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Public engagement with politics, information and news – Nigeria

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About this paper and the authors

Misinformation and disinformation in the media and politics have detrimental effects on people's finances and health, as well as democracy. This briefing is part of a research programme set up by Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact to find evidence for this and make it useful. In this briefing, the research team at the Africa Centre for Evidence looks at what we know about the extent of Nigeria's public engagement with news, information and politics. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to Peter Belesiotis and Natalie Tchakarian for their work on this project. This research was supported by a grant from Luminate.

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Overview

- This briefing sets out background information on the demography, language use, and socio-economic make-up of Nigeria, along with evidence of public engagement with politics, information and news, with a focus on misinformation.

- Nigeria is a large and multi-ethnic country, with a young and diverse population.

- Though formal English is the language used in government, everyday communication is in Pidgin and a range of local languages. Less than half of Nigerians speak formal English.

- Nigerians have low levels of trust towards democracy in general and show decreased participation in political processes.

- Radio is the most frequently used medium for news consumption, followed by television, internet sources and social media.

- The growing use of social media in the country has enabled greater reach of mis/disinformation. A significant number of Nigerians have admitted to sharing political news stories on social media despite believing that they were false or could be false news.

- Underlying ethnocultural and religious divisions within Nigerian society appear to both fuel the spread of mis/disinformation, particularly during election time, and exacerbate potential for harm.

- The majority of Nigerians do not think they could access information from their local government office, due to limited awareness of the Freedom of Information Act.

Demographics

Large population under 24 years of age

Nigeria has the largest population of all African states[1] and the seventh largest population globally.[2] The World Bank estimates Nigeria's population was more than 195 million in 2018,[3] continuing a decades-long trend of high birth rates (35.2 births/1 000 population in 2018)[1] yielding an average 2.6% population growth annually.[3]

Between 1990 and 2015, the population of Nigeria roughly doubled.[4] By 2050, estimates suggest Nigeria will have a population upwards of 390 million, making it the fourth most populous country worldwide.[1]

Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the population in Nigeria, due to controversies surrounding national census figures since the 1950s.[5] To this day, population estimates are still not considered to be reliable or credible. The most recent census in 2006 revealed the population count to be 140 million. This was followed by a statement by the president of the senate at the time, David Mark, saying "every time we talk about statistics in this country… we don't appear to have the accurate figure".[5]

Nigeria's age makeup is markedly youthful: 4% of Nigeria's population is under 14 years of age and a further 20% is between 15 and 24 years of age.[1] In comparison, only 4% and 3% of the population is respectively between 55 and 64 years of age and above 65 years of age.[1] The current median age in Nigeria is 18.3 years.[1]

Nigeria's youth-heavy population distribution is expected to continue. While the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs projects Nigeria's total population to grow 44% between 2015 and 2030, the youth population is expected to grow by nearly 60% during the same period.[4] As previously mentioned, there is uncertainty about interpreting these estimates as precise and reliable figures.[5]

Highly diverse religious and cultural makeup

Nigeria is notable for its many distinct ethnocultural groups and regionally localised languages.[6] Though English is Nigeria's official language due to its British colonial history, it is typically a second language, even among officials,[7] while informal or 'Pidgin' English functions as a *lingua franca* for the broader population.

Estimates suggest formal English is learned by less than half of all Nigerians.[3,8] Despite limited English language use across Nigeria's population, the country's commerce, press, educational institutions, and government administration operate in English.[7]

Irrespective of the official role of English, indigenous languages often provide the basis for recognising distinct ethnocultural groups in Nigeria.[7] Although population figures for different ethnocultural groups are uncertain, according to one source the Hausa-Fulani are Nigeria's largest ethnocultural group, representing 33.7% of Nigeria's population.[1] According to this source, the Igbo (Ibo) and Yoruba comprise 14.1% and 13.9% of Nigeria's population, respectively.[1] Other ethnocultural groups include (percent of total population indicated in parentheses): Tiv (2.2%), Ibibio (2.2%), Ijaw/Izon (2%), Kanuri/Beriberi (1.7%), and Igala

(1%).[1] The remaining 29% of Nigeria's population belong to one of more than 250 other ethnocultural groups.[1] In total, Nigeria is home to more than 500 indigenous languages.[1]

Some scholars cite Nigeria's abundance of minority languages as a barrier to the implementation of a national language policy, with minority groups fearful of marginalisation by larger groups.[7] Additionally, some research has shown that some Nigerians prefer English over indigenous languages and view English as having greater "usefulness".[7]

Similar to strongly localised language-based ethnocultural groups, Nigeria also demonstrates a religious separation that divides the country both geographically and socially.[9] Nigeria's Muslim population (according to above data, 51.6% of the total population)[1] is found predominantly in the northern regions of the country, whereas the country's Christian population (46.9%)[1] generally resides in the more prosperous southern or coastal regions of the country.[10] Among Nigeria's Christians, roughly one-quarter are Roman Catholic.[1]

Divisions between Muslim Nigerians in the north and Christian Nigerians in the south can be traced as far back as the late 19th century when Christianity was introduced in the colonial Southern Nigeria Protectorate, but kept out of the largely Muslim Northern Nigeria Protectorate. The two regions were amalgamated into a single British entity in 1914.[11] In present-day Nigeria, violent tensions often arise between Muslims and Christians.[12] A particular point of contention is Islamic sharia law's place in the socio-legal and political institutions of 12 of the northern Nigerian states.[10]

Nigeria's largest urban centres are spread across both Christian and Muslim-majority areas, however there are often strong sociocultural divides between urban and rural populations.[10] Political institutions, organisations, and interest groups reside mostly in urban centres, as well as nearly all print and online media outlets.[10] As of 2018, 50.3% of Nigeria's population resided in urban areas with an estimated rate of urbanisation from 2015 to 2020 of 4.23% annually.[1]

Poor population despite largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa

Nigeria is the largest economy is sub-Saharan Africa. However, globally Nigeria's economy is considered broadly under-developed and disproportionately reliant on fossil fuel exports.[1] Despite strong fundamental economic indicators and an increasingly diversifying economy,[1] Nigerians continue to be one of the world's poorest populations.[13] Over 44% of Nigeria's population – 87 million people, more than any other country – lives in "extreme poverty".[14] The World Poverty Clock estimates that by December 2030, roughly 114 million people in Nigeria will live in "extreme poverty."[15]

Widespread corruption and the state's inability to provide security for its citizens and their property are cited as among the most salient reasons for the disconnect between the Nigerian economy's strong performance on a macro level and the rate of inequality.[13] When polled between 2016 and 2018, 44% of Nigerians stated they had paid a bribe to access a public service in the previous 12 months.[16]

Throughout Nigeria's history, the benefits of the country's economic growth and abundant crude oil reserves have been disproportionately concentrated among Nigeria's economic

and political elite.[13] This distribution has created one of the most economically stratified societies in the world, with a 2013 Gini coefficient of 0.488.[17]

Nigeria had a labour force of roughly 60 million people by 2017. 70% of this work force occupied a post in agriculture, 20% in services, and 10% in industry.[1] In total, 16.5% of Nigerians were unemployed.[14] High youth-unemployment rates have been identified as a factor contributing to ongoing religious and ethnocultural violence.[14]

Failing education system coupled with preference for education of the boy child

The public education system in Nigeria has largely failed its mandate. Stakeholders have described the system as "collapsed" and in "an education state of emergency".[18] In 2017, the Nigerian government acknowledged for the first time that over 10.5 million children were not enrolled in school.[19] Concerns have been raised about both access to primary education and its quality.[19] Lack of access to primary education is more prevalent in northern Nigeria.[19] Compounding challenges in northern Nigeria, attendance at school, particularly for girls, is low.

The Nigerian government says that lack of access to education in northern Nigeria is the result of "cultural factors", as well as the presence of terrorist activity and the nomadic lifestyle of some communities.[19]

The violent campaign against the uptake of Western-style education run by the insurgency Boko Haram (whose name is translated by some to mean "Western education is sinful")[20] has also had a powerful effect on educational attendance in the regions most affected. The targeting of schools and the abduction of female students is common for this group of terrorists as its aim is to discourage parents from sending their daughters to school.[20] Boko Haram further manipulates vulnerable young girls, who are already separated from family, into carrying out suicide attacks.20

However, critics contend that the failure of the Nigerian public education system is largely due to paltry funding from the government.[18] There is too little evidence to judge whether this is true.

In addition to poor educational attainment indicators, the attitudes of Nigerians towards the public education system appear symptomatic of a broader lack of faith in public institutions and the government's inability to effectively fund and manage key social programmes.[13,21] When 1,600 Nigerians were surveyed by Afrobarometer between 2016 and 2018, 32.1% of respondents indicated that government effectiveness in addressing educational needs was "worse" or "much worse" than a few years ago.[22] When the same sample was asked to evaluate how well the government is handling educational needs, 24.1% of respondents indicated "very badly," 24.5% of respondents indicated "fairly badly," 40% of respondents indicated "fairly well," and 10.4% of respondents indicated "very well."[22]

Irrespective of access, the quality of teaching nationally was called into question[23] when primary teachers in one province were administered a test meant to evaluate 10-year-old students and two-thirds of the teachers did not score above 75%.[24] This result was criticised by a teachers' union leader who said the results were not valid and were "cheap media propaganda".[24] One prominent Nigerian newspaper editor has claimed that most Nigerians

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do not wish to be teachers, and that "many see it as a stop-gap before getting their dream job".[24] The failure of Nigeria's basic education system is borne out in literacy rates: less than 60% of the Nigerian population over 15 years of age is functionally literate.[1]

Beyond primary education, Nigeria's public universities have been met with challenges in delivering tertiary education to the country's population. Nigeria's public universities frequently encounter long-term faculty strikes organised by the Academic Staff Union of Universities.[25] These strikes can last months and delay students' graduation significantly.[21] As a result of endemic strikes creating uncertainty in the public university system, private universities in Nigeria and neighbouring countries have flourished and are utilised by the country's wealthy.[21]

Political context

Questionable democracies and unstable governance

Nigeria has had a fraught and unstable political history since achieving independence in 1960.[26,27] After becoming an independent nation state, Nigerian leadership oscillated for almost 40 years between military dictatorships established through violent coups d'états, and brief presidential democracies with mandates provided by elections of questionable validity.[10] Since 1999, the country has been ruled by elected politicians but the validity of election results is widely questioned. Nigerians are generally suspicious of the federal government and its legitimacy, which originates back to the early days of colonialism.[28]

In an attempt to reduce the control of the three main ethnocultural groups over other communities, successive central military governments increased the number of states from three to 36 whereby significant power is delegated to local and provincial governments that Nigerians may identify with more strongly.[28] Many scholars argue that efforts to establish a robust, consolidated federal democracy in Nigeria have failed.[26,27,28] Nigerian politics is overwhelmingly dominated by a culture of prebendalism[29,30]: a political system of criminal diversion in which "elected officials and government workers feel they have a right to a share of government revenues, and use them to benefit their supporters, co-religionists and members of their ethnic group".[31] Nigeria's culture of prebendalism is enabled, in part, by a weak judiciary that operates slowly and struggles to maintain rule of law.[1,28]

To some extent, the fraught nature of Nigeria's democracy is also visible in the population's level of political engagement and trust.

Political engagement and trust

The Afrobarometer R7 survey provides an extensive look at Nigerian civic engagement and political attitudes. In a 2016 to 2018 survey where Nigerians were asked how frequently they discuss political matters with their friends or family:

Frequency that Nigerians discuss political matters with their friends or family
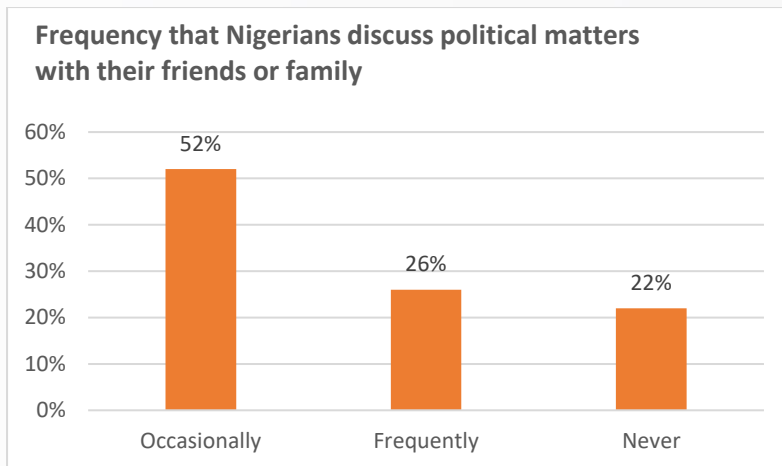
Source: Afrobarometer R7

No data was available on how often respondents discussed political matters with people outside of their main social group.

It is however important to observe that despite the level of individual interest in politics, both trust in Nigerian democracy and participation in the political process were low:

With regards to trust, in the 2016 to 2018 survey, 38.6% of respondents indicated Nigeria was a democracy "with major problems", and an additional 9.3% indicated that they did not believe Nigeria was, in fact, a democracy.[22]

When asked how satisfied they were with Nigerian democracy generally, 27.2% of respondents indicated they were "not at all satisfied" and 29.8% of respondents indicated they were "not very satisfied."[22] Finally, just 7.5% of respondents to the same survey indicated they trusted the Nigerian national assembly "a lot", while over 75% of respondents indicated they trusted parliament "just a little" or "not at all".[22] Trust in the Nigerian president was modestly higher: 29.2% trusted him "a lot", nevertheless 54.9% of respondents trusted him either "just a little" or "not at all".[22]

The low levels of trust expressed towards democracy in general were also visible in how Nigerians engaged with the political process in practice. In the 2019 presidential election, only 35% of registered voters cast a ballot. Since an impressive 70% turnout in the 2003 presidential election, voter turnout in Nigeria has been decreasing with each successive election.[32,33] Voter turnout for the presidential election in 2015 was 44% and 54% for the presidential election in 2011.[33]
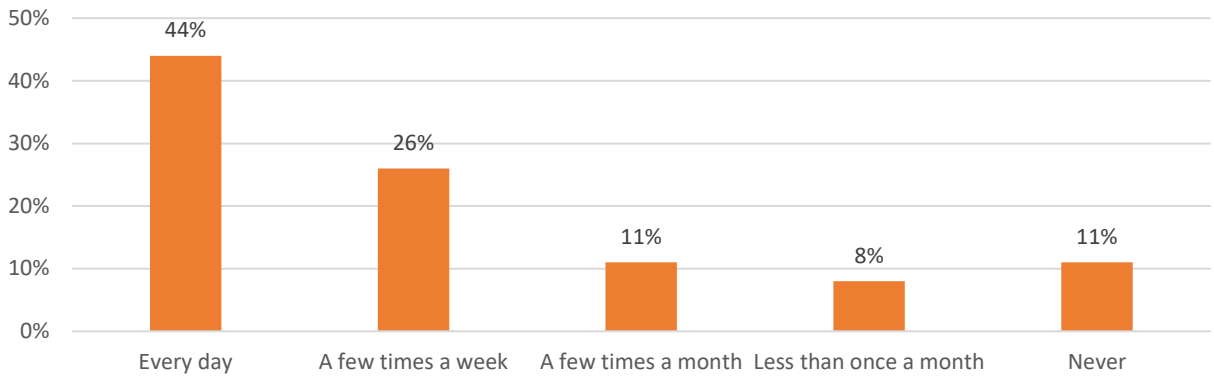
Media and the news

Media landscape and sources of news consumption

Nigeria's recent history has been marked by a dramatic increase in the number of media outlets producing print, radio, and television media. Many Nigerians receive their news from provincial-level outlets.[28]

The Afrobarometer R7 survey in 2016 to 2018 sampled Nigerians on their news media consumption habits. The tables below illustrate some of the results:
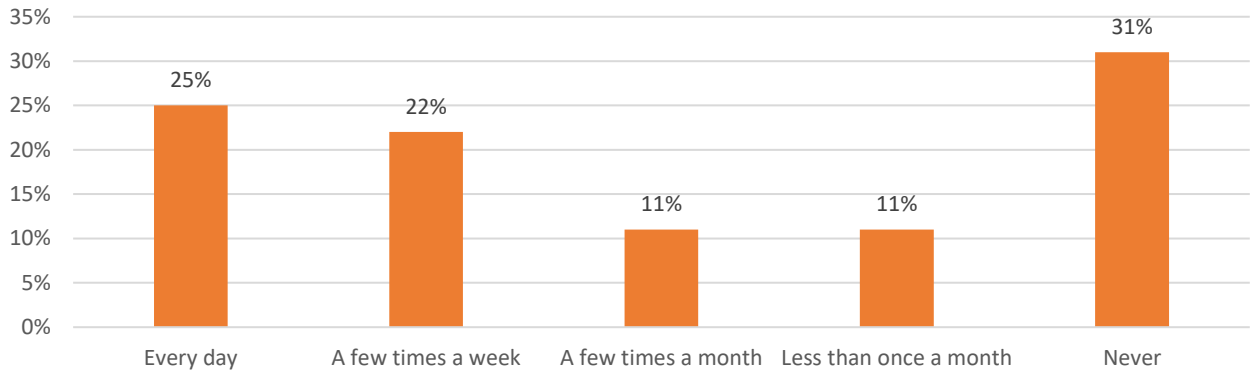
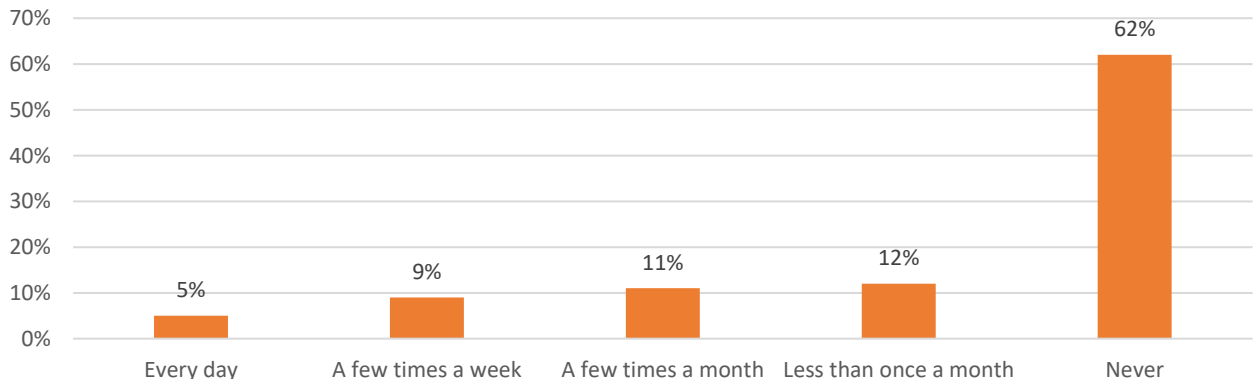**Frequency that Nigerians receve their news on Radio**

Every day	A few times a week	A few times a month	Less than once a month	Never
44%	26%	11%	8%	11%

Source: Afrobarometer R7

Frequency that Nigerians receive their news on Television

Every day	A few times a week	A few times a month	Less than once a month	Never
25%	22%	11%	11%	31%

Source: Afrobarometer R7

Frequency that Nigerians receive their news on Newspapers

Every day	A few times a week	A few times a month	Less than once a month	Never
5%	9%	11%	12%	62%

Source: Afrobarometer R7

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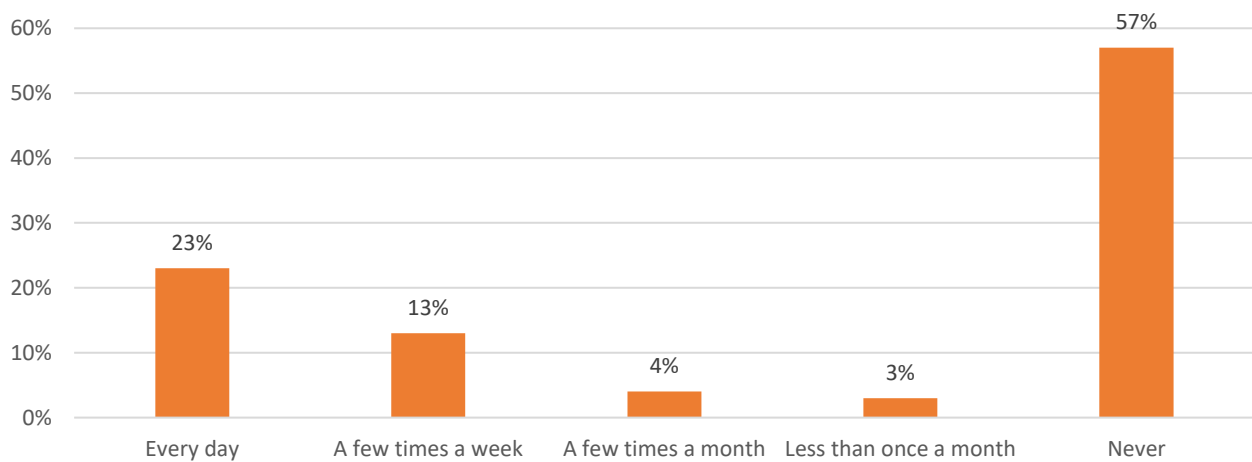
Frequency that Nigerians receive their news from Internet sources (excluding social media)
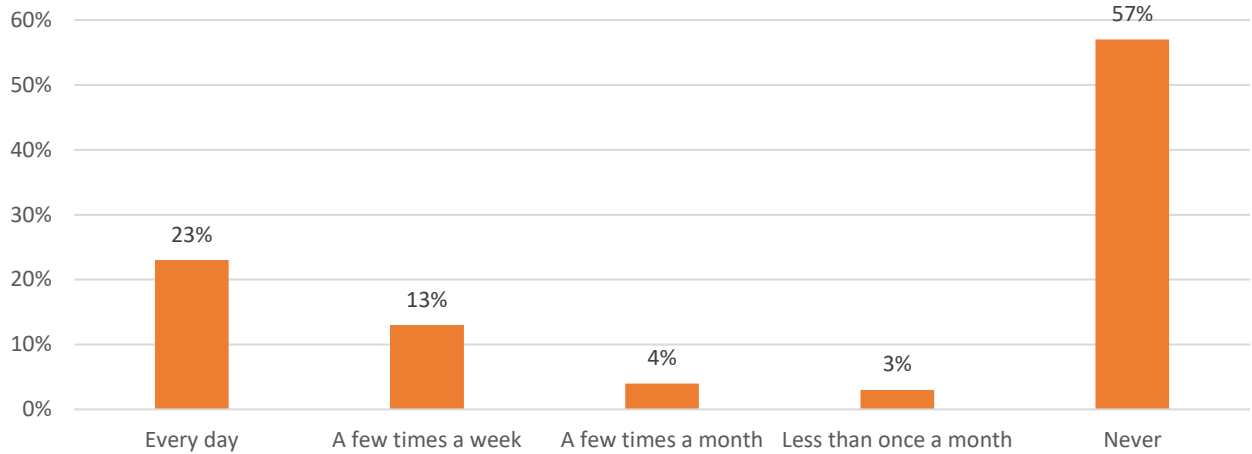
Source: Afrobarometer R7

Frequency that Nigerians receive their news from social media (such as Facebook and Twitter)

Source: Afrobarometer R7

Information on the role of peer-to-peer news transmission is limited, however, reports have noted the group and private messaging platform WhatsApp has been used to spread mis/disinformation aimed at inciting violence.[34]

Freedom of press

Nigerians' perception of trends with respect to the media's ability to criticise the government is mixed.

When questioned whether the media's freedom to "investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticise government" has changed compared to a few years prior, 15% of respondents noted "much less freedom", 22% of respondents indicated "somewhat less freedom", 21% of respondents indicated the same amount of freedom, 25% of respondents indicated "somewhat more freedom", and 17% of respondents indicated "much more freedom".[22]

It is notable that a free press is not necessarily a priority for a majority of Nigerians: only 45% of polled Nigerians agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control".[22] In comparison, more than 54% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society".[22]

Despite mis/disinformation often being more associated with social media than with traditional media outlets, some researchers argue that many journalists and media outlets in Nigeria contribute willingly and unwillingly to the circulation of mis/disinformation.[35]

This has contributed to a distrust of the media by Nigerians: when asked to rate trust in media from 0 ("no trust in the media at all") to 100 ("a lot of trust in the media"), national media, local media, and social media all fell between 40 and 45.[34] Only global media rated above 50.[34]

What is known about how mis- and disinformation is produced, consumed, and spread in Nigeria?

After conducting a systematic search of available peer-reviewed research evidence, no evidence was found on the impact of the sociocultural/religious makeup, economic conditions, educational attainment, political history, access or reliability of the media and other official information on the production, consumption or harm of mis/disinformation in Nigeria. Given what can be inferred from public news reports, this appears due to the lack of academic work in the field to date, rather than a lack of evidence.

Nigeria is a severely fragmented society with social divisions that may make mis/disinformation particularly virulent and harmful. These divisions are long-standing and firmly entrenched. The Hausa-Fulani, Igbo (Ibo), and Yoruba – Nigeria's dominant ethnic groups – are often seen as broadly suspicious of one another. The Hausa-Fulani dominate in the north, the Igbo in the southeast and Yoruba in the southwest.[10]

As is frequently the case in African states with borders drawn by colonial powers, Nigeria is an amalgamation of multiple nations with no simple shared cultural identity.[38] Underlying ethnocultural, religious, and sectarian divisions within Nigerian society appear to fuel the spread of mis/disinformation and can be weaponised for powerful disinformation campaigns by political actors.[39] Mis/disinformation capitalises on these divisions while simultaneously worsening them.[39] One prominent Nigerian journalist claimed that mis/disinformation is "further endangering the delicate ethno-religious fabric of Nigeria".[39]

A review of media reports on mis/disinformation distributed on social media in Nigeria suggests that it has fomented violence along ethnocultural and religious lines. In one example of many, on 24 June 2018, 11 Muslim men were reported as being killed in civil unrest that allegedly erupted as a result of socially divisive faked images spread on Facebook.[40]

The social media platform has been widely criticised by Nigerian stakeholders for not adequately addressing mis/disinformation and its apparent repercussions for ethnocultural/religious violence in Nigeria.[40] Some Nigerian police forces have dedicated

significant resources to officers surfing Facebook to locate and address mis/disinformation, recognising the threat of mob violence.[40]

Due to poor law enforcement, Nigeria has for decades suffered from the problem of vigilante forces, some created to defend their communities from attack, and others by political actors to commit acts of violence against other groups. It is now reported that these groups are frequently galvanised to action by mis/disinformation spread on Facebook.[40] One investigation found that mis/disinformation and incitements to ethnocultural/religious violence, originating from the Facebook account of a man in the United Kingdom, reached more than 30,000 Nigerians.[40]

Ethnic militias in Nigeria often engage in violence without punishment due to weak rule of law in Nigeria,[12] exacerbating the threat posed by mis/disinformation. Perhaps the most relevant recent political movement is Boko Haram, a militant Islamic group whose purpose is to institute sharia, or Islamic law across the country.[41] Uprisings began in 2009 and thousands have been the victims of Boko Haram violence since then.

Misinformation on social media has also fuelled unnecessary fear. In one example, it was reported that a 15-year-old girl kidnapped by Boko Haram had been killed.[41] Multiple posts on WhatsApp and Facebook went viral, with some posts even reporting that a "family source" had confirmed the death of the adolescent. The government quickly responded and determined that the story was fake, fabricated to target the lack of government response to previous Boko Haram killings.[41] Other instances of misinformation included a graphic photograph of dozens of corpses lined up on the ground, with a caption that read "Boko Haram burns 375 Christians".[42] Even after the image was proven to be fake, it was shared again multiple times on the internet with different headlines, showing the lack of accuracy on social media.[42]

The effects of economic conditions or educational attainment on the production, consumption, or harm of mis/disinformation in Nigeria are not clear. However, when reflecting on the sources available, one assumption is that the faltering Nigerian public education system potentially hinders the population from critically evaluating some types of mis/disinformation in the popular media.

Nigeria's fractious political climate, in combination with a population untrusting of federal authority, seems to have created an environment in which mis/disinformation spreads easily and efforts to undermine free and fair execution of elections are common. The media has reported allegations that Nigeria's main political parties stage coordinated disinformation campaigns during elections that aim to exploit discord between Muslim and Christian communities for electoral gain.[39]

This is a potentially powerful election strategy as Nigerians often strongly – though not exclusively – identify with their religious or ethnocultural community.[28]

During the 2019 Nigerian general election, a disinformation campaign was launched against a Muslim candidate.[39] The campaign claimed that this candidate received support from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community – a highly marginalised group in Nigeria[43] – in an attempt to discredit him with Muslim voters in northern Nigeria.[39] This campaign aimed to purposely deceive voters with weaponised partisan disinformation in order to affect electoral results.

A similar disinformation campaign was undertaken against another candidate, falsely claiming that he aimed to institute sharia law across the country, in an attempt to discredit him with Christian voters in southern Nigeria.[39] It is unclear what effect these campaigns had on the election, however researchers suspect they may worsen already fragile community ties and generally have an especially harmful impact in rural areas.[39]

The growth of social media and its influence in Nigerian society has contributed significantly to the prevalence of mis/disinformation and its associated harms.[44] As outlined earlier in this document, social media platforms are frequently utilised in Nigeria, seemingly to incite ethnocultural and/or religious violence. Over 28% of Nigerians in a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Centre stated they had shared a political news story they later found out was false, and 20% of respondents stated they had shared a political news story despite believing at the time that it was false.[34]

The role of social media in spreading mis/disinformation is especially prevalent in African states during elections; other African countries including Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda have cut internet access during charged political periods.[35] The Nigerian government has recently instituted limits on internet freedom – and is considering more – largely as a result of the spread of problematic mis/disinformation.[45,46]

Some scholars argue that professional journalists in Nigeria have failed to keep apace with a changing media landscape in which blogs and social media networks have robbed them of their gatekeeper role with respect to the dissemination of information and opinions.[35] Furthermore, many of the emerging private media outlets in Nigeria are owned by people who "have vested political interests and […] are deliberately configured to advance the regional, religious, ethnic, and political interests of their owners".[35] These media outlets are willing to traffic in mis/disinformation when it suits their interests, or do so unintentionally due to limited journalistic expertise.[35]

Access to and trust in official information

In 2011, Nigeria's federal government passed into law a freedom of information act.[36] Similar to other countries' freedom of information legislation, this law states that government bodies and private companies tapped by the government to perform official functions are mandated to provide non-classified information to any citizen in a timely manner upon request.[36] However, even among well-educated members of society, there is very low awareness of this act, which is a barrier to implementation.[37] In practice, denials of access to information have been common, and the number of annual requests for information under this law have steadily dropped since it was instituted.[36] Notable cases have included a human rights lawyer being denied information on the business dealings of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, and the denial of information on President Muhammadu Buhari's expenditures while in office.[36]

Afrobarometer's most recent survey asked Nigerians how likely it was that they could access their county's development plan and budget at their local government office: 50% of respondents indicated "not at all likely", 24% of respondents indicated "not very likely," 17% of respondents indicated "somewhat likely," and only 9% of respondents indicated "very likely".[22] Beyond this survey, no evidence on Nigerians' perceptions of availability and trustworthiness of official information was identified.

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