

Nigeria 2023 Decides: Disinformation Brief



IN BRIEF

- More than in previous polls, social media is influential setting the agenda and shaping the direction of election discussions, both online and offline in Nigeria.
- Renewed sophistication and organisation in the push of disinformation has been observed with efforts generally focused on glorifying or delegitimising political aspirants and undermining the credibility of institutions. It can also be weaponised to foster insecurity and violence post-election. It can be weaponised not just to dampen citizens trust in the electoral process but to incite violence around the announced outcome.
- Commentators and digital influencers that are paid to promote a particular political agenda can earn as much as ₦500,000 a month (over US\$1,000)
- The politicisation and political use of fact-checking is a notable trend and growing concern that could undermine trust in impartial fact-checking initiatives.
- Short-staffed social media companies are largely failing to respond to, label or takedown user reports of political misinformation and disinformation on their platforms.

IN A NUTSHELL

Social media is increasingly influential in the Nigerian political realm. More politicians are investing more in social media as part of their election campaign than ever before. It is, more than ever, shaping the coverage of the campaigns of mainstream media, with social media influencers having an outsized role in setting the agenda. Whilst social media has opened avenues for citizens to engage more robustly with their prospective representatives the volume of false information circulating online can also lead to citizen actions based on incorrect information especially considering the long time it takes for politicians or government bodies to respond with accurate information. Trust is a scarce commodity in Nigeria and this fact is only being exacerbated by the volume of misleading content online. Disinformation has the potential to foster insecurity and violence post-election. It can be weaponised not just to dampen citizens trust in the electoral process but to incite violence around the announced outcome.

CONTEXT


The role of social media in shaping Nigerian politics has evolved significantly in the last decade and a half. Although present in 2011, 2015 was arguably the first general election where digital tools really came to the fore, with the then opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) launching 'The Broom', a social media platform for its supporters and taking advantage of the digital space that was largely unoccupied and uncontrolled by the ruling party. By 2019, both leading parties had a clear and growing online presence with coordinated disinformation campaigns aimed at manipulating public opinion and drawing clear divisions between party supporters and political opponents observed. Some were led by foreign firms – Cambridge Analytica in 2015 and Archimedes in 2019 – but for the most part they were domestic operations directed by party activists and social media influencers, both at home and in the diaspora.

REACH AND PLATFORMS

The number of active social media users in Nigeria has risen from 27 million in 2019 to 36 million ahead of the 2023 elections. But greater access to online information does not necessarily create more informed citizens. Electoral disinformation – which implies deliberate intent – and misinformation – the sharing of falsehoods without knowing they are false – is rampant on social media platforms in Nigeria. Furthermore the way such disinformation can permeate into mainstream media more generally, means it can reach and impact a much wider audience than just direct platform users. Information that begins as a rumour on WhatsApp or through Twitter can be picked up by media houses or shared by influential community figures creating a litany of indirect users alongside those with direct access. Pre-existing cleavages, identity politics and the insecure political and ethnoreligious landscape of the Nigeria's democratic system further engenders the spread of disinformation with the risk that it can even impact on national cohesion.

Cross-posting across social media platforms is also common and widens a platforms audience and reach. This is particularly the case for TikTok, which has grown in prominence in the 2023 election campaign despite a relatively small user base. Politicians and their social media advisors are now using TikTok, particularly when they want to reach new audiences, to promote, often derogatory, political songs or create challenges around the candidates or campaigns. The visually appealing and audio content can resonate with those individuals that have limited levels of education when it comes to reading and writing.





TikTok's growing prominence does not mean the other platforms are no longer relevant. Facebook is used to target older Nigerians and groups linked to professions, ethnic affiliations or religious constituencies. Twitter, despite the seven month ban imposed on it by the government that ended in January 2022, is a news resource for both youth and the middle-class, with its debates and discussions often setting the narrative for wider political discussion in the country. Twitter Spaces, in particular, are a much used feature in Nigeria's electoral politics. All political parties organise almost daily discussions, hosted by hired social media influencers or party activists, in which efforts are made to delegitimise opponents, boost the profile of their own candidate and galvanise supporters and would be voters to cast a ballot. The oral nature of the discussions and the difficulty in moderating them, means that they have become places where disinformation is rampant. But WhatsApp remains the medium through which all social media content really circulates widely, through cross-posting and screenshots from other platforms. Furthermore this is the application that facilitates the jump into offline spaces where non smartphone users will begin debating and discussing news that has originated online.

MANIPULATION METHODS

Ahead of the forthcoming polls renewed sophistication and organisation in the push of disinformation has been observed with efforts generally focused on glorifying or delegitimising political aspirants and undermining the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This includes hashtag manipulation, the use of automated or controlled networks, deliberate mistranslation, false impersonation, and manipulated audio and video material. Once this manipulated content starts circulating online it becomes like a cancerous tumour, growing and spreading in ways that are hard to stop and reverse.

Hashtag manipulation involves the use of coordinated hashtags in order to get an issue trending, given that many users navigate platforms like Twitter through the 'trending' feature. This can also entail flooding existing hashtags to dilute and disrupt the efforts of political opponents or applying all trending hashtags to a post to ensure content trends, even if the actual material has no relevance to the hashtags being used. Buying unused accounts, or those with followers, to disrupt the conversation in a way that looks organic or to create an impression of their narratives trending more widely is also a tactic deployed, and can be more effective than automated bot networks. It can also be the case that someone has ten or more Twitter accounts and that they seem to be having an organic conversation between multiple people when it is all scripted and happening between one person who controls them all. Hiding behind online identities is increasingly a tactic deployed both by those spreading falsehoods and even by those looking to counter it.

Creating fake content continues to be a feature and to grow in sophistication. Given the prevalence of screenshotting and cross-posting across platforms, there are increasing examples of fake tweets being generated and then shared across other platforms – particularly WhatsApp – from prominent political or electoral figures claiming to show them making a statement that may be favourable to a particular candidate or suggest malfeasance, but which are pure fabrication. It is also possible to create 'parody' Twitter accounts for the same purpose, and when screenshotted onto other platforms these can be difficult to identify.

Fake infographics imitating fact-checking operations have been shared widely, claiming that a checked claim had found something damaging about one of the leading candidates. The politicisation and political use of fact-checking is a notable trend and growing concern that could undermine trust in fact-checking initiatives. The electoral umpire has also been on the receiving end of this rise of synthetic and manipulated media. At least two fake press releases have been shared widely, claiming to be pronouncements about the election from INEC itself. The first one claimed **INEC was leading investigation into APC presidential candidate Bola Tinubu** of the APC, the second, and more recent, claimed INEC had **announced postponement** of elections by one or two weeks.

Videos are also key to the spread of disinformation in the current elections, and along with pictures, are the content most manipulated. Accurate videos can be mislabelled, inaccurately captioned or screen grabbed to relay a particular narrative, just as old videos are circulated with different captions or languages to disinform citizens. In short many videos are often captioned in different ways to reflect different viewpoints making it easy to reconfigure reality to suit a particular narrative. With many users not even watching the content but sharing videos based on the conversation around it, these can circulate widely before being proved false.

Deliberate mistranslation of articles from English into prominent local languages – Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba – is a big problem on social media. For example, a factually accurate news piece can be translated into a local language in a way that tells a completely different story and the person reading it does not know as they do not understand English. Daily True Hausa, a Facebook page with over 145,000 followers, is just one place where this sort of content regularly appears. Furthermore use of doctored chyrons or logos, of reputable media organisations are being used by Facebook pages and other sites, particularly those that operate in local languages, to gain credibility for their inaccurate reporting. Related to this is the proliferation of blogs funded or operated by political parties and their activists. CDD has identified the creation of certain websites to push falsehoods about the election. Many of these websites were created in the third and fourth quarter of 2022, and include Podium Reporters, Proseng, Reportera, and Igbo Times Magazine.

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Online political organisation remains largely informal, in part by design, with political parties driving disinformation behind the scenes through unofficial party accounts or hired influencers. Whilst there are influencers who are not co-opted, or who remain the targets of political co-option because of their audience, and who can broadly be seen to act in citizens interests, there are many commentators and influencers that are paid to promote a particular agenda when it comes to electoral politics.

For paid influencers, payments vary based on the size of an individuals audience and their influence within the political structure and the party they work for. Those employed by the ruling party, in previous and current elections, are more likely to be better paid as they have the greater resources. Whilst some influencers are paid around ₦50,000-120,000 a month (US\$111-267, using the official exchange rate), those with more senior positions in political operations can command between ₦200,000-500,000 (US\$445-1,110 a month). These senior influencers often have thousands of followers on key social media platforms and can be in 2-3,000 WhatsApp groups. They have direct access to, and some degree of influence over, leading political figures all the way up to the presidential aspirant as a result. For example, a group working to support the APC across the 19 northern states temporarily withdrew its support in November 2022, but was able to successfully negotiate a resumption of activities after its leadership met directly with Tinubu.

Those at lower levels, often employed on a more ad-hoc basis and which make up the vast majority of political influencers in Nigeria, undertake more routine tasks, with some degree of direction from above, but also a 'creative license' to generate their own content, as long as it advances the candidates campaign. Sometimes this can be to promote a particular narrative or create a specific piece of content, for which they might be 'dashed' ₦5,000 or compensated with airtime. Sometimes misinformation and disinformation is actually generated by these relatively low-level and unknown account and then boosted by more prominent accounts, with some coordination presumed.

TRENDS

There have been three major drivers of disinformation and misinformation; content that promotes candidates, attacks political opponents and efforts to undermine key electoral institutions. Some attacks on opponents and the promotion of candidates have been instrumentalised to entrench pre-existing social cleavages around ethnicity and religion. This is accentuated by the fact that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are fielding presidential candidates. Others have sought to undermine a particular candidature by declaring that the candidates has decided to stand down for example, Atiku's followers claimed that Rabi'u Kwankwaso had stood aside in a show of support for the PDP candidate.



Disinformation is also being used to delegitimise institutions. In the last few months there have been claims that INEC is involved with manipulating the voter register, hoarding permanent voter cards or that its chairman had been unceremoniously removed from his position. This kind of disinformation is preying on Nigerians distrust of institutions and previous problems with voters register and electoral system and aims to delegitimise the credibility of electoral outcome and cast a doubt on the election management body's ability to run elections.

There has also been a notable increase in fake endorsement of candidates and exaggerated claims of decamping. Following Olusegun Obasanjo's decision to endorse Peter Obi in the first week of 2023, many Obi supporters have [gone on to fabricate endorsements](#) for their candidate. For instance, the Sultan of Sokoto had to publicly debunk an endorsement of, a piece of disinformation he claims was intentionally spread to coincide with the visit of the APC vice presidential candidate to the Sultanate. The aim of such endorsement is to bolster candidates acceptability. In the case of the Sultan his endorsement could have huge implication. Besides from his being the most senior traditional authority in northern Nigeria he is also the leader of over a 100 million Nigeria Muslims as the of the faithful. In Nigeria voters listen to their faith leaders when deciding on who to cast their ballot for.

REGULATION, MODERATION AND FACT-CHECKING

Regulation is likely to be used to close down the social media and democratic space, particularly for political opponents. The Nigerian Broadcasting Code prohibits false advertising, impersonation and hate speech and it is also a crime, in the country's criminal and penal codes. The Electoral Act also prohibits the use of intemperate, abusive and slanderous languages during campaigns, but online actions are rarely subject to this level of accountability and when they are primarily politically driven. Specific legislation - the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill - to curb the threat was met with strong opposition from civil society groups when first introduced in 2019. It contained draconian provisions empowering the government to unilaterally shut down social media, and even the internet, for posts deemed to pose risks to public safety and national security, which were loosely defined.

Fact-checking can increase analytical thinking, push back against falsehoods and reduce the volume of disinformation being created although it struggles to have the same reach and impact as misleading content. In December 2022 CDD unveiled its Election War Room, with the sole purpose of dealing with information disorder in Nigeria ahead of and during the 2023 general elections. Already it has published 60 fact-checks and seven explainers covering election technology, permanent voter cards, opinion polls, runoffs and the health of candidates. In addition, the establishment of the Nigerian Fact Checking Coalition has enabled 20 Nigerian media and civil society platforms to jointly investigate, author and disseminate fact checks, widening their reach. These coordinated actions can bolster information integrity during the elections. Tackling online disinformation also requires addressing some broader challenges linked to democratic deficits and trust imbalances between citizens and the state. Creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between true and false information is also critical to achieve this. Compared to the 2019 general election, INEC is playing a much more visible and proactive roles, engaging and training both online and mainstream media platforms across the country on the issue of disinformation. The Commission has also been active and engaged online and is engaging social media platforms on moderation during the elections.

Social media companies role in tackling misinformation and disinformation is twofold; to engage with key stakeholders in the country and to respond promptly to take down or label disinformation circulating on their platforms in Nigeria. Whilst there is recognition of the challenges, they are still struggling to respond quickly enough, if at all, to user reports of abuse. Members of the CDD War Room team, acting in an individual capacity to understand how platforms engage with ordinary Nigerians, have received no responses to several reports of political misinformation and disinformation they have submitted. This lack of communication is consistent across Meta, Twitter and YouTube.

These companies also have limited capacity to moderate content in local languages, and where moderators are in place, they lack a nuanced understanding of the politics at play. Challenges have been further undermined by recent redundancies for staff working on integrity efforts across social media operations, which were already insufficient for an ever growing user-base communicating in a vast area of languages across the African continent.

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