

NIGERIA'S

FAKE NEWS'S

ECOSYSTEM

AN OVERVIEW

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Understanding Information Flows	3
Key Actors and Enablers	7
Fake News Influence	9
External Shapers	11
Addressing The Problem	13
Conclusion	15
Recommendations	16

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fake news is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Historically, peddlers of disinformation were popularly referred to as “radio without battery”, with fake news a weapon in Nigeria’s civil war (1967-1970). Today in Nigeria’s southeast, fake news peddlers are given the moniker of ‘Okokon Dems’ – a homage to Biafra’s chief propagandist - and use their influence on spread rumours at the sub-national level. Whilst social media has expanded the bandwidth of the ‘radio without battery’ through its more extensive reach, speed, and low costs, word of mouth continues to be a fundamental way in which falsehoods are spread in the country, particularly in rural areas.

Drawing on 15 key informant interview and extensive desk-based research this paper highlights the increasingly blurred line between conventional and online media and between the spread of offline and online misinformation and disinformation. It argues that online and offline disinformation are intertwined and shape and influence each other. Tweets and Facebook posts are regularly reported in print media or discussed during radio and television programs in Nigeria. It also highlights the increasing sophistication of online disinformation operations in Nigeria, outlining a toolkit of methods from which propaganda secretaries, cyber warriors and online activists choose.

The implications of this deluge of falsehoods into the information ecosystem are significant. Fake news increasingly inhibits informed decisions on issues affecting everyday lives in Nigeria, including whether citizens participate in democracy or even take Covid-19 vaccines. Most worryingly of all it is building on existing tensions to divide and polarise Nigerians across ethno-religious lines.

Actors responsible for spreading disinformation include state affiliated groups such as the Buhari Media Centre, who harasses and try to delegitimise opposing voices online, domestic and international public relations firms like the now defunct Cambridge Analytica, and even nation states like Iran, who used proxy social media accounts to attempt to shape Nigerians views around the Islamic Movement in Nigeria in 2020.

Arguing that there are several existing laws in Nigeria legal framework to address misinformation, the report claims selective implementation of the laws, not the absence of legal recourse, is a challenge. It opines that instead of introducing new targeted laws that will likely infringe on citizens’ fundamental rights, the government should look instead into formulating a regulatory framework with tech companies and at the same time support efforts to improve civic education and digital literacy in partnership with civil society and media.

In Nigeria, what we are increasingly seeing is a digital divide not between those who have access and those who do not, but between those who have direct and indirect access to social media content. Therefore, a comprehensive response to tackle the infiltration of fake news into the countries wider information eco-system is urgently needed. Recommendations highlighted by this study focus on improving digital literacy, investing in quality journalism, supporting fact-checking in local languages and strengthening existing laws.





INTRODUCTION

Fake news is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Historically there have been peddlers of fake news popularly referred to as “radio without battery”; a term which emerged from Nigeria’s civil conflict in the 1960s. During the Biafran War (1967-70), Okokon Dem, a key Biafran propagandist, was renowned for giving false information about the progress of Biafra in the war; exaggerating casualties on

the Nigeria side and downplaying the figures on the Biafran side. He did this through word of mouth networks which remained strong in Nigeria’s military dispensations that followed.¹ Today in Nigeria’s southeast, fake news peddlers are given the moniker of ‘Okokon Dems’.

Across northern Nigeria, Sojojin Baci – soldiers of the mouth in Hausa – continue

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. Odunfa, S. 2009. “Lies, politics and Nigeria’s great rumour mill”. BBC. 2 December. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8389020.stm>





to apply similar tactics to that of Okonkon Dem; using their personal influence, to spread rumours at the community level. Whilst social media has expanded the bandwidth of the 'radio without battery', though its bigger reach, speed and low costs, word of mouth continues to be a key way in which falsehoods are spread in the country, particularly in rural areas. A consequence of this is that disinformation is increasingly inhibiting informed decisions on issues affecting everyday lives in Nigeria. In fact, it is driving division and polarising Nigerians across ethno-religious lines.²

To better understand the information ecosystem in Nigeria 15 key informant interviews with Nigerian journalists, politicians, propaganda secretaries, citizens, academics, journalists, and social media users were conducted for this study. This was supplemented by existing literature, media reports, the authors own online interactions and participation and through a review of the Centre for Democracy and Development's (CDD) fact-checking archives, curated since 2018, on fake news.

UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

According to 2021 figures from Statista 51.4% of Nigerian are internet users; a figure that has increased by 8% between 2017 and 2021. By 2026, the percentage of the Nigerian population that will use the internet at least once a month is expected to reach 60%. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most common platforms Nigerians use to come online, but other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and, before it was banned by the federal government, Twitter, also have significant and growing user bases. Telegram and Clubhouse have also seen rapid increases in the numbers of users in the last year. Clubhouse aligns well with oral traditions in Nigeria.

In some of the Clubhouse discussion

monitored for this study, speakers referenced false dates, misrepresented personalities and reinterpreted events in ways that could stoke further division.

But it is important to note that these social media platforms do not operate in silos. Conversations that take place on Clubhouse, may subsequently become a topic for debate on Twitter, with tweets then screenshotted and shared across WhatsApp and Facebook. The interconnected nature of online platforms is also reflected in the increasing overlap between online and offline sources of information. This happens through conventional media who pick up information online and share it with another audience.

2. Hassan, I & Hitchen, J. 2020. "Driving division? Disinformation and the new media landscape in Nigeria". Centre for Democracy and Development.





Several Nigerian television mornings shows - the 'Morning Show' on Arise, Africa Independent Television's *Kakaaki* and Channels TV's *Sunrise Daily* - share tweets, sometimes of questionable provenance, from social media as part of their discussions about current events. In addition, they determine what will be discussed on their show and who should be invited to their show through constant monitoring of social media trends.

Newspapers remain an important source of information, even if overall print runs are not significantly high. Nearly all major morning television and radio shows undertake newspaper reviews in the first segment of their shows, which like with the use of social media posts, ensures that content reaches a wider audience. But traditional media houses are also susceptible to conveying, or deliberately promoting, falsehoods. State owned media like the Nigerian Television Authority largely operates as the government mouthpiece and provides an outlet for the circulation of political propaganda at the federal or state level.³ Private media is also culpable of pushing misinformation and disinformation. The quest to generate financial resources combined with combined with political loyalties shapes coverage and can lead to the publishing of deliberately false information. Africa Independent Television's coverage of the 2015 elections is one notable example. The outlet deliberately pushed disinformation impugning the character of the All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate Muhammadu Buhari and his key supporter, Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The owner of the station, Raymond Dokpesi, is a well-known People's Democratic Party (PDP) stalwart.

Aside from the fact that newspaper stories are regularly used as topics for discussion on local radio stations, newspaper stands are

also places where individuals – predominantly men - such as motorbike and tricycle drivers, bus drivers, and artisans and the unemployed, gather to discuss and debate headlines and national and local issues of concern. Many share and get information on local and national issues at these places or in 'beer parlours'. Even monthly union meetings, common amongst Nigerians living outside their state, are susceptible to being infiltrated by fake news, particularly narratives that focus on issues of ethnic division in the country. According to one interviewee, "during our town union meetings, it is increasingly common for speakers to validate a point by referencing information picked from WhatsApp or Facebook".⁴ This is not always content deliberately designed to mislead but can reflect an individuals' "quest to gain respect in the people's eyes as an educated and enlightened person"⁵ according to one respondent.

In Nigeria's southeast and southwest, where secessionist agitations have grown increasingly where secessionist agitations have grown increasingly prominent in the last five years, unregulated local tabloids are another key source of information for residents despite their very lax commitments to accuracy or rigour. Biafra Insight and Biafra Mandate are just two examples that are used to propel positive propaganda about the secessionist agitation in the southeast to a wide and broadly receptive audience. According to a respondent, these platforms "are created not just to push propaganda but importantly to mobilise citizens and garner sympathy for the separatists and their causes".⁶ In the same way that disinformation, which is created online can circulate offline, this offline content is increasingly finding its way online. The link between the online and the offline in Nigeria is not thin but blurred

3. See Nigeria chapter of Ghana Centre for Democratic Development. 2021. "Democracy Capture in Africa". Democracy in Africa.

4. Personal interview. Enugu. 16 October 2021.

5. Personal interview. Abuja. 2 November 2021.

6. Personal interview. Lagos. 13 October 2021.





and overlapping.

However social media platforms remain the most common platforms used in influence operations in Nigeria. There is evidence to support the claims that there is significant

use of Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and Twitter to disseminate false information. Here the manipulation of images, creation of misleading headlines and republishing of old videos and news articles about current events are used.

⊖ NIGERIA'S DISINFORMATION TOOLKIT ⊖

The toolkit of online sharing of mis/disinformation is expansive and contains several different components.

- ⊖ **Computational Propaganda**
Automation is a growing feature of the Nigerian online disinformation industry. Over the first month of 2019, CDD compiled a Twitter dataset of over 30 million tweets from the accounts of major politicians, political parties and media houses, and hashtags related to the general election campaign and process.⁷ It found that 19.5% of accounts showed signs of automation, pointing to a high level of bot activity.
- ⊖ **Automation**
Botnets, groups of bots and coordinated groups of trolls promoting specific narratives, called troll farms, are deployed to generate online conversation and get stories trending. They use pre-agreed hashtags and share each other's content through 'mutual admiration societies'.
- ⊖ **Astro Turfing**
This involves unsolicited comments on social media networks and by political consultants or *Sojojin Baci* who are given a specific narrative or agenda to spread.
- ⊖ **Masking Online Identities**
Hiding the identity of a user can enable that person to make outlandish claims with less likelihood of retribution. Masquerading as someone else is another way to do this, in a way that can enhance the user's credibility among followers.
- ⊖ **Microtargeting**
Using consumer data, to create and target specific geopolitical locations and interests, biases and religion is another tactic used in Nigeria. One example is a video titled "Church of Christ is in Danger" that was used during the 2019 presidential elections. The video was targeted at Christian voters and falsely suggested that President Buhari would impose sharia law if re-elected.

7. Centre for Democracy and Development. 2019. "Nigeria's 'fake news' eco-system". 26 March.





- **Audio Messages**
Voice over Internet Protocol applications like WhatsApp and Telegram have widened the reach and captured the elders and non-literate population. Many people send voice messages in local languages and the familiarity increases levels of trust in the content. In March 2020, an audio clip emerged on WhatsApp of an alleged World Health Organization official predicting that at least 45 million Nigerians would die in the pandemic. The audio provoked so much attention that the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control had to issue a rebuttal declaring it to be false.
- **Deep Fakes**
Although digitally altered or fabricated videos or audio that are increasingly lifelike are not widespread in Nigeria, they have been used during the elections to share disinformation about candidates. A video of the incumbent governor of Edo state which circulated ahead of the election showed a lifelike caricature of the governor handing out cash to opposition activists. This never happened.
- **Videos**
Videos are key to the spread of disinformation in Nigeria. It is interesting to note that a single video is created and produced with several iterations, and in multiple languages to increase the audience that can be reached and to support microtargeting efforts. In addition to creating new content, old videos are also recirculated with new captions to disinform citizens.
- **Manufactured Amplification**
Increasingly, Nigerians are manipulating search engine results and hashtags. The manipulation of hashtags is used to boost the profile of a politician, for example, or to sell their agenda. The artificial boosting of information search engine results promotes content on blogs ahead of genuine news platforms.
- **Doctored chyrons**
The use of doctored chyron, or logo, of reputable media organisations such as CNN and the BBC is a tactic used by peddlers of disinformation in Nigeria. For instance, there was a doctored CNN chyron about Covid-19 cases in Nigeria. The screenshot of a fake CNN newscaster with the headline “constant sex kills Covid-19” was shared widely across social media and WhatsApp. But this was not an actual story run by CNN, nor was it true⁸

8. Centre for Democracy and Development. 2020. “Health Misinformation: False Stories from Ebola to Coronavirus”. Available at <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/health-misinformation-false-stories-from-ebola-to-coronavirus/>





KEY ACTORS AND ENABLERS

Coordinated disinformation campaigns by state sponsored actors in Nigeria are directed at manipulating public opinion and harassing and delegitimising opposing voices online. These actors, and their allies, make false claims and then act as ‘fact checkers’ to further muddy the water. Another strategy deployed is to police the handles of people critical of the government, then to use troll farms such as the Buhari Media Centre (BMC) to harass, threaten, intimidate, and humiliate these critics. However, it is important to note that there is a deliberate formal distance between party or government structures and groups like BMC.

BMC has created, and maintains, multiple social media accounts and WhatsApp channels to propagate content. During the 2019 general election its structured WhatsApp groups covered all 774 local government areas, with state and national

coordinating bodies using the groups to advance the presidential candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari.⁹ Influencers within or coordinating these groups are often young and paid as little as \$20, or as much as \$3,000, per month depending on their audience and ability to influence along partisan lines.

Individual political candidates also align with informal networks of cyberwarriors who create Facebook and Twitter handles, sometimes supported by bots, to spread disinformation about opponents, promote hashtags or share doctored images. These networks are also increasingly using the language of “fact checking” to give wider credibility to their claims. A member of such a group spoken to for this study was adamant that, “our work is to promote our candidate, so we have to fact check opponents, to show the lies of the opponents even if we exaggerate them”.¹⁰ In northern Nigeria, political aspirants also look to recruit propaganda secretaries¹¹, who communicate

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...informal networks of cyber warriors who create Facebook and Twitter handles, sometimes supported by bots, to spread disinformation about opponents, promote hashtags or share doctored images...

9. Hassan, I et al. 2019. “WhatsApp and Nigeria’s 2019 elections: Mobilising the people, protecting the vote”, Centre for Democracy and Development.

10. Personal interview. Abuja. 3 November 2021.

11. Hitchen, J & Hassan, I. 2019. “Nigeria’s propaganda secretaries”. Mail and Guardian. 18 April. Available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-04-18-00-nigerias-propaganda-secretaries/>





communicate largely in Hausa to Facebook followings of more than 80,000. One influencer spoken to for a 2019 study admitted to being the administrator of more than 600 WhatsApp groups,¹² a significant audience to have at your disposal during an election campaign.

Domestic political consulting firms are also growing actors in this space. Dominated by a few, highly connected and well-resourced actors operating at the mid to high level political campaigning, firms include Statecraft, CMC Connect, Edelman affiliate' Chain Reactions Nigeria and Datavision Limited.¹³

Predominantly offline, thought leaders and opinion shapers are also key actors in the peddling of misinformation and disinformation. Trust plays a massive role in whether messages are believed and spread.¹⁴ According to one respondent, "I believe my pastors and respected personalities, I will not take anything they say with a wave of hands, especially men of God". Another argued that "God has ordained in the Koran to follow constituted authorities and currently our revered authorities are the mallams and Imams who lead us in prayers, so if they say Covid-19 is a scam so it is".¹⁵ Content is more likely to resonate from religious leaders, friends, family or other trusted authority figures. But some authoritative figures have used their platforms to propagate false news.

In northern Nigeria, Covid-19 has been presented by some Islamic clerics, in videos that circulate widely on WhatsApp, as a

western conspiracy or ruse by the political class to siphon money. In 2020, Pastor David Kingsley Elijah of the Glorious Mount of Possibility Church, in Lagos told his congregation he was going to China to "destroy coronavirus". Elijah subsequently became a victim of fake news in relation to this however, after social media posts emerged that he has travelled to China and become hospitalised with the virus. These rumours were not true.

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Predominantly offline thought leaders and opinion shapers are also key actors in the peddling of misinformation and disinformation...

12. Hassan, I et al. 2019. "WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 elections: Mobilising the people, protecting the vote", Centre for Democracy and Development.

13. Hassan, I & Segun, T. 2020. "Personal Data and the Influence Industry in Nigerian Elections". Tactical Tech

14. See Buchanan, T. 2020. "Why do people spread false information online? The effects of message and viewer characteristics on self-reported likelihood of sharing social media disinformation". PLoS ONE 15(10)

15. Personal interview. Abuja. 26 October 2021.





FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

In the last couple of years there have been four major areas in which fake news has been influential in shaping narratives in Nigeria. These are around issues of ethnic identity, the delegitimising of government, in driving political polarisation and in response to Covid-19.

In Nigeria, misinformation distorts reality and changes how people perceive religion and ethnicity. This has changed relationships and dampened trust and turned ethnic groups against the other. In the last year, there has been a disinformation drive aimed at reducing of all the Nigerian problems into a single narrative of 'Fulanisation' - the idea that conflicts in Nigeria are perpetrated by the Fulani's or as part of Fulani agenda to occupy other parts of the country and Islamise the nation. This disinformation has stoked fear and led to attacks against, and stigmatisation of, the Fulani ethnic group. Whilst it is the case that Fulani's are heavily involved in banditry in northwest Nigeria, there are a complex web of actors involved in each of Nigeria's insecurity crises.

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These false narratives can have significant real world impacts. A 2018 report by the BBC described how a riot that led to the death of eleven people, mainly Fulani Muslims in Plateau state, was ignited by Facebook images showing mutilated bodies, burnt homes and murdered children. The claim made was that this mass atrocity against the ethnic Berom and Christian groups in the state was undertaken by Fulani's. However, a subsequent review of the images showed that they were in fact related to events that had taken place in 2012 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nonetheless by the time this truth emerged the images had been used to tap into prevailing false narratives and ultimately led to people losing their lives.

Disinformation is also used to delegitimise government and its institutions. In August 2021, following the Nigerian governments ban on cryptocurrency and the introduction of e-Naira, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) announced that Bitt, a Barbadian fintech start-up, had won the competitive tendering process to develop the electronic currency. Representatives of the Nigeria Computer Society (NCS) faulted the decision, partly based on claims that Bitt "is a company of not more than three staff and a lower market capitalisation than any of Nigeria's major FinTech companies". This narrative trended online, generating heated conversation and indictment of the CBN as engaging in a fraudulent selection process designed to benefit cronies. However, these claims were untrue. Data from Crunchbase suggests that Bitt has between 50 and 100 staff, with PitchBook data pegging the number at 60 full-time employees. According to Crunchbase, Bitt has raised \$31 million (about N12.7 billion using official rates); this is comparable





to Migo's —a company NCS mentioned as a Nigerian alternative.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is another institution that has been the target of fake news. Ahead of the 2019 general elections, a photo surfaced online of the INEC chairman, Prof Mahmud Yakubu, wearing a popular cap with broomstick design that President Buhari had worn when campaigning in Adamawa state. This picture quickly made its way onto WhatsApp and other social media platforms, accompanied by claims that Yakubu was showing support for the APC by wearing the cap. This was part of wider efforts, on both sides, to undermine the overall credibility and impartiality of the commission. However, a factcheck conducted by Cable Newspaper¹⁶ showed Yakubu wearing the same cap with the opposition, PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar and his campaign director, Bukola Saraki. It noted that during elections it is a tradition of key election stakeholders to engage with the cultures of communities they visit by wearing local traditional attires to identify with the electorate and garner votes. Explaining why both candidates, as well as the INEC chairman, has been wearing the cap.

There is, however, increasing evidence to suggest that influence operations using disinformation and other data-driven strategies are influencing and even swaying elections and democratic proposes in small yet significant ways. For instance, in the 2019 Kano supplementary governorship elections in Nigeria, the use of fake pictures depicting

violence in opposition strongholds on voting day was effectively utilised to reduce voter turnout in those areas in what was a very close election.¹⁷

The health of senior political figures has also been a popular target for disinformation campaigns, as an attempt to throw into question their fitness for office. A widely-disseminated piece of fake news that circulated ahead of the 2019 poll was that President Buhari had died and been replaced with a Sudanese clone named Jubril¹⁸ while on medical leave in the UK. Even after Buhari publicly responded by saying "it's the real me, I assure you", some Nigerians, including one interviewed for this study, continue to believe the rumour; "Buhari is already dead, he was cloned, and a specially created engine is inside him, that makes the voice sounds like him".²⁰

Health-related fake news is not new in Nigeria. However, with the increased number of Nigerians on the internet, the Covid-19 pandemic has become a more protracted health issue for Nigeria. At the start of the outbreak, false narratives were created to incite fear, proffer fake cures, promote hatred against non-African and politicise the official response. Supporters of the opposition PDP sought to create a narrative that their party had handled the Ebola crisis in 2014 far better than the current APC government was handling the Covid-19 response. In response APC supporters, after confirming that the son of PDP 2019 presidential aspirant Atiku Abubakar had contracted the virus, sought to further politicise the response by focusing

16. Awojulgbe, O. 2019. "Fact Check: Did the INEC chairman wear 'APC cap' to support Buhari?". The Cable. 13 February. Available at <https://www.thecable.ng/fact-check-inec-chairman-apc-cap-buhari>.

17. Hassan, I & Hitchen, J. 2020. "Driving division? Disinformation and the new media landscape in Nigeria". Centre for Democracy and Development.

18. Hassan, I. 2019. "How fake news spreads, sowing distrust ahead of Nigeria's elections". African Arguments. 31 January. Available <https://africanarguments.org/2019/01/nigeria-fake-news-2019-election/>.

19. Hassan, I. 2019. "How fake news spreads, sowing distrust ahead of Nigeria's elections". African Arguments. 31 January. Available <https://africanarguments.org/2019/01/nigeria-fake-news-2019-election/>.

20. Personal interview. Lagos. 15 August 2021.





more on the irresponsible action of individuals linked to the opposition by promoting and getting hashtags to trend. Fake photos and videos of Atiku's son dancing in clubs, ignoring government isolation advice, were shared online by BMC members.

With the introduction of vaccines in March 2021 to tackle the virus, the infodemic has taken an alarming dimension spurred on largely by the high level of distrust amongst citizens towards the state. Data collected and analysed through the fact-checking platform run by CDD between November 2020 and April 2021 found that of more than 5,000 messages collected on WhatsApp, 38% were exclusively about vaccines. Messages included false claims of a high number of deaths from the vaccines; that fatal or damaging side-effects that were being

hidden in plain sight; that the vaccine alters DNA; and that the speed at which it was developed means that it cannot be effective. A number of these falsehoods are being re-shared offline by influential community figures. In April 2021 a well-known Pentecostal pastor was quoted as saying once a person is injected with the vaccine, "you become a vampire" and "need a regular supply of blood to survive". Context is important here as some of these narratives build on Nigerian's own experience with vaccination programmes. In 1996 Pfizer tested a new drug for polio which led to 11 death out of the 200 children enrolled for the trial.²¹ These experiences combined with the infodemic of rumours are driving vaccine hesitancy. Currently, fewer than 4% of the population have been fully vaccinated.²²

EXTERNAL SHAPERS

External actors are also present in Nigeria's information ecosystem. 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 2020.²³ Using fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram, anti-Nigerian government propaganda was pushed out, with President Muhammadu Buhari singled out. Another feature of Iran's disinformation campaign has been its support for the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and its leader Sheikh Zakzaky. Zakzaky is known for his close links

with the Iranian state and was until recently held prisoner alongside his wife by the Nigerian government. Hashtags such as #zakzaky lives matters were pushed out from a network of linked accounts on Twitter during the height of the #blacklivesmatter worldwide movement.

Foreign campaign consultancies have played a huge role in Nigeria's influence industry. For instance, Cambridge Analytica (CA) was hired to provide support to the 2015 Goodluck Jonathan campaign. CA spread targeted disinformation to suppress opposition votes

21. McGreal, C. 2007. "Nigeria sues Pfizer for \$7 billion over 'illegal' tests on children". The Guardian. 5 June. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/05/health.healthandwellbeing1>

22. Mcallister, E. 2021. "Up to 1 million Covid vaccines expired in Nigeria last month". Reuters. 7 December. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/exclusive-up-1-million-covid-vaccines-wasted-nigeria-last-month-2021-12-08/>

23. Thurston, A. 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>





and allegedly released sensitive medical and financial information about then opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari. One of the videos used to suppress votes was so insidious that a former CA contractor called it “voter suppression of the most crude and basic kind”.²⁴ CA is not the only foreign firm to work in Nigeria. After the 2019 Nigerian general elections, Facebook removed pages linked to Archimedes²⁵, a Tel Aviv based political consulting and lobbying firm, for “coordinated and deceptive behaviour” targeting Atiku Abubakar, former vice president and PDP presidential candidate. One of the pages had a fake image of Atiku as Darth Vader, the Star Wars villain, holding up a sign reading, “Make Nigeria Worse Again” as its banner.

Beyond international states and companies, the Nigerian diaspora is increasingly spreading fake news and influencing political debate and discussion within Nigeria. For instance, a network of Twitter handles tweeting in support of secessionist group the Independent People of Biafra helped spread anti-Nigeria, anti-Fulani sentiments while propagating pro-Igbo sentiments. Koiki Media a pro-Oduduwa nation outlet, is leading the southwest secessionist movement from the United Kingdom. Koiki runs his blogs and online TV in support of the Oduduwa Nation and the now arrested de facto leader, Sunday Igboho. Like Radio Biafra, which is also diaspora run, Koiki media shares false information and photographs that stoke secessionist tension within Nigeria.

Here it is important to note the resonance of

these messages among ordinary Nigerians who tend to hold people in the diaspora in high regard. According to one respondent, “persons in the diaspora are very educated, have travelled far and wide and done live in the developed economy”²⁶, which in their view reduces the likelihood that they will knowingly spread fake news. However, diaspora individuals have been major contributors to Covid-19 disinformation. One of the most popular videos of a cure for the virus was that of a diaspora member who made a concoction using lemsip, lemon, garlic and water and claimed it cured his grandmother.

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For instance, a network of Twitter handles tweeting in support of secessionist group the Independent People of Biafra helped spread anti-Nigeria, anti-Fulani sentiments while propagating pro-Igbo sentiments...

24. Cadwalladr, C. 2018. “Cambridge Analytica’s ruthless bid to sway the vote in Nigeria”. The Guardian. 21 March. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/21/cambridge-analyticas-ruthless-bid-to-sway-the-vote-in-nigeria>

25. Debre, I. 2019. “Israeli company targeted Nigerian election in Facebook disinformation campaign”. The Times of Israel. 18 May. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-company-targeted-nigerian-election-in-facebook-disinformation-campaign/>

26. Personal interview. Abuja. 5 December 2021.





ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

The Nigerian constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression. However, the 2015 Cybercrime Act made it a felony liable to imprisonment of three years or fine of N7million (approximately \$17,000), or both, for knowingly publishing fake news to cause a breach of peace.²⁷ The application of this law in practice has yet to be tested. Although a young man who allegedly created the false news of President Buhari's marriage²⁸ to two of his ministers - Sadiya Farouq and Zainab Ahmed - was arrested for breaching the Act by the State Security Services in January 2020. The case, and indeed his whereabouts, has not moved forward since. The implementation of other existing legal recourse to challenge those spreading fake news has also been problematic. There have been several instances of digital activists being imprisoned or simply disappeared. Digital activist and *Kwankwasiya* - cultlike followers of the former Kano Governor and political stalwart Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso – Idris Abubakar, better known by the moniker Dadiyata, went missing in August 2019 and has not been heard from since.

A plethora of laws and regulations already exist which could be applied to regulate disinformation. The Nigerian Broadcasting code²⁹ prohibits false advertising, impersonation and hate speech and it is also a crime, in the country's criminal and penal codes, to impersonate a government official

or another person. The Electoral Act also prohibits the use of intemperate, abusive and slanderous languages during campaigns, and anybody found culpable is liable to a maximum payment of N1 million and 12 months imprisonment, or N2 million in the instance of a political party.³⁰ Although social media is not explicitly included, and therefore covered, by this election specific regulation, it could be.

However, the government has continued to push forward a specific social media bill. The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, was first introduced in Nigeria's House of Representatives in November 2019. The Bill looked to tackle the problem of false information but in a way that poses a severe threat to Nigerians democratic right to freedom of speech. The draft contained draconian provisions empowering the government to unilaterally shut down social media, and even the internet, for posts deemed to pose risks to public safety and national security, which were loosely defined. It required a low burden of proof in the determination of contraventions of its provisions and vested implementation powers in the already overburdened Nigeria Police Force. Strong civil society pressure was key in its failure to become law.

But it is also important to consider to what extent should citizens look to governments to regulate these areas, not least as the

27. Section 24(1)(b) of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention) Act, 2015.

28. Udo, B. 2020. "SSS arrests alleged mastermind of viral video of Buhari's fake marriage to two ministers". Premium Times. 3 January. Available at <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/371077-sss-arrests-alleged-mastermind-of-viral-video-of-buharis-fake-marriage-to-two-ministers.html>

29. See Nigeria Broadcasting Code 2019, amendment to the 6th edition

30. See the Electoral Offences and Penalties addendum to the 2010 Electoral Act (as amended)





government itself is already taking steps to restrict online communication and social media use. In the course of ongoing military operations in Zamfara state, the government shutdown telecommunication networks for over two months to limit bandits' ability to communicate. However, this shutdown also affected citizens who had no internet or telephone networks to reach out to family and friends or transact business. Furthermore, in June 2021 the federal government banned Twitter,³¹ ostensibly for taking down a tweet issued by President Buhari that it claimed contravened its user standards. The ban was lifted in January 2022. An accountability framework for social media companies operating in Nigeria, something that the government is looking to introduce, could make them more responsive to citizens' concerns that they are not able to report abuse effectively. However, overemphasis on regulating cyber space as a means of curbing disinformation is also a risk, given that it can equally be used to muzzle free speech.

For now, Nigerian media outlets and civil society organisations are focused on doing what they can to stem the tide of disinformation in Nigeria in three main areas. They undertake fact-checking, support civic education efforts and, as third party partners, report suspected fake accounts, accounts spreading disinformation and hate speeches or suspected of inauthentic behaviour to the social media platforms. However, there is a need for the tech companies to cooperate more closely with civil society social networks. While Facebook currently runs a third party factchecking partnership and occasional

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trainings for civil society the relationship is not one of equals. Consultations between the two remain rare nor has there been an attempt to draw up a code of conduct of fact-checking standards, even if voluntary, amongst partners. At least Facebook has been engaged in Nigeria. Other platforms such as Twitter and Google have made little attempts to engage Nigerian civil society in addressing disinformation. Moving forward it is important that the tech platforms and a cross-sector of key stakeholders in Nigeria, including both government and civil society, develop a policy framework to tackle disinformation akin to the European Union Action Plan against Disinformation.

31. Togun, K & Hassan, I. 2021. "Buhari's authoritarian Twitter ban continues to silence Nigerians". Foreign Policy. 10 September. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/10/nigeria-twitter-ban-buhari-authoritarian/>





CONCLUSION

Across the country disinformation is now widespread and, in some cases, it is threatening social cohesion. The weaponisation of information by different actors ranging from the soldiers of mouth, social media warriors and government propagandists have made for toxic public discourse that fuels hate speech and distorts the democratic process. The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the volume and impact of fake news, as well as undermining trust in government and its institutions. Nigeria faces the dual problem of a lack of trust in official sources of information and a growth of falsehoods in circulation.

The state approach of regulation as a panacea will largely not work as there has been too much emphasis on online disinformation and not enough focus on broader efforts to improve civic education and digital literacy.

What this study has reinforced is that there is an increasingly blurred line between conventional and online media and between the spread of offline and online information. This impact may be hard to quantifiably measure, but is increasingly important to recognise.

Online and offline disinformation are intertwined and shape and influence each other. Tweets and Facebook posts are regularly reported in print media or discussed during radio and television programs in Nigeria. These can move further offline as they are shared by community leaders, across word of mouth networks. In Nigeria, what we are increasingly seeing is a digital divide not between those who have access and those who do not, but between those who have direct and indirect access to social media content.





RECOMMENDATIONS

The report proposes five recommendations for tackling fake news in Nigeria:

- 1** Rather than focusing on strengthening the laws, the Nigerian government should instead look to regulate the tech companies under a carefully worked out framework. This framework should address issues of content moderation, particularly in local languages, and transparency around political advertising. Government must also insist that tech companies with a digital presence in the country establish a physical presence to ensure they are more accountable to its citizens.
- 2** There is an urgent need to empower people to consume content critically. This should entail educating every citizen on the 'ABC' of fact checking. This entails evaluating news, identifying fake news and the motivations, news trustworthiness and how to engage online and consume information. In addition, efforts are required to support greater critical awareness among the public of how social interactions and relationships influence our decisions regarding what to share or like, which in turn contributes to the circulation and visibility of news in the wider media environment.
- 3** Civil society actors can work to support counter messaging initiatives in the form of online and offline fact check ambassadors.
- 4** The effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives may not be immediately realised as their diligently compiled content – often produced hours, if not days after a story first circulates – struggles to penetrate networks of WhatsApp groups. But, over-time, fact-checking initiatives can support a change in mindsets. In Nigeria more factchecks in Pidgin English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, focused on stories with sub-national resonance and relevance are needed.
- 5** There is a need for more investment to support quality, independent journalism in Nigeria. Funding that can reduce media houses reliance on political benefactors, improve credibility and support the generating of high quality, well researched, content.





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