POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS OF DISINFORMATION

KOGI STATE
Post-Election Analysis of Disinformation in Kogi State

INTRODUCTION

The Kogi state off-cycle elections were conducted on 16th November 2019. Twenty-four political parties participated in the election, but there were three frontrunners: Musa Wada of People's Democratic Party (PDP), Yahaya Bello of All People’s Congress (APC), and Natasha Akpoti of Social Democratic Party (SDP). Given the trend of disinformation in previous elections held in the country, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) chose to intervene in two ways:

1. CDD conducted disinformation mapping, aimed at identifying key actors and mechanisms of action in Kogi’s disinformation ecosystem;

2. This mapping informed a state-based factchecking structure that sought to identify and counter disinformation spread before, during and right after the election.

Our methodology for disinformation mapping involved a combination of desk review of reports on political and electoral trends, and in-person unstructured interviews. Disinformation mapping revealed that false narratives were spread by actors called “Data Boys” and “Shekpe Boys” who operate in online and offline spaces. The primary mechanism of action was tailoring messages to exploit ethnic cleavages in Kogi as they largely coincide with partisan divides. The tension between the two major ethnic groups, Igala and Ebira, was exploited the most. These messages leverage confirmation bias to entrench polarization; their efficacy is enhanced by high levels of poverty and illiteracy in Kogi state. Our pre-election report details specific sources of disinformation.1

We established a fact-checking hub composed of five state-based fact-checkers, three fact-checkers from CDD, and two graphic designers. We deployed three fact-checkers to

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1 Some of the largest groups were: Kogi Political Discuss Group with 78,000 members, Kogi State Political Forum with 21,000 members, Kogi News with 51,000 members, Kogi Political News with 41,000 members, Kogi Latest News Update with 26,000 members and Kogi Political Platform with 52,000 members. We also observed WhatsApp groups such as Kogi Egalitarian Youths, FUL Decide, Lokoja Political Forum, Ward A Youth Council and Bell-Cedo Development Front.
Facebook and WhatsApp, and two to Twitter. The hub was opened on the 14th of November, and we then deployed observers to spot and fact-check the authenticity of stories that were widely spread on Election Day. When confronted with questionable news, we called CDD election observers deployed to various polling units in the state to ascertain veracity. Upon verifying stories as false, we went to a fake post’s comment or reply section to flag it as fake. We did not post clarifications for claims that were not popular, to avoid inadvertently popularizing them. For each of the trending fake news posts that were fact-checked, an infographic was designed and spread over all social media platforms. However, not all of them were uploaded on CDD’s official social media handle, also to avoid popularizing false narratives. They were instead countered by CDD fact-checkers and observers using their social media handles. With fake election results specifically, we sent fake result alerts to newspapers and urged people through our social media handles to accept only the official result from INEC.

Disinformation Mapping

Our research suggests that age is the strongest predictor of media consumption habits. Media habits, in turn, determine the kind of propaganda one is exposed to. The youth get news from social media platforms; Facebook and WhatsApp are most popular. These social media platforms are strongly influenced by “Data Boys”, online political propagandists, who mainly supported the ruling party. Those with little access to the internet get political information at beer parlours from “Shekpe Boys” who were ardent supporters of the opposition. “Shekpe” is a Yoruba word for beer. Shekpe boys are to offline spaces what data boys are to online spaces. Politicians in the state also employed the service of social media influencers to spread false information, especially on the new media space. These influencers tend to remotely support the work of the state-based political propagandists; for example, popular influencer Austin Usman Okai operates from Abuja. The use of pseudo accounts was also prevalent amongst the influencers in the disinformation business.

Elderly people listen to radio stations and watch television programs. Regarding media houses, ownership predicts political influence. Radio Kogi is owned by the state government, NTA Kogi is federal; Grace FM and Confluence TV are private radio and TV stations respectively. Publicly owned houses are inherently susceptible to state political control. Private houses may also be unduly influenced: Grace FM and Confluence TV are owned by former PDP Senator Tunde Ojibeha.

Evidence suggests a low digital literacy level in Kogi state. For example, the state government in 2019 has identified mass illiteracy as a key problem and is increasing education funding as a result. Furthermore, we digital library users at a local university who sit on the higher end of the state digital literacy spectrum, displayed difficulty with basic digital skills such as saving a picture from a webpage. A low level of

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2 #StopFakeNews, #CDDFactCheck and #CDDelectionAnalysisCentre were our hashtags.


digital literacy suggests higher susceptibility to false narratives. However, fact-checking groups like Dubawa (managed by the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism), Africa Check (at the national level) and CDD fact-checking platforms (at national and local levels) and other independent media outfits like the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) work to mitigate disinformation. CDD also partnered with the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) to counter disinformation in the Kogi election.

Frameworks for mitigating disinformation are poorly implemented; this issue is national and not limited to Kogi state. The relevant framework in Nigeria is the 2015 Cybercrime Act, which makes the sharing of disinformation and hate speech punishable by up to two years in prison. Policymakers have used this framework to censure media expression, evidenced in the secular deterioration in Nigeria’s press freedom index. This proclivity for censorship displayed itself again in 2019 when the Nigerian Senate passed the second reading of a new social media bill titled, Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019 (SB 132). This bill drew huge criticism and concern due to its draconian nature and potential to further suppress freedom of expression.

**Fact-Checking**

We spotted fake news in the form of old pictures, unsupported or false claims, and misleading or fake headlines, aimed at delegitimizing party candidates, creating false alarms, stoking ethnic tensions and causing violence. PDP and APC spearheaded online fake news posting, with PDP sharing most fake news we countered. High stake contests received relatively substantial attention from data boys. Specifically, APC at the state governorship level and PDP at the senatorial (Kogi West) level were targeted.

We spotted and debunked 20 trending false claims. In cases where claims stretched the truth, we provided clarification. These claims were organized around the following thematic areas:

1. **Election Materials:** One of the PDP’s social influencers, Usman Okai Austin, shared on Facebook and Twitter that APC was working with INEC to rig the Kogi gubernatorial election. He specifically said that 25 pieces of ballot papers out of 1025 were missing at Unit 009 Abejukolo. Another misleading claim that gained traction on WhatsApp asserted that SDP was not on the ballot paper. We found that it was the election statement of result which had SDP appended in ink, not ballot papers. Many social media posts also claimed that ballot papers that were used are 2015 ballot papers. A picture of a stamped ballot paper was shared on WhatsApp and Facebook to substantiate the claim. We found that the stamp, not ballot paper, had 2015 on it.

2. **Parties and Their Candidates:** A Facebook account aptly named “Data Boy” posted that PDP candidate Musa Wada was disqualified. In a Facebook video, UDP gubernatorial candidate claimed that only APC members were allowed to vote at Opu-loko 1 ward. CDD observers verified that even though there was violence at the polling unit, the claim that only APC members were allowed to vote was false. Another claim alleged indiscriminate thumbprinting of ballot papers going on in Dekina. A picture of Senator Dino Melaye sharing money with the caption that he was buying votes went viral on social media. We found that the Senator was not buying votes but giving money to women who stopped him on the road to his home after he cast his vote. Another fake post claimed “Yahaya Bello, APC Forcing INEC, NYSC Officials
3. **Violence:** A Facebook user uploaded an old picture from a 2015 election in Akwa Ibom and captioned it with “thugs arrested in Lokoja”. Before Senator Dino Melaye cast his vote, false reports that thugs disrupted his polling unit arose. A fact-check revealed that Dino Melaye cast his vote peacefully and the violence came later. Ethnic sensationalism tended to undergird these posts. For example, a claim posted on the Igala Social Lounge Facebook group suggested “Violence and snatching of ballot box in Fentolu polling unit [was carried out] by Ebira thugs”. Another claim on WhatsApp alleged “Heavy violence and ballot box snatching by gunmen in Ajayi Crowder Memorial College ward 7, 2 people killed.” We found that even though violence was recorded, there was no evidence of death.

4. **Fake Results:** A fake result from an APC supporter on an INEC result sheet showed APC swept all the votes cast and all other parties got zero. A news blog also reported that Yahaya Bello was leading in 19 out of 21 local governments in Kogi state. The claim came before ward collation at different local governments commenced.

### Challenges and Limitations

Our fact-checkers were faced with challenges that did not significantly hinder the success of our operations. Listed below are some of the challenges faced:

1. Due to the closed nature of WhatsApp, we could not access all of the WhatsApp groups in Kogi state. During our background research, we found out that politicians in the state create and spread fake news from their official WhatsApp groups. However, our attempts to join these groups proved abortive.

2. As most of the election stakeholders like police, INEC and political parties were occupied with electoral logistics, they were not forthcoming with verification requests. We instead relied on our field observers.

3. Violence in some of the polling units forced affected observers to flee. Verifying claims arising from these polling units became more difficult as a result.

4. Our fact-checkers got their requests to join some Facebook groups disapproved. This limited them from posting fact-checks of the false claims made in the group. We instead posted the fact-checks on our personal Facebook and Twitter handles and shared them with newspapers we worked with.

### Note: Kogi West Re-run Election

As some polling units in Kogi West witnessed violence during the November 16th election, INEC declared the re-run election between Senator Smart Adeyemi of APC and Senator Dino Melaye of PDP inconclusive. Another election was conducted for the polling units on 30th November and Senator Smart Adeyemi emerged the winner. During the re-run election, CDD established a fact-checking hub with four fact-checkers and a graphic designer. The mechanisms for identifying and countering fake posts were the same as the November 16th election. We did not record a single instance of fake news around this election.
Conclusion

CDD intervened through a disinformation mapping and fact-checking hub in the Kogi state off-cycle gubernatorial election on 16th November 2019. The mapping aimed to identify key actors and mechanisms of action in Kogi’s disinformation ecosystem. It also informed the fact-checking hub which sought to identify and counter disinformation spread right before, during and right after the election. Our disinformation mapping found that age is the strongest predictor for what channel of fake news posting one would be exposed to: younger people seemed to prefer online channels, while older parts of the population prefer traditional media channels. So-called data boys and shekpe boys specialize in spreading fake news via online and offline channels. Low digital literacy and poor implementation of legal frameworks exacerbate the state’s vulnerability to fake news.

Our fact-checking hub identified and countered 20 trending fake news posts, organized around themes of election materials, parties and their candidates, violence and fake results. They came in the form of old pictures, unsupported or false claims, and misleading or fake headlines, aimed at delegitimizing party candidates, creating false alarm, stoking ethnic tensions and causing violence. Our fact-checkers ran into challenges around the invitational, closed nature of Facebook and WhatsApp groups, the preoccupation of electoral officials, and violence in polling units. Ultimately, these did not significantly hinder our operations. The re-run election came without fake news.