DISINFORMATION: AN UNKNOWN CANDIDATE IN NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS

Information Environment Assessment Ahead of the 2024 Ondo State Off-Cycle Election

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Executive Summary

The Ondo State Governorship election slated for 16 November 2024 is the fifth off-cycle election to be conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since the 2023 general elections. Data from INEC indicates that 2,053,061[1] registered voters will be eligible to cast their ballots. INEC figures further indicate that out of a total of 89,777 Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs) belonging to recently registered voters, prospective voters have collected 55,859 PVCs[2], representing 62.2%. This level of enthusiasm in the PVC collection is perceived as an indication of the readiness of the electorate to participate in the electoral process. However, myriads of challenges, which combine to constrain and depress the robust participation of voters in the electoral process remain to be confronted.

At a time when apprehension is rife in the West African Sub-region because of the coup contagion, and the democratic reversals, which have elicited a serious debate on how to safeguard, protect and promote democracy, the conversation around ensuring the integrity of the information ecosystem is as important as ever. As such, tackling information manipulation is now considered by pro-democracy advocates as one of the crucial steps to ensuring the triumph and supremacy of the voices and the votes of the electorate. It is to achieve this goal that a CDD-West Africa Team of assessors recently visited Ondo State for an assessment of the information environment. The objective of the assessment was to interact with and share the perspectives of key stakeholders in the electoral process. Specific focus of the assessment was about tracking the various strands of mis/disinformation and how they impact on the electoral process, particularly the participation of historically marginalized groups, including women, youth and persons with disabilities.

One dimension of the challenges posed by information manipulation takes the shape of its use by political actors for partisan advantage. Although information manipulation in the Ondo State electoral context is not yet as prevalent as it was in the recent Edo State governorship poll, there remain strong signs of vulnerabilities of the electoral terrain with regards to peddling of false narratives for partisan advantage, especially as the date of the election draws closer. In the Edo context, a total of 60 viral claims were subject to fact-checks by CDD-West Africa Countering Disinformation Team in the pre-election, election and post-election period.

One of the key findings of the assessment was the dominant narrative in the state alleging that the election of 16 November is already won and lost, and that there is no need for the electorate to approach the process with so much seriousness. Some stakeholders who provided their perspectives during the assessment were of the view that the lack of serious campaigning by the political actors beyond a few rallies was indicative of the absence of a keenly contested election.

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[1] The Punch, <u>Ondo poll: Over two million voters registered - INEC</u>
[2] INEC, <u>2024 Off-Cycle Election Update</u>

Among the disinformation peddled in the campaign period, there have been narratives targeting INEC and various political party candidates. Identity-driven disinformation relating to the geographical origin of the Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) trended a few days after the assessment commenced. Also, a video circulating on WhatsApp claimed the incumbent governor of the state was allegedly involved in a fight with his mistress in London. Based on the responses of interviewed respondents, this apparently false narrative gained traction because of the biases it generated. Respondents who weighed in on the viral disinformation alleged that the absence of the First Lady of the state for a considerable period, made the content quite relatable and believable. This apparently informed the wide shares the content has received and the push back against fact checkers who have made efforts to show that the individual captured in the footage is indeed not the governor of Ondo State.

Background

With the realization by political actors that computational propaganda can become instrumental in controlling narratives and thereby gaining access to political power, partisan actors in the Nigerian electoral environment have been quick in using it to achieve their goals. As a communicative practice, which is widely deployed by politicians, computational propaganda describes the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks.[3] The effect of disinformation as a version of computational propaganda is apparent in the sinister roles it plays in terms of undermining the integrity of elections.

The risks and vulnerabilities posed by disinformation in the electoral process stem from the connections and the cardinal place of information in the entire process. Every other issue relating to the smooth conduct of elections must be conveyed through the system of information dissemination. The impact of information is so pervasive to the extent that, while the former issues have shaped the electoral process in Nigeria, issues such as information manipulation have taken centre stage and their impacts radiate before, during and after elections.

This is due to the importance of information which is a critical input shaping the democratic process. Hence, when manipulated without concerted efforts to counter the narratives peddled, the severity of damage could be unequalled. In the time past, such manipulated information relating to the democratic process, and left unverified, has had varying effects on various stakeholders in the process, including the electoral body and its officials, security institutions, political actors and even the electorate. Such manipulated information has affected the entire electoral process, undermining the power of the umpire and the credibility of results. It therefore becomes pressing and urgent to ensure there are pre-emptive measures towards curbing information manipulation as it constitutes a growing threat to our democracy.

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[3] C. Woolley (Eds), Computational Propaganda, Oxford University Press, p4

At the national level, information manipulation takes several facets and some narratives are peculiar to states or ethnic extractions. Therefore, bad actors manipulate these narratives towards existing bias and deploy it to drive home their agenda. For instance, the Northern ethnic extractions have zero tolerance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and Queers (LGBTQ) persons. Bad actors therefore develop narratives within this context and put a political actor at the centre of it. The impact could be far-reaching while the immediate one would be to discredit the candidate and create a sentiment around such a targeted person. At the sub-national level, information manipulation is deployed in a smaller, enclosed space making the circulation faster and of more magnitude.

For instance, in the final build-up to the November 16, 2024, off-cycle governorship election in Ondo State, several narratives, mostly offline, show a growing momentum of mis/disinformation. WhatsApp and Facebook have been the platforms of choice for peddlers of false narrative. Online bloggers with no significant editorial and gatekeeping capacity have been identified as some of the key drivers of viral stories, which turned out to be false or misleading. However, attempts to get respondents to pinpoint the specific bad actors responsible have been met with a measure of reluctance.

Overall, there is the understanding that information manipulation poses a big threat to the information ecosystem and could undermine the credibility of the electoral process. According to the INEC timetable, the Ondo governorship poll is the fifth off-cycle state governorship election to be conducted by INEC since the 2023 general Elections, and the first in the South-West geo-political zone. Considering the region's importance to the country's ruling political class and the series of events that trailed the primary elections, there are mixed feelings about the slow pace of campaigns and engagements in the weeks before the election.

In the context of political engagements, the information environment is a critical component of the entire electioneering process, especially as offline and online media spaces become   avenues for political contestants to market their ideas while pushing to assert their dominance in the political terrain. This essentially is the rationale for Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD West Africa)'s efforts, with technical support from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and funding from Global Affairs Canada (GAC) to conduct a pre-election assessment of the information ecosystem in the State ahead of the November 16, 2024 Ondo State Governorship poll. The primary objective of the assessment is to evaluate the information landscape and identify its potential vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns, such as social media platforms, news outlets, or communication channels. A critical aspect of the information assessment was to establish contact with relevant stakeholders, including government officials, electoral authorities, media organizations, and civil society groups, to coordinate efforts to combat disinformation. Equally crucial to the efforts to combat disinformation and all other strands of information manipulation is the need to provide training, especially for fact-checking initiatives and open-source collection of claims relating to

trending online and offline disinformation at the community level. The information assessment therefore enabled CDD to identify the knowledge gaps, to provide training and resources to local fact-checkers, while simultaneously providing a support system to relevant stakeholders and bolster their efforts to identify and counter false information.

Manifestations of Disinformation in the 2024 Ondo Governorship Election

As against several predictions and anticipations, the information environment in Ondo State has recorded less frequency and variety of narratives. Unlike the just-concluded Edo governorship election, which had a similar pattern to the 2023 general elections with various identity-driven narratives, the information ecosystem vis-a-vis political engagements in Ondo State has been largely characterized by personality attacks, since most of the frontline candidates are from the same senatorial districts. As such, a good deal of the disinformation, which has been peddled in the build-up to the election has targeted the key individuals and revolved around local political considerations.

Another expected political engagement that could easily fuel information manipulation is campaigns, debates and media engagements. However, these activities are gathering slow momentum and have been relegated in favour of the display of trivial issues instead of avenues to demonstrate intellectual prowess, superiority of logic and alternative ideas and narratives about the issues that matter the most to the electorate. There has equally been a dearth of data-driven conversations, which could serve as a basis for the electorate to weigh and assess if the manifestos and agendas of the various partisan camps could be considered realistic or not.

Ultimately, the engagement with key stakeholders, state actors, government institutions and political actors ahead of the election has brought to the fore new realities and vulnerabilities, which have in turn expanded the scope of CDD fact-checking work. It was discovered for instance that the information ecosystem, in the build-up to the 16 November 2024 Governorship election, has been variously portrayed as one experiencing lower levels of energy and a lull in terms of the activities of different actors, which would usually be in a state of frenzy whenever it is election time.

This perspective is exemplified by the very few claims and counter claims in the build-up to the election. During the three-day assessment conducted by the CDD-West Africa Team, the claims and counter-claims which usually get intense during the campaign period, were few and far between in Ondo State. Unlike in Edo State, which saw a deluge of claims, including variants described as gendered disinformation, Ondo State has been relatively "calm." Several stakeholders attributed this reality to the lack of serious campaigns, and the canvassing of the various partisan positions and ideas to the electorate. Nonetheless, the lack of disinformation "energy" in the Ondo ecosystem has been described as some sort of decoy, which is aimed at making the relevant information integrity stakeholders drop their guard and consequently miss the wave of disinformation, which is likely to follow as the elections draw closer.

Most stakeholders, including the political parties, have lent their voices to the moral argument about the extent of the damage that will be done if false information is allowed to fester. The verdict was therefore unanimous that when false narratives are allowed to spread like wildfire all through the electoral process, the result is usually an electorate that is deformed through exposure to false and inaccurate information. The outcome of this will be inability to identify, analyse and vote on the basis of the fundamental political and governance issues, which ordinarily should shape the elections.

Information Assessment Methodology

The process of collecting data about the information manipulation trends prevalent in the electoral process involves documenting the realities and lived experiences of the people across the state. Relying on the datasets acquired and well-documented audio-visual recordings, the assessment methodology leveraged visits to public places, visits to key government institutions and actors, focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews. During this assessment, the CDD West Africa Team conducted several interviews with relevant stakeholders in the state including the state office of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Nigerian Police and the National Orientation Agency (NOA).

The assessment also facilitated robust engagements with ruling and opposition political parties, gender-based organizations, journalists, sociocultural youth bodies, and civil society organizations. The data collected brought to the fore the most widely shared and damaging false claims, which combined with the personality attacks rhetoric by politicians to confuse voters and undermine information integrity. Most importantly, the head of the electoral umpire was not spared in this personality attack, towards undermining her capability and the credibility of the process in which she will be the superintendent.

Importantly, during this information assessment, the data collected pointed at the respective roles being played by bad actors, including the origins of disinformation campaigns, such as social media accounts, websites, or individuals spreading false information. The information assessment was similarly able to document the trends and patterns of disinformation, especially in the context of how false narratives evolve and spread. It revealed the prevalence of offline narratives and the acceptance of such narratives among the community as against online narratives that are easy to trace and debunk.

Information Manipulation Trends in the Pre-Election Period

During the three-day assessment, the discussion across the board shows a high level of awareness about information manipulation in the state. There was however the lack of specificity in terms of pinpointing the bad actors responsible for the disinformation in the state, especially in the build-up to the election. For instance, one key informant interviewee was quick to identify online bloggers as major peddlers of disinformation in Ondo State. However, when asked to name the specific online

blogs that had been involved in the spread of such narratives, there was a reluctance to get specific in naming those responsible.

Notwithstanding, from the electoral umpire to the political actors, the security institution, the civil society organizations and the media stakeholders, there was awareness of the dangers posed by disinformation and the stakeholders are on the lookout for all forms of misinformation, disinformation, mal-information and in a general context, fake news, with a strong awareness of the impact on the electoral process.

Speaking on the spate of information manipulation ahead of the Ondo State governorship election, a key staff of INEC said,

> "Everything is okay for now because there is no serious campaign but there are videos and some messages circulating about the governor and the INEC woman [commissioner]."

In adding context, she referred to a trending video of an individual alleged to be the governor having a brawl with a mistress ("*side chic*") in London. This video exposed a lot of people in the state to information manipulation and could damage the credibility of the candidate and have other far-reaching impacts on the political actors and electoral process.

For most stakeholders interviewed about information manipulation, their foremost example was the trending video followed by the narratives stirred up by a key political figure, Seyi Makinde. This political figure is the governor of a neighbouring Oyo State in the (same) South West region, who, while on a campaign rally for the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in Akure, made a false and spurious claim. He said:

> "This message is for the INEC National Chairman, Prof. Yakubu Mahmood. You must remove the Resident Electoral Commissioner in Ondo State, Mrs. Oluwatoyin Babalola. She is from Ondo State…We will protest until she is removed."[4]

INEC policy stipulates that RECs cannot be deployed to their states of origin to conduct elections.

This claim, albeit false[5], went viral and became a trending topic, especially among the opposition party. For such a claim, several of our respondents believed it has been trending across the state but got more acceptance and went viral in the mainstream media and online space due to the popularity and clout of the "bad actor" who basically amplified what had been circulating across off-line and informal spaces. By repeating the claim at a televised campaign rally, he gave it further traction.

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[4] See X (fka Twitter) Comr_Aisha: The law requires that RECs be from a different state from their posting.
[5] CDD Fact Check, Is INEC REC ftom Ondo as claimed by Governor Seyi Makinde?

In her response, the INEC Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) identified the claim as an attack on her and her capability, even though she had built an enviable track record in over three decades. She said,

> "Aside that I am from Ekiti State, I have worked at INEC for about 30 years, and I retired as a Director before being appointed as a REC."

She noted that INEC is conscious and on the lookout for such narratives, considering that at every election, the electoral umpire and key figures of the INEC are always targets of information manipulation. In this context, the stakeholders are highly aware of information manipulation with few trending examples to buttress their awareness. Coincidentally, some of these direct targets of the attacks gave their views about the narratives and explained the impacts on their personal lives and the electoral process at large.

Political Parties and Effects of Disinformation

The assessment data points to the fact that while a motley of amorphous and loosely affiliated bloggers have been fingered as the main peddlers of disinformation in the campaign period, the level of understanding among political parties on what to do to address the narratives targeting them have been driven by diverse perspectives and orientations.

For the dominant political parties, the traditional method of releasing statements aimed at debunking information manipulation appears to be the go-to strategy. As such, after public denials, and statements focusing on traditional media, no further rigorous methods are adopted to halt the spread of false narratives online. In other words, in their responses to viral disinformation, the political parties tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, overlooking the reality that different audiences require tailor-made methodologies to stop the spread of disinformation and debunk false viral claims.

A case in point is the trending video-targeting the incumbent governor and APC candidate for the November 16, 2024 governorship poll. In an interview granted on the side-lines of the stakeholders meeting for the distribution of copies of the voters register to representatives of political parties, the State Chairman of the ruling APC in Ondo State simply retorted:

> One, that information on social media is false. Two, the photograph there is not the real photograph of Mr. Governor. If you look at it very well, it is a computer concoction. Thirdly, these are the handwork of the dissenters. They are just looking for ways to create diversion, calling for attention. The video is being circulated by those threatened about the victory that is looming and gathering momentum for APC. That is one aspect. To me, as a politician, like I said here, what you need to do is go back to the polling units. Election is being won at the polling units, not on social media. We have 3,933 polling units. How many of the polling units can you dominate over, you can sit on? They didn't tell us.

In terms of how political parties' counter disinformation, the perspective of the ruling party in the state was quite interesting. Efforts to address false claims to them involve the mobilization of the instruments of State power. As such, when asked what the ruling party was doing about the slew of viral claims its candidate has been targeted with, he said:

> I agree with you, and I want to tell you emphatically, we have the capacity. In terms of political machinery, in the whole country, APC is number one. I am alive. You can judge me. You can judge me. The Publicity Secretary of my party is a media guru. He worked in The Nation. He worked in TVC. Also, I have some younger guys, too, who are media experts, but we engage on issues. We told them You don't spread.... No, no, no, we don't. That's what I said. We sell ourselves. When you have a good product, when you have a good manifesto, APC is the only ideologically focused party.

As such, the argument of the ruling party in Ondo State when it comes to countering information manipulation is contingent on the fact that since they won previous polls and are governing with a popular mandate, disinformation will not impact it as much as it would affect the opposition. This level of confidence will be gleaned from the comment about the incumbent from the camp of the ruling party.

The ruling APC in Ondo for instance canvassed the notion that what the incumbent has done is a continuation of what the progressives have done in the past eight years. The respondent was of the view that:

> "No governor, since the existence of Ondo State, has ever done it in terms of road construction, school buildings, and payment of salary."

In terms of gendered disinformation, the ruling party in Ondo State expressed its commitment to mainstreaming women as a strategy for countering gendered disinformation. The strategy according to the senior ruling party chieftain is to use the 35% affirmative action at the level of cabinet and across the local government areas in the state.

However, the less dominant political parties have tended to act as a counterweight to the ruling and the other more prominent parties in the state. Their approach to countering information manipulation is to use the campaign process for pre-debunking activities and to discuss their plans through widely followed media channels. A key informant who responded on behalf of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) expressed the desire that the electorate should see beyond money.

> You know we don't have money. Not that we don't have money to run a party; I'm saying this, the money that most of these politicians throw around during elections, our party is not interested in that. Basically, we have been going around telling people this is what we stand for. You have tested APC for long in all those states. You have also witnessed PDP governance in all those states, and you can know that it has always been business as usual. Nigerians are really suffering. About some minutes ago we were talking about how much people pay in secondary school. The head of a social organization was telling us how much they are paying. Even public schools that are not supposed to

pay. And it's because of governance, because of who is ruling us. So, for us, we don't carry fake news. Our members across the states do not carry fake news, because we don't believe in it. And because from the leadership of the party, we don't misinform our people in their various local governments.

Mechanisms Towards Tackling Information Manipulations

Having identified the prevalence of information manipulation, with recent examples and the impact on voter participation in the Ondo governorship election, there was the need to delve into the mechanisms such as response frameworks and tools towards combatting the spread of information manipulation. For the institutions superintending the electoral process, this is a critical issue to address. For the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which shared perspectives through an interview with the Resident Electoral Commissioner, the key strategy is robust training of staff on crisis communication.

The INEC State office was emphatic about the importance in getting the right information to the public. Due to the level of constraint INEC faces in terms of joining issues in the public space with partisan elements, which target the election management body (EMB), there has been more focus on ensuring utmost clarity and to message about important activities of the Commission in ways, which make communication full proof one of the ways to prevent misinformation or disinformation. INEC's strategy was encapsulated in its training on effective communication.

In the REC's perspective, working with fact-checking organizations like CDD-West Africa is equally critical. According to the REC:

> We have our various officers, and if you have information you need, if it is about operation, just tell us. We are ready for collaboration; and if you require information for your fact-checking work, we will direct you to the officer in charge. We will cooperate with you, because we are all working towards a goal, and that is the success of democracy, and the success of the election.

On the part of the National Orientation Agency (NOA), their work is cut out for it as it has officers spread across the local government areas (LGA) of the state. The Director General identified the roles as calling for peaceful polls devoid of violence and the need for increased engagements to prevent voter apathy. While these are laudable focuses toward strengthening democracy, the key actors seem to be putting little effort into campaigns against information manipulation.

This assessment indicates that this key government institution lacks a robust response framework and tools toward identifying, analysing, and combatting all forms of mis/dis/mal-information. Although the State Director and Management Staff have a grasp of information disorder, like every stakeholder, their offices have focus more on increasing awareness about the general electoral process and promoting the need for peaceful polls than the technical details of fact-checking, pre-bunking or de-bunking viral disinformation and other forms of information manipulation.

A similar scenario plays out with the Civil Society Organizations (CSO) stakeholders and journalists. These groups of individuals are aware of the various forms of disinformation, with several of them being experts in the field. However, their media houses and offices have few response mechanisms and tools to track, analyse and combat these false and misleading narratives. Furthermore, as the Election Day approaches, most of them expect the narratives to be around recurring issues such as the inconsistency in the electoral process, anticipated faults in regards to the BVAS and IREV portal, fake endorsements and stepdown of candidates, fake election results and old violent reports. They were however puzzled to see the narratives taking different twists. Hence, their capacity development concerning the recurring issues (highlighted above) does not suffice in the trending narratives within the information ecosystem ahead of the Ondo State governorship election.

With a few weeks to the election, there are however efforts towards closing the response gap and creating a seamless communication network. This communication network will enable these key actors to forward claims and escalate narratives to more sophisticated institutions with the resources and technical capacity like CDD-West Africa. The assessment was therefore a good space to initiate conversations on how to use open-source tools like the Check by Meedan chatbot, which will be used by CDD-West Africa. With skilled individuals and sophisticated tools, CDD fact-checkers are readily available to support the various institutions for real-time combatting of all forms of information manipulation. The assessment team has also collected the contacts of the spokespersons and the social media management teams of these institutions for the purpose of coordination and synergies, with the goal of ensuring the information ecosystem is free of mis/disinformation, especially during the final build up to the November 16, 2024 Ondo State Governorship election.

Gendered Disinformation Trends

A key question that resonates at every election, whether national or sub-national, is the narrative around the stifling of women and marginalized groups' participation. Over time, there has been a conscious effort and several advocacies to increase women's participation in the electoral process. With such a robust population, the women population are expected and are being encouraged to massively vote, present themselves for party nominations, win primaries and contest elective positions, with a greater chance of winning as a result of their population strength. However, there seems to be a decline in women's participation as the number of women in the current National Assembly stands at three in the Senate and 17 in the House of Representatives, representing 2.7% and 4.7% respectively.[6] Unfortunately, there are no women governors in Nigeria, with just eight of them as deputy governors as of 2024. [7]

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[6] Placng, Worrying Numbers for Women in 10th NASS
[7] The Nation, Meet Nigerias Female Deputy Govs

Narrowing it down to Ondo State, of the 19 political parties recognized by INEC, 17 of them fielded candidates and will contest, while only three have women as the deputy governorship candidate.[8] Interestingly, the Labour Party (LP), Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Action Democratic Party (ADP) nominated women as their deputy governorship candidates.

In a laudable feat, the candidate of the governorship candidate of the African Democratic Congress (ADC), Nejo Adeyemi, is a person with disability (a paraplegic)[9]

Fig 1 – A select snapshot of nominees for governor and deputy governor in the Ondo 2024 governorship election.

While the party stakeholders do not have a full understanding of gendered disinformation, they highlighted several age-long narratives that could be described as gendered disinformation. From the narratives that women do not belong to the ruling class or do not have the capacity to be voted for, such narratives are however not prominent and have not featured in the recent political discourse in Ondo State. This assessment team asked the SDP party spokesman, whose party has fielded a female deputy governorship candidate, if she has faced online harassment or mal-information because of her participation in the election. The reply was negative; the party therefore has not had to prepare any counter-response to any forms of gendered disinformation.

Some of the party stakeholders said:

> "There are cultural and traditional biases against women and they come up in every election. Even within the party, the only specific role for women is the office of the woman leader. In the main election, beginning from the primaries, they have several gimmicks to discourage women and it ends there once the men win."

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[8] INEC, INEC publishes particulars of nominated candidates for Ondo State governorship election

[9] INEC NEWS, INEC Publishes Final List of Candidates for Ondo Governorship Election

This assessment therefore, concludes that these narratives were in the background and could not gain mainstream attention because there were few women nominated by parties for elective positions in the Ondo governorship election. Therefore, while they existed within the party structures and some gatherings, they did not dominate the information ecosystem.

In the same vein, the narratives about marginalized groups, considering that one of the parties nominated a person with disabilities did not resonate in the information ecosystem. During the engagement, several stakeholders were unaware that a party has a person with a disability as their governorship candidate. They seem to be fixated on the prominent political parties.

It was deduced that even though the ADC nominated a person from the marginalized group, the party had little campaign activities and events towards selling their candidate and ideas. Since the party failed to capitalize on this strength, it became difficult for the people to identify such strength and thereby limited disinformation targeted at such persons.

Conclusions

Compared to other recent off-cycle governorship elections, the prevalence of disinformation and false narratives in the build-up to the 16 November 2024 Ondo State Governorship election is less. Notwithstanding, the few narratives which have trended seem to have had a significant reach. It was observed that before, during and after the political primaries of the parties, peddlers of disinformation sought to undermine rival candidates with mal-information. In terms of the tool of preference, WhatsApp and Facebook remain the pre-eminent platforms for spreading false information. The resort to forwarded messages based on biases and perception about realities on the ground have made viral disinformation believable among many in the state.

Although key institutions connected to the electoral process and responsible for shaping public perception are well versed in identifying disinformation; they are however not adept when it comes to the technical skills required for fact-checking and debunking claims. Importantly, there is a heavy reliance on traditional media outlets for countering false narratives and other shades of information manipulation. These do not necessarily address the online audience and spaces, where disinformation tends to trend without much robust attempts to debunk them. Added to this is the indication from the assessment about the lack of awareness of the roles, which the big tech companies should be playing in terms of content moderation.

In terms of how political parties respond to information manipulation in the build-up to the election, there has been the tendency to over rely on the instrumentality of state power and access to state media resources. Less prominent parties do not enjoy this luxury and as such focus more on discussing the issues contained in their manifestoes. This strategy in their estimation will insulate

them from being vulnerable to viral mis/disinformation, especially as they lack the capacity to engage in fact-checking.

Recommendations

I. Increased voter education, awareness and sensitization: The bulk of the work should not be delegated to the electoral umpire. Every actor should ensure increased voter education that includes awareness about the political process, structures and candidates ahead of elections. An informed citizenry will drive their narratives towards issue-based discussions such as qualification and track records of candidates.

II. Strengthening fact-checking initiatives: Having recorded successes, there is the need to improve and strengthen the existing fact-checking initiatives, efforts and frameworks. The coverage should extend beyond the national level to subnational with emphasis on different cultural, ethnic and language contexts.

III. Advocacy to regional bodies (e.g., ECOWAS): for collective action to pressure big tech platforms on content moderation and ensuring that false contents are taken down in the public interest.

IV. Training, capacity building and synergy with government institutions: There should be formalized and continuous capacity-building programmes for relevant government institutions such as the NOA, INEC and Police. Moreover, there is a need to form a robust synergy with these institutions and ensure they are updated on the best practices towards combating information manipulation.

V. Targeted media literacy programs: Develop tailored media literacy programs aimed at educating the public, especially vulnerable groups like women, and youths. These media literacy curricula will also be targeted at rural communities about the dangers of disinformation. This can be achieved through workshops, social media campaigns, and local language content to enhance awareness.

VI. Collaborations and continuous engagement with community stakeholders and traditional leaders: At the sub-national level, most narratives gain traction in the communities and offline spaces before spreading to the mainstream media. However, with continuous collaboration and engagement with community stakeholders and leaders, these narratives can be dispelled and pre-bunked before they can gain mainstream attention.

VII. Continuous gender-focused counter-disinformation initiatives: Most initiatives are launched on the eve of elections when most of the narratives have caused damages right from when such persons expressed interest at the party level. The aim is to establish continuous initiatives that directly counter misogynistic narratives targeting women in politics. This can include social media campaigns, public service announcements, and fact-checking reports that emphasize the contributions of women in leadership.

VIII. Self-regulation and the use of Ombudsman: to hold to account traditional media outlets that distort facts and fuel unfounded narratives. Some of the key instruments for self-regulation are obsolete and not well known. As such they should be updated and publicized in line with global practice.

IX. Collaboration with social media/tech platforms: Engage with the tech giants to develop effective monitoring and tracking frameworks. In addition, these frameworks should include prompt response mechanisms whereby the tech platforms can flag and pull-out contents that could affect the electoral process and peaceful polls.

Acknowledgment

About CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa (CDD-West Africa) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The Centre was established to mobilize global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to democratization and development processes in West Africa, and to provide alternatives and best practices to the sustenance of democracy and development in the region. CDD envisions a West Africa that is democratically governed, economically integrated – promoting human security and people-centred development. The mission of the Centre is to be the prime catalyst and facilitator for strategic analysis and capacity-building for sustainable democracy and development in the West African sub-region.

About the Authors

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