WHATSAPP AND NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS: MOBILISING THE PEOPLE, PROTECTING THE VOTE

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in 40 African countries, including Nigeria, due to its low cost, encrypted messages, and the ability to easily share messages with both individuals and groups. Its political influence has expanded rapidly in line with its growing penetration.

The private messenger application continued to play an increasingly significant role in the 2019 Nigerian general elections. 91% of those interviewed for this research were active WhatsApp users. Political leaders have been quick to understand the potential of WhatsApp and to adapt it to mobilise voters and try to safeguard their vote.

As a result, it has become part of the fabric of election campaigns and is now a key mechanism through which political leaders seek to communicate with their campaign teams and supporters. WhatsApp is increasingly being relied upon to coordinate campaign events as well as to carry messages that both promote a candidate's credentials and manifesto pledges, and criticise their rivals.

To investigate the impact of WhatsApp on the Nigerian elections – and whether it has facilitated the spread of misinformation (the innocent sharing of false information) and disinformation (the deliberate sharing of fabricated stories) – we collected data from a range of different sources at both national and sub-national levels, including:

- Fieldwork in two states – Kano and Oyo – and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Conducting 46 qualitative interviews to understand both the national picture and the use of WhatsApp at the sub-national level.

- Two state level surveys in Kano and Oyo to run state level surveys with a total of 1,005 respondents to see how WhatsApp is used in practice and gauge popular opinion.

- Seven focus groups – three in Kano, four in Oyo – to probe survey findings and learn more about how WhatsApp functions to create political networks in different environments.

- Conversations with Nigerian researchers and experts on the role of social media.

Drawing on this data, existing publications by Nigerian scholars and media coverage, the report reaches the following conclusions:

1. **Organisation.** The political use of WhatsApp is becoming increasingly sophisticated and organised, but a significant proportion of activity remains informal, in part by design. In turn, this limits the ability of formal structures to set and control narratives. This means that WhatsApp replicates existing clientelistic networks, but at the same time has the potential to generate space for a broader range of actors, including women and youth actors, to enter the political arena.

2. **Content.** Different types of content shared online have varying impacts depending on who they have been shared by and how they are presented to the user. The format of messages – pictures are more powerful than text – and the regard in which the individual sharing the information is held, shapes popular perceptions of their credibility.

3. **Networks**. Offline and online structures are interlinked, reinforcing and building on each other in ways that are important to understand. As a result, in many respects WhatsApp amplifies the significance and influence of networks that already exist within Nigerian politics and society.

4. **Impacts.** WhatsApp is used to both spread disinformation and to counter it. The private messenger application is also used to observe elections and to share fact-checked information. It therefore represents a competitive information environment that may spread misinformation but also levels the playing field between the ruling party and the opposition and can be used to boost electoral transparency and accountability.

This final point is particularly important and suggests that many popular media narratives around the use of social media in contested elections need to be nuanced. While WhatsApp is often associated with the spread of "fake news", it can also be a tool for accountability and monitoring. Leaders from across the political divide explained that while the danger of WhatsApp was that disinformation about them could be shared rapidly, the benefit was that they could counter false stories immediately by sending out messages through their own channels. The low cost also means that it levels the playing field between the ruling party – which has greater access to resources – and the opposition. Similarly, while WhatsApp has become a powerful tool in the hands of the country's political class it is also used by journalists and election observers to collect information and protect sources.

It is therefore important to balance the positive and negative impact of WhatsApp on elections in Nigeria. It is also critical to recognise the ways in which WhatsApp use varies both between and within countries. At the national level, presidential candidates have developed sophisticated social media teams that drive messages to thousands of supporters through interlinked WhatsApp groups. Things look very different at the regional level, where structures are more ad hoc and informal. In Kano, we found evidence that there was considerable sharing of disinformation emanating from both the national and the state level. By contrast, leaders in Oyo downplayed the significance of "fake news" – though they acknowledged some had circulated – and said that they tended to use WhatsApp to coordinate the activity of their campaigns rather than to actually communicate with their supporters.

Finally, it is important not to exaggerate the impact of WhatsApp. Political rumours and misinformation were part and parcel of Nigerian politics prior to the advent of social media. For many political leaders, WhatsApp simply represents a further stage of a transformation in political communications that has gone from newspapers to radio, television, block text messages and internet-based forms of communication over the last eighty years. Nigerians are also becoming increasingly savvy WhatsApp users and understand that many of the messages that they receive are misleading or untrue. The ones that are seen to be credible are those that resonate with individuals because they contain an element of the truth, or play on recent experiences.

Indeed, while the candidates for sub-national elections that we interviewed agreed that using WhatsApp effectively gives candidates an electoral advantage, they were also clear that social media alone cannot win an election. Instead, the most important thing for a candidate is to be an authentic leader of the community – to be present and accessible. WhatsApp has transformed the electoral environment, but it has not revolutionised it.

On this basis, the report recommends that WhatsApp and the policy makers and civil society groups that engage with it focus on reforms that would enhance the platform's capacity to promote participation and accountability while reducing the risk that it contributes to electoral manipulation and conflict:

Short term: 1) make it easier for individuals to leave WhatsApp groups and report disinformation; 2) targeted digital literacy training aimed at social influencers; 3) reinforce the ability of group administrators to set standards; 4) invest in fact-checking initiatives that work in local languages; 5) strengthen WhatsApp's ability to understand the risk of misuse by opening an office on the continent.

Long term: 6) Comprehensive digital literacy education as part of the national curriculum; 7) develop WhatsApp and social media codes of conduct for future elections; 8) support continued research into the use of WhatsApp; 9) enhance online protection of data and civil liberties.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Social media has changed the face of politics in Nigeria."[1] So said many political candidates, professionals, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and civil society actors, scholars and political advisers interviewed as part of this research project in the lead-up to, and the aftermath of, the 2019 presidential and gubernatorial elections. To what extent, though, is this true? Moreover, if it is true, how exactly has it changed politics – and with what effects on political discourse, information flows, campaign strategy, the democratic process and, indeed, election results themselves?

This research – funded by WhatsApp[2] – helps to provide some answers to these questions by focusing specifically on the role of WhatsApp in Nigerian electoral politics. Although the centrality of social media platforms to information flows around electoral processes globally is now widely acknowledged by scholars, practitioners, industry, commentators and even politicians themselves, WhatsApp's influence has received far less attention in this regard than Twitter or Facebook.[3]

WhatsApp, a Facebook-owned private messenger application, is nonetheless playing an equally important, though harder to quantify role, in the spread of information during election campaigns and votes.[4] Ahead of national elections in April and May 2019, for example, India's political parties were pouring money into creating hundreds of thousands of WhatsApp group chats to spread political messages and memes.[5]

In Brazil's 2018 election, candidate – and now president - Javier Bolsonaro's campaign benefited from a powerful and coordinated disinformation campaign intended to discredit his rivals. According to one academic, supporters used WhatsApp to "deliver an onslaught of daily misinformation straight to millions of Brazilians' phones".[6]

Even in countries where digital campaigning remains nascent, WhatsApp is playing an important role. Sierra Leone's presidential vote in 2018 saw false rumours that were started on the platform appearing in national newspapers and on radio discussion broadcasts. Through word of mouth, telephone conversations or calls to popular radio shows, disinformation that originated on WhatsApp reached far beyond individuals with direct access to a smartphone.[7] A similar phenomenon was noted in Malawi's 2019 presidential election.[8]

In Africa, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in 40 countries, including Nigeria.[9] Given the low data costs involved with usage and the simplicity of the application's functions it is fast catching-up with calls and text messaging as the most popular way of communicating in countries like Nigeria, where smartphones are available for as little as US $30. According to a civil society

1 Interview with former political party candidate and current and former civil servants, Ibadan, April 2019.
2 This research has been funded under WhatsApp's Research Awards for Social Science and Misinformation (https://www.whatsapp.com/research/awards/). WhatsApp have played no role in directing or managing the project – including its framing, inception, development and implementation. Nor have they had any influence over the authors' analysis and delineation of findings.
3 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. 2019. "Disinformation and "fake news": Final Report". UK House of Commons. Available at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf.
4 Rennó, R. 2018. "WhatsApp: The Widespread Use of WhatsApp in Political Campaigning in the Global South". Tactical Tech. Available at https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/whatsapp/.
5 Perrigo, B. 2019. "How Volunteers for India's Ruling Party Are Using WhatsApp to Fuel Fake News Ahead of Elections", Time Magazine. Available at https://time.com/5512032/whatsapp-india-election-2019/
6 Belli, L. 2018. "WhatsApp skewed Brazilian election, proving social media's danger to democracy". The Conversation. Available at http://theconversation.com/whatsapp-skewed-brazilian-election-proving-social-medias-danger-to-democracy-106476.
7 Hitchen, J. 2018. "The WhatsApp rumours that infused Sierra Leone's tight election", African Arguments. Available at https://africanarguments.org/2018/04/10/the-whatsapp-rumours-infused-sierra-leone-tight-election-social-media/.
8 Kondowe, R. 2019. "Despite a low internet penetration, Malawi is worried about fake news in its election run-up", Quartz Africa. Available at https://qz.com/africa/1616511/malawi-election-has-a-fake-news-problem-on-whatsapp-facebook/.
9 Data collected from Google Play store downloads; We Are Social. 2019. "Digital 2019: Nigeria". Available at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-nigeria.

activist we interviewed in Abuja there has been "an explosion of WhatsApp use from 2015 to now ... you give someone your number, the first thing that they ask you is: is that your WhatsApp number? It is taking over the communication landscape in Nigeria".[10]

The data reflects this expansion. Nigeria's active social media users were estimated at 24 million in January 2019, a 26% increase on the number in 2018.[11] "I use WhatsApp more than I use the toilet," remarked one user we spoke to, whilst another said that "it was the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do at night."[12] 91% of individuals surveyed for this research, predominantly degree educated, urban residents, use WhatsApp.

It is therefore unsurprising that WhatsApp played a critical role in the spread of a range of "fake news" stories – or disinformation – during Nigeria's 2019 election season, most notoriously the rumour that president Muhammadu Buhari had died and been replaced by a Sudanese body double named "Jubril". The rapid spread of this story across WhatsApp and other platforms eventually prompted Buhari to address it directly.[13]

But while WhatsApp is often associated with the spread of false information it can also be a tool for accountability and monitoring; for improving the transparency of the electoral process. It can also offer opposition candidates a more level playing field when it comes to access to, and distribution of, information, and give youthful political activists an opportunity to enter and influence politics in a system often closed to those without wealth and extensive, elite networks. The importance of finding a balance to ensure that the positive uses of the platform come to the fore and negatives are diminished is key in increasingly digital democracies like Nigeria.

Our research has therefore focused on answering four key questions, in the context of Nigeria's 2019 elections. It builds on the research and efforts of Nigerian researchers and civil society groups to counter online propaganda, which the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), with partners, has been at the forefront of:

a. How is WhatsApp used by political candidates, their teams and supporters to tailor political messages to local and electoral contexts, and with what impact?

b. What strategies do different actors and communities use to disseminate messages via WhatsApp during elections?

c. How far are voters influenced by political messages shared on WhatsApp?

d. To what extent do voters distinguish between "fake" and "genuine" news spread on WhatsApp during elections?

In answering these questions, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, described in more detail below, and built on pre-existing research undertaken in Nigeria and elsewhere on the role of social media.

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10 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
11 We Are Social. 2019. "Digital 2019: Nigeria". Available at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-nigeria.
12 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
13 BBC News. 2018. "Nigerian President Buhari Denies Death and Body Double Rumours". Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-46424562.

1.1 Researching WhatsApp: Research Design and Methodology

Recognising the important role that WhatsApp is increasingly playing in elections across Africa and the growing use of the messenger application in Nigeria, this research seeks to better **understand how it was used (and, in some cases, abused) by political actors in the 2019 election, and how it was received by users.**

To do so, we focused on the political use of WhatsApp in two of Nigeria's 36 states – the northern state of Kano and the southwestern state of Oyo – as well as discussing the applications use with key stakeholders in Abuja. In doing so, we explicitly compare and contrast presidential and gubernatorial elections in the primarily Muslim and Hausa-speaking north and the primarily Christian and Yoruba-speaking southwest.

The choice of Kano and Oyo was informed by the fact that elections in both were expected to be competitive – hence these two areas would provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the ways in which WhatsApp was being used to spread misinformation and disinformation at a sub-national level within the context of a more contested playing field.
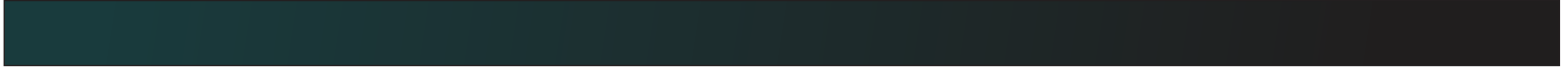
Discussions were held prior to the presidential election with key stakeholders in Abuja, with state-level visits taking place in the aftermath of gubernatorial elections in April 2019. Resource constraints meant that it was not possible to conduct research in the predominantly Igbo-speaking southeast of the country. Given the regional variation we identify, it is plausible that the picture there is different from the story we will tell here.[14]

The closed and private nature of WhatsApp – end-to-end encryption means that the contents of group discussions are inaccessible to all except group members – makes understanding how information flows, and to whom, on the application difficult to monitor in any comprehensive way for researchers – at least without invading members' privacy. To avoid that, and given the short-time period for research available, the approach of this research had four core elements:

To understand the ways in which political party members and supporters use WhatsApp for campaign purposes. This was undertaken through 46 qualitative interviews with political and campaign advisors, experts, political party supporters and members and civil society actors based in Abuja, Kano and Oyo;

To engage with and learn from existing research and researchers working on the role of social media in Nigeria;

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14 Nigeria features 6 geo-political zones, but historically had three main regions: northern, western, and eastern. Our fieldwork in Oyo and Kano meant that we covered the northern and western regions, but not the eastern

To explore how voters use WhatsApp in relation to elections, and politics more broadly, and how far they are influenced by messages received and shared. This was undertaken through seven focus group discussions (three in Kano, four in Oyo) with individuals who use WhatsApp, or have access to the platform, as a source of news;

To work with researchers in Kano and Oyo to run two state-level surveys, covering a total of 1,005 respondents in order to gain a better sense of how individuals use WhatsApp and the information they receive from it around elections. Preliminary findings from this survey are outlined below.

The surveys and focus groups were confined to the major city, Kano (Kano) and Ibadan (Oyo), of the two states examined. Our analysis of citizen perspectives and practice therefore reflects more of an urban perspective and experience, albeit of two urban areas with very different ethno-religious demographics, levels of education and degrees of poverty. Our data nonetheless offers critical points of comparison, and divergence, with national-level studies, as well as the chance for greater comparison between states.

"Fake News": In this report, and in the research more widely, we employ the terms "misinformation" and "disinformation", rather than "fake news", because they better capture both the type of content that is shared on WhatsApp and other platforms, and the reasons it is shared. First of all, a lot of false information shared online, particularly that with the biggest reach, is not entirely "fake" but relies on a combination of false information interwoven with elements of truth that make the information both more believable and harder to dismiss.

Second, using misinformation and disinformation allows for an important distinction in the intent used by the sharer. Whilst misinformation can involve sharing content that you genuinely believe to be true, only to find out later that it is not, disinformation comes with a deliberate attempt to mislead others. For the most part in Nigeria people are misinforming others, but as our research shows, some of those working to support political campaigns are also engaging in efforts to deliberately mislead, to disinform.

In exploring these phenomena, our aim is not to cast judgement on the normative role of WhatsApp on either national or gubernatorial races – whether it is a "force for good" or otherwise – but, rather, to support a better understanding of how the platform is used to spread information. The report seeks to outline what kinds of strategies leaders use, the ways in which content is curated for specific audiences, and how offline and online structures interact to shape how information flows.

A better understanding of how WhatsApp is being used and interacted with by voters and political parties is important in order to develop strategies to limit the spread of online misinformation and disinformation that are better tailored to local realities and hence more

effective. In particular, it is important to take into account the way that WhatsApp has been used to promote accountability, transparency and access to information during and outside of election cycles, in order to ensure that efforts to reduce "fake news" do not also undermine the platforms potential to strengthen democracy.

1.2 WhatsApp in Nigeria

Less than a quarter of Nigeria's 113 million users are on social media.[15] Access to information on WhatsApp does not require having the application, however, or even a smartphone or internet connection. It is critically important to factor in those who share phones with friends of relatives, the ways in which information shared online can reach offline audiences and who, and how influential, the online users are.

For example, many of our respondents said that they had heard stories circulating on WhatsApp referred to in sermons by pastors, or relayed by traditional and community leaders who have online access. Radio news and phone-in-shows, calls from relatives and word of mouth discussions in the street are other ways in which WhatsApp messages can be widely shared. **Understanding that internet penetration does not equate to internet influence is critically important when understanding WhatsApp's reach**.

It is also critical to understand – at least for Western audiences – the predominance of large WhatsApp groups in Nigeria, and elsewhere in West Africa. This reflects strong and extensive offline social structures and networks such as religious groups, alumni associations and extended family. 73% of individuals surveyed for this research said that the average size of the groups they were in was 50 or more people.

One implication of this finding is that most of our respondents belonged to groups where they did not personally know all of the members. In Nigeria, the cascading of information across groups of this size and reach is a key way in which information spreads online, for the most part organically, but increasingly with efforts by political and candidates – and those acting in their name – to exercise a degree of control. This matters for political campaigning and for this project because it enables one individual to be able to reach a significant audience very quickly through an informal network of groups. If you are in four groups,

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15 Cited in European Union Election Observation Mission. 2019. "Nigeria: Final Report". Available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/nigeria_2019_eu_eom_final_report-web.pdf.
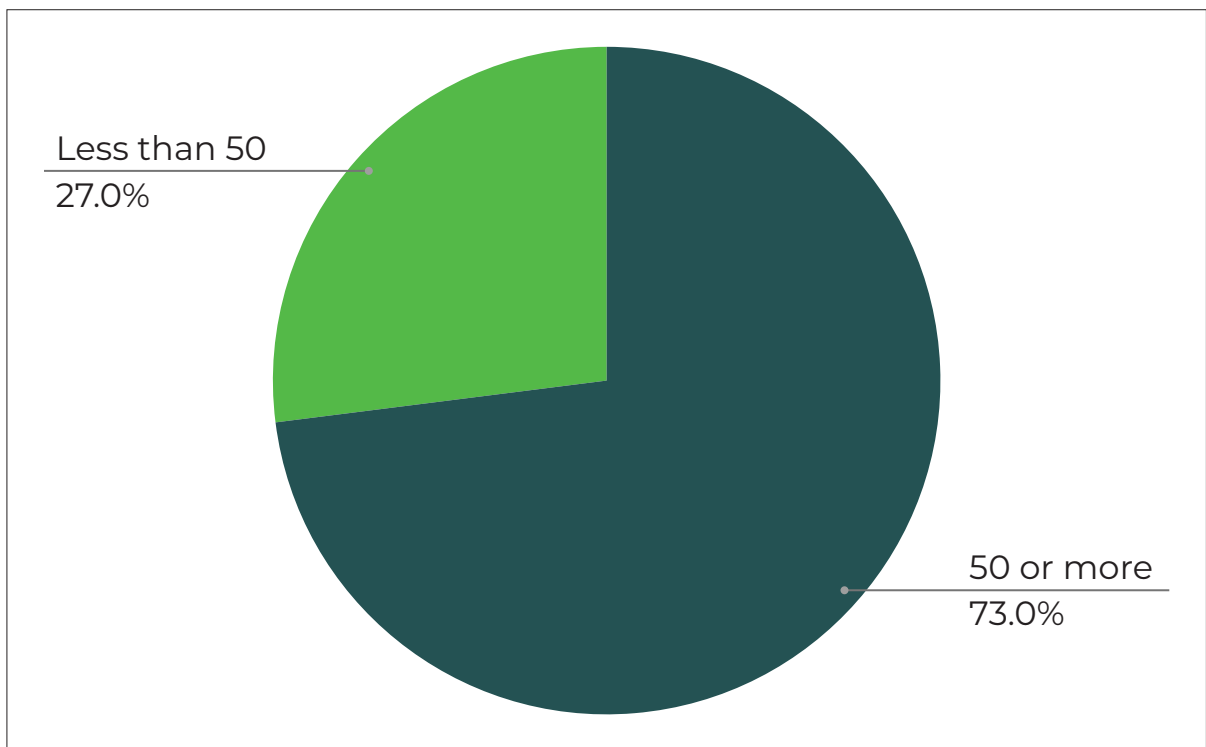
Average number of WhatsApp group members

each of which is at the WhatsApp capacity of 256 users, you could reach over 1,000 people by sharing a message in those fora.

The pyramid effect of this is that if 10% of members from those four groups share the message to a further four groups, that message may end up being seen by up to 104,000 people. And that is just those with direct access to an account.

This is possible despite WhatsApp's introduction of a restriction of the number of times a message can be forwarded in one go to five – while this effectively constrains the sharing of messages to individuals, by forwarding a message to five groups it is still possible to reach over 1,000 people at the touch of a button.

This example is the extreme, but it gives an indication as to why WhatsApp is increasingly being seen as a vital part of the electioneering toolkit. In Oyo a political strategist stressed that "It [WhatsApp] is very important. Virtually all candidates have WhatsApp groups."[16]

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16 Interview with political strategist, Oyo, April 2019.

2.1 Setting the scene: How Nigeria decided
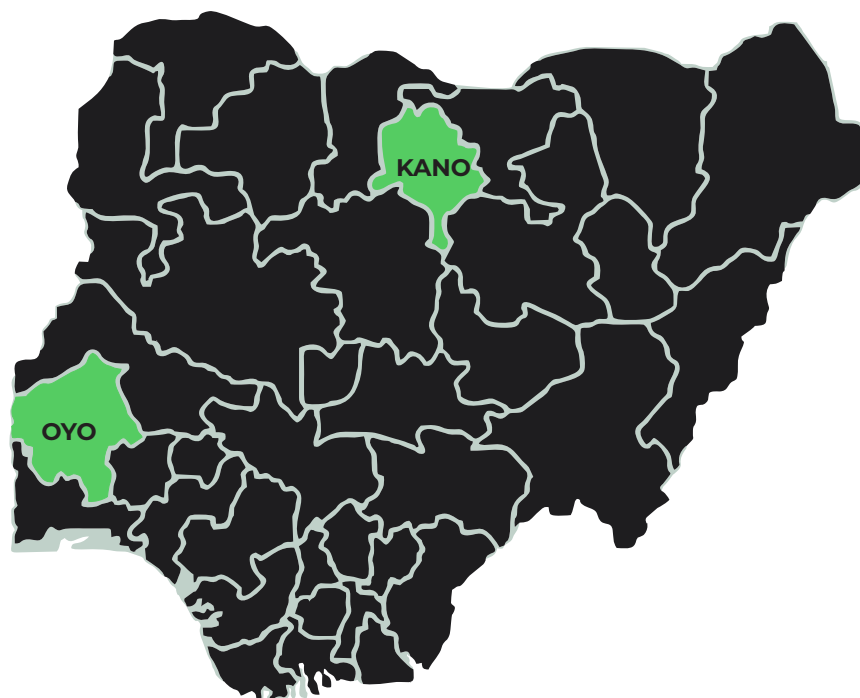
The context for understanding online discussions and debates is crucial for properly interpreting the role WhatsApp plays in an election. Nigeria's 2019 elections[17] were won by the incumbent All Progressives Congress (APC) party and its presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. In that way, they marked a return to a familiar pattern of incumbent electoral victory, which only Buhari himself has been able to counter since the country's return to multi-party democracy in 1999.

The presidential election – held after a week-long delay in February 2019 – was a two-horse race between Buhari and former vice-president Atiku Abubakar. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Buhari won with 56% of the vote – a verdict that Abubakar has sought to overturn in the courts. Turnout in the presidential election was just 35.6% and electoral-related violence, concentrated in a few states in particular, saw the deaths of 58 people during the campaign.[18]

State-level gubernatorial and legislative elections, which followed in early March, in 29 of Nigeria's 36 states[19] produced an almost even split, with 15 won by APC candidates and 14 by candidates of the People's Democractic Party (PDP).

17 Nigeria held presidential and senate elections on 23 February 2019 and gubernatorial and house of representative elections on 9 March 2019.
18 Olokor, F. 2019. "58 Nigerians killed in 2019 elections". Punch Newspaper. Available at https://punchng.com/58-nigerians-killed-in-2019-elections-situation-room/.
19 Seven states currently hold off-cycle elections: Anambra, Kogi, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Osun and Ondo.

Six[20] required supplementary elections to establish a victor after the number of cancelled votes was higher than the margin of victory. Kano, eventually re-elected Governor Abdullhai Ganduje after supplementary voting, marred by further violence,[21] saw him come from behind to win by 0.46%. Oyo saw the opposition PDP candidate Oluwaseyi Makinde take almost 60% of the votes cast, defeating Adebayo Adelabu of the APC. In both cases turnout for state polls was slightly higher than for presidential elections, though not by much: 1.2% in Oyo and 0.9% in Kano.[22]

2.2 Kano: Kwankwasiyya vs Gandujiyya

With over 5 million registered voters, Kano – second only to Lagos in terms of the size of its electorate – is a crucial source of votes for presidential aspirants. The state is also nationally significant for other reasons. Kano was a theatre of post-election violence after Buhari lost in 2011 and was key to his victory in 2015. Partly as a result, the state is often referred to as a "a crucial battleground" and a political context in which there is a particularly high risk of violence during both presidential and sub-national contests.[23]

Although his name was not on the ballot paper, Rabiu Kwankwaso is key to understanding why the APC governor's margin of victory was so small in Kano, a state which Buhari won with 77.45% of the vote during the presidential vote just two weeks before. Kwankwaso served as a PDP governor of Kano from 1999-2003 and 2011-2015, and then as an APC Senator for Kano Central from 2015-2019, having defected from the PDP before his term as governor had expired. Kwankwaso's chosen successor as governor was his deputy Abdullahi Ganduje who joined his political godfather in switching allegiances and won the 2015 election on the APC ticket with 75.2% of the vote. Two things explain this 25% drop in support in four years.

First, and arguably most critically, Ganduje and Kwankwaso's relationship gradually broke down, with the former deputy keen to establish himself as a stand-alone political actor. Among the elite, and with the resources of the state at his disposal, Ganduje was able to push Kwankwaso away from the centre of power in the state. But through the Kwankwasiyya movement – comprised of those who had benefited from scholarships and opportunities during Kwankwaso's extended time at the top of politics in Kano – he retained significant influence. With Kwankwaso giving his support to the PDP candidate, Abba Kabir Yusuf, who described Kwankwaso as "my leader, my oga [boss]" in an interview with Daily Trust newspaper,[24] the contest was about loyalty to individuals.

20 Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Kano, Plateau and Sokoto
21 Ibrahim, J. 2019. "Kano politics and the decline of values". Premium Times. Available at https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2019/03/29/kano-politics-and-the-decline-of-values-by-jibrin-ibrahim/.
22 Governorship election results 2019. Data courtesy of Stears Election Centre. Available at https://nigeriaelections.stearsng.com/governor/2019.
23 International Crisis Group. 2018. "Nigeria's 2019 elections: Six states to watch". Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/268-nigerias-2019-elections-six-states-watch.
24 Danjuma Adamu, L. 2019." Why Ganduje's Re-election Cannot Stand – Abba Kabir Yusuf". Daily Trust. Available at https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/why-gandujes-re-election-cannot-stand-abba-kabir-yusuf-abba-gida-gida.html.

Second, in October 2018 Ganduje was caught on video accepting several bribes worth $230,000 from a public works contractor. This was allegedly part of a corrupt deal worth $5-million, a claim he refutes despite the evidence. The video went viral and Ganduje struggled to rid himself of the nickname, "Gandollar".

In the context of increasing economic hardships for many residents of the state his popularity was at a low ebb, with elections taking place just six months after the video first emerged. Ultimately, "continued support for the embattled governor in rural areas, where online access remains limited, was juxtaposed with significant opposition gains in urban areas." [25]

Despite Yusuf holding a slender advantage of 26,000 votes after the 9 March votes were tallied, INEC called for a supplementary election. In that poll, held in 28 out of the 44 LGAs of the state, Ganduje won 45,876 votes to Yusuf's 10,239 to emerge the victor by just 0.46%. [26]

Nigerian and international observes alike reported targeted violence and intimidation during the process with the European Union election observation mission noting that "extensive electoral security problems were observed in some areas, with groups of men with weapons intimidating and obstructing the process, and security agencies ineffective at protecting citizens' right to vote." [27]

2.3 Oyo: Ajimobi must go

In Oyo, as many of our respondents made clear, political context is also key. The state, as noted by scholars from Ibadan's Nigeria Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), has a history of political violence. [28]

This has had an important impact on how many individuals and communities in the state receive and react to more divisive and vitriolic messages received during elections; few of our interlocutors in Oyo could point to any information they had received via WhatsApp, or other platforms, which would constitute "hate speech". [29]

Moreover, many of our respondents from across the political divide emphasised the significance of Yoruba sensitivities around leadership tropes in driving electoral choices. As one interviewee, a strategic advisor to a gubernatorial candidate, made clear, "The Yoruba worldview is that they like humility [in leaders]." [30] Another, a senior academic, underscored the ambivalence felt by many Oyo voters around candidates providing "gifts" to voters which are not perceived to be of sufficient substance. [31]

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25 Interview with digital rights advocate, Kano. April 2019.
26 Ibrahim, J. 2019. "Kano politics and the decline of values". Premium Times. Available at https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2019/03/29/kano-politics-and-the-decline-of-values-by-jibrin-ibrahim/.
27 Sanni, K. 2019. "EU Mission reports widespread violence, vote buying in Kano supplementary elections". Premium Times. Available at https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/322349-eu-mission-reports-widespread-violence-vote-buying-in-kano-supplementary-elections.html.
28 Discussion with scholars in NISER's Policy and Governance Department, Ibadan, April 2019.
29 Interview with former APC candidate, Ibadan, April 2019.
30 Interview with former strategic advisor to gubernatorial candidate, Ibadan, April 2019.
31 Interview with senior academic, Ibadan, April 2019

This speaks to conclusions from recent research which underlines the rejection of so-called amala politics [the direct distribution of food, money and material goods] by Oyo voters "apart from where they [have] facilitated programmatic change."[32]

In this regard, the perceived failings of Oyo's outgoing governor – Abiola Ajimobi – conspired to weaken the APC support base in the state and opened the way for the PDP candidate, Oluwaseyi Makinde, who had previously contested for a senatorial seat in 2007 and as the Social Democratic Party gubernatorial candidate in 2015, to secure victory.

Ajimobi, the first two-time governor of Oyo state, had lost credibility by the time the 2019 elections came around. His second term as governor was plagued by a failure to pay civil servants – with some teachers complaining of going unpaid for over a year – an inability, and unwillingness, to resolve strike action at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology – together with University of Ibadan the most important education facility in the state – and efforts to tamper with the long existing law guiding Obaship hierarchy in Ibadan. He was also perceived by many, including some of his own former staffers, as brash, impolite and arrogant.

"Ajimobi has diverted from the founding [APC] vision," claimed one APC candidate, citing a number of examples of the former governor's reportedly imperious style of leadership.[33] Another respondent, an Oyo-based intellectual and political analyst, emphasized Ajimobi's distribution of groundnuts to supporters at several Oyo political rallies – interpreted by the crowd as an insultingly small show of good faith.[34]

An indication of the outgoing governor's lack of popularity was brought into sharp focus on 23 February. He failed to win a senatorial seat, losing to Lekan Balogun of the PDP. As a result, while Ajimobi was not standing in the race, his close ties to the APC's gubernatorial candidate, Adebayo Adelabu, undermined the latter's credibility.

There was also a shift in the presidential vote in Oyo, where Atiku Abubakar beat Buhari by less than 2,000 votes. This represented a stark change from 2015 when Buhari took the state with 200,000 more votes than Goodluck Jonathan.[35] This swing from APC to PDP, combined with Ajimobi's falling popularity, saw renewed efforts by the leading powerbrokers in the ruling party – including Bola Tinubu – to focus on Oyo in the run-up to the gubernatorial vote, but with limited success.

Makinde had developed a strong presence in the state throughout Ajimobi's second tenure and had used his wealth – accumulated through work on the oil and gas sector – to engage in philanthropic activities. Through this mechanism he had built enough support to overcome the advantages of incumbency that APC sought to deploy. As a result, the PDP captured the seat, taking advantage of a 16% drop in votes for the APC candidate to win with 59.02% of the vote.

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32 Roelofs, P. Forthcoming, 2019. "Beyond programmatic versus patrimonial politics: Contested conceptions of legitimate distribution in Nigeria", Journal of Modern African Studies.
33 Interview with former APC candidate, Ibadan, April 2019.
34 Interview with senior academic, Ibadan, April 2019.
35 Presidential election results 2015. Data courtesy of Stears Election Centre. Available at https://nigeriaelections.stearsng.com/president/2015.

3. FINDINGS

Four key and, to an extent, interlinked, findings emerge from our interviews, discussions and surveys in Abuja, Kano and Oyo:

1. **Organisation.** The political use of WhatsApp is becoming increasingly sophisticated and organised, but a significant proportion of activity remains informal, in part by design. In turn, this limits the ability of formal structures to set and control narratives. This means that WhatsApp replicates existing clientelistic networks, but at the same time has the potential to generate space for a broader range of non-elite, including women and youth actors, to enter the political arena.

2. **Content.** Different types of content shared online have varying impacts depending on who they have been shared by and how they are presented to the user. The format of messages – pictures are more powerful than text – and the regard in which the individual sharing the information is held, shapes popular perceptions of their credibility.

3. **Networks.** Offline and online structures are interlinked, reinforcing and building on each other in ways that it is important to understand. As a result, in many respects WhatsApp amplifies the significance and influence of networks that already exist within Nigerian politics and society.

4. **Impacts.** WhatsApp is used to both spread disinformation and to counter it. The private messenger application is also used to observe elections and to share fact checking information. It therefore represents a competitive information environment that may spread misinformation but also levels the playing field between the ruling party and the opposition and can be used to boost electoral transparency and accountability.

3.1 Political entrepreneurship or reproducing clientelism?

Political parties and candidates in Nigeria are increasingly recognising the importance of online organisation around elections. The 2015 elections were the first time WhatsApp had been given significant attention during a national election. Following the polls, a consensus emerged among APC supporters and members that social media had played an important part in Buhari's election. By 2017, two years before the presidential elections were scheduled to take place, the Buhari Media Centre (BMC) had established a network of groups on WhatsApp that extended across all 36 states[36] and 774 local government areas (LGAs).

The view that drove this approach was outlined by a key BMC strategist:

> *"If you take the fact that Nigeria Communication Commission estimates there to be over 100 million internet users in Nigeria and compare that with the voter register of 84 million, our assumption was that every voter was potentially online. WhatsApp is cheaper than text messaging and you can get everyone in one place."[37]*

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36 At the time of this research, Kano state BMC group had 220 members, Oyo state BMC group had 243 members
37 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Abuja, April 2019.   .

The Buhari New Media Centre (BNMC): BNMC was not an official APC structure but it was indirectly linked to the party. It is typically staffed by younger, politically ambitious supporters and party members and funded with money from the budget allocated to the Special Assistant on Social Media to the President. The Abuja office, constituting around 30 people and working mostly on a voluntary or ad-hoc payment basis, was opened by Nigerian vice president Yemi Osinbajo in 2018. Drawing on the strategies for grassroots activism that had been used so successfully by the 2008 and 2012 Barack Obama presidential campaigns in the United States, supporters of Buhari's re-election bid were able to sign up to request to join WhatsApp groups specific to their location, until the group reached its 256 capacity.

Reporting mechanisms were established in late 2017. Each of the 36 state groups had a chapter leader, chosen by the BNMC national committee, who would receive updates from the LGA focal points – chosen using the same approach – and feed in updates to a "central command" in Abuja having received some level of training.[38]

In the words of one BNMC representative, a central command then "sits and monitors what is going on – some members even sit in WhatsApp groups as a way of checking up on our chapter leaders – and provides some direction of how and when to respond [depending on the issue]."[39] Members of groups at the sub-national and LGA level were encouraged to share messages widely among their own networks and contacts. With WhatsApp, as one respondent noted, "In less than 10 minutes information can spread across the country."[40]

BUHARI NEW MEDIA CENTRE

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        NATIONAL
  STRATEGY SECRETARIAT
          ↑ ↓
       36 STATES
        CHAPTER
          ↑ ↓
     774 LGA GROUPS
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OYO STATE CHAPTER

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        NATIONAL
       SECRETARIAT
          ↑ ↓
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        CHAPTER
          ↑ ↓
     33 LGA GROUPS
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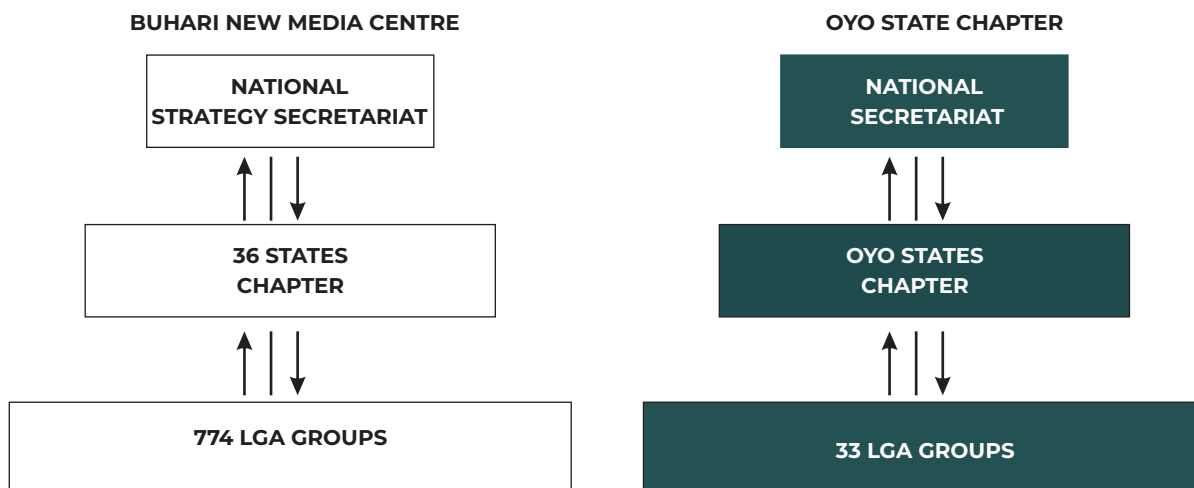
38 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Abuja, April 2019.
39 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Abuja, April 2019.
40 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Abuja, April 2019.

The Atikulated Youth Force (AYF): The PDP constituted a similar structure for the presidential vote: the Atikulated Youth Force (AYF). With less funds at its disposal, however, it was harder for AYF to achieve the same level of nationwide coverage.

Still, the PDP constituted an 18 person presidential committee on social media – the top strategic tier of the non-formal party structure – which discussed online strategy and fed information down to the state and LGA level often through a dedicated WhatsApp group.

Efforts to monitor the activities of group members, directly and indirectly were also put in place. Around 7,000 AYF members,[41] who for the most part signed up to join using a web-link, were rewarded for good performance – which meant sharing content with as many people as possible – by being recognised as "AYF Ambassador of the week".[42] For most the prize was a campaign t-shirt or hat, but three winners had the chance to meet Atiku in person.[43]

AYF was formally separate from the PDP, though in reality they were closely related. As one member explained, "I have access to the official campaign team but we are separate from it ... sometimes there is overlap and we work together but there is not a joint approach."[44] Efforts to provide some level of strategic direction at a national level did take place as to what content or issue should be focused on during a particular period of the campaign according to one BNMC member:

> *"There's a group at the top – they talk about the materials we put out, take out what's not supposed to be there, if they think it's propaganda ...[they] decide what material goes out...For the most part we are left to our own devices but when there is a critical issue we do occasionally receive a directive from above that we are encouraged to follow."[45]*

During the supplementary election in Kano, when rumours emerged the night before that APC was set to use thugs at polling stations, an action that it did take, AYF members were contacted by the PDP and asked to start spreading messages online in an effort to discredit APC and the process.[46]

It was widely accepted that, given the lack of barriers to entry, spies, or "moles" were likely to sign up to WhatsApp groups on both sides. Both admitted to deploying moles into groups run by the other in the hope of gaining advanced knowledge of any information, and for the most part little was done to prevent this practice given that the vast majority of these groups "[were] not discussing strategy".[47] Those centralised groups which were used to discuss strategy or policy were managed through a different system, in which the moderator knew group members – though this did not completely resolve the problem.

Although these structures, in theory, allowed for a more coordinated online campaign and created informal mechanisms for monitoring, the ability to control information online remained limited. One advantage of this situation for the candidates was that it enabled them to distance themselves from controversial remarks while doing very little to prevent their spread.

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41 Interview with Atikulated Youth Force representative, Abuja, February 2019.
42 Interview with Atikulated Youth Force representative, Kano, February 2019.
43 Interview with Atikulated Youth Force representative, Kano, February 2019.
44 Interview with Atikulated Youth Force representative, Abuja, February 2019.
45 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
46 Interview with Atikulated Youth Force representative, Kano, February 2019.
47 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Abuja, April 2019.

At the national level, both sides strenuously denied using WhatsApp to create and spread "fake news", insisting that they only shared information about their own candidate's platform, how to register and vote and to "fact-check" opponents claims. One AYF member claimed that "AYF is not in the position of producing propaganda."[48] But neither did anything to respond to disinformation that offered a political advantage and it was noted that "political groups [set up by campaign organisations] tend to be very indisciplined; people share all kinds of things."[49]

State-level coordination: At the state level similar, though less well-structured and monitored, group structures were in place to support the bids of gubernatorial candidates. In Oyo, candidates used known social media influencers and party supporters to establish focal points in all 33 LGAs, with the idea that these individuals could support the cascading down of information in ways that favoured the candidate.

This process was often rather ad hoc, however, with recruitment relying on co-opting pre-existing personal networks rather than any recruitment drive, and one individual we interviewed in Oyo admitted to "adding people to groups without their consent".[50]

Although he was keen to stress that they quickly seek to establish the rationale and topic of conversation for the group in a bid to keep newly added members, many focus group respondents noted that they had been added to political WhatsApp groups of various types against their will.

In Kano, the structure of the WhatsApp campaign was more evident but still not well defined. Informal networks of social media influencers or entrepreneurs with deliberately loose links to a candidate or party arguably played a more important role than official party leaders and groups.

One member of several APC supporting WhatsApp groups told us that "people are rewarded for their efforts.

They will buy smartphones for members [the respondent received 30,000[51] Naira (N) in lieu of a smartphone] and focal persons received up to N5,000 a month for mobile data."[52] Their "efforts" were to make the party or candidate look good and his opponents look bad. Self-styled "propaganda secretaries" existed in some of the groups, he noted, whose roles were primarily "to create false or doctored information".[53]

In this way the two major candidates in Kano – and the two parties they allied with – were involved in developing the framework for how WhatsApp was to be used, but, intentionally, did so with a degree of distance from the content that was shared. Political parties and candidates "allow their social media supporters to do their dirty work ... they tried to keep their distance, though with small finance they are involved and by saying nothing they give their endorsement to supporters."[54]

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48 Interview with Atiku Youth Force representative, Kano, February 2019.
49 Interview with government official, Abuja, February 2019.
50 Interview with political communication strategist, Oyo, April 2019.
51 USD 1 = N360
52 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
53 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
54 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.

Creating political space? In Elnathan John's recently released satirical book, Becoming Nigerian: A Guide, the author cites a quote about how to use social media if you are a politician. "All you need are motivated guys that have internet connection and hope that when their oga's hustle is blessed it will reach them. It is these ones who will identify anything bad said about you and attack appropriately."[55]

As with all good satire, there is a lot of truth in this statement. As one active APC supporter in Kano told us told us, "The party is not in control of what is shared or even created in these groups – this is up to the creativity of the individual. And to a large extent the party [APC] doesn't care where the content comes from or whether it is true but that it helps get them ahead of the PDP is all that matters."[56] Analysts agreed but noted how, "It is very hard to prove that they [party officials] actually sat down [and ordered the creation of fake news]. They [young supporters] will create something on social media, share what they have done and then say [to politicians], 'Here is what I did for you, boss.'"[57]

These social media entrepreneurs are not just young men – they are almost exclusively men – with limited skills looking for a short-term opportunity. Graduates with a strong understanding of how social media platforms operate are also used, as they often bring with them a sizeable online presence: "These are people who are conversant and really understand how social media works."[58] One of the social media entrepreneurs interviewed for this research in Kano had over 85,000 Facebook followers and almost 25,000 Twitter followers. Claiming to be a member of more than 600 WhatsApp groups, he boasted that his name was known by every LGA head in northern Nigeria. While he may have been exaggerating for effect, one respondent in Abuja noted: "Some of these young guys on social media are so influential that the governor will know their name."[59]Similarly, one influencer we met in Kano had met both presidential candidates during the course of the 2019 campaign as each side tried to buy his loyalty.

Even for those with limited access, ***social media offered the chance to showcase loyalty that might be rewarded, creating a new path to political influence for Nigerian youth.*** A report produced by the Centre for Information Technology and Development in Kano,[60] shows that many state governors have up to 200 Facebook pages; the majority created by individuals with no affiliation to the governor directly but who hope to be rewarded for their public support for him.

Similar approaches were used on WhatsApp with individuals seeking to show their value to a particular party or candidate by doing everything they could – including creating and sharing false information – to enhance their chances of victory. Self-reporting propaganda – taking screenshots, of WhatsApp stories and sharing it with others – was one approach used by social media influencers to get themselves noticed.

55 John, E. 2019. "Becoming Nigerian: A Guide". Cassava Republic Press.
56 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
57 Interview with media representative, Abuja, February 2019.
58 Interview with Buhari New Media Centre representative, Oyo, April 2019.
59 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019
60 Yau, Y Z. 2019. "Politicians, Fake Facebook profiles and the possibility of being unwitting hate speech purveyors". Centre for Information Technology and Development.

Another route cited by one social media influencer was to target the children of aspiring political candidates in the hope that they would come across his "creations" online and inform their father. "Only now are politicians coming around to the importance of using social media as part of the campaign helped by their children,"[61] he said.

Attempting to gain "access" was cited by many interviewees as a key reason for joining a political campaign. "Access to power [or a big man] is one thing many youth in Nigeria aspire too, more than a job or skills training and WhatsApp is enhancing their chances of doing this,"[62] observed one civil society representative.

Moreover, as one social media entrepreneur in Kano noted, "There are definitely many people working for free who hope/expect that when/if the candidate is elected they would either be offered a job in the administration, scholarships to study abroad or small contracts of N10-20 million (US $28-56,000) to do work for the state government on an ad-hoc basis."[63] Becoming one of the social media assistants to a governor is perhaps the most sought after outcome for those at the top of the pyramid of influencers with the greatest degree of political access. Youth representation in politics has historically been very low, as was recognized by the signing of the Not Too Young To Run Bill in 2018.[64]

But while online campaigns on platforms like WhatsApp are opening up a space for greater youth engagement in politics, they are also replicating and reinforcing the big man, clientelistic networks that currently dominate; changing yet at the same time reproducing power relations.

> ## Life as social media entrepreneur
>
> *A social media commentator and strategist, Abdul65 was initially brought on board by the BMC to support Buhari's re-election bid in Kano. With a significant online following across key social media platforms and a track-record of political commentary on development and poverty issues in the state since 2003, he was seen as a key influencer to a Hausa audience; his chosen language of communication. Abdul denies spreading fake news, and argues his main goal is "to stand up for development in northern Nigeria".*
>
> *Paid a stipend of N30,000 a month, Abdul briefly switched sides during the campaign – after rumours that he felt undervalued by the APC, Atiku's team offered him a gift to join them. A month or so later, he returned to the APC, who provided him with an upgraded gift and a lump sum of cash. Abdul intends to use some of this money to establish a social media political consulting firm in Kano in order to formalise contracts for what have, up till now, been informal arrangements.*
>
> *For Abdul, and others like him, the financial rewards are seen as fair compensation for the increasingly important work they do to support candidates online. "WhatsApp is a very powerful tool" and politicians are gradually realising this, he told us. "Most of the politicians in northern Nigeria have their eyes on social media (Hausa language in particular) even if they are not saying anything online".[66]*

61 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
62 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
63 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
64 The Bill reduced the age limit required to stand for president from 40 to 35 and for governor from 35 to 30. For more see Asiedu, K. 2018. "Nigeria's president, 75, has reduced the minimum age for presidential aspirants to 35", Quartz Africa. Available at https://qz.com/africa/1292513/nigerias-president-75-is-about-to-reduce-the-minimum-age-for-presidential-aspirants-to-35/.
65 Not his real name
66 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.

3.2 Curated Content

Our research indicates that the format, style, source and content of a piece of information shared or received on WhatsApp all have a critical impact on how far they reach, and how far they are believed. Whilst there are exceptions – such as the Buhari clone rumour [see box] – our research suggests that national rumours often struggled to penetrate even urban centres in Oyo and Kano.

Making sense of the Buhari clone rumour

The most well known, and arguably the most pervasive rumour that continued to circulate during the run-up to Nigeria's 2019 election centred on the health of President Muhammdu Buhari as he prepared to run for a second term. The president spent over six months of his first term in office seeking care in London for an undisclosed ailment. In the absence of official statement, rumours began to swirl on social media, the most popular being that during his time abroad Buhari has died and been cloned and that the man pretending to be the president was actually "Jubril from Sudan". Despite the implausibility of this rumour it continued to circulate and be believed for three main reasons.

First, influential pastors and opponent political figures, whose views shape the opinions of many others, suggested that it might be true.[67] Second, Nigerians only had to cast their minds back to 2010 to remember a time when they were told that an ailing president was going to make a full recovery from medical treatment, only for him to never be seen in public again. Finally, for many Nigerians, the idea that you go to a medical facility and get better does not resonate with their own lived experience. Late diagnoses combined with poorly equipped facilities often mean that seriously ill, particularly elderly people, do not recover. This, allied with a healthy distrust of government as a conveyor of truth, explains why some people, even as they went to vote in February 2019, did so not fully convinced that one of the two main presidential aspirants was not in fact a clone.

The importance of local context: During our survey, two prominent, national stories – fact-checked as false by CDD – were shared with respondents in Kano and Oyo, who were asked if they had seen the information and where they had come across it.

The rumours were 1) that Atiku was planning to hand over land and oil to Boko Haram in exchange for a ceasefire and 2) that the Nigerian government was setting up an agency to monitor churches in the country. While 11% of people said that they had seen the first story, 17% had seen the second. In Kano there was an even split between the two stories, but in Oyo twice as many people had seen the message about churches as the Atiku rumour. In both cases, social media was the primary source of information for 70% of survey respondents.

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67 Akinwotu, E. 2019. "Whose Truth? Disinformation and misinformation online in Nigeria". West Africa Insight, Vol 7 No 1. Available at https://cddelibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Keeping-Track-in-2019-_Vol-7_No-1_230119.pdf.

After the gubernatorial elections had been completed, a smaller sample of respondents were asked to share if, and where, they had seen a false rumour that either the APC candidate in Oyo, or the PDP candidate in Kano had – contrary to the actual result – won the race. Here there was a significant divergence between the two states. In Kano 91% of respondents had seen this inaccurate claim, with 75% having come across it first on social media (Facebook, Instagram or Twitter) and 84% having seen it circulating on WhatsApp, even if it was not their primary source for the news. In Oyo, just 8% of respondents had seen a comparable rumour.

This demonstrates that local context and citizen experience are key factors in understanding the ways in which mis-and disinformation spread on WhatsApp. In Kano, where the PDP candidate held a slender advantage before INEC called for supplementary elections, the rumour was both likely to have been pushed by party supporters keen to pressure INEC to declare in their favour, and more likely to be believed. As one Oyo social media strategist told us, "Specifics are important ... at the local level we would visit the community and survey them and then craft a particular message."[68] A similar sentiment was shared by a social media influencer in Kano who noted that "at the national level it is more complicated as there is no one single message that will resonate across the country – what works in south-south may not penetrate at all in north-west. But at the state level it is easier to find messages that resonate with broad vote base across the entire state."[69]

He gave an example of how, in an effort to impress the party, he sought to boost the standing of the PDP candidate in Kano by creating a narrative that promoted Yusuf as an educationalist and Ganduje as a violent thug. To cultivate this image he used pictures of Ganduje's rallies where people with weapons were very prominent in the crowd and contrast them of pictures taken at Yusuf's campaign rallies where attendees were receiving scholarships and bursaries. Even though he admits that "people would turn up to Yusuf's rallies with weapons," he explained how he "would strategically take pictures so that these people were at the back and therefore not visible."[70] These approaches were not limited to supporters of opposition candidates but happened across the political divide in an effort to get, or stay, ahead.

As one focus group discussant noted in Kano, "The best [most effective] fake news relies on exploiting people's pre-existing biases."[71]

Giving an example of unfounded rumours that he had heard that the deputy police commissioner and resident electoral commissioner in Kano had taken big bribes to rig the governorship election, he noted that whilst it "might not be true, in the context of Ganduje's corruption scandal, people are not inclined to dismiss it out of hand."[72]

Others noted the effectiveness of tapping into pre-existing beliefs. A rumour, quoting a non-existent gay rights group in Nigeria, proved particularly difficult to disprove in conservative Kano. As one influencer told us, "Even though we spent lots of time debunking this online I still met voters queuing to vote in Kano on election day who said they would not vote for Atiku because of his stance on gay rights."[73]

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68 Interview with social media campaign strategist, Oyo, April 2019.
69 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
70 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
71 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
72 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
73 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019

In addition to being encrypted, and so providing users with greater insulation from detection and prosecution, WhatsApp appears to play a particularly significant role in the spread of such stories because they are more likely to be believed if they come from someone the recipient knows on a personal level. Our survey data shows that across the two states the two most common types of people that respondents would share WhatsApp messages with were friends (71%) and family (44%). Unlike Facebook or other social media platforms, WhatsApp's "intimacy factor" makes it "profoundly powerful, for good and bad."[74]

The role of networks, and trusted sources: Despite the introduction by WhatsApp of a label on messages showing if a message has been forwarded or not, several people we spoke to highlighted the importance of **who the immediate sharer of the information is, even if they were not the originator, as being a decisive factor in whether they believe the content.** "Once you get the info in a certain group you believe it [all content] is true … when I receive a message in my church group I believe it to be true, even though in some instances it has later been proven not too have been."[75] Furthermore, in the view of an academic studying the use of WhatsApp among women in Kano, "Unless someone else that they trust more comes with a different truth, they won't stop believing the original message [regardless of its content]."[76] This poses a challenge to fact-checking initiatives looking to set the record straight on false accusations and re-emphasises the importance of local context, and structures, when seeking to understand information flows on WhatsApp.

The type and format of the content being shared on platforms like WhatsApp is also important. **Our survey shows a significant difference in the use of language on WhatsApp between Kano and Oyo.** 96% of respondents in Oyo said that the most frequently used language across groups they were in was English. In Kano, although English was still the most commonly used (62%), 36% of respondents said they typically use Hausa and a majority of the social media influencers in Kano we spoke to for this research operated primarily in Hausa. That is not to say that many respondents were not in groups that combined Pidgin, Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, but that these were used less often, which perhaps reflects the relatively high level of education of our survey respondents.[77] In the view of one interviewee in Kano, "When people [who speak Hausa] see a message in Hausa they are even more likely to believe it than when they see it in English."[78]

Images vs text: Images were also viewed by many of our respondents as constituting an extremely effective way of sharing information – of all kinds – across WhatsApp groups. "Pictures are so important … we hardly write text messages to be honest,"[79] one social media influencer in Kano told us. This view was shared by a compatriot in the state who noted, "We look at how people receive and consume messages on WhatsApp and we tailor all our materials to that … people relate to colourful pictures, a lot of them are not [able to] read long materials … so we 'fact-check' statements of our opponents and put them on colourful posters saying this and it is not true."[80]

Even though text overwhelmingly remains the primary form of content respondents to our survey received, the assumption we heard in many of the interviews was that pictures were the most effective tool for conveying a message. One social media influencer in Kano told us how he used pictures of a mosque in Kebbi state that bore Atiku's name to claim that it had been built by the

74 Interview with security analyst, Abuja, February 2019.
75 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
76 Interview with university academic, Abuja, February 2019.
77 83% of respondents held at least an undergraduate degree.
78 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
79 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
80 Interview with social media influencer, Abuja, February 2019.

presidential aspirant – it had not and he knew this – in an effort to boost his credentials among Muslim voters and to attack Buhari for not having showed enough commitment to Muslims. As he noted, "This was my creation and idea, I didn't need party support or approval to do it, but once it was going viral I would be sure to mention to PDP members I had created it."[81]

One of the important effects of manipulating real images is that those doing a reverse Google Image search can find the picture and so may assume that it is genuine. The incredulous therefore need to dig further to uncover the truth.

This is compounded by the fact that knowing the original source of a WhatsApp message is very difficult. "On WhatsApp it is hard for people to trace who you are so I can be more creative with the messages,"[82] noted a respondent in Kano, who was more cautious about sharing such content on public platforms like Facebook, given that some opposition figures on social media have been arrested for sharing disinformation. By contrast, WhatApp's small and closed groups mean that by the time content "reaches the first waves of recipients it comes forwarded and hence [is] impossible to trace".[83]

It is therefore easy to see why WhatsApp is favored by less scrupulous social media influencers. Videos are also used[84] but do not have as wide a reach as they are more data heavy. Though they are becoming more popular. In Kano, in an effort to boost the popularity of Abba Yusuf songs were commissioned to portray the candidate in a positive light. One such song, 'Abba Gida Gida' (there is a father in each house), was shared widely on WhatsApp and became popular not just in Kano, but among Hausa speakers across Nigeria.

It spawned the Abba Gida Gida challenge, where women took videos of themselves dancing to the song, before uploading it their WhatsApp statuses, and other social media platforms, and encouraging others to follow suit. WhatsApp stories, which utilise captioned pictures and videos, are a growing feature of urban engagement. Voice messaging is also very important as it helps parties to reach out to less literate voters in a language they are familiar conversing in. In 2019, there were a number of voice only groups; the same phenomena has been observed in other parts of West Africa.[85]

Looking to the future, respondents noted the potential, as smartphone coverage penetrates further into rural areas, for audio and video messages on WhatsApp to take on some of the roles currently held by radio and TV. Talking about how short video and audio jingles could be made for WhatsApp, one respondent in Oyo noted that "jingles are not just on TV anymore. Circulation [on WhatsApp] is easy and then it's permanent ... seeing a jingle on TV it is there and then it goes, whereas on WhatsApp you can re-listen or watch whenever you want."[86]

Target audiences: *In addition to format, a number of respondents emphasised the importance of targeting the right demographic group.* In Kano, one social media influencer, explained why they believed targeting younger voters to be the most effective strategy on WhatsApp. "Old people still rely a lot on the radio for their information. We feel like younger voters are more likely to change their mind and can actually help to change the minds of parents who

81 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
82 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
83 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
84 Hassan, I. 2019. "How fake news spreads, sowing distrust ahead of Nigeria's elections", African Arguments. Available at
https://africanarguments.org/2019/01/31/nigeria-fake-news-2019-election/.
85 Dwyer, M. Molony, T & Hitchen, J. 2019. "Between Excitement and Scepticism: The Role of WhatsApp in Sierra Leone's 2018 Elections" in Dwyer, M & Molony T. eds, "Social Media and Politics in Africa". Zed Books.
86 Interview with political strategist, Oyo, April 2019.

sometimes look to their better educated children for advice. They are also more likely to share content among like-minded peers."[87]

Others took a different view, citing their parents and grandparents as the biggest sharers of misinformation in Nigeria due to their lack of digital literacy, reliance on trusted social networks (which WhatsApp replicates online) and belief in the scientific neutrality of technology. One focus group discussant in Oyo gave an example of his father receiving a message about a celestial event meaning that phones needed to be turned off before midnight for protection and how he had shared this with him in order to tell him to do so. In his view "older people tend to share when they feel worried about something happening to someone".[88]

While the assumption among Nigerians we spoke to is that a more tech-savvy youth is less likely to share false information on WhatsApp than older generations, there is no conclusive evidence, other than anecdotal comments, to confirm this.

One thing that is clear is that the volume of content so high that many people are not able to read or engage with the vast majority of what they receive. Group recipients can receive hundreds, even thousands of messages a day per group – in our survey, 10% of survey respondents explained that they were in more than 20 groups.
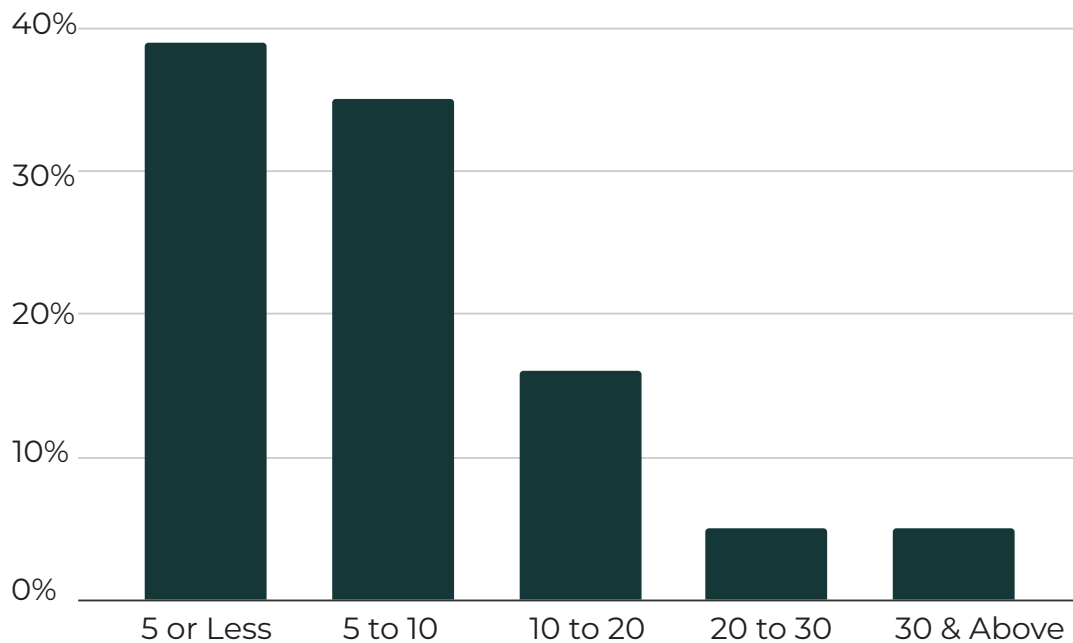
Number of WhatsApp groups respondents were members of

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87 Interview with social media influencer, Kano, April 2019.
88 Focus group discussion, University of Ibadan, Oyo, April 2019.

How much content people engaged with also depends on how much time they want to spend on WhatsApp: 65% of users reported checking their messages hourly, or every few hours. But even these respondents were not able to look at, and interrogate, all of the message they received, which meant that in some cases "there is a lack of serious introspection when it comes to sharing messages online, people want to be the first to share the news and in their quest to do so they don't always think critically."[89]

Impact on voting? *Another unanswered question is how much impact WhatsApp has in actually shaping or changing people's minds when it comes to voting.* This is a complicated thing to measure, not least because people do not always want to say how they voted, but is an area that would benefit from more research. One point that was mentioned several times in interviews was the idea that the contest on WhatsApp was more about discrediting the opponent, than actively securing new voters. This point was summarised best by a female participant of a focus group discussion in Kano:

> *"The strategy is not to win voters over by selling them what you will do or promoting the policies you want to introduce, but to discredit the other party so much that voters will be forced over to your side."*[90]

This view was shared by a prominent civil society member in Abuja who noted, "I have never been part of a political WhatsApp group where parties are using it to promote their own manifesto promises ... attacking opponents is the norm."[91] In Kano, WhatsApp was used – particularly on voting days – to spread information that violence was taking place around polling stations in opposition strongholds. During the supplementary election on 23 March many videos of violence were shared, some of which were true, but many of which could not be verified and gave a skewed impression of just how severe the scale was in certain areas.[92] In some cases, sharing false information about violence seems to be designed to suppress turnout in a rival's home areas. By the time such rumours are countered, they have often had a sizeable impact by making voters too fearful to go to vote.

The increasing prominence attached to WhatsApp by candidates' supporters and strategists is an indication that they believe it has an impact, even if this is hard to quantify. As one official explained, "WhatsApp is fairly new in public consciousness but a lot of things we do now have to be targeted at WhatsApp ... though you cannot measure the impact compared to Facebook or Twitter ... other than if I send a video out and by the evening 20 people have sent it back to me. It is basically just gambling."[93] But in Nigeria's win-at-all-costs political system, there are lots of people willing to gamble.

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89 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
90 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
91 Interview with civil society representative, Abuja, February 2019.
92 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
93 Interview with government official. Abuja, February 2019.

3.3 Navigating between online and offline spaces: Beyond the "digital revolution

"WhatsApp," as one digital rights advocate in Abuja observed, "is an amplification of what already exists – people gathering at newspaper stands, in the hairdressing salon, the barber salon – people bring information from nowhere and then it spreads to motor parks and so on ... what makes WhatsApp significant is that it is not complex; with Twitter and Facebook you need to set up a profile but with WhatsApp you just need a phone number."[94]

The technology has simply provided a new and faster platform for conspiracy theories to flourish, but the fertile ground already existed. As one respondent noted, the "reach and speed are new, but rumours themselves are old".[95]

The interaction between information shared on WhatsApp and the offline context in which senders of that information exists is a crucial part of the digital eco-system, and challenges claims that the platform has revolutionised political campaigning. Rumours can start on WhatsApp, spread offline, and then even come back online on different social media platforms, expanding the audience beyond simply the number of users with access to WhatsApp directly, or even indirectly.[96]

Messages also move between social media platforms, with WhatsApp messages posted to Twitter and Facebook. Many influencers believe that it is when individuals see messages on a variety of platforms that they start to believe them. Content shared on WhatsApp, be it false or accurate, can shape offline views by "shaping people's conversations with friends"[97] and by becoming discussion points of radio talk shows. As WhatsApp becomes an increasingly important source of news, the significance of political rumours is only likely to increase. *Here the power of community leaders, religious preachers and even family heads to stop the spreading of false information is significant.*

Take the example of Bishop David Oyedepo, the founder of Faith Tabernacle in Ogun state, one of the largest and most influential pentecostal megachurches in the country. Oyedepo told his congregation in December 2018 that some of the evidence he had seen circulating claiming that Buhari was a clone was, in fact, convincing – despite the fact that the newspaper article he cited was satire.[98]

Whilst in this instance the information was taken from a traditional media source, several people interviewed for this research had encountered pastors using information shared on WhatsApp in their sermons; potentially spreading it among thousands of congregation members, and subsequently their networks, who are not necessarily themselves online. Our research suggests that if a congregation member tells a friend that the information is from their pastor, someone they view as a trusted source, it is more likely to be seen to be believable, and hence to spread yet further.[99]

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94 Interview with digital rights advocate, Abuja, February 2019.
95 Interview with security analyst, Abuja, February 2019.
96 Hitchen, J. 2018. "The WhatsApp rumours that infused Sierra Leone's tight election", African Arguments. Available at https://africanarguments.org/2018/04/10/the-whatsapp-rumours-infused-sierra-leone-tight-election-social-media/.
97 Interview with government official, Abuja, February 2019.
98 Akinwotu, E. 2019. "Whose Truth? Disinformation and misinformation online in Nigeria". West Africa Insight, Vol 7 No 1. Available at https://cddelibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Keeping-Track-in-2019-_Vol-7_No-1_230119.pdf.
99 Interview with digital rights advocate, Abuja, February 2019.

In the view of a political strategist from Oyo, "WhatsApp is still mostly used by the urban, educated class – the grassroots don't have the connection directly." However, rural dwellers may rely on, and trust, information they get from relatives [who use] WhatsApp. As such his candidate had sought to encourage supporters with connections to rural leaders to "reach out ... to disseminate to less educated relatives."[100]

All politics is local: WhatsApp does not supersede the importance of a strong grassroots campaign according to many of the individuals we spoke with. "It is only a lazy politician who believes that technology can do everything ... we still need to do more door-to-door,"[101] noted one party strategist. This view was echoed by another respondent – a State House of Assembly member – who argued that it should be seen as an added advantage: "If you just rely on WhatsApp you might have problems."[102]

According to one experienced political strategist who worked on a 2019 gubernatorial campaign in Oyo state:

> *"You cannot fight the battle only on social media ... you would never win an election that way. You have to run a manual election process, otherwise people will tell you you are not visible enough and complain that we do not see you."[103]*

WhatsApp has not replaced the need for physical ground campaigns. A candidate who unsuccessfully contested in the primaries for the House of Representatives in Oyo, reiterated from his experience that "even if they like you [as a candidate] they will take offence if they don't see you."[104] But what the network of WhatsApp groups does provide is a cheaper and faster way of reaching out to voters more consistently and more often during campaigns; to be more responsive and interactive with prospective voters; and, a tool to discredit and attack potential rivals.

Groups typically replicate offline structures of networks and communities. Politics is a topic for discussion, particularly during elections, across all groups but our survey suggests that a number of offline structures of social organisation are replicated online. In Oyo, the four most common types of groups respondents were characterised as religious (36%), academic (29%),[105] political (27%) and those representing alumni networks (25%). In Kano the notable difference was the importance of family (41%) and friendship (38%) groups, which were followed in importance by political groups (28%) and alumni networks (22%). What this data illustrates is that WhatsApp is not necessarily creating new forms of social structures, but rather building on, and altering, existing ones by bringing them into a digital realm and allowing information to spread faster.

100 Interview with former special advisor to governor. Oyo, April 2019.
101 Interview with political communication strategist, Oyo, April 2019.
102 Interview with a member of the state house of assembly, Oyo, April 2019.
103 Interview with political aspirant. Oyo, April 2019.
104 Interview with a member of the state house of assembly, Oyo, April 2019.
105 A reflection on the fact that many of the respondents surveyed were students.

3.4 Protecting digital space

Despite the fact that WhatsApp can be used for nefarious purposes, this research underscores that it has many positive uses too. ***Finding ways of protecting and enhancing these whilst reducing the negative aspects of the platform is the balancing act required to protect this growing digital space.***

Access to information: WhatsApp provides Nigerians with access to a vast array of information, in an easy-to-navigate application at a very low cost. According to one focus group respondent in Kano, WhatsApp is so cheap – with all the add-ons and bonuses you can get from Nigerian airtime providers – it is possible to make N100 (US $0.36) worth of data last a month if you are very cautious with how you use it.[106] That is on the extreme level but shows how accessible the platform can be. Others spoke about "managing N999 (US $3.60) [which gets you 1.5GB of data] for three weeks."[107]

All had a detailed knowledge of how to "manage" their data – Airtel has reduced data tariffs between 1am-7am for example and MTN was seen as very expensive with "airtime flying into the air"[108] – and were very savvy in their use of it. Increasingly, it is cheaper to make calls on WhatsApp with data than to load credit and call on mobile phones. With smartphones available for less than US $50, getting online in Nigeria has never been more affordable

> ### Poor Protection
>
> *A lack of data protection is a concern for a number of African countries[109] and Nigeria is no different. When you register your sim card in Nigeria you have to provide details such as state of origin, LGA, ethnicity and date of birth. But as one respondent noted, "Our data management in Nigeria is very poor, not centralised and weak legislation is not implemented ... [there is] a lot of personal data flying around."[110] Companies are already selling users' telephone numbers in Nigeria, raising concerns that future polls may see the sort of thing that has happened in Brazil and India, where parties were able to purchase the numbers of hundreds of thousands of people. A Digital Rights Bill, which has the support of leading digital rights groups in Nigeria, was presented to, and rejected by, the executive in March 2019.*

Accountability and Transparency: With regard to elections and governance, WhatsApp is being used to increase accountability, connect broad-based coalitions, produce impartial information and to monitor election processes in real-time. For one political advisor interviewed in Oyo, "The advantages of WhatsApp are more than the disadvantages.

The only disadvantage is getting fake news, but you can use WhatsApp to convert those [receiving/persuaded by] fake news."[111] That is to say, the real-time nature of the information that allows "fake news"-style rumours to become viral can also be to counter false information. The

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106 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
107 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
108 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
109 Okolloh, O & Wekwete, S. 2019. "As the continent digitizes rapidly, Africans need a bill of data rights to protect them online". Quartz Africa. Available at https://qz.com/africa/1641394/africans-need-a-bill-of-data-rights-for-protection-in-digital-age/. .
110 Interview with legal professional, Abuja, February 2019.
111 Interview with former special advisor to governor. Oyo, April 2019

speed with which information can be shared therefore aids observers and voters as well as candidates. As one Kano focus group respondent noted, "Before, people in Kano would walk around with radios in hand, now they have their phones and during elections they can get information directly from people who are at a certain location using WhatsApp networks."[112]

On election day itself the platform's ability to capture real-time information has also proved useful to a number of groups, and is used by INEC, political parties and civil society-led election observers to monitor the process. Given the security of the network, and the relatively low data costs, it can be used to coordinate election monitoring plans, share pictures of how the process is unfolding and circulate verified results from the polling unit level. Because INEC does not publish a full list of polling station results, capturing data at this level on WhatsApp provides an important check against electoral manipulation. Monitors can also use WhatsApp to counter false rumours about election violence or malpractice happening in a particular area if they are able to share and triangulate their own pictures and information from the scene.

Social media, including WhatsApp, is also playing a role in strengthening accountability between elected politicians and voters, and contributing to increased awareness among groups that have traditionally been harder to reach. Disgruntled citizens can use WhatsApp to voice discontent, send messages to politicians via their networks, and contact radio news shows[113].

They can also use WhatsApp to discuss their concerns. "WhatsApp groups can be a forum for better quality debate and discussion where like-minded people gather to discuss challenges in society," noted one Abuja-based political commentator who detailed several political campaigns that had started in earnest on the platform. Nonetheless he noted that, at least for now, "these groups are few and far between".[114] In Kano, a focus group participant, explained the purpose of a group she, along with other professionals, was a part of that essentially formed a vetting committee for prospective local candidates.[115]

In fact, in Kano, where the engagement of some women in politics is restricted by cultural norms, ***WhatsApp can offer women an opportunity to become more engaged and better informed.*** This is both because it offers greater privacy and because it can be used from the safety of your own home. "WhatsApp is a gender neutral platform (no profile is needed) and I think this is allowing women the chance to participate more in politics in more conservative areas like Kano,"[116] noted one researcher. This view was supported by several women who participated in our focus group discussion in the state. Many noted that they actually learned who the candidates were from WhatsApp and the pictures helped them put a face to a name. They could then use the way that candidates were talked about to gain a stronger sense of how respected, credible or trustworthy he/she was.[117] As one individual noted, "Women rely more on WhatsApp than men in places like Kano where in conservative households they don't have the opportunity to move around and see things with their own eyes, but their phone (with pictures and videos) can allow them to do that."[118]

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112 Focus group discussion, Mambayya House, Kano, April 2019.
113 Hitchen, J. 2018. "The WhatsApp rumours that infused Sierra Leone's tight election", African Arguments. Available at https://africanarguments.org/2018/04/10/the-whatsapp-rumours-infused-sierra-leone-tight-election-social-media/.
114 Interview with political commentator, Abuja, April 2019.
115 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
116 Interview with university academic, Abuja, February 2019.
117 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
118 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Striking a balance

In Nigeria, WhatsApp is both a major conduit for the spread of disinformation and misinformation and yet a key tool for tackling "fake news". It also plays a role in strengthening accountability and offers a new pathway through which the youth and women can increase their participation in politics. The dilemma to be grappled with is therefore how to strengthen WhatsApp's contribution to democracy while reducing its negative impact. So, what can be done?

Removing encryption or allowing governments to censor WhatsApp – or social media in general – is not the best way to move forward. As one political commentator noted, "You cannot control social media, that is the wrong approach, even if we had the technical ability to do it, which I doubt, it is not the way forward."[119] Especially in a country like Nigeria with a history of authoritarian rule and a government with questionable commitment to key democratic norms, strengthening government control is likely to facilitate the erosion of civil liberties in the future. Moreover, heavy handed efforts to manage WhatsApp would risk undermining its potential to strengthen accountability in evolving democracies.

As a space for (in)formal political organisation, debate and discussion; for sharing audio, visual and text-based content to a diverse an ever-increasing audience; and for connecting communities online and for providing cheap and simple access to communication, WhatsApp has the potential to support efforts aimed at generating a more informed electorate and a more accountable political system.

We therefore need to look for other ways to harness WhatsApp's democratic potential while reducing the damage done by disinformation. While political rumours and misinformation will always be part and parcel of election campaigns, digital literacy campaigns can ensure that users will be better equipped to interrogate and question the authenticity of messages they receive.

One focus group participant in Kano, for example, was of the view that "as people become more exposed to platforms like WhatsApp they are starting to see that a lot of the information shared on it turns out not to be true, even if they initially believe it, and so over time people will become more skeptical of the content they receive."[120] Our survey data shows that across respondents in Kano and Oyo there is normative agreement that sharing "fake news" is never justified – 83% of people surveyed agreed with that statement – but still misinformation and disinformation spread.

This suggests that disinformation may be spread by a relatively small number of users, and that for many Nigerians the challenge is to effectively interrogate information they receive on WhatsApp.

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118 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.
119 Interview with political commentator, Abuja, April 2019.
120 Focus group discussion, Bayero University, Kano, April 2019.

Is "fake news" justified?
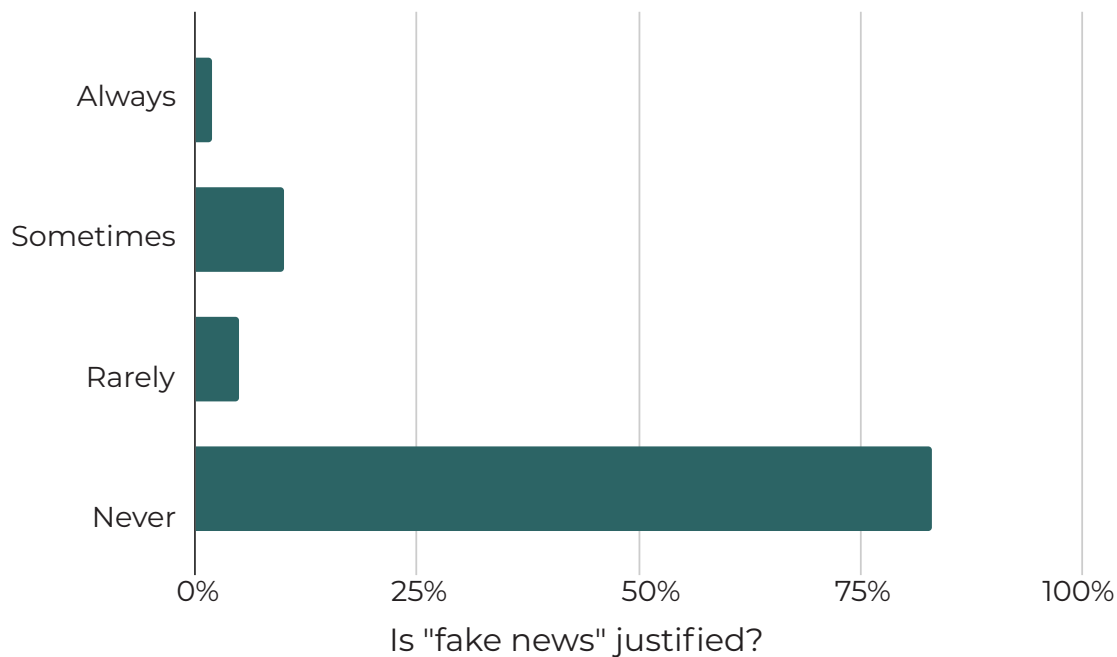
WhatsApp group administrators have an important role to play in this process.[121] In non-political groups, they are already doing this. For example, "In professional groups [those organised around work] admins are much more diligent in keeping the quality of information higher...sometimes it's the group admin, other times it is a sort of group-wide admin," noted one analyst.[122]

Others mentioned that "some WhatsApp groups – those with more academic members – require members to verify posts,"[123] with Naija News and Sahara Reporters, as well as national daily newspapers, CNN and Twitter, cited as credible sources of evidence. In a number of cases, we found that groups had codified rules that are regularly shared, prohibiting practices such as abusive language and sharing "fake news". Indeed, many non-political groups actually ban members from sharing political news and exclude those who break these rules. It was also noted, though, that in some social groups that are less well policed, oversight is weak, enabling messages to be shared with little scrutiny. This is a significant cause for concern given that our survey found that, especially in Kano, these were the most popular types of group to be a part of.

The problem is of course particularly acute when it comes to the political groups set up by candidates and activists, where the idea is to promote a certain point of view and there is much less concern about information it is verifiable.

121 Warungu, J. 2018. "Letter from Africa: Inside the gated communities of WhatsApp". BBC News. Available at
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42653088.
122 Interview with security analyst, Abuja, February 2019.
123 Focus group discussion, Dare to Dream Christian Centre, Ibadan, Oyo, April 2019.

4.2 Moving Foward

The findings of this research from Kano and Oyo offer new insights that can drive more nuanced interaction with WhatsApp by policymakers, civil society and citizens more broadly. These may be applicable to Nigeria as a whole – and even extend to neighbouring countries in the sub-region – but before Kano or Oyo's experience is used to inform policymaking elsewhere, further research to better understand local dynamics in a particularly setting is encouraged. That is just one recommendation this research study proposes. It argues that there are both short-term and long-term approaches that can support a shift in the balance of WhatsApp use; to emphasise its positive functions and minimise the negative uses.

Short term targets

1. **Make it easier to leave groups and report disinformation**. WhatsApp has not created "fake news" in Nigeria but it has provided a new vehicle for the spread of it. In our discussions, respondents noted that one of the problems was that people could add them to groups without asking permission. This is something that WhatsApp is seeking to address by trialing an update that would allow users to change their privacy permissions to limit unsolicited additions.[124]

This is a good start, but it has yet to be rolled out worldwide. A second problem is that many Nigerian users want to be able to leave a group without all other members receiving a notification, so that they feel less pressure to remain in groups that are sharing information they do not wish to receive, but at present this option is not available. The inclusion of a simpler, visible "report content" mechanism would also encourage individuals who are concerned about a message that they have seen to communicate their worries. At present, only user accounts themselves can be reported.[125]

2▪ **Targeted digital literacy training on responsible use of WhatsApp.** Given the importance attached to receiving information from a trusted source, targeting respected individuals – religious preachers and community leaders – improving their capacity and willingness to screen out "fake news" would be an extremely valuable step. Training of this kind could also encourage social influencers not only to cease sharing unverified rumours but also to persuade their followers to do likewise.

3. **Reinforce the ability of WhatsApp group administrators to set standards.** Offering interactive training in which group administrators can agree on acceptable standards for group discussions and the sharing of information can improve the quality of online debate. In groups created to serve a political purpose this will be difficult but in groups where politics is one part of the discussions, these rules, if enforced, can support the development of critical thinking and a normative shift in what online engagement looks like. Some of the most effective groups have clearly defined rules that are regularly shared so that members are aware of them, enabling effective enforcement. Model "codes of best practice" could be designed and shared over WhatsApp to encourage other groups to follow suit.

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124 Business Today. 2019. "This new WhatsApp update will make group feature more personal, less random". Available at
https://www.businesstoday.in/technology/whatsapp-group-invitation-update-privacy-new-latest-feature/story/319092.html.
125 Users can also send feedback to WhatsApp via a "Contact Us" page in the app's settings.

4. **Invest in fact-checking initiatives that work in local languages.** The effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives may not be immediately realised as their diligently compiled content – often produced hours, if not days after a story first circulates – struggles to penetrate networks of WhatsApp groups. But, over-time, fact-checking initiatives can support a change in mindset among WhatsApp users. It is increasingly important they do so in a way that makes them more relevant at a sub-national and even LGA level. For Nigeria this means working more in Pidgin English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo and focusing on stories with sub-national resonance and relevance.

5. **WhatsApp should strengthen its ability to understand the risk of misuse by opening an office on the continent.** With its application the most downloaded in over 70% of African countries, WhatsApp should devote greater research to how it is being used and time to explain changes and functions of the application (such as the report function) to citizens in languages they are familiar with. Although Facebook does have a presence on the continent, and Facebook owns WhatsApp, no WhatsApp staff are based in Africa. An office of the continent, would be symbolically important, but should be enhanced by greater listening to WhatsApp users.

Long term goals

1. **Comprehensive digital literacy education as part of the national curriculum.** A more digitally educated and aware population is the most effective means of reducing the spread of disinformation and misinformation on WhatsApp. A multi-pronged, cross-sector approach is needed to prepare citizens of all ages for the complex digital landscape of the future – especially as new developments such as "deep fake" videos are just around the corner.

This sort of campaign can target different demographic and social groups in ways tailored to their particular needs and can be overseen by a Digital Education Working Group: comprised of key stakeholders from civil society, media, the education profession, politics and government. As part of this process, digital education should be made part of the national curriculum.[126] Equipping the next generation of Nigerians with the skills to better discern fact from fiction on WhatsApp will reduce the need for perpetual digital literacy campaigns. Nigeria's education sector, and political parties developing policies, must start thinking about how to best incorporate digital awareness and critical thinking into the curriculum for secondary school, tertiary institutions and university students.

2. **Develop WhatsApp codes of conduct for future election campaigns.** Having a set of standards that candidates have promised to adhere to would allow civil society organisations and the media to hold them to account when they, or their supporters, fail to do so. These should be developed through a consultative cross-party basis, so that key parties and leaders feel a sense of ownership over the agreement. Publicising such codes of conduct, for example through high profile signing ceremonies, can further strengthen a normative shift towards citizen driven accountability and the public shaming of those spreading disinformation.

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126 Mackintosh, E. 2019. "Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to Western democracy", CNN. Available at https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/.

3. **Support continued research into the use (and abuse) of WhatsApp.** Given the closed nature of WhatsApp, research is difficult and resource intensive. Both policymakers, development partners and WhatsApp itself should support research that improves our limited understanding of the platforms political effects. Only with better knowledge can more effective and locally relevant solutions be generated.

4. **Enhance online protection of data and civil liberties.** Nigeria's Digital Rights and Freedom Bill was presented to the President in March 2019 to be signed into law, but Buhari did not give his assent arguing that it covers too many technical subjects and fails to address any of them extensively. Passage of the bill, which aims to provide for the protection of the human rights online, to protect internet users in Nigeria from infringement of their fundamental freedoms and to guarantee the application of human rights for users of digital platforms and/or digital media, into law would be a welcome and continent-leading step.