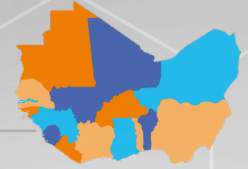
14. BBC News. (2022). 'IPOB: Nigerian 'media warriors' call for killings on social media over Biafra". 12 May.

Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-61354014>

15. Nick Statt. 2019. "Facebook shuts down an Israeli firm's effort to influence politics in West Africa". The Verge. 16 May. Available at

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/16/18627776/facebook-election-interference-shut-down-west-africa-instagram-pages-groups-israeli-firm>





communications strategies of around thirty campaigns between 2015 and 2019, many with no external guidance or support.¹⁶

Specialist political communication firms from Africa are increasingly prominent. For instance, UReputation, owned by Lofti Bel Hadj, a Tunisian businessman, is one of the leading designers of disinformation campaigns in francophone West Africa. One strategy it deploys is to create numerous news pages on Facebook which appear to provide credible information, to gather followers, before it shifts to promoting politicised narratives as their audience grows and elections approach. In Togo, according to the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab), the firm was behind 11 new fictitious pages on Facebook in support of the candidate Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé during the presidential elections in February 2020. Also in 2020, UReputation, was active on Facebook to advance the interests of Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire leader Henri Konan Bédié. An investigation into

these activities by DFR Lab saw Facebook remove 446 pages, 96 groups, and 200 Instagram accounts that were being used to promote political propaganda.¹⁷ But the impacts of these sorts of narratives can be long lasting and inhibit social cohesion.

Data or digitally driven political campaigning is growing in prominence and will likely be commonplace in the future. These will pose even more of a risk to polluting the information space around elections, conflicts, or political issues if they can access individuals data and utilise it to drive targeted campaigns, as has already been done in Senegal.¹⁸ With weak or non-existent data protection and privacy laws across West Africa — only nine of the 15 ECOWAS countries had legislation in place in 2021¹⁹ and even in those countries where it does exist questions remain about the capacity of requisite agencies to enforce the legislation — the opportunities for specialist consultancy firms to shape electoral outcomes based on data driven approaches remain high.

“

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External states

Nation states are also seeking to shape and influence information flows through proxies to push their agendas. On social media in Niger, Mali and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso there has been an ongoing battle for influence between French officials — keen to promote their historic interests and military engagement in the Sahel — and organisations with close links to the Russian state, that continues to take advantage of the ongoing political turmoil in the region to increase its influence, particularly in the security space. Facebook, in its effort to remove what it calls “coordinated inauthentic behaviour,” indicated that individuals linked to the French military and Russian state were using its platform to engage in propaganda

16. Idayat Hassan. 2020. “Personal data and the influence industry in Nigeria’s elections”. Centre for Democracy and Development. Available at <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Data-Politics-Nigeria-CDD-Tactical-Tech.pdf>

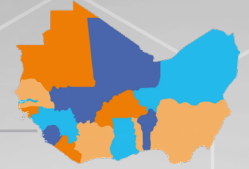
17. Koaci.com, ‘Côte d’Ivoire : Fabrication de fausses nouvelles pour peser sur la Présidentielle, Henri Konan Bédié cité dans une enquête internationale’, 9 June 2020. Available at https://www.koaci.com/article/2020/06/09/cote-divoire/politique/cote-divoire-fabrication-de-fausses-nouvelles-pour-peser-sur-la-presidentielle-henri-konan-bedie-cite-dans-une-enquete-internationale_142130.html

18. Simon Allison. 2019. “How big data swung Senegal’s vote”. Mail and Guardian. 6 September.

Available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-06-00-how-big-data-swung-senegals-vote/>

19. Cathy-Eitel Nzume. 2021. “Slowly but surely, data protection regulations expand throughout Africa”. The International Association of Privacy Professionals. 2 April. <https://iapp.org/news/a/slowly-but-surely-data-protection-regulations-expand-throughout-africa/>





using its platform to engage in propaganda and fake news sharing in Mali, Niger and Central African Republic and removed them in 2020.²⁰ These online operations involved “two networks with 274 fake Facebook accounts, along with groups, pages and accounts on Instagram”.²¹ Whilst it is hard to estimate the extent to which these coordinated inauthentic online behaviour impacted the situation on the ground in Mali, this propaganda war aligns with growing local negative sentiment toward France in the Sahel. It is notable that pro-Russian banners and flags were visible during protests and the recent coup in Burkina Faso, and that the junta government in Mali appears keen on lessening its reliance on French support, particularly in the area of security.

Other examples of nation states being directly engaged in online influence operations are less evident, but do exist. Iran was documented as having used proxy social media accounts to spread pro-Khamenei and anti-Western propaganda in Nigeria’s information space in October 2020. Using fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram, anti-Nigerian government propaganda was pushed out, with President Muhammadu Buhari singled out for attacks. Support was also proffered for the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and its leader Sheikh Zakzaky. In 2020, a study by researchers at Stanford University, published in the run-up to Guinea’s presidential election, pointed to evidence of links between select Facebook pages and official Turkish interests, although it found no direct evidence of Ankara’s involvement in the creation or administration of these pages.²³

Stepping away from the online space and reflecting on the wider information ecosystem, China’s growing presence and influence on the media space in West Africa is also important to highlight. As part of its wider agenda for the region, the Chinese government and state affiliated media houses have taken a multi-faceted approach to influencing media in the region – providing scholarships and training for journalists, free content for existing media houses, by opening bases in places like Dakar for its media broadcasters, and through the provision of media infrastructure support, including digital networks.²⁴ This expansion of Chinese media into Africa has sparked competition with Western media organisations over audience. African-focused broadcasting programmes such as the BBC’s Focus on Africa and CNN’s Inside Africa which started in 2012 and 2014 respectively, responded to the creation of China Global Television Network and its two hours of dedicated Africa news bulletins, which began in January 2012.

Although predominantly focused on more conventional media, and with an approach that is focused on long-term incremental changes than a short-term overhaul – there are signs of China’s increasing interest in, and focus on, the digital realm. In 2021, Senegalese President Macky Sall officially commissioned a new government data centre that would remove its reliance on foreign-based servers. The centre was funded and built with Chinese money and expertise. For leading tech experts, this was just another example of the “deepening tech-telecoms relationship between China and nearly every African country over the past two decades”²⁵ – a dynamic that is set to continue in the near future.

20. Nathaniel Gleicher & David Agranovich. (2020). Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from France and Russia. December. Available at <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

21. Craig Timberg & Elizabeth Dwozkin. (2020). People affiliated with French military used Facebook to meddle in Africa. The Washington Post. 15 December. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/15/people-affiliated-with-french-military-used-facebook-meddle-africa/>

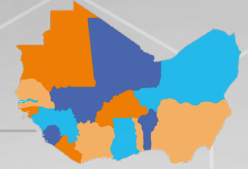
22. Alex Thurston. 2017. “Salafism in Nigeria beyond Boko Haram”. Council on Foreign Relations. 27 January. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/salafism-northern-nigeria-beyond-boko-haram>

23. Jacob Cable, Zoe Huczok and W.E Ditto. 2020. “Qui sont les trolls Facebook du président guinéen ? Campagne électorale moderne ou actions inauthentiques concertées, une frontière floue.”. Stanford University, 21 September. Available at <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/qui-sont-les-trolls-facebook-du-pr%C3%A9sident-guin%C3%A9en>

24. See Emeka Umejei in “Increasing Influence: China in West Africa”. Centre for Democracy and Development. Available at <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/INSIGHT-MAY-CHINA-AFRICA.pdf>

25. Yinka Adegoke. 2021. “The real reason China is pushing “digital sovereignty” in Africa”. Rest of the World. 1 December.





RESPONSES TO FAKE NEWS

Across the region responses to the threat posed by fake news has largely been in three areas: closing down the internet entirely or specific social media platforms for key periods; the introduction and application of specifically targeted legislation or the use of existing legislation to deal with the challenge; or an increased focus on improving the quality of information being circulated by official or regulated sources, with fact-checking initiatives particularly prominent.

Internet shutdowns

Citizens of 12 of the 15 ECOWAS²⁶ countries have experienced some form of government directed internet or social media shutdown in the last decade with some lasting for hours and others for weeks and even months. This approach has often been driven by states looking to clamp down on popular discontent. Using the narrative of needing to protect national security, particularly around elections - as was the case in Niger in March 2021²⁷ - or during popular protests - as was the case in Senegal in May 2021²⁸ - governments have shutdown the internet

claiming that this is to prevent falsehoods from circulating. But more often than not, the narratives they are seeking to clampdown on are those that threaten the status quo or ruling party.

Internet shutdowns only offer a temporary solution and comes with significant economic implications.²⁹ The shutdown approach also fails to address the fact that information shared online transcends digital boundaries and whilst shutting off the internet can slow the spread of information, it does not eradicate it. In fact, shutdowns only make rumours that circulate in offline channels more believable as digital information blackouts sow instability and uncertainty. Furthermore, the closure of the online space also limits, during an election for example, the chance for non-partisan actors like an election commission to use it to boost the transparency of the process.

Regulatory approaches and enforcement

In the last five years there has been an increased focus on developing regulation that is specifically designed to respond to,



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26. So far only Ghana, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde residents have been unaffected

27. Access Now. 2021. "Niger blacks out internet after presidential runoff election". 1 March.

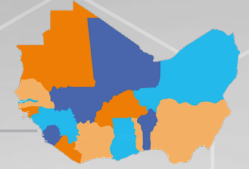
Available at <https://www.accessnow.org/niger-election-internet-blackout/>

28. Bloomberg. 2021. "Senegal shuts down TV stations, internet disrupted amid protests". 3 May.

Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-05/senegal-shuts-down-tv-stations-internet-disrupted-amid-protests>

29. Yomi Kazeem. 2020. "Internet and social media shutdowns cost African economies over \$2 billion in 2019". Quartz. 16 January.





and regulate, the challenged posed by social media to the information ecosystem. Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria Sierra Leone and Togo have all introduced cybercrimes or cybersecurity laws since 2015 that lay out punishments for the sharing of falsehoods that generally involved a combination of time in prison and/or a substantive fine. Nigerian legislators sought to pass the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill in 2019, that would have allowed Nigeria's government to cut off internet access or block specific social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter at its own discretion. But after significant opposition from civil society groups, it has been shelved for now.

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and the Gambia have either adapted or reinterpreted media codes or existing penal legislation to account for the rise of digital fake news. In Ghana and Senegal, the governments have publicly stated they are working on new legislation or adapting existing legislation to better account for the fake news threat. Majority popular support does not exist for such measures according to 2020 Afrobarometer survey data but around one in three respondents were supportive of regulation.

ECOWAS is also exploring how it can support an improved and more robust regulatory environment at a regional level. But the prevailing challenge for regulation is how to ensure that it is applied evenly across the political spectrum. Cases, and successful prosecutions, brought against individuals in Côte d'Ivoire since 2017 have been focused on political opponents of the government and civil society activists. In Niger, the 2020 Cybercrimes law was used to arrest journalists and civil society members as well as prosecute

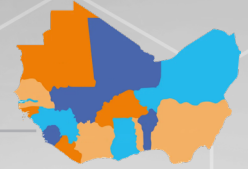
some private media houses. In January 2020, Amnesty International estimated that more than 17 journalists, bloggers and opponents had been prosecuted in less than two years under Benin's revised digital code, in a clampdown that was jeopardising freedom of expression and media freedom. Selective application of legislation or regulation to tackle the threat of fake news to serve political ends is problematic but can be hard to get away from given the control many states exercise over the appointment of members to regulatory authorities.

But even if legislation is applied evenly across the political spectrum, the feasibility of prosecuting everyone who shares, or even creates, fake news is impractical. Inciting ethnic violence or publishing hate speech that an individual knows is false and that can have serious real world consequences is quite different to sharing jokes or already circulating content about a president getting married to a minister, for example. These nuances needs to be reflected and accounted for in legal frameworks.

Public engagement

So far, the bulk of public-facing initiatives to tackle fake news have focused on fact-checking, increasingly and importantly, but still not comprehensively enough, in local languages and through media outlets – print, radio and television. Predominantly run by civil society organisations or media institutions, they face challenges of trying to keep up with the pace and volume of fake news in circulation – by the time a fact-check is researched, double-checked and published the story may have moved on –; attracting the same online audience as the online activists they are trying to disprove – in Côte D'Ivoire, Abidjan Fact Check has a little





over 1,000 Facebook followers compared with Chris Yapi's 600,000+ –; and actually demonstrating that people change their opinions or minds after reading a fact-check.

A further challenge is establishing the perceived independence of the fact-checking entity itself, particularly in politically polarised environments like Guinea Bissau or Sierra Leone. When they 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. The importance associated with the source of information is key in this regard. Africa Check – a West Africa regional fact checking organisation – is seeking to build this into its approach with the creation of Fact Ambassadors – respected peers and individuals within communities who are trained to receive the fact-checks in local languages and share amongst their communities. This is not just a recognition of the importance of who a piece of information comes from, but also reiterates the continued importance of word-of-mouth networks for the flow of information. But the volume of false information in circulation presents a sizeable obstacle to these sorts of initiatives that often can produce, at best, a fact-check every day or two.

Even if the short-term benefits are often more assumed than delivered with the fact-checking approach, the long-term ones – getting people to critically think about whether the information they receive is credible — are key and can be part of larger and more widespread, and even targeted, plans for public digital education campaigns. However, these widespread or even targeted education campaigns are largely lacking across West Africa.

Improvements to the flow of quality information can also be delivered through Right to Information legislation. Whilst this exists in 11 ECOWAS states, the majority

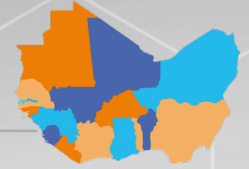
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of requests are routinely ignored or face delayed responses. But this sort of legislation should ideally provide a backstop. What is required in the first place is for governments to be more open in sharing information. Whilst this is unlikely to happen on political sensitive topics or when it comes to issues of national security, there have been examples during the Covid-19 pandemic that can be replicated when it comes to the delivery of other basic services.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the Ministry of Youth Promotion and Employment was supported by telecoms operator MTN to open a call centre with the capacity to deal with public calls to help it fight fake news and rumours related to the pandemic. In Ghana, the government liaised with key media stakeholders, including the umbrella organisations of independent broadcasters, journalists, and editors to align on authoritative data sources for Covid-19 reporting. A website was created to serve as the comprehensive source for information on the virus and infographics, which simplified





bulky data into digestible segments, were widely publicised on social media to further improve accessibility. The triangulated and proactive approach helped in limiting the spread of fake news around the virus and could have application beyond the health space. The rebuilding of trust in official information will take time, but it remains a crucial part of efforts to improve wider information flows.

The role of social media companies

Responses to the threat of fake news have rarely focused on the social media companies operating the platforms. Twitter's announcement that it would be opening its African headquarters in Ghana in 2021 may provide a greater chance for governments to engage directly. Issues such as slow response rates to user reports of abuse, platforms limited ability to moderate content³⁰ and their lack of understanding of nuanced political issues across the region have been issues consistently raised by digital experts. Despite these they remain largely underaddressed. For instance efforts to downgrade Covid-19 mis/disinformation or to tackle falsehoods around elections are largely applied to countries in the Global

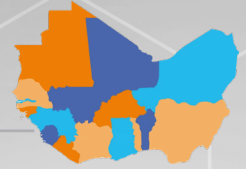
North, and even when some attention is given to West Africa the focus is only on a handful of the most prominent ones. Places like Benin and Cape Verde do not appear to be on social media companies' radars when it comes to monitoring and enforcing community standards, let alone on the issues of innovative approaches to tackling fake news.

States in the region have also failed to engage these companies sufficiently. Nigeria's recent engagement with, and ban of, Twitter – ostensibly for its decision to take down a post by President Buhari that it deemed to have breached terms of use – was primarily driven by a politicised agenda than a wider push to make the company more accountable to Nigerians as a whole. Even if Nigeria did get Twitter to agree to appoint a country representative and commit to more regular dialogue³¹ concerns remain that states engagements remain driven primarily by political imperatives, rather than by wider efforts to compel social media companies to do more to tackle the spread of misinformation and disinformation on their platforms in West Africa.

30. For more on content moderation see the 'Santa Clara Principles'. Available at <https://santaclaraprinciples.org/>

31. Nduka Orjinmo. 2022. "How Nigeria succeeded in clipping Twitter's wings". BBC News. 18 January. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60024742>





RECOMMENDATIONS

To support a more positive information ecosystem in West Africa, key stakeholders – including ECOWAS, governments, media, civil society and researchers – all have a role to play. The following recommendations outline what these could be.

Recommendations for ECOWAS

- 1 Develop a forum for regular engagement between social media companies and member states to discuss challenges and how they can be addressed.
- 2 Support states to apply and enforce the 2010 Supplementary Act on Personal Data Protection within ECOWAS.
- 3 Create a set of standards that aims to promote a more inclusive digital dialogue and challenges users not to share falsehoods. In addition to getting member states to commit to these standards, it can popularise these provisions among civil society groups working in the information and governance space, who in turn can educate citizens about what they are and why they should be adhered to.

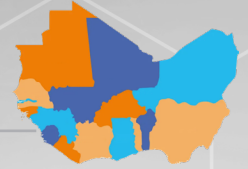
Recommendations for social media companies

- 1 Have a strong and engaged West Africa presence that seeks to engage government and other key stakeholders — including media, civil society and research bodies — on a regular basis to see how they can support tackling fake news and learn more about how it spreads.
- 2 Work to ensure compliance with the Santa Clara Principles on transparency and accountability in content moderation. In particular, focus on improving content moderation capacity in languages spoken in the region in order to respond more efficiently and effectively to complaints of abuse or hate speech by platform users.

Recommendations for civil society and the media

- 1 Traditional media houses should look to embed fact-checking into media newsrooms and train journalists in best practices, so that individuals, as well as media houses, improve the standards of reporting.
- 2 Civil society organisations, in partnership with media houses, should produce fact-checks in key local languages and think seriously about how the information collected can be distributed to as wide an audience as possible. This could include through offline ‘fact-check ambassadors’, audio and visually appealing mediums and traditional media – particularly radio – in recognition of the enduring online-offline information overlaps.





3

During elections, civil society groups should push political parties, and their supporters, to sign up to social media codes of conduct, that will be designed in partnership with political actors and aim to reduce the amount of divisive and false information in circulation. Enforcement of these standards will be done by civil society groups in partnership with the media and general public, who will also be made aware of the provisions contained in the codes of conduct through online and offline awareness campaigns.

4

Civil society organisations, the media, and where it is feasible to do so, government agencies can run public education campaigns about what disinformation is and the risks that it can pose to society. Key to the success of these campaigns will be to run them in several local languages, to ensure there is initially targeted engagement of information influencers – both online and offline - and to ensure campaigns engage both traditional and social media channels.

Recommendations for government institutions

1

Introduce, or improve, data protection legislation and data protection agencies capacity and to educate the public about the importance of protecting their data.

2

Introduce, or improve, right to information laws and to educate the public, civil society groups and the media about how they can use them to extract information

3

Improve channels of communication with citizens both in traditional and social media by providing regular public briefs on a weekly or monthly basis. During these briefs, citizens and journalists' can be given the chance to ask questions on government performance.

4

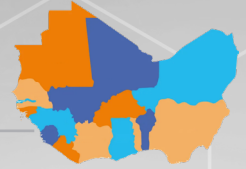
Efforts to develop curricula for secondary education, should include the provision of a module on critical thinking to empower future generations with the mindset to better discern fact from fiction in their everyday lives.

Recommendations for further research

1

Specific research is still required at the country level to understand how different social media platforms are used or how fake news shapes particular events – like elections. This can contribute to enhancing the understanding of the influence of digital disinformation on wider society.





2

There is significant scope for studies that explore the way fake news spreads in local languages in countries and across the region. This can further our understanding of who spreads it, how it interacts and shapes other media channels and what impacts it has on wider societal events and interactions.

3

Efforts are needed to document and better understand the responses of social media companies to the threat posed by fake news in West Africa.





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