

# AFRICA FACING DOWN DISINFORMATION



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## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT

This summary of a longer report (available on the PIN website<sup>1</sup>) 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 problems of the unintentional dissemination of falsehoods.

Why take the time to understand these kinds of content, and assess how they go hand-in-hand with emotional identity appeals, hate speech and conspiracy thinking?

The answer is that the resulting knowledge can constitute the basis of strategic recommendations to protect human rights and push back against the threats.

Information integrity is a precondition for rational debate and a culture of peace and co-operation. But the research for this study shows how information pollution is wreaking havoc in Côte D'Ivoire, Benin, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. In these countries, ethnic tensions and gender inequalities are being dangerously fanned by the flood of false content.

The expert-based research commissioned by PIN, summarised here, also draws from separate and longer country studies that provide grounded and context-sensitive analysis. It further assesses various counters to disinformation, noting that state measures such as internet shut-downs and mass surveillance are not compliant with international human rights standards.<sup>2</sup>

The insights of the exercise 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. Guided by an ethical research code, the research has also taken care to be gender-sensitive.

While each country is different, there are also many common trends, as well as cross-cutting recommendations to governments, platforms, civil society and others.

In this era of generative AI, platforms backsliding on their responsibilities, and rising conflicts, it is becoming existential for African peace, development, democracy and human rights for stakeholders to turn the tide and ensure that if information integrity is successfully advanced even though the threats are formidable.

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1 Link to be added

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

## **NIGERIA**

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.

Research 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 men dominate political disinformation, extremist propaganda and the framing of insecurity, while women often serve as both amplifiers and targets of misinformation and disinformation.

## **GHANA**

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 weaponising galamsey within political narratives.

## **BENIN**

Benin exhibits a strong presence of false information, mainly in the context of crises and 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 polarisation, are conducive to the dissemination of false, misleading, or manipulated content. The dominant narratives found by this research mobilised fear, anger, mistrust, or indignation and are mainly rooted in political, security, identity, and religious themes.

## **CÔTE D'IVOIRE**

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.

## **SENEGAL**

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.

## **CAMEROON**

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 the country, there is growing mistrust of formal media outlets, often due to perceived bias, state censorship, or inconsistent reporting on conflict events.

# GENDER OVERVIEW

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 a key dimension of information disorder in West and Central Africa.

## CROSS COUNTRY COMPARISON:

While each country in this study is unique, there are also strong common threads across the six studied:

- » Disinformation in these democracies exists within a wider information context (online and offline). This context covers 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 take place within 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 also 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 often reinforcing - rather than challenging - gendered-disinformation.
- » There is little clear evidence of formal foreign-organised disinformation operations, although there is high visibility of Africans in the diaspora and also of content 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. Worse, some are often engaged in censoring communications (including via Internet shut-downs), which leaves the field open to rumours and distrust.
- » Levels of media and information literacy in the digital space are lagging the challenges, while efforts by fact-checkers face challenges of catching up with the speed and scale of false content.
- » Unaccountable platforms are failing to intercept serious disinformation in local languages. Worse, they 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.

## CROSS CUTTING / REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many proposals, consistent across the six countries, about what needs to 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 to privacy.
- » Consult with diverse stakeholders, including civil society groups and regulators, to ensure fitness for purpose of current information governance.
- » 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.

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Akinola Akintayo (country researcher: Nigeria)

Yacine Diagne (country researcher Senegal)

Moussa Diop (country researcher Cote D'Ivoire)

Olga Elume (Country researcher Cameroon)

Gbétohou G. Wenceslas Mahoussi (Country researcher Benin)

Eucharia Nkengafack (regional researcher, gendered disinformation and intersectionalities in West and Central Africa)

Olunifesi Adekunle Suraj (Country Researcher, Ghana)

Guy Berger (research advisor)

Ethics compliance and data management: Moussa Waly Sene, Paradigm Initiative

Research supervisor: Sani Suleiman, Paradigm Initiative

