# GHANA'S
# FAKE NEWS
## ECOSYSTEM
### AN OVERVIEW

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores Ghana's fake news ecosystem examining key actors in the online and offline space and the origis of their authority; key online information platforms and the interaction between offline media and non-media structures that shape information flows and gender dynamics. Ten interviews were undertaken to augment secondary data gathered from online and offline news publications, academic research reports, current affairs programmes on several media stations, and social media engagements. The key informants were purposively drawn from targeted institutions considering their role in the information ecosystem.

Young people, mostly college and high-school educated, constitute a significant percentage of the 31 million Ghanaians, about half of whom have some level of access to the internet. This figure is growing rapidly. This younger demographic increasingly relies on Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Twitter to interact with each other and to mobilise around topics of shared interest. It is this same purpose that has attracted political activists, commentators and high ranking officials, who increasingly see the online realm as a place where they can seek to shape and control narratives.

Whilst most Ghanaians still access news stories from radio and television, increasingly traditional media feeds on, and overlaps with, social media trends. The fact that a significant share of media operators have direct or indirect political affiliations, increases the risk of politicised narratives being spread online.

But in a very competitive information space, bloggers, online news platforms and freelancers, whose business model is to cash in on traffic to their sites through click-baiting headlines and hot gossip, and who are less concerned about ensuring the accuracy of the information they post, are also shaping the information eco-system.

Still, it is political actors and supporters of political parties that drive Ghana's fake news ecosystem. Political parties use digital platforms to market party candidates, identify policy priorities and seek massive voter turnout in the party's favour. Fake online accounts were also behind some of the misinformation and disinformation spread in the run-up to the 2020 general elections. Cloned, fake websites of popular and credible outlets emerged, aiming to appear legitimate but using the platform to spread disinformation online. This information can have real-world impacts in altering individuals' perceptions about the outcome of election processes or on whether the Covid-19 vaccines are safe as is documented in this study.

Tackling the problem requires a multifaceted approach. Beyond the proposed regulation of the social media space in Ghana, the production and communication of more accurate and credible information by the government and media stakeholders is critical in tackling the circulation of falsehoods in Ghana. For example, the communication strategy adopted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is an example worth replicating in other spaces but must be underpinned by a wider commitment to ongoing efforts to enhance digital literacy among the population.

# INTRODUCTION

Between October 2020 and May 2021, a rough count of fake news stories about Ghana on Dubawa's website, a transnational fact-checking project, returned 55 hits. This is despite Ghana's Electronic Communications Act of 2008 stipulating sanctions for persons who knowingly share false or misleading information. Knowingly, the operative word in the Act is interpreted as "a person is taken to know that a communication is false or misleading if that person did not take reasonable steps to find out whether the communication was false, misleading, reckless, or fraudulent".[1]

Almost 80% of Ghanaians are literate[2], so perhaps the law assumes that every Ghanaian has the means to verify every piece of information before sharing. However, reading and writing literacy is not the same as digital literacy or critical thinking about what one reads.

## Misinformation, disinformation and "fake news"

Misinformation involves the spread of falsehoods without a deliberate attempt to mislead whilst disinformation is manipulated narrative or facts— propaganda deliberately intended to mislead. Both are more commonly captured under the term 'fake news', a term used in this report as a catch all term. These kinds of information pose a significant threat to liberal democracy because as they are allowed to spread and flourish, they disinform and misinform people about a range of civic issues from voting to political accountability, and corruption.

Seeking to shape a civic process using falsehoods is not new. Before the internet, people shared disinformation and misinformation through word of mouth and rumour networks, with information spreading slowly from one person to the other before diffusing through communities. Traditional media and propaganda outlets also broadcasted or published news meant to mislead people and promote agendas.

Although the internet did not start the spread of fake news it has further enabled it. The availability of the internet has made it far cheaper and easier to produce and disseminate fake news to a wider audience and much harder to sort fact from fiction. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, alongside messaging applications like WhatsApp, have served as popular conduits. With these platforms enabling people to share a myriad of information in a range of audio, text and visual formats.

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1. See articles 74, 75 and 76 of the Electronics Communications Act, 2008
2. World Bank. 2021. 'Literacy rate, adult total: Ghana'. Available at  https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=GH

Besides that, it is tiresome to be constantly separating fact from fiction in what has become a very complex information superhighway where disinformation and misinformation thrive in spaces left by a dearth of credible information. This is not to say that false information is a new phenomenon, only that with the increasing tools available for the sharing of information it has become more and more difficult to decipher.

Ghana has a liberal democratic environment where freedom of speech and expression thrive, something that informed Twitter's decision to set up its African headquarters in the country in 2021. The country scored 82 out of 100 in Freedom House's latest report which evaluates citizens access to political rights and civil liberties.[3] While this liberal environment allows citizens to criticise the government and speak their minds on most social issues without fear of going missing the next day, it has also given impetus to hired propagandists and mischievous bloggers.

"If consistently you keep reading or hearing fake news or false narratives about our body politic, about our institutions and about our democracy over a period, citizens begin to lose confidence in democracy, in public institutions and in the governance systems", said Kojo Oppong Nkrumah, Ghana's Information Minister at the launch of Dubawa last year.[4] What holds democracy together, citizens' belief in the social contract and in government actors to act in fidelity of the same, once compromised by doubt, is also what tears democracy apart.

It was in cognisance of this possibility that the information minister at the 2020 National Public Relations and Communications Summit, a month before general elections, urged the mainstream media to help stem the tide of fake news "by ensuring that persons with tendencies to pronounce untruth and exaggerations are not given access to platforms that enables them to further spread this falsehood and misinformation".[5]

This report is a product of a qualitative study undertaken between May and August 2021 to better understand Ghana's information eco-system in the digital age. Data used in this report was gathered from online and offline news publications, academic research reports, current affairs programmes on several media stations, social media engagements, and ten key informant interviews. Key informants were purposively drawn from targeted institutions considering their role in the information ecosystem. Inferences and conclusions arrived at in this report are informed by the data gathered.

3. Freedom House. 2021. 'Freedom in The World Index: Ghana'. Available at https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores
4. Joy FM. 2020. 'Support fight against misinformation to preserve our democracy – Oppong Nkrumah'. 27 February. Available at https://www.myjoyonline.com/support-fight-against-misinformation-to-preserve-our-democracy-oppong-nkrumah/?myjo/
5. Ibid.

# UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

With the increased democratisation of access to information brought about through the internet in Ghana, the days when statements by high-ranking religious, medical, political, business and opinion leaders were considered infallible truths and went unchallenged are in decline. Authority figures have not lost their influence entirely. But they are now tested regularly for consistency, with online spaces a key platform for these challenges.

Young people, mostly college and high-school educated, constitute a significant percentage of the 31 million Ghanaians, about half of who have some level of access to the internet.[6] This figure is growing rapidly. From 2020 to 2021, the number of internet users increased by 6.4% and active social media users 36.7%; from 6 to 8.2 million.[7] This younger demographic increasingly relies on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter to interact with each other and not all of them are on social media to chat, network, play video games and listen to music. There are sub-groups leveraging the convening and multiplier prowess of social media to mobilise around political topics. It is this same purpose that has attracted political commentators, including traditional civic activists, and some high ranking officials online, with the goal of shaping and controlling narratives.

In Ghana, it is increasingly the case that what is true and what is false is not defined by its origin per se but by its survivability in the face of challenge; a challenge that is regularly posed social media users.

Nonetheless, traditional media is still an important source of information for many Ghanaians.[8] Inequalities in digital access and social media use exacerbate socio-economic divides in the country and restrict the ability of some citizens – most notably rural women – to exercise their voice online.[9] Of the 87% of Ghanaians who say they own mobile phones, less than half (45%) say their phones have access to the internet. In rural areas, this figure declines further to 31%.[10] The majority of the population continues to access news stories from radio and television.[11] Radio commands the largest audience share in Ghana[12] and stations mostly operate under the affiliate system where several local FM stations rebroadcast content from a mother station. Unlike in other countries in the region, the state broadcaster does not have a dominant share of the audience. Many of the private radio stations are owned by political actors or entrepreneurs who have an affiliation to a political party.[13]

There is a lack of transparency on the actual owners of media houses in Ghana although

6.  Kemp, S. 2021. 'Digital 2021 Ghana'. DataReportal. 11 February. Available at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-ghana
7.  Ibid.
8.  Afrobarometer. 2018. 'Ghanaians rely on radio and TV, but support for media freedom drops sharply'. Dispatch 250. 6 November.
9.  Gadjanova, E et al. 2019. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilisation in Ghana'. University of Exeter.
10. Afrobarometer. 2020. 'Ghana's e-learning program during pandemic presents access challenges for many students'. Dispatch 374. 20 July.
11. Afrobarometer. 2020. 'Ghana's e-learning program during pandemic presents access challenges for many students'. Dispatch 374. 20 July.
12. Yeboah-Banin, A. A. & Amoakohene, M. I. 2018. 'The dark side of multi-platform advertising in an emerging economy context'
13. Osei-Appiah, S. 2020. Private radio stations in Ghana influence political discourse. Here is how.' The Conversation. 14 May. Available at https://theconversation.com/private-radio-stations-in-ghana-influence-political-discourse-unfairly-here-is-how-138038

a 2017 Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) report asserted that every third media outlet in the country has an owner with political interests.[14] Another MOM study found that only 8.1% of the media outlets in Ghana are proactive when it comes to providing ownership information.[15] Because the actual owners are often hidden, it is difficult to hold them accountable and link their conduct to political, business, or religious interests. As a result, these channels are not immune from sharing politically motivated falsehoods, with allegations continuing to emerge of top media houses taking bribes to subvert the truth.[16]

In 2021 the Ghana Journalist Association lamented the levels of 'money taking' by journalists to publish, sometimes, one-sided reports on issues of political or business interests.[17] This practice is referred to as 'soli' and can also take the form of a transportation fee for journalists to cover press conferences of persons publicly accused of some wrongdoing. But in some cases, a politically-exposed person, politician or business owner may not even have to give financial incentives to influence favourable reports. By owning a media outlet, they can affect the narrative directly. For example, the chief executive of a sanitation company in Ghana also owns a TV station that has consistently failed to fairly and objectively report on the findings of the Auditor-General concerning the company.

But in what is a very competitive information space, gatekeepers such as traditional media houses are no longer just in competition with each other.

Their existence is threatened by bloggers, online news platforms and freelancers whose business model is to cash in on traffic to their sites through click-bait headlines and hot gossip, and who are less concerned about ensuring the accuracy of the information they post. Sensational, attention-grabbing headlines that attract more traffic to their sites which in turn ensures increased revenue is a key part of their strategy and can partly explain the growing prevalence of fake news in Ghana's information ecosystem. The rush to break news is fuelling inaccurate reporting across the board. It is also seeing traditional media enter the online space.

Increasingly traditional media feeds on and overlaps with, social media in the same way that 'pavement radio' used to, and still does, take media discussions offline through word of mouth networks.[18] There are now segments of TV and radio shows devoted to discussions about what is trending on social media, sometimes reporting verbatim what people are saying on the platforms. Citi FM, now called Citi Newsroom - a brand synthesis of radio, television, and social media channels - runs a popular show called #CitiTrends which explores popular topics and commentaries on social media. They have a combined following on Facebook and Twitter of 2.5 million.

Sister station Joy FM, which has a similar following on the two social media platforms, is aggressively integrating social media engagement across its primetime shows. Recently, they launched 'State of Play', a platform for discussing political issues 'with

14. Media Ownership Monitor. 2017. 'Who owns the media in Ghana? Political Affiliations'. Available at https://ghana.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/political-affiliations/
15. Media Ownership Monitor. 2017. 'Who owns the media in Ghana? Transparency. Available at https://ghana.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/transparency/
16. Media Foundation for West Africa. 2020. 'Fighting corruption in West Africa: The media's role'. 3 March. Available at https://www.mfwa.org/fighting-corruption-in-west-africa-the-medias-role/
17. Media Foundation for West Africa. 2021. 'Monitoring of media ethics in Ghana: June 2020-May 2021'.
18. Ellis, S. 1989. 'Tuning in to pavement radio'. African Affairs. Vol 88 (352). pp.321-330.

the gloves off', in response to what they see as "young people growing weary of throttled honesty". Both Citi FM and Joy FM have helped mainstream popular social media hashtags like #FixTheCountry - a non-partisan civic movement by Ghanaian youths demanding improved public goods, better democratic governance, and constitutional reforms. Such movements have both reach and impact. In response to the #FixTheCountry campaign, which also involved offline protests, the Ghana National Petroleum Authority reduced petrol price after an effort to raise them was met with sustained anger on social media.[19]

## Online gender dynamics

Social stereotypes which play out in a conservative society like Ghana also manifest online. According to Naa Koshie, a female political activist, "men are generally enabled by the status quo, and this makes them more assertive and domineering in the communication chain".[20] At the same time, women tend to suffer more attacks on their personality, work, and other endeavours. Koshie believes these attacks are deliberately orchestrated to intimidate women and kill their voices on critical public interest issues.

But Ghanaian women, particularly those in positions of economic or political power, are refusing to be cowed by this type of abuse. For example, in November 2021, three female TV presenters publicly shamed a Twitter user and cyberbully, compelling him to apologise for the misogynistic and sexist name-calling online.

19. Krippahl. C. 2021. 'Ghana's youth turn to social media to fix country's problems'. Deutsche Welle. 12 May. Available at https://www.dw.com/en/ghanas-youth-turn-to-social-media-to-fix-countrys-problems/a-57508590
20. Key Informant interviews with Naa Koshie. May & June 2021.

# KEY ACTORS AND ENABLERS

Political actors and supporters of political parties drive Ghana's fake news ecosystem. 69% of respondents to a 2019 Afrobarometer survey listened to political parties and politicians themselves as the most common spreaders of fake news.[21] Whilst indicating that she is careful not to be a fake news conveyor-belt, New Patriotic Party (NPP) activist Maame Serwaa did not deny that sometimes she exaggerated some of the achievements of the current administration, "it all depends on how creative you can be, and it is no different from putting the icing on a cake".[22] In the political arena, only two outcomes are offered – win or lose. All players go in to win and social media offers a new way to exert this influence.

Political parties use digital platforms to market party candidates, identify policy priorities and seek massive voter turnout in the party's favour. It was reported that the ruling NPP contracted 700 persons to boost the party's online presence ahead of the 2020 election.[23] They were "paid salaries and given phone credit. They (were) recruited in addition to media teams in each constituency office across the country, as well as social media communicators hired by individual politicians."[24] It was rumoured on Twitter that each person was paid GHS700 (US$145) with a "win at all cost" mentality encouraging the spread of misleading information against political opponents.

The opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) has been "slower to recognise the potential of social media for electoral politics"[25] although there were unsubstantiated rumours that they also employed, and funded, social media cyber activists to advance the cause of their presidential aspirant – former president John Mahama - in 2020. Speaking in December 2020 Mahama seemed to agree with the assertion that the 2016 NDC social media campaign was "relatively disorganised and sporadic"[26]: We did not take advantage of social media in 2016. We didn't recognise the potential at that time, but our opponents did and took advantage of it. They set up troll factories, spread fake news and threw mud at us with unsubstantiated rumours. They said I had hotels in Dubai, shops in Tokyo and at that time we thought Ghanaians will know it's fake. But it was sinking into people's minds and so it created a certain perception that the government was corrupt. It was after we had lost the elections that people realised all the stories were lies.[27]

In addition to political party activists, journalists can also be enablers of the spread of falsehoods according to 59% of those surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2019.[28] Experts familiar with the local media environment claim that political actors' intent on shaping the narrative and spinning stories in their favour, channel incentives through news editors and producers of prime time

21. Afrobarometer. 2020. 'Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news'. Dispatch 366. 8 June.
22. Key Informant interview with Serwaa (pseudonym used) in May 2021.
23. Lynch, G. et al. 2019. 'The hidden costs of social media use in elections: A Ghana case study'. The Conversation. 3 December. Available at https://theconversation.com/the-hidden-costs-of-social-media-use-in-elections-a-ghana-case-study-128007
24. Ibid
25. Braimah, S. 2019. 'The NPP, NDC social media battalions and election 2020'. The Graphic. 19 December. Available at https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/the-npp-ndc-social-media-battalions-and-election-2020.html
26. Ibid.
27. GhanaWeb. 2020. 'NDC lost 2016 polls due to NPP sponsored fake news – Mahama'. 3 December. Available at https://mobile.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/NDC-lost-2016-polls-due-to-NPP-sponsored-fake-news-IMF-programme-Mahama-1124861
28. Afrobarometer. 2020. 'Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news'. Dispatch 366. 8 June.

political shows who manage programmes with a considerable audience. According to the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), in April 2021,186 ethical violations were recorded in seven of the 26 media organisations monitored.[29]

That is not to say that there are not good journalists in Ghana who seek to ensure balance in their reporting and that facts are verified before being published. Journalists like Joshua Mawuli, who works with an Accra-based media house that appeals mostly to the youth, are more committed to ensuring the integrity of their output, "I personally verify every information I work on since my integrity is at stake with every story, I work on".[30] But Joshua admits that some traditional media have joined the "break it first" bandwagon, jumping on any piece of information without subjecting it to proper fact-checking. In trying to keep up with the speed of information sharing traditional media also risks amplifying falsehoods to an even wider audience. In December 2020, Adom TV, one of the largest local TV stations affiliated to the Multimedia Group broadcast a video showing President Akufo-Addo allegedly collecting a US$40,000 bribe. But the video was found to be misleading as it subsequently emerged that he had received cash shown in the video as a donation for his 2016 presidential campaign.

Fake online accounts are also behind some of the misinformation and disinformation in Ghana's information ecosystem. According to female political activist Naa Koshie, there

is a "proliferation of fake bloggers and news channels who rely on half-baked information and sensationalism to advance their agenda".[31] Freelance broadcasters and bloggers operate in a space that is acephalous and often get away without severe consequence argues Koshie, who blames the National Media Commission and the National Communication Authority for failing to effectively regulate the space.

In the run-up to the 2020 general elections, politically-driven fake news websites popped up. They cloned the websites of popular and credible ones to appear legitimate and then went ahead to spread disinformation online. Sites such as Joynewsroom.com emerged. The domain name is similar to JoyNews, an influential and credible TV and radio platform which also has a well-regarded online news portal, myjoyonline.com. Daily Graphic, the biggest national newspaper, has an online version on graphic.com.gh. But a fake site, graphicgh.com tried to mimic the credible news site. The faces behind these sites are still not known. But the way they put a narrative to the news often points to the political affiliation of the owners. For example, joynewsroom.com offered a very strong pro-government, pro-NPP perspective.

29. Media Foundation for West Africa. 2021. 'Monitoring of media ethics in Ghana: April 2021'.
30. Key Informant interview with Joshua Mawuli, broadcast journalist with Class FM, May 2021.
31. Key Informant interviews with Naa Koshie in May & June 2021.

# FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

The desire to be the first to break the news or publish stories that are likely to trend is also becoming a driver of fake news. During the December 2020 general elections, TV3 network published election results that were subsequently found to be inaccurate. Although they issued an apology for the error the circulation of this type of false information during a tense and close-fought election can further increase the risk of verbal clashes becoming violent.

Outside of politics another area where fake news is having a real-world impact in Ghana has been in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Vimbuzzgh, an Instagram handle with close to 68,000 followers posted a video on 25 June which showed a man claiming that his arm become magnetic after taking the Covid-19 vaccine. The video which went viral with the caption "Really? This is serious o" had garnered 2,681 views as of the time of writing. A comment in pidgin English under the post read, "Me if I take that vaccine, like I fool…".  The video was likely inspired by the global trend #magnetchallenge where several persons posted videos of their arms becoming magnetic after taking the vaccine which attracted millions of views on social media. Even if this was done on a lighter note, without expressly stating satire as context, this trend is greatly likely to affect beliefs and attitudes toward Covid-19 vaccines considering existing myths about vaccines

that circulate in Ghana. Prominent rumours that continue to circulate despite the lack of scientific basis are that spraying alcohol on one's body can kill the virus, that eating garlic helps prevent infection and that hot pepper can cure Covid-19.

The widely televised and reported news coverage of the President, his wife, and top government officials taking the vaccine did not assuage the fear of many Ghanaians like Emmanuel whose sole hesitancy arises from the source of the vaccine, "I don't want to take the vaccine because I don't know from where the medicine comes from so, I can't put my life in danger for whatever because we don't know where the medicine is coming from".[32] Research has suggested that exposure to information about the virus on social media is linked with higher susceptibility to misinformation and that people are more likely to encounter fake news about the virus on social media platforms.[33]

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> *Prominent rumours continue to circulate despite the lack of scientific basis...*

32. Africa News. 2021. 'Skepticism as Ghana begins mass covid-19 vaccination drive. 3 March. Available at https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/03/skepticism-as-ghana-begins-mass-covid-19-vaccination-drive//
33. Roozenbeek J. et al. 2020. Susceptibility to misinformation about Covid-19 around the world'. Royal Society Publishing. 14 October.

# EXTERNAL SHAPERS

Ghana has been home to fake news factories for countries looking to shape third country elections. In 2020, Ghana's National Cyber Security Unit busted a Russian-linked operation in which Ghanaians were recruited to meddle in the United States elections. Facebook removed 49 accounts, 69 Pages and 85 Instagram accounts for engaging in foreign interference, whilst Twitter deleted 71 accounts with a cumulative following of over 65,000.[34] But to date there is no evidence to suggest that such operations have been used within Ghana, to shape its electoral outcomes.

However, there have been rumours of foreign entities exploiting the absence of a lobbying law and gaps in the existing regime of political party financing to influence local electoral outcomes. American PR firm KRL International was contracted by the opposition NPP presidential campaign to help Nana Akufo-Addo unseat incumbent, John Mahama in 2016. A part of this contract involved developing a communications strategy that sought to draw on local data gathered from online and offline sources. But even if these entities may have some say in developing the strategies for social media use during a campaign, as discussed in previous sections, the bulk of the social media political campaigning is done by young party activists.

For now, to a large extent, the role of external actors in the Ghanaian information chain can be said to be technological, rather than ideological. Whilst all the leading social media companies are present digitally – and in the case of Twitter physically - not all have built-in mechanisms to flag fake news or to effectively moderate content in languages other than English. This does impinge on their ability to impact the ecosystem positively.

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> *For now, to a large extent, the role of external actors in the Ghanaian information chain can be said to be technological, rather than ideological...*

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34. Ward, C, et al. 2020. 'Russia election meddling is back – via Ghana and Nigeria – and in your feeds. CNN. 11 April. Available at https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html

# ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Ghana's social media space is currently unregulated and 48% of respondents to a 2019 Afrobarometer survey would like it to stay that way.[35] But during his parliamentary vetting in early 2021, Information Minister, Kojo Oppong Nkrumah, intimated that the government has made provisions for the regulation of social media in the amended Broadcasting Bill, which has yet to be introduced to parliament. Others familiar with the draft bill say social media regulations are not yet included.

Beyond regulation, the production and communication of more accurate and credible information by the government will be key in tackling the circulation of falsehoods in Ghana. At the 2017 Africa Open Data conference, President Akufo-Addo noted that "if African leaders are to succeed in improving the living standards of their peoples, a critical piece of the puzzle has to be the availability and use of information and data".[36] The repeal of the 1985 Statistical Service Law and the introduction of the Statistical Service Act in 2019 was a necessary reform in this regard. Similarly, enacting the Right to Information law was a big step in the right direction, albeit on the back of 19 years of inertia and sluggishness. But leaving stakeholders in suspense about when the law will become fully operationalised is politically disingenuous. In the absence of an operational mechanism, the law risks becoming "a piece of legislative white elephant".[37]

What is clear is that fake news thrives not just because accurate news is lacking; but often because credible information exists in inaccessible formats. Until information, especially those of public interest are better distilled, politicians will continue to peddle falsehood on issues they are certain most of the people have no means of discerning fact from fiction on. In response to Covid-19 there have been some positive examples of improving credible information flow. The government liaised with key media stakeholders, including the umbrella organisations of independent broadcasters, journalists, and editors to align on authoritative data sources for Covid-19 reporting. A website was created to serve as the comprehensive source for information on the virus and infographics, which simplified bulk data into digestible bits, were widely publicised on social media to further improve accessibility. The triangulated and proactive approach the government adopted greatly helped in limiting the spread of fake news around the virus and could have application beyond the health space.

Domestic fact-checking initiatives have also grown in response to the challenge posed by fake news. Ghana Fact recently surveyed 400 people across all regions of the country to understand people's experiences encountering fake news and to gauge their expectations from a fact-checking organisation. 69% of respondents said they had encountered fake news in 2020 and 90% said it would be crucial for a full-time fact-checking organisation to be deployed especially during elections.[38] To illustrate the point during the 2016 election, a fact-checking operation run by MWFA found that

35. Afrobarometer. 2020. 'Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news'. Dispatch 366. 8 June.
36. The Presidency of the Republic of Ghana. 2017. 'Press Release: Access to information and data key to national development'. 17 July. Available at https://presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/news-style-2/315-access-to-information-data-key-to-national-development-president-akufo-addo
37. Media Foundation for West Africa. 2019. 'MFWA welcomes Ghana's RTI law with caution'. 27 March. Available at https://www.mfwa.org/mfwa-welcomes-ghanas-rti-law-with-caution/
38. Key Informant interview with Rabiu Alhassan (Ghana Fact), May 2021

more than half of the 98 claims by 2016 electoral campaign participants were completely false, half-truths, or misleading.[39] At a global level the introduction of automated fact-checking mechanisms by social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter to flag content as either false or inconclusive and in some instances to offer a prompt to recommend a reading of a story before sharing has helped a little but only on platforms with these fact-checking measures and where users are aware of how to engage with them.

# CONCLUSION

The war on fake news must begin with radical transparency on the part of the government. Earning citizens trust is critical for making next steps to be seen credible and in the public interest. Fake news does not evolve from falsehood entirely; it is also a perversion of truth and a set of facts.

Moreover, fake news is not a new phenomenon in Ghana. As we have seen, the ability of political actors to exert some degree of control over the flow of information is rooted in their links to traditional media operations, but social media is providing another avenue for this information to flow, more quickly and in more interactive ways than before. As a result, it is having an increasing influence on election campaigns and processes and discussions around healthcare issues in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These impacts can be positive as well as negative as they are providing a new space for citizen engagement, but to amplify these positive benefits, more needs to be done to improve digital literacy and awareness to stem the flow of falsehoods online.

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> *The war on fake news must begin with radical transparency on the part of the government...*

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39. Fact Check Ghana. 2016. '2016 Elections: 98 Campaign Claims Fact-Checked – 28% of Claims False, Others Half-Truths'. 15 December. Available at https://www.fact-checkghana.com/2016-elections-98-campaign-claims-fact-checked-28-claims-false-others-half-truths/

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings laid out in the report, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the information ecosystem in Ghana:

**1** Traditional news outlets have an important role to play in making the information ecosystem impervious to compromise. Integrating fact-checking segments into their radio programming, for example, would increase awareness about fake news and empower the listening public to question information they come across, before accepting them as gospel truth.

**2** Government should bring finality to the right to information implementation process to make the law fully operational, leaving little room for the exercise of personal discretion in the disclosure of public information in the public interest (with exception of health, national security, and personally sensitive information).

**3** Government can consider regular live face-to-face conversations between key government functionaries and citizens. There is growing distrust in press releases alone as a sufficient reaction to false claims and these public interactions could help build a foundation of trust, crucial for consensus building.

**4** Ensure social media companies comply with a set standard practice of mitigating the entry of fake news into the information ecosystem. These standards should be agreed upon and set by a coalition of governmental, non-governmental, technology, media, legal, gender, and other relevant stakeholders. A rating system could be developed to incentivise compliance and discourage non-compliance.

**5** Politicians, business people and faith-based organisations now all have media stations. With Ghana's media dominantly funded by commercial interests, there must be more support for independent journalism.

**6** Efforts are needed to improve digital literacy among the population as a whole. These educational campaigns should be delivered by civil society and media groups through a combination of social media, radio, TV and face-to-face engagement. A strong emphasis should be given to content in local languages to ensure wider reach.

**OSIWA**