



INFORMATION INFLUENCE: DISINFORMATION DURING EDO'S 2020 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION



Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement



POLITICAL CONTEXT

Located at the centre of southern Nigeria, in the south-south geopolitical zone, Edo state was created in 1991 but it was not until 1999 that its first democratically elected leader - Chief Lucky Igbinedion of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) – was elected to power. PDP ruled the state for nine years before a court order invalidated Professor Osunbor's election in 2007 and Adams Oshiomole won the 2008 re-run on the Action Congress (AC) ticket which merged into the All Progressive Congress (APC) in 2013. Oshiomole was the Governor until 2016 and remains involved and influential in Edo politics to this day.

But twelve years on from losing power in the state, the PDP has been emboldened by the recent defection of Governor Godwin Obaseki

from the APC following a well-publicised falling-out with Oshiomole in 2019. This marriage of convenience between Obaseki and the PDP, who would relish the chance to come back to power and regain parity with the rest of the south-south states, presents a very interesting dynamic for September's gubernatorial election which pits the current governor against Pastor Osagie Ize-lyeamu of the APC. It has created an information environment characterised by accusations and counter-accusations between the two dominant political party aspirants and their supporters. There is a clear sense that the parties are prepared to slug it out without recourse to the impact of their actions on the integrity of the process.



Chief Lucky Igbinedion
(PDP)
(1999-2007)



Professor Osunbor
(PDP)
(2007-2008)



Adams Oshiomole
(AC/APC)
(2008-2016)



Godwin Obaseki
(APC)
(2016)

MAPPING DISINFORMATION IN THE STATE

The growth of disinformation ecosystems in Nigeria represents a continued shift towards the increased weaponisation of social media and online messaging platforms. The continued growth of disinformation as a tool for political influence has been closely tracked by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) over the past few years. As far back as the 2015 presidential elections, the exploitation of social media and online messaging platforms had already entered the arsenal of Nigeria's political weaponry. In 2019, CDD's research revealed an evolving web of disinformation networks at the sub-national level across multiple states. These networks revealed peculiarities that were unique to certain regions. In Kano State, the sojojin baka

leveraged on the communal layouts of family dwellings in the state, to spread falsehoods. In Kogi the shekpe boys and data boys targeted local beer parlours and online social communities to spread information. Political forces in Nigeria, even at the local and state level, are increasingly employing trolls and disinformation armies both online and offline to win the information war.

Ahead of the Edo state election on 19 September, CDD has conducted a two-fold analysis to understand the unique elements of the disinformation ecosystem in the state. This involves social media analysis that is supplemented by field research in the state.

DISINFORMATION: PLATFORMS AND GOALS

Information influence campaigns operate in line with the nature and function of the platforms on which they are conducted. Campaigns often employ a variety of platforms as part of their wider messaging strategy. In Edo state these are the major platforms on which information campaigns are being conducted:

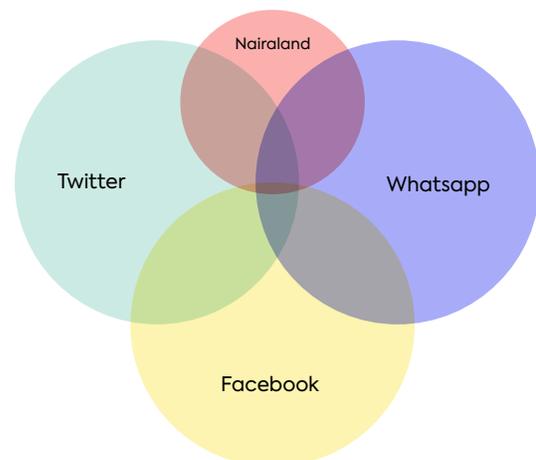


Figure 1: Online disinformation platforms

While Nairaland's sphere may be the smallest of the four, its influence should not be understated. It operates somewhat outside of the other three, more contemporary social media platforms. It is Nigeria's oldest online forum, and remains one of the most popular websites for Nigerians to share stories, sell goods and communicate. Its platform allows for complete anonymity, is simple to use and has a very data-lite interface, which has undoubtedly contributed to its staying power. Its role in the disinformation ecosystem is somewhat unique. CDD's researchers have found that a significant number of long-form forwarded text messages on WhatsApp, and political tabloid posts originated on Nairaland. In many instances it acts as a feeder to more widely used and

personal social media platforms.

Twitter has a strong appeal for the more technocratic and internet-savvy strata of society. Messages on here tend to be short, sensationalist and provocative, and there is a larger focus on pictures and videos. WhatsApp brings these messages home; there is a far more intimate feeling to having a video sent either directly to you or your closed WhatsApp group. Facebook remains Nigeria's most widely used platform, and the nature of its groups foster echo-chambers that amplify one-sided narratives. Political parties exploit the unique characteristics of all these platforms, ensuring that they have a presence across them all:

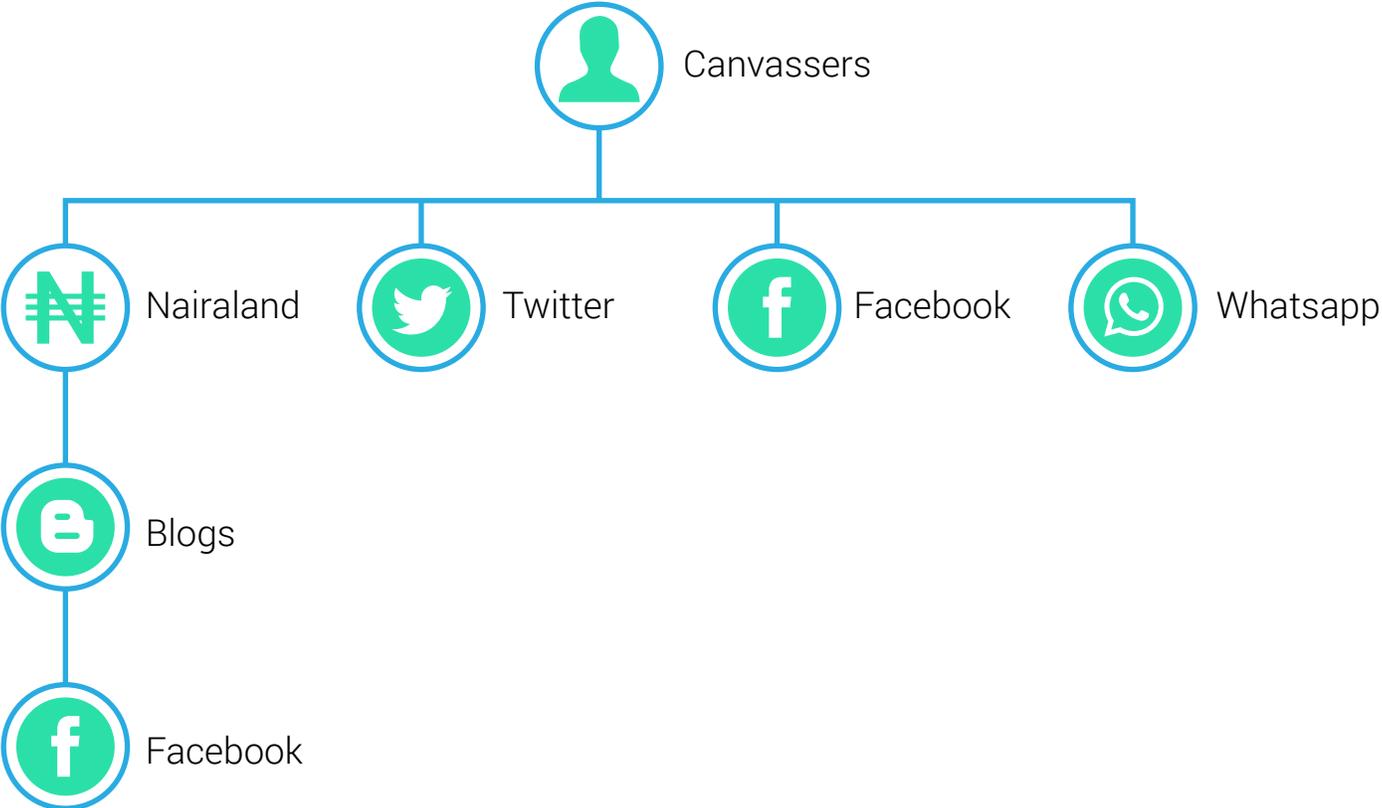


Table 1: Information distribution by canvassers across platforms

Our research in Edo suggests that political affiliation is the strongest predictor of media consumption habits, which in turn is a strong indicator of the type of content an individual consumes. Interestingly, while there were also offline canvassers who go door to door in local communities to engage directly with voters, we found that during this campaign there has been a strong focus on exploiting the online space. Videos have been used to a great extent in the campaign to date. These videos are shared across social media, and increasingly through promoted posts – a targeted advertising tool that allows payees to send photos and videos to people that are outside their immediate networks. This is a marked shift from previous gubernatorial elections where traditional methods of election malpractice continued to dominate.

The use of Nairaland and blogs to disseminate misinformation is also particularly interesting. The kinds of sites used to spread their reach are tabloid websites whose content is often already sensationalist. For example, on 17 August a story emerged on tabloid news site iReporterOnline, claiming that Governor Obaseki had hired 1,000 new special assistants, which was untrue. A google search of the headline revealed only one other instance of the story – a post on Nairaland that had been published a few hours earlier. While there is no evidence to suggest that tabloids are paid to publish Nairaland stories, there is a clear pattern of posts published on the site appearing as news in tabloids or on blogs.

However, most of the online content is still circulated on prominent WhatsApp and Facebook groups such as those listed in the table below. Members of these groups receive or see, and can share, hundreds of messages a day.

NAME	MEMBER COUNT	PLATFORM
Edo Political Forum	122.9k members	Facebook
Edo People and politics	11.1k members	Facebook
Edo Arise	33.3k members	Facebook
Edo State Today	12.9k members	Facebook
Edo State what we need	256	WhatsApp
Edo 2020 Situation Room	250	WhatsApp
Network for Good Governance	160	WhatsApp
Edo Leadership Forum	238	WhatsApp
APC National Update	196	WhatsApp

Table 2: Key Facebook and WhatsApp political groups in Edo

PARTY-DRIVEN ONLINE CAMPAIGNS

There is a growing body of empirical evidence that shows a move towards party-driven information influence campaigns. Around the world political parties are exploiting the magnifying effect of online echo chambers and it is no surprise to see this playing out in the high-stakes game that are state elections in Nigeria.

Both the APC and PDP in Edo state have dedicated media teams with clearly defined structures designed to maximise their online presence. However, there are a few differences in strategy. The use of targeted and sponsored messages on both Instagram and Twitter suggests that the PDP is running a more digitally sophisticated online operation. On the other hand, the APC has chosen to focus more on a human resources approach, supported by a

clearly defined and structured team of up to 300 canvassers spread across Facebook, Twitter, Nairaland and WhatsApp groups.

Messages these party canvassers create manifest in closed WhatsApp groups, move to the private and public groups on Facebook and the messaging boards of Nairaland before circling onto social media. To do this, political parties employ a horizontal and vertical tiered organisation structure. At the very bottom are the canvassers who infiltrate the groups and write up the messages. These report to field canvassers (managers) who determine the basic themes and storylines to be pursued. Above them is the head supervisor; he or she is often the person leading the party's media campaign team during elections.



There is a growing body of empirical evidence that shows a move towards party-driven information influence campaigns



LINES OF ATTACK

Exploring the narratives of information that are designed by party activists and pushed through the channels outlined, CDD has unearthed several prominent themes that are shaping the disinformation eco-system ahead of the elections in the state.

● INTER-PARTY CONFLICT

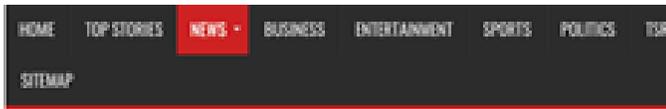
CDD discovered that a significant amount of content in Edo state was centred on the switch of parties between the incumbent and opposition. Most of the content online consisted of stories which were direct attacks on either the APC or PDP. The type of content varied from satirical material, to more serious attacks on character. According to a civil society representative who took part in a roundtable dialogue organised by CDD, “political campaigning has not been issue-based, it has instead been about character assassination”.

One campaign video depicted a scene in which a candidate came to the party he previously campaigned against, called them thieves and asked to join them. To win them over he brought bags totalling up to N15bn. “We are the share the money party... the Edo people know us”; this political party that was pronounced – fee e fee. While no explicit names were



mentioned, the video ended with a call not to bring in a party known for stealing, and to vote back in APC with Pastor Osagie Ize-Iyamu. This video was brazen in its transparent attack of the opposition party that one would initially think it to be a comedy sketch; not, an APC branded campaign video.

DISCREDITING CANDIDATES



Osagie Ize-Iyamu's HIV/AIDS Positive Result Hits World Wide Web

Headlines suggesting that the APC candidate is HIV positive or posters labelling the incumbent, and PDP candidate as a “scammer” reveals the extent to which the online armies are going in their bid to discredit the other candidate. A recent tweet stated, for example, that Ize-Iyamu’s running mate has been caught in a certificate forgery case. Given that such an eventuality occurred in the 2019 Bayelsa governorship elections made this a more believable story, notwithstanding its veracity.

In our conversations with both political parties, they stressed that they were concerned with their own agenda – those are, the **MEGA (Make Edo Great Again)** and the **SIMPLE (Security, Infrastructural development, Manpower development, Public Private Partnership, Leadership and Employment creation)** manifestos for PDP and APC respectively. But a review of APC Media Campaign Director, John Maiyaki’s, website shows that far from remaining fixed on Ize-Iyamu’s SIMPLE agenda, Obaseki remains a

strong focal point of attack for the party with many of the messages repeating the narrative that Obaseki has done nothing for the state.



An analysis of CDD’s WhatsApp data collection shows a clear disparity in the occurrence of the names of the PDP and APC candidates in political messages. Obaseki’s name had a recurrence rate of 84%, while Ize-Iyamu’s was at 16%. This high volume of content targeting Obaseki, while not definitive in suggesting that APC is targeting the opposing candidate more than PDP is, it is indicative of APC’s wider reach. It is however clear that both party are focusing efforts on attacking the other candidate.

DISCREDITING INEC

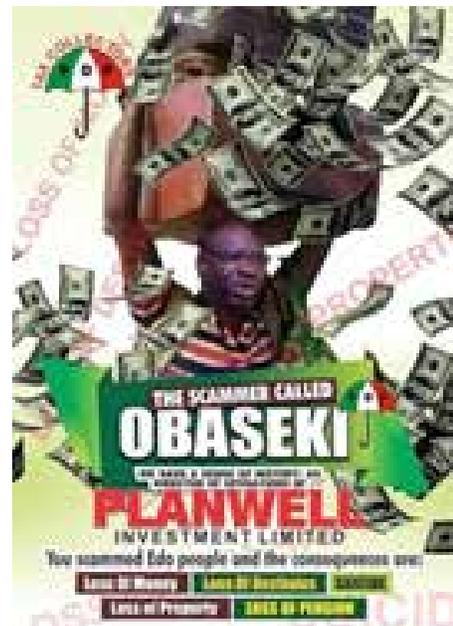
In addition to attempts at discrediting the political, disinformation narratives have also turned towards the electoral management body – INEC. Headlines such as the one pictured, and in this reveal a blatant attempt at raising suspicions of wrongdoing. Both parties have seemingly resorted to early accusations of bias from INEC; after APC's allegations against INEC in which the head of the APC Media Campaign team, John Mayaki, accused the Akwa Ibom State REC, Mike Igini, of plotting to rig the governorship election in Edo in favour of the state's ruling PDP; the PDP chairman also responded by saying that that INEC National



Commissioner Dr Mustapha Lecky is a nominee of the past APC National Chairman Adams Oshiomole and thus will do the bidding of the APC.

ACCUSATIONS OF FRAUD

Both parties have extensively thrown accusations at each other blaming the other of fraudulent activity. A Facebook post which was cross-posted across multiple Edo state groups was shared with the headline: Obaseki fraud exposed. Some versions of the post had a video attached that depicted an oil and gas refinery in Olobo, Edo state. The accompanying narrative attempted to portray Obaseki as having fraudulently claimed ownership of the project. These narratives are typical of many of stories that have emerged since his switch to PDP.



➔ Forwarded

OSAGIE IZE-IYAMU IN LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION SCANDAL

By BHR Media Team

Ize-Iyamu on the other hand, has been labelled guilty by PDP supporters of charges of misappropriating N700 million in campaign funds, even though his case is still with

the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and he denies all wrongdoing. Similar themed messages such as this forwarded message on WhatsApp(see image opposite), capitalises on the already existing corruption case, to suggest other, unfounded cases.



HOMOPHOBIA

A 12-minute YouTube video which has been shared across multiple platforms, proclaims in capital letters that, 'Governor Obaseki is the first gay governor', and goes on describe how certain mannerisms and video evidence prove that he is gay, and concludes that he is a political terrorist. This line of attack, dovetails with questions around Obaseki's lack of children and alleged marital problems. We saw a similar line of attack used against Atiku Abubakar during his presidential campaign, as his opponents leveraged on widespread homophobia by accusing Atiku of being a supporter of gay rights, as well as being homosexual himself. This strategy plays out

both in northern and southern Nigeria where religious conservatism across both Christianity and Islam propagate negative views and stereotypes around homosexuality.



INCITING VIOLENCE

With the recent violence from Kogi and Kano still very fresh in the minds of many, there is a real fear about the potential for violence in the Edo state elections. Inflammatory statements from both parties have not allayed

these fears. Some of the statements made have raised concerns especially due to their ambiguous nature, and the potential for manipulation of words on both sides. Considering that these are the same candidates

who contested in the 2016 state elections, which saw low-intensity violence, many are worried of a repeat especially as neither seems to be ceding any ground.

On July 25 a fracas in front of the Oba's palace during a visit by Governor Obaseki escalated with gunshots fired by yet to be identified groups. PDP supporters claim that it was APC thugs sent out to intercept the entourage while the APC team insists that it was a peaceful demonstration that turned violent after the intervention of Obaseki's security team. According to the APC spokesman however, it was "a glimpse into the do or die plot the PDP plans to unleash in the lead up to the September election."

Only a week later, during a campaign rally on July 30 for Pastor Ize-Iyamu, popular 'enforcer' Tony Kabaka, made references to the 'lions and tigers' who now protect our votes. Many analysts point to this as threatening the use of election-related violence. When CDD researchers asked Kabaka to clarify what was meant by 'lions and tigers' statements, he

explained it away as a reference to animals he owns. John Maiyaki, the APC media campaign director, also explained it as a literal reference to animals.

Unfortunately, it is likely that any violence that does occur will be heavily politicised, and both parties will attempt to use it as a means to discredit the other, which could itself lead to renewed cycles of violence.

Adding another layer of intrigue to this political war is the evolving situation at the regional level. The use of Kano state governor as the leader of the APC campaign council brings back memories of the violent and unsavoury conclusion to the states' governorship elections in 2019. The chairman of the PDP campaign council, Governor Wike of Rivers state, was also elected amidst violence last year.

CONCLUSION

Moving towards the elections, CDD expects to see an exponential rise in the amount of disinformation. As the information space continues to get saturated, citizens will be overwhelmed and vulnerable to distorted truths. CDD's analysis of the disinformation ecosystem in Edo state shows evidence of clear attempts at distorting perceptions. There has been little to no focus on some of the topical problems such as the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

With the fragile and insecure existence that characterises life in many urban and rural settings, selling a misleading narrative becomes easy as people look for 'evidence' to reaffirm their

existing beliefs. It therefore more important than ever for voters to be critical of information they receive on their WhatsApp and Facebook groups and Twitter feeds in days leading to the Edo state gubernatorial election.



It's therefore more important than ever for voters to be critical of information they receive

RECOMMENDATIONS

In anticipation of the political infodemic in Edo state, CDD has designed a radio show that will be aired prior to, during and in the aftermath of the election, called The Mandate. The show aims to objectively address political issues, the ways political parties engage in information distortion, picking apart disinformation narratives, and provide a platform for citizens to engage in this emerging dialogue.

The integrity of the elections is a principle that must be protected if Edo is to avoid a repeat of some of the unfortunate levels of violence seen in recent state elections. CDD proposes the

following five recommendations to address the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation:

- Political parties should engage in clear and transparent communication. Messaging needs to incorporate tangible objectives they hope to achieve. Slogans such as 'SIMPLE' or 'MEGA' mean very little if there is no substance behind them giving those slogans meaning.

- Stakeholders in the state such as civil society groups must engage in actively building messages that speak to vulnerable

youths, emphasising on the benefits of abstaining from being recruited for violence.

● Traditional leaders must abstain from creating partisan narratives and should instead affirm to their followers the value of peace.

● Platforms for citizen dialogue should be prioritised. When citizens feel like their voices are heard, then it reduces the need for them to express themselves through violence.

● Transparency is key. The Independent National Election Commission should communicate to Nigerian citizens openly, swiftly on the processes, and thereby casting a light on the behaviour of political parties. Good behaviour must be incentivised.

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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