
The report, authored by CDD’s director, Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen, CDD’s editor-at-large and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham details the individuals or organisations involved in the spread of falsehoods, the tactics they seek to employ, and the influence and impact that they are having. It also discusses the approaches employed so far to respond to the fake news threat.

To speak with the authors of this report or if you have an interest in reviewing the 15 country level studies produced as part of this series. Please contact Esther Yusuf (eyusuf@cddwestafrica.org)

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

+ The spread of falsehoods across information ecosystems in West Africa is growing. Although enabled by increasing access to social media and the internet across the region, the flow of fake news is not simply confined to online spaces but moves between offline and digital environments with regularity and ease.

+ The way information flows between online and offline networks is critical for understanding how fake news spreads and influences actions across West Africa. So too is trust. Information that a recipient deems to be from a trustworthy source – be that the original source of the information or the individual who last shared it – remains fundamental to decisions about what is true and what is not, along with whether the information aligns with existing beliefs and biases.

+ The seven main groups engaged in the spread of falsehoods are political activists, online influencers, the state, media enterprises, specialist consultancy firms, the diaspora and foreign states.

+ During elections, the battle for influence over an ever growing online audience is amplified, with political actors increasingly recruiting domestic ‘cyber warriors’ or regional and international communication specialists to give them an electoral advantage.

+ Responses to the growing proliferation of fake news in the information ecosystem are challenged by the fact that the state is not only not an impartial actor, but that it also engages either in the spread and creation of falsehoods or in the self-serving restriction of online information flows.

+ West African states have sought to clamp down on fake news by limiting the space, either through platform or internet shutdowns or through updating existing — or creating new — legislation to deal with digital disinformation.

+ But digital regulation in the region is still primarily used as a political tool. Whilst regulation can be part of the solution to tackling falsehoods, this is only true if it is overseen by a credible and independent arbiter.

+ Critical recommendation is improving the digital literacy of ordinary citizens through public awareness campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and revised education curricula. A generally more educated citizenry will be better positioned to arbitrate between true and false when encountering new information either online or offline.

+ More pressure on social media companies to effectively moderate their platforms for hate speech and falsehoods, will have a transformative impact on reducing not just the fake news in circulation in West Africa, but the degree to which falsehoods are embraced by its citizens.