

Democracy and Disinformation (How Fake News Threaten our freedom and Democracy)

1. SUMMARY

As Nigeria's 2019 general elections are fast approaching, the need to prevent the circulation of fake news, disinformation has become imperative. Presently, the country's political landscape is tense given the increasing insecurity threats pervading different parts of the country amidst perceived marginalisation, anger, confusion and economic challenges. There is a tendency that political actors can willingly take advantage of these gaps either to misinform, disinform, promote apathy or skew peoples voting choices in the forthcoming elections. Besides, the pluralistic nature of the media in Nigeria (particularly the rise and use of social media), the influence of social media political overlords, emergence of Reputation Management Agencies and identity factor (such as religion and ethnicity, etc.) may negatively influence the direction of political discourse in the run-up to the elections. Cybersecurity has also become a watershed in democracies, and Nigeria is no exception. The fear that cyber technologies could be exploited to tamper with result transmission during elections poses real fear to stakeholders in the Nigerian ecosystem mainly as this is the first time, Nigeria will be deploying electronic transfer of results.

As such, this conference is conceived to explore as well proffer solutions to the menace of fake news, disinformation and cybersecurity and the dangers it portends to the 2019 elections and the country's democracy.

2. BACKGROUND

We live in a digital world, surrounded by a deluge of information. The internet has made us more connected than ever in one sense, and yet we seem disconnected from each other in a fundamental sense. In this new information age, we are always surrounded by information, a large part of which is reliable with the more significant chunk unverifiable. Thus, discerning truth from untruth has become a herculean task. Citizens, development practitioners and other stakeholders around the world have raised concerns about the prevalence of misinformation in contemporary politics mainly because of its characters and manifestations. The fact that misinformation can be quickly spread and difficult to correct, popularity it has gained in global politics, its capacity to distort the truth, render it useless and replace it with damaging information, and the threat it poses on democracy re-emphasise the need for corrective measures.

Nigeria, since her independence, has been defined by its differences, and now seems to have reached a tipping point. Fake news has increasingly become a problem in Nigeria. Their source and platforms vary, many of course are created by politicians, ignorantly or deliberately by the media, interest groups, etc. For example, in December 2017, there were reports that Kia Automobile was pulling its business out of Nigeria because of the poor economic climate, of course, this turned out to be fake news.

More so, when President Muhammadu Buhari left the country for medical treatment in London in January 2017, news stories started circulating that he had died. Moreover, when he returned some even

alleged that it was a fake Buhari, an example is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) leader who claimed: "The man you are looking at on the television is not Buhari, he is from Sudan. After extensive plastic surgery, they brought him back the person was taught Buhari's mannerisms, and he came back deceiving all of you. I can stand and prove who I am but Buhari cannot do the same thing. He cannot deceive Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB". Of course, this was fake news too. A most recent example of how social media can be utilised to skewer elections in Nigeria is the just concluded Anambra governorship elections of November 2017. Where the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), almost thwarted the Anambra 2017 governorship elections when it peddled highly emotive and divisive content with the aim of a creative fake narrative designed to deceive the populace. Identity factors such as political, ethnic and religious affiliations further reinforce false beliefs for political gains.

The pluralistic nature of "the media" has further complicated the issue. There are so many sources and with so little trust; people are retreating into social media echo chambers made up of like-minded people, who are often the subjects of targeted campaigns. The 2015 report by DigiXplus shows that internet users in Nigeria increased from 35.7 million in 2011 increased by 22 million to 57.7million in 2014. In 2015, about an additional 5 million users are recorded making internet users almost 62.7 million in the country. As the internet penetrates the nation, more Nigerians have access to social networking sites. According to a report on Social Media Landscape in Nigeria released by Africa Practice, 72% of Nigerians with access to the internet were visiting social media sites. Undoubtedly, access to social media has increased demand for accountability but also make users vulnerable to the danger of misinformation.

Studies show that when false information is introduced to these echo chambers, it is viewed as credible so long as it conforms to the existing narrative. Moreover, when more truthful information is presented, if it is not ignored, its only impact is to reinforce the false beliefs. Confirmation bias is not a new phenomenon; however, in a post-truth, internet-driven world, the increasingly urgent question now becomes: how do we overcome these biases? Research on how we decide what is right is even more damning because it reveals that there is often no conscious process involved. Instead, we are more likely to believe something if it is repeated enough times. Moreover, if we take into account the amplified ecosystems of places like Twitter and Facebook, fact checking starts to seem less like the panacea we believe it to be.

Another phenomenon on the rise in the Nigeria landscape is the influence of Western and locally based, Reputation Management Agencies. These are companies that are hired to help political leaders run divisive campaigns to boost their prospects. For instance, the Nigerian social media space is ruled by overlords and influencers, who mostly push the interests of one political party or the other on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter among others. In empowering anyone to broadcast anything, social media have further eroded the traditional gatekeeping (and norm-preserving) roles of established media and political party organisations. In the process, they have coarsened the political dialogue, facilitated the natural proliferation of "fake news", and made it vastly easier for extreme and marginal figures to mobilise followers. By enabling like-minded people to find and engage one another exclusively, they have also heightened social and political polarisation. Social media have fit populist politics like a hand in a glove.

Cybersecurity is now fast becoming a watershed in democracies and Nigeria is no exception. The fear that cyber technologies could be exploited to tamper with result transmission during elections poses a real concern to all stakeholders in the Nigerian ecosystem. For instance, during the 2015 elections, the INEC website was hacked even though immediately restored. The fear of the cyber attacks during the

2019 elections are rife mainly as this is the first time, Nigeria will be doing an electronic transmission of results. It is essential that this vulnerability is carefully addressed to deter cyber interference and reassure the citizens and relevant stakeholders on the credibility of the system.

All the aforesaid has become imperative as in less than a year, Nigeria will go into general elections. Already there are heightened threats of insecurity in different parts of the country, and this is coupled with a lot of perceived marginalisation, anger, confusion, and economic challenges. Actors are willing to take advantage of these to misinform, disinform, promote apathy or skew peoples votes. We are in a moment where the information space is hostile to public discourse, and one of the reasons why social media is so powerful is because of the product it sells - although as exemplified in the #NotTooYoungToRun movement as well as the Arab Spring, it could be used to promote a definite cause. Unfortunately, the Nigerian government has not been apt in its engagement with fake news and disinformation. Its understanding of this phenomenon is constricted to the space of hate speech.

Indeed, democratic activists are developing innovative strategies to bring transparency and accountability to the electoral process. To succeed, they will need the political space, access, and technical capacity to identify disinformation in elections and technical strategies to protect the electoral system from cyber interference. We at the CDD believe that to curtail the menace of disinformation and cybersecurity; success will require country-specific interventions, embracing new partnerships, and advocating for change through potentially broader or nontraditional avenues. Ultimately, the response should reflect the two traditional guiding principles of election observation: defending the electoral integrity (this is inclusive of high-level political action to curtail real and perceived cyber vulnerabilities) and speaking truth to power. Furthermore, the advent of social media means that electoral analysis of disinformation must now consider the role of new agents and stakeholders such as media, civil society, citizen journalists etc.

It is against this backdrop, CDD Stiftung is organising a 2-day conference to discuss the implications of fake news, disinformation and cybersecurity in a democracy and also in the forthcoming 2019 elections. It will be the first time such a conference will be organised in Nigeria. This conference is expected to contribute to the development of a strategy on how to tackle the spread of fake news disinformation and cyber vulnerabilities in the forthcoming 2019 elections. The conference will bring together experts, average 50 participants from the media, academia, civil society, experts and relevant government agencies.

3. Conference Objectives

The project is set to achieve the following objectives:

1. Convene a multi-stakeholder conference on fake news, disinformation and cybersecurity, define the challenges, the effectiveness of measures and proffer options for addressing the problems
2. Identify the impact of fake news on journalism and democracy
3. discuss the implications of fake news on freedom of press and speech
4. explore the role of social media in the fake new crisis

5. hackers and leaks in election
6. election cybersecurity
7. impact of fake news on elections and the press;
8. to explore reporting in elections in a post-truth era

There will be a keynote address delivered on the War Against Facts, Governance, Peace and Security in a Post Truth Era.

Several panels on will follow this

1. Defining Fake News, What exactly is truth in A post Truth Era
2. What happened to Truth and Where is Trust? Fake news as a threat to Democracy
3. To regulate or not, the implication of fake news on freedom of press and speech
4. How do we counter fake news in a post-truth era, social media versus conventional media
5. The fake news machine and 2019 Nigerian General election; the impact of fake news and disinformation on election management and electoral integrity
6. Changes, The Media and 21st Century
7. Countering Fake news, experiences from the Global North
8. Election cybersecurity
9. Towards a comprehensive strategy on cyber security and electoral violence
10. The influence of fake news on existing conflicts and new conflicts