DRIVING DIVISION?

DISINFORMATION AND THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN NIGERIA

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FEBRUARY, 2020
Executive Summary

Disinformation, which differs from misinformation in its deliberate intent to mislead, has always been a feature of Nigeria’s social and political landscape. What is new is the speed and format of content which can be shared amongst Nigeria’s growing numbers of social media and internet users. But its influence is not simply confined to those online. Disinformation campaigns may start on social media platforms and private messenger applications like WhatsApp but they penetrate into offline spaces by influencing the outputs and programmes of conventional media and through well-established rumour networks.

The way online disinformation interacts with, and exploits, the society in which it is being used is one of the key findings of this research which drew on data collected in 60 interviews and 18 focus group with key stakeholders in six states representing Nigeria’s geo-political zones, social media monitoring by CDD on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, and secondary sources. Drawing on respondents’ feedback, and providing sub-national and national examples to further strengthen points that have emerged from media coverage and previous studies, the report highlights the ways in which disinformation shared online is disrupting civic space in Nigeria.

The research shows that disinformation is most effective when it draws on existing narratives and contexts to sharpen existing social and religious divides. These disinformation campaigns, designed and led by Nigerians, as well as international firms, are aimed at delegitimising institutions, groups or personalities, glorifying a leader or, during elections, confusing voters, instigating apathy or marginalising women and other vulnerable groups.

The volume of disinformation now circulating in Nigeria is unprecedented and is further exacerbating pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions. The opening up of online space has coarsened political dialogue, facilitated the proliferation of false and fabricated news and made it easier for extreme and marginal figures to mobilise followers and stoke insecurity. Separatist groups operating in Nigeria are all active on social media, using it to attack opponents and recruit followers. The effect is to increase social divisions and cleavages, potentially leading to schisms in the national polity itself.
Whilst disinformation’s growing influence and ability to muddy the waters and make facts harder to see is a concern, social media platforms can provide avenues for the sharing of information that improves transparency, engages with those in authority and ultimately holds them to account in ways that were not previously possible. Campaigns that have been able to draw on a strong digital presence to amplify pre-existing, or compliment, offline campaigns include #EndSARS, #NotTooYoungToRun, #BringBackOurGirls and #FollowTheMoney. The challenge therefore is to find ways in which these more positive elements can be enhanced in order to reduce the threat posed by digital disinformation.

Regulation is accompanied by difficult questions about who and how, with concerns raised by many of the individuals engaged for this study that it would be used to muzzle critical voices in Nigeria. Despite the government’s intentions in this regard, the focus instead should be on pressurising social media companies to improve their responsibility for moderating content - particularly in local languages - and in supporting wider efforts to improve citizens’ digital literacy: empowering them with the tools to sort fact from fiction. These - along with further support to improve the quality of journalism in Nigeria and efforts to better build and integrate online and offline dialogues aimed at building more harmonious relations - are some of the key recommendations that suggest ways of reducing divisive disinformation online, as well as offline.
In a 2018 interview, former WhatsApp vice-president Chris Daniels noted that "while the desire to spread and consume sometimes harmful sensational information predates the internet, it certainly makes it easier". Disinformation, which is differentiated from misinformation in that it is driven by a deliberate intent to mislead, is not new to Nigeria. The creation of false rumours and conspiracy theories have always been a feature of society. Writing in 2009, journalist Sola Odunfa noted that, "there is only one industry I know in Nigeria which is completely immune to the vagaries of the national economy and the well-oiled machine of the government security and intelligence services. It is big, it is strong, it never sleeps and it is unimaginably creative - but it is invisible. I am talking of the Nigerian rumour mill". He further notes that rumor mill "is so powerful that it has permeated the conventional media. Many newspapers and magazines publish products of the rumour mill as authentic news" and points to its rise to prominence during the long period of military rule when the news media was largely controlled by the state.

In providing a platform for people to broadcast anything, social media is gradually eroding the traditional gatekeeping and norm-preserving role of established media and political parties, while augmenting their role in promoting disinformation and rumours. Despite the positives for accountability and political engagement this can offer, the opening up of this space has coarsened the political dialogue, facilitated the proliferation of false and fabricated news and made it much easier for extreme and marginal figures to mobilise followers. The rise of populist politics, globally and in Nigeria, has undoubtedly been helped by the rise in prominence and influence of social media. Falsehoods have a new way of spreading - through social media and private

4 Ibid
messenger applications - that is faster and allows for more diverse content - in addition to text, audio, images and videos - to be created and shared. The growing prominence of online influence campaigns, deliberately targeted and coordinated efforts to shape perceptions, are a feature of this increasingly digital era. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – as well as private messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram - have become key tools for the rapid spread of disinformation (content deliberately crafted to mislead others), misinformation (where individuals spread false news they believe to be true, without knowing it is not) in addition to accurate information.

Arguably the most important change that social media has brought to Nigeria’s information landscape is the speed at which content, including rumors and campaigns, can now travel. With WhatsApp, even with the introduction of a five-forward limit, content can in theory be sent to 1,280 people (based on sharing with five groups each with the maximum number of members) instantly, and repeated again and again.

On Facebook and Twitter, posts can reach thousands of followers within minutes of the content being shared. A useful categorisation of how these platforms are used in Nigeria was offered by a social media influencer interviewed in Kano for this research. “WhatsApp and Facebook have a broader audience, one can use Facebook without data using its data free mode. One can say that Twitter and Instagram, to a large extent, have a more ‘elitist’ user base. Instagram, for example, requires a lot of data to navigate, you need at least 100MB to successfully use Instagram whereas with 10MB one can enjoy WhatsApp”⁵.

Cross-platform content sharing is also very common, to maximise the audience size, particularly among social media influencers, political or otherwise.

Across these platforms in Nigeria the “volume of untruths is fast overtaking the volume of truths”⁶ according to an opinion piece written by Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) researcher Alhassan Ibrahim for The Republic magazine. A 2019 report by the Oxford Internet Institute found that organised social media manipulation campaigns took place in 70 countries, including Nigeria⁷.

The involvement of foreign non-state actors - often reputational management agencies or political consultants - in these disinformation campaigns are a recurring feature of Nigeria’s political landscape, that mimic other contexts.

These companies are hired to help political leaders run divisive campaigns to boost their election prospects. Cambridge Analytica and its parent company SCL Elections were officially hired to provide advertising and marketing services in support of the Goodluck Jonathan campaign in Nigeria’s 2015 election⁸. In addition, allegations made by the UK Guardian claim that they worked closely with Israeli hackers to obtain the financial and media records of Jonathan’s political opponent Muhammadu Buhari. They also

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⁵ Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019
created misleading video content that painted a bleak picture of what Nigeria would look like under Buhari, seeking to exacerbate the Muslim-Christian divide in the country. “It was voter suppression of the most crude and basic kind”⁹ noted one former Cambridge Analytical employee who worked on the campaign.

In 2019, Archimedes, an Israeli-based political consulting and lobbying firm tried to meddle in the Nigerian election by creating accounts on Facebook and Instagram that posted on behalf of certain political candidates, smeared political opponents and presented themselves as legitimate local news organisations peddling supposedly leaked information¹⁰. This disinformation campaign targeted the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, and the Rivers State gubernatorial vote. In May 2019, almost three months after the conclusion of Nigeria’s election, Facebook banned the Israeli company and removed 65 Facebook accounts and 161 pages engaged in spreading disinformation.¹⁰

But Nigerians are the major proponents of disinformation in the country. Through WhatsApp and Facebook, people share propaganda videos, made-up quotes, misleadingly captioned pictures and fabricated articles made to look like they are from reputable news sources like the BBC or Al-Jazeera. By boosting or suppressing content they contribute to the polarisation of the discourse. The agents who spread disinformation in Nigeria, in addition to international firms, include paid trolls, partisan media outlets, social media influencers, bloggers, „propaganda secretaries”¹¹ and automated bots.

Automation is a growing feature of the Nigerian online disinformation industry. CDD compiled a Twitter dataset of over 30 million tweets between 31 December 2018 and 30 January 2019¹². Data was collected from the accounts of major politicians, political parties and media houses, as well as by using hashtags related to the general election campaign and process. It found that 19.5% of accounts showed signs of automation, pointing to a high level of bot activity. In particular it found a significant percentage of bots promoting messages concerning the renewed calls for Biafran independence and calls by the movement to boycott the 2019 general elections.

A particularly active bot account, @nwakpa_gabriel, generated 521,518 tweets in the 40 day period; the equivalent of over 13,000 tweets per day. Whilst overall 96.4% of the accounts analysed were located within the country, of the 532 that discussed the issue of Biafra and election boycotts, only 56% (301) were based in Nigeria. Coupled with the fact that such a small number of accounts produced such a high number of tweets, and that nearly half of them came from outside the country, the data supports the conclusion that a significant amount of Biafra related content within the dataset was automated.

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⁹ Ibid.
Global disinformation campaigns

With the volume of information available on the internet it can be hard to discern what is accurate information from real sources and what Singer and Brooking describe as “made up sources cleverly laundering made up facts”. A task that is made increasingly difficult by the prevalence of sophisticated bots and deepfakes. What is clear is that disinformation campaigns, using a variety of tactics and approaches, can have real world consequences. In the 2019 UK general election, “high-level disinformation and false polling reports” across social media were a notable feature of the final week; in Brazil’s 2018 vote, “Bolsonaro supporters delivered an onslaught of daily misinformation straight to millions of Brazilians phones” through WhatsApp in particular; and in India, “disinformation and hate speech are [steadily] drowning out truth on social media networks in the country”. Whilst accentuated during elections and other moments of high-stakes political context, this increased flow of disinformation is also shaping more everyday events and interactions; reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and biases in ways that are potentially divisive.

15 Belli, L. 2018. “WhatsApp skewed Brazilian election, proving social media’s danger to democracy”, The Conversation, 5 December
According to the National Communications Commission (NCC), at the end of May 2019, 122 million Nigerians were internet users, an increase of over 20 million when compared with mid-year figures for 2017.

At the start of 2019 We Are Social, a social media analysis firm, estimated that Nigeria had 24 million active social media users, an increase of 26% on the previous years figures¹⁷ with numbers likely to have risen significantly in the last year as internet infrastructure improves and mobile data and phones become more affordable. The exponential growth in the use and availability of mobile phones with access to the internet, as well as the sheer amount of information accessible in the age of digital media, has made the task of filtering out false information far more difficult in Nigeria¹⁸.

The volume of disinformation now circulating in Nigeria is unprecedented and is further exacerbating pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions in the heavily divided and fragile polity. This disinformation is most effective when it builds on existing narratives and contexts, sharpening the existing social and religious divides.

It is often designed to either delegitimise institutions, groups or personalities, glorify a leader or during elections to confuse voters, instigate voter apathy or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. A good example of this is the false claim that President Muhammad Buhari was replaced by a Sudanese clone named Jubril after he returned from several months of medical treatment abroad for an undisclosed illness in 2017. The allegation was first presented in a YouTube video made by Nnamdi Kanu, leader of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), in September of the same year. The assertion, which took a life of its own, became so prevalent that President Buhari felt the need to confront it directly in December 2018 through a press release and by publicly insisting “it’s the real me, I assure you”¹⁹ during an event in Poland.

In spite of this some Nigerians still insist that the president is a clone pointing to his new-found ability to pronounce the word corruption as “evidence”. This illustrates the power of falsehoods to sustain themselves and be believed when they build on individuals’ pre-existing biases. Nigerians have only to go back a decade to remember a time when a president went abroad for medical treatment never to return to public office.

Furthermore, in a country with a dilapidated health care system the idea that a 77 year old Buhari would be able to recover from a severe illness and return

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looking healthy and agile is hard to comprehend for many Nigerians given their own experiences or that of family members²⁰.

Whilst Nigerians agree that in order to establish the veracity of information they receive online, they should look to trusted sources, there is a huge divergence as to what that constitutes, with some looking to corroborate news received online with reportage of traditional media, others seeking out pictorial and video evidence that can be scrutinised and many reliant on the level of trust they have with the individual who shared or forwarded the story to them²¹.

This is particularly difficult to do on WhatsApp where the end-to-end security encryption makes finding the original source almost impossible. As a result there is a tendency to fall back on existing beliefs and biases in making snap judgements. And that can be problematic as one media practitioner in Bayelsa noted. “If you have to counter particular fake news, the counter has to be timely. Without that you will not be able to get it out of the minds of people, because so many people will buy into the first information they saw [sic] and then will not want to change their belief”²². Even when presented with the correct data, people misremember it based on their existing biases, a study by researchers at Ohio State University found²³.

Often this information does not stay online and this further complicates efforts to find the truth. It extends to those offline by shaping the coverage of traditional media, becoming sources of debate for radio phone-ins and simply through word of mouth, as false stories are discussed in key places of social gathering, like markets, transport hubs or places of worship. Mainstream television and radio stations, for example, frequently host “political consultants” – or Sojojin Baci (“soldiers of the mouth”) as they are known in northern Nigeria – who further spread half-truths and manipulations in favour of their candidates. Online and offline disinformation campaigns work together.

A piece of false information on social media may be taken up by the Sojojin Baci or political consultants through more traditional media, who can add nuance and context to the story in a way that allows it to resonate with a new audience. Disinformation campaigns are often coordinated and well organised efforts in Nigeria, in other cases individual stories that “go viral”, taking on a more organic and uncontrolled spread in the form of misinformation, where users are unaware of the provenance or truth of what they are sharing.

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²⁰ Ibid.
²³ Owen, L. 2019. “People who are given correct information still misremember it to fit their own beliefs”, Nieman Lab, 13 December.
Those involved in the spread of disinformation in Nigeria use a range of strategies to achieve their objectives:

● **Selective deployment of facts:** Here, some elements of the statement will be true but key facts are omitted. More often than not, the story is fabricated to fit into a false narrative to guide the audience to a conclusion.

● **Misleading headlines or captions:** This builds on an assumption that many readers do not read stories in full, so whilst pictures and stories are accurate or real, people’s views are shaped by the misleading title or caption.

● **Cross-posting:** The coordinated use of what appears as credible websites to propagate a story into the mainstream. This is complemented by the manipulation of search engine optimisation.

● **Unsourced content:** Opinion pieces or stories that claim to present the truth but that are not backed up with proof or sources.

● **Reliance on false binaries:** This is content that exploits pre-existing ethnic, social and religious divides to accentuate “us versus them” narratives. The rise in violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria’s middle-belt over the last few years has proven to be fertile ground for this type of disinformation.

● **False visuals:** The use of fake or manipulated provocative visual material, videos and pictures, to lend credibility to a false narrative. This includes the growing threat posed by deep or shallow fakes, media that are manipulated either using advanced computer graphics or selectively edited, often simply.

● **Conspiracy theories:** The lack of information from the government provides a void to be filled by falsehoods and conspiracies as to what has happened and why.

● **The illusion of credibility and impartiality:** Using political consultants, masquerading as independent experts, on television and radio programmes, who hide their political allegiance, to hijack debates or share disinformation about an issue.
Disinformation techniques in Nigeria

- **Presenting satire as fact:** Satirical articles are presented as genuine information on WhatsApp and Facebook pages. In late 2018 Bishop David Oyedepo, the founder of Winners Chapel, one of the largest and most influential pentecostal megachurches in the country, told his congregation that some of the evidence held seen of the claim that Buhari was in fact a clone was convincing. The article he cited as evidence was satire.

- **Undermining facts:** There is a consistent attempt to undermine the narrative of political opponents and to attack the credibility of impartial or independent voices.

- **Creating confusion:** Producing vast amounts of content and jumping on hashtags with irrelevant information can be a tactic aimed at making the truth harder to find amid so much false information.

- **Mis-attribution of quotes:** This can involve both creating quotes and attributing them to prominent and respected individuals or using quotes made by one individual and claiming they are made by another. Ahead of the 2019 elections former Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chair Prof. Attahiru Jega was the victim of this, as parties used his name to either lend credibility to, or discredit, election preparations.

But while social media platforms are key tools for the spread of disinformation, they can also be a mechanism for supporting civil society and citizens in pushing for greater accountability and monitoring, and for improving the transparency of governance processes.

It can offer political opponents and journalists space to engage directly with citizens, and the online distribution of information can engage youth, women and other marginalised groups in new ways that circumvent elite networks or patriarchal norms. The importance of finding a balance to ensure that the positive uses of these platforms come to the fore and negatives are diminished is key in empowering democratic principles through digital systems in countries like Nigeria.
In Nigeria, research into how both useful information, and potentially damaging disinformation, is shared through online networks and the impact it has on individual and group decisions has primarily been focused around elections\textsuperscript{24}.

Whilst these are important junctures that shape a country’s short-term future, democratic accountability and the credibility of its institutions are forged in day-to-day interactions over a much longer period. Furthermore, focusing solely on online debates and discussions overlooks the ways in which social media content penetrates into offline spaces through traditional media and word of mouth\textsuperscript{25}. Exploring the ways in which online and offline media structures interact to spread information in ways that resonate with different audiences is a key focus of this research.

Another cross-cutting focus of the research, building on findings from a study of WhatsApp’s use during the 2019 elections\textsuperscript{26}, is to better understand the importance of the medium of the message - the sender, the format and the language and platform used.

Two key thematic areas were used to focus the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions held in six states - Bayelsa, Lagos, Imo, Kano, Kogi and Borno - chosen to capture voices from Nigeria’s six geo-political zones:

1. If, how, and why social media platforms and private messenger applications - specifically Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp - are improving accountability between political actors and the citizens they are in office to serve. And where they are not, how, why and with what impact politicians and their supporters are utilising such platforms to share false information that serves their own political ends.

2. In the context of ongoing insecurity issues across Nigeria - ranging from kidnapping, insurgencies and ethno-religious clashes - how disinformation is being spread that can heighten tensions and risk further violent incidents, and with what effect.

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\textsuperscript{25} Hitchen, J. 2018. “The WhatsApp rumours that infused Sierra Leone’s tight election”, African Arguments, 10 April.

The decision to conduct a comprehensive study across the six geo-political zones was an effort to produce data that was nationally representative and that allowed for regional differences to be highlighted and drawn out. An increasing number of studies focused on the sub-national level have shown the importance of understanding how local issues and dynamics drive online debates and discussion as much as, if not more, than national stories. But these studies have not sought to draw national inferences from their sub-national findings and this is where the comprehensive coverage of this report can be of added advantage.

In each state ten semi-structured key informant interviews were held (amounting to 60 in total) with key stakeholders ranging from government officials, media professionals, online social influencers, civil society activists, researchers and academics and, in some instances, security personnel. These were complemented by three focus group discussions - each with around 8 discussants - per state. Participants were deliberately selected so that one focus group was composed of youth, a second was made up only of women and the third was open to individuals with experience interacting across social media platforms. Interviews and focus groups were primarily undertaken in English and in the capital cities of each state in December 2019 and January 2020.

The research findings identified four key themes that are explored in detail in the report:

1. Social media content increasingly shapes the way conventional media operates
2. Disinformation is further entrenching ethno-religious and political fault lines
3. Insecurity is both fomented and prevented online
4. Online content is increasingly influential in shaping public opinions and views

Drawing on respondents' feedback, and providing sub-national and national examples to further strengthen points that have emerged from media coverage and previous studies, the report highlights the ways in which disinformation shared online is disrupting civic space in Nigeria. It draws attention to instances where increased access to information - despite the challenges of deciphering what is true or not - can support improved citizen-state accountability. Key informant interview respondents and focus group discussants' views are also used to shape debate and discussion how different stakeholders can respond to the challenge of disinformation, while further reflections are laid out in a series of recommendations to key policymakers and actors.
In Nigeria it is increasingly difficult to draw a distinct line between content that is shared on social media and information reported or broadcast by print media, radio and television. This is not a uniquely Nigerian challenge. In Sierra Leone the blurring of line between content created online and that which is printed offline is common and in Ghana, journalists must strike a delicate balance when selecting which social media messages to broadcast as they try to gain a reputation for “breaking news” while simultaneously trying to build and maintain a reputation as reliable and trustworthy sources of information.²⁸

That is not to say that the Nigerian media houses are simply lifting content from social media and print it word for word - though in some cases they do - but that due to the speed information travels and the way in which content can be created and shared at a community level, social media is increasingly used as a source of content inspiration to be investigated further. It also provides a way to quickly gauge the popular pulse on a particular issue or to understand the questions that citizens are asking which remain unanswered. But this reality opens up the possibility of online disinformation reaching a new, and wider, audience.

A television presenter from Lagos noted that “every time I have live interviews I go on social media platforms to feel the pulse of the people, to know what they are saying and what they are thinking. And my questions [to panelists] would always be around the questions I found people asking on social media”²⁹.

But if those questions or comments are informed by disinformation, this approach can have the effect of broadcasting unverified rumours to a wide, and offline, audience. In Kano this was a concern raised by one development practitioner, “a lot of the [radio] political programmes, especially in Hausa, are unapologetically partisan, sectarian and filled with hate speech. While the traditional media are aware of sanctions for infractions, they cannot resist the lure of picking up unverified stories from social media [to

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Africa Independent Television (AIT), in the run-up to the 2019 election ran the "Kakaaki Socials", a ten minute social media segment as part of its flagship morning programme. In it, they shared user generated content - including pictures and memes - from social media to discuss current political issues without first verifying their accuracy. In June 2019 the Nigeria Broadcast Commission suspended the station’s license, citing the inciting and divisive comments on the "Kakaaki Socials" as one of the main reasons for doing so. AIT was able to overturn the suspension but the "Kakaaki Socials" segment has not returned.

But it is not only the presenters and hosts of television and radio programmes that can bring deliberately misleading social media content offline. Participants in debates and phone-ins, intentionally if they are working as political consultants, will use the platform afforded to them to further the spread of false information that either makes their political godfathers look good or discredits opponents or allegations against them. Citizens are then likely to misinform each other given the increasing use of social media as a source of news. A 2018 study by Afrobarometer found that radio remains the key source of information for Nigerians, with 44% of respondents listening every day, but 22% of respondents checked social media daily for news updates. Respondents spoken to for this study illustrated this growing prominence of using online media for news, “my craving for newspapers has gone down because most times now, even if you listen to radio, the news highlights are from social media”. Another added how, “before the governor comes out with any press statement, it’s already on social media. Before we read in Punch or other newspapers, we have already seen it on social media.” A survey conducted in two states during the 2019 election period highlighted the use of traditional media (newspapers, TV and radio) in verifying content shared on WhatsApp - 29% of respondents in Oyo used traditional media and 33% in Kano. But information overlaps between online and offline media make ascertaining the truth in this way increasingly complicated.

In some instances, journalists under pressure to meet deadlines or to write "viral" stories are either duped into believing stories they receive on social media or choose to share content without properly verifying it, in the hope of being the first to break a story. One respondent who works as a journalist recalled an example where a reporter for a national newspaper took a story about the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association in Jos from WhatsApp and printed it. The story falsely claimed the association’s chairman had granted an interview in which he said Fulanis had carried out retaliatory attacks on some villages because people had killed their cows. When it was printed the Miyetti Allah chairman claimed he had never met

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30 Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
35 Unpublished data collected by Hitchen et al. 2019 for study into WhatsApp use in Nigeria’s 2019 election
the reporter before in his life and it subsequently emerged that the story had been written, based on a false Facebook post³⁶. This example also illustrates the ways in which disinformation can be created on one social media platform (Facebook) and shared onto others (WhatsApp), obscuring the source and provenance.

More recently in October 2019 Nigeria’s media was dominated by a rumour that President Muhammadu Buhari was planning to take a second wife - cabinet minister Sadiya Farouq³⁷. A not implausible scenario given that Muslims are permitted to marry up to four wives. Hashtags such as #TheWedding and #PresidentialWedding began trending on Twitter and soon stories appeared in local news platforms that the wedding would take place on Friday, 11 October 2019³⁸, citing a close source at the Presidential Villa. “It got to a point that even the traditional media panicked and started taking stories from social media”³⁹ noted one respondent.

A lack of a definitive response from those close to Buhari and pictures of the alleged wedding invitations fuelled the rumours to the extent that Friday prayers on the alleged wedding date saw an unprecedented number of faithful join the President to pray in the hope of bearing witness to the ceremony⁴⁰. It subsequently emerged that the videos and pictures had been fabricated and first shared on Facebook by Kabiru Muhammad, a 32 year old from Kano. He is now facing trial and possible imprisonment for up to three years charged with defamation and injurious falsehood according to sections 392 and 393 of the Penal Code of Kano State.

This example illustrates the ways in which false content, created and shared on social media, can, to a large extent, shape print, television and radio content. As one respondent noted, “when rumours emerged that President Buhari was about to marry a new wife, many traditional media houses carried the story”⁴¹. It also highlights the desire for virality among traditional media operators that is a feature of social media platforms. In Kano a political analyst noted that, “in a bid to keep up with the social media, the print media has been forced to find creative new ways to share their information or to just create an online presence for themselves. It is not hard to find instances where print media publishes a story that generated a lot of buzz online in the hopes of recreating that kind of buzz for themselves”⁴².

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³⁷ Orjinmo, N. 2019. “Nigeria’s Buhari saga: The fake wedding, the president and the family feud”. BBC News. 19 October
⁴² Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019
Though the Buhari wedding story was a rumour with less serious consequences, it highlights the potential for dangerous disinformation to spread not just to offline audiences but through platforms that are (particularly in the case of radio) deemed a trusted source of information. In the view of one focus group participant in Imo, “social media and contemporary media are now one and the same, in the sense that they carry the same news headlines. I get breaking news on social media even before the traditional media cover these stories. In these cases, it’s the viral information that influences mainstream media for the next few days”⁴⁴.

However there are ways in which the merging of information from social media, through citizen journalists, and reporting in traditional media can work to strengthen accountability. It can support better coverage of issues in more remote areas. For example, Channels TV has iWitness News, a programme which encourages people to report what is happening in their local area through the platform. As noted by a Bayelsa media practitioner, “you will see how difficult it is for somebody to travel from here to a creek... you spend about six, seven hours just to see things that are happening. But with social media, just a snapshot dropped on Facebook, can make people aware what is happening”⁴⁵.

Social media campaigns can also create space for coverage of sensitive issues noted by a Lagos-based respondent. “The reality is that some of the happenings that traditional media for one reason or the
other, has not been able to report, social media, not just reports but also escalates it, to the point that traditional media is now compelled to follow up”⁴⁶.

The #EndSARS campaign is a good example of how citizens forced a longstanding issue to the attention of the government in a way that elicited media coverage and eventually a government concession.

“On social media everyone is a source of news”⁴⁷. This is both a positive in that it allows for a greater plurality of voices but a challenge in that those voices are free to say what they like, largely unchecked. In Borno one respondent was concerned that journalists’ assessment of the veracity of comments made online were often driven by the caliber or number of followers they have, “if they discover they are top shots involved they will just print or share them on radio as original news. The danger of this is that some of these informations on social media can be prejudicial which will lead to the spread of fake news”⁴⁸.

Finally, social media is carried to offline audiences not just through traditional media but also through word of mouth. In Kogi State groups of political supporters were observed moving from village to village to share the same content being posted on social media during the November 2019 gubernatorial election⁴⁹. Whilst an assessment of those with direct access to social media would suggest an urban bias and an increasing urban-rural divide, the reality is far more complex.

Though hard to measure definitively it is clear that intentionally and unintentionally, through traditional media and pre-existing structures for the spread of rumours, social media content is reaching significantly more Nigerians than simply those who have direct access to social media platforms. Online content, accurate or false, is not confined to a digital setting.

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⁴⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Borno. December 2019
⁴⁹ Insights gathered as part of CDD’s Election Analysis Centre project during Kogi gubernatorial elections in November 2019.
The possibility of disinformation exacerbating existing ethno-religious divisions is clear and builds on long-standing tensions that pre-date the internet. According to Eniola Anuoluwapo Soyemi, a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute, “Nigeria has an ethnicity problem...it is evident in high-profile cases of sometimes violent tensions. But perhaps most damagingly, it is also demonstrated in the low-profile everyday mistrust and prejudices with which many Nigerians view fellow citizens of ethnicities other than their own. The pervasive ethnic stereotyping and myth-making that goes on between ordinary civilians has the capacity to destroy the very fabric of Nigerian society”⁵⁰.

In the online disinformation age in which Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages and tweets that appeal to emotions are, according to CDD researcher Aliyu Dahriu Aliyu, “shared without checking the veracity of their claims” this risks posed to peace and stability are clear⁵¹. A concern raised by interview respondents across the geo-political zones and neatly summarised by an academic in Kano who noted that, “there are dangers inherent in all the distortion, fake news and misinformation that are out there on social media. A lot of crises are fuelled by these distortions which come with a photo-shopped scene or old image saying these are one ethnic group attacking members of another ethnic group...without putting too much thought into it people might decide to act and carry the law into their own hands”⁵².

An example of this content was given by a prominent social media user in Imo who recalled seeing a false video that was circulating on Facebook and WhatsApp showing a farmer from the north sprinkling something - it was insecticide, not poison as was claimed - on his beans before they were transported to the south-east of the country. “Of course, a critical thinking person will understand that the purpose of this is to preserve the produce for the long journey from pests such as weevils” noted the same respondent, “however, the average person who doesn’t bother to ask critical questions or even verify the news would believe the story and share it with

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⁵⁰ Soyemi, E. 2016. “Nigeria’s ethnic conflicts are a result of the failures of a weak state”, Quartz Africa. 29 August.
⁵¹ Aliyu, D, A. 2019. “Beware the fake news soldiers”. Mail and Guardian. 16 August
⁵² Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
others who are also likely to believe and before you know it, there can be a clash between Hausa and Igbo’s”⁵³.

Another example surrounds the recent efforts by the six south-west governors to create Amotekun, a security outfit designed to “complement the work of the mainstream security agencies overstretched in their efforts to arrest the menace that have afflicted the entire country”⁵⁴. Amotekun has been declared illegal by the federal government and its “real purpose” has fuelled unsubstantiated rumours online that it was created primarily “to respond in fierce combat and revenge to the unpleasant activities of Hausa/Fulani herdsman in Yorubaland”⁵⁵. With different ethnic groups living all across Nigeria, one act of violence fuelled by this type of disinformation can spark several violent reprisals. In India, between April and July 2018 false rumours that started on WhatsApp, accusing individuals of being child kidnappers resulted in attacks and as many as 17 deaths⁵⁶.

In Nigeria the potential for inter-ethnic strife driven by disinformation varies on a state by state basis with one respondent arguing that social media statements that might be considered inflammatory in inter-ethnic locations can be less inflammatory in states like Imo where the vast majority of the population are Igbo⁵⁷. In Kogi State, on the other hand, pre-existing tensions between the three major ethnic groups - Igala, Egbeira and Okun - over who controls political power are being exacerbated by disinformation shared online. The Igala have historically held power, and they argue that even if power has to shift, it has to be from local government to local government in their own area. “This kind of situation makes fake news even more dangerous and more likely to be believed”⁵⁸ not one respondent working on politics in the state. Local dynamics are key in understanding the disinformation cycle but that does not mean that rumours with Nigeria-wide impact cannot emerge. “At the national level [too], it is clear to see that disinformation can trigger religious and ethnic disharmony....Nigeria is now more divided than it has ever been and a big chunk of what drives this is misinformation on social media”⁵⁹ was the view of a civil society activist interviewed in Imo State.

Recognition of the dangers posed by reporting ethnic violence were noted by print journalists interviewed. In Bayelsa State one noted how he engaged in disinformation in an effort to reduce the risk of violence. An approach that reflects the peace journalism seen in Kenya during its 2017 election, after post-election ethnic violence led to several hundred deaths in 2013⁶⁰.

Citing an example where two women and their mother in Bayelsa were killed by a Hausa man, he recalled how, under pressure from the deputy governor, and concerned about what might happen if he released the full visuals he had received, he

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56 Bathini, D. 2018. ”How WhatsApp helped turn an Indian village into a lynch mob”. BBC News. 19 July
decided to “manage the report...I had the visuals but I only used another part, which did not show what would provoke people”⁶¹. Other media professionals shared similar sentiments noting that they had been involved in de-ethnicising reporting or preferring to underreport numbers of those affected by violence or killings, often under pressure from the government, “when these attacks happen, the government is very reluctant to say the exact number of people who die. They either want to deny that it happened or reduce the number of casualties. If an independent media reports, the government will come after the journalist”⁶².

But with social media, the ability of the media to act as a gatekeeper of information is increasingly difficult, notwithstanding the debates about whether the media’s role should be to promote harmony or accurate reporting. This can be both a positive in that social media makes it more difficult to have information gatekeepers that keep stories and coverage which paint individuals or government in a negative light, hidden. But the challenges are multiple and include the dangers of false ethnicised content sparking retaliatory attacks, along with citizens losing trust in the impartiality of media houses to report accurately.

But disinformation is not just created by citizens; the government and other political actors are some of the leading proponents of false information in Nigeria on a day to day basis. A focus group respondent in Kogi illustrated one example, “I belong to social media groups of people who are in the government. In one of these groups, it was posted that roads in some communities had been tarred. I was surprised to hear that the road passing through my village had been tarred and even dualised. I called my brother in the village to know if anything happened after the last time I visited. That was how I discovered that what they did was to build a few meters of the road, take pictures of it, and then spread it on social media that the governor had constructed 1500 kilometers of road around that axis”⁶³. Outside of elections, politicians are increasingly using social media platforms not just to attack opponents but to curate an image of their successes - imagined or real - in office. This is happening at both the sub-national and national levels as the contest to win the online narrative battles and extends beyond voting periods. Nonetheless, election campaigns remain the major locus for the sharing of disinformation by political actors.

According to Lolade Nwanze of Nigeri’s Guardian newspaper, in the lead-up to the 2019 presidential vote, fake news was “on steroids”⁶⁴. In 2015, companies such as Cambridge Analytical produced video content that sought to entrench religious divisions⁶⁵. In Kano, politicians have come to understand the wide reach of social media and they employ it to push election propaganda, “the messages from the politicians do not focus on core campaign issues, but on trading insults or spreading false stories about their political rivals”⁶⁶.

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⁶⁶ Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
Content Curators:

Those creating and spreading this false content with the aim of disinforming voters are often not the politicians themselves, but youths, sometimes paid, or given phones and data who work across social media platforms to primarily attack or discredit their political paymasters opponents, with limited levels of direct connection to political parties⁶⁷. In Kogi one respondent noted how, “data boys are trained to send fake news about elections with the goal of deceiving voters who might vote for an opponent”⁶⁸, arguing that it has not really helped the nation’s nascent democracy because “it has allowed desperate politicians to hijack the social media space for their selfish interest”⁶⁹. In addition to the data boys, who one respondent described as more professional, in Kogi there are shekpe boys⁷⁰ who “are on the loose. They are not as savvy as the data boys. Data boys can put one or two things together to make a news item, but shekpe boys just run riot and attack the opponents of their pay masters”⁷¹. In essence these operate more like decentralised troll farms, given the minimal oversight and limited strategic direction provided.

A respondent in Kano bemoaned the way that “paid content creators work for political parties especially political leaders by managing their social media accounts and creating pseudo-social media accounts to devalue perceived opponents”⁷² which can include the election commission or opposition candidates. “If you happen to criticise what a politician is putting out there, he or she will probably have goons out there that will bombard you [with disinformation], rather than engage in any meaningful debate”⁷³. In Imo a focus group respondent accused these individuals of being, “e-thugs, that use social media platforms to promote lies and propaganda”, noting that “most of the content is either sycophancy or about tackling their opponents”⁷⁴. During the last elections, politicians were focused more on attacking other people or exposing their private lives than issues of development. “Unfortunately, there is a tendency for people to be swayed along party lines instead of focusing on issues”⁷⁵ noted one focus group participant, whilst a civil society activist in Imo State commented on how “political rivalries have moved to an online battlefield”⁷⁶.

But creative curators of political content are not new. Northern Nigeria has historically been characterised by the use of music, poetry and songs by activists to spread messages. Since the return to democracy in 1999 the likes of now deceased Hausa singer Alhaji Muhammadu Gambu, Aminuddeen L Abubakar, Bashir Dandago, Adam M Kirfi and Adamu Zango have continued that tradition, utilising Hausa language to discuss political education, voter mobilisation, accountability and push political propaganda through songs. In the 2015 elections, a prominent

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⁷⁰ A Yoruba slur that translates as “beer boys”
⁷² Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
⁷³ Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
Of significance for the credibility of the election process, a member of civil society in Bayelsa noted that “voting was still going on when results started flying around on social media. From where those results come, we don’t know; but that is the kind of thing we get during the elections, and I suspect the politicians are responsible”⁷⁹.

Even more concerning were reports of political actors and their supporters taking to social media to make false claims on election day, “they may be losing at a particular polling unit, and then claim they are winning, just to deceive voters to make it look as if they [voters] are chasing a lost cause by voting for the candidate who is already losing. And the funny thing is that many voters fall for it”⁸⁰. When people send out election results declaring one party the clear winner, ”by the time INEC comes out with the authentic results, people doubt the real results and they can start fighting”⁸¹ remarked a respondent reflecting on the recently concluded gubernatorial vote in Kogi. Part of the danger of disinformation is “the credibility crisis it creates for information that is in fact true”⁸².

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77 Translated to English it means „The man with the hat has lost hope
Disinformation has the potential to foster insecurity and violence. In Kano, a university lecturer shared a piece of news which he now knew to be fake stating that ex-Boko Haram members were joining the Nigerian army. But he noted, “even I believed this news when I first saw it and it left a bad taste in my mouth. These forms of misinformation create great distrust and divide the country. That with time we would not be able to trust the military”\(^8^3\).

In Borno State, where interactions with the military are frequent and many families have lost loved ones to the Boko Haram insurgency, this type of false information is particularly dangerous and prevalent. An example given was of an image of Red Cross workers, in what turned out to be an old photo from Darfur, taking food items into the bush, with the conclusion drawn that they were in some way supporting Boko Haram. “It caused serious panic and tension in Borno”,\(^8^4\) according to one focus group discussion participant with many people finding credence in the claim given that the Nigerian government has frequently, albeit with little evidence, accused international agencies of colluding with Boko Haram\(^8^5\). As ever, the pre-existing reality was the fertile ground that enabled this disinformation and misinformation to spread online and convince many who saw it.

Disinformation around security issues was discussed more often in Borno as compared to other states less affected by armed insurgency. In places like Lagos, disinformation was more focused on crime, with an example given of individuals posing online as security agents or law enforcement officers to warn of a traffic incident - often using footage or images from a real incident that is several years old - that can divert unsuspecting passengers into areas of the city where petty or more serious criminal acts can take place\(^8^6\). Elections were another flash point where online disinformation posed a security risk.

A respondent in Kogi noted that “I was at the CDD Elections Centre, someone called that there was an attack at Adankolo Clinic. I called only to find out it was fake, and that everywhere is peaceful. If voters see that

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83 Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
84 Focus Group Discussion, Borno. December 2019.
kind of information, they will not want to go out”⁸⁷. Or worse, they will take retaliatory action.

These rumours persist or flourish in part because no public authority - notwithstanding issues of public trust with state authorities in Nigeria - regularly comes out to deny them. In fact, across the six zones the lack of engagement by security services online was highlighted.

In Borno State there was some recognition for the police and army’s efforts at online engagement. But questions remained about the accuracy of the information shared - “in most of their [the army] reports on social media the public have no confidence on their sides of the story because they mostly share success stories of their operations. They hardly tell the citizens that particular communities are under security threats”⁸⁸ - and its relevance - “it is effective but unfortunately most of those that are vulnerable to security risks are not active on social media due to low levels of education in the state”⁸⁹. A view shared by a Lagos respondent familiar with the security sector, “for security agencies to engage citizens, accessibility is a key issue; the accessibility of the social media platforms have to be top notch. If that is not so, security agencies may be churning out the best information, but it will never get to the citizens”⁹⁰.

In several states covered for this research it was noted how little of an official online presence security agencies chose to have. The majority of information shared about security was done by ordinary citizens. In Bayelsa, “the police, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corp, all of them put together, nobody is active on social media. We actually get security information from other citizens”⁹¹. Connecting these citizen-driven responses and security services can offer a way forward. A respondent in Kano recalled an incident during the contentious 2019 gubernatorial vote where “an INEC office in a community received information [through WhatsApp] that thugs were on their way to that office to burn the building down and the people inside it. Upon receiving this news, we transferred it to the police who were waiting for them and arrested most of them”⁹².

Disinformation around security issues was discussed more often in Borno as compared to other states less affected by armed insurgency.

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⁸⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Borno. December 2019.
⁸⁹ Key Informant Interview, Borno. December 2019.
Whilst Nigeria’s security agencies are, for the most part, broadly absent from online platforms, groups such as Boko Haram and IPOB are using these platforms to talk directly to supporters, to foment mistrust, spread disinformation and recruit followers. It was IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu that started the rumour, which many Nigerians refuse to disregard completely, that Buhari was cloned. Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP) use of social media has evolved with time, but since the latter pledge of allegiance to Islamic State in 2015 it has become more sophisticated; Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram are all used to share their preachings. The use of these mediums is complemented by offline engagements by members and supporters to amplify messages. ISWAP sends emissaries to the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps urging residents to return to their communities. To do this they often use social media to show pictures of farmers or fishermen in territories controlled by the group with bountiful harvests or catch. Even though the reality might be quite different, the objective is to show the possibility of a better life outside the poorly managed IDP camps.

More and more people are following them on the platforms”93. They “release videos of atrocities [particularly those where Nigerian soldiers are captured or killed] and post targeted threats [to instill fear]”94 according to one Borno respondent.

Both benefit from the vacuum of credible information, something that the government has further exacerbated with its efforts to close down critical media and civil society voices in the north-east in the last year95. The lack of impartial voices offers fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.

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93 Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
94 Focus Group Discussion, Borno. December 2019.
95 Al Jazeera, 2019. "Nigeria raids paper, arrests journalist over Boko Haram coverage". 7 January
Disinformation is designed to muddy the waters and make facts harder to see. But citizen responses to false and misleading content, particularly on social media, can provide avenues for engaging with those in authority and holding them to account in ways that were not previously possible. However, given the volume of false information circulating online that is often designed to draw on existing biases and beliefs, it can also lead to citizen actions that are based on incorrect assumptions. What is clear is that in both instances information from social media is increasingly influential.

Creating a unified online voice can be particularly powerful according to a civil society activist in Bayelsa, “there are things I may say personally on Facebook and WhatsApp that may not go far. But then if someone shares my post on Facebook, and then another person shares the post of the person, before you know it the message starts going into political groups, educational groups, various groups. And then we have so many people in these various groups, before you know it becomes the voice of the majority. That way the government can hear what we have to say”⁹⁶. This applies to both well-intentioned initiatives and those with nefarious purposes.

In Kogi one respondent noted how, social media provides “real time interaction between government and the governed, unlike in the past where you had to wait for a longer period for government agencies or representatives to provide responses to citizens key concerns”⁹⁷. “It can checkmate their [government] activities”⁹⁸ noted another. In Ekuri, Cross River State, a successful social media campaign was able to stop the devastation of a forest; “the campaign was happening before people went on social media to cry out, but the online voice really helped check the plans of the government to destroy the entire forest in that region”⁹⁹ noted a civil society activist familiar with the campaign. Other campaigns that have been able to draw on a strong digital presence to amplify pre-existing, or compliment, offline campaigns include #EndSARS, #NotTooYoungToRun, #BringBackOurGirls and #FollowTheMoney.

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The #NotTooYoungtoRun campaign was able to raise the issue of reducing age limits for political aspirants to a level that in 2018 President Buhari signed constitutional amendments into law affecting that change after a sustained nationwide campaign that saw 33 of the 36 State Houses of Assemblies grant their assent. Instagram and Twitter posts, along with updates to Facebook statuses around the objective of the movement, “bypassed the bias of official sources of the mass media and gave a voice to ordinary youths in transforming the political landscape of the country.

Helping them to quickly establish a sense of a community with a shared objective at a low cost\(^{100}\). It helped that the government saw political benefits to its passage, but without the movements sustained online advocacy, it would not have even been an issue.

Sub-national issues are also being raised with consequence online. In Kogi State, social media was used to demand accountability when it was revealed that officials of the school feeding programme were engaged in corrupt practices. Discussions online drew attention to the issue and led to the arrest and ongoing prosecution of the officials\(^{101}\). In Borno State a similar example of social media driven accountability was offered. During Kashim Shettima’s tenure, the Bama Youth Forum (BYF) discovered that if someone died in the IDP camps in Maiduguri they would not bury him or her immediately as required by Islamic rules but wait for more deceased bodies in order to undertake a mass burial. This according to one camp official was more economical but in reality opened up the window of opportunity for them to embezzle resources set aside for burials. One BYF member recalled how, “we went and complained to the government officials directly but to no avail. So we went back and snapped a corpse that is two days old and posted on Facebook. The social media post went viral and was seen by the Governor who summoned the officials...we gathered that the people concerned were suspended”\(^{102}\).

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102 Focus Group Discussion, Borno. December 2019.
"Much of this push for accountability comes from CSOs and youth groups"¹⁰³ and it is increasingly clear the government is listening, observing and responding. Those in power, in recognition of the growing influence of online debates and discussions in offline political interactions, have also responded by hiring increasingly large social media teams - special assistants on social or new media are a feature of almost all state governor’s arsenal - that are tasked with spinning a positive image of their personal or party’s actions online. Flooding hashtags with spurious information, along with the amplification of contradicting narratives are other tactics used by online disruptors to further obscure efforts to uncover the truth¹⁰⁴. In Bayelsa, former Governor Dickson had a team for new media and according to an individual spoken to for this survey, “those who are picked get picked as a result of their activeness in promoting and defending the activities, policies and programmes of the party and the government”¹⁰⁵.

A Kogi-based respondent working in the media space was less than complementary about the types of messages being churned out by these actors, “most times what we get is the propaganda that they have sponsored their data boys to help them push out”¹⁰⁶. A concern shared by a respondent in Borno who argued that “citizens don’t have access to those in power to engage in such conversations. Most of them [politicians] use their social media team to respond to issues relating to corruption and those social media handlers use disinformation to defend their political godfathers”¹⁰⁷. However a political strategist based in Lagos argued that “most of the policy decision makers are on social media, and even when they pretend not to be paying attention to what’s going on, somebody that is close to them will monitor what’s going on and they get to know what is going on, what people are thinking and talking about”¹⁰⁸.

Furthermore, a respondent who had previously worked with Senator Kwankawso in Kano, reaffirmed this point “he [Kwankwaso] wasn’t very active online, but he had a special assistant on social media who kept him up to date by compiling conversations from groups, postings online and questions concerning the government... it was taken to him, he read it, made comments and sometimes even he would dictate what the responses should be”¹⁰⁹.

However decision makers can respond with counters that are not based on reality, “at times one finds that what is posted is not really what is happening; there’s a process of deliberate disinformation”¹¹⁰ said one Lagos-based journalist. Others can respond to online debates in offline ways. A civil society organisation working to improve transparency and accountability in Nigeria’s sub-national governance structures noted that, “in some cases where we called out elected represe-

¹⁰⁷ Key Informant Interview, Borno. December 2019.
¹⁰⁹ Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
ntatives online over projects that concern them...our tracking officers have been [physically] attacked"¹¹¹.

In other instances political figures can choose to simply ignore what is being circulated online, without significant consequences. On the eve of the 2019 elections, videos emerged allegedly showing APC godfather Bola Tinubu moving two bullion vans to his house. "Social media brought it up and then put it across the world. Everybody saw it. I would have expected the Inspector-General of Police, the Director of National Intelligence Agency, and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission boss without prompting to latch on to this information and begin an investigation" noted a Lagos-based media practitioner, but "you know what happened? Everybody kept quiet"¹¹².

There is also frustration that government or political figures’ use of social media is primarily responsive, and when it is proactive it is often politicised in talking about what a governor or politicians has done for his or her community. Efforts, such as those pioneered by the former Director of the Bureau for Public Sector Reforms, Dr Joe Abah, where social media was used to inform citizens of processes such as obtaining drivers licenses and passports help to demystify how government works, but are not widespread. "When you don’t give out information, you are creating space for rumour and fake news. Our leaders should be talking to us more about what they are doing. Let them tell us what the budget is, what they plan for the people and how they will generate money to do it”¹¹³ was the view of a civil society activist in Kogi.

Another in Imo believed that "wrong information on social media is not a big problem because the right information can always be put out there; the problem is that government is not putting out enough useful information”¹¹⁴. Whether or not Nigerians are likely to believe verbatim content produced by its government is another matter - that trust may have to be earned over time - but allowing false information to spread unchecked can have significant real-world consequences.

Take the 2019 example of pictures and videos that emerged which appeared to show Nigerians living in South Africa being killed as part of xenophobic violence. Whilst there was ongoing xenophobic violence in the country at the time, no Nigerians were among the 12 killed, although Nigerian-owned shops and businesses were believed to have been targeted by the mobs¹¹⁵. However old videos and mis-captioned pictures shared by popular blogs [Linda Ikeji] and individuals [Nigerian rapper Skales]¹¹⁶ portrayed a more severe but false reality, and contributed to reprisal attacks on South African businesses in major cities across Nigeria. As one focus group respondent in Lagos recalled, “the videos that circulated the most were not videos

¹¹⁶ Clifford, C. 2019. “Think before you share! Old, misleading videos said to be on xenophobic violence in SA are going viral”, Africa Check.
that were recent events. Some videos were not related to South Africa, and had nothing to do with Nigeria"¹¹⁷. But as with the majority of viral disinformation stories, these images had elements that were plausible given previous attacks and the fact that other nationalities were killed during the violence.

As one respondent in Kogi succinctly put it, “I think a lot depends on what we already want to believe; the trend is that when you post things, if it falls in line with what people want to believe, they will gladly share, whether it is fake or the fact. If the people already have their mind made up, they will never be convinced, even if you are saying the truth”¹¹⁸. The difficulty in establishing trusted arbiters of accurate information is one of the biggest challenges for countering disinformation.

Respondents held a wide array of views as to what needs to be done to tackle the threat posed by disinformation shared online. Whilst some argued that greater regulation was a necessary step there was deep skepticism about the government’s ability to do so in a way that ensured impartiality. Others were more focused on ensuring that the social media platforms take more responsibility for curbing the spread of false information. A significant number argued that, despite the challenges and issues disinformation may be causing and exacerbating in Nigeria, the way to reduce the spread of malicious content online was greater awareness of disinformation and verification concepts, and education of citizens on core media literacy concepts. Highlighting the important accountability functions and positive uses of the platforms should not be lost in discussions about their negative uses.

Global responses

How to tackle disinformation, hate speech, influence campaigns and other negative content on social media is a question being grappled with by countries across the world. Temporary internet shutdowns - comprising a total of 8,000 hours - were a frequent occurrence across Africa in 2019¹¹⁹. But given the ability of messages to spread through offline structures and the impacts this can have on businesses - the Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns 2019 report estimated Africa lost $2.1 billion as a result of internet shutdowns last year¹²⁰ - it does not offer a long-term solution for authoritarians, nor countries aiming to strengthen their democratic credentials. In Singapore the government has signalled its intention to clamp down on the spread of false information online with passage of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill in 2019 which “gives authorities sweeping powers to police online platforms and even private chat groups”¹²¹. In the United Kingdom, a report by a parliamentary committee into disinformation and fake news, argued that companies like Facebook needed to be subject to, and compelled to respond to, stronger government regulation, but that platforms could also do more “to proactively identify this content [disinformation] for themselves”¹²². In Finland a multi-pronged, cross-sector approach is in place, designed to prepare citizens of all ages for the complex digital landscape of today – and tomorrow. A key component of the programme is the country’s “critical thinking curriculum, which was revised in 2016 to prioritise the skills students need to spot disinformation”¹²³.

¹²⁰ Ibid
¹²¹ Wong, T. 2019. “Singapore fake news law policies chats and online platforms”, BBC News, 9 May
¹²² Busby, M. 2019. “Facebook needs regulation to combat fake news, say MPs”. The Guardian, 18 February
¹²³ Mackintosh, E. 2019. “Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it’s learned may be crucial to Western democracy”. CNN, 12 May
For those who see regulation as a key part of curbing disinformation online there is recognition of the need to find a way of doing so without clamping down on vocal citizens who are merely enjoying their freedom of expression guaranteed by Section 39 of Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution.

As one frequent user of social media noted, "I think we can find a way, it is true, government can latch on to it [regulation] and use it to control the media, but that is not to say there should not be regulation"¹²⁴. Another agreed, "I think the government has a role to play, but it should be a balanced role, where people are able to say the truth, and people who spread fake news should be punished, but only when it is certain that it was consciously done. But for those people who have innocently spread something, somehow they should be punished but, in a balanced way. It should not be done in such a way that it stops us from sharing the truth because we are afraid."¹²⁵. But Nigeria already has laws and regulation in place that can sanction those caught spreading disinformation online and protect online space.

Under Nigeria’s criminal code any false speech and expression may be punishable under the law of defamation and if made against the state may amount to sedition and liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment ranging between one and three years¹²⁴. Furthermore the Cybercrimes Act 2015, Section 24[1][b] states that "any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means of computer systems or network that he knows to be false, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent: commits an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than N7,000,000 or imprisonment for a term of not more than three years; or to both such fine and imprisonment"¹²⁷.

In 2019, Nigeria’s National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) issued the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation, which contains many concepts that mirror the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation. It includes clear data processing principles, mandates organisations to develop security measures and policies to protect personal data, lays out the data rights of citizens and outlines penalties for non-compliance¹²⁸. Interpretation and implementation is where issues have arisen.

The Cybercrimes Act has been criticised as a tool, used by both federal and states governments, to muzzle political opponents and the press. Several journalists and bloggers have been tried under the act since its enactment in 2015 including Omoyele Sowore, publisher of Sahara Reporters, who is currently on trial accused of cyberstalking the president.

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¹²⁶ See Sections 50/51 of the Nigerian Criminal Code
¹²⁷ Government of Nigeria. 2015. “Cybercrimes Act, Section 24[1][b]”.
NITDA is still finding its feet as the country’s data protection watchdog and will need continued political and technical support to enforce laws that regulate communications, networking and data protection, and to ensure that businesses within the country are compliant with strict data protection principles.

But even for those in support of new regulation, The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill currently before the Nigerian Senate is seen as problematic. “Those kinds of bills while they argue that they want to stop the spread of fake news, on the other hand, we know that a lot of times is just to stop people from being vocal”¹²⁹ said one experienced media practitioner in Lagos. A sentiment echoed by a respondent from civil society in Kogi who argued that “if you allow the government to be the only decider in the push to regulate social media, they would abuse that power. But we cannot also say we should leave social media users to do whatever they like...key stakeholders should come together to put in place measures to check the cankerworm of misinformation and disinformation”¹³⁰.

Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill

The Social Media Bill (as it is more popularly known) has passed a second reading and is now in the committee stage in Nigeria’s Senate. Several draconian provisions in the Bill empower the Nigerian government to unilaterally shut down social media and even the internet for posts they deem to pose risks for public safety and national security. The proposed bill grants the Nigerian Police force absolute power “to direct the National Communication Commission to order the internet access service provider to take reasonable steps to disable access to end-users in Nigeria based on their online location”. In short, the proposed legislation places an excessive amount of power in the hands of the government and security agencies. If passed into law, it will infringe not just on freedom of expression and press but also on the digital rights of Nigerians, creating challenges and conflicts with existing laws.

The suggestion of an independent national body, responsible for monitoring and regulating social media, and composed of actors like the NCC, leading media practitioners, justice department representatives and academics was mooted by several respondents but even this may not be able to escape accusations of bias. In much the same way that the independence of INEC is increasingly questioned by politicians on both sides, a similar social media regulatory body would struggle to be immune from accusations of favouring a political side or ethnic group(s) whether those accusations were true or not. Self-regulation for bloggers, in much the same way that the Nigerian Union of Journalists oversees the traditional media, may provide an avenue that is less divisive but it will be hard to ensure compliance given that social media has created a space in which all users can be bloggers.

One civil society activist in Imo pushed back against the notion of regulation arguing that, "if social media is regulated by the government, it will further shrink the civic space" and instead highlighted that despite "a lot of good, bad and ugly flying out there on the social media, it has given the average person an avenue to vent, and a platform to amplify their voices". Reflecting on the recent disappearance and arrests of online activists such as Abubakar Idris (popularly known by his online handle of Dadiyata) and Salisu Hotoro in Kano, one respondent in the state was of the view that the political elites were only regulating the space, "to silence critics of bad governance". It was a view shared by a political consultant in Imo when discussing the motivation for the government seeking to increasingly control the online media space, "I think the government doesn’t want the people to talk about their work, they want to silent [sic] peoples voices, they want to be able to send people to jail for what only they can classify as fake news". A media practitioner in Kogi shared a similar view, "regulation is a no no for me. Just imagine a government like the one we are having currently, which does not want to be criticised. Telling them to regulate social media is like asking them to crush those of us who are not singing their praises, but are asking questions.

Discussions about regulation highlighted support for tackling the prevalence of disinformation, but also highlighted the challenge of doing so in ways that would render the authority in charge independent from political pressure and influence. Instead greater responsibility can, and should, lie with the owners of the social media companies, who have created these platforms which have accentuated the spread of disinformation in Nigeria. One respondent in a Bayelsa focus group, documenting her own recent experience, noted that phone and internet provider MTN has 24-hour customer care service, but Facebook does not, "when I sent an email to Facebook telling them that my account had been hacked, it took them over

132 Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
133 Key Informant Interview, Imo. January 2020.
two days to reply. And even when they replied me, they were like we are going to get back to you in about a week’s time”¹³⁵.

Social media platforms are stepping up their self-regulation efforts. Engagements to dialogue with African governments and create awareness raising content about “fake news” in partnership with civil society have centered around elections. Whether this is enough or having a notable impact is questionable. In 2018, ten African elections saw automated bots act as important vessels for the spread of misinformation and disinformation¹³⁶. In October 2019, a total of 443 Facebook accounts, 200 pages and 76 groups, as well as 125 Instagram accounts, were removed, from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Nigeria that were designed “to mislead others about who they were, and what they were doing”¹³⁷. But this is just a small drop in the ocean given Nigeria’s ever growing numbers of social media users.

Despite awareness raising efforts, many users are still unaware of how to report other users or content on these platforms. Furthermore, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook do not have sufficient capacity to assess content, particularly when it is in local languages such as Igala or Kanuri. Even when they do have capacity in languages like Hausa, the number of people responsible for monitoring content is unable to keep up with the vibrant conversations (and abuse) taking place online. This reflects a growing, but still limited, focus on Africa by social media companies¹³⁸. Finding ways that regulation by the platforms is more seen by, and accountable to, citizens and relevant regulatory authorities in places like Nigeria is a key, and often missing, component. But this will not be easy. Despite being asked to appear at a UK House of Parliament select committee hearing which looked at the role of disinformation and fake news, Mark Zuckerberg declined to do so, leading the report authors to accuse Facebook of acting as digital gangsters¹³⁹.

“A person spreading fake news can even be countered by other citizens who call out their information as false”¹⁴⁰ if they have the knowledge to do so. This was the view of one civil society campaigner who supported an approach focused on creating more digitally aware citizens who may nudge others towards the truth. This perspective was shared by a journalist in Lagos who argued that “the orientation should not be about regulating what should be called fake news. But about the level of receptivity of this news. How do you handle information that is given to you that you are not sure of? Do you have any other source to corroborate? Check for the credibility of that information and at the end of the day, come to an objective position. It has to do with our rationality in handling issues”¹⁴¹.

Additionally, greater exposure to false information can make individuals more reluctant to share content they see or receive online for fear it is fake. Pointing to

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¹³⁶ Dahir, A. 2018. “How social media bots became an influential force in Africa’s elections”. Quartz Africa. 18 July
¹³⁷ Al Jazeera. 2019. “Facebook removes accounts from UAE, Nigeria, Egypt and Indonesia”. 4 October.
¹³⁸ Facebook has a growing presence on the continent but WhatsApp (which is owned by Facebook) does not have a presence on the continent. Neither does Twitter, though its CEO Jack Dorsey is planning to spend up to six months on the continent in 2020.
an interesting, and perhaps useful, normative idea that was frequently hinted at in this research; that being accused of being a serial sharer of disinformation lowers social standing, something many citizens are keen to avoid.

It is clear that civic and digital literacy are key in equipping Nigerians with the knowledge to “handle social media.” A prominent academic in Kano believes, “everyone has a role and responsibility. The government should encourage news literacy and strong professional journalism. The news industries must provide high-quality journalism and correct fake news and disinformation without legitimising them.

Technology companies should invest in tools that identify fake news, reduce financial incentives for those who profit from disinformation and improve online accountability. Educational institutions should make informing people about news literacy a high priority. Restrictive regulation of internet platforms set a dangerous precedent, encourage authoritarianism and expand censorship. Restricting global freedom of expression and democratic governance in the process. What we should be focusing on is how to stop the prevalence of disinformation on social media, not regulating it.”

143 Key Informant Interview, Kano. December 2019.
Nigeria’s political and ethno-religious landscape, challenged by insecurity, provides fertile ground for the spread of disinformation on social media platforms and private messaging applications that are growing in users month on month. A piece of deliberately misleading information is most likely to gain traction when it aligns with individuals pre-existing beliefs or experiences. As Odunfa noted in his 2009 BBC piece, “no rumour is built on vacuum”¹⁴⁴. That is to say that tackling disinformation online requires addressing some of the broader challenges - insecurity and a lack of trust in government officials - facing Nigerian society, on which digital disinformation builds.

But information shared online is not always false. In fact, the same tools and mechanisms that are enabling disinformation to penetrate society faster than ever before, are those that can be used to shed light on facts that can drive more accountable and transparent governance. The balance that needs to be struck is to find ways in which these latter uses are amplified, and the former increasingly discredited if social media’s influence is to be more positive than negative.

But with increasingly sophisticated technology at the disposal of the curators of influence and disinformation, it is becoming harder to decipher fact from fiction online in Nigeria and across the world with any great certainty. It is also crucial to recognise that disinformation created online gets offline and shapes wider debates and discussions across Nigerian media by influencing content that is printed in newspapers or discussed on television and radio programmes. This impact may be hard to measure quantifiably, but is increasingly important to recognise.

Regulation to curb the spread of false information has been proposed and implemented in some countries, but it comes with serious risks to citizens’ freedom of expression. Companies like Facebook and Twitter can play a far more proactive regulatory role in places like Nigeria, but a more sustainable solution lies with creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry, capable of assessing for themselves what is true and what is not online.

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Recommendations

Drawing on the research findings the report presents the following recommendations:

1. Continued support to the media industry, including journalists and editors, to improve the quality of reporting. Embedding fact-checkers in leading media houses - to include radio, TV and print - can reduce the reproduction or use of misleading online content across traditional media and support the development of a more critical audience. A particular focus on non-english language content producers should be emphasised.

2. Civic and digital education that supports critical thinking and reasoning. This can be targeted at key online influencers and WhatsApp group administrators in the short-term, with a campaign to have such an approach become part of the secondary school curriculum, a longer-term goal.

3. Civil society organisations, in partnership with academia and think-tanks should conduct ongoing social media content mapping using hashtags/keywords, designed to highlight, on a map and in real-time, where potentially divisive rumours are being shared or debated. They can use this information to work with institutions like the National Peace Council and state level religious and community leaders in a rapid response approach designed to foster dialogue and reduce tensions among communities.

4. Advocate for social media platforms to do more to prioritise growing markets like Nigeria. This includes more local language capacity capable of proactively monitoring content and pages, and continued efforts to raise awareness among users of how to report disinformation.
5. Encourage and provide technical support to government bodies to convey accurate and apolitical information using social media handles. Key agencies to focus on include, but are not limited too, the police, INEC, the Office of the Auditor General, the National Orientation Agency and the National Communications Commission.

6. Continued efforts by civil society, the media and other key stakeholders to lobby political actors to not pass The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill (2019) which would endanger the right of citizens to freedom of speech as well as impact on economic activities (given the powers it contains to shut-off the internet) if passed into law. Efforts instead should focus on pushing legislators to empower NITDA to ensure widespread compliance with data protection regulations passed in 2019 and to further strengthen this legislation by having it enacted into law.
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