LIBERIA'S FAKE NEWS ECOSYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

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## About the Author

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Fake news is spreading fast and wide in Liberia driven by increased access to the internet. This report provides an overview of the fake news ecosystem in Liberia by investigating — through key informant interviews and secondary research — how information is produced, shared and spread in the country. The report focuses on the key actors and platforms used to circulate fake news in the country. It then examines how fake news impacts and shapes national events, and offers some recommendations on how to contain fake news and mitigate its impacts on society.

Even though radio continues to have, by far, the most significant reach in terms of numbers of users, the report shows that social media platforms, mainly Facebook, are the main tool used to spread fake news in the country and highlights ways in which content originating online penetrates offline spaces. The study illustrates how those who spread fake news are mostly influential political activists and social-media-savvy young people who use these platforms to promote certain political views or agendas. Members of the public who receive fake news are susceptible to believing them and share to their followers or friends and relatives through WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and word of mouth.

The spread of fake news became extremely alarming in the first half of 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and again in December when Liberia held special senatorial elections. Individuals used these events to spread false information that suggested quack remedies election social media content was created to malign opponents and generate fake electoral results. Individual politicians have even established party wings of 'cyber warriors'.

This research identified several Facebook pages of 'cyber warriors' linked to some of the major parties and candidates that contested the special senatorial elections in 2020 as well as some linked to government officials. The falsehoods these pages spread can have impacts on wider political events.

The dominance of social media in spreading both credible and unverified information in Liberia is also redefining the way print media operates. Newspapers, struggling to keep afloat as more people turn to the internet for news, are developing online platforms to adapt to this changing media landscape. Journalists are also getting involved in fact-checking initiatives that have started to emerge as part of efforts to tackle the problem. But to respond quickly to circulating falsehoods they need the government to be more transparent and forthcoming with information requests.

Overall, the fight against fake news in Liberia requires multi-stakeholder participation, with social media companies, government, civil society and media, working together to contain the flow of information on the internet while at the same time guaranteeing the public’s right to freedom of expression and speech. So far, despite the damaging effects of fake news not enough has been done to counter its spread in Liberia.
In September 2018, two Liberian newspapers, The Hot Pepper and FrontPage Africa, reported that a shipping container carrying newly printed Liberian banknotes amounting to 16 billion Liberian dollars - then equivalent to USD 104 million - had gone missing after being cleared from the Port of Monrovia. Liberians on social media quickly spread this story on various pages, groups and in chats, created memes mocking officials and accused the government of a heist. International news organisations also reported the story as it happened. This led to a #BringBackOurMoney campaign online and several street demonstrations against the government.

Two official investigations, published in March 2019, subsequently established that no container of money had gone missing as was reported, even though the Central Bank of Liberia was found to have violated several established procurement and operational protocols. But by the time the reports were public, the government’s credibility had been irreversibly dented and its opponents had gained the upper hand in the propaganda war. Even now many in Liberia continue to accuse government officials of stealing the container of money.

How this news was fabricated and disseminated so quickly by citizens, politicians, and journalists, to the point of rallying citizens for street protests brings to light several important phenomena. First it shows that the traditional media and social media have complementary roles in the dissemination of misinformation; second, it highlights how susceptible Liberians, including journalists and politicians, are to fake news; and third, how the traditional media has lost its role as a gatekeeper and dominant actor in the production and dissemination of news. But this is not unique to Liberia. The rise of the internet as an easy means of communicating with and accessing people all over the world means information can now be produced and rapidly disseminated without rigorous checks for accuracy.

The upside to this is that it has “made more information available to more people than ever before” and has furthered the “democratisation of news” such that media institutions and their patrons find it harder to control what is published. People now have the tools to instantly report on events


occurring in a village to a wider audience across the world almost instantaneously. It has also facilitated popular mobilisation and successful campaigns around civic causes that have led to sea changes in public policies or compelled governments to launch investigations into corruption allegations.

However, there is a downside to this new-found freedom to publish anything from anywhere. Without regulation and gatekeeping – elements that ensure some level of moderation and credibility in the traditional media – people now use the internet to spread misinformation and disinformation. The spread of fabricated news is not a new phenomenon. While the term ‘fake news’ only gain global traction in 2016, fabricated news stories with malicious intents have always been part of the information ecosystem.

“Previously in Liberia we called it propaganda. The terminology only changed” noted one public relations expert interviewed for this study.4

Drawing on key informant interviews with Liberian academics, journalists and politicians and social media users, hundreds of posts on Facebook and Twitter, news stories on the websites of traditional media outlets, and existing literature, this report examines the fake news ecosystem in Liberia with a focus on the key actors and platforms used to circulate falsehoods in the country. It assesses how fake news is produced and shared, how it impacts and shapes national events, and the existing regulations and ongoing efforts designed to counter the spread of fake news in the country.

### Misinformation, disinformation and “fake news”

Misinformation involves the spread of falsehoods without a deliberate attempt to mislead whilst disinformation is manipulated narrative or facts— propaganda deliberately intended to mislead. Both are more commonly captured under the term ‘fake news’, a term used in this report as a catch all term. These kinds of information pose a significant threat to liberal democracy because as they are allowed to spread and flourish, they disinform and misinform people about a range of civic issues from voting to political accountability, and corruption.

Seeking to shape a civic process using falsehoods is not new. Before the internet, people shared disinformation and misinformation through word of mouth and rumour networks, with information spreading slowly from one person to the other before diffusing through communities. Traditional media and propaganda outlets also broadcasted or published news meant to mislead people and promote agendas.

Although the internet did not start the spread of fake news it has further enabled it. The availability of the internet has made it far cheaper and easier to produce and disseminate fake news to a wider audience and much harder to sort fact from fiction. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, alongside messaging applications like WhatsApp, have served as popular conduits. With these platforms enabling people to share a myriad of information in a range of audio, text and visual formats.

4 Key Informant Interview with Clara Malah, public relations expert. 8 May 2021.
A decade ago, when internet penetration was only 2.5% in Liberia, researchers identified the five key sources of public information as radio (63%), informal sources such as friends and family (29%), local leaders 4%, and newspapers and television (both just 1%). News reaching the public through radio, newspaper, and television channels is produced by media organisations run by the state, private sector operators and not-for-profit groups.

The state-owned Empire Liberia Broadcasting System - which runs ELBC Radio and Liberia National TV - has the largest audience in the country, whilst private media outlets, albeit often more independent of government, survive solely on advertisement income or a reliance on financial support from their owner, many of whom are politically involved.

But the growth of the internet is gradually changing the reliance on these traditional media outlets. Liberia had an internet penetration rate of 14.9% as of January 2021, with most influential individuals in the country online. “Liberians are latecomers to the internet. We came online when the rest of the world had gone far ahead”, says Tennen Dalieh, a PhD candidate in politics at Dublin City University. However, once online, they have leveraged the internet and its various social media platforms for a range of objectives; “Liberians are taking advantage of the internet and social media to vent out their frustration about bad governance and poverty and spread hate messages about their government. Others use it to promote peace messages in times of contentious national events like elections”.  

Radio remains the main source of news and information for most Liberians, with internet access restricted to urban areas and used mostly by individuals who are literate. Yet traditional media is also adapting to the new digital reality with some radio stations now hosting shows during which they read out Facebook posts of prominent users. Mainstream newspapers and radio stations also increasingly rely on their own Facebook pages to promote content and increase traffic and readership to their webpages. Some have been forced to adapt having lost readership and revenues due to the availability of free news on websites and social media. For instance sales of The Daily Observer, the oldest and most renowned independent newspaper in the country, dropped from 1,200 copies a day in 2005 to 550 in 2021. Decline in production and circulation were partly due to the outbreak of Ebola in 2014 and Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 which saw social distancing and stay at home regulations introduced. But the paper, like most newspapers, has been compelled to increase its presence online in response to the changing way Liberians are accessing news.
According to journalist Wremongar Joe, “social media is now far ahead: ... people now know what’s happening around the community or around a particular event even before the radio stations can begin to give the news.” However the two are in a “symbiotic relationship” in which news reported in the traditional media is shared on social media at the same time as journalists reporting for traditional media houses regularly follow and use social media pages for news stories and talking points for their radio and TV programmes. Tennen Dalieh argues that;

Social media has changed how the traditional media operates. In the past news was controlled by radio managers. It was easy to kill a news story in the newsroom. Certain stories were restricted and never got to the public. Social media, mainly citizen journalism, has changed that. Events are reported as they happen.

Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube help facilitate the flow of information in Liberia. As a result, social media influencers, politicians and activists have a greater ability to shape public debate in the country. The key benefit of this is that social media “has provided citizens the opportunity to air their views because previously only politicians and journalists control the public space”, says Clara Mallah a public relations expert. This has in turn helped expose corrupt political and social practices, created more space for citizens to interact with public officials and opened a channel for them to demand accountability from their public officials.

Whilst the new freedom with which information flows has its advantages, the downside to the rise of social media and citizen journalism is the increasing use of the platforms, mainly Facebook in the case of Liberia, to enable the circulation of unverified news at rapid speed. “As more people have gained access to the internet and interact on Facebook, the spread of fake news has increased” says Lamii Kpargoi, former head of the Liberia Media Center.

In Liberia, the most popular social media platform is Facebook. Its ‘Free Basics’ programme, launched in collaboration with mobile network providers, has made it possible for people to access the platform and post information – pictures, videos and voice notes are excluded - free from internet data charges. This is particularly attractive in a country like Liberia which has comparatively high internet data charges. In December 2020 there were 658,200 Facebook subscribers in the country – a 12.7% penetration rate. The platform accounted for 78.8% of all social media subscriptions; a performance that dwarfed other platforms like Pinterest (12.1%), Twitter (4.6%), YouTube (2.5%) and Instagram (1.7%). As the dominant social media platform, Facebook has become a vital means of communication for people from all sectors.

It has provided numerous opportunities for information dissemination and has been leveraged by government, politicians, businesses, civil society organisations, and individual citizens for marketing goods, sharing public information, civic education and advocacy campaigns.

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11 Key Informant Interview with Wremongar Joe, Liberian journalist. 11 June 2021.
12 Key Informant Interview with Aaron Weah, Doctoral Researcher, University of Ulster. 11 June 2021.
13 Key Informant Interview with Tennen B. Dalieh, Doctoral Researcher, Dublin City University. 3 June 2021.
14 Key Informant Interview with Clara Mallah, public relations expert. 8 May 2021.
15 Key Informant Interview with Lamii Kpargoi, former Officer-in-charge of the Liberia Media Center. 12 June 2021.
engagement, and sensitisation campaigns. However, it is also the main platform for sharing fake news in Liberia and its role in spreading fake news is now “profound and concerning.” Facebook is “mainly used for politics and the generation of fake news” agrees Dalieh. Noting that information shared on one platform spreads to others and even on to messaging applications like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

Liberians have become increasingly politically active on Facebook since the 2011 general and presidential elections — the year when the internet became more accessible in the country for the first time. The fake news ecosystem in Liberia is dominated by news about politics and government programmes, making the main drivers of fake news, “people who are politically active or have political motivation.” But informants identified two groups in this ecosystem, namely, ‘producers’, who are mainly politically active and social-media-savvy young people, and ‘shearers’, the majority, who simply see the news on their timeline and share on their pages or forward to friends and relatives.

This second group tends to believe the former because of their authority – perhaps they are a friend, relative of a trusted advisor, or because they have popular name recognition. The ‘producers’ command authority either because they are known for being party activists or ‘self-styled leaders’, or gain name recognition because they regularly comment on national issues, host talk shows, or because they are viewed as rights activists.

Election campaigns are now fought both on the ground and online. Parties have developed capacities to campaign on social media, promote policies, and respond to allegations made against their leaders. They have dedicated Facebook groups and pages where their members meet to discuss issues, post information and disseminate propaganda. This research found at least five Facebook groups and pages associated with each of the five main political parties and coalitions. These are in addition to several WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger groups used for similar purposes.

Beyond party pages, politicians try to discredit each other and dominate the public space and supporters of political parties. Individual politicians have even established party wings of ‘cyber warriors.’ This research identified several Facebook pages of ‘cyber warriors’ linked to some of the major parties and candidates that contested the special senatorial elections in 2020 as well as some linked to government officials. These political beneficiaries ensure that the ‘cyber warriors’ have smart phones and regular internet access.

For instance, ‘Hon. Thomas P. Fallah T-5 Cyber Warriors’ — a Facebook page created on 11 July 2020 and linked to supporters of Thomas P. Fallah, the candidate of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) in the 2020 Montserrado senatorial election — describes itself as a ‘group of professionals, battle tested and well-schooled propagandists’. Similarly, a Facebook group, ‘Dillon’s Cyber Team,’ linked to supporters of Abraham Darius Dillon, the candidate of the opposition Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) in the same election, defines its objective as ‘to defend and protect the legacy of Senator Dillon.’

While established politicians and parties have a strong social media presence with active cyber warriors, new and smaller parties are increasingly

19 Interview with Henry B. Gboluma, Station Manager of Voice of Gbarpolu 102.3 FM. 16 June 2021.
20 Togar Joash T. Hodges, Postgraduate student of Media and International Development, University of East Anglia. 7 June 2021.
21 Key Informant Interview with Tennen B. Dalieh, Doctoral Researcher, Dublin City University. 3 June 2021.
22 Key Informant Interview with Aaron Weah, Doctoral Researcher, University of Ulster. 11 June 2021.
23 Togar Joash T. Hodges, Postgraduate student of Media and International Development, University of East Anglia. 7 June 2021.
building an online presence with the aim of becoming more visible, prominent and competitive during elections. Supporters of the newly established People’s Liberation Party (PLP) for instance, created a Facebook group, ‘PLP Cyber Intellectuals’, on 19 February 2021, ‘to defend and protect against cyber war against our party leader and members’.

Overall, the role of these cyber warriors is to produce and circulate propaganda in favour of their parties and leaders and fabricate malicious contents against their political rivals and their families. ‘Cyber warriors’ have also fabricated and circulated false election results and made baseless claims of rigging against their rivals. During the 2020 senate elections, ‘cyber warriors’ supporting candidates in the various counties produced and circulated multiple fake election results on Facebook – purporting that they were released by the National Elections Commission (NEC) - that put their candidates in the lead. These fake results created anxiety and confusion among the public about the true outcome of the polls. This compelled the NEC to make repeated appeals to the public not to take seriously results reported on Facebook and even some radio stations.

These ‘cyber warriors’ and the other purveyors of disinformation have caused deep polarization and widened political and social divides. Those who attempt to dissect information on social media and question their veracity are quickly dismissed. Within this context, according to Kula V. Fofana, a women’s rights activist and university lecturer, there is no middle ground. It is either you are for, or you are against. When you try to be objective, you will be seen as one sided. When you challenge the veracity of a news, they brand you. It is that outright notion that if you see things the other way, then you belong to the other side. So, everyone must fit in this binary. This has made it challenging for people to even point out fake news.

This challenge is even more acute for women. While women and men use social media in almost equal measures, women, particularly those in politics are more affected by fake news, argues Fofana: “Liberia is a very patriarchal society and people target women in politics by spreading lies against them on social media to discourage them from engaging in political activities”.

Liberian fake news is not created in a vacuum, rather, most viral stories “are wrapped around emerging true stories mostly intended to shape opinion in the favour of certain actors” says Parker Johnson a public relations expert. For instance, on 4 September 2020, when a government minister suffered a stroke, it was quickly reported on Facebook that he had died as a result. Also embedded in this ‘breaking news’ story was the claim that the minister had been poisoned by his rivals in the government during a tense meeting. Having received a flurry of condolence messages, including some posted to his public page, the minister’s brother reacted on his Facebook page to say “For the sake of family and friends, I must do this: Minister Mobutu Nyenpan is alive! The breaking news on social media is FALSE!”. Indeed, the ‘breaking news’ was false. The truth was that the minister had suffered a severe stroke on that day and was critically ill in hospital – an ailment that led to his death nearly two months later. While the minister’s family reported his subsequent death, some public officials were still being accused of...
being responsible as the rumours about his poisoning refused to go away. Several mysterious deaths of public officials during this period only fuelled these rumours further.29

Facebook has given these ‘producers’ the platform to quickly create propaganda and fake news that they can share widely to discredit each other and promote themselves or their allies.30 For instance in May 2021, Senator Prince Johnson of Nimba County who allies with the ruling party, accused Senator Nyonblee Karnaga-Lawrence, leader of the opposition CPP of being an active combatant during the Liberian civil war. Johnson’s supporters quickly promoted the allegation against Senator Karnaga-Lawrence by sharing an old photo of Agnes Taylor - ex-wife of former President Charles Taylor - and a gun-wielding female bodyguard in military uniform whom they falsely claimed was Senator Karnaga-Lawrence.

This came at a time of heightened public debate and increase in momentum for the campaign to establish a war crimes court to prosecute warlords, including Senator Prince Johnson, who are accused of committing atrocities during the civil war. While the claim by Senator Johnson and his supporters was a deliberate attempt at disinformation intended to malign his rival in the senate, its circulation impacted the national debate on the issue of the war crimes court, and left Senator Karnaga-Lawrence and her party facing a credibility crisis since they had initially voiced support for the establishment of the court.29 Rather than pressing for the war crimes court agenda to be discussed in the senate, Senator Karnaga-Lawrence and her supporters were focused on clarifying that she was never an active combatant in the conflict.

In other instances, people tend to believe online fabrications largely because they are shared on the internet. This is because many Liberians revere the internet, particularly search engines like Google, as a credible source of information. The inability of the majority of people to distinguish between what is genuine or fake news on the internet “threatens the fabric of our information structure”31 in the view of Parker Johnson. For instance, news circulating on Facebook that the Covid-19 vaccine is part of a grand scheme to make people infertile and reduce the African population has contributed to vaccine hesitancy in the country.32 A March 2021 Afrobarometer survey found that 66% of Liberians are ‘not likely to try to get vaccinated’ for Covid-19.33 Despite receiving 123,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine since March 2021, only 64,129 had been administered by 10 June.34

30 Key Informant Interview with Parker Johnson, public relations and communications expert. 17 May 2021.
31 Key Informant Interview with Bettie Johnson Mbayo, journalist and co-founder of The Stage Media. 8 May 2021.
Unlike in Kenya, Senegal and Nigeria where foreign media and political consulting firms, like the defunct Cambridge Analytica, have used disinformation to shape political campaigns, there is no evidence of foreign public relations firms and political consultants producing or sharing disinformation with the aim of influencing Liberian politics. However, foreign public relations firms based in Africa have made pitches to support political parties with their campaign activities. Firms from Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa have sent several proposals to political parties around elections according to Mohammed Ali, Secretary General of the Unity Party (UP):

“They proposed that we send them our information and they will massage them for us, prepare promotional materials for us, and design materials to damage the government’s image but we could not afford the amount they were charging.”

The main actors who do not reside in the country but play active role in national events, and by extension in the dissemination of fake news, are members of the Liberian diaspora. Liberia has an active and well-resourced diaspora community that influences everything from politics to the economy. The role of the diaspora in political activity, including in the civil war, has been extensively documented. Diaspora Liberians send regular and significant remittances to sustain their families back home and support local causes. This includes financing political campaigns and providing healthcare and education services in communities. For this reason, Liberians at home have respect for the views and positions of their relatives abroad and often perceive them to be more educated and informed as a result.

The internet, mainly Facebook, has brought diaspora Liberians closer to political activities and their individual engagements have increased rapidly in recent years. Previously they participated through diaspora organisations like the influential Union of Liberian Associations, whose views and public declarations were circulated through traditional media. But individual diaspora Liberians are increasingly making greater impacts and influencing political developments on their own or through less formal associations. Politically active diaspora members have created Facebook groups and pages through which they do live broadcasts and posts on national issues. Perhaps because they are out of the jurisdiction of Liberian laws and not likely to be extradited for libel and defamation or face any negative consequences for their actions, they tend to spread more fake news against the government and their rivals online.

But this is a problem given that many of the Facebook broadcasts, like the Henry Costa Show and the Prophet Key Show, which a majority of Liberians online follow for ‘breaking’ political news, are hosted by people based out of the country.

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35 Key Informant Interview with Mohammed Ali, Secretary General of the Unity Party. 17 June 2021.
37 Key Informant Interview with Varney K. Sirleaf, Journalist at Local Voices Liberia Fact Check Desk. 17 June 2021.
38 Key Informant Interview with Boakai Fofana, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism. 31 May 2021.
39 Key Informant Interview with Bai Best, Managing Editor of Daily Observer. 3 June 2021.
October 2019, Henry Costa, falsely reported on his Facebook broadcast that the government had deployed police to the St. Joseph Catholic Hospital to deny the exit of a patient (a political activist), who was due to attend a visa interview at the US Embassy in Monrovia. His broadcast incited a street riot between supporters of the individual who had assembled at the hospital and the police in which dozens were wounded.\(^{40}\) However, it turned out that the talk show host had broadcast disinformation with the intent of undermining the government’s credibility and rallying support for the lady who was his political ally. Not only were several people injured in the skirmishes that followed, but patients “were denied access to the hospital for hours, people could not use the Tubman Boulevard which is a very busy road, and businesses were disrupted for nearly half a day.”\(^{41}\)

It is difficult to regulate social media and what happens online because the internet is such a free space...the government cannot effectively tackle fake news on the internet like it did before with the traditional media\(^{42}\) is the view of one senior government official at the Ministry of Information.

There are currently no specific laws or regulations on the use of the internet, social media, and their contents in the country. Existing laws\(^{43}\) were designed to regulate traditional outlets like newspapers, radios and televisions, although the government extends its regulatory authority – through the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism and more recently the Liberia Telecommunications Authority – to the operation of these traditional media outlets online as well. But this has not impacted on the growing number of amateur social media news platforms and citizen journalists sharing content with the public on Facebook. This has led to what one respondent decried as an ‘epidemic of breaking news;’ every citizen with a smart phone and internet access is now a journalist and their contents on public issues are not subject to any editorial verification. It is therefore difficult to know what the rules of engagement are on what to do and what not to do when posting; what kind of images to post or not. It is a new place for understanding.\(^{44}\)

However, in the last couple of years the government has found ways of dealing with how citizens use the internet and social media to spread information on public affairs - particularly on those regarding the government - or mobilise for protests using social media. These include a mixture of internet or social media shutdowns, the arrest of social media users and an increase in the government’s online presence.

Internet shutdowns, which involves throttling of internet speed, blocking specific sites or blocking all access to the internet, have become a common tool deployed by African governments in responding to popular protests or in countering ‘fake news’ around

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41 Key Informant Interview with Varney K. Sirleaf, Journalist at Local Voices Liberia Fact Check Desk. 17 June 2021.
42 Key Informant Interview with Boakai Fofana, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism. 31 May 2021.
43 Laws regulating the traditional media are found in Acts creating government agencies responsible for licensing and regulation like the Ministry of Information and the Liberia Telecommunications Authority. The Act of Press Freedom was passed in 2019.
44 Key Informant Interview with Tennen B. Daleh, Doctoral Researcher, Dublin City University. 3 June 2021.
major political events like elections and anti-government protests. On 7 June 2019, the Liberian government imposed a 12-hour partial shutdown, blocking Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and WhatsApp in an attempt to frustrate mobilisation efforts by members of the opposition who were staging an anti-government demonstration under the theme ‘Save the State’.

The shutdown limited live coverage of the protest as many Liberians, including those in the diaspora, could not follow live broadcasts of events on the Facebook pages of traditional and online news outlets. According to the government, the move was intended to “stop the dissemination of rumours and illegal contents on the internet”. Notwithstanding that they violate citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, internet shutdowns are not viable long-term options. During the shutdown in June 2019, tech-savvy Liberians used virtual private networks to get around the block. Furthermore, one estimate suggests that the 12-hour shutdown cost the government and service providers more than US$100,000.

A second pattern observed is the arrest and intimidation of, mainly opposition, social media activists for posting contents critical of the government or those that it deems to be ‘endangering national security’. In April 2020, the country’s chief prosecutor vowed to shutdown media institutions who spread ‘fake news’ about the Covid-19 pandemic in the country. This followed widespread rumours on social media that President George Weah had contracted the virus. The prosecutor also suggested that individual rights such as free speech were to be suspended as part of the state of emergency – which was lifted in July 2020 - imposed to contain the spread of the disease.

Two weeks later, opposition activist Menipakai Dumoe was arrested for a Facebook post in which he suggested that poor people in Monrovia did not need rice but ‘AK47s so our leaders can take us seriously’ in the Covid-19 relief programme. Similarly, in March 2021, the secretary general of the UP, Mohammed Ali, was arrested for suggesting in a Facebook post that the NEC was involved in a ‘ploy’ to stall the certification of a member of his party who had won an election to the senate. These arrests were roundly condemned by prominent domestic civil society groups for suppressing free speech. In both cases the individuals were subsequently released without formal charges being filed.

A third, and perhaps more sustainable and effective strategy is “to tackle fake news with the facts”. The government has sought to do this by increasing its presence on social media and through encouraging officials to talk more about their work using all available media. Currently, nearly all government agencies, including the Executive Mansion (Office of the President) have websites and active Facebook pages where they provide updates on activities and broadcast live coverage of their events. However,
these sites and social media pages cover only news about the government and are designed to advance the government’s side of a story or promote its narrative. So, the “facts” they produce are contested depending on the reader or listener’s political affiliation.

Beyond government other entities are also looking to increase the volume of factually accurate content circulating online. In 2020 a team of three journalists, concerned about the ‘epidemic of fake news’ that broke out during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 elections, established The Stage Media (TSM) with the sole object of countering fake news in Liberia. TSM was first launched on Facebook in August 2020, providing verified information on the pandemic, flagging fake news and providing facts only after checking them with the medical experts and authorities. TSM has since established several pages on other social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram and over the last few months it has successfully flagged instances of misinformation and disinformation and other fake contents in official speeches by politicians, including the President, social media users, traditional media, and foreign diplomats in the country. A second effort, Local Voices Liberia (LVL) was started in April 2021. It has a network of journalists across the country who have established a ‘Fact Checking Desk’ with support from the European Union. The LVL has created a special portal on its website for its factchecking reports and disseminates its findings predominantly through social media.

But TSM and LVL face challenges operating in an environment with limited protection for investigative journalism. Despite laws on free speech and freedom to access public information, efforts to use the Freedom of Information Law of 2010 are regularly blocked by bureaucrats and politicians. Factchecking relies on experts and data to provide accurate information. Crucial for the credibility of the factcheck is having sources willing to go on the record. This has proven to be a significant obstacle in Liberia, says Varney Sirleaf of LVL, “sources do not want to be cited and we hardly find updated statistics on national issues and resources, so we take so long factchecking some stories and sometimes we do not even get what we want to factcheck the numerous false information people put on social media”. This challenge in accessing official data has made it impossible for factcheckers to keep pace with the speed at which fake news spreads. Furthermore, factchecking reports provided by these outlets rarely spread as fast or as wide as the fake contents shared by politicians and influencers on social media.

54 The Stage Media (25 February 2021). ‘President George Weah Claim, “This Gov’t Has Done More in 3-Years than other Administration” is False.’ Available at: https://thestagemedia.com/2021/02/25/president-george-weah-claim-this-govt-has-done-more-in-3-years-than-other-administration-is-false/. Accessed: 16 June 2021.
56 Key Informant Interview with Bettie Johnson Mbayo, journalist and co-founder of The Stage Media. 8 May 2021.
57 Key Informant Interview with Varney K. Sirleaf, Journalist at Local Voices Liberia Fact Check Desk. 17 June 2021.
From the spread of the disinformation around the ‘16 billion container’ to the production of fake election results, and regular production and circulation of unverified ‘breaking news’ online, it is now clear that “fake news is a serious problem in Liberia”. The producers and sharers of social media news stories, specifically on Facebook, are not being held to account on a set of agreed standards despite the fact that they have huge followings and significantly shape public opinion and national events.

As Liberia prepares for general and presidential elections in 2023, the influence of social media on political debate and discussion is only likely to grow. With this comes the rise of unverified information, unfounded, libellous, and defamatory allegations packaged as news stories. There is undoubtedly a need for better regulation but whether the government can be trusted to be an independent arbiter given its involvement remains in question.

What is clear is that misinformation and disinformation, if left unchecked, will increasingly undermine efforts to inform and educate the public with genuine and credible information; leaving many Liberians, including the new users who are coming online each year, struggling to sort fiction from fact.

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58 Key Informant Interview with Henry B. Gboluma, Station Manager of Voice of Gbarpolu 102.3 FM, 16 June 2021.
As fake news spread and influence public debates and events in Liberia, all actors in the information ecosystem have a role in curtailing its circulation and mitigating its negative impacts on society. The following recommendations, though inexhaustive, can contribute to addressing the ongoing challenges with fake news in Liberia:

1. The Government of Liberia must strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms and reduce bureaucratic barriers to accessing public information. Improved access to official information including statistics on economic and social development will enhance public knowledge and reduce reliance on unverified sources. Such access will also give journalists and civil society actors the facts they need to help better inform the public.

2. Factcheckers must make extensive use of radio and other means of offline communication to circulate their reports.

3. Civil society organisations must work with communities to facilitate information dissemination and public education on major national events like elections and emergency situations like epidemics.

4. Traditional media outlets must be encouraged to increase their presence online and regularly update their websites and social media pages with credible information. The active online presence of established and credible media outlets is likely to reduce public reliance on unverified online news sources.

5. Social media platforms, like Facebook, must develop country-specific tools that direct users’ attentions to official and credible information during major national events like elections or emergency situations.

6. Social media companies can collaborate with the Government of Liberia to create online codes of conducts, which new and existing users will have to agree too to continue using the product. These will commit users to adhering to a set of agreed practices about the quality and accuracy of information they share, which if not adhered to can see them reprimanded by an independent, country-level oversight commission.