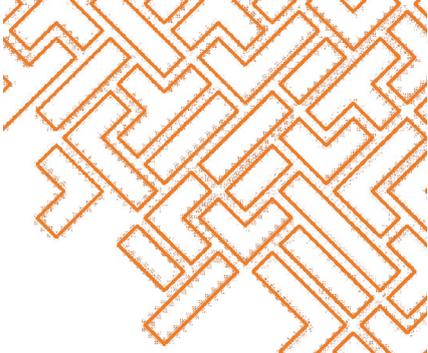RESEARCH REPORT

# CÔTE D'IVOIRE'S FAKE NEWS ECOSYSTEM

## An Overview

Jessica Moody

DECEMBER 2021

## About the CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

CDD West Africa does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CDD or West African Insights.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form, in any registered online or print publication without express permission from the Centre for Democracy and Development.
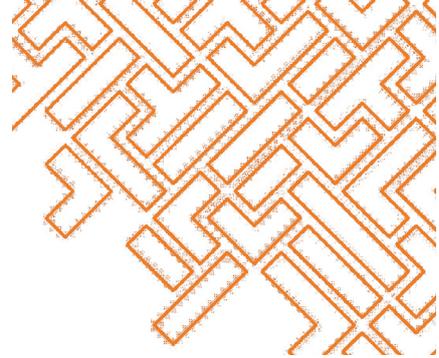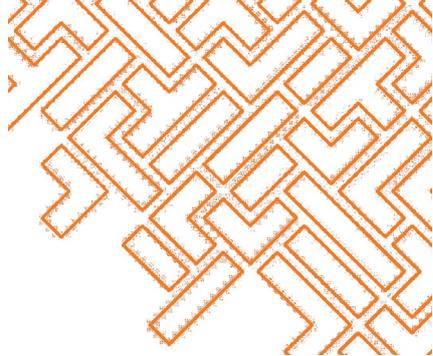
# TABLE OF CONTENT

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report argues that fake news in Cote d'Ivoire is a predominantly political phenomenon and that it poses a considerable threat to political stability. Falsehoods in Cote d'Ivoire spread most rapidly on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as via word-of-mouth. Indeed, the interaction between these online and offline spaces has amplified the pace at which falsehoods can spread around the country in recent years. Although social media is increasingly popular, particularly among young people, there is a particular challenge associated with fake news spread by word-of-mouth in the country. This is not a new challenge, but it is one that has been amplified with the growth of online platforms.

The overlap and interplay between the two means that fake news that starts online can spread rapidly into offline spaces in ways that fact-checking initiatives often fail to match. Drawing on desk-based research, interviews, and focus group discussions the report illustrates the ways in which fake news has considerable real-world consequences. During the October 2020 presidential elections rumors of targeted violent attacks on ethnic lines led to reprisal attacks between conflicting ethnic groups in the town of M'Battao. Equally, a fake news story that went viral in May 2021, inciting violence against Nigeriens living in Cote d'Ivoire, led to the death of at least one Nigerian.

These examples are concerning given that the country still faces considerable post-electoral unrest and instability following a nine-year on-off conflict that ended in 2011. This study finds that the prominence of fakenews is exacerbated and facilitated by the dearth of timely and credible information provided by the government. Silence creates the space for conspiracy theories and rumors to flourish. Even when the government does provide information, people do not trust it be true, preferring instead to rely on social media influencers and people they know personally who provide more regular, though not always accurate, updates.

Online avatars, who hide behind pseudonym's are a prominent feature of the information eco- system. With the most prominent, Chris Yapi, having over half a million Facebook followers and being widely regarded as a credible source of information by many Ivorians. One in every 12 Ivorians with a social media account follows Yapi.

The government's preference for punitive measures to try and clamp down on those who are involved in spreading fake news has not stemmed the flow of falsehoods. If anything has provoked further online activity as citizens desperately seek space to express
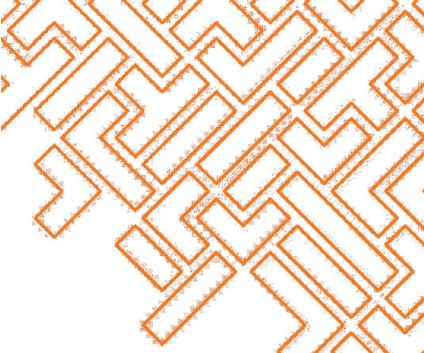
themselves freely. Rather than legal crackdowns, which are often viewed through partisan political lenses, there is an urgent need to create greater education around understanding and sharing information both online and offline in the country.

# INTRODUCTION

It was a series of rumors that essentially resulted in the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire between 2002 and 2011. We need to treat this problem before this happens again.[1] Côte d'Ivoire's nine-year on-off conflict culminated in a disputed 2010-2011 election, in which former President Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down when Alassane Ouattara was declared the winner. Gbagbo was eventually ousted by the Forces Nouvelles (FN) rebel group, which was loyal to Ouattara, supported by United Nations and French troops. The Ivoirian conflict was driven by several factors, including access to land, disputes over what constitutes true national identity, political representation, recurrent mutinies in the armed forces and alleged flaws in the electoral system. These factors were all closely tied to political propaganda and information flows that have always been central to political stability or instability.

Since the last years of the first post-independence presidency of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire has struggled with questions of national identity. Agitations between ethnic groups perceived to be autochthonous and those thoughts of as allogenic has been the root of considerable long-standing tensions. This is a problem that has been repeatedly manipulated through the dispersion of fake or exaggerated information by political leaders over the past three decades. Current president, Alassane Ouattara, and former presidents Laurent Gbagbo and Henri Konan Bédié, and their supporters, have used the rhetoric of true Ivoirian heritage, or 'Ivoirité', to garner support in electoral periods and divide the population where it was politically beneficial to do so.[2]

Emerging from civil war in 2011, President Ouattara's government has administered a one-sided form of reconciliation, resulting in arrests and prosecutions almost exclusively for those who committed crimes on behalf of former President Gbagbo, but not those former warlords who supported Ouattara.[3] This, as well as a failure to fairly share out employment opportunities and access to land between different ethnic groups, the ineffective implementation of the truth and reconciliation commission findings, and weak security sector reform, has contributed to a failure to build national reconciliation and the

---

1. Interview with Ivoirian anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
2. Ivoirité is a concept created by Henri Konan Bédié in 1995 which claims that Ivoirian nationality is only granted to those with two parents born in Cote d'Ivoire. It tries to distinguish between "true Ivoirians" and those of foreign heritage, who are merely immigrants; Araoye, Côte d'Ivoire, p.xiv.
3. Human Rights Watch, ,"Justice Re-Establishes Balance', 22 March 2016.
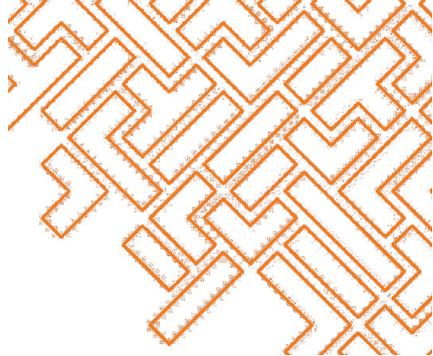
persistence of political tensions.[4]

This contestation has intensified with the arrival of the internet, smartphones and social media. According to DataReportal, there are 37.6 million mobile connections in Côte d'Ivoire, comprising 139.1% of the population, indicating that many Ivoirians have multiple mobile connections.[5] 12.5 million Ivorians are internet users and 5.9 million are on social media; 46.8% and 22.1% of the population respectively.[6] These numbers are constantly increasing, with mobile connections growing by 8.5%, internet users increasing by 2.5%, and active social media users increasing by as much as 20.4% between January 2020 and January 2021.[7]

> **"**
>
> *12.5 million Ivorians are internet users and 5.9 million are on social media; 46.8% and 22.1% of the population respectively* **"**

Misinformation and disinformation were prominent during the October 2020 and March 2021 presidential and legislative elections. In this period Gbagbo, Bédié, and Ouattara all engaged in electioneering, using cyber activists to disperse stories which made their adversaries appear weak and dysfunctional and improved the chances of their parties winning the poll.[8] The stakes were high, as Ouattara had opted to run for what many in civil society and opposition viewed as an unconstitutional third term. Violence broke out on several occasions leaving more than 50 people dead and prompting many more to flee; tensions that were exacerbated by persistent fake news stories surrounding ethnically motivated attacks.[9]

This report is based on a desk review of existing literature on the fake news ecosystem in Cote d'Ivoire and 13 key informant interviews conducted by the author over the phone with individuals that have knowledge of the fake news ecosystem. This included citizens, fact-checkers, international and Ivoirian journalists and anti-fake news activists. Three focus groups with social media users - one comprised of females only, one male-only discussion and one youth group - were conducted by the author's research assistant in Abidjan.

4. Piccolino, 'Rhétorique de la Cohésion', p.6; Piccolino, 'Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace', p.16.
5. Kemp, 'Digital 2021: Côte d'Ivoire', DataReportal, 11 February 2021.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021; Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
9. Al Jazeera, 'Clashes over Ivory Coast vote as neighbouring states urge talks', 11 November 2020; Le Monde, 'En Côte d'Ivoire, les « fake news » jettent de l'huile sur le feu', 13 November 2020.
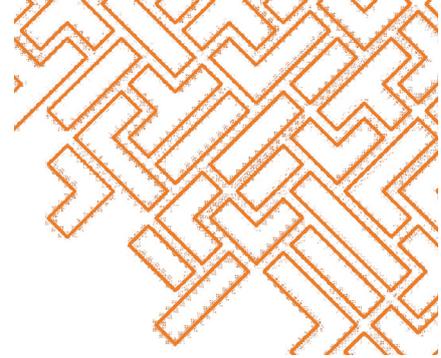
The report seeks to unearth who the key actors are behind fake news in Côte d'Ivoire; how this affects the political environment and prospects for post-conflict reconciliation; what the key online information platforms are; how information spreads; what impact external actors have on the fake news ecosystem; how fake news impacts on and is affected by gender; and what the government has done to try to address the significant challenge fake news poses. It will be argued that the Ivoirian fake news ecosystem predominantly revolves around political tensions and pre-existing social divisions and is heavily manipulated by political actors and their supporters, particularly during electoral periods.

The report demonstrates that fake news is largely spread through WhatsApp, Facebook and word-of-mouth and that these means of communication allow falsehoods to spread rapidly and unchecked, posing a considerable threat to political stability.

## 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.
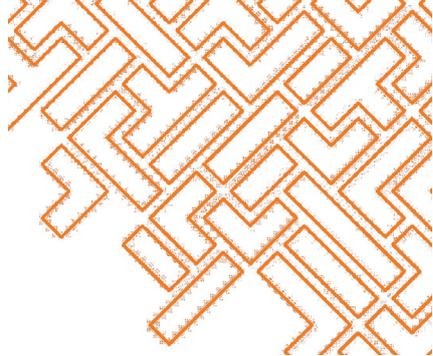
# UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

Ivorians still report regular use of a television (70%) or radio (50%) to access news but fewer and fewer are choosing to read a newspaper, with many instead relying on Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp to get hold of information about current events.[10] This is especially true among the younger generation, as well as in more remote parts of the country where newspaper circulation is limited, and subjects covered by radio stations rarely focus on local events. The lack of interest in reading newspapers also appears to be connected to the lack of faith in valid information being produced in print media, as well as a sense that the information is often slower compared with online sources. Youth focus group participants complained that newspapers are not interactive and therefore it is not easy to comment on news stories. One female participant lamented that "the information in the newspapers was never neutral and was always dependent on which political party they were supporting".[11] Where research participants accessed neither social media nor newspapers to get information, they tended to rely solely on information they received from friends or relatives in their districts. This dependence on acquaintances for information predominantly gathered on social media, is crucial to the rapid dispersion of information in Côte d'Ivoire.

Indeed, there is a strong connection between online and offline information spaces. This is important to note because, while internet connectivity is high in comparison to the rest of West Africa, it is still low in many more rural parts of the country. Nonetheless, information can spread very rapidly, irrespective of the absence of widespread fixed internet connections, which was estimated to cover less than 1% of Ivorians in 2018.[12] Text messages are a key medium for bridging the divide. On 4 October 2018, text messages began circulating about a public transport vehicle, known locally as a gbaka, crashing into the Ebrie Lagoon in Abidjan, killing 18 people. The information spread rapidly to Facebook and even appeared on the government's own Twitter and other social media accounts. Photos emerged to support the story and it was reported in the newspapers the next morning. But all the information for these articles came from social media accounts, there was no verified information or confirmation of the crash. In fact, the actual story entailed a normal van, not a gbaka, falling from a bridge in Abidjan, killing just two people.

The incident highlights several interesting features of fake news in Côte d'Ivoire. Not least its relationship with the truth and its propensity to be amplified by print media and social

---

10. Afrobarometer, 'Malgré l'hégémonie de la télévision et la radio, l'utilisation des réseaux sociaux et de l'Internet présente une rapide progression', 14 May 2020 ; Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
11. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021
12. Kalonji Mfunyi, 'Cartographie et analyse des médias sociaux en Côte d'Ivoire', p.12
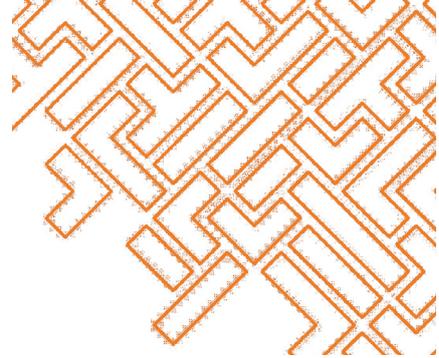
media sites. Firstly, while the news story was fake, it was an exaggeration or a reinterpretation of the truth, rather than bearing no resemblance to anything real. This is a common feature and there have been several instances where fake news closely resembles the truth but has been taken out of context or slightly altered to suit the spreader's motives. Indeed, it is rare for fake news to be entirely disconnected from reality. It typically reflects, albeit in a distorted manner, real life concerns, motivations or context. For example, one international journalist explained how a tweet she had posted noting that at that specific polling station there were no voters at a specific time on election day had been inaccurately captioned by the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) to say that a respected international journalist was reporting that there was nobody voting anywhere in the country.[13] The post quickly spread around the country, helping the PDCI to push the narrative it was trying to spread that its supporters, and the majority of voters, had heeded its call for a boycott.[14]

The gbaka example also highlights the possibility for stories to spread rapidly both through online and the offline spaces. There is a strong oral tradition in Côte d'Ivoire and considerable amounts of information continues to be spread through word-of-mouth supported by the strength of connections between individuals. People are more likely to believe something a friend or relative shares with them, because they trust that person, irrespective of how trustworthy or real the information they have shared appears to be. As one interviewee attested:

> People who don't give importance to social media or don't even have access to social media, give trust and importance much more to people they know well. So, while they might not believe a story on Facebook, if a good friend tells them it's true, they don't even question it.[15]

These connections and the culture of respecting what other people tell you is problematic for debunking fake news stories. When Ivoirians were asked as part of this study whether they verified information before sharing it, the answer was largely no.[16] Particularly important here is that many interviewees noted that they might verify information before sharing it widely but if it was just about sharing between friends and family, they would very rarely do so. Equally, if they received information from people that they knew well or trusted then they would not seek to verify it. For example, one respondent noted that she was scared to dispute news stories she was told by friends, even when she thought they were definitely fake. "I don't like to say when I think something is definitely fake just because it's so politicised, so you don't want to intervene and become renowned for saying something is fake. It's dangerous to speak out about this".[17] In the few cases where research participants admitted to trying to verify information before sharing it, this generally consisted of checking with a friend they trusted, calling the person who posted the information to find out their sources or sometimes watching a television news channel to see if it was reported.
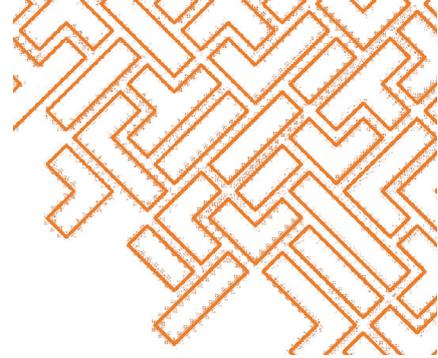
13. Interview with international journalist Leanne de Bassompierre, Abidjan, 15 June 2021.
14. Interview with international journalist Leanne de Bassompierre, Abidjan, 15 June 2021.
15. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
16. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
17. Interview with Ivoirian woman, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.

"Word of mouth is so effective at moving information in Côte d'Ivoire that it is faster than the internet" argued one journalist.[18] The historical prevalence of word-of-mouth communication and more simply the sharing of information broadly between communities was highlighted as being central to the spread of fake news. These interactions tend to revolve around cafes and bars, in gbakas, at schools, shops and "mini parliament" public debate spaces, known as agoras.

Rumours are also spread through phone calls or text messages to relatives or friends in other locations, as well as, for those with access to the internet, WhatsApp, Facebook and less commonly Twitter and Instagram. Notably, while phone calls or face-to-face interactions tend to occur between people who know each other, there are many cases where text messages are sent anonymously and widely. The rapid rise of anonymous text messages underscores the ease with which news travels, as many interviewees noted that they regularly received unsolicited anonymous text messages purporting to be providing valuable information.[19] It is not entirely clear how this process works, though the large numbers of unsolicited messages sent by mobile phone companies and the government hint at the possibility of individuals being able to access lists of phone numbers for a fee.

For those who do use social media to spread and access information, Facebook and WhatsApp are by far the most used online platforms for sharing information. Facebook is particularly popular for sharing information[20] because it is easy to create groups and events, attracting like-minded supporters rapidly to new information and engaging people with a particular cause over the long-term.[21] Before fake news became so prominent, Facebook was regularly used to draw attention to problems faced by communities, notably after incidents of flooding, to collect funds for victims.[22] Now these same mechanisms are often used to garner followers and likes for fake news stories.

The spread of fake news through WhatsApp and Facebook appears to be assisted by bots created by external actors or political parties to help stories spread faster.[23] These tools are often involved in the creation of fake stories and subsequently generate mass "likes" for stories which assist in ensuring it goes viral.[24] As one respondent noted, "fake news is not new in Africa. Social media is just amplifying the spread of rumours that was already prominent in many West African countries".[25]

According to 2018 survey, about two-thirds of Facebook users are men, with a similar split on Instagram.[26] Research participants also testified that men were much more present on social media and in spreading fake news, not least since men were more involved in the political domain, which is where most fake news occurs.[27] Whilst men tend to be much more widely involved in spreading fake news and sharing political information on social media, women are much more often the targets. One research participant pointed out that

18. Interview Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
19. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021; Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 2 July 2021.
20. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021; Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021
21. Kalonji Mfunyi, 'Cartographie et analyse des médias sociaux en Côte d'Ivoire', p.14
22. Kalonji Mfunyi, 'Cartographie et analyse des médias sociaux en Côte d'Ivoire', p.14
23. Abidjan.Net, 'Côte d'Ivoire : Comment les «fake news» tentent d'intervenir dans l'élection présidentielle ou décryptage de l'article de Vice Média', 15 June 2020.
24. Abidjan.Net, 'Côte d'Ivoire : Comment les «fake news» tentent d'intervenir dans l'élection présidentielle ou décryptage de l'article de Vice Média', 15 June 2020.
25. Interview with Congolese journalist who has worked on programmes to prevent fake news in Côte d'Ivoire, France, 21 June 2021.
26. Kemp, 'Digital 2018: Côte d'Ivoire', DataReportal, 1 February 2018.
27. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
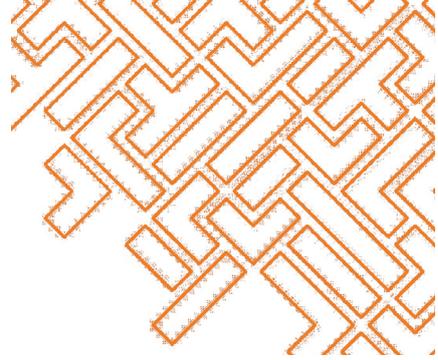
at Felix Houphouet-Boigny university in Abidjan, there was widespread harassment of women using fake news.[28] This situation has led to the establishment of Facebook groups designed to counter fake news which targets women and to protect them from abuse.[29] One such Facebook group is called Les AmazOon du Web. It aims to train women in the use of social media and information technology so they can better protect themselves from harassment.[30] For one interviewee this type of assistance is really useful for women because they often do not have the tools at their disposal to prevent or avoid attacks on social media.[31]

Another research participant pointed out that harassment of women via fake news was not just problematic at university and that this was a broader trend within society, "where women have begun to make some advances in their rights, this has prompted an onslaught of abuse on social media".[32] A female anti-fake news activist noted that some of the consequences of fake news stories for women were dire. She remarked that often fake news stories which targeted women standing for political office for example resulted in women being forced to flee or leave their husbands and children because of fear of attack.[33] In other cases, women have been attacked by their own husbands in response to fake news stories about them.[34]

# KEY FACTORS AND ENABLERS

The predominant figures involved in the spread of fake news are powerful political actors. One interviewee estimated, "90% of fake news in Côte d'Ivoire is in the political domain".[35] Political actors tend to use fake news during elections to drum up support for their parties or to denigrate the opposition, in turn increasing electoral tensions between the different parties and their followers. Indeed, the communication agencies representing the main political parties now have teams specialising in digital reputations.[36] Using algorithms and bots, they create rumours to test the water. According to one international journalist, this is a common approach to information sharing by the Ivoirian government, "often it seeks to gauge public response by leaking information or even fake news, and then working out a policy based on the reaction to hashtags to try and make an event or figure trend on Twitter or Facebook"[37] One interviewee who works to improve media understanding and prevent the spread of fake news said that although fake news was not exclusive to political parties it was mainly these organisations that were involved in this scene. Noting that" all political parties in Côte d'Ivoire had benefited from the spread of fake news and encouraged its dispersion".[38]

28. Interview with Congolese journalist who has worked on programmes to prevent fake news in Côte d'Ivoire, France, 21 June 2021.
29. Ibid.
30. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 2 July 2021.
31. Ibid.
32. Interview with Ivoirian man, Bradford, 22 June 2021.
33. Interview with female anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 2 July 2021.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview with Ivoirian fact checker, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
36. Duhem, 'Côte d'Ivoire Presidential Election: On the Web, Anything Goes', Africa Report, 29 October 2020.
37. Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
38. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
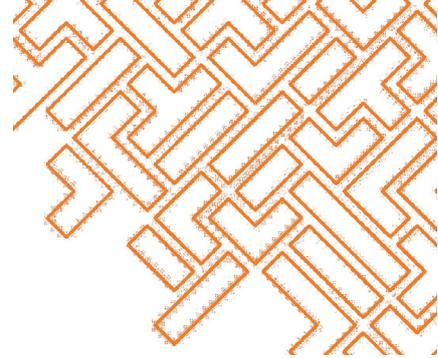
The ruling Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pourla Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP) uses tens of different individuals, some of whom are associated with the Ivorian communications agency "Voodoo", to spread positive media about the political party.[39] RHDP advisers report that there are a variety of different cyber activists involved, including moderators with in- depth expertise, those incharge of reinvigorating electoral campaigns and even a few activists who are allegedly tasked with initiating rumours to test the waters.[40]

The main opposition parties, including the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI), the PDCI and the Génération et Peuples Solidaires (GPS) all use extensive social media accounts to engage the public and garner support. Their strategies are similar, according to interviewees, with most parties seeking to use social media to undermine their opponents.[41] It is noteworthy, however, that Guillaume Soro, former leader of the FN rebellion which ruled northern Côte d'Ivoire during the civil war, and who is now head of the GPS party, was an early adopter of Twitter. Ahead of the 2020 election, Soro became regarded as a 'modern candidate' because of his use of social media and the way in which it had enabled him to engage with youth.

Following in Soro's footsteps, the PDCI has also launched a widely followed Facebook page, with nearly 60,000 followers, which links to its PDCI- TV channel.[42] Bédié, the longstanding PDCI leader and candidate for the 2020 election, has been heavily involved in spreading dis-information . Ahead of the October 2020 presidential election he began discussing the takeover of mines in northern Côte d'Ivoire by 'foreigners', feeding into wartime rhetoric on what it means to be Ivoirian and stoking tensions between perceived allogenic and autochthonous populations.[43] Much of his online content, and the content of those affiliated with him, is perceived, or has been proven, to be fake.[44] Sponsorship campaigns and Facebook pages affiliated with him, were blocked by Facebook in May 2020 ahead of the October presidential election.[45]

The increase of fake news during the presidential election in October 2020 and the legislative polls in March 2021 underscored the political nature of the phenomenon. As one Ivoirian journalist pointed out, "fake news is a political weapon in Côte d'Ivoire. It is very, very, very politicised... around the elections everyone was using fake news to destabilise their opponents. This was very, very widespread".[46] Politicians also appeared to be seeking to get journalists to publish false information about physical damage wrought on them by their political adversaries. One international journalist noted that during the election she was regularly receiving text messages with pictures of injuries and attacks from members of the cabinet saying 'look what the opposition is doing to us' or vice versa with messages from the opposition.[47] The information was rarely true.

During the elections, there was "no good information" available to Ivoirians about who they were voting for, and this shaped the whole atmosphere around the vote.[48]  One female voter agreed;

41. Interview with Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
42. Duhem, ,Côte d'Ivoire Presidential Election: On the Web, Anything Goes', Africa Report, 29 October 2020.
43. Bloomberg, ,Ivory Coast Sees Return to Anti-Foreigner Rhetoric Ahead of Vote', 28 June 2019.
44. Duhem, ,Côte d'Ivoire Presidential Election: On the Web, Anything Goes', Africa Report, 29 October 2020.
45. Duhem, ,Côte d'Ivoire Presidential Election: On the Web, Anything Goes', Africa Report, 29 October 2020.
46. Interview with an Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
47. Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
48. Interview with an Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
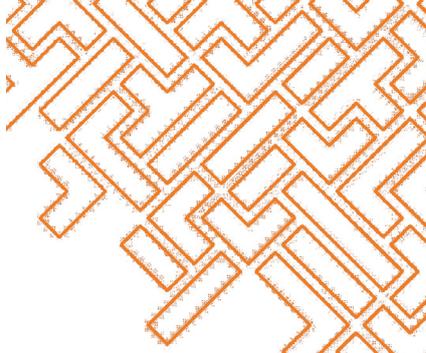
*A lot of fake news was circulating that made us really scared. Fake information was everywhere and was spread in the hope of making people scared. People were so worried about attacks, there was talk of a genocide happening. All this news sent us away from the towns – we all went back to our villages because we were too scared to go and vote because of the fear of attack or violence. It definitely pushed a lot of people not to vote... There was so much fake news you couldn't tell what was true and what was not.*[49]

It appears that a common tactic by all political parties during the electoral period was to make the election appear more dangerous than it was to reduce voter turnout. This was beneficial for the opposition because it prompted people to adhere more strongly to its call for a boycott, while it was also helpful for the government, which benefited from fewer members of the opposition voting.

> **"** *Fake news is a political weapon in Côte d'Ivoire. It is very, very, very politicised… around the elections everyone was using fake news to destabilise their opponents* **"**

In addition to those who work for political parties intentionally spreading fake news to enhance their political party's reputation and denigrate the opposition, there are also many significant online figures who support political parties but who do not work for them. These partisans seek to promote their party and act as second-hand spreaders of misinformation. They believe almost anything that their chosen political party says on social media and share it widely and with vigour.[50] They are key enablers for the spread of misinformation on social media and offline as well, though their involvement in spreading fake news is much less pernicious than those who initiate such stories at the top levels of politics.

According to one interviewee who works closely with programmes aimed at preventing fake news, these people rarely realise that the information they are sharing is fake and their involvement in the fake news ecosystem is typically involuntary.[51] Another interviewee, a specialist in communications at the UK embassy in Abidjan, agreed with this interpretation, noting that "some people are just eagerly following current affairs and accidentally spread fake news, while others have much more intentionally spread mistruths for the sake of their political ambitions".[52]

49. Interview with Ivoirian woman, Abidjan, 24 June 2021
50. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
51. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
52. Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021.
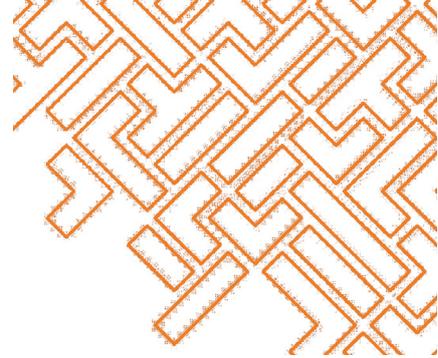
In the latter category are many newspapers and journalists who are affiliated with politicians and help to spread falsehoods for their own political or financial benefit. Several newspapers are owned by political actors, including 'Le Patriote' which was established by former Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko. One anti-fake news activist noted, "there are many journalists and newspapers who are very close to political parties. In these instances, information is produced by these publications which spreads hate".[53] This has been particularly notable in times of political turmoil. For example, in the aftermath of the 2010-2011 election, 'Le Patriote' included a series of stories highlighting the need to 'hunt down' all those resisting the government.[54] An Ivoirian journalist believes that;

> *80-90% of Ivoirian journalists don't verify the information they use – they are all connected to a political party or a political figure and they work with them. They take it straight from the account of avatars online without verifying. They want to promote their political party, they aren't interested in the real news.*[55]

'Avatars', anonymous social media accounts given fake names, are key online actors. These accounts often belong to political actors, but the real user is hidden behind a pseudonym. This includes the infamous Chris Yapi, a well-known avatar generally believed to be linked to Guillaume Soro.[56] One interviewee noted that Yapi is so popular that "people watch this guy on Twitter more than they watch the news or the government – even in villages people are always looking to see what Chris Yapi said".[57] Yapi has provided compromising information about Ouattara and other political figures. Sometimes, he appears to be very well informed, indicating that he must have senior connections in government, though at other times he spreads information which is not even close to the truth.

Yapi's credibility, and significant following - nearly 600,000 followers on his main Facebook account - stem from his catchy phrases and skilful showmanship. His posts are discussed at the highest levels of government, in the cabinet office and by foreign diplomats, which only lends further to his credibility. According to one interviewee "the fact that avatars give information that frequently transpires to be true is also central to their success".[58] The success of avatars like Yapi also comes from the fact that there is a dearth of information coming from the government itself.

The success of Yapi has also led to the emergence of copy-cats, seeking to build their influence through spreading compelling stories online. One of these influencers, who became infamous for a serious incident of fake news dispersion in May 2021, is female blogger Fofana Nawa, known online as 'Succès'.[59] This cyber activist was behind a video posted on Facebook which purportedly demonstrated horrific attacks on Ivoirian migrants in Niger, inciting retaliatory attacks on Nigeriens living in Côte d'Ivoire. It subsequently emerged that the video, which was filmed in Nigeria, was taken out of context and had

---

53. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
54. International Crisis Group, 'Côte d'Ivoire: Defusing Tensions', p.12.
55. Interview Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
56. Evidence is limited for this connection, though it is noteworthy that a tweet sent from Yapi's account related to the death of former Ivoirian Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko in March 2021 was quickly deleted and later sent from Soro's account, appearing to indicate that Soro was behind Yapi's online activity.
57. Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021.
58. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 28 June 2021.
59. Burkina24, 'Chasse aux Nigériens en Côte d'Ivoire : La lanceuse de la «fake news» condamnée', 23 May 2021.
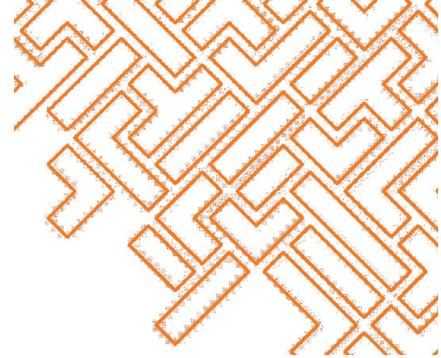
nothing to do with Ivoirians. But the spreading of fake news is not just the domain of online activists. For example, many research participants pointed to the role of people speaking in public spaces around Abidjan, who spread fake news to generate a popular following. These public speaking areas, known as agoras, became popular under Gbagbo's leadership, and provide space for large groups of people to gather for political debates. These "mini-parliaments" are often used to spread fake news, particularly in the sprawling, populous districts of Abobo and Yopougon in Abidjan.[60]

In contrast there appears to be very low public trust in what the government has to say. As one interviewee noted, "trust in Yapi is much higher than the government because he shares truthful information more often".[61] During the focus group discussions held for this research, younger social media users were the least likely to verify information before sharing it online. But when they did seek to verify information, this often consisted of listening to avatars like Chris Yapi to check whether they had said it as well.[62] This demonstrates the power of certain avatars in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as the paradox of the absence of good sources of information: Ivoirians tend to use a known source of fake news to verify whether information they are sharing is true or not.

The absence of real information created or shared by the government poses obstacles for journalists too. According to one international journalist, the spread of false news is generally the result of "a lack of information rather than any malicious attempts to spread rumours".[63] While this comment does not appear to be entirely true, given the many politically affiliated media outlets and journalists intentionally disseminating fake information, it is noteworthy that the task of well-meaning journalists is made much more challenging by the political environment they operate in. "It is so challenging to verify information in Côte d'Ivoire that some people do not even realise this is a necessity of good journalism" said one respondent.[64]

Moreover, even where journalists do seek to publish and verify real information, they are often the target of violent attacks or arrests for doing so, likely diminishing their interest in pursuing their work with integrity that holds the government to account. In November 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that a series of journalists had been detained or arrested while covering the October presidential election, while the general manager of influential news portal koaci.com was arrested in June 2017 after criticising the disappearance of political prisoners.[65]

Another issue for journalism in Côte d'Ivoire is that the quantity of news emerging on social media creates competition for newspapers. They cannot produce the same amount of information of good quality and so many newspapers have instead opted to provide significantly more information but of considerably worse quality.[66] This has led to newspapers simply copying and pasting stories from social media, rather than doing their

60. Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021.
61. Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021.
62. Focus group with youth participants, Abidjan, 26 June 2021.
63. Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
64. Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
65. Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Journalistes détenus, attaqués alors qu'ils couvraient une élection contestée en Côte d'Ivoire', 19 November 2020 ; Agence Ecofin, 'Laurent Despas, directeur du site d'information koaci.com, a été arrêté par la gendarmerie de Côte d'Ivoire', 25 May 2016.
66. Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021; Interview with international journalist, Abidjan Leanne de Bassompierre, 15 June 2021.
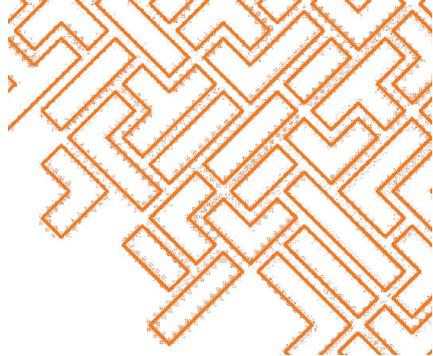
own investigations. It was the view of an international journalist that "people definitely use sources from social media to write articles".[67] This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that doing independent investigations is incredibly difficult. One interviewee, who was previously a journalist in Côte d'Ivoire for an international publication, pointed out that many officials in senior government roles refuse to talk to local journalists about recent events because they do not perceive them to be important enough, only divulging information to international reporters.[68]

# FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

Côte d'Ivoire's fraught political atmosphere and failure to build inclusive national reconciliation after the cessation of civil conflict in 2011 has leant itself to the manipulation of information.

> *There is a strong possibility that fake news is caused by the post–conflict political context.... Among every level of society people use fake news to find and destroy the image of others. They use fake news to try to control the situation and advance their own interests.*[69]

The 2020 presidential and 2021 legislative elections highlighted just how dangerous fake news can be in a tense political atmosphere. In the lead up to the 2021 vote, rumours abounded that large quantities of weapons and mercenaries were arriving in various districts of Abidjan.[70] Stories circulated among opposition groups online that the government was mobilising youth gangs, known as Microbes, to target opposition supporters.[71] These types of stories led to intercommunal violence in Dabou between pro-Ouattara and pro-Gbagbo/FPI supporters, that left 11 dead and 40 injured.[72]

> *It is clear many Ivoirians struggle to identify the difference between false and accurate information.*

67. Interview with international journalist Leanne de Bassompierre, Abidjan, 15 June 2021.
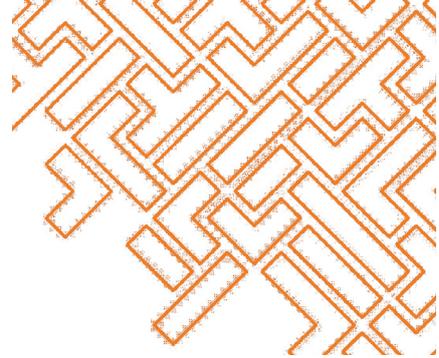68. Ibid.
69. Interview with Ivorian man, Bradford, 22 June 2021.60Tv5Monde, 'Présidentielle en Côte d'Ivoire : la désinformation
70. pullule sur les réseaux sociaux', 30 October 2020.
71. AFP Factuel, 'Présidentielle en Côte d'Ivoire: quand les réseaux sociaux jettent de l'huile sur le feu', 30 October 2020.
72. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.

The idea that the government was mobilizing Microbes against opposition supporters was false but resurfaced in June 2021 when former President Gbagbo sought to return to Côte d'Ivoire.[73] The rumour resulted in several clashes between groups of youths in the Abidjan suburbs of Port-Bouët and Yopougon.[74]

Perhaps the most concerning incident however centred around the town of M'battao. In November 2020, post-electoral violence erupted in the town after the Agni ethnic community protested the third term of President Ouattara, who is ethnically Malinke.[75] The protest began in a part of town which has historically been home to traditionally northern ethnic groups like the Malinke.[76] The Agni burnt shops and vehicles and threw stones, clashing with the northern communities in the area. The clashes led to the deaths of six people, with 40 others injured.[77] The initial absence of information about what happened in M'battao led to chaos on social media , where catastrophic accounts of what happened circulated. One person said they had been at the morgue where 34 people were dead, all of whom were Agni, suggesting the northern communities had been killing them.[78] A fake report purported to be from the ,gendarmerie which claimed 38 had died, went viral on social media. There were 5,000 tweets about M'battao on 10 November[79] with narratives exacerbated by opposition politicians like Guillaume Soro, who called for the international community to open its eyes to the "massacre at M'battao".[80] The death toll at this point was only three, but it was made to sound like a genocide as social media accounts repeatedly linked it to events like the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.[81]

It is clear many Ivoirians struggle to identify the difference between false and accurate information. One focus group of male participants in Abidjan, argued that one of the main drivers of fake news was the presence of significant numbers of illiterate people who did not understand how to decipher fake news.[82] Sorting fact from fiction is a challenge for all social media users. One interviewee who works on public initiatives to prevent the spread of fake news pointed out that despite his background in this area, he had been a victim of fake news:

> *I once received a story which I was sure of because I was sure of the source, but it ended up being fake and I had to correct this on social media. So even when we are well trained, we can fall into this trap. Nobody is safe from fake news.[83]*

Increasingly fake news is produced with a high- level of sophistication. One of the most prominent, and difficult to verify, forms of fake news are photos or videos taken from a foreign country or previous event, but then captioned with a controversial, different title, which obfuscates its origin, presenting it as a current event or problem.[84] This was a particularly prevalent form of disinformation during the electoral period. During this time several images circulated on social media supposedly demonstrating political prisoners

73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Le Monde, 'En Côte d'Ivoire, les « fake news » jettent de l'huile sur le feu', 13 November 2020.
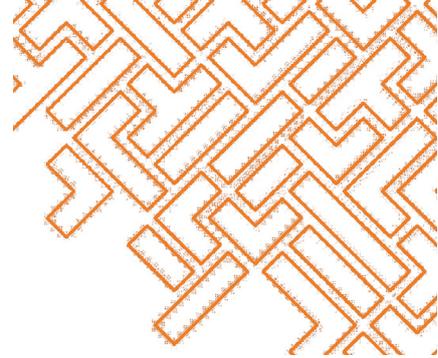76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021.
83. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 24 June 2021
84. AFP Factuel, 'Présidentielle en Côte d'Ivoire: quand les réseaux sociaux jettent de l'huile sur le feu', 30 October 2020.

under Ouattara's administration.[85] The pictures, though deplorable, dated from newspaper articles in 2006 – well before Ouattara took office - which denounced the dire state of prisons.[86] Similarly, images were in circulation which purported to show opposition campaign buses causing serious accidents on the roads; these were in fact photos taken in Ghana between 2018 and 2020.[87] In both cases the images appeared intended to provoke anger and outrage among a particular section of the electorate.

Another factor that allows fake news to have growing influence in Côte d'Ivoire, is the government's poor communication strategy. It fails to keep the public adequately informed, yet at the same time it seeks to maintain very tight control over the information sphere.[88] In the absence of a shortage of credible information people often create information to fill this void.[89] There have been three prime ministers who have been very unwell in Côte d'Ivoire in recent months, two of whom have died, and yet the government has been incredibly slow to communicate this information each time. "Rumours emerge from the gap that is created... the government fails to confirm or deny information".[90] This situation lends considerable credibility to avatars like Chris Yapi who regularly shares information through tweets, Facebook posts, and his own TV channel which can be streamed through Facebook. So much so, in fact, that one anti- fake news activist noted, "so many people listen to Chris Yapi first thing in the morning because they are craving information, information, which the government has often been reluctant to provide".[91]

When the death of former Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko was announced in March 2021, Yapi propagated the idea that the brother of President Ouattara, Téné Birahima, had poisoned him.[92] This was said to be an attempt to allow 'photocopie', as Ouattara's brother is known because of his strong resemblance to his older brother, to take up a significant position in the administration, paving the way for an easier transition when Ouattara's presidency ends in 2025.[93] The rumours spread widely, and when 'photocopie' was made defence minister shortly after Bakayoko's death, this only served to lend credibility to the narrative.[94] According to a communications specialist, this story made it very difficult for the new defence minister to do his job effectively because many in the armed forces believed Yapi's narrative and, having been close to Bakayoko, did not want him to succeed.[95]

Further, because of the government's failure to communicate regularly and clearly, there is a severe lack of trust in information that the government does provide. This is not without good reason. Many people interviewed for this study believed that the government regularly uses fake news to try and reshape public opinion when a current event makes them look bad.[96] The absence of trust in the information that is provided by the government has been underscored during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among Ivoirians surveyed by the Africa Centre for Disease Control, two in three believed

85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Interview with international journalist, Abidjan, 15 June 2021; Interview Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021; Interview with international journalist, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
89. Interview with international journalist Leanne de Bassompierre, Abidjan, 15 June 2021.
90. Interview Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
91. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 2 July 2021.
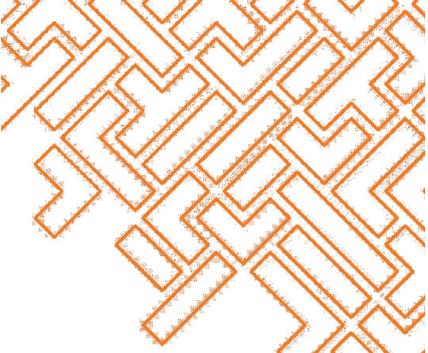92. Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
96. Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021.

the threat from Covid-19 had been exaggerated.[97] Additionally, focus group participants did not believe any information the government had given around the disease.[98] One particularly common rumour surrounding the pandemic was that the vaccines given to authorities on television to promote the vaccination campaign were different from those being given to ordinary Ivoirians.[99] The lack of perceptibly valid information surrounding Covid-19 has had a negative impact on vaccine rollout. The Ivoirian government has sought to inoculate 20% of the population and received 500,000 doses of AstraZeneca at the end of February.[100] However, by the end of March, it had only managed to vaccinate 34,388 people.[101]

# EXTERNAL SHAPERS

In Cote d'Ivoire most of the external involvement in the fake news ecosystem comes from international public relations (PR) companies. Ivoirian political parties increasingly work with these companies to improve their image around election time. In the lead up to the 2020 presidential election Tunisian PR company UReputation, led by French-Tunisian businessman Lotfi Bel Hadj, was active on Facebook to advance the interests of PDCI leader Henri Konan Bédié.[102] An investigation into these activities by Digital Forensic Research Lab saw Facebook remove 446 pages, 96 groups and 200 Instagram accounts.[103]

UReputation's operations had consisted of creating seemingly harmless pages about tourism, links with the diaspora and the fight against Covid-19, that attracted a wide audience, before changing tone and using them for political propaganda. One of these Facebook pages was "Elections Côte d'Ivoire", launched on 10 March 2020, which presented itself as providing neutral information about the forthcoming election. In total, these sites reached an estimated 4 million internet users before Facebook shut them down. As is typical with these kinds of disinformation campaigns, a lot of the information was not outright false but the pattern of behaviour and the myriad connections across the network showed a widespread intent to mislead. According to Facebook the operation invested the equivalent of US$331,000 in paid advertisements.[104]

External involvement in information flows appears to be heightened during election periods. But evidence that the Ouattara administration itself has undertaken a longer-term strategy to gain insight from other countries to help tackle fake news or disperse fake news in more innovative ways is very limited. One anti-fake news activist noted that

---

97. Devex, 'Is Côte d'Ivoire's slow COVID-19 vaccine rollout linked to hesitancy?', 31 March 2021.
98. Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021; Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
99. Focus group with female participants, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
100. Devex, 'Is Côte d'Ivoire's slow COVID-19 vaccine rollout linked to hesitancy?', 31 March 2021.
101. Ibid.
102. Koaci.com, 'Côte d'Ivoire : Fabrication de fausses nouvelles pour peser sur la Présidentielle, Henri Konan Bédié cité dans une enquête internationale', 9 June 2020.
103. Ibid.
104. DFRLab, 'DFRLab uncovers Tunisia-based political influence operation on Facebook', 5 June 2020.
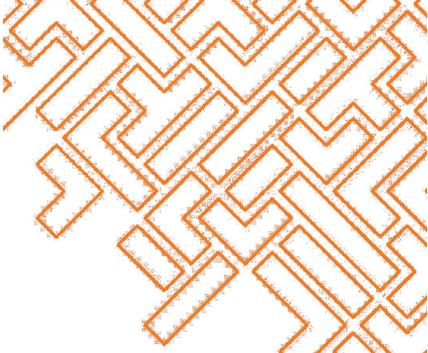
whereas in Guinea, where the ruling party had been found to be working closely with China to develop its fake news capacity to affect election results, this did not seem to be as prominent in Côte d'Ivoire.[105]

Other external influences in the fake news ecosystem in Côte d'Ivoire appear to come from those politicians who have close ties with foreign governments. For example, an Ivoirian journalist noted the connection between high- profile opposition figure Nathalie Yamb and the Russian government.[106] Yamb, who is allied with opposition leader Guillaume Soro, lives between Russia and Switzerland and regularly shares pro-Russia information online.[107] According to interviewees, this is part of a wider attempt to diminish the influence of France, particularly its role in responding to the threat of terrorism in the north of the country.

# ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

The Ivorian government has introduced legal revisions to the penal code, as well as awareness campaigns, to crack down on fake news, while fact-checking organisations have also become more prominent. Awareness campaigns, including the establishment of call centres, training programmes and public notices, have emerged since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has prompted the government to find ways to communicate more clearly with the population.

For instance, the Ministry of Youth Promotion and Employment has been supported by telecoms operator MTN to open a call centre with the capacity to deal with 5,000 non-stop free calls to help it fight fake news and rumours related to the pandemic. This is part of its communication campaign called 'Le Bon Son'.[108] Equally in March 2020 an internet radio station WA FM that broadcasts mainly on WhatsApp was established to fight fake news around Covid-19.[109]

Fact-checking has also grown in prominence in the last decade, with several organisations emerging, including Abidjan Fact Check. Mean- while some non-governmental organisations and embassies have begun to initiate fact checking training. Nonetheless, these organisations remain much less popular than those sites which are renowned for sharing media that is unverified. Abidjan Fact Check has just less than 1,000 Facebook followers compared to Yapi's nearly 600,000 for example. In general, the entrenched political divisions in the country are a prevailing challenge. "Information that confirms an individual's point of view is rapidly shared and 'liked' with little consideration for its veracity, there is not significant popular interest in fact checking for now" noted one respondent.[110]

---

105. Interview with Congolese journalist who has worked on programmes to prevent fake news in Côte d'Ivoire, France, 21 June 2021
106. Interview with Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021.
107. Interview with Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021; Interview with communications specialist UK embassy, Abidjan, 25 June 2021.
108. APA News, 'Covid-19: Ivorian govt uses call center to fight fake news', 7 May 2020.
109. RFI, 'Côte d'Ivoire: WA Fm, la webradio qui lutte contre la désinformation sur WhatsApp', 10 April 2020.
110. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 2 July 2021.
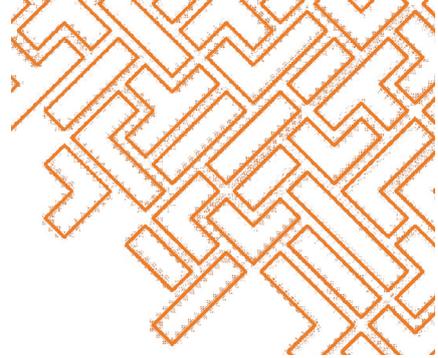
Most research participants agreed that these sorts of educational and awareness campaigns are much more effective than attempts to legally crackdown on and repress those who spread fake news. However, the latter is at the forefront of government thinking. Article 173 of the penal code forbids the publication, diffusion or spread of any false information through any medium.[111] Any infraction of this law is punishable by one to three years in prison and the payment of a fine.[112] But the government's emphasis on punishing those who are involved in fake news is not particularly effective because it does not address the root cause of the problem. As one anti-fake news activist noted, "the strategy [the government] uses is poor. They are trying to address the problem after it has happened – they arrest people who are involved in the crime if it is particularly serious. But they don't educate people beforehand not to spread fake news".[113] Furthermore, the law is selectively applied.

In February 2017, six journalists, including three media owners, were arrested for spreading false information about a mutiny by security forces.[114] The government said the fake news that was being dispersed was designed to encourage the armed forces to revolt.[115] In May 2020, prosecutors arrested Etienne Daipo N'Ponon, general secretary of an umbrella opposition political group called Ensemble Pour la Démocratie et la Souveraineté, and accused him, alongside cyber-activist, Francois Ebiba Yapo, of disseminating rumours that led to a riot at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yapo, who in early April called for the destruction of Covid-19 centre in Abidjan, triggering a riot[116] was arrested on 7 May and later charged with "harming national defence and disturbing public order" after "several publications of fake news on social networks".[117] Yapo is still awaiting trial but faces between three and five years in prison if he is convicted. Also in May, 'Succès', the blogger who spread fake news about Nigeriens torturing Ivoirian migrants, leading to mass attacks on Nigeriens living in Abidjan, was arrested and imprisoned for five years for "spreading fake news, undermining stability and posing a threat to public order".[118]

> " *Information that confirms an individual's point of view is rapidly shared and 'liked' with little consideration for its veracity, there is not significant popular interest in fact checking for now* "

111. Koaci.com, 'Côte d'Ivoire : Voici ce que la justice reprocherait véritablement aux pro-Soro arrêtés en décembre dernier', 2 March 2020.
112. Ibid.
113. Interview with anti-fake news activist, Abidjan, 24 June 2021.
114. TheGuardian.ng, 'Ivory Coast arrests six journalists over mutiny 'false information'', 13 February 2017.
115. Ibid.
116. Irfan, 'Opposition Leader Arrested in Ivory Coast Over Virus "Fake News"', UrduPoint, 20 May 2020.
117. Ibid.
118. SoirInfo, 'Interpellée pour incitation au trouble et appel au meurtre, Fofana Nawa dit "Succès" condamnée à 5 ans de prison ferme et 2.000.000 FCFA d'amende', 22 May 2021.
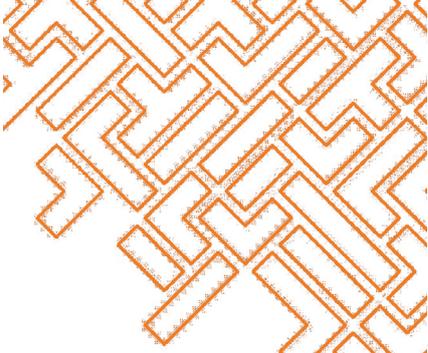
At times the government appears to have mobilised the concept of fake news to crackdown on dissenters and key opposition figures. This politicisation of the concept of fake news undermines efforts to combat it and makes it a partisan issue. This in turn further undermines trust in the government and contributes to the diffusion of more fake news and conspiracy theories, which are shared widely. In fact, there was a sense among some interviewees that the government did not want to totally eradicate fake news as a concept. One anti-fake news activist noted, "the government is not trying to do this right, they are not trying to properly eradicate fake news, because it is useful to them".[119] Another agreed, noting that fake news is a valuable tool for the government for when they want to crackdown on the opposition and reinforce their position, "it enables them to criminalise the opposition for spreading rumours and since Ouattara is still in a precarious position this is useful for them".[120]

# CONCLUSION

This report has demonstrated the intensely political nature of the fake news ecosystem in Cote d'Ivoire. Most falsehoods are spread by political actors belonging to one of the major political parties, while the content of fake news tends to revolve around longstanding, and tense, political issues. Information is spread rapidly, both through social media online, and offline through word-of- mouth and print media. Indeed, one of the most important findings of this report is that fake news can spread just as fast offline, through phone calls, text messages, and face-to-face interactions on public transport and public spaces, as it is can through social media. Importantly, Ivoirians spoken to for this paper testified to the incredibly high value placed on information given to them by friends and families, reducing the desire or need to verify such information.

This presents a major obstacle to the prevention of rapid fake news' distribution. Fake news can also have real-world consequences. This report has demonstrated that during period of heightened electoral tensions fake news can lead to increased risks of violence and deaths, while also diminishing voter participation in elections by exacerbating existing, longstanding political tensions between ethnic groups and serving political leaders who wish to manipulate and divide the population. Women are disproportionately targeted.

It is against this background that it is vital that fake news is brought under control, not least because, as many interviewees testified, there was a link between fake news circulation and the previous civil war which ended in 2011. But so far government efforts to prevent the generation of fake news stories remain ad-hoc and politicised. The focus on repression and de jure methods, ignores the fact that the problem stems predominantly from a lack of education and the absence of a pro-active government communication strategy.[120] This means that attempts to prevent fake news rely largely on treating the symptom rather than the cause.

119. Interview with Congolese journalist who has worked on programmes to prevent fake news in Côte d'Ivoire, France, 21 June 2021.
120. Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
121. Interview with an Ivoirian journalist, Abidjan, 23 June 2021; Focus group with male participants, Abidjan, 27 June 2021; Interview with international journalist, Abidjan, 15 June 2021; Interview with international journalist Katarina Höije, Abidjan, 18 June 2021.
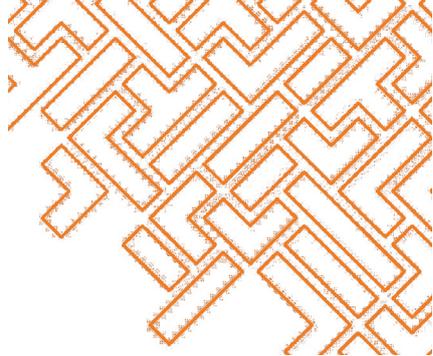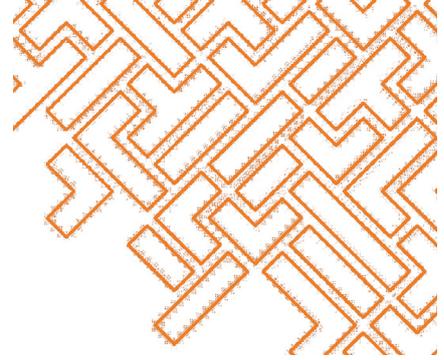
# RECOMMANDATIONS

It would be prudent for the government to address some of the root causes by considering much broader awareness raising campaigns for civilians and journalists regarding how to recognise fake news and how to verify information. Further, it is essential that the government makes a much more concerted effort to communicate clearly, truthfully, and efficiently with the population. A failure to do so creates the space for divergent conspiracy theories and fake news stories to emerge and take root. Finally, where the government does deploy its more repressive means of cracking down on fake news, these should be applied to all political actors across parties, not merely opposition. This would help to depoliticise the response, reduce mistrust in the government and raise the possibility of a sustained effort to reduce fake news across the political spectrum. To reduce the spread of fake news, it is recommended that the government, fact- checking groups, social media organisations, civil society and political parties undertake the following actions:

1 The government communications ministry - the Ministère de la Communication et des Médias - should initiate broader awareness campaigns throughout the country to inform civilians about how to recognise fake news and how to verify information before sharing it widely with friends. These initiatives should be collaborative, involving social media organisations, fact-checking groups and civil society to ensure that they are not seen as partisan information campaigns and reach a broad section of the population.

2 Fact-checking organisations and large Ivoirian newspapers should provide training programmes for journalists regarding how to produce good journalism and the necessity of verifying information before publishing it.

3 Civil society groups, fact-checking organisations and social media companies should work together to encourage the emergence of new media outlets which are not closely affiliated with either the government or the opposition, and aid them in publishing politically neutral, verified information.

4 The government should hold more regular press conferences where they inform the public about key government initiatives and give information about events affecting ministers or senior officials. To further increase public awareness, the government could work with social media companies and local radio stations to broadcast these press releases more widely.

5 Political parties should aim to diminish the amount of fake news spread by their supporters by establishing clear codes of conduct regarding the use of social media and the spread of fake news. To ensure this is effective, parties could introduce greater monitoring of their members on social media and request that supporters who were seen to regularly abuse the rules have their accounts suspended or deleted.
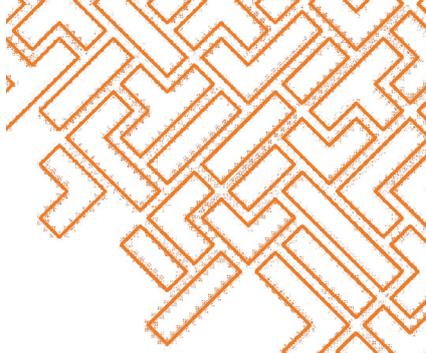
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Moody is a freelance political risk and peacebuilding consultant, focusing on West and Central Africa. She recently completed a PhD on post-conflict peacebuilding in Cote d'Ivoire from King's College London.

**Centre for Democracy & Development**
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

📍 16 A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate, Jabi Airport Road, Mbora District, Abuja, FCT

🌐 cddwestafrica.org

✉ research@cddwestafrica.org

🐦 @cddwestafrica

With Support | **OSIWA**