

AFRICA FACING DOWN DISINFORMATION

April 2026



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This report was produced under the project, Countering Information Disorder in West and Central Africa: Analyzing the Dynamics, Impacts, Actors, and Strategic Responses, funded by International Development Research Center (IDRC-CRDI) Canada. The project investigates the evolving landscape of information disorder in the region, with particular attention to its drivers, impacts, key actors, and strategic responses.

The current study examines six countries in West and Central Africa, highlighting issues of information integrity and incorporating a gender perspective.

Paradigm Initiative extends its appreciation to the individuals who contributed to this research, including the research team, key informants, Build-up' Phoenix team, experts consulted directly and indirectly.

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The findings of this project are those of the individual researchers concerned.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
2	FOREWORD BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
4	COUNTRY REPORTS
34	GENDER OVERVIEW
38	CROSS COUNTRY COMPARISON
39	CROSS CUTTING / REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS
41	METHODOLOGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides factual assessments of disinformation and its impact on the information ecosystem in six African countries. It highlights how citizens are being disinformed to their collective disadvantage from deliberate lies plus content presented out of context, as well as the unintentional dissemination of falsehoods. Understanding disinformation, and how it goes hand-in-hand with emotional identity appeals, hate speech and conspiracy thinking, is the basis of strategic recommendations to push back against the threats.

Information integrity is a precondition for rational debate and a culture of peace and co-operation.

But this study shows how information pollution is wreaking havoc in Benin, Cameroon, Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, where ethnic tensions and gender inequalities are being fanned by the flood of false content.

This expert-based report is based upon separate and longer country studies that provide grounded and context-sensitive analysis. As a condensed synthesis, it enables comparative insight across the countries, and also assesses the challenge of gendered-disinformation across the wider region.

The study also documents various counters to disinformation, noting that state measures such as internet shut-downs and mass surveillance are not compliant with international human rights standards¹.



The findings are based upon document and literature analysis, interviews with experts and observers, insights from focus groups and responses from online surveys, and big data analysis. Each of the researchers has signed and adhered to an ethical research code. All have been gender-sensitive in their investigations. Their output includes systematic recommendations to governments, platforms, civil society and others.

Readers are invited to visit the PIN website for access to the full expert studies that inform this research. These knowledge resources are in both French and English. The methodology is summarised at the end of this report, and each individual study contains further elaboration as well as full citations of literature consulted.

1. ACHPR Resolution 573. <https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/573-resolution-deployment-mass-and-unlawful-targeted-communication>

FOREWORD BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The danger of disinformation is, at its core, a danger to trust, and that is one reason PIN is keen on finding ways to solve a problem that erodes trust and is becoming an excuse for governments with a clampdown agenda to strike. Information integrity occupies a central place in PIN's mandate because the ability of Africans to participate meaningfully and safely in digital spaces depends, in no small measure, on the integrity of the information environment in which that participation occurs. Research of this nature requires researchers of corresponding quality, and this project was well served in that regard. I am grateful to the project team, including PIN team members (Moussa Waly Sene, Thobekile Matimbe and Sani Suleiman Sani) and external researchers (Dr. Akinola Akintayo, Dr. Olunifesi Adekunle Suraj, Dr. Gbétohou G. Wenceslas Mahoussi, Dr. Moussa Diop, Dr. Yacine Diagne, Olga Elume, Eucharía Nkengafack and Prof. Guy Berger).

This research is made possible through the generous support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and sincere appreciation is due for that partnership. IDRC's support made it possible to conduct this work with the rigour it demands, as grounded, country-level research spanning six countries in West and Central Africa. The methodology was designed to achieve depth alongside breadth. Each country study was informed by desk-based research, focus groups conducted with gender balance, structured interviews with national experts, and big data analysis conducted through the Phoenix platform, tracking key accounts and keywords across X, Facebook, and TikTok. Across all six countries, disinformation does not function in isolation. It operates within a wider information ecosystem and spreads most effectively when it carries strong emotional resonance such as fear, anger, identity, and grievance, and when it occupies the vacuum created by governments that are either silent or themselves engaged in misleading their citizens.

The research's recommendations are addressed to governments, platforms, civil society, and media institutions, and they are grounded in specific evidence. Governments must address communication vacuums they have created through opacity and silence, and must cease the instrumentalisation of "fake news" legislation against legitimate expression. Platforms must invest substantively in local language moderation, conduct human rights impact assessments, and apply consistent content standards to African markets. Civil society must build functional bridges between communities and authorities, and place media and information literacy at the centre of civic education programmes. Media institutions must strengthen fact-checking capacity, apply conflict-sensitive reporting standards, and resist the corrosive influence of partisan ownership structures.

The concluding observation concerns the relationship between the different forms of work that this challenge demands. Research conducted without advocacy produces documentation that changes little. Advocacy conducted without evidence produces assertion rather than argument. And both, in the absence of responsive policy, remain largely without consequence. What this moment requires, and that this report is intended to contribute to, is a genuine and functional alignment among all four elements: research that meets standards of rigour, advocacy that is grounded in that research, evidence that is actively incorporated into decision-making, and policy that reflects the lived realities of the populations it is designed to serve. It is my hope that this report and the supporting work by PIN around this topic moves the needle towards constructive partnerships that solve, rather than take advantage of, the cracks in our information ecosystem.

'Gbenga Sesan
Executive Director
Paradigm Initiative



01

COUNTRY REPORTS



1.1 MAPPING INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN NIGERIA: ACTORS, NARRATIVES, AND DYNAMICS OF DISSEMINATION

The issues

Nigeria is currently facing a complex security crisis, defined by widespread kidnapping, mass abductions, rural banditry, insurgent activity and escalating communal violence. The country's digital environment has transformed these threats into a real-time, highly mediated digital experience. WhatsApp broadcast chains, Facebook community pages, TikTok videos, Instagram reels and commentaries on X now function as primary information channels for millions of citizens. These platforms blur the boundaries between credible news, rumours, propaganda, manipulated audiovisual content, and emotionally charged commentaries.



The research conducted for this study shows that false and exaggerated narratives about security issues thrive in an environment characterised by weak state capacity, poor official communication, digital platform vulnerabilities and low media literacy. Further, it reveals that women often serve as both amplifiers and targets of misinformation and disinformation, while men dominate political disinformation, extremist propaganda and the framing of insecurity.

Grand narratives in play

Content circulating around kidnapping and banditry in Nigeria covers four dominant categories:

- fear,
- identity,
- governmental failure, and
- crime as a lucrative endeavour.

01

Fear-Based and Exaggerated Narratives

These widely shared messages exaggerate casualty figures, the number of abducted victims and the geographic spread of attacks. Old or recycled videos are repeatedly re-shared as ‘ongoing’ attacks.



On TikTok, contents generated with the use of ‘Fulani herdsmen’ and ‘kidnapping and banditry’ keywords return as the highest viewed post, with 3.8m views, a report of a social media influencer visiting Benue state as a result of killings by alleged Fulani

herdsmen/bandits in the state. Most of the posts in the first 12 highest viewed category are posts of attacks, kidnappings, casualty figures and the like with each garnering not less than a million views each with significant shares. A similar pattern is noticeable on X, YouTube and Facebook.

02

Identity-based and religion framed narratives

Narratives frequently cast people with Fulani ethnicity as the default or sole perpetrators of banditry and kidnapping, turning a complex, multi-actor phenomenon into a simplified ethnic label. This framing often erases local criminal dynamics and ignores incidents in regions where Fulani groups are not involved. The conflation of Fulani herdsmen with kidnapping and banditry is evident in many users tending to use the two terms interchangeably.

A related category interprets violence as part of a faith-based identity conflict, casting entire communities as perpetrators. Claimed Christian persecution or genocide, and an Islamisation agenda, are common. Social media platforms amplify these frames through unverified videos, emotive images and recycled content portraying particular ethnic or religious groups as inherently violent. Such narratives have been linked to retaliatory violence, forced displacement and heightened communal suspicion.



The top 10 posts with the highest number of views on X generated with banditry and kidnapping keywords express ethnic views or perspectives on the insecurity problems reported. Ethnicisation of the insecurity problems is pronounced on TikTok

where a higher majority of the posts scraped recorded much higher numbers of views and more directly conflate Fulani herdsmen with kidnapping and banditry.

03

Government Incompetence or Complicity

Narratives portraying government institutions as ineffective, corrupt or complicit thrive. This is because of citizens' long-standing distrust of formal institutions and weak government communication during crises. Officials often emphasise victories and downplay ongoing violence, creating a credibility gap. Meanwhile excessive secrecy in security operations leads citizens into speculation or conspiracy theories. Some sub-narratives suggest collusion between political elites and bandit groups, especially around ransom payments or illegal mining operations.



Politicians and political networks use kidnapping and banditry narratives to portray opponents as incompetent, corrupt, sympathetic to armed groups, or responsible for deteriorating security.

Others exploit fear to mobilise ethnic or religious blocs. Kidnapping and banditry thus become tools for political persuasion, being not just security matters.



A social media influencer on Facebook, VeryDARKMAN produced a post titled 'Now this explains why these Fulani herdsmen go into any



community with their cows, our leaders sell us out' and topped the list of engagements with keywords on the topic, winning 39.2k likes and 3.34k shares.

04

Ransom Economy Narratives (Ransom, Corruption, Criminal Markets)

Widespread stories depict kidnapping as a profitable criminal enterprise with images of kidnapers displaying cash, weapons or luxury items. Flaunting of such illicit wealth online without consequences may normalize the crime and even attract new recruits.

These narratives shift public understanding of kidnapping from isolated incidents to an imagined national criminal economy.

Threats to information integrity

Politicians, separatist groups, armed actors and even some religious networks strategically shape these narratives to blame opponents, mobilise followers or justify violence. Social media influencers and personalities gain the most views, likes and shares, while there is an invisibility of government or official presence in the discourse, as well as a relative absence of women's voices.

Most of the posts can be deduced as being motivated by desire for clicks and followers. This leads to unsubstantiated rumours, bogus and/or exaggerated claims and outright lies. The authors often ask users to like video and/or subscribe to channels. There is slow, but growing, use of AI generated content. More common though are instances of manufactured or doctored videos/contents through the adaptation of images/audios of probably real events or earlier videos or images posted by other users often with a different title or narration.

Disinformation circulates across different linguistic and media ecologies. Rumours and warnings often emerge first in local languages or informal speech spaces before being translated, reframed, or amplified in English-language digital environments. Fear-laden narratives initially circulate within Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Pidgin, or mixed-language WhatsApp groups, markets, religious gatherings, and community networks before entering broader English-language online spaces, where they gain national or diaspora visibility.

This cross-fertilisation enables locally rooted rumours to acquire wider political or ideological framing, while English-language narratives are often reabsorbed into local-language networks in simplified or more emotive forms. English functions as a bridge language linking local audiences, national influencers, and international media spaces. Visible fact-checking actors and civil society interventions operate primarily in English.

Counters to the challenges

There are institutional partnerships between media organisations, civil society groups, fact-checking bodies (such as Dubawa and AfricaCheck), and digital platforms that are aimed at verifying and correcting misinformation. However, these mechanisms remain largely reactive: corrections are issued only after misinformation has already spread widely, particularly through encrypted platforms like WhatsApp.

As a result, the speed and scale of disinformation dissemination consistently outpace such responses. Interviewees perceive that platform responses are rarely fast enough, contextually informed, or shaped by policies that reflect Nigerian linguistic, cultural, or security realities.

Community responses are mediated through trusted gatekeepers, including religious leaders, community elders, family heads, alumni associations, and informal security actors such as vigilantes and hunters. Hyperlocal verification practices include calling contacts near alleged attack sites, consulting hunters or vigilantes on patrol, seeking clarification from religious or community leaders, and selectively forwarding or reframing WhatsApp messages with cautionary qualifiers. These are creative, localised, and often effective—but also fragmented and lacking in institutional support.

In the few cases where government responses feature, these cover press briefings, arrests for “fake news,” sanctions on broadcasters, and military operations. However, these responses are slow, inconsistent, and influenced by politics. There is also very low engagement by citizens compared to posts by social media influencers/ content creators and others.

A post on YouTube titled ‘Tackling the Issues of Kidnapping and Banditry in Nigeria 25th Sept 2024’ by Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a government owned television station, covers government officials and citizens on menace of kidnapping and banditry. The post had only 58 views with 0 likes.



This contrasts with a news report on YouTube by Channels Television, a private television station, which reported bandits attack on travellers which took the most viewed slot with **1,162,351 views** in the ‘kidnapping and banditry’ keywords list on this platform.

Analysis

Misleading content thrives because insecurity has created deep institutional distrust, leaving a communication vacuum that rumours, speculation, propaganda and emotionally charged content quickly fill. Fear, confusion and frustration shape how people interpret and share information, making the public highly vulnerable to manipulation. Women, elderly persons and rural communities—often lacking reliable access to formal news sources—become especially dependent on word-of-mouth information, which spreads rapidly and with little verification.

Offline and online ecosystems constantly feed each other, making misinformation remarkably persistent.

Rumours at markets, in neighbourhoods, at motor parks, in camps for internally-displaced people, or among vigilante groups. A frightened resident, a returning traveller, or a local leader’s unverified warning become the seeds for widespread panic. There are also many cases where a viral video, a misleading

warning, or a manipulated image has triggered real offline consequences: school closures, travel restrictions, mass displacement, or mob attacks against wrongly profiled “suspects.”



Mainstream media simultaneously function as amplifiers, validators, and delayed correctives within the circular information ecosystem.

Women are disproportionately represented in the narratives of kidnapping and banditry; both as actual victims and as symbolic figures used in public mobilisation. Female suffering is often used to evoke strong emotions, inspiring fast and uncritical sharing of content. Men appear in media and online spaces as perpetrators of banditry and kidnapping, political commentators, producers of propaganda, leaders of ethnic/ political mobilisation, and influencers (especially on X).

Conclusion and recommendations

Policy makers should address the information vacuum in which citizens turn to rumours and WhatsApp broadcasts because official sources are either silent or unreliable. Government should establish Rapid Response Information Units in each geopolitical zone.

Regulators should not rely on punitive “fake news” provisions, but instead develop a National Information Integrity Framework that clearly defines misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in security contexts, sets out principles for effective state communication, and provides guidance on proportional responses to content that harms human rights.

Civil society organisations are well-placed to provide digital literacy and rumour-checking tools, especially in communities most affected by kidnapping and banditry. Since women often share unverified content out of fear and care, women’s groups are important for interventions.

Media organisations should adopt conflict-sensitive reporting standards that avoid inflammatory labels that ethnicise criminality and require multiple independent sources before publishing kidnapping reports. A national fact-checking network could share alerts about emerging rumours.

Platforms should better detect and act on content in Nigerian languages and informal speech. They must invest in local language moderation as well as regional dialects and slang associated with insecurity narratives. Platforms can also introduce crisis-sensitive algorithmic controls, such as temporarily slowing the virality of high-risk content, and promoting links to reputable fact-checks. Platforms should also experiment with mechanisms to advance verified security information, such as pinning emergency alerts, and create special “crisis verification” badges for accredited government or humanitarian channels, as well as offer dedicated safety channels for high-risk communities.

APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

As of March 2025, Nigeria is reported to have 150 million cellular mobile connections, 107 million internet users, meaning an internet penetration of 45.4 percent of the total population, and 38.7 million active users of social media. Three in five of Nigeria’s active social media users were male. Reports also indicate that 61 per cent of Nigerians in rural areas are not connected to the internet compared to 40 per cent in the urban areas.



150 million
Cellular mobile connections



107 million
Internet users



45.4%
Internet Penetration



38.7 million
Active users of social media

It is estimated that YouTube has 27.0 million users, representing 23.5 percent of the country’s total internet users. Facebook is reported to have 38.7, representing about 16.4 percent of the country’s total population, while Instagram had 9.90 million. TikTok had 37.4 million and Snapchat 19.6 million users, and X 7.57 million. In all cases, there is a preponderance of male users, similar to the connectivity gender divide.

Factors accounting for low access levels include low income, poor infrastructural development, gender inequality, age, government policies, lack of access to requisite devices and technology, and the high cost of internet connectivity.

The right to freedom of expression is constitutionally entrenched in Nigeria. Its enjoyment, however, is restricted by outdated and obsolete laws. Nigerian courts also interpret the right to privacy in ways that reflect traditional and narrow conceptions of digital rights.



1.2 MAPPING INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN GHANA: ACTORS, NARRATIVES, AND DYNAMICS OF DISSEMINATION

The issues

Political disinformation during Ghana's December 2024 presidential election about corruption and illegal gold mining – known locally as “galamsey” – corroded information integrity and weakened prospects for informed electoral decision-making. Social media platforms particularly TikTok, X, and Facebook witnessed active influencers seeking to shape public discourse, as well as the presence of partisan political gladiators weaponizing galamsey within political narratives.

Grand narratives in play

A knowledge gap exists amongst the public about the distinction between genuine, government-approved mining licenses, and unapproved illegal mining (galamsey). Among the disinformation circulating on social media about galamsey were generalised views assuming that all mining operations in Ghana are galamsey, and that images of galamsey sites were fake, doctored or exaggerated. This provides space for political leverage. Supporters of the opposition party promoted the narrative that the (then) incumbent government struggled to combat galamsey effectively, because the practice in fact involved its own supporters. This framed the issue as the government's weakness and/or selective enforcement of mining law. For its part, the then ruling party blamed the (then) opposition party as having previously sponsored galamsey and are sabotaging the efforts of the government to counter this mining malpractice.

From the other side, it was argued that the opposition, when previously in power, invited foreign nationals to engage in galamsey. Supporters of the government also dismissed as fake authentic footage showing the Vice Presidential candidate of their party making a promise to small-scale miners at a campaign event. Claims that top politicians of both political parties were behind galamsey were propagated without facts.

The politicisation of the environmental hazards of galamsey saw claims that such risks were invented to preserve the gold for a certain privileged few. Additional falsehoods were that lands used for illegal mining are redeemable after 2–3 years with increased vitality for farming; that water from galamsey sites (contrary to stories about its environmental hazards) was even cleaner and safe for drinking than that found in non-mining sites; and that the pollution of water in Ghana was not as a result of galamsey but a deliberate act of the opposition to discredit the then ruling party.

Further themes were:

- involvement of foreign nationals (especially Chinese and Korean) in galamsey;
- military involvement in enforcing arrests of illegal miners;
- young girls dropping out of school (especially in Subri area) as a result of the lure to prostitution linked to illegal miners;
- health and environmental implications (water contaminated with poisonous substance such as mercury, deformation of babies, deforestation, disruption of farmlands, cancer-related diseases).

One gendered fake was the claim that if pregnant women were buried alive in mining sites, they would decay to yield a lot of gold in the future.



TikTok, Facebook and X are assessed as the most prominent social media platforms for spreading false galamsey narratives.

The counter-message community, especially the factcheckers organizations, have much lower engagement. Posts by anti-galamsey activists also attracted more comments, shares and likes than the fact checking organizations, but they were all nonetheless overwhelmed by the sheer volume of distorted narratives.

One who condemned the environmental and health hazards associated with galamsey and incited people to protest against it, also used the opportunity to campaign for a particular presidential candidate.

Her comments, attracting lots of likes, covered issues such as “burning flags in protest better than people dying via galamsey”, “ten people have died due to blockage of the road during demonstration, but do you know how many children are being born with deformities due to galamsey?”, and “they can do all they want, Bawunmi will be president”.



Data further showed that the highest number of comments with the highest number of likes took place on X platform, illustrating how influential social media influencers can be in shaping narratives and public opinion on political discourse.



Here is a summarized list of major verified disinformation / misleading-claim cases tied to the issue of galamsey during the run-up to the 2024 presidential election in Ghana:

Table 1: Fact Checkers Verified Political disinformation on Galamsey

Date/Period	Actor/ Source	Claim	Verdict & Notes	Platforms
August 19, 2024	GhanaToday 8 comments, 92 shares, 13 likes	41 seized excavators released back to galamseyers as 4 soldiers guarding seized excavators were arrested by NDC thugs in a military guardroom.	False - No excavators were released to galamseyers and no soldiers were arrested by NDC thugs	Social media / Facebook
Sept 27 2024	Dr Ayew Afriyie (MP) 121 comments, 0 shares, 462 likes	“Water bodies in the Ashanti region had not been impacted by galamsey until one month ago.” Fact Check Ghana+1	False – long-term impact documented. – The claim of “just one month” is false.	Campaign-event video / TV (then social media)
Sept 2024	Anonymous online claim 4 comments, 2 shares, 9 likes	Prof Frimpong Boateng said John Dramani Mahama “owns a galamsey site”. Adomonline.com	Verified as false: Prof Boateng did not make that claim; the attribution is incorrect. Adomonline.com	
Sept–Oct 2024	Campaign team of Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh / media	Claim of “deep-fake” video manipulating his galamsey-related remarks. WITNESS Blog	Unclear. The video’s authenticity contested; the allegation of manipulation used as part of the narrative.	Social media / WhatsApp
Mar 26 2025 interview	Emmanuel Armah-Kofi Buah (Minister)	“Ghana imported GH¢6.2 billion worth of excavators in 2024 for galamsey operations.” Ghana Fact	Misleading – import value correct but not clearly for galamsey equipment. Ghana Fact	TV interview / Online publication
Undated viral social-post	Unknown actor (Facebook post) 58 comments, 88 shares, 426 likes	Photo of an elephant claimed to have died due to galamsey. Ghana Fact	False – image from Brazil, unrelated. Ghana Fact	Facebook

*Platform indicates where the claim circulated or was made public

Threats to information integrity

Most of the information on galamsey in the election period was from mixed media – like legacy media (television and radio), online media (news websites, blogs and social media) and informal sources considered as pavement media (friends and relatives especially through closed exchange medium of communication like WhatsApp, religious gatherings, community leaders, opinion leaders, relaxation centres, market places, neighbourhood gossip, bars, community ceremonies etc).

It is assessed that majority of the rural populace relied on local and community radio as sources of credible information on galamsey, with the rural women assessed as giving more heed to “pavement media” such as information from colleagues in the market place, salons, and from friends and relatives (mostly on WhatsApp platforms). Contrary to their contemporaries in the cities, rural men were assessed as aligned to the local radios, political party members, and beer parlours. In general, it appears that the rural populace, especially the older ones, tend to perceive whatever information about galamsey that comes from local radio or WhatsApp platform as real and authentic.

Counters to the challenges

Among the diverse sources about galamsey, some of the legacy media did not do enough to fact-check panelists' claims during broadcasts, while some of the radio stations, especially the local stations in the rural areas owned by politicians, appeared to be partisan. Social media narratives became a pointer to older citizens who were initially indifferent, but who later became interested in authenticating galamsey narratives by means of the legacy media. Due to X's interactive nature, the narratives there appeared more debatable and allowed for detailed conversation, contrary opinion and dialogue, as compared to Facebook which was seen as promoting surface-

level conversation.

Traditional media such as Joynews, City FM, Classic News FM, Ghana FM, ACCRA FM, and Adom TV are seen as more credible, including for young adults, in circulating credible information when compared to social media and other online news sites. Sites like MyJoyOnline, GhanaWeb and Action Group against Galamsey, helped to debunk misleading narratives on galamsey.

The influence of certain social media influencers was linked to their detailed and consistent reports on galamsey. Activism by prominent environmentalists gave attention to deforestation, river pollution, mercury contamination, health issues and political complicity in the crisis. Fact-checking groups like Dubawa, Witness, GHOne, GhanaWeb are seen as reliable, but with limited effectiveness.

Civil society organizations such as Penplusbytes, Democracy Hub, Ghana Journalists Association, Young Reporters for the Environment, Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and Digital Africa Research Lab worked with various Ghana media houses to push back against galamsey mis/disinformation.

Analysis

Dynamism of media (social, legacy and closed channels such as WhatsApp and pavement media) constituted many vectors for spreading political disinformation around galamsey. Social media, particularly Tiktok, and X played a prominent role in orchestrating, manufacturing, scaling and spreading political disinformation on galamsey. Often, the narratives on social media constituted to a large extent what dominates the public discourse, feeding the pavement media and setting the agenda for legacy media.

The claims tied to galamsey often interfaced with electoral politics: e.g., blame for seats lost, mobilisation of voters in mining communities, and discrediting political figures. Gender dimensions were harnessed for political exploitation by the pro- and anti-camps using different narratives to make points that favoured either the opposition or the ruling party.



This study demonstrates the need for citizens' education and the role of educated citizens in defending democracy, since ignorance on what constitutes legal or illegal mining can be weaponized to gain political advantage.

There is also the issue of the environmental effects of both realms of mining. Likewise, the issue of who benefits in terms of profits on one hand, and wages on the other, is overshadowed in the predominant terms of contestation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Galamsey is both a technical environmental and economic issue and a highly emotive campaign theme as it connects with voters' concerns (water, jobs, land), and with critiques of governance. When disinformation blends into such a high-stakes topic as demonstrated in the Ghana 2024 election, it can undermine trust in public institutions (such as the media regulatory system and democratic institutions like the electoral commission). The study informs several lines of action:

All stakeholders should synergize their expertise to enhance the information integrity ecosystem during elections. This calls for continuous capacity training of media professionals, social media influencers, citizens and other important



stakeholders in fact-checking techniques and generally on media, information and digital literacy.

Governments should give much more attention to promoting media, information and digital literacy, and implement appropriate information integrity policies.

Voters and civic actors should adopt a level of skepticism concerning claims, and interrogate the use of images and the attribution of blame.

Big Tech should invest more in partnership especially with reputable local fact-checkers as well as give more prominence to fact-checking on their social media platforms. There is a need to invest in automatic speech translators and local translators.

Media should support newsrooms' ability to fact-check especially during live talk shows and call-in programmes, and enhance the capacity of journalists in dealing with disinformation during sensitive times like election periods.



38.3 million
Cellular mobile
connections



24.3 million
Internet users



70%

Internet Penetration



7.95 million
Active users of
social media

APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

Data from GSMA Intelligence (2025) records that 38.3 million Ghanaians have active cellular mobile connections; and that 24.3 million use the internet making for an online penetration at approximately 70%. Ghanaian women (59%) are less likely than men (65%) to own internet-enabled devices, use the internet, access government e-services, or make digital payments (GSMA, 2023). In Ghana, more than nine out of every 10 internet users in Ghana use mobile phones to access the internet with 58% of male internet users accessing it via mobile exclusively compared to 75% of female internet users. The report also shows disparity in mobile internet usage between rural women (46%) to urban women (64%).

DataReportal's (2025) figures estimate 7.95 million active social media users (42.7% female, 57.3% male); YouTube 7.81 million users (46.8% female, 53.2% male); Facebook 7.95 million (41.1% female, 58.9% male); Instagram 2.15 million and X 1.21 million (20.9% female, 79.1% male).

In order to address the challenges of disinformation, Ghana's government has put up several proactive measures and initiatives: the Right to Information Act 2019, Coordinated Mechanism on Safety for Journalists (CMSJ), the Media Capacity Enhancement Programme (MCEP), the GhanaToday website, media literacy programs, the drafted National Action Plan, the Legal provisions under the Electronic Communications Act 2008, and the Criminal Offenses Act 1960.



1.3

MAPPING INFORMATION DISORDER IN BENIN: ANALYSIS OF DYNAMICS, IMPACTS, ACTORS, AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Prof Gbétohou G. Wenceslas Mahoussi, Maître-Assistant des Universités du CAMES en Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication, Benin

The issues

Benin exhibits a strong presence of false information, mainly in the context of crises or socio-political tensions, such as the build-up to the 2026 election, security issues, controversial reforms, and arrests of public and political figures. These contexts, which are fraught with uncertainty, emotion, and polarization, are conducive to the dissemination of false, misleading, or manipulated content.

The dominant narratives found by this research mobilized fear, anger, mistrust, or indignation and are mainly rooted in political, security, identity, and religious themes.

Grand narratives at play

The main topics observed in the research period, January and July in 2025, were the attempted coup against President Patrice Talon in January 2025, the planning of a secret military operation in Parakou (Tourou) against the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), false statements attributed to former defence minister and opposition leader Candide Azannā in April 2025, and controversial statements by a former Minister-Counselor in June about drinking water supply and electrification of localities.

Regarding the January 2025 coup attempt, posts emerged from social media accounts such as “Chris Yapi TV News,” an account presenting itself as a whistleblower based in Côte d'Ivoire. These consisted of videos and texts conveying claims of a military overthrow of the President and alleged collaboration with the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The content was widely shared on Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Despite the lack of evidence, these allegations spread rapidly, sparking public outrage and rejection in almost unanimous comments, regardless of gender.



The immediate effect was a strong critical mobilization, accompanied by concerns among internet users, but also among certain political and military actors.

The narratives made significant use of intense emotions such as fear, anger, and mistrust to provoke rapid engagement and promote virality. They exploited sensitive topics such as politics, identity, or security to find immediate resonance with the public, fuelling suspicion or division.

Political narratives were especially prevalent in regard to elections, and conducted by means of propaganda or personal attacks between political opponents. The dominant feature is to

discredit an opponent or reinforce a position, through comments about a community or ethnic issue that incite hatred. Political and elections-related disinformation narratives also sought to delegitimise democratic institutions. This was based on unsubstantiated accusations of electoral fraud, repeated attacks on the Independent National Electoral Commission, the Constitutional Court or the Supreme Court, and the spread of rumours about the legitimacy or private lives of leaders and opponents.

A significant portion of the narratives portray elites, the state, or foreign powers as oppressors, establishing a binary narrative between them and “the people”. According to one focus group participant: “They often pit an oppressor [presented as] the state, the elites, the West against a victimized people.” They are seen to exacerbate citizens’ mistrust and to make democratic dialogue and consensus-building around public policies more difficult. Alarmist announcements of shortages, price increases or economic collapse, as well as false promises of public aid or subsidies. This content diverts citizens’ attention from essential development issues and creates cognitive overload that hinders rational analysis of the facts. These narratives claim to highlight a “hidden” truth, or seek to stigmatize a community or gender.

There is also content relating to issues of terrorism in the north, with those spreading this seeking to gain influence. This is in the context of many rumours arising from the silence of the authorities, opaque management of affairs, restrictions on human rights and unregulated expression. This narrative manifests itself in false alerts, the exaggeration or fabrication of violent events, particularly in the north of the country, or the false attribution of acts to political or foreign groups. Such content can affect local populations, territorial authorities, security forces and economic actors, generating fear, panic and disorganisation.

Threats to information integrity

There is a diversity of actors involved, ranging from intentional producers (political actors, influencers, cyberactivists) to the unintentional intermediaries who are ordinary citizens. Response actors (journalists, fact-checkers, civil society, regulators) operate with means that are insufficient given the scale of the phenomenon. The perceived impacts are significant, particularly in terms of institutional distrust, social polarization, and harm to the quality of democratic debate, with increased vulnerability among certain social groups, especially young people, women, and rural populations.

Counters to the challenges

Responses to disinformation are limited and sometimes ineffective due to their insufficient visibility, limited coordination, and the risk some of them pose to freedom of expression. These responses are based on a combination of legal frameworks, regulatory actions, fact-checking, and media and information and other literacy initiatives.

In regard to the claimed coup against the president, counter-actors, including the spokesperson for the government, professional journalists, civil society organizations, fact-checkers, academics, and regulatory authorities tried to limit the effects. However, they did not have sufficient resources commensurate with the scale of the phenomenon.

Although the government claims to be committed to creating an environment conducive to the development of citizens' information, digital, and media literacy, efforts often benefit only those who are connected, leaving behind all those who are far from the school system or living in precarious conditions. Meanwhile, a narrative of glorification of the State and "major projects" is developing, presenting government achievements in an

excessively positive light while glossing over limitations or controversies. Uncritically relayed by certain pro-government media and influencers, this shapes public perceptions amongst political supporters, public officials and citizens with little exposure to pluralist sources of information.

As raised in focus groups, there is concern that most attempted solutions do not take into account the specific needs of women or men. Some fact-checking initiatives incorporate gender sensitivity, such as the specialized RoundCheck office launched in October 2024 to combat gender-specific disinformation, in collaboration with Naija Feminist Media.

Analysis

A significant portion of the population struggles to access the digital world. This is exacerbated by a fragile electricity grid (55.1% coverage), especially in rural areas, which widens the digital divide and prevents equitable access to media and information literacy, even though awareness campaigns are mostly conducted on digital platforms. In this context, disinformation is seen as being more accessible than official information.

Despite a diversification of online media offerings, traditional media remain central to access to information. Afrobarometer data indicate that radio remains the main source of daily information (46.3%), ahead of social media (33%) and television (21.4%), while print media reaches only a small proportion (8%) of the public (2024).

46.3% Radio Information Access	21.4% Television Information Access
33% Social Media Information Access	8% Print Media Information Access

Thus, a significant portion of the population remains on the margins of the online informational space. It follows that misinformation exists and has effects, but its impact varies according to social groups, territories, distribution channels, and levels of exposure.

A lack of information literacy weakens the public's ability to discern truth from falsehood, while the proliferation of social networks, online anonymity, the quest for virality, and the presence of non-professional actors (influencers, bloggers, pseudo-journalists) creates a climate where verification is relegated to the background.

Furthermore, due to illiteracy and low education, many people struggle to distinguish between verified facts and rumours, reliable sources and manipulation. Over 40% of women in Benin between 15-34 years of age have never attended school. Thus women are exposed to the consequences of information disorder through unconfirmed rumours about reproductive health, and misinformation about gender-based violence. Women are often targeted by misogynistic disinformation, particularly those involved in politics or those in positions of responsibility. Women are mostly targeted by content that is sexist, stigmatizing, or misleading in nature.



These trends and lack of knowledge make citizens vulnerable to dubious information.

Some fall into the trap of spreading false information because they lack the necessary perspective when they receive the information. Taken as a whole, these narratives particularly affect young people, populations strongly connected to social networks and socially vulnerable groups. Their coexistence and dissemination contribute to social polarisation,

the erosion of institutional trust and the weakening of public debate in Benin.

Conclusion and recommendations

Disinformation in Benin is a structural and contextual phenomenon, which intensifies primarily during periods of socio-political and security crises, where uncertainty, emotion, and polarization facilitate the spread of misleading content. It is largely rooted in a digital environment characterized by limited regulation, low media literacy, and significant involvement of non-professional information actors. Dominant narratives, largely emotional and polarizing, are constructed to influence public opinion, legitimize positions of power, or delegitimize opponents. Their virality relies primarily on audiovisual formats and the intensive use of digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. Against this background, the following recommendations can be made:

Policy makers should update the digital code with rules that advance the fight against disinformation without criminalizing legitimate criticism or undermining freedom of expression. They should also improve transparency and communication with the public, and develop effective and rapid response protocols to rumours and false information during sensitive periods (elections, crises) as well as create simple and anonymous tools that allow citizens to easily report problems. More broadly, they should strengthen media and information literacy in local languages and by integrating it into school and university curricula; and expand electricity and internet access coverage to rural areas.

Civil society actors should promote media and information literacy initiatives tailored to young people, women, and rural communities, as well as promote community, religious, and traditional leaders as relays for raising awareness about reliable

information. There is also a need to promote rights-based and inclusive narratives to counter false content, hate speech, and polarizing discourse, and to document specific forms of disinformation targeting women, journalists, activists, and content creators, and provide support to them.

Platforms should develop mechanisms for detecting problematic content in local


languages and audiovisual formats, and conduct human rights risk assessments to anticipate serious threats to information integrity and put mitigations in place. They should increase the visibility of verified content and reliable sources during times of crisis, and make anonymized data available for research on disinformation, in compliance with personal data protection standards and laws.



4.71 million
Internet users



67.8%
Population offline

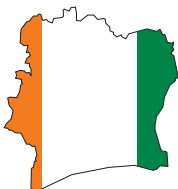


2.40 million
Active users of social media

APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

In Benin, 4.71 million people were using the Internet at the start of 2025. Over 9 million people in Benin were not using the Internet at the start of 2025, suggesting that 67.8% of the population remained “offline” at the start of the year. Of these users, over 2.40 million used social media, of whom 38.1% were women, while 61.9% were men. The most widely used social media are WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and emerging apps like TikTok.

Governance and regulation of the information space and digital rights are ensured by the following three main players: State actors (Ministry of Digital Affairs and Digitization, Information Systems and Digital Agency, National Center for Digital Investigations, National Assembly, Agency for the Development of the International City of Innovation and Knowledge “Sèmè City”, Beninese Digital Infrastructure Company); regulatory authorities (Haute Autorité de l’Audiovisuel et de la Communication; Autorité de Régulation des Communications Electroniques et des Postes; Autorité de Protection des Données à caractère Personnel); non-state actors (Forum sur la Gouvernance de l’Internet, club des Directeurs des Systèmes d’Information, SPACETEL BENIN, MOOV AFRICA BENIN, ISOCEL, STARLINK, Internet Society Benin).



1.4 UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION DISORDER IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: MAPPING THE ACTORS, DYNAMICS, AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Dr. Moussa Diop, Lecturer and Researcher at CESTI-UCAD, Dakar, Senegal.

The issues

The integrity of information in Côte d'Ivoire in a pre-election context was marred by strong political polarization, identity tensions, and a crisis of confidence in the media and public institutions. This against the background of election-related conflict in 2010 that left around 3,000 people dead, with enduring questions around national

reconciliation and awareness of the real risks of hate speech. These challenges continue beyond the October 2025 presidential elections.

Overall, information disorder in the country is structured around internal and external actors, coordinated strategies, and highly divisive narratives. These concentrate around election legitimacy and geopolitical changes in neighbouring countries. In this context, disinformation circulates via a multi-channel system combining politicized traditional media, digital platforms (Facebook, TikTok, X, Instagram), and physical spaces.

Grand narratives at play

Three dominant narratives can be identified:

- a political narrative denouncing the legitimacy of incumbent president Alassane Ouattara's electoral quest for an effective third term in office;
- an identity narrative that revives the question of nationality (via Ivorian identity and the ethnicization of electoral competitions);
- and a geopolitical narrative based on pan-Africanist and anti-Western discourse in a context of recent coup-based regimes in the Sahel and other countries.

The political-electoral narrative tends to discredit the political and judicial institutions involved in organizing and implementing the rules of the electoral competition.

The social and identity-based discourse involves a resurgence of hate speech targeting “Dioula” – so-called foreigners, supposedly from Mali or Burkina Faso. These are individuals residing in the north, and the ethnic community from which Ouattara is said to originate.

The geopolitical discourse is regularly promoted by the alleged supporters of former President Laurent Gbagbo, self-proclaimed pan-Africanist, pro-Russian, and anti-imperialist groups, particularly supporters of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).



Quantitative data shows for example that during the research period, the category of Ivorian identity accounts for **1,026 Facebook posts** received **1.8 million likes** on Facebook, representing a significant level of engagement on the topic.

Historically associated with the political and identity crisis of the 1990s and 2000s, Ivorité has resurfaced in the digital sphere as a versatile mobilizing repertoire, used both to legitimize certain claims and to delegitimize political opponents. Its power of attraction reflects an “emotionalization” of public debate, where national identity becomes an instrument of polarization in the service of partisan actors and influence entrepreneur.

The term Dioula(s) ranks second in terms of engagement, with approximately 1.3 to 1.4 million Facebook likes. It refers to persistent ethnopolitical tension, often linked to the perception of supposed political or economic domination attributed to the populations of the north or associated with the ruling party. This discourse echoes that of Ivorian identity: while Ivorian identity marks the boundary between national inclusion and exclusion, the “Dioula” category functions as a means of internal differentiation, fuelling ethnic conflicts and being exploited by several groups.

In reference to former president Laurent Gbagbo who has been an historic opponent of Ouattara, the word “Gbagbo” appears in around 500 Facebook posts and has around 700,000 Facebook “likes.”



Threats to information integrity

External actors in the information contestation include individuals, groups, structures, or institutions operating outside Côte d'Ivoire, and whose actions have concrete effects on the country's public and political sphere. This includes cyberactivists from the diaspora, close to the pan-Africanist ideology, and supporters of the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States. This is the case, for example, of Maï la Guêpe (presumably Maimouna Camara, her real name), who presents herself in her videos and accounts as a Burkinabe citizen apparently residing in the United States, and who openly claims positions in favour of the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States, and who is pro-Russian, anti-French, and anti-Ouattara.

From abroad, these actors launch and coordinate massive strategic disinformation campaigns. There is also the presence within Côte d'Ivoire of Ivorian organizations that position themselves as supporters of Russia and who seek new geopolitical and international alliances for the country. There is thus an interconnection of national and international actors.



Many cyberactivists online use nicknames, sobriquets, or pseudonyms that may reveal their attachment to a camp or a cause.

These groups appear to be organized or coordinated, insofar as they use the same terminology and tone in the messages they convey and the content they disseminate, and also operate within the same time frame. They generate highly emotional and rapidly disseminated content, often conflict-oriented and misleading or fabricating content.

Activists online who are closer to traditional partisan dynamics exploit historical divisions emphasizing an identity dimension. Influencers who enjoy strong social legitimacy among young audiences, contribute to the massive dissemination of polarizing identity categories (Ivorian identity, Dioula), disseminating on a larger scale the representations initially produced in militant or extremist circles.

Due to marked polarization and strong ideological bias, the media landscape is fragmented between media outlets favourable to certain political figures, or between pro-government and pro-opposition media. Indeed, editorial lines, and headlines are coloured even at newsstands: the colour green designates media outlets close to the government, and blue those close to the opposition. At the same time, the proliferation of "fake" online media outlets such as Zone Presse, Boush de Côte d'Ivoire, and Cash Ivoire fuels the massive production of partisan and polarizing content.

Both male and female actors actively participate in the disinformation with several prominent women in the contestation, sometimes as perpetrators and sometimes also as victims of disinformation and allegations of sexual misconduct.

Counters to the challenges

There are public policies promoting Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and combating disinformation, as well as a multitude of non-governmental initiatives. There are institutional partnerships between media outlets, civil society groups, and fact-checking organizations (such as GIZ, AfricaCheck, CAFN, etc.).

These partnerships focus on training journalists in fact-checking and, in some cases, also enable the creation of fact-checking platforms for journalists. For example, on November 29, 2023, in Abidjan, the Network of Online Press Professionals of Côte d'Ivoire (REPPRELICI) presented its own fact-checking software. Called “La Trousse,” it was funded by the OIF and developed in partnership with the French media outlet “Les Surligneurs.” This software helps journalists verify, write, and publish their articles.

In order to raise public awareness of issues related to disinformation, the government has set up services and initiatives such as the Platform for Combating Cybercrime (Plateforme de Lutte Contre la Cybercriminalité PLCC) and the EnLigneTousresponsables campaign. These initiatives involve offline and online awareness-raising activities involving communities.

The main challenge is that there is a lack of consistency, independence, neutrality, and technical support for independent actors to counter disinformation at scale.

Conclusion and recommendations

The three narratives, i.e. around election legitimacy, identity and geopolitical positioning, are not mutually exclusive but often intersecting. Discourse thus highlights one or more of these thematics. The legacy they leave in the country is one of harm to institutional trust, social cohesion and dialogue, as well as national unity. In the light of these observations, here are our recommendations:

Government officials should combat information disorders and content that violates human rights such as the right to peace, security, and diverse cultural identity. The state must commit to preserving human rights, in particular freedom of expression and freedom of political demonstration, and thus commit to greater transparency in its actions to regulate the media and the digital space.

All stakeholders should co-operate towards creating a recognized and legitimate administrative entity bringing together the media, relevant civil society organizations, and the state to create an observatory. This will serve as a scientific laboratory, but also as a place for proposing appropriate and harmonised steps to parliamentarians, government officials, civil society actors, and law enforcement agencies.

Civil society actors, journalists, and specialists should develop local campaigns via community radio stations (in the medium term), traditional authorities, and physical community spaces such as “grins”. They should promote “integrity ambassadors”. As community relays trained in issues of information integrity and the proliferation of hate speech, these actors could encourage citizen discussion forums on social media and elsewhere in order to raise awareness of democratic culture and the preservation of a peaceful digital space.



99%

**Households own
a cell phone**



11.23 million
Internet users



7 million
Active users of
social media



APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

Available statistics show that 99% of Ivorian households own a cell phone, and that 17.9 million individuals of an estimated population of 29.24 million have such a device. However, there is low use in some rural areas, as well as gender disparities. In January 2024, Côte d'Ivoire had 11.23 million Internet users. According to the Digital 2024 report, there are around 7 million Ivorian users active on social networks. Facebook dominates the social media landscape with 7 million active users, while there is also extensive use of WhatsApp.

Between 2021 and 2025, several governance measures have been introduced. The National Cyber Security Strategy (adopted in December 2021) focuses on protecting cyberspace, strengthening digital confidence, as well as international cooperation. The Digital Confidence and Cybersecurity Department (August 2022) aims to coordinate actions and act as a national contact point. In 2024, the Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information (ANSSI) was proclaimed, a new national organization dedicated to cyber security in the country.

1.5

UNDERSTANDING SENEGAL'S CHANGING MEDIA ECOSYSTEM: BETWEEN DISINFORMATION, POLARIZATION, AND THE QUEST FOR INFORMATION INTEGRITY

Dr Yacine Diagne – Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Centre for the Study of Information Science and Technology

The issues

Disinformation in Senegal is part of an ecosystem marked by partisan polarization, a profound crisis of confidence in institutions, and the pursuit of audience-share. These generate three registers. The first involves identification of voices that are part of “the system” – primarily existing institutions, political elites and the media. The second is a strong ‘anti-system’ register that uses terms such as ‘people’, ‘truth’ and ‘sovereignty’ to legitimise the contestation and disqualification of institutions. The third consists of nationalist or identity markers opposing ‘us’ to ‘them’ and are activated to reinforce the symbolic exclusion of the adversary and accentuate polarisation.

This report covers the pre- to the post-campaign of the 2024 presidential election in which there was a proliferation of sources of disinformation and increasing porosity between professional content production, citizen expression, and influence strategies. Four main categories of discourse serve to structure the production and circulation of false information: content disseminated on social media, contributions from partisan columnists and biased journalists, speeches by political actors, and contributions from citizen users.

Grand narratives

The misleading content observed from January 2024 to March 2024 focused mainly on political issues, in particular the legitimacy of institutions, the transparency of electoral processes and the integrity of public figures. It comprised unfounded accusations of fraud, manipulation or dependence on foreign interests, creating an opposition between actors referred to as 'part of the system' and 'anti-system' positions claiming to speak for 'the people'. Many misleading claims are based on slanderous denunciations, accusations of corruption and poor governance, drawing upon content that was taken out of context or recontextualised in order to distort the facts.

Some narratives mobilise nationalist or identity-based rhetoric, constructing a 'them' designated as foreigners or groups perceived as allies of the system. Emotional discourse dominated. Indignation, fear or hatred were used to mobilise public opinion, for example among young people and disadvantaged populations, rather than rational arguments.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is increased polarisation of public opinion, mistrust of institutions and the news media, and the weakening of social cohesion and democratic debate.

Threats to information integrity

Social media discourse

Content disseminated on social media is characterized by strong emotional charge, an often sensationalist tone, and a very high capacity for virality. Designed to elicit immediate reactions and capture attention, it frequently contributes to polarizing public opinion. Due to its rapid dissemination and lack of editorial control, this discourse promotes confusion, facilitates the circulation of unverified information, and amplifies the spread of falsehoods.

Social networks and WhatsApp groups are major channels for the viral spread of rumours. Their semi-public nature and lack of editorial control reinforce the spontaneous, emotional, or unintentional dissemination of misleading content. Influencers, including YouTubers, also play a significant role in spreading misinformation. The quest for audience-share and the logic of viral content encourage the dissemination of sensationalist or simplified messages.

Discourse from partisan columnists and biased journalists

There is a higher level of trust in traditional sources. However, some newsrooms remain exposed to political or economic pressures, which can lead to biased or slanted reporting. These interventions are characterized by an assertive, often polemical tone and a clearly stated political orientation. They aim to promote a particular side, influence public opinion, or reinforce certain ideological convictions. By adopting strong positions and mixing analysis with activism, this type of discourse fuels media polarization and contributes to weakening trust in media outlets perceived as neutral or independent.

Discourse of political actors

Political communication is largely based on a binary register opposing the “pro” and “anti” camps. This strategy aims to delegitimize the opponent, mobilize supporters, and impose a Manichean interpretation of national issues. By oversimplifying complex issues and favouring emotional confrontation over, this discourse contributes to the radicalization of public debate and reinforces political polarization.

Discourse of ordinary citizens and users

Ordinary citizens contribute to the dynamics of disinformation through narrative, participatory, and often identity-based discourse. By sharing, commenting on, or reinterpreting content, they express their allegiance to a particular camp and reinforce certain partisan narratives. Their engagement serves to amplify the spread of disinformation and consolidates the circulation of biased representations in the public sphere. Most observers see the spread of false information as spontaneous, diffuse, or individual phenomenon rather than the result of coordinated operations. Part of the diaspora participates in the dissemination of alternative narratives via social media. These external discourses reinforce internal divisions and accentuate the polarization of public debate.



Visual manipulation and viral content

Visual content is seen as the main vector of disinformation. This includes misappropriated or out-of-context images, and videos that have been truncated, re-edited, or re-contextualized to reinforce partisan narratives.



False statements by political actors

This includes statistical manipulation, polarising and emotional discourse to legitimize certain positions or discredit opponents, as well as hate speech. Manipulation of data: Truncated figures (number of people registered on the electoral roll, number of sponsorships) or figures taken out of context were used to legitimise or discredit certain political positions. There is also content that accentuates political, social, or generational divisions, structuring the debate into opposing camps. Rumours of an ethnic or identity-based nature are part of the mix.



Conspiracy theories and false quotes

Conspiracies and rumours emerged, reinforcing mistrust of institutions such as the Constitutional Council. Among the most widespread practices were false statements, such as the sale of barrels of oil to foreign companies, attributed to the outgoing president, Macky Sall,

and by extension to his candidate, Amadou Bâ. These were used to mislead public opinion about their positions and contribute to their delegitimation.

Counters to the challenges

Existing initiatives to combat information disorder, whether citizen-led, institutional, or media-based, demonstrate real mobilization, but remain heterogeneous and insufficiently structured. Columnists in traditional media and digital platforms, who play a central role in stimulating public debate, appear in this context to be ambivalent actors: they are both targets of manipulation and sometimes unwitting relays of unverified content.

Fact-checking initiatives in Senegal seek to correct false information and strengthen critical thinking. Despite rigorous methods, their impact remains limited by the speed at which digital content circulates and the polarization of public debate. The organisations here include I-Check, which promotes citizen vigilance; Soleil Check, based at the newspaper Le Soleil which is perceived as close to the government; and Africa Check, operating a professional model for systematic verification work and also playing an educational role. All struggle to counter the virality of false information and overcome perceptions of bias in a context of widespread mistrust.

Analysis

The disinformational discourses in Senegal share common features:

- mobilising emotions to influence perceptions and behaviours,
- simplifying reality into binary oppositions ('us' vs. 'them') and reinforcing divisions,
- strategically manipulating information to impose agendas or generate virality,

blurring the line between legitimate criticism and disinformation, and rapidly circulating and amplifying messages through the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is increased polarisation of public opinion, mistrust of institutions and the media, and the weakening of social cohesion and democratic debate. Digital discourse in Senegal is therefore not limited to the dissemination of misinformation: it shapes collective perceptions and influences citizen behaviour.

Conclusion and recommendations

In Senegal's context, it is necessary to build a public space based on the integrity of information that is capable of supporting calm and informed democratic debate. To improve trust in the public sphere and improve the quality of such debate, several complementary areas of action can be considered:

Policy makers should regulate political communication during elections while not violating freedom of expression for all actors. Implement balanced regulation of online political content (sponsorship, hate speech, algorithmic transparency), while respecting freedom of expression. They should also roll out media and information literacy education from primary school onwards and encourage young people to participate in local initiatives for responsible media production and information verification (media clubs, citizen platforms).

Regulators should encourage communicators to adopt enforceable codes of

ethics and professional conduct that include journalists, columnists, and digital content producers. They should set up workshops to raise awareness of ethical communication and public political actors. There should be better coordination of the actions of regulatory bodies (Directorate of Communication), self-regulatory bodies (Council for the Observation of Ethical and Professional Standards in the Media, CORED), and journalists' associations (Union of Information and Communication Professionals in Senegal, SYNPICS; Council of Broadcasters and Press Publishers in Senegal, CDEPS, and Association of Online Press Publishers and Professionals, APEL).

Platforms should prioritize emotionally neutral content to reduce emotional bias, encourage critical analysis, and create a non-polarizing learning environment. There should be regular collaboration between

regulators and platforms to improve the prevention, detection, and moderation of problematic content through co-regulation and information-sharing mechanisms.

Media should focus on transparency, fact-checking and editorial rigour. There should be: strengthening of journalism training; holding columnists and influencers accountable; developing critical thinking among the public; and political commitment to true media independence.

Civil society should recognise that fact-checking is insufficient to stem the tide of informational confusion, although it remains essential. Researchers should be promoted as neutral actors in public debate, and academics mobilised to produce analyses, support public policy, and strengthen dialogue between politicians, the media, and citizens.

APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

Senegal had an Internet penetration rate of 112.42% in 2024, measured by the frequent use of several SIM cards per person. A digital divide persists: only 16% of rural populations have access to the Internet, with rural women being 32% less likely to have access.

An estimated 20.6% of Internet users are active on social networks, mainly on Facebook (70%) and YouTube (45%). TikTok achieves 30%, mainly made up of younger people, while X has 10-15%. The DataReportal Digital 2024 report shows that WhatsApp is used by 85% of Senegal's online citizens. Young urbanites, generally French-speaking and well-educated, are the most digitally literate and the most active on social networks.

From an institutional point of view, Senegal has put in place a relatively comprehensive legal framework for the digital environment, notably through laws on cybercrime, personal data protection and telecommunications regulation. However, the application of these laws remains ambiguous and sometimes contested.

Relevant laws in force include the Cybercrime Act (2008, revised 2016) which criminalizes illegal access to computer systems, identity theft, and defamatory online content. The Electronic Communications Code (2018) governs telecoms and net neutrality. Data protection is covered by the Personal Data Protection Act (2008). There is weak law



112.42%

Internet Penetration



16%

Rural population has internet access



20.6%

Active users of social media

enforcement, but also repressive instrumentalization: laws used to prosecute activists, journalists or bloggers, notably via vague charges (defamation, disturbance of public order). Recent events - arrests of journalists and activists, blocking of platforms, suspicions of electronic surveillance - illustrate that technology can be a tool for control, censorship and repression. This tension highlights a major challenge for Senegalese digital governance, which must reconcile the promotion of an inclusive digital transformation with respect for fundamental rights, in particular freedom of expression and the right to privacy.



1.6

UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION DISORDER IN CAMEROON: MAPPING THE ACTORS, DYNAMICS, AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Olga Elume, Communications and Social Media Professional, Human Rights advocate, researcher

The issues

Cameroon's information landscape has become increasingly fragmented and volatile due to the combined effects of the Anglophone crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and the Boko Haram insurgency in the Far North. These overlapping conflicts, alongside limits on press freedom, low digital literacy, and widespread socioeconomic inequalities, have created an environment in which misinformation and disinformation thrive. This is evident in:

- Conflict-driven propaganda, used by state and non-state actors to shape narratives, justify violence, or mobilize support;
- Socioeconomic and digital divides, which push rural and marginalized populations toward rumour-based information networks; and
- Weak regulatory and media ecosystems, where the factors of censorship, limited professional journalism, and shrinking civic space reduce access to credible information.

Across all national regions, there is growing mistrust of formal media outlets, often due to perceived bias, state censorship, or inconsistent reporting on conflict events.

Grand narratives at play

Political narratives, conflict-related claims, and emotionally-charged content drive the highest engagement levels online. The Anglophone crisis and security incidents have been used to shape opinions, assign blame, or question official information by distorting timing, scale, or responsibility.

The “Government Is hiding the truth” narrative fosters widespread distrust of official media, particularly regarding the Anglophone crisis. Many citizens perceive official reports as propaganda that downplays civilian casualties or frames events to protect state legitimacy. This perception drives reliance on alternative sources such as Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, and blogs, which often lack verification mechanisms.

In addition, narratives around “Separatist victory” and exaggerated “Boko Haram strength” amplify fear and insecurity at the community level.

Videos, audio messages, and posts circulated via diaspora networks frequently overstate territorial control or battlefield success, fuelling panic, displacement, and youth radicalization. Rumours tied to identity, ethnicity, or loyalty further compound these threats.

Accusations of “traitors” or “collaborators” circulate without evidence, especially during periods of high tension such as elections, lockdowns, or military operations.

Examples of false and misleading claims.

Date/Period	Actor/ Source	Claim	Verdict & Notes	Platforms
Jan 15, 2025	Anonymous Facebook post	“Government soldiers killed 50 civilians in Bamenda during operations.”	False: no independent verification; official and local reports confirm no such mass casualties.	Facebook / X
Feb 10, 2025	Ambazonia separatist network/ facebook post	“Separatists captured an entire military base in Lebialem.”	False: bases remained under government control; claims used to boost morale and recruitment.	WhatsApp / Facebook
Apr 20, 2025	Influencer (diaspora account)	“Cameroon lost all Anglophone-region seats in 2025 elections due to government failure.”	Misleading: partial losses occurred, but framing exaggerates outcome and simplifies reasons.	Facebook / X
May 8, 2025	Government press release (circulated online)	“All military operations in Anglophone regions have eliminated separatist threats.”	False: ongoing conflict and incidents reported by independent sources.	Government website / TV / Facebook
Jun 12, 2025	WhatsApp group	“UNICEF confirms children in Anglo-phone regions are being abducted by separatists en masse.”	False: no UN verification; claim used to inflame fear.	WhatsApp

Jul 3, 2025	Anonymous Twitter account	“Cameroon army used chemical weapons in the Northwest region.”	False: no credible evidence; repeated by blogs to generate outrage.	X / Blog
Aug 15, 2025	Local news commentary from a TV station	“Internet shutdowns are meant to hide mass civilian deaths from the world.”	Misleading: shutdowns occurred but no evidence of mass killings.	TV / Facebook
Oct 12, 2025	Citizen post on social media	“Military helicopters bombed civilians in Bamenda to prevent elections.”	False, reports confirm military activity targeted separatist positions, not civilians; imagery misattributed.	Facebook / X

Many posts do not deny certain events but twist the timing, scale, or responsibility. Common tactics included using old photos or videos as if they were new, exaggerating events, and linking real events to political arguments.

Threats to information integrity

A wide range of actors, including government institutions, separatist groups, bloggers, influencers, citizen journalists, and diaspora-based networks, shape and spread these disinformational narratives, often in pursuit of political influence, social visibility, or financial gain. Power dynamics play a central role in determining credibility, with celebrities, public officials, and popular online figures often exerting more influence than subject-matter experts. Gender bias affects how certain voices are received. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X serve as the primary channels for dissemination, while traditional media also contribute through state-influenced or partisan reporting. There is selective reliance on mainstream media such as CRTV and Equinox.

Bloggers are consistently identified as the most significant spreaders of disinformation, largely due to clickbait incentives, lack of verification, and reliance on unverified sources such as hearsay, random individuals, or user-generated photos and videos. Fear, panic, survival instincts, propaganda battles between state and separatist actors, and low trust in both state and private media are the main drivers of unverified sharing.



A side by side copy of a print media manipulated to change a narrative.

Government communications sometimes frame military operations as targeting “terrorists” while underreporting civilian casualties; Ambazonia separatist networks share videos exaggerating battlefield successes to boost morale; and Boko Haram exaggerates territorial control and military actions to create fear and distrust.

Language diversity and translation are seen as secondary but important contributing factors to disinformation, particularly in second- and third-hand reporting, where misinterpretation, cultural bias, and emotional frustration distort messages.

Counters to the challenges

In 2025, government monitoring reported the deactivation of nearly 9,000 fraudulent accounts spreading false or manipulative content. However, while laws against misinformation exist, they are vague, selectively enforced, and often weaponized, reducing their effectiveness. Communities reported a deep mistrust of official communication channels, often relying instead on community leaders or diaspora influencers for information. While these sources are trusted, they can reinforce false claims, increasing susceptibility to distorted or manipulative narratives.

Locally grounded counter-narratives and trusted actors help limit the spread of misinformation. Faith leaders, educators, women's groups, and community-based civil society actors promote messages of peace, unity, and reconciliation, often engaging communities through interfaith dialogue, local workshops, and facilitated discussion forums. Their deep embedding in local networks gives their messages credibility and reach, often surpassing official channels. However, their reach remains limited compared to highly emotive false content. Effective counter-content efforts lack consistent amplification and platform support, limiting their ability to compete with viral misinformation.

Analysis

During periods of internet shutdowns, access to verified information is severely constrained, resulting in greater dependence on informal communication channels and the rapid circulation of unverified claims. The highest misinformation peaks correlate with several highly sensitive socio-political moments, including national elections, ongoing military operations, school-resumption periods, and separatist-declared “lockdowns”. These spikes occur at moments when communities especially

those in the conflict-affected Anglophone regions are experiencing heightened fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability to rumours.

A clear gender dimension emerges during these periods of tension. Women and girls face risks linked to mobility restrictions, fear of abduction, or violence from armed groups, with vulnerability to false content about these. Men are disproportionately harassed by security forces, with resulting misinformation about military raids, arrests, or alleged “lists” of targeted youth, triggering panic, mass displacement of young men, and distrust in state institutions. This dynamic makes the male population susceptible to consuming, believing, and sharing conflict-related disinformation.

Conclusion and recommendations

A clear information gap exists between Anglophone and Francophone regions, driven by censorship, uneven media coverage, lived experience of the crisis, and varying levels of public interest. This results in Francophone audiences often lacking a full understanding of events in affected areas. The Boko Haram insurgency also generates uncertainty, fear, and intense competition over narratives.

Weaknesses in Cameroon's digital ecosystem exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Youth are highly active online but often lack fact-checking skills, while rural communities and women primarily rely on personal or local networks for information. These patterns make misleading narratives harder to detect, challenge, or correct, and may lead digitally active youth to unintentionally amplify unverified content. High unemployment, limited access to education, and historic political grievances create fertile conditions for misinformation.

The cumulative impact of these dynamics includes declining trust in institutions, social fragmentation, fear and panic among citizens, public health risks, psychological

harm, and weakened civic decision-making. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions, including that:

Policymakers should provide timely, accurate information on security, elections, and local developments, while ensuring that laws against disinformation align to international standards on free expression and are applied consistently. They should also support national digital literacy initiatives and address limited education access and high unemployment which increase susceptibility to misinformation.

Civil society organizations should lead community-level awareness actions, and advance fact-checking and critical thinking, especially among youth, women, and rural populations. They should also partner with faith leaders, educators, and local influencers to deliver messages of peace, unity, and reconciliation, creating spaces for dialogue that reduce the appeal of harmful narratives and foster social cohesion.

Regulators need to work with social media platforms and local media to monitor and flag harmful or misleading content, enforce context-sensitive moderation, and maintain access to reliable information during

internet shutdowns or connectivity restrictions. Regulators should also encourage incentives for media outlets to adhere to ethical journalism standards.

Social media platforms must invest in rapid response systems to detect false or harmful narratives, promote verified local news and humanitarian sources, and provide tools that help users verify information before sharing. Platforms can also collaborate with civil society and regulators to design localized interventions, ensuring moderation respects national contexts while protecting freedom of expression.

The range of stakeholders should prioritize ongoing monitoring, research, capacity building, and coordination to track emerging trends, evaluate interventions, and adapt strategies accordingly. There should be a national multi-stakeholder forum or task force that can help ensure responses are evidence-based, context-sensitive, and sustainable. Continuous capacity building for local actors, journalists, and community leaders will strengthen skills in verification and fact-checking, creating a more resilient information ecosystem capable of supporting informed civic decision-making and long-term social cohesion.





25.1 million
Cellular mobile
connections



14.8 million
Internet users



51.5%
Internet Penetration



28%
Rural Population
with internet access



65%
Urban settings
with internet access

APPENDIX: COUNTRY CONTEXT

Data from GSMA Intelligence (2025) reveals that Cameroon has 25.1 million active mobile connections and 14.8 million internet users, corresponding to a 51.5% internet penetration rate. Significant disparities persist between urban and rural areas, with only 28% of rural populations having internet access compared to 65% in urban settings (ITU, 2024).

Furthermore, gender gaps are stark: women are 23% less likely to own smartphones than men (GSMA, 2023), and only 37% of women in rural areas use mobile internet, compared to 59% of urban women. Barriers such as affordability and digital illiteracy remain acute, especially in the conflict-affected Anglophone and Far North regions, where infrastructure is limited.

Social media engagement, according to DataReportal 2025, includes Facebook: 4.8 million users (40% female, 60% male); YouTube: 4.5 million (45% female, 55% male); Instagram: 1.2 million; X: 680,000 (25% female, 75% male).

Cameroon's press freedom is poorly ranked at 138 out of 180 countries by Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024). Journalists face arrests, censorship, and intimidation, particularly in the Anglophone regions, resulting in widespread self-censorship.



These challenges have led to increased reliance on social media for news, a space where disinformation and propaganda flourish.



02

GENDER OVERVIEW

GENDERED DYNAMICS, INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES AND INFORMATION DISORDER IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

By Eucharika Nkengafack, communications professional and gender equality activist

The issues

Gendered disinformation is being used across Africa as a weapon against freedom of expression and to exclude women from civic discourses and processes. This undermines the fight for gender equality and digital inclusion, widening the gender digital divide gap and reinforcing structural inequalities. Gendered and intersectional dynamics are key in analysing information disorder in West and Central Africa.

Grand narratives at play

In the flow of content in the region, four underlying and mutually reinforcing narratives can be discerned:

- hostility to women's civic engagement;
- the instrumentalization of religion and sexuality;
- promotion of unequal social status and gender stereotypes; and
- intersections with tribal, ethnic and political differences.

Gendered disinformation disproportionately compromises women's civic engagement, as women and girls are more frequently targeted by disinformation, harassment, and moralistic narratives aimed at disqualifying their public participation. Gender stereotypes portray women as unfit for leadership along with narratives that reinforce the myth of the female brain, fortify patriarchal norms and silence women's voices. Gendered disinformation serves not only to distort facts, but also to silence, intimidate, and delegitimize women's political participation.

The hostility narrative serves to create misogynistic online environments that push women out of public debate. Cases abound of African women political leaders whose civic engagement has been affected by them being attacked through targeted sexist content that undermines their value and ability to effectively engage in digital spaces. There is a disregard for digital privacy, contributing to both reputational harm and psychological stress for women.

Instrumentalized religious discourse is often deployed to frame gender equality, feminism and bodily autonomy as alien, intensifying stigma and promoting exclusion, particularly in relation to women's rights and sexual autonomy, as well as to LGBTQI+ and other minority groups. This discourse fuels bullying and hate towards LGBTQI+ individuals, legitimising digital abuse against them. Portraying women or men as homosexual is a high risk to the persons concerned, and it intensifies a backlash against same-sex relationships. Mainstream media are also vehicles through which such stereotypes

are disseminated. Labelling gender identity and sexual orientation as moral transgressions increases stigma in both formal and informal settings.

The online gender stereotypes and sexism present women as emotional, and unfit to undertake mentally demanding or independent activities. These narratives are reinforced in tabloids, political talk shows, radio vernacular broadcasts and social media narratives. Stereotypes abound of women as primary caregivers (through adverts showcasing detergents, cooking and movies) and/or as sexual objects (for example, in music videos, certain fashion ads). Men are often portrayed as strong, emotionless providers (for example alcohol ads, action movie heroes) or solely interested in sports/technology.

The female Ghanaian vice president and former minister of education, Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, was attacked by some Ghanaian TikTok users through disrespectful comments about her physical looks and hairstyle. Online users attributed her leadership qualities to the fact that she is a wife and a mother. However, this was not the same treatment for her male counterparts.

Other cases of women leaders who have been affected by information disorder through sexist narratives which undermine their value include Hermine Patricia T. Ndam Njoya, lone female presidential candidate for the 2025 Cameroon presidential elections; Edith Kah Walla, female political leader in Cameroon; Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan in Nigeria; Chantal Nanaba Camara of Côte d'Ivoire; and Nana Ama Agyemang Asante, Ghanaian media personality; amongst others. Women are also faced with online hate and backlash for using or supporting the use of non-traditional methods for

childbearing. For example, multiple award-winning Nigerian writer and feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was criticised online for having her twin boys through surrogacy.

Demonstration of homophobia is seen in a backlash against same-sex relations between Nigerian-born Amara and Yinka, and Professor Uju Anya's same-sex marriage. Homophobic opinions also met the announcement on social media that Nigerian and Cameroonian UK-based LGBT couple, Bandy Kiki and Jenny, were expecting a baby.

Threats to information integrity

Socio-political crises and issues of bad governance enhance the spread of gendered information disorder. For example, with the 2025 presidential elections in Cameroon, men and women engaged in the spread of content that disinformed the public. In Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, differences in opinion on governance issues have escalated gendered disinformation. In Côte d'Ivoire, the same occurs with ethnic and political differences. Social media in Nigeria has proven to be a breeding ground for bullying and electoral violence. There is the use of fake videos to ruin the reputation of both men and women, but especially women.

Compounding the threats are deeply entrenched patriarchal systems and gender stereotypes. Gendered disinformation is evident in the mainstream media features in channels like radio, television and print. The same interests and perspectives are intensified in online spaces to the further disfavour of women and girls. Across the information system, the relatively unchecked online spread of deceptive and inaccurate information and images propagate gender stereotypes, portraying women in ways that discriminate against their rights to equal treatment. Worse is

the sexual objectification of women's bodies and reinforcing falsehoods like 'men are polygamous by nature'.

Counters to the challenges

Experts assess that platforms do little to protect those whose rights to gender equality are harmed, and even less to promote the values of anti-discrimination. Women who do support gender equality are labelled (in diverse languages) the equivalent of 'harlots', 'desperate', 'lonely', 'bitter', and 'delusional' people. Men who openly speak up against misogyny are referred to as 'sims' and 'weaklings'. Unmarried celebrities are slut-shamed and labeled as examples of 'bad life choices'. Influencer culture hyper-sexualises women and promotes unrealistic body standards. Male influencers reinforce toxic masculinity, 'hustle culture' or aggressive online behaviour. Experts have observed practices aimed at discrediting female politicians or women in highly strategic positions.

These attempts to discredit and destabilize are carried out by cyber activists who engage in spreading rumours and accusations targeting women and leading the public to believe that these women benefit from their professional status by engaging in consensual sexual relations with prominent politicians belonging to the presidential clan and its allies.

Practices like "slut-shaming" aim to tarnish the reputation and image of female politicians in the presidential regime and to delegitimize them by discrediting their skills and expertise, reducing them to mere sexual objects. Basically, this is one of many expressions of sexism, misogyny, and gender-based misinformation in the context of a high-stakes election.

Analysis

Gendered information disorder is part of the wider information disorder in much of West and Central Africa. Socio-political diversity, shaky democratic institutions, and unequal access to reliable information collide, stimulating information disorder that permeates elections, constitutional debates, and security crises. Disinformation is used as a weapon to sway public opinion, deepen religious and ethnic divisions, and undermine political opponents. The issue is made worse by authoritarian tendencies in some areas of the region, where governments occasionally use discourses about “fake news” to justify censorship and stifle opposition, making it difficult to distinguish between limiting freedoms and combating information disorder. In all this, misleading and false information combines with opinions that reject human rights for all, exacerbates ethnic and inter-tribal differences and co-opts gender as part of the armoury of ‘them’ and ‘us’.

Reinforcing gendered disinformation is compounded by the lack of access to stable electricity, internet connectivity, money and devices, particularly affecting rural women. Harmful social norms, systemic inequalities, cultural values, social gatherings in rural and urban communities facilitate and reinforce the intensity and diversity of gendered disinformation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research recorded in this report shows that gendered dimensions and intersectionality constitute a key component of information disorder. Disinformation discouraging women’s political participation and promoting stereotypes intersects with religious, ethnic and political agendas for which information integrity is an obstacle. Attacks on individual’s rights to sexual preference are melded into censorship and bullying of such expression.

Overall, there is a need for gender-responsive, context-sensitive approaches to ensure information integrity fit for human rights and development. This involves approaches that safeguard women’s civic participation, challenge harmful stereotypes, engage faith leaders constructively, and strengthen public discourse towards respect for human rights and social tolerance. In this context:

Governments should implement existing policies on information disorder in the different countries and develop new policies or revise the existing ones to better address the gendered dimension of disinformation while respecting freedom of expression and strengthening the safety of women to enjoy this right.

Civil society actors should increase education and sensitisation programmes to promote information integrity and digital literacy, and scale advocacy programmes to meaningfully engage women in claiming their civic rights and collectively challenge gender stereotypes. They should also support emotional intelligence and mental wellness to help online users control their emotions and respectfully share opinions.

Platforms should set up stronger digital protection mechanisms and foster dialogue to challenge stigma and cultural harm.

All stakeholders should work in solidarity to create bodies that monitor the information integrity space, provide situational analysis, give expert support and prevent the escalation of gendered disinformation. They should also use gender-transformative and context-sensitive approaches which engage religious narratives critically, while promoting human rights and inclusion for all.

03

CROSS COUNTRY COMPARISON



While each country in this study has its unique specificity, there are strong common threads across the countries studied:

- Disinformation in West and Central African democracies exists within a wider information context (online and offline), that includes not just social media (usually as the primary incubator), but also legacy media plus channels such as marketplace and religious networks.
- Attacks on factually accurate information occur as part of a package of narratives that puts a premium on appeals to emotions and identities.
- Online influencers and activists serve as opinion leaders, and many mobilise falsehoods within emotive discourse that appeals to attitudes, fears, identities and claimed traditions.
- There are different involvements with disinformation linked to people's age, gender and rural/urban locality.
- Information and disinformation flow dynamically across multiple languages, platforms and "pavement media" channels, and the circuit encompasses relatively-closed services like WhatsApp messaging.
- Community-based networks including faith leaders, and some legacy media, perform as credible agents for validating information, although also reinforcing rather than challenging gendered-disinformation.
- There is little clear evidence of formal foreign-organised disinformation operations, although there is high visibility of content by Africans in the diaspora and also apparent political campaign synergies between actors inside and outside the country. Countries with Francophone legacies appear to be more subjected to geopolitical disinformation than those with Anglophone influence.
- Governments are not communicating accurately or timeously but are instead engaged in censoring communications (including via Internet shut-downs), thus leaving the field open to rumours.
- Levels of media and information literacy in the digital space are lagging the challenges, while fact-checking faces challenges of speed and scale.
- Unaccountable platforms do not intercept serious disinformation in local languages, but instead operate with business algorithms that work to amplify the virality of falsehoods, fear and aggression.
- Elections, security and gender equality are focus points for disinformation to flourish, and conversely also critical topics for information integrity and its value to society.



04



CROSS CUTTING / REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the different countries, there are consistent proposals about what should be done, and by whom:

Government and policy-makers should take adequate steps to:

- Adopt legitimate and rights-respecting measures that address threats to information integrity, avoiding surveillance that is contrary to international and African human rights standards.
- Do more to reduce digital divides based on urban/rural, gender and age differentials.
- Support efforts to monitor threats to information integrity, such as observatories, while respecting the right privacy.
- Consult with diverse stakeholders, including civil society groups and regulators, to ensure fitness for purpose of current information governance to the national environment.
- Develop a rights-based National Information Integrity Framework that regulates the communications space (online and offline) without restricting freedoms.
- Be more transparent and accountable in practical initiatives and spending in relation to communications.



- Strengthen institutional networking among regulatory bodies as well as civil society organisations.
- Practice pro-active disclosure of information and operate effective mechanisms and capacity to provide accurate and timely information, especially in sensitive periods, to ensure rapid response to rumours and false information.
- Support early-warning systems that include civil society's role in detecting and countering of disinformation while not overstepping into legitimate expression or protest.

Social media platforms should take adequate steps to:

- Conduct human rights impact assessments to anticipate serious threats to information integrity and put mitigations in place, with particular attention to crisis-sensitive controls such as limits on forwarding content and promotion of platform content standards.
- More timeously detect and curb disinformation and narratives of hate and polarisation (including in audiovisual format), and invest to ensure coverage of different languages.
- Make anonymized data available for research on disinformation, in compliance with personal data protection standards and laws.
- Pay for independent fact-checking initiatives, including by newsrooms, and promote fact-checks to users - including retrospectively to those previously exposed to the narrative falsehoods.

Civil society organisations should take adequate steps to:

- Support local initiatives and forums online and offline that promote information integrity, such as in regard to digital rights, media and information literacy, and the value of fact-checking, while flagging ethics of digital information sharing and warning about online polarization.
- Bridge gaps between authorities and communities and develop partnerships with faith leaders, educators, and traditional leaders to build information integrity and be ambassadors against disinformation and hate.

Media should take adequate steps to:

- Counter information disorders by strengthening skills in investigative journalism and fact-checking in line with their code of ethics.
- Practice conflict-sensitive reporting and counter inflammatory labels and damaging stereotypes.

All stakeholders should take adequate steps to:

- Support coalitions as well a national multi-stakeholder forum or task force to enhance information sharing and co-ordinated actions, particularly in regard to issues such as elections and security crises.
- Prioritize gender-sensitive ongoing monitoring, research, capacity building and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

A wide range of research activity informed this project. First, for each country, a reference group was established, comprising persons well placed to provide knowledge, advice and feedback to the researchers. This informed the country assessment reports, as published elsewhere on the PIN website. These assessment reports were compiled through desk-based research.

For the full country reports (see links in the relevant sections above), which underpin the summaries above, the following methods were employed (further elaborated in each full-length report):

First, key information for the Appendices (presented with each country above) drew from the individual country assessment. Second, most content for the full reports emerged as follows:

- Further desk research into relevant literature was conducted.
- Focus groups, with gender balance, were convened in most countries, and tapped for insight.
- National experts, with gender balance, were consulted via interviews (and in one case, also through an online questionnaire).
- Preliminary online research was conducted (in one case with a group of analysts applying a grid to structure their observation).
- Big data analysis, via the Phoenix platform, of key accounts and keywords was employed to get insight into statistical and thematic trends on X, Facebook and TikTok.

All researchers signed an ethical code, leading to the use of signed informed consent forms

from sources, and anonymising names of participants in focus groups and some expert informants who did not want to be named. Gender-sensitivity was applied in data gathering and analysis. The data was stored in secure, limited-access folders.

Limitations include a lack of coverage of more than the dominant languages per country, and a lack of detailed user ethnography. Urban bias is a strong risk that may not have been adequately mitigated.

The big data analysis depended on specific search queries and may have missed some key fields. Expertise in assessing and comparing disinformational content and counter-content (eg. in comments) was limited. The lack of wide-access to platform Application Programme Interfaces inhibited the ability of this study to assess platforms' own roles in content curation and moderation.

Nevertheless, the overall methodology allowed for triangulation, revealing correspondence in most cases, and thus underlining the value of using complementary methods to obtain in-depth qualitative and quantitative evidence.



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