Dissecting Disinformation in Nigeria: An Overview of CDD's Work So Far
With many of the world’s populations in lockdown, or living with restricted freedom of movement, it is a good time to reflect on the present, evaluate the past, and look towards the future. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) is taking time to reflect on its journey in fighting disinformation by looking at some of our key work in this area, and meditating on both the current state of affairs, and where to go next.

Disinformation is a relatively new term, but it refers to a practice as old as time. The dissemination of false information through modern channels using the internet is what marks out the disinformation of today. CDD began working on countering disinformation five years ago. Our first foray was through the Bu-harimeter, a platform that was designed to measure accountability by tracking the (in)congruence between Nigerian President Buhari’s campaign promises and actions in office.

In August 2018, CDD put together an international conference which brought together experts from Nigeria and around the world, from diverse sectors such as journalism, civil society, politics, business and tech with the aim of starting a national dialogue of disinformation in Nigeria. Officials from Facebook attended this event and CDD has continued to engage with the company as it seeks to find ways to tackle the issue of fake news on its platform. As far back as the 2015 Nigerian elections, CDD collaborated with Facebook to host a training for civil society on the platform and elections. We are part of the Facebook Trusted Partners Channels, which provides a way of reporting false or dangerous content that goes to an escalated queue of enforcement experts.

In 2015, Nigeria was a test-site for learning and fine-tuning the computational methods of propaganda that were popularised by the now notorious Cambridge Analytica. It was clear to CDD that an interrogation of Nigeria’s online space, and a response to it, was necessary ahead of elections in 2019. In response, in October 2018, CDD launched the first dedicated fact-checking system in Nigeria. To date CDD’s dedicated fact-checking centre has produced well over 600 fact-checks, with a dedicated team that has been producing long-form and infographic type fact-checks that address the broad range of misinformation circulating online in Nigeria. The fact-checking work has covered elections at both the state and national level.
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It is primarily focused on fact-checking during the three critical phases of elections: pre-elections, during and post-elections. In addition to a national countering fake news hub during the general elections, CDD also established hubs in each of the off-cycle state elections that have followed.

This has helped improve our understanding of the way WhatsApp and social media platforms function as a medium for quick dissemination of false information, and their critical importance in shaping Nigeria’s disinformation landscape. This was documented in a 2019 report, ‘Sorting Fact from Fiction’, which analysed and discussed common false narratives that surrounded the conduct of Nigeria’s 2019 elections.

This kind of work has enabled CDD to make huge strides in understanding the evolving nature of disinformation campaigns and the specific ways political actors looks to utilise these for their own gain. Our research paper ‘Nigeria’s Fake News Ecosystem’, published a month after the 2019 presidential election in collaboration with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), was the first social media analysis conducted in Nigeria using advanced machine learning tools. It provided evidence of high levels of automation on Nigerian social media. Almost 20% of Twitter accounts analysed were bots, indicating an online space that is highly manipulated.

Recognising the important role of WhatsApp in the disinformation landscape, CDD partnered with the University of Birmingham, and with funding from WhatsApp, was able to conduct a study of the way political parties sought to mobilise using the platform across Nigeria during the 2019 elections. ‘WhatsApp and Nigeria’s 2019 Elections: Mobilising the People, Protecting the Vote’, which has a specific focus on Kano and Oyo states, highlights the positives that online organisation can offer women and civil society, but raises concerns about how political parties were using the application to entrench existing divisions and electoral (mal)practices.
Following on from this work, CDD, with the support of NDI, conducted an in-depth mapping of disinformation and the new media landscape in Nigeria drawing on field research in the six Nigerian geo-political zones. This has enabled us to build a picture of how disinformation spreads in different regions of the country and to illustrate more clearly the important, and increasing, overlap of information flowing between traditional and social media. Or at least how it is influenced by it. Our ongoing work on “Personal Data and Political Persuasion in Nigeria” finds that the use of data-driven campaigning in Nigerian elections is growing in prominence.

This research works has helped with the development of innovative systems for countering disinformation in Nigeria. CDD has worked to get political parties to sign pacts where they agree to stop sharing false information in a bid to influence electoral proceedings. In Kogi and Bayelsa states an initiative known as ‘Securing the Vote’ - where political parties publicly committed to fair electoral practice, and the cessation of disinformation campaigns - was authored by CDD ahead of gubernatorial votes in late 2019.

We have conducted hackathons throughout the country to support the development of context specific solutions. For these we have invited the brightest young tech minds, to come together and provide solutions to the evolving information ecosystem. The last hackathon took place in August 2020 in Kano State. Finally, leveraging on popular culture in states such as Kano, that have a very engaged entertainment industry, popular singers and musicians have been used to deliver messages and enlighten citizens on the dangers of disinformation around electoral process and health outbreaks.

In February 2020 when Nigeria’s index case of COVID-19 was declared, CDD set-up a designated fact-checking team who collected and analysed data of misinformation around the virus and built a database of popular conspiracy theories and their resonance. In combatting the dangerous effects of health-related misinformation, CDD has partnered with the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 to order to disseminate messages that both educate Nigerians about the virus and dispel dangerous rumours and myths.

In addition to building a stronger understanding of the disinformation landscape in Nigeria within CDD, the organisation has also committed significant resources to training others in how to spot, counter and reduce the impacts of disinformation. Since 2018, we have trained more than 140 persons from organisations such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), NOA, officials from the Nigeria Police Force in Kogi & Bayelsa and the Nigeria Union of Journalists. We conducted a specialised technical capacity building session at the Nigeria Police Force Headquarters, Abuja. This was a unique session that was directed at high-level members of the Police Force, including the Public Relations Officer and his team.
Civic education is also an increasingly core component of our work in this area. Since 2018 the significant role of language, the different spoken languages of different regions function almost as silos in which disinformation thrives, has become clear.
Our research findings in Kano for example, revealed a rich world in which Hausa speakers consumed information at a very high rate. This high demand for information created a space in which peddlers of ‘fake news’ thrived, which at the same time, were invisible to consumers of English content.

In response, civic education work in states where we are present has been conducted through radio, cartoons, songs and our very own TV programme – the Fake News Show. The Fake news show airs on Television Continental (TVC) and is anchored by popular comedian, Frank Donga. The show feature panel of experts discussing topical issues and present opportunities for those experts to debunk false news in circulation. CDD has also produced educational materials in Pidgin, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and radio shows in Bayelsa, Kogi and Kano state discussing the complex issues around disinformation and providing a platform for citizens to participate.

OUR FOCUS ON NORTHERN NIGERIA

With over 70 million native Hausa speakers in Nigeria, CDD has increased its focus on tackling the growth on online disinformation specifically crafted for the Hausa language. To do this, CDD first trained twenty social media influencers in Kano state on fact-checking techniques and combatting disinformation. The social media influencers trained constituted owners of Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups administrators, as well as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube influencers who use both English and Hausa to interact with their followers. To date we have fact checked 150 messages in Hausa, information that is circulated on our Hausa Twitter handle and through popular Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

We know that in order to enact social change it is important to speak using the voices that will be listened to and so we have also collaborated with notable Kano Musicians like Tijani Gandu and Hafsah Baba who have produced songs
on fake news and its danger to democracy in the Hausa language. This is in addition to our weekly radio programme to educate people on fake news. A key achievement has been realised through our partnership with the NOA, whose free airtime from radio stations such as Arewa Radio 93.1 FM has enabled us to reach a potential audience of 25 million Hausa speakers across northern Nigeria.

ADVOCACY-DRIVEN RESEARCH

Our vision has been to create research that is not just academically robust and insightful, but that can also provide a foundation for sustained advocacy work. Ultimately, our core mission is to support the deepening of democracy and we believe that in the rapidly evolving information space, policies have to be founded on a solid base of knowledge. And that is why we have continued to speak out publicly and oppose legislations that seeks to clamp down on citizens ability to use social media to speak freely such as the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, 2019 SB 132, popularly known as the Social Media bill.

We have used the research and fact-checking work to engage governments, donors, academic institutions and civil society. The reasons for this are simple – by engaging in wide ranging dialogue across Nigeria, we hope to drive through a new wave of thinking that informs how we can conduct our democracy in a digital age. It is necessary to raise awareness about how exactly our information ecosystems work, and how they are being used to exploit us, because only then can we begin to develop effective solutions to mitigate the threats they pose.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: OUR THOUGHTS AND PLANS

As the algorithms that determine our social media feeds get more advanced, so too do our techniques in ensuring that the use of digital technology in democratic processes does not become solely exploitative. CDD is always looking for new and innovative thinking as we embark on the path towards a digital democracy. In addition to the hackathons CDD conducts, we are also building capacity in using machine learning and artificial intelligence to stay ahead of the curve. By developing algorithms using data that we have collected, we will be able to make predictions on disinformation hotspots, the likelihood of violence and possibly even begin to pre-empt false narratives before they become entrenched.

The role big data plays, and the implication for electoral politics, is becoming increasingly salient and this is an already an area where CDD is working, in partnership with Tactical Tech. CDD is also expanding her focus to work regionally on social media issues during election processes in Burkina Faso (2019) and The Gambia (2020). Capacity building for civil society and journalists, sustained engagement with ECOWAS and a study to understand the disinformation ecosystem in West Africa are just some of the ways CDD will be continuing to provide continent-leading research and analysis on the impact of disinformation on democratic processes.
The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation.

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