



# **SORTING FACT FROM FICTION**

## **NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS**

**JUNE 2019**

## Sorting fact from fiction: Nigeria's 2019 election



The Centre for Democracy and Development's Election Analysis Centre (EAC) for the 2019 presidential and gubernatorial elections represented the first attempt in Nigeria at running a rigorous fact-checking process before, during and after the electoral process of both presidential and gubernatorial elections. CDD's specific mandate was to provide a filter and check on viral stories that were demonstrably false. Or to confirm, with sources and justification, if certain events were true. To do this CDD worked in collaboration with the National Democratic Institute and the Premium Times. However, there is scope for greater collaboration with other like-minded institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the future.



## METHODOLOGY

Our methodology during the elections was a highly focused version of our usual fact-checking process. A small team of seven individuals each had individualised functions. We had two spotters who monitored the online space, including Facebook groups, Twitter accounts and WhatsApp groups. The groups we monitored had already previously been tagged in our ever-expanding database as sources of disinformation, through research and online mapping efforts that will be described further below. The spotters would then forward news stories that were popular (for example over a hundred shares on Twitter) to the fact-checkers.

This ensured that we highlighted and countered stories that were significant and prevented us from popularising false information that may not have reached a wide audience until our fact-check.

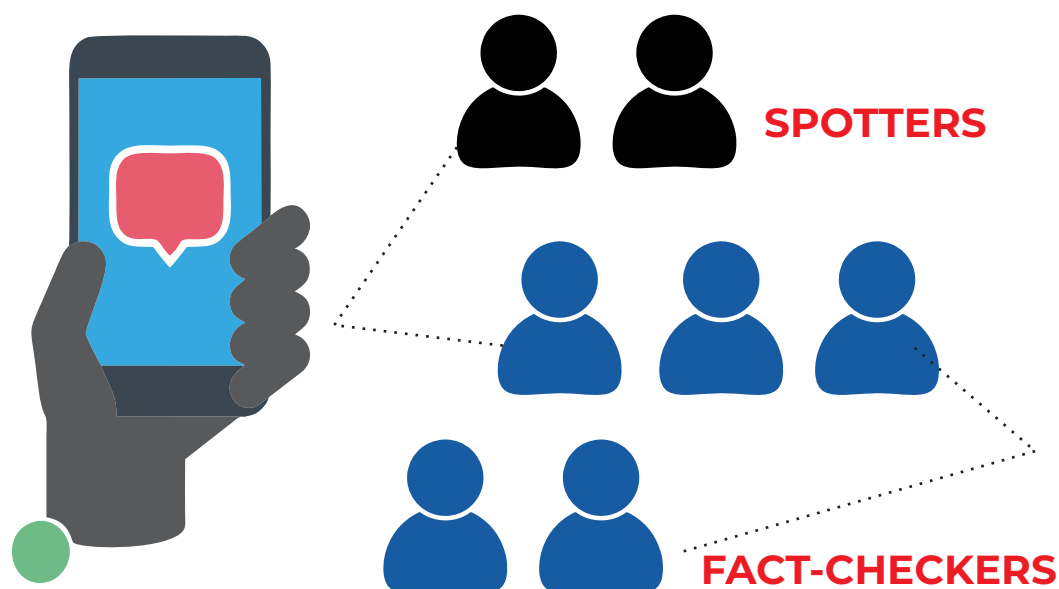
The process for checking the validity of a story during the elections was facilitated by our nationwide-wide network of election observers<sup>2</sup> in each of Nigeria's 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). This meant that our fact-checkers could reach out to an observer in any state to confirm a story. Once the validity of a story was verified, the fact-check itself would be written and sent to our designer to be turned into an infographic. This infographic was published on Twitter<sup>3</sup> with all the relevant hashtags to ensure better reach and visibility.

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1 CDD's fact-checking is based around countering claims that are damaging to the electoral process. Our usual process refers to the method of investigation. When a claim surfaces, the fact-checker will first place the story in context, and then trace the origin and source of the claims made. This also means that we check to see if the story already exists is simply a duplication. Fact-checkers also have access to a wide network, during the elections, this extends to observers in each state, thereby allowing us to fully investigate claims. In the case of pictures and videos, we have analytic tools available which allows us to trace details of the uploaded material.

2 Each of the observers signed "pledge of neutrality and objectivity" which mandates them to ensure that information shared with the in-house team are fact-based and comply with extant laws governing elections and information dissemination in Nigeria.

3 The infographics were uploaded on Twitter, and not on other platforms due to limitations in our social media outreach. This is something we will be looking to rectify and expand on in the future.



Monitoring the online landscape is not just relevant for fact-checking, but allowed our research team to collect examples of hateful, inflammatory or false content; find groups that were spreading it; and track trending topics and disinformation campaigns online. Groups and accounts that we initially found led us to more, which if significant were added to our list online sources to be observed in future. In our online monitoring, we were able to identify three key content types that we subsequently focused on:

- **Election logistics**
- **Election-related violence videos**
- **Conspiracy theories**

Images or videos were analysed using tools such as reverse-image search to verify their origins and see if the content had appeared elsewhere. The fact-checking process for a single story could take up to one hour and involved detecting a trending story - sometimes shared on private WhatsApp groups<sup>4</sup>, reaching out to our observers in the field and then designing and publishing the fact-check. Our standard format was in the form of an infographic that clearly showed the material being fact-checked, whether it be a picture, or a headline or a tweet. We chose infographics because the format allows us to convey information in an easily consumable form. Our tracking showed that our infographics had on average, 20 interactions on Twitter. In looking for sources of fake news, we were able to map the partisan nature of the online landscape.

## LIMITATIONS

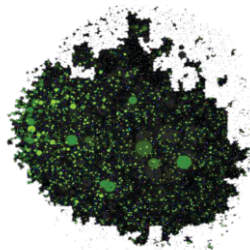
Our approach was effective in that we were able to be very thorough with each fact-check, however, there were a few limitations, which are listed below:

- A** In some of the flagged pro-PDP (People's Democratic Party) and pro-APC (All Progressives Congress) groups, representing the two main parties, over 100 posts were being produced a day. The sheer volume was hard to keep up with for a team of just 5 people.
- B** The size of our team meant communication was simple, however it limited our overall output.
- C** Inevitably were not able to keep up with all the fake news content that would have been produced over the election period. However, all the information collected, even if not responded to, formed part of our research findings.

## ONLINE ESCAPE

In order to introduce systematic and quantitative analyses into our process, we worked with the social network analysis and threat intelligence firm Graphika to produce a map of conversation around the Nigerian elections on Twitter. The Twitter map collected millions of Tweets and network data relating to the Nigerian Twittersphere in the month preceding the 2019 presidential elections.

The two graphics below highlight groups in Graphika's Twitter map of Nigeria<sup>5</sup>. The green nodes in the image below represent pro-PDP accounts in the Nigerian Twittersphere, while the nodes highlighted in red represent the pro-APC swath of Nigerian Twitter. These two groups in the map represent the two main political parties in Nigeria.



**Fig. 1: pro-PDP Twitter**



**Fig. 2: pro-APC Twitter**

*Both of these figures from represent groups in Graphika's map of the 2019 Nigerian Presidential Elections on Twitter.*



## PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The election campaign saw the development of certain kinds of narratives that extended throughout the campaign. Two emergent storylines that persisted during the campaign were recurrent themes of foreign influence and religious colonisation. If we look at an example of a headline from SpyNigeria, and one that was fact-checked by CDD's researchers: "Allow Me To Re-Colonize Nigeria And Ghana For Just A Year.....Kim Jong Un", we find that this is a clear example of disinformation – content created with the intent to deceive, and the story readily proven to be false after our fact check.

This story was posted seven times across various SpyNigeria related platforms, recording a total of 866 interactions by February 13, 2019 according to CrowdTangle. However, this story was also shared across multiple WhatsApp groups in Nigeria, including ones CDD tracked, and the total engagement is far greater than this initial number suggests.

We had initially flagged SpyNigeria as a 'fake news' distributor because it often shared stories that were sensational, unsourced or incorrect, and the results of our research proved that to be the case as well as multiple indicators of suspicious activity. The SpyNigeria domain was initially created in 2015 under the name 'Punch Newspaper', in 2016 it was changed to 'SpyNigeria Newspaper', and is now currently known simply as SpyNigeria under its current domain - 'spynigeria.ng'. Our analysis showed that there are actually two Facebook groups with over 100k followers linked to these domains- spynigeria.NG and SPYNigeria.ng; and identical content is cross-posted on another Facebook

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group - Punch Newspaper, which also has a significant following. This Punch account is not associated with the real newspaper, but is clearly affiliated with SpyNigeria because it often posts content from that source, which we were able to confirm through CrowdTangle - a social media analytics tool.

The second emergent theme focused on the issue of the fear of Nigeria's Islamisation. In January 2018, CDD responded to a 55-second video, titled: "The Church of Christ in Nigeria in Danger!", which emerged on social media - especially on WhatsApp and Facebook. The video claimed that the Nigerian government had concluded plans to set up an agency to monitor churches across the country.

The well-produced video, presented the Kaduna State Governor, Nasir El-Rufai and President Muhammadu Buhari, and cited an unnamed source inside Aso Rock, Nigeria's State House, claiming that the administration of President Buhari had hatched a plot against churches in Nigeria. The video claimed that this plot would be carried out through a new agency whose task it would be to "monitor and regulate church operations" in Nigeria. The video concluded with a call to Christians to protect and defend the church, and ended with the hashtag #VoteWise2019.

The following month in February, another similar story emerged concerning an alleged plan by the government to Islamise the country, this too was fact-checked and proved to be false. Worryingly, there were also stories that aimed to stoke these religious tensions with the most notable being attributed to the non-existent group - FUNAM. The most viral of these messages was one titled, "Fulani War Threat" - CDD responded to this false story. FUNAM, or the Fulani National Movement is a fictional Fulani interest group that been proven not to exist by the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD). The group exists purely as a trope used to stoke ethnic hatred.



## *The Week before the Elections*

The presidential elections were originally scheduled to take place on 16 February 2019. However, in the early hours of the day of the elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officially declared that the elections would be postponed for a week. The initial postponement of presidential elections occurred just a few hours before polling was due to start by INEC, and the subsequent week-long delay, fed into an already fraught information landscape. At a thematic level, the CDD-EAC fact checker system identified the following categories of disinformation: anti political parties; anti INEC; anti-system; and hateful and divisive speech. These narratives appeared targeted to weaken confidence in the integrity of the political system and the electoral process.

11:30pm Friday, 15 February	Premium Times and Sahara Reporters, reported rumours of an apparent high-level meeting taking place at INEC
Midnight	Both online and offline, rumours were being spread that the elections might be postponed
2:00am Saturday, 16 February	Multiple newspapers confirmed a highlevel meeting was taking place between top INEC officials regarding the feasibility of the elections with the likely outcome being postponement
3:00am Saturday, 16 February	It was officially announced that the elections would be postponed for a week due to logistical issues

Following the postponement of the elections, the online space became very saturated with false and misleading content, and therefore difficult to navigate. This was not helped by the lack of information provided by INEC, leading to several posts claiming that the Chairman of INEC, Mahmood Yakubu, had resigned. Political parties on demanded their right to continue campaigning, representing another central theme for this interval, an important distinction because parties in Nigeria are barred from campaigning for the penultimate<sup>24</sup> hours before the elections.



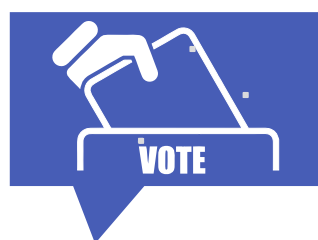


The air of uncertainty was exploited by some political actors for their own ends. CableNG published a list of the most common conspiracy theories surrounding the postponement. These conspiracy theories ranged from alleged plans to boycott the elections; to dangerous claims implying certain politicians wanted planned to bomb INEC; to the absurd – an alleged APC plot to plunge Nigeria into anarchy. Some blogs that were sending out large amounts of false or questionable content, which had already been flagged by in our database, posted articles citing US engagement with the elections, stories claiming that Buhari deserved a second term, or opposing stories that claimed Buhari was to blame for the postponement. These articles were shared in their respective pro-APC and pro-PDP Facebook groups.

Genuine fears around the safety of election materials also emerged. Users on Twitter posted misleading pictures of money they had allegedly been given to vote for a particular candidate. Hate speech was also rampant, particularly targeting other ethnicities. These posts often shared a similar theme, such as accusing other ethnic groups of being too greedy.

On pro-PDP groups, multiple stories were posted that claimed Kaduna governor, Nasir El-Rufai, had made inflammatory remarks about the Igbo group. The posts, which came up on Facebook groups like this one, that had already been flagged by our team, published alleged quotations such as, "...greediness is in their (Igbo) blood...". Our fact-checks proved these stories to be false, and that El-Rufai himself did not make these claims. To verify the story, CDD fact-checkers reached out to the source of the claims to find out when/where the alleged statements were made. No such evidence was provided.

## ELECTION DAY

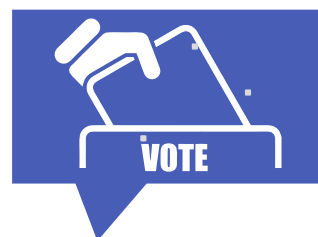


From our understanding of the campaign environment, we expected disinformation to increase as polls opened, with rumours that units were not opening on time, that election materials were missing or that security agencies or others were causing disturbances and preventing people from voting. These may have been grossly exaggerated in terms of scope to create chaos and tension in the polity, discourage turnout, and ultimately affect people's confidence in the entire electoral process. However, what we found was that the volume of fake news was highest in the period leading up to the announcement of results.

On the day of voting our research team also noted some interesting geo-political trends. We found that politically partisan Facebook groups created a deliberate pattern of sharing false news stories. It is not clear whether or not these were deliberately coordinated by the party structure. Pro-PDP groups pushed narratives of electoral violence, for example voter intimidation and destruction of voting materials to suggest that the APC was using the advantages of incumbency to rig the election.

There were also several photographs shared of alleged minors voting in northern strongholds of the APC. These stories played on pre-existing biases, as accusations of under-voting in the north have been a constant feature of election processes since the return to democracy in 1999. There was a specific narrative of minors captured voting in Lafia, Kano State. However, attempts to verify this story was unsuccessful, as our team was unable to attain sufficient evidence of actual violations. However, in Kano, we investigated a post circulating on social media, depicting children standing in line waiting to vote, and our checks revealed that the claim was false.

In the pro-APC Facebook groups we monitored, there was a slightly different narrative. Lots of stories focused on electoral malpractice such as rigging, vote buying and corruption. In addition to this, manipulation of information represented an observable trend in relation to the delivery of electoral material in

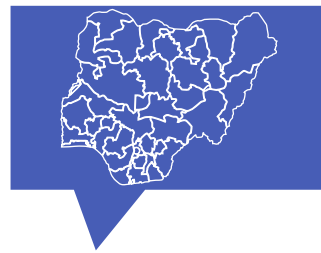


Imo, Akwa Ibom, Sokoto and Rivers states. In Imo, we responded to claims that INEC ad-hoc staff had not yet arrived at Uzii Primary school polling booth by confirming with our election observers who provided evidence that it was false. We also received confirmation from our observers in Okrika, Rivers state that a viral story stating that election materials were still missing from wards 7, 8 and 9 was not the case.

It is clear that false stories were released to coincide with different stages of the elections. For example, stories about ballot boxes being snatched coincided with the times that accreditation and voting had started. This had a cascading effect. The false news mixed up with the genuine news reporting of ballot box snatching, making it more difficult for the average voter to navigate and find information on issues surrounding the electoral process. This appears to be a deliberate strategy designed to interfere with the spread of information related to the election. However, it should also be noted that the sheer amount of misinformation online has also led to a growing distrust of social media platforms among some users.

The difficulty of disaggregating false news, which could be true given the context, and genuine news, can be highlighted with examples from Rivers and Akwa Ibom states, where multiple reports of violence emerged. In Abonnema ward 10, in Rivers state, there was report of a man allegedly shot by the military. Our fact-check found sufficient evidence that this news was true. However, an allegation of destruction of electoral material by thugs with the aid of a Police Officer in Ikpe Anang, Essien Udim Local Government Area (LGA) of Akwa Ibom state, was found to be false when we fact checked the story. Confusion about the security of the polls could have a negative effect on turnout, and these stories, both true and false, helped to aggravate these fears and spread more misinformation about the process.

## GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS



Following the presidential elections, the online information landscape saw a significant shift in the volume and content of false and divisive stories. During and leading up to the gubernatorial vote on 9 March, stories accusing political supporters of 'thuggery' were still prevalent. It is interesting to note, however, that while the overall output was vastly reduced compared to the presidential elections, there was high online activity regarding the elections in certain closely-contested states such as Kano. We found that many of the ad-hoc partisan Facebook pages, which were created on the eve of the presidential elections, had stopped producing content. However as all of our tracking was on groups in English, we may have missed information produced in Hausa, the predominant language spoken in northern Nigeria.

Although we found a reduction in overall volume, there were still incidences of hate-speech posts with personal attacks on gubernatorial candidates as well as continued attacks on president-elect Buhari. Attacks were also ethnically based. One viral story that appeared on multiple online outlets was a video of Senator Remi Tinubu, wife of the APC national leader, Adams Oshiomole, telling a crippled beggar that their trust in the Igbos had been lost. The video was faked.

Conspiracy theories, a strategy used by pro-PDP or pro-APC pages to undermine the credibility of their opponents, were again used. The pro-PDP groups claimed that the Nigerian Army was attacking houses of PDP supporters in Adamawa State. Videos also surfaced of apparent attacks on civilians, mostly in Rivers, Bayelsa and Sokoto states. The APC and their supporters online were notably silent on the issue. From our checks, we discovered that a significant number of the videos of attacks in Gokana and Asari Toru LGAs in Rivers state were true. We could not independently verify the videos from the other two aforementioned states, however, our observers on ground corroborated the narratives of minor attacks on civilians in these states. Our analysis suggests the low voter turnout recorded across the country is partly because of early accounts of violence and

military interference that may have spread to other states and made voters more reluctant to cast their ballot.

A final trend observed was that the states about which rumours of violence and meddling in the elections were shared often had the most closely contested elections. In cases where the race was not closely contested, the online landscape often reflected the sense of the outcome being already decided.

## SUPPLEMENTARY ELECTIONS



Following the declaration that the results of gubernatorial elections were inconclusive in seven states; Adamawa, Rivers, Bauchi, Kano, Benue, Sokoto and Plateau, INEC fixed March 23rd fore-runs in six of the States excluding Rivers. During the elections, stories in circulation across social media platforms were mostly on harassment and intimidation of voters, intimidation of observers and pressmen, and vote buying. These stories spread fast and spontaneously across Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The online trends with regard to the supplementary elections after the presidential and gubernatorial rounds, was generally in the similar to those seen before, with the major difference being a reduction in overall volume of content being posted.

For example in Kano State, a claim circulated on Twitter, which our fact-check found to be true, that a TVC crew was harassed by people at the polling station at Gama ward in Nassarawa LGA. We also fact checked a claim that observers were harassed Kano State, and confirmed that it was true. Of the six fact checks done that day, four were from Kano State, indicating that Kano had the highest number of news stories, often around violence, that were shared on social media.



## CONCLUSION

This is the first attempt at a comprehensive online study of the information landscape in Nigeria. What has emerged from our research is that there was a concerted attempt to sway the electorate along partisan lines, and also along ethnic lines, through often false online content shared on social networks and closed messaging systems such as WhatsApp. These initial findings show that the information-warfare that has often characterised Nigerian politics, and by extension its elections, has begun to shift online.


It is clear that the political culture in the country has laid the grounds for a complete lack of trust in governmental bodies, institutions and persons. This lack of trust means that the multiplicity of cultures, languages, religions and peoples are tools for division as opposed to a celebration of diversity.

Our observations of the elections lead to us to ask whether campaign promises even matter? Have people already made their decisions in advance? Can we measure the impact, as accurately as possible, of disinformation on the possible choices people make? Because we know that disinformation is targeted along lines of religion, ethnicity, and economically differentiated demographics. We are left with more questions than answers, and to that end, we have proposed a number of recommendations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1**. It is critical to conduct further research to better understand phenomena such as the direct impact of fake news on the voting populace. Beyond that, we should also look towards understanding the patterns of fake news in greater detail, especially around significant events such as elections. This will be profoundly beneficial in terms of preparations in the build-up to future elections. Furthermore, it will enable us to place safeguards against the exploitation of social media and online space.

**2**. It is clear that there is a huge need to promote digital literacy at all levels in Nigeria. This has to do with a long-term vision towards educating Nigerians on how to be more discerning in navigating the online space. Failure to do that, will leave Nigerians vulnerable to more coordinated attempts in the future to deceive Nigerians. There is also pressing need to develop in more informal structures and setting, education oriented towards critical thinking, and to create awareness beyond the elite space, or even just those with access to online spaces, the tools to more discerning with regard to the vast amount of available information.



**3**. Tech companies such as Facebook need to be far more engaged in helping to make the Nigerian information space more open and truly commit to combatting disinformation there, particularly during elections with better content moderation, research and focus on Nigeria, and beyond in Africa and the Global South

