

DRIVING DIVISION? DISINFORMATION AND THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN NIGERIA.



Centre for Democracy
and Development

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The volume of disinformation now circulating in Nigeria is unprecedented and is further exacerbating pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions, says a new Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) report released today. The study is based on more than sixty interviews with respondents across six (6) states - Borno, Kano, Lagos, Imo, Kogi and Bayelsa - each chosen to represent a geo-political zone.

The report finds that "Nigeria's political and ethno-religious landscape, challenged by insecurity, provides fertile ground for the spread of disinformation on social media platforms and private messaging applications that are growing in users month on month". Though the report found that the potential for inter-ethnic strife driven by disinformation varies on a state by state basis.

Disinformation, different from misinformation, in its deliberate intent to mislead, is often designed to either delegitimise institutions, groups or personalities, glorify a leader or during elections to confuse voters, instigate voter apathy or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. The study found that "with increasingly sophisticated technology, it is becoming harder to decipher fact from fiction online in Nigeria with any great certainty".

CDD's FINDINGS

CDD uncovered over 80 Facebook Hausa pages which had been created to replicate, often using the same profile picture and similar name, an existing user or organisation who is a prominent online or offline personality. Automated bots, traditional praise singers and paid content curators, particularly around elections, all play a role in further obscuring the truth, often directed to do so by political actors.

A key finding of the research is to recognise that disinformation created online gets offline and shapes wider debates and discussions across Nigerian media by influencing content that is printed in newspapers or discussed on television and radio programmes. This impact may be hard to measure quantifiably, but is increasingly important to recognise as report author Idayat Hassan acknowledges, "in Nigeria it is increasingly difficult to draw a distinct line between content that is shared on social media and information reported or broadcast by print media, radio and television".

That is not to say that the Nigerian media houses are simply lifting content from social media and print it word for word - though in some cases they do - but that due to the speed information travels and the way in which content can be created and shared at a community level, social media is increasingly used as a source of content inspiration to be investigated further. It also provides a way to quickly gauge the popular pulse on a particular issue or to understand the questions that citizens are asking which remain unanswered. This opens up the possibility of online disinformation reaching a new, and wider, audience.

But the report also recognises that not all information shared online is false. In fact, "the same

tools and mechanisms that are enabling disinformation to penetrate society faster than ever before, are those that can be used to shed light on facts that can drive more accountable and transparent governance". The balance that needs to be struck is to find ways in which these latter uses are amplified, and the former increasingly discredited if social media's influence is to be more positive than negative.

In discussing how best to counter the challenge posed by disinformation the report argues that better moderation of content by online platforms and regulation of their activities, along with improving citizen's civic and digital literacy should be prioritised over regulation, which remains open to political manipulation. Regulation to curb the spread of false information is being debated in Nigeria, but it comes with serious risks to citizens' freedom of expression, the report argues. A more sustainable solution lies with creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry, capable of assessing for themselves what is true and what is not online.

The research proposes six (6) key recommendations:

1. Continued support to the media industry, including journalists and editors, to improve the quality of reporting, embed fact-checkers and improve non-english language content.
2. Civic and digital education that supports critical thinking and reasoning, starting at secondary school level.
3. Ongoing social media media mapping aimed at identifying potential hotspots of violence. With the information used to inform peacebuilding interventions.
4. Advocate for global social media companies to do more to prioritise growing markets like Nigeria when it comes to content moderation.
5. Encourage and provide technical support to government bodies to convey accurate and a political information using official social media handles.
6. Empower NITDA to ensure widespread compliance with data protection regulations passed in 2019 and to further strengthen this legislation by having it enacted into law.

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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.