



Verification, Duty, Credibility: Fake News and ordinary citizens in Kenya and Nigeria

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DUTY, IDENTITY, CREDIBILITY:

Fake news and the ordinary citizen in Kenya and Nigeria – a comparative study

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And the teams at Flamingo and Synthesis.

A note on the authorship of this report:

This has been a truly collaborative project between the World Service Audience Insight team and its agency partners. The ideas, words and phrases in this report have come from many places, including from discussions and meetings with the various individuals named above, as well as in presentations, emails, and conversations with all our partner agencies.

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We have not edited the translations or corrected grammatical errors, as we believe it gives a better flavour of the original interviews. When quotes have been used they have not been edited, other than condensing occasionally. When this has happened, it has been shown with ellipsis (...)

CONTENTS

Executive summary

Introduction

Part I. Fake news in the minds of ordinary citizens

1. What is 'news' for ordinary citizens?
2. What is 'fake news'? And what are the perceived impacts of fake news

Part II. Consumption of information in the digital ecosystem

1. The messages shared on private networks
2. Coping mechanisms for dealing with digital information

Part III. The motivations behind sharing

1. Sharing as social currency
2. Sharing as civic duty

Part IV. The limitations of verifying techniques

1. How are people verifying their information?
2. Which types of fake news messages put citizens' verification techniques under strain?
3. Do audiences differentiate between sources of legitimate news and sources of fake news?

Part V. Conclusions/suggestions

Executive summary

Fake news is not new in these societies; but the exponential proliferation of information that people are exposed to in the age of digital media make it a constant challenge to filter and determine the legitimate from the fake. Whilst there has been a huge amount of discussion in both the Nigerian and the Kenyan media about fake news, in this project, we wanted to ask the question that has been underexplored in all the discussion: what makes the ordinary citizen spread fake news without verification? And why misinformation spreads on private and public networks. We wanted to study fake news as a social phenomenon, enabled by technology, as opposed to most discussion and research that puts the technology at the center.

We learnt that though people in both Kenya and Nigeria are often keenly aware of the negative consequences of sharing fake news, there is a degree of resignation that 'this is just the way things are'.

Most ordinary citizens in Nigeria and Kenya share news and fake news as an act of civic duty or social currency, not through malice. People do believe that there can be serious societal level consequences of the spread of fake news in Kenya and Nigeria, especially from those messages that are seen to lead to violence. Recognizing the difficulty in identifying legitimate from fake news stories, ordinary citizens are concerned that fake news might be swamping

legitimate news. In an ecosystem where people are consuming news from sources of both legitimate and fake news, it is increasingly hard for audiences to distinguish the real from the fake. This is true for all people, not just subsets of society, demographics or political affiliations. Misleading headlines from the mainstream media, or taking short-cuts for verification when rushing to publish, are further blurring the lines between legitimate journalism and out and out misinformation.

How ordinary citizens feel about a story can be more important than fact-checking when it comes to sharing news. This is one of the reasons why during periods of heightened emotions such as elections we see an increase in sharing of fake news. This also true for fake news stories that reflect national, societal, or personal anxieties and aspirations.

Most people in both Nigeria and Kenya do not look to platform features such as 'forwarded' or online fact checkers such as Africa Check for verification. On digital platforms, people in these markets are checking the source and the sender of the content, assessing their reputability on whether the content is credible or not. In addition to this, people are actively verifying news using various signals to help assess if content is fake or not. While it is encouraging that people in both Nigeria and Kenya are aware of fake news risks when consuming news and have mental short-cuts to help decipher legitimate news, this is consequently also leading to people overestimating their ability to spot fake news. Finally, citizens are trying to verify through their own social networks instead

of looking up legitimate news outlets leading to the unwitting spread of fake news.

We believe there is an opportunity and need to reduce the blurred lines between legitimate and sources known to have published fake news for creating a healthier media environment. The correlation between political or sectarian fake news and the corruption of the political process is there, but in pockets – for most citizens, it is too abstract a concept to dwell on. We need to proactively engage with the problem, and give citizens concrete tools to identify the strategies used by the creators of fake news. Citizens should not be left relying on their own faulty signals, but given training and encouraged to demand greater transparency and integrity of information. In these two countries, audiences should raise the bar of expectation from news providers, and the politicians and business leaders who are seen to hold the levers of power, thus helping create a more informed citizenry.

At the moment there are some positive signs in behaviours and attitudes of citizens with respect to fake news. But some of the tactics they are adopting to separate fake from fact are liable to crack under the strain of heightened tensions or pressures during politically intense periods, say elections.

DUTY, IDENTITY, CREDIBILITY:

Fake news and the ordinary citizen in Kenya and Nigeria – a comparative study

INTRODUCTION

There was a time, “what a time it was, it was a time of innocence, a time of confidences”¹. In that ancient era, the term ‘fake news’ was used to refer to a form of satire; and commentary of that time grappled with the troubling notion that young people might be getting their information not from actual legitimate journalistic outlets, but from such satire^{2 3}. We refer of course to the discussions in the early 2010s around *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the American TV shows that blurred the lines between ‘hard news’ and satire. Difficult as it is to imagine at this particular moment in time, this form of ‘fake news’ was even called ‘some sort of corrective to, and substitute, for mainstream journalism’.⁴

¹ Simon & Garfunkel. (1968). Bookends. *Bookends*. Universal Music. LP.

² Amarasingam, Amarnath, ed., *The Stewart/ Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011)

³ Baym, Geoffrey, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*. (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010)

⁴ McChesney, Robert W., Foreword to *The Stewart/ Colbert Effect*. By Amarnath Amarsingam (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011).

Today, it is fair to say, the term ‘fake news’ carries few positive associations. Today it is an inarguably negative term, irrespective of who is using it, though broadly speaking all users of the terms refer to misleading or false information. The term has been used by journalists and researchers in conjunction with words such as ‘crisis’, or even ‘democratic crisis’⁵. As is well known, influential politicians around the world have taken up the term to connote any news that is critical of them and their achievements.

Gone missing: The ordinary citizen

A lot of the media commentary - and emerging research - on the phenomenon has focused on the actors responsible for creating ‘fake news’ (e.g. Macedonian teenagers from the town of Veles⁶; or suspected Russian state actors⁷), the platforms thought to play a central role in the spread of ‘fake news’ (e.g. ‘falsehoods spread faster on Twitter than does truth’⁸, the possible use of WhatsApp to ‘poison’ Brazilian politics⁹) or

⁵ See, for example, <https://qz.com/india/1335161/indias-fake-news-crisis-to-worsen-ahead-of-election-oxford-study/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-44967650>

⁶ One of the best of these stories is this one:

<https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>

⁷ See for example:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/31/facebook-russia-election-midterms-meddling>;

⁸ Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., Aral, S. *The spread of true and false news online* (Science, 2018) 1146 -1151.

¹³ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/opinion/brazil-election-fake-news-whatsapp.html?module=inline>

indeed the ‘victims’ of fake news - from individuals to communities to even entire democracies. A whole host of academics from a whole host of disciplines - including economics, computer science, have sought to understand various aspects of the phenomenon, from the consequences of digital information overload to the economics of fake news production.

A lot of the research in the area has been focused on the technology or platform and used technology in the analysis¹⁰.

In all of the frenetic and frantic research and commentary, there is one thing that has gone underexplored: the voice of the ordinary citizen - and indeed, the responsibilities of the ordinary citizen. Where the ordinary citizen does appear, especially in the media, s/he is sometimes inadvertently portrayed as dupe of malicious actors, or heavily influenced by social media/chat app messages to the extent of committing acts of egregious harm.¹¹ Despite the injunctions of researchers like Alice Marwick, who call for a “sociotechnical approach” to understanding the ‘fake news’ phenomenon, and Wardle & Derakshan¹², who draw upon the work of James Carey and urge researchers to understand better the ‘ritualistic function of communication’, some bits of the academic research and a lot of the journalism so far have

¹⁰ See for example: Qiu, Xiaoyan, Oliveira, Diego F. M., Shirazi, Alireza Sahami, Flammini, Alessandro Menczer, Filippo, Limited individual attention and online virality of low-quality information (Nature Human Behavior, 2017), 1-132.

¹¹ For example, the headline here says ‘How WhatsApp *helped turn* an Indian village into a lynch mob’: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44856910>

¹² Wardle, Claire, Derakshan, Hossein . Information Disorder (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 2017)

inadvertently diminished the agency of ordinary human beings, focusing more on the technology of the communication. Even Wardle & Derakshan, who do think about communication as culture, recommend action by technology companies, national governments, media organisations, civil society, education ministries, and funding bodies - but don’t have anything to say about what the responsibility of the ordinary citizen is in addressing the problem of ‘fake news’.

The occasional study has centred the public’s voice/role on the phenomenon of ‘fake news’. A study commissioned by the BBC’s commercial news arm, Global News Ltd., found that 79% of the public in 6 countries of the APAC region were ‘very concerned’ about the spread of fake news.¹³ A late 2017 global poll in 18 countries conducted by Globescan for the BBC World Service found that 79% of the respondents globally were concerned about ‘what’s fake and what’s real on the Internet’.¹⁴ In Kenya, 87% of the respondents in a study by Portland reported that they had seen ‘deliberately false news’.¹⁵ All of these studies shed some light upon the phenomenon as experienced by the public. However, they answer more of the *what* questions than the *why* or the *how* questions about citizens’ motivations and behaviours¹⁶. But

¹³ BBC Global News Limited, *The value of news* (BBC Global News, 2017)

¹⁴ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-41319683>

¹⁵ Available here: <https://portland-communications.com/pdf/The-Reality-of-Fake-News-in-Kenya.pdf>; the study did not go into the question of *how* respondents knew the content was deliberately fake.

¹⁶ This is as it should be - quantitative surveys are better at answering certain questions than others. However, it must be said that online quantitative studies

because the research terrain is relatively new, these studies lead to more questions than answers. Above all, though, the main question that these studies throw up is this: what exactly is this ‘concern’ that people seem to be expressing? And if indeed they are so concerned, how have they changed their behaviour in response to that concern¹⁷? It is well-nigh impossible to answer these questions by simply tracking their behaviour on technology platforms or even by asking them a set of questions in a large scale quantitative survey. It is by immersing ourselves to some extent in the lives of these ordinary citizens to some extent can we start to understand how social and cultural forces, and their own desires and aspirations, come together to influence the role they play in the spread and growth of ‘fake news’.

In addition to this people sized hole at the centre of many of the research projects and papers, much of the published or publicly available research has been centred in the USA, and

are increasingly easier and quicker to do than ever before, and many journalists find it easier to report on such studies than others. Consequently, quantitative surveys are often being used for purposes they are not designed to fulfil.

¹⁷ We are assuming that ‘concern’ usually leads to some kind of change, first in the individual’s internal state of being and then in their external actions. We recognize though that there is a body of scientific evidence that argues this is not inevitable and that existing human behaviour, say, for example, humanity’s response to the threat of climate change, is ample evidence of the big gap that exists between attitudes and behaviour. (Which also leads us to the depressing conclusion that the movie ‘Wall-E’s’ depiction of future humans might be extremely prescient...).

to a certain extent, Europe. While there has been reporting on ‘fake news’ and its consequences from around the world and extensive coverage of the issue in local media in many countries of the world, this has not yet been accompanied by a similar volume of published research in those countries. Of course, the research cycle moves slowly while the news cycle moves at the speed of light, but the lack is glaring; and the first draft of history, which is what journalists write, should not become the final verdict on the phenomenon.

And what’s going on inside private WhatsApp and Facebook feeds?

In addition, it is well-nigh impossible for researchers to use algorithmic/computerized/automated techniques to investigate audience behaviour within encrypted private networks (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp) - and this is as it should be to ensure people’s privacy.¹⁸ As a result, the picture we have about *how* people are sharing information, especially ‘fake news’, is from the ‘outside’, so to speak, assessed primarily from the metrics that are available within the analytics systems of the platforms¹⁹. This picture is especially fuzzy when it comes to the WhatsApp and Facebook. Not that

¹⁸ In this paper we do not engage with the debate on fundamental issues of privacy and data collection on technology platforms.

¹⁹ Here we are referring mainly to Facebook and Twitter. WhatsApp lacks even rudimentary analytics systems, or at least does not make it available widely - this is a feature, not a bug, from the perspectives of its founders, a consequence of their commitment to user privacy and lack of interest in advertising. See for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/30/jan-koum-whatsapp-co-founder-quits-facebook>.

much is known²⁰ of the *content* of what is actually in the feeds/ groups of users. Nor is that much known about the actual strategies and tactics people adopt to share messages on WhatsApp. WhatsApp, for example, has been put at the heart of media coverage of ‘fake news’ and violence, but it has not been fully explained, which innate characteristics of WhatsApp have made it so central to the debate. Or, talking about Facebook, or Twitter, or any other platform for that matter, how exactly – and for what purposes - ordinary citizens are using these platforms - and how that matters in the context of ‘fake news’. Not that much work has been done either in categorising the messages within these networks by *content*, even though there have been proposals to categorise these by *intent* ²¹.

What do we mean when we use the term ‘fake news’ in this report?

As we have touched upon earlier, there are multiple uses - and abuses - of the term ‘fake news’. While a precise definition of the object of inquiry is critical to high quality research, one of the objectives of this project was to understand how ordinary citizens defined the term, if at all. That being said, Wardle’s categorisation²² of ‘mis and disinformation’ into seven broad categories of satire/parody, misleading content, imposter

²⁰ At least not to the external world; Facebook, for example, will know about the material flagged for moderation.

²¹ Wardle, Claire, Derakhshan, Hossein . *Information Disorder* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 2017)

²² Ibid.

content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content, was certainly a starting point. However, classifying ‘fake news’ by the *intent* into mis, dis and mal-information seems problematic, because judging intent from outcome is - as journalists well know²³ - no easy task. Also, including satire/ parody in the bucket of mis/dis-information because it has the ‘potential to fool’²⁴ sat uncomfortably with us: not just because satire has been historically a weapon of the weak against the powerful but also because we suspected that most people for the most part did have the ability not to be ‘fooled’ by satire. In this report, we will use the term ‘fake news’²⁵. Our rationale for doing so, as opposed to the variety of other terms proposed such as ‘mis-information/mal-information/disinformation’²⁶, ‘junk news’ ²⁷, or even ‘propaganda’, is in line with many of the arguments of Marwick²⁸. However, while Marwick, borrowing from Caroline Jack, prefers to use the term ‘problematic information’, we persist in using the term ‘fake news’ for the

²³ See, this: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/reader-center/donald-trump-lies-falsehoods.html>

²⁴ Wardle, Claire, Derakhshan, Hossein . *Information Disorder* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 2017) p17

²⁵ A number of prominent social scientists observed in an article in *Science*, that just because a terms has been weaponised should not mean we do not use it. See: <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1094>

²⁶ Wardle, Claire, Derakhshan, Hossein . *Information Disorder* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 2017) p17

²⁷ Bradshaw, Samantha, Howard, Phillip N., *Why does junk news spread so quickly across social media ? Algorithms, advertising and exposure in public life* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2018)

²⁸ Marwick, Alice E., *Why do people share fake news: a sociotechnical model of media effect* (Geo. L. Tech.Rev.474, 2018).

simple reason that this project starts with the *emic* perspective²⁹, even if it does not end there as we will see later, that the term that the ordinary citizen uses to refer to the entire spectrum of incorrect or misleading information (and more) is - for good or for bad - 'fake news'. It is mainly for this reason that we use the term fake news³⁰ in this report- and not just as a heuristic. Note, though, that while we were keenly interested in understanding how citizens perceived fake news, we did not use their definitions in the analysis of news stories or the content of their private networks. We have used African fact-checking sites such as AfricaCheck to assess the truth claims of news articles called out as fake. Researchers on this project have also assessed the truth claims of various pieces of private network content. As a starting point, then, our definition of fake news was this: *information, however conveyed, in whichever format, on whatever platform, which is not fully supported by factual evidence.*³¹ That is, our starting definition of fake news certainly goes much beyond the news stories on websites, located somewhere on the internet, available by using an URL, and shareable on social media platforms using that same URL.

²⁹ For a good- but very specialist discussion- see Harris, Marvin, *History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction* (Annual Review of Anthropology, 1976) 329-50.

³⁰ We report relief at this point to be able to drop the quotation marks from 'fake news'!

³¹ We note here that the issue of what constitutes 'evidence' can be debated, of course. In India, for example, debates around history in India often centre around what constitutes evidence. For the purposes of this project, we follow the standards of factual evidence that are regarded as normative in the academy and can be arrived at by a process of inductive or deductive reasoning.

Approaching this project: Ordinary citizen, sharing, and verification

Our starting observation for this project was the simple observation that there are a few basic conditions that are required for fake news to spread through networks. It certainly needs someone to create the fake news, and it certainly needs platforms and technologies which enable them to spread. But it also needs one critical element: ordinary citizens to *share* the fake news in their networks. And it needs these things to be spread on *without verification*. For us, then, an understanding of the fake news phenomenon is simply incomplete without understanding this key question: *why does the ordinary citizen share fake news without verification?* The simplest and therefore simplistic³² answer is that *they* don't care about 'facts' and 'accuracy' or even 'truth'. Equally reductive in any sense that the majority of ordinary citizens spreading fake news are either malicious or duplicitous, or conversely dupes of malicious state actors. None of these assumptions and explanations seemed sufficient to us as researchers, leave alone the necessity to explain the phenomenon of fake news.

To be absolutely clear, our focus in this project is neither state actors nor government propaganda. In this project, we aim to shift the focus to the actions of ordinary citizens. We aim to understand the fake news phenomenon as a socio-cultural

³² And more common in more circles of discussion than anyone would care to admit...

and socio-political phenomenon enabled by technology rather than as a purely technological phenomenon.

In this project then, we draw upon the British Cultural Studies research tradition to understand the usage³³ and the *sharing* of fake news by ordinary citizens, both within encrypted Facebook networks and within WhatsApp. In particular, we aim to understand if and why sharing happens without verification. We attempt to situate this sharing activity of citizens in their specific sociocultural contexts. In this project, therefore, we start with **people** and the nature, content, and structure of the **messages** they are sharing, but we also look deeply at the way they are using **platforms** (Facebook and WhatsApp, mainly).

³³ Without arguing that media effects are minimal. In fact, one of the central objectives of this project is to assess the effects of people's networks on their sharing behaviour.

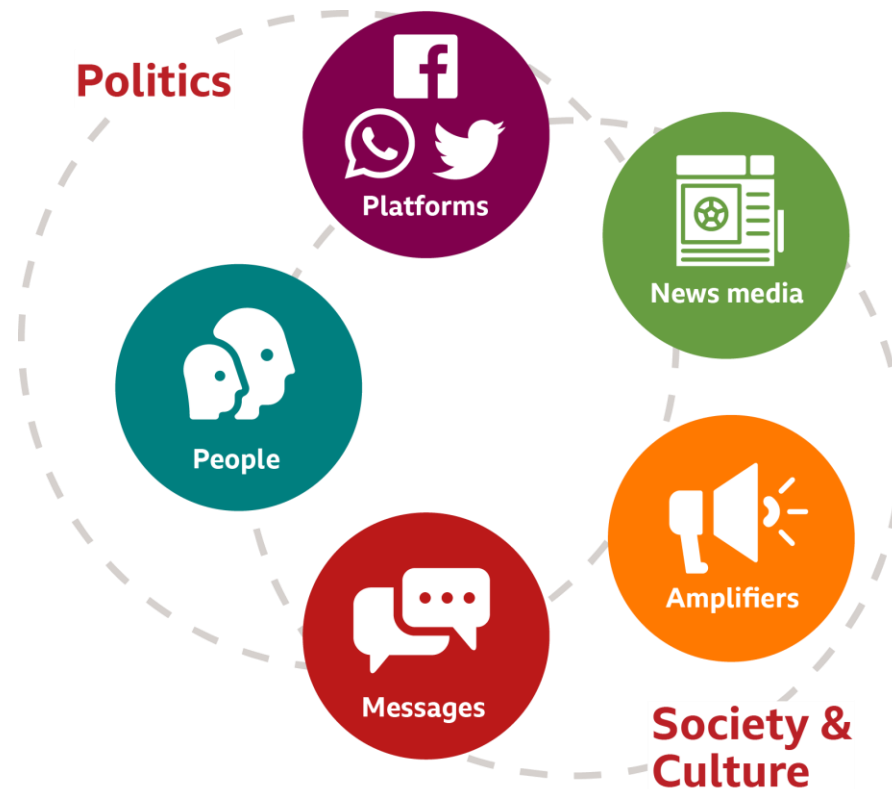


Figure 1: How we are studying fake news in this project

This project is exploratory in nature and aims to approach something close to a ‘thick’ description³⁴ of the phenomenon of fake news. However, while being exploratory, it is also conclusive in many of its findings, given the breadth and depth of the fieldwork. We do hope this report will be read widely by anyone interested in ‘fake news’ or for that matter Kenya or Nigeria, but the principal audience we had in mind

³⁴ See Geertz, Clifford, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, Publishers, 1973)

while writing this report are academic researchers. We want this report to spur exploration and research across multiple fields of inquiry, and as such we have borrowed magpie like from multiple disciplines³⁵ in the writing of this report.

About the methodology and research process

We set out in this project to try and answer the question of why ordinary citizens spread fake news without verification - a little understood part of the fake news equation. The project was extremely quick turnaround, from starting to final report publication was to be completed in three months flat. This meant that we would not be able to address all of the questions we would like to answer, and we would also not be able to use all of the methodological tools at our disposal.

Key to deciding on approach was the fact that the fake news phenomenon is very new indeed, and not yet that well understood. When a phenomenon is new or not very well understood, qualitative research techniques are especially useful. These techniques - in this case, in-depth interviews and up-close observation of sharing behaviours - allowed us to explore fake news with nuance, richness and depth. And because we wanted to know what was spreading in encrypted private networks like Whatsapp, semi ethnographic approaches – in this case, visiting people at home - was essential. This allowed us to understand the individual in full

³⁵ The lead author takes full responsibility for this cavalier approach to disciplinary boundaries, and drawing upon literature he is only passingly familiar with.

and establish how their histories and backgrounds had brought them to the present point; and how they were contending with societal and cultural forces surrounding them.

We debated using large sample quantitative surveys³⁶ but we came to believe that the survey methodology should follow the establishment of a conceptual framework and intellectual scaffolding. Our interest was in exploring audience psychology in-depth to start with, to understand what citizens meant by the term ‘fake news’, so we decided against using survey methods for this project.

Fieldwork and analysis were carried out in six overlapping stages (see Methodology Appendix for more detail on each stage of the methodology):

1. Respondents were recruited, and consent forms signed. Respondents came from a mix of social, political, age, gender and economic backgrounds. They were first asked to share with researchers what they found interesting in their WhatsApp and Facebook feeds and were sharing within their networks. Researchers were very careful to **not** use the term ‘fake news’ at this stage-because one of the key objects of the inquiry was to assess whether or not respondents were able to

³⁶ Not least because we work in a journalistic organisation and have observed that journalists feel the most comfortable reporting on research whose findings are conveyed in charts and graphs!

detect what was fake and what was not; and what they labelled as fake.

2. Post four days of such sharing, in-depth in home interviews were held, where researchers had detailed conversations touching on multiple aspects of their lives – from childhood to adulthood, their influences, their idols, their likes and dislikes, their reaction to their changing environments, their news consumption, their usage of digital platforms, their social, cultural, and political perspectives and their sharing activity, eventually arriving at the topic of fake news. During the course of- and again at the end of – the sessions, respondents were asked to show researchers the contents of their WhatsApp and Facebook feeds, and discussions were held on what they would share, would not share, and why. Also, they were shown known ‘fake news’ messages and asked whether or not they found these credible and why. Respondents were finally asked to share with researchers. The interviews were then analysed using a grounded theory approach³⁷ - given that this was a new phenomenon being explored- and the results married to what was being found in the analysis of the messages.
3. The shared messages were in parallel analysed by researchers- and using machine learning methods- for tone, content, style and structure.

4. Data science approaches were used to assess the media coverage of fake news in these markets.
5. After a seed list of sources known to have published fake news was generated, publicly available Facebook advertising data was used to understand strength of affinity, build a network map and use clustering analysis to understand closely knit communities with social connections.

That is, the project ended up using multiple methodologies eventually:

- **In-depth in home qualitative approaches:** 80+ hours of in depth interviews at home in 5 cities and 40 individuals across Nigeria and Kenya: Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, Nairobi and Machakos. Interviews were conducted in English and transcribed. Original recordings, photographs and videos taken inside the respondents’ homes were used for analysis, alongside transcriptions of the conversations.
- **Auto ethnography:** Collection of a corpus of fake news messages.
- **Semiotic analysis:** Understanding signs, symbols, and structures of fake news messages.
- **Big data/ network analysis:** Across 3,000 Facebook pages & interests

³⁷ See methodology appendix for more details

- **News scan and topic modelling:** Media scans from last two years of news about fake news, in English and in local languages. 8,000 across Kenya and Nigeria.

The findings from all of these stages- plus learnings from desk research/ review of existing literature- was brought together by the research teams to create initial presentations, finally followed by this report that you are reading.

For taking the time to read this report, thank you.

And now, here's what we found.

I. 'Fake news' in the minds of ordinary citizens

1. What is 'news' for ordinary citizens?

When discussing fake news, both parts of the term are equally important. So first, we must understand how people understand the term 'news', before we move onto issues of fake and genuine.

As a term, 'news' itself has always had more than one meaning: on the one hand, news is what you got in your newspapers and televisions and radio sets; on the other hand, news was also information about you, your family, and others important to you. In the realm of institutional news providers- and researchers of media- too, there has always been a further demarcation between 'hard news' and 'soft news'³⁸ as there has been a demarcation between 'news' and 'features'. Many of these demarcations originated from the world of print newspapers and were carried over into TV news when it first started. But the emergence of Facebook as a key platform for news – and the centrality of its 'Newsfeed'- established a forum where not only hard and soft news and 'news' and 'features' blended together, it also created a forum where

³⁸ See, for example, Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Sebastian Scherr, Guido Legnante. "Hard and soft news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings." *Journalism*, 2012: 221-240.

'news' about your niece's birthday and 'news' about a dictator's latest autocratic actions merrily intermingled. But for our purposes what is most important is the demarcation between reporting and opinion - a key feature of traditional journalism with its routines, structures and adherence to the norms of objectivity and/or impartiality.³⁹ It is this demarcation between reporting and opinion that seems to have been almost completely decimated by digital news sources, especially social platforms such as Facebook.

This, at the level of the ordinary citizen has had very important consequences. Crucially, news is now considered to be as much about 'how it makes me feel' as about what it tells me. 'Human interest stories', or softer news in general is considered to be a core part of news, while political and policy reportage is expected to not just be dry and analytical but expressing some emotion. In other words, people *expect* news to not just inform but to entertain.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. That is, this collapsing of boundaries between various types of news predates the rise of digital and social media. Media scholars have been expressing anxiety about the blurring of news and

³⁹ These are related but different terms, with 'objectivity' more commonly used in the American journalism context. For example, see the BBC's editorial guidelines (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/bbc-editorial-values/editorial-values>) for how it thinks about the idea of impartiality, and Tuchman's classic sociological investigation of the workings of objectivity in an American newsroom: Tuchman, Gaye. "Objectivity as a Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1972: 660-679.

entertainment for a while now, lamenting the rise of global ‘infotainment’ and the ‘Bollywoodization of news’.⁴⁰

What is new though, is that with the definition of news becoming expansive and all encompassing, anything that is of importance to the consumer is now considered news. It then also stands to reason that people are happy receiving information from just about anyone – and not just a handful of news organisations with rigorous journalistic practices and legacy brands. Even more importantly for our purposes, we find that people don’t differentiate, or more precisely, find it too hard or too resource intensive⁴¹ to differentiate between various sources of news (in the broad sense outlined above). Social media, with its low barriers to entry, therefore provides innumerable sources of information - and the distinctions between them are flattened in the minds of the users.

2. What then is ‘fake news’? And what are the perceived impacts of fake news?

Audiences do not have a very nuanced definition of the term ‘fake news’. It covers all types of misleading news from sport to politics, and indeed covers all forms of misinformation. Very importantly, it also includes rumours. The difference in

⁴⁰ Thussu, Daya Kissan. *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment*. London: Sage Publications, 2007.

⁴¹ Here, when we say ‘resource’ we primarily mean time and cognitive resources. See later sections where we discuss this in detail.

the current context is evidently the fact that rumours now are not arriving word of mouth, but digitally – usually through their WhatsApp messages. In this context - and the context of blurring of all kinds of ‘news’ described above, anything that arrives digitally has the potential to be considered fake news.

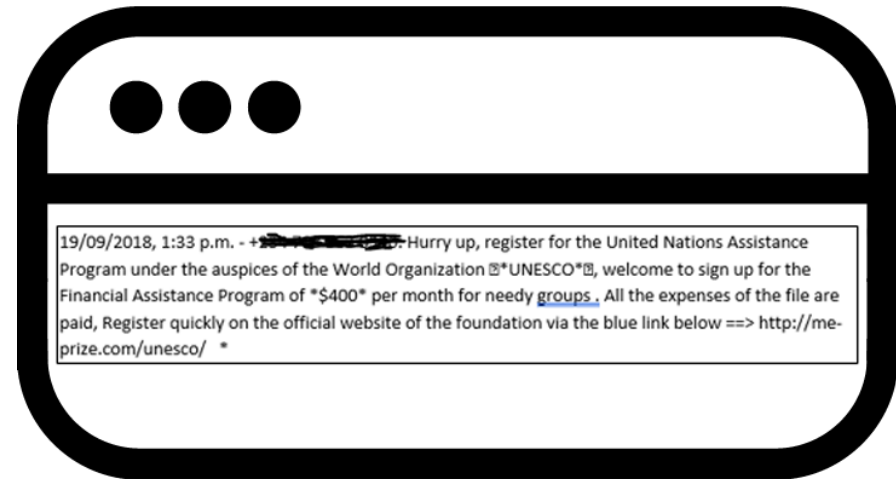


Fig 1: Scam shared on Nigerian WhatsApp thread and identified as ‘fake news’

So, although people express *concern*, societal and electoral harm is too abstract to be understood – harm is understood to be personal. People’s concerns are lessened when fake news does not appear to harm them or their friends and families on a personal level. For example, entertainment and celebrity fake news, and fake news about *activities* of politicians are considered relatively harmless as opposed to those explicitly appearing to incite violence or social rift. In Nigeria, for

example, citizens distinguish between fake news that doesn't matter i.e. 'gist' (slang for chitchat, gossip), celeb news, and the field of politics.

“Like on social media, rumours, things are bad celebrity breakups, or a politician decamping to another party.

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

“At the time I was told that Fayose wanted to leave to another party. He is the current governor of Ekiti state. So I was told that he had lost the election and he wanted to go about to the opposition party which is APC. I didn't really verify my source but I shared it anyway.

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

“I laughed about it, celebrities and their problem”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

“Because it's different from gist and entertainment. This is about political parties and what is happening in Nigeria”

(Female, 25-35, Ibadan)



Fig 2: Extract from a Kenyan WhatsApp thread talking about celebrity news

When they do talk about the everyday impact of fake news, it's about things like falling for a recruitment scam or a technology scam; but rather than elevating anxieties this is just taken to be a part and parcel of everyday life.

“Fake information that they are not recruiting which we've been there for like 4, 5 hours”

(Female, 25-35, Ibadan)

“When you put your phone under the sun, it is going to charge. I was a victim.

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

When talking about fake news, people do sometimes ascribe intent to categorise fake news. That is, when someone seems intent on artificially causing fear in society, that is fake news - the same thing, when not sent out with the intention of scaring you is not considered fake news. For an example, messages warning about violence in a certain region is seen as helpful. We will see this difference play out when we talk about the ‘civic duty’ aspect of fake news transmission in these two markets.

“Like people posting about things that are not true, posting something that is a lie, trying to scare other people”

(Female, 18-24, Lagos)

People in these countries connect fake news with negative consequences in society. In Nigeria there is a fairly clear association of fake news with violence, even though none of

our respondents had been affected themselves by the violence. Citizens are clear that fake news can “instigate hate and violence” or that it “brings violence and ethnicity problems, it creates clashes”. They are also clear that they would not share messages that they see as instigating this violence.

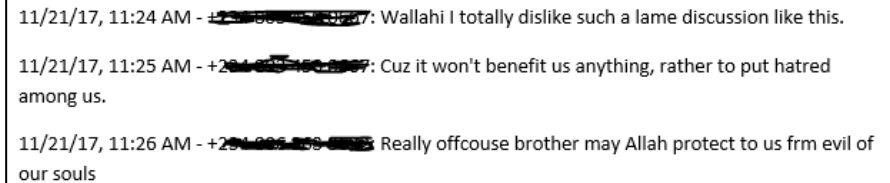
A screenshot of a WhatsApp conversation with three messages. The first message is from a contact with a redacted name, dated 11/21/17 at 11:24 AM, saying 'Wallahi I totally dislike such a lame discussion like this.' The second message is from a contact with a redacted name, dated 11/21/17 at 11:25 AM, saying 'Cuz it won't benefit us anything, rather to put hatred among us.' The third message is from a contact with a redacted name, dated 11/21/17 at 11:26 AM, saying 'Really offcouse brother may Allah protect to us frm evil of our souls'.

Fig 3: Extract from a Nigerian WhatsApp thread disdaining violence

When extreme messages do land in their WhatsApp threads, citizens are cautious about sharing them on any further. Whilst the societal effects of fake news are understood and recognised on a conceptual level, actual harm (even when prompted specifically about societal harm) is interpreted/elucidated on a *personal* level. People talk about how fake news impacts people’s plans, decisions and personal image, rather than equating the effects of fake news to macro issues or electoral harm.

“It will affect the society because people will have different plan, different thought”

(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

“They might get affected, like sending money to another person account”

(Female, 18-24, Lagos)

“It makes you apply a wrong method to a particular situation for example when somebody come to tell you that when there is fire outbreak in your house, pour kerosene”

(Female, 18-24, Lagos)

The consequences of fake news are also understood as loss of face or social embarrassment. This usually happens when someone shares a message and is publicly called out for sharing inaccurate information. However, this also positively leads to an increased vigilance in assessing the veracity of content they are sharing.

“I felt very sad. Now, whenever I see that kind of story I deleted immediately. Now I have experience that I do not want that to happen to me again.”

(Female, 18-24, Lagos)

“By the time you share it just downgrades you. Especially when the people responds to you and say,” Hey, this is just fake news. It makes you feel bad”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

Very clearly, citizens are simply not thinking about fake news and its consequences on democracy and the democratic process. These are slightly high-level abstractions - and if we are to boil it down, it would be fair to say that the ordinary citizen isn't at the time of fieldwork overly concerned about fake news. Or at the very least, their concern about fake news is not as great compared to the concerns they have about other issues in their day to day lives. This is despite the fact that in both of these markets there has been a fair amount of coverage of fake news, especially around elections.

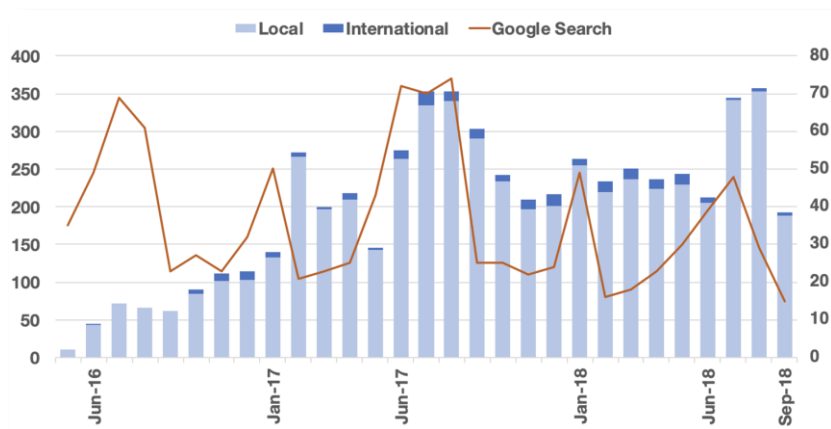


Fig 4: Coverage of fake news in Nigeria, by local and international media (with Google search by people for the term 'fake news')⁴²

We see coverage of fake news in-line with election cycles in Nigeria. Political news (notably President Buhari's health issues) causes spikes in coverage of fake news (and in our fieldwork we have picked up examples of this). In line with this, we do also see some audience interest around those times.

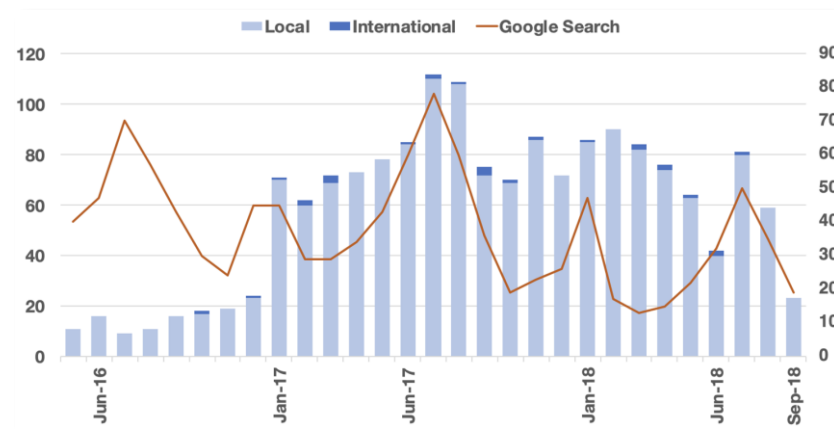


Fig 5: Coverage of fake news in Kenya, by local and international media (with Google search by people for the term 'fake news')

In Kenya, too, we see coverage of fake news- as well as audience interest in the topic - waning in the wake of the 2017 presidential elections. Note also that the quantitative study in Kenya referred to earlier had suggested that 90% of Kenyans had seen fake news. Yet our study - fieldwork for which was conducted in October 2018 - shows that there is not that much anxiety around fake news at the moment, certainly as it relates to the democratic process. This suggests that during the elections the heightened media coverage of fake news in Kenya had an impact on audience perceptions of fake news, or that at that point in time fake news was circulating much more. Note, though, as we will go on to describe later, we should not take at face value the citizen's ability to accurately distinguish between what is fake and what is fact, even if they say so. For that matter, the parallel Indian study has shown,

⁴² See methodology appendix for the methodology for generating these charts.

that political identity does influence the labelling of accurate information as 'fake' – and especially at a time of elections when political emotions are heightened, it is quite possible that citizens label accurate information from the opposing political side as fake.

All of which being said, for citizens, there is a certain sense that there are different 'flavours', so to speak, of fake news, and some categories of what is considered fake news might not be devoid of some usefulness. As one respondent in Kenya suggested, "The genuine fake news is the news people will like to read and fake-fake news is news that people will not bother to use." This points to a bigger issue that we see in these two markets - in terms of the media and sensationalistic journalistic practices, which we will come to later.

*Consuming
information in
the digital
ecosystem*

2

II. Consuming information in the digital ecosystem

1. The messages shared on private networks

People today are having to deal with a huge amount of digital information. Despite the fact that data costs remain high in the African continent, people are increasingly using digital platforms to stay connected.

As a result, we find our respondents bombarded frequently with messages on WhatsApp and Facebook. There is a flurry of notifications and forwards throughout the day on their phones and messages across all types of categories.

As part of this research project, for the first time, we are able to map the categories of messages that are circulating within the WhatsApp ecosystem. While this is only indicative, we do see that while domestic news and politics constitute a significant proportion of the messages, so indeed does religion (at 20%). Also, interestingly, though, scares (and sometimes scams) relating to health, jobs and careers, money, and technology form another significant 17% of the messages.

In Kenya, this looks slightly different (see image below), partly because the Kenyan respondents of this research were

significantly younger, many of whom were in education. Still, while education does feature prominently in the message set, what is important here is to note how much significantly larger the proportion of scares is in their WhatsApp messages, mostly to do with money and technology.

Figure 6: The categories of messages on WhatsApp feeds of our respondents (Nigeria); analysis of 13,000 WhatsApp messages.

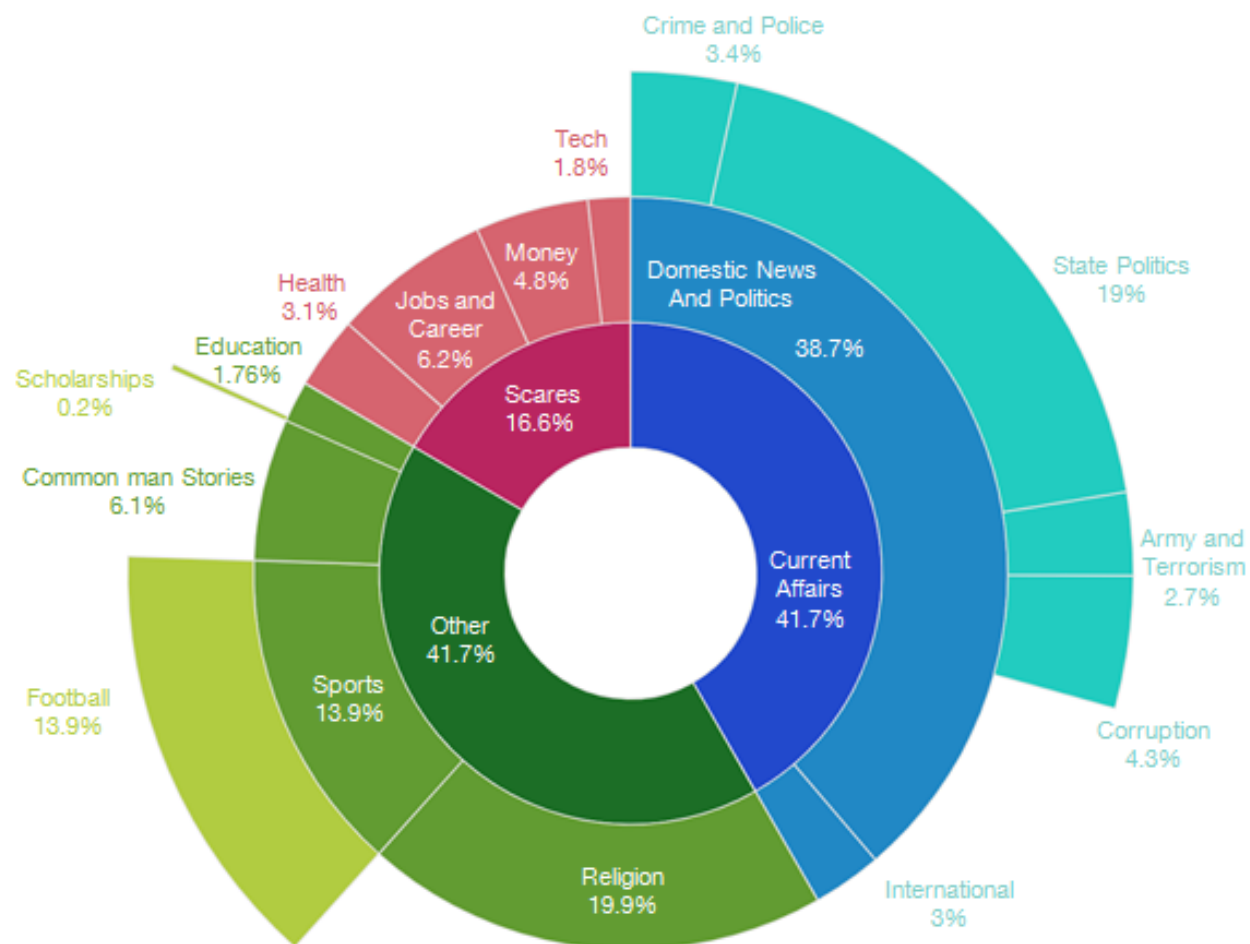
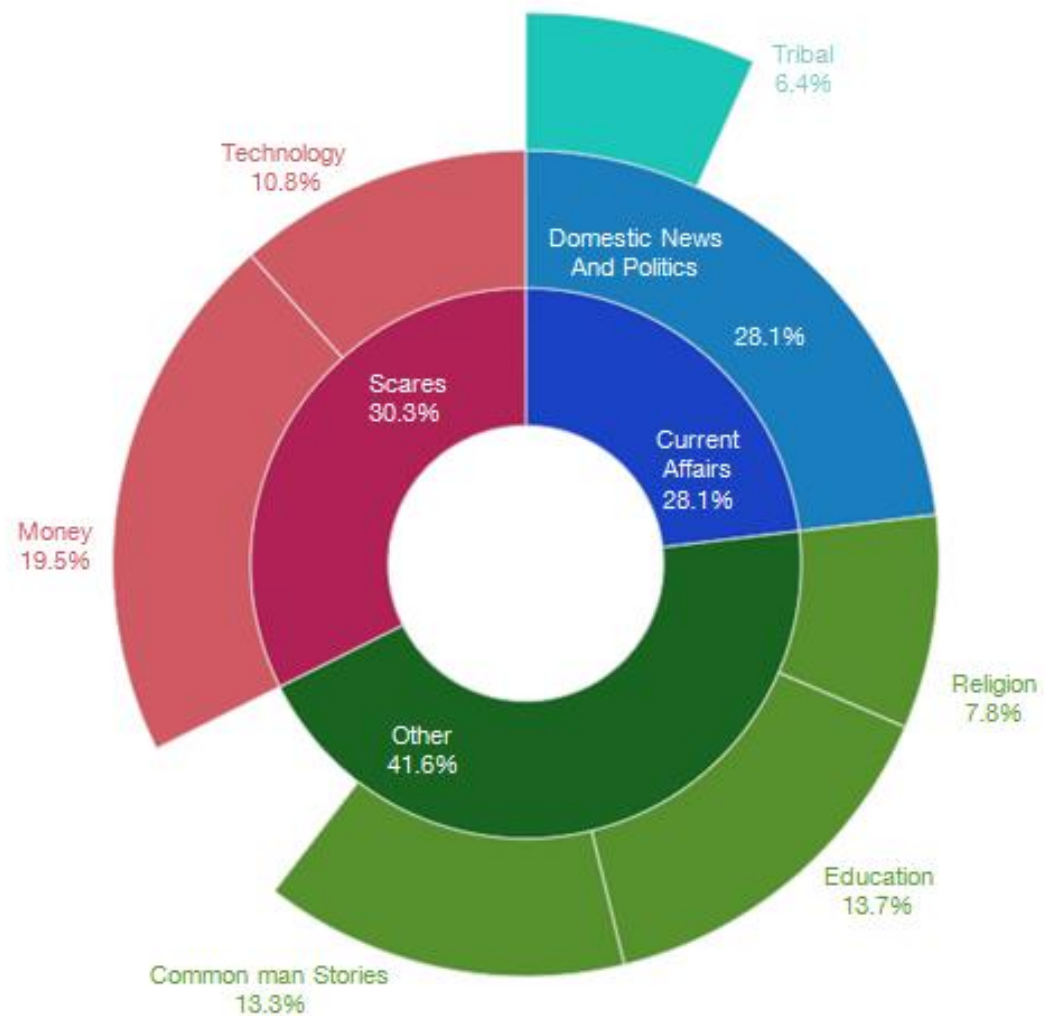


Figure 7: The categories of messages on WhatsApp feeds of our respondents (Kenya); analysis of 3,700 WhatsApp messages



In effect, people are having to contend with a huge amount of information all the time, across a multiplicity of categories, and this shows no signs of abating. But the rise of digital as the central means of acquiring information has effectively transformed news behaviour from a *high time spent, low frequency* behavioural pattern to a *high frequency, low time spent* behavioural pattern. This, we find, is necessitating the adoption of coping mechanisms – which then end up being a key factor in the spread of fake news.

2. Coping mechanisms for dealing with digital information

To be absolutely clear, we don't see our respondents articulating any kind of anxiety about dealing with the flood of information in their phones. If anything, they only see the positives of online and social media.

“Social media has been of great help when it comes to the election in order to inform us. It was the social media that first alerted me when Atiku won the primaries in PDP.”

(Female, 18-24, Lagos)

“Before that you always have to wait for time, maybe the first one in the morning by 7, the

second one by 2 and the last one by 10, but now it is not like that any longer...all what you have to do is to subscribe to their channel, you can get their app or go online and catch up with what you have missed out...I think now we have the news in our...I think it is easier and better now”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

In Kenya and Nigeria, the need to stay ‘updated’ (and that is exactly the term that respondents use) overrides any anxiety about the ability to cope with the constant stream of digital signals asking for attention.

“It’s good. Maybe if the news, the article that you have posted is helping the people, or at least keeping the people updated, yes”

(Female, 18-24, Nairobi)

“So on social media I’m so updated. So that way you know you get to morph with the current, whatever is happening currently. It’s not like a few years ago, when something happens it has to

***be posted after five hours or something like that.
Nowadays everything is live.”***

(Female, 25-35, Nairobi)

In effect, navigating WhatsApp and Facebook is now part of the everyday life and people are doing it without consciously thinking about how they are doing so. That does not mean though that it is easy to do. WhatsApp and Facebook- which we will from this point refer to collectively as digital sharing platforms- are quite likely leading to a situation of information overload.⁴³

⁴³ “Information overload” is not the most well- defined of terms despite being used diverse fields such as cognitive science, business, and technology. Clay Shirky argues that the problem is not ‘information overload’ because we have always been dealing with information overload, but ‘filter failure’ – there is no economic incentives for producers of digital content to filter for quality before publication. See Juskalian, Russ. “Interview with Clay Shirky Part I.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. 19 December 2008. https://archives.cjr.org/overload/interview_with_clay_shirky_par.php?page=all (accessed November 4, 2018).

“Before news is not all that rampant but now in few seconds you will get news updates...and the way people listen to news now is fast.”

(Female, 18-24, Kano)

But while people are not articulating their anxieties, we find that they are certainly adopting a slew of tactics and stratagems to cope with their digital feeds. It seems, though, that as Qiu et al⁴⁴ have suggested, reviewing the literature on cognition in computer mediated/ digital environments, that “paradoxically, our behavioural mechanisms to cope with information overload may make online information markets less meritocratic⁴⁵ and diverse, increasing the spread of misinformation and making us vulnerable to manipulation”.

The strategies that are being adopted by people include:

3.1.1 Selective consumption: This operates in two ways. First, given the volume of messages in their feeds, a significant proportion of the messages received in their feeds, especially WhatsApp feeds are simply not opened or consumed. Second, messages are often part consumed before they are forwarded

⁴⁴ Xiaoyan Qiu, Diego F.M. Oliviera, Alireza Sahami Shirazi, Alessandro Flammini, Filippo Menczer. “Limited individual attention and online virality of low-quality information .” *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2017, 4.

⁴⁵ The approach here is based in the field of economics, so merit and quality are not limited to ideas of the accuracy of a piece of information.

on. It means that simply the headline can be consumed without actually consuming the content.⁴⁶ The format of the message then becomes a cue for people to decide whether or not to engage with it.



Figure 8: Taken from Nigerian WhatsApp thread

⁴⁶ Of all the people reading this, who are also active on any social media, 90% of them have shared something without consuming. The other 10% are lying to themselves. (Estimates, obviously!)

Because people find it easier to consume information in visual heavy formats - or at best very short text formats - they also prefer to share in these formats. A very common mode of sharing is through 'screenshots'. In fact, the practice of 'screenshotting' is something that becomes highly preferred for those who do adopt the practice.

Note that, at the moment, unlike, for an example, in India, the bulk of the material in people's WhatsApp and Facebook feeds is not images, but a combination of regular stories (in the form of URLs) and other formats, including images.

There are – we suggest - two related reasons why the images are not at the moment the dominant circulatory form of messages or fake news messages. One, data costs are still high, and we have observed citizens being extremely careful and conscious of the 'size' of their messages and the space they occupy on their phones.⁴⁷ Two, while there are clear examples of very sophisticated techniques⁴⁸ used in the dissemination of fake news, it does not look like there is a huge amount of production of disinformation in the form of images and memes either.

In some ways, the fact that URLs/ stories/ text formats still dominate people's feeds is an advantage when it comes to assessing the spread and origins of fake news. This enables very effective digital techniques such as those suggested in A

⁴⁷ Private BBC World Service research with speakers of Pidgin, Yoruba, and Igbo in Nigeria.

⁴⁸ See for example, this article: <https://pesacheck.org/a-fake-poll-website-shows-just-how-crafty-kenyan-fake-news-is-getting-35cf90aeb64>

Field Guide to “Fake News” and other Information Disorders,⁴⁹ to be applied.⁵⁰

2.1. **Sender primacy**

Given the overwhelming amount of information, and the consequent inability or disinclination to subject each message in your feed to rational critical analysis, people use heuristics to decide which content to engage with and even to assess what they find credible. As such consumption decisions are quite significantly influenced by *which individual* has sent the message in the first place. If that individual happens to be a person of influence or social standing in the recipient’s online or real-life network, chances are that the message will be consumed and even shared.

“There’s a current university. It’s called Kenyatta University. That’s where she works. That’s where her dad used to be, her dad’s still the lecturer. So, political things, when she tells you, you trust them, because the university, the vice chancellor who used to be there, that’s where all the dirty work used to happen, with the rigging of the election, or whatever. So, that thing, when she tells you, you believe it because she’s in that

⁴⁹ See the various “recipes” suggested at <https://fakenews.publicdatalab.org/>.

⁵⁰ We hope this section is not seen by malicious creators of fake news as advice for them.

environment.”

(Female, 25-34, Machakos)

“Because, she herself is very religious. She will go through the messages and the contents of the news before she then shares it with me”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

However, this is balanced quite a bit by the desire of Nigerian and Kenyan sources to get to the truth of the matter, and therefore a desire to investigate the source of their messages, which we will come to later. Before that, though, we will spend some time discussing what is at the heart of the *spread* of fake news: sharing.

*The
motivations
behind sharing*

3

III. The motivations behind sharing

For the ordinary citizen, consumption is hard, and critical engaged consumption is even harder. However, digital sharing platforms are built to make sharing easy - and there is no requirement built into the platforms that sharing only be done after the consumption of content. But why do people share in the first place? What are they getting out of it? The reasons people share messages on digital sharing platforms form a mix of the not too surprising and the quite counterintuitive. But in each of these cases, the motivations for sharing also allow for fake news to slip through - sometimes accidentally, and in some cases, intentionally.

“Broadcast messages, especially the WhatsApp stories are easy to share”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

"On Facebook? Maybe when I go to Tuko I get an article that I see as interesting. I just press it and then I post it to Facebook on my account..."

(Female, 18-24, Nairobi)

1. Sharing as social currency

In both Nigeria and Kenya, it is considered extremely important to be ahead of the game or at least not *behind* the news. News is not just information, in many cases news consumption is considered to be critical to self-development and projecting an ‘in the know’ status. The social costs of being seen as someone who is not in the know is too high. Engaging people online by entertaining and provoking discussion is socially validating. And this need to provoke and entertain even extends to occasions where fake news is deliberately shared for amusement and debate. Note, though, as discussed earlier these instances of self- confessed sharing of fake news are almost always those that citizens don’t consider to be harmful.

“These days you don’t want to be left behind because you’ll hear the people talking then, ‘What, how? What are they talking about?’

(Female, 18-24, Nairobi)

“if I inform people, they feel I know everything going around in the world”

(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

There is a particular form of sharing where the validation from the network becomes a key factor in sharing: sharing to make people laugh and gain comments or approbation from your social network.

“If it has a sense of humour in it, that is another reason to share it, or if it has something engaging in it, I might know that it is fake and still share it”
(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

“My friends only share fake news to me if they want me to laugh; they will forward it to me telling me that it is fake news”
(Female, 36-55, Kano)

“If you don’t share they would think you are not online... It’s fun at least they would know that I also am there”

(Female, 25-35, Ibadan)

Of course, sharing fake news, especially as a form of humour, can also be interpreted as acts of everyday subversion; or as Ebenezer Obadare puts it, “In Nigeria jokes serve a double

function as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state (including its agents) and themselves”.⁵¹

“All Nigeria politicians, about 80% of them have that corruption in them”
(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

“I would share that to show how our civil servants have kept themselves so low. I would just read through the headlines and then share this. It’s about corruption so it has some interest for me.”

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

⁵¹ See: Obadare, E. (2009). The Uses of Ridicule: Humour, 'Infrapolitics' and Civil Society in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 108(431), pp.241-261.



Fig. 9: A tweet about a dubious story, recognised as such but still forwarded.

“It sounds funny, probably he thinks PDP is on the high side, and he wants to switch to the other party...[will share] Because it will make people laugh”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

2. Sharing as civic duty

If sharing as social currency is about gaining the approval of those in the network, sharing as civic duty is in some ways its opposite: it is about actively participating in the world and helping others, especially on issues considered to be of public concern. In both Nigeria and Kenya, though more pronounced in the former, there are acute concerns around personal safety and security. This manifests itself in the desire to *warn and update* others to inform them when they receive news of a supposed impending security crisis. The underlying thought process here seems to be that it is better to inform people – widely – just in case it helps them. And in case the information about the security crisis turns out not to be true, this does not in the end really cause any harm. On the other hand, in case there is even a slim chance that the information might be true, it can bring great practical benefits to many. In some cases, though, the urge to share – and the social validation that it brings with it – is so strong that the burden of verification is left to the recipient of the messages.

In cases of particular types of information – for example news about health, about policy issues, and security type updates – the behavior is a broadcasting type i.e. sending the message out as far and wide as possible within your networks.

“If I get news on how to prevent somebody from dying or having complicated health issues I try to share ityou should not mix coke with banana ,orange or one of these fruits, if you mix, take banana and coke together, it might cause heart failure, it will affect your heart in a way”
(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

“Yes, there was news that I shared long ago about EBOLA. That salt and water to bath with it”

(Male, 25-35, Kano)

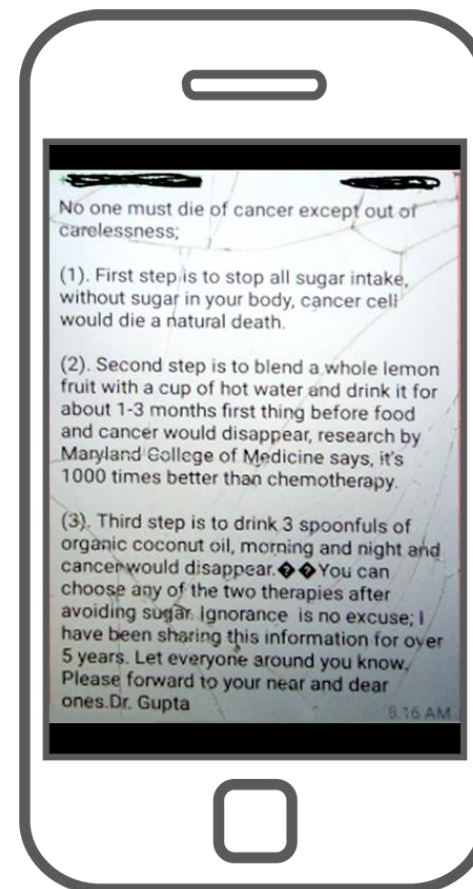


Fig. 10: Fake news about how to share cancer shared on Nigerian WhatsApp thread

Finally, citizens in these countries seem to have well developed sense that access to information is unequal, and there is a desire to democratise that information.

The emotional desire underlying sharing as civic duty (to protect, project self-image, to warn under times of insecurity/terror) is exacerbated by a sense of urgency that has been brought on by digital (the sense that news is something that happens fast, you need to 'grab' onto, something that can 'pass you by'). This ends up privileging speed of sharing over fact checking, creating gaps for fake news to slip through.

In each of these three situations, this sometimes leads to behaviors where the sending of the message quickly and widely is considered to be of optimal importance - this overrides the usual caution that Nigerians and Kenyans have about verifying information (as we will see in the next section) and allows fake news to slip through.

"To make people aware, and to caution people. Maybe there is a person who didn't know about it, and to avoid something like this to happen to my friend"

(Female, 16-24, Nairobi)

"I will circulate it. Incidentally because it's all about, "Safety first."

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

"Because there are some people that don't have the access like others, for instance the way I browse online is different from the way my dad does...I just share on WhatsApp, as soon as he reads it, he gets to know what is happening"

(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

"I would share this. And people who live around that area can testify whether it is true or not"

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

(In response to a message with very dubious news about rape) "It's an important message for the female friends I have and so I wanted to pass it across. I want them to be more careful"

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

*The limitations
of citizens'
verifying
techniques*

4

IV. The limitations of citizens' verifying techniques

1. *How are people verifying their information?*

As we discussed above, the challenge these days for anyone with a smart phone is coping with the sheer amount of information rushing at them. However, in both these countries, the desire to get to the source of the information that they are receiving is extremely high, especially if they are considering sharing that information further.

There are multiple ways in which citizens are trying to get to the source of the information. Some of these are stratagems that would be taught in any media literacy session, but some of them involve the use of signals and cues in the content and the content environment that are, unfortunately, more prone to failure in crunch times. These include:

1.1. *Cross checking and checking for source:* The use of Google search to verify information by checking at least with one other source. People are turning to Google to verify a piece of content – and is treated as a trusted platform. Whilst people are sceptical about commercial interests of bloggers, clickbait

and social media platforms, Google stands out as a trusted platform:

When I Google it online if I should see a particular website that have a genuine news that talks about it then I will believe it”

(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

“They look real that is why I said for you to be sure just go and Google it, I’m sure Google could not lie”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

"Whenever you want to dig further into it, you know, the matter at hand. How? What happened? Were you there? Are you a third party? You know. Yes, so you'd like to know if the person who brought it up is a third party, or has he just diluted something. It's like moving steps towards the source"

(Male, 18-24, Machakos)

1.2 *Comments on a post:* There is often a tendency- especially in the case of Facebook to look into the comments on a Facebook post, and assess the veracity of a news article by the reactions of people towards that article.

1.3. *Images:* In a world of disinformation-and relative lack of trust in the media- images are still perceived to be a guarantor of truth. If anything, the idea seems to be that more the number of photos with a news story the greater the chance of the story being true.

1.4. *Headlines:* People are also using the tone and tenor of headlines to assess whether a particular story is true. The sense is that if it is too ‘flashy’ then the story is probably fake.

Note here though that most of these verification techniques are far from fool proof- and it is quite easy for the malicious creator of fake news to overcome. Because people are using – for the most part - heuristics or rules of thumb to assess whether something is true, rather than engaging with the content fully and critically, the ultimate chances of them getting the better of fake news is perhaps not as high as they think.

“For somebody to pick or write down 2.7 million Nigerians, it means they have done a lot of work to get this figure. You can’t come out and just pick random figures like this. And it says, ‘by experts’”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

“Wow! 2.7 million Nigerian women engage in abortion! This is evidence based. The statistics have been done”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

Our analysis of the actual ways in which people consume information in this project suggests that even though 67% in Kenya claim that they wanted ‘comprehensive and detailed’ news about the general election⁵² (p.7) they might not actually consume that type of news on digital platforms.

1.5. *Verification (within the network) through sharing:* One of the more counterintuitive behaviours we discovered that

⁵² <https://portland-communications.com/pdf/The-Reality-of-Fake-News-in-Kenya.pdf> (p.7)

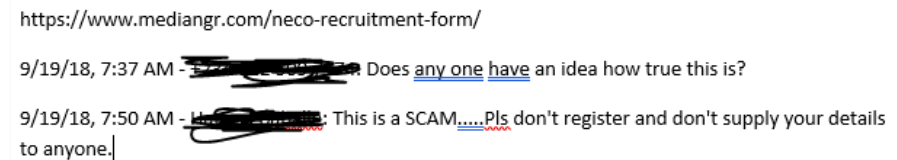
people were sharing messages of dubious provenance or facticity within the networks themselves to verify. Usually, though, these messages are not shared with an explicit request to verify; but it is shared in the expectation that someone in the network itself would get back to the sender disproving the contents of the message if it were untrue. Usually, for every individual there is someone in the network who is trusted, either on specific issues, or because they are generally considered to be 'learned' or 'educated' to point out if something is untrue. In some ways, this is a mirror behaviour to what we earlier termed 'sender primacy'. Cues about veracity are being sought not from third parties, but from someone in the network- as a result fake news messages are spreading, even if the intention is very much there to check verification.

“I might share with them with the caption of please laugh alongside with me or I share it with them and ask can you tell me this is true or false”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

“So, I shared the news but I said I am still yet to confirm it. People commented saying, ‘please confirm’ and they also weighed in with their own comments.”

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)



https://www.mediangr.com/neco-recruitment-form/
9/19/18, 7:37 AM - [REDACTED] Does any one have an idea how true this is?
9/19/18, 7:50 AM - [REDACTED]: This is a SCAM.....Pls don't register and don't supply your details to anyone.

Figure 11: WhatsApp thread with the network being asked to verify

1.6. The emotional truth vs the rational facts: As we have suggested earlier, a lot of digital behaviour is about shortcuts and heuristics, especially in an environment where the volume of information is ever increasing. In this environment, rational critical thinking – combined with the ease of sharing that digital platforms enable - is sacrificed over what *feels* true. So, messages are shared irrespective of the validity of their content. Furthermore, people still do judge the fakeness of news by how it confirms their worldviews and experiences, in a classic case of confirmation bias.

“I want to share this thing. This is what we are talking about. I would want to see more of this. This is talking about people who took bribes for the current election... Because this is what we do in Nigeria.”

(Female, 25-35, Lagos)

“I might easily share this because I hate corrupt politicians.”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

“After watching the news I was touched, so I have to post it... there are some comments that yes we Nigerians we should not forget that God has really blessed us”

(Female, 25-35, Ibadan)

“It was trending and it was just very sad news, so that’s what I shared... babies were dying there due to the wars”

(Female, 25-35, Nairobi)

*“News is real if you hear it everywhere; if it has lots of comments”
(Male, 25-35, Kano)*

To sum up, then, Kenyans and Nigerians are keen to get to the source of the information, and they are using a whole host of techniques to assess the veracity of a piece of news. However, many of their techniques are prone to failure, because they do not actually involve the consumption and assessment of the content themselves, or indeed classic methods of fact checking and verification. On top of this, we see our respondents being quite proud of their ability to detect fake news from fact- and sometimes this tips over into people assessing completely legitimate news as fake news.

For example, some respondents when exposed to this Twitter thread about a landmark BBC investigation into accusations of atrocities by Cameroonian soldiers, fell back into their preconceived notions about the world to say the story could not be true.

1.7. *Virality as a way of verification*: Respondents also believe that if something is widespread it might be true. This is a kind of a naïve belief in the “wisdom of the crowds” but is of course quite flawed as a way to judge the fact value of a news item.

“Because if it were true I would have known about it by now, it would be trending on WhatsApp and Facebook.” (Female, 25-35, Nairobi)

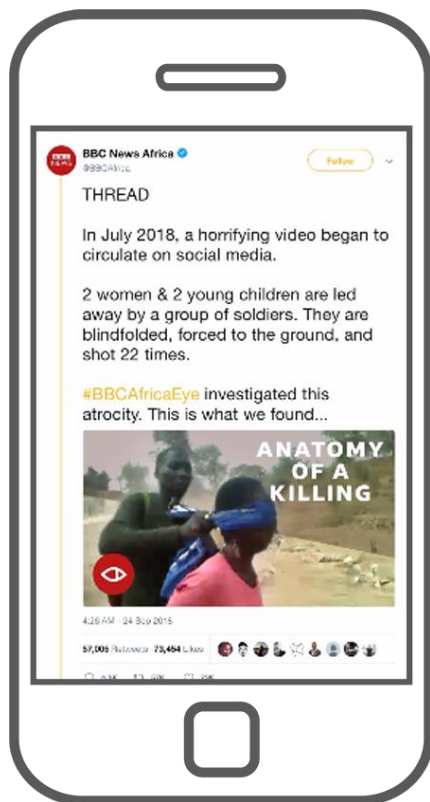


Figure 12: Twitter story from the BBC, deemed to be fake by some respondents

Confidence in ability to judge fake news may be related to the high amount of pride and normative value people place in having a formal education. The idea persists, especially in Nigeria, that education automatically means that you are media literate and a shrewd judge of authenticity (and therefore the converse also applies).

“The people who are not educated. The people who do not have the chance or the sources or time to go and verify the information. They will just take it and consume it.”

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

[Talking about monkey pox fake news story]
“People that are well educated will let their children have those drugs because it is for their health”

(Male, 18-24, Ibadan)

“And you will not doubt them because they are educated”

(Female, 18-24, Kano)

“But for those that are educated they will doubt the authenticity of the news.”

(Male, 25-35, Kano)

Therefore, people are confident that they do not spread fake news - unless, they are doing so knowingly and deliberately to spread humour.

As education is also closely tied to morality, people are confident that they would not intend to spread fake news.

“What I have learn in is school is the morals and how to look at myself”

(Female, 18-24, Kano)

“For example between I and an almajiri [beggar] there is much difference. The morals are not the same”

(Female, 36-55, Kano)

However, it is worth remembering the advice of renowned psychologist David Dunning, who says: “The way we

traditionally conceive of ignorance- as an absence of knowledge- leads us to think of education as its natural antidote. But education can provide illusory confidence.”⁵³

This suggests that there are two related challenges at the level of the audience we have to meet in order to tackle the fake news problem: first, audiences need to see fake news as a problem bigger than that causing them personal inconvenience and second, they need to also recognize that *everyone*, whatever their education level and socio economic status, is susceptible to fake news.

This is especially important because we know that in certain occasions, certain types of messages can be quite resistant to verification.

2. Which types of fake news messages put citizens’ verification techniques under strain?

As we have seen, one of the things typifying the Nigerian and Kenyan citizen’s attitudes to news and information is their strong desire to verify the source of that information. We have also seen that their verification techniques are not foolproof, as they often rely on signals and heuristics rather than an evaluation of the content on their merits.

⁵³ See <https://psmag.com/social-justice/confident-idiot-92793>

What we find, though, through the course of this project is that fake news messages tend to play on the anxieties and concerns that are anyway dominant in their lives. For example, in Nigeria, where unemployment is a dominant concern- and people feel they have to run just to stand still- fake news stories about employment scams dominate, as do terrorism and army related fake news. In Kenya, scams related to money and technology are quite common in WhatsApp feeds, our respondents have encountered this one way or the other.

For example, the WhatsApp message below preys on people's anxieties about the political situation to warn them against posting all kinds of political messages.

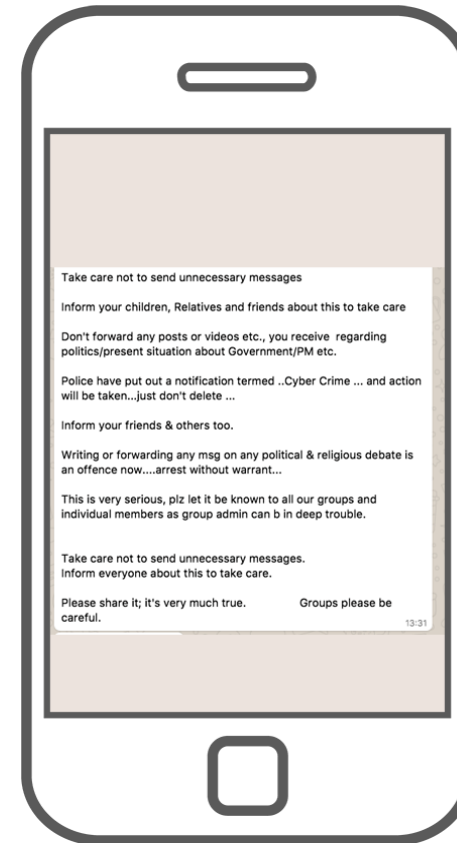


Figure 13: Fake news message in Kenyan WhatsApp thread about not sending political messages

But more importantly, we do see that people question fake news stories less when it confirms an aspect of their identity, for example, tribal affiliation (in the case of Kenya) or religion or geography (i.e. are you from the North or South of Nigeria). For example, the fake news story below is considered to be quite plausible, but this can only happen in an environment where there is a real element of a rift in a country.

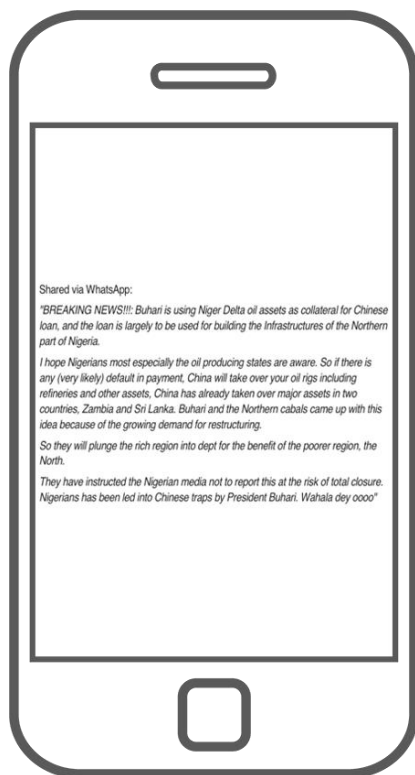


Figure 14: WhatsApp fake news story playing into North-South divide, not to mention distrust of media.

“So tell me, is this not interesting? The loan is used to build infrastructure for the northern part of Nigeria but why should it be in the north when the asset being used as collateral in this hour, in the Niger Delta.”

(Female, 25-35, Lagos)

Very interestingly, we see in both countries, a keen desire emanating from the respondents to move beyond the divisions of the past (tribal, in the case of Kenya, and religious, in the case of Nigeria). We see a strong emergent sense of coming together as a nation. However, if the fault lines between groups widen again, it will create more favourable conditions for fake news to flourish.

But fake news could not have flourished in the first place if the media ecosystems in these markets were not already the object of a fair level of distrust from citizens. So, let’s understand the role mainstream media in the two countries has been playing so far.

3. Do audiences differentiate between sources of legitimate news and sources of fake news?

One of the challenges in discussing the topic of fake news is that the boundaries between what is fake and what is not have become quite fuzzy. In the course of the fieldwork we discovered a number of instances of legitimate journalistic organisations publishing what is inarguably fake news. Admittedly, just like ordinary citizens feel the pressure of relentless content shooting at them, journalistic organisations must too. Digital platforms privilege speed over all else. Nonetheless, it is quite embarrassing for some of the most

respected news sources to be publishing fake news - and most probably this results from a breakdown in the editorial and verification processes within organisations.

This is how a fake news story gets into the mainstream:



Fig 15a: A Twitter post on October 14th, from a fake account purporting to be that of the Nigerian politician Atiku Abubakar, thanks the “Association of Nigerian Gay Men (ANGAM)” for endorsing his campaign.

2019: Association of Nigerian Gay Men Endorses Atiku for President

By Ehi Ekhator on October 14, 2018 · No Comment



Fig 15b: A news article on local news aggregator site claims that a LGBT organisation had supported Atiku Abubakar's presidential campaign, but the LGBT organisation doesn't exist.



Fig 15c: On October 26th, two weeks after the fabricated tweet, articles in mainstream newspapers - Vanguard and The Nation - report similar stories quoting the fictitious organization as a source. ⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See <https://factcheck.afp.com/nigerias-opposition-presidential-candidate-atiku-abubakar-has-not-received-lgbt-support>

People are distinctly able to identify trusted and untrustworthy news sources:

“This has come from the Punch newspaper and I know they are credible. I love them because they’re credible”

(Male, 36-55, Lagos)

“Linda Ikeji some of her news are not genuine”

(Female, 25-35, Ibadan)

However, in the media ecosystem, fake news can sometimes sit on mainstream publications, or publications that you generally find reliable – so source cannot be treated as something that is unconditionally reliable:

“The fact that I get reliable news from them doesn’t mean I have to believe every news from there”

(Male, 25-35, Lagos)

“For example I think last month a popular magazine owner shared the news that a particular person had decided to run for a particular office. Meanwhile the guy in question had not said anything. Most people believe it”

(Male, 18-24, Lagos)

Respondents certainly identify certain sources as purveyors of fake news. But one of the most interesting aspects here is that even when they call out a site as full of fake news, that still does diminish their desire to visit those sites.

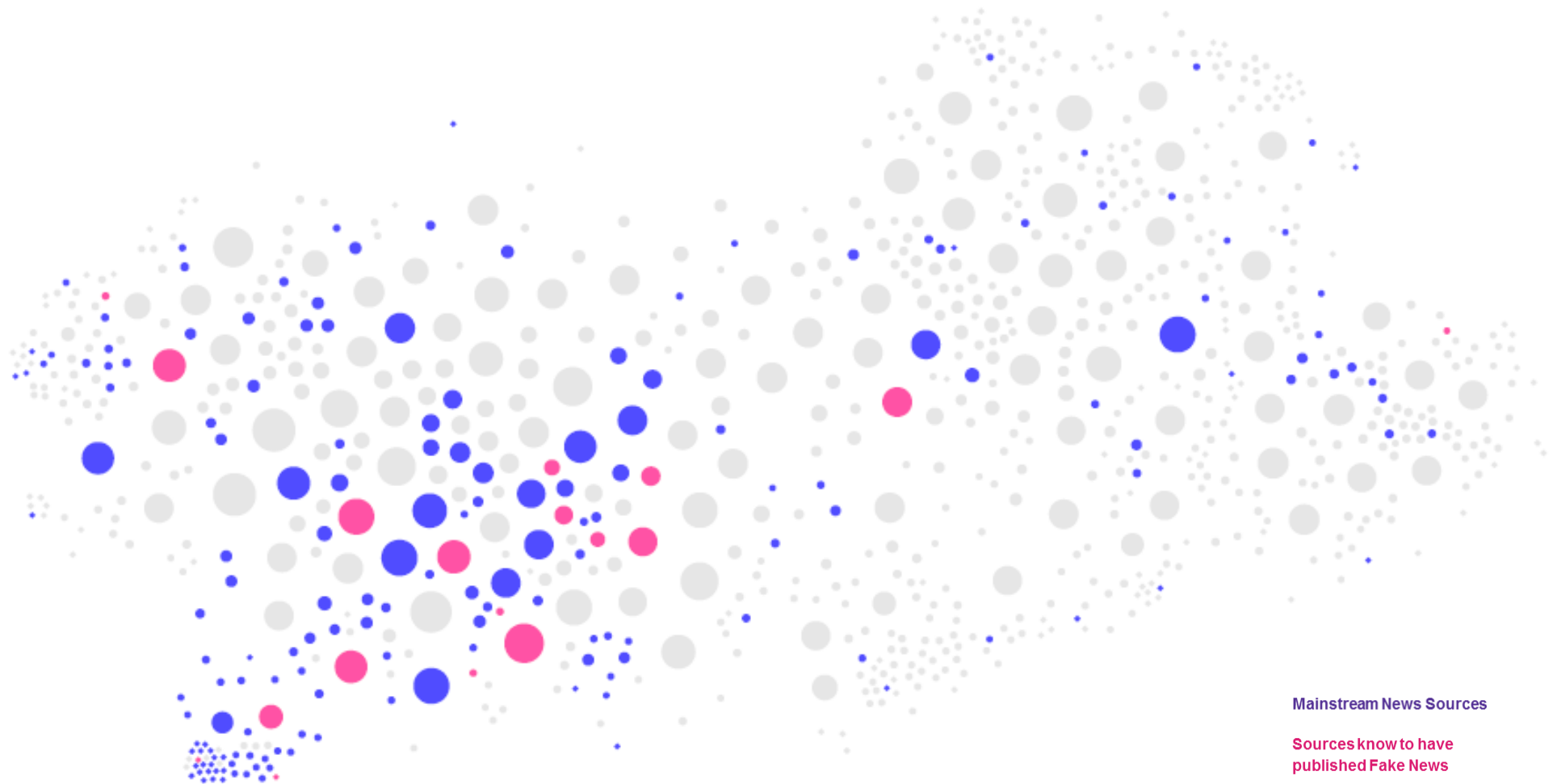
“Most likely Tuko, though it ain’t real, but I just like the gossip. Know that it isn’t ‘real’ but still like it”

(Female, 25-35, Machakos)

When we use Facebook’s public advertising data⁵⁵ to assess whether people who have an affinity for mainstream media also have an affinity for sources known to have published fake news, we find that this is indeed the case:

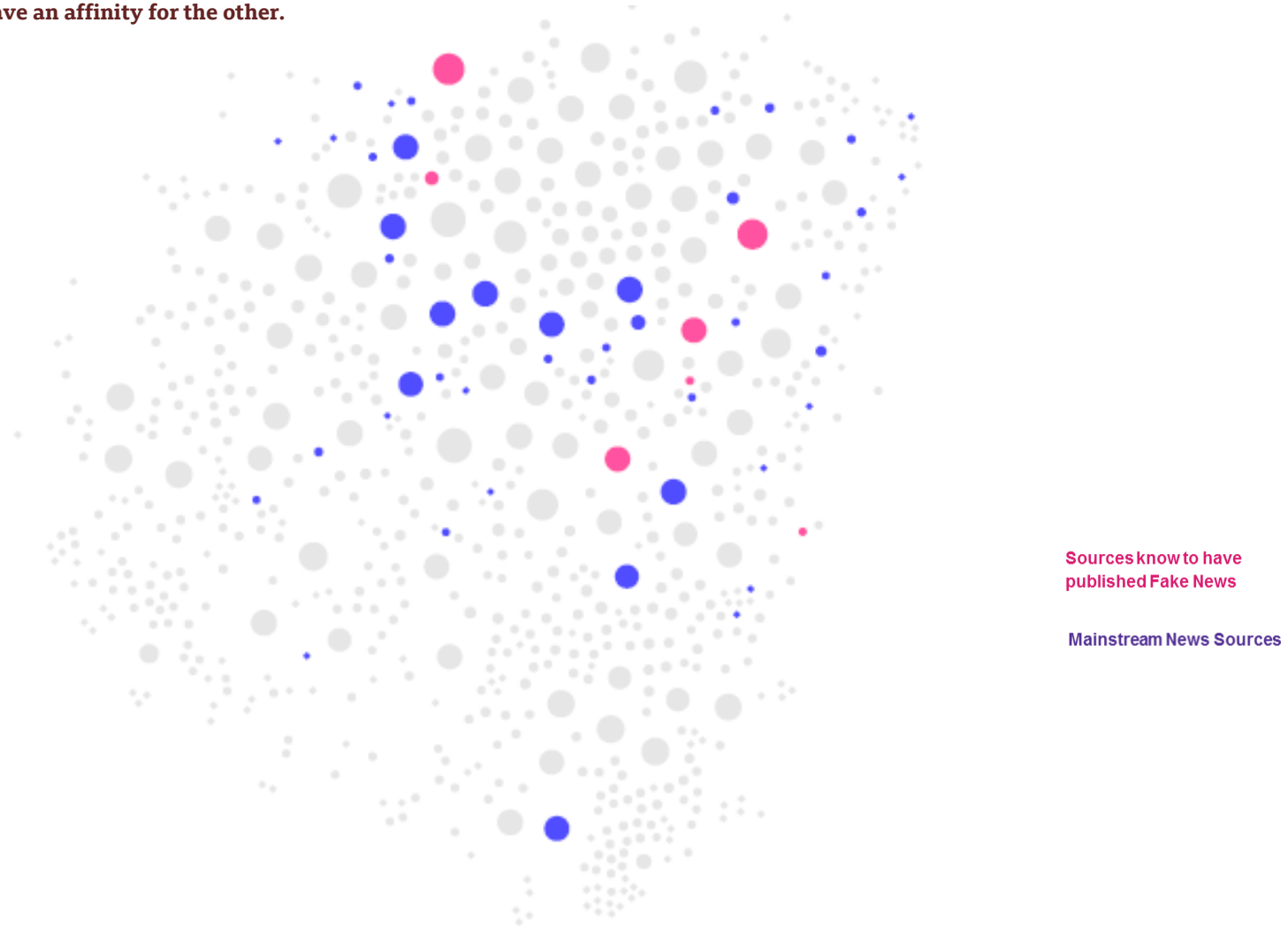
⁵⁵ Please see the appendix for more details on the techniques used for this analysis

Fig 16a: Facebook affinity network map (Nigeria) showing how close the sources known to have published fake news and legitimate journalistic sources are- indicating that audiences who have an affinity for one also have an affinity for the other:



We see a very similar pattern in Kenya, even though the effects are not as pronounced:

Fig 16b: Facebook affinity network map (Kenya) showing how close the sources known to have published fake news and legitimate journalistic sources are- indicating that audiences who have an affinity for one also have an affinity for the other.



In other words, the lines between legitimate media and fake news really tend to get blurred in these two countries. In particular, online media is treated with a great deal of scepticism. In Kenya, particularly bloggers come in for a lot of criticism with the accusation that most of what they are doing is for money. Citizens make a link between writing 'exaggerated' stories and commercial imperatives.

“Kenyan bloggers are getting the publicity out there and getting their pages to have more supporters than getting the real information out there. So, they better exaggerate a situation to get the people to view their pages. So, this was an exaggeration thing, it was a simple accident that was made to look like it’s a big thing that happened to Daniel Churchill, who’s popular. They can do anything for money, they can lie that somebody’s dead to get the money.”

(Male, 18-24, Machakos)

In general, online is seen as 'faceless' and therefore unaccountable. Online platforms (site and Facebook in particular) are seen as faceless places where you cannot know who is creating the content – there is no clear accountability in the spread of information (unlike TV) and no way of knowing the original creator – therefore fake news can spread with impunity. People find it quite discomfiting that they can't trace back the origins of a story.

“The news that are fed there. Maybe I can create my own article and put it there. Later on you come to know that whatever was posted on Facebook was not the truth.”

(Female, 18-24, Nairobi)

“It is spread from faceless people”

(Female, 36-55, Kano)

In this environment, TV still stands tall as a source of credibility. The platform is deemed to and perceived to put content through a journalistic process before it is broadcast. People believe that TV would not deal in extreme/obvious falsehoods because there is too much at stake for them i.e. having built an infrastructure, there they are disincentivised to put it all at risk by spreading fake news. Very importantly, TV is not considered 'faceless': ultimately, there is a person who is giving you the news. And TV also is seen to quickly bust the most obvious fake news (e.g. celebrity deaths).

Conclusions

5

At the moment there are some positive signs in behaviours and attitudes of citizens with respect to fake news. But some of the tactics they are adopting to separate fake from fact are liable to crack under the strain of heightened tensions or pressures during politically intense periods, say elections.

We have picked up some signs that there is an emerging sense of a national identity overcoming societal divisions among younger citizens in both Kenya and Nigeria. If this holds for the future, it's an encouraging sign, because the evidence from this research project - and others- suggests that sectarian divisions facilitate the creation and spread of fake news.

Being up to date with news is a vital part of social currency in both markets but particularly Nigeria. While this has facilitated the spread of fake news when ordinary citizens value speed of sharing over verification, it presents the foundations for encouraging the spread of legitimate news on for all digital sources and platforms. There would be higher demand in these markets to provide a service which enables the spread of legitimate news as part of adding to citizen's profile and status.

Looking at the implications, there is an opportunity and need to reduce the blurred lines between legitimate and sources known to have published fake news for creating a healthier media environment. The correlation between political or sectarian fake news and the corruption of the political process is there, but in pockets – for most it is too abstract a concept to dwell on. But by proactively engaging with the problem, and

giving audiences concrete tools to identify the strategies used by the creators of fake news, rather than relying on their own signals, there is an opportunity to sow the seeds of a bottom-up demand for greater transparency and integrity of information. Raising the bar of expectation from both news providers, and the politicians and business leaders who are seen to hold the levers of power. And thus to help create a healthier media environment in the future.

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Data appendix

Data and Methodology Appendix

I. Qualitative/ethnographic in-depth interviews

1. Sampling

The sample for the qualitative stage was drawn to achieve an equal mix of gender, age and political affiliation across the total sample. For political affiliation the screening questionnaire used a localised version of the 10 point left-right orientation questionnaire developed by John Curtice and Caroline Bryson.⁵⁶ This allowed us to recruit for political affiliation without asking questions about people's voting behaviours or support for particular political entities.

The cities in which the fieldwork was conducted were:

Nairobi, Machakos, Kano, Lagos and Ibadan

2. Analytical technique

The approach to data analysis was mainly a grounded theoretical one where the analyst does not approach the data with ready hypothesis but induces the hypothesis from close data analysis. In practice this means that across the data set (in this case the forty interview recordings or transcripts), one gathers new data to test suppositions about theoretical

categories till the properties of that category are 'saturated' with the data- at this point fresh data are not producing any new insights. Central to the approach, and indeed good qualitative research, is to not ignore any data at variance with others but find an explanation for that variance. In qualitative data analysis the tools of analytic induction (e.g. the use of the constant comparative method, or the search for deviant cases) help ensure the rigour and credibility of the final analysis.

Is a sample size of 40 adequate?

- If this were a quantitative study (for example, a survey), a sample size of 40 would be too small to draw any meaningful conclusions. However, the sample size of 40 is for a *qualitative* study- which uses the analytical technique known as "grounded theory" for the data analysis. It aims to *describe* the various factors at play when it comes to explaining the phenomenon of fake news.
- The research report states clearly that this project is *exploratory* in nature. It is intended to serve as a 'starting point in the research conversation' – not the final word. We did this study in the hope researchers will further explore the topic using various research techniques to extend, validate or finesse the findings.

⁵⁶ See more detail here:

https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/methodology/core_ess_questionnaire/ESS_core_questionnaire_socio_political_orientations.pdf

Why choose qualitative research techniques to explore this topic?

- The researchers perceived the discussion and debate around the fake news issue to be overly centred on technology, with little research or understanding of the role of individuals, their psychologies or of the societal forces around them. The research objective was to **understand** and **describe** a complex phenomenon which they believed to be insufficiently understood in the case of Kenya and Nigeria. As stated in the report, the researchers' interest "was in exploring audience psychology in-depth to start with, in particular to understand what citizens meant by the term 'fake news'". The researchers wanted to understand why ordinary citizens say they are concerned about fake news in quantitative studies but still share information without verification.
- Qualitative techniques were the most appropriate to generate **richness** and **depth**, in an area of research that is to date under-investigated.

Can 40 people's 'opinions' be representative?

- The objective of the research wasn't *to report on people's opinions*- one of the reasons why quantitative survey techniques were not used. The objective is to trace the various factors that influence the sharing or spreading of fake news. By speaking to people- and then analysing the data- we try to understand their

psychology, why they behave the way they behave and the various influences and currents and counter currents in their lives. We don't simply take what people say at face value and report on it. People don't use terms like 'sender primacy' or 'source agnosticism'; these terms come from the analysis. The aim here was to outline as many factors as possible that play a role in the spread of fake news.

How confident are you that the research findings give a realistic picture of the role of the various factors play in influencing the spread of fake news?

- We can say with a high degree of confidence that the picture we have painted realistically depicts how psychological factors (e.g. motivations for sharing; people's identities and beliefs), technological factors (e.g. sharing platforms), and the content of a message interact to contribute to the spread of fake news. We are confident that whatever the tools future researchers use to study this phenomenon, the basic picture we have painted will remain recognisable. What we can't say from this project is the *degree* to which the various factors outlined will apply.

This study – being qualitative - cannot tell us the relative importance of each of these factors and how they will vary across different population groups. What it does tell us is that all of these factors will play some role. So, it could well be the case that for young people the motivation of civic duty plays

much more strongly than their socio-political identities- but we think it likely that both of these factors will apply. Similarly, we do not know from this study if men as compared to women are less likely or more likely to be influenced by the technological factors when spreading fake news. But we can be sure that for both men and women technological factors will play some role. A quantitative study would be required to understand the interplay across these factors, but the factors needed to be established in a qualitative study to allow the design and development of a quantitative study.

II. Big data/ data science / network analysis approaches

One of the challenges of analysing fake news in media is that there are very few sources that can be classified as out and out fake news sources. On the other hand even the most well respected journalistic sources such as *Vanguard* have on occasion slipped from their standards and have been called out for spreading misinformation.⁵⁷

As such our analysis is not about ‘fake news sources’ (as that indicates there are sources who *only* publish fake news) but about ‘Sources who have published fake news’. For the purposes of the Facebook Network Maps therefore, we define two categories, 1) ‘Sources of Identified Fake News’ and 2)

‘Likely Fake News Disseminations’. The ‘Sources of Identified Fake News’ is established in the two following ways:

- A. Identified as fake news by a fact checking site (factcheck.afp.com), or
- B. Identified in the qualitative fieldwork by researchers

We also use algorithmic techniques to establish a list of *likely* disseminators of fake news in the following ways:

To identify these, we looked at sources very closely linked within our network analysis to Identified Sources of fake news, via:

- A. Facebook Audience Network: Classified in a modularity class⁵⁸ with at least 15% identified fake Sources, and at least 80x affinity with identified fake news sources

As must be obvious, the analysis would vary depending on the choice of the ‘15%’ or the ‘80x’ affinity. However, the substantive results are unlikely to change much.

Some other definitions

Facebook Affinity: Affinity is the likelihood a person will be interested in page B if they have shown interest in page A. By ‘interest’, Facebook means multiple touchpoints such as liking, commenting, sharing, viewing content from, responding to ads from etc.

⁵⁷ See <https://factcheck.afp.com/nigerias-opposition-presidential-candidate-atiku-abubakar-has-not-received-lgbt-support>

⁵⁸ See , for the mathematics behind this: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1602.01016.pdf>

Facebook's discovery algorithm calculates an 'EdgeRank'. This determines the content Facebook serves to its users. The Affinity score is important in the EdgeRank formula (although the formula itself has never been disclosed by Facebook). When a user shows an interest in a certain page, there is a higher likelihood that they will subsequently be exposed to closely related pages - those with high Affinity - by the Facebook algorithm

Facebook Network Maps

Facebook data is hard to source because most of it isn't publicly available. Most of it is also unusable from an ethical point of view. One useful dataset, however, is Facebook's Advertising data, which captures the interactions of Facebook users with public pages (which are mostly brand, topic, and organisation's pages) and adverts. The advertising platform notably collects stated and behavioural data.

In a first instance, we created a list of known Facebook sources of fake news, made up of sources identified in the qualitative phase of the research project. From this seed list, mathematically snowballed into ~3,000 pages their audience also likely follows; and using network mapping theory we plotted the relationships of pages with similar audiences.

Use these affinities (i.e. how many times more likely than the average Kenyan/Nigerian person on Facebook to follow seed interest), we plotted a network using the Force Atlas 2 algorithm - a widely accepted network mapping algorithm for

mapping social connections (traditionally designed to visualise interpersonal connections and relationships on social media but works equally well for shared interests). We then conducted a clustering analysis on the network to identify clusters sharing similar connections using the Modularity Maximisation algorithm - designed to outline closely knit communities within social connections

Online news scan

Webhose.io was used to extract online news articles mentioning the topic "Fake News" or related keywords, in Nigeria and Kenya from June 2016 to September 2018 and categorised the different themes that emerged from this coverage. This resulted in ~8,000 articles

Keywords used for extraction:

"fake news" OR "misinformation" OR "disinformation" OR "whatsapp forward" OR ("fake" AND ("whatsapp" OR "facebook" OR "twitter")) OR "labarin karya" OR "irohin iro" OR "ozi oma" OR "habari bandia"

We then moved on to statistical topic modelling, using the LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) algorithm. This model assumes that all documents within the dataset are a collection of topics, and that each topic is a collection of words in the document. Since the number of topics is unknown at the start of the process, topic modelling is performed iteratively to achieve optimal coherence in the topics.

The LDA model assumes that each document is a collection of topics, however for sizing, we have used the dominant topic in each document to ensure that no document is duplicated in the sizing process.

The process consisted of 4 key stages:

- Firstly, we ran an initial topic model to generate top words and to establish which is the most representative story in each topic
- Next, we qualitatively analysed each topic to gauge thematic consistency of stories within each topic
- If a topic category seemed ambiguous or appeared to contain more than one story, we took that category in isolation and performed another topic modelling on that topic to gain more granularity
- Lastly, we sized topics based on the number of stories within each category.

The output achieved was a visualisation of the most recurrent “fake news” categories covered by Kenyan and Nigerian media outlets, from June 2016 to September 2018.

Whatsapp topic modelling of consumption of Fake News

We reviewed the messages shared in private networks to categorise & size the topics discussed by the public.

Similarly to the first news coverage scan exercise, topic modelling was processed using LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation).

Process:

- We ran an initial topic model to generate key topics of the dataset, and establish which content pieces were most representative of each topic.
- We then qualitatively analysed each topic in our topic modelling to gauge the thematic consistency of the documents within. We isolated topics that seemed ambiguous and performed another round of topic modelling on that topic.

The output achieved was a visualisation of the most recurrent themes shared by citizens in Kenya and Nigeria.

If you have any further questions, would like to have access to the network analysis data, or would like to have a chat about the project, please send an email to santanu.chakrabarti@bbc.co.uk.