

GUINEA BISSAU'S

FAKE NEWS

ECOSYSTEM

AN OVERVIEW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 occur in Guinea-Bissau, with the recent Covid-19 pandemic bringing significant attention to the use of social media platforms and messaging applications for that end.

The tools provided from online spaces in Guinea-Bissau have allowed for the proliferation of false and fabricated news and made it easier for almost anyone with access to the internet to voice out their ideas and spread falsehoods, often with the aim of supporting or discrediting political figures. This study looks at the fake news ecosystem in Guinea-Bissau by conducting 10 interviews and conducting an analysis of social media platforms and blogs, to gain a better understanding of information flows in the country both online and offline.

Results found that political party supporters and activists are some of the lead creators and spreaders of fake news. Guinea-Bissau's fake news ecosystem is dominated by news about politics and the political and military elite mainly on blogs and social media platforms. Images shared on social media platforms have become a key element in the spread of false news during the different political crises in the country. Diaspora actors are also extending their offline influence into online spaces in ways that can also facilitate the spread of factually inaccurate information or rumours that have a particular political agenda.

This is particularly problematic in Guinea-Bissau given the ongoing and cyclical political instability. For a country which has such a volatile and fragile political context, the production and circulation of unverified news, propaganda and information online poses risks to its very stability. Not only is fake news on Facebook becoming more common, but it is also accompanied by abusive and violent language that goes as far as incitement to violence on erroneous and defamatory grounds.

With more and more users joining online platforms such as Facebook, and the important overlaps between online spaces and offline oral networks identified by this study, action is needed to tackle the threat posed by fake news. Specifically, efforts are needed to improve digital literacy among citizens and to embed the culture of fact-checking into media but also society at large. Social media has offered a means of communication and coordination amongst Bissau-Guineans, which for once has not noticeably discriminated across class, age or gender. Ensuring that these positive impacts are accentuated, whilst the negatives are reduced will be key.





INTRODUCTION

Fake news is not a new phenomenon, but it has been exacerbated due to the increased presence and influence of digital platforms and social media. There exists a substantial body of research to indicate that social networking and media sharing platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram serve as prominent vectors for the dissemination of conspiracy beliefs and related forms of misinformation.¹ The main discussions around “fake news” and

cyber-propaganda have often shown how its “evolution and manifestation has been closely linked with the rise of populist politics, digital capitalism, the transformation of the public sphere and structural weaknesses of liberal and mainstream media”.² Local specificities also matter and issues surrounding misinformation and disinformation should not be understood outside of those contexts of production and consumption.³

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.

1. Pandey, A., N. Patni, M. Sing, A. Sood, and G. Singh, “YouTube as a source of information on the H1N1 influenza pandemic.” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 38:3 (2010), pp.1–3; Buchanan, Rachel, and Robert D. Beckett, “Assessment of vaccination-related information for consumers available on Facebook.” *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 31:3 (2014), pp.227–34; Oyeyemi, Sunday Oluwafemi, Elia Gabarron, and Rolf Wynn, “Ebola, Twitter, and misinformation: a dangerous combination?” *British Medical Journal* 349 (2014), p.6178;

2. Admire Mare, Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara & Dumisani Moyo (2019) “Fake News” and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda, *African Journalism Studies*, 40:4, 1-12

3. Wasserman, Herman. (2017). “Fake News from Africa: Panics, Politics and Paradigms.” *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, Sage, 2 (1)





Guinea-Bissau has faced cyclical instability and insecurity for the last two decades.⁴ These episodes of political breakdown have ranged in scale, from armed attempts to overthrow the president, to assassination plots, to countless extra-judicial imprisonments and beatings. The country has become infamous for the fact that successive elected governments and heads of state have not been able to complete their mandates.⁵ To compound this bleak timeline, since 2003, it has been known as a “narco-state” due to the heavy involvement of state and military officials in the drug trade.⁶ But what is unique is that in Guinea-Bissau’s case, despite all the intra-elite fighting and violent struggles for power as well as the ineffective state is that “there are no outbreaks of large-scale violence across broader society”.⁷ Furthermore, citizens are rarely directly targeted during those power struggles, as they are not co-opted in the violence, nor are they casualties. In fact, with the ongoing cyclical violence within its political elite, and very few prospects of economic growth and development, Guinean society had become politically disenfranchised and removed from conversations about politics. Yet, an increased civic activism really began to take place in the more recent years following a long period of relatively apathy by its population.

In fact, sporadic protests have erupted in response to the stagnant nature of political,

economic and social life in Guinea-Bissau. This increased civic activism has been influenced by the increased engagement with social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as blogs both in the country and abroad. These online platforms have had a significant impact on the way politics and social issues are discussed, debated and fought online and offline. These platforms have also seen increased engagement since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with users looking for information about the virus but encountering many falsehoods instead.

To understand the evolving information ecosystem in Guinea-Bissau and how fake news spreads this report draws on ten key informant interviews with journalists, economists, lawyers as well as social media users with a focus on the key actors and platforms used to circulate falsehoods in the country. A second stage, saw an analysis of Facebook, Twitter, individual blogs as well as news stories on the websites of traditional media outlets, and existing literature, that were identified as sources of information and misinformation. In doing so the report assesses how fake news is produced and shared, how it impacts and shapes national events, and the existing regulations and ongoing efforts designed to counter the spread of fake news in the country.

4. See Mendes, Rosa Pedro (2013), Guinea-Bissau: Peacebuilding responses to impunity and exclusiveness, Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) roundtable report, http://eplo.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/02/CSDN_Geographic-meeting_Guinea-Bissau_Report_EN.pdf;

International Crisis Group (2008), Guinea-Bissau: In Need of a State”, Africa Report N. 142, 2 July

5. Rudebeck, Lars, (2001), On Democracy’s Sustainability-transition in Guinea-Bissau, Sida Studies

6. See Loewenstein, Antony (2016), Guinea-Bissau struggles to end its role in global drugs trade, The Guardian Newspaper accessed <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jan/07/guinea-bissau-global-drugs-trade>; Vulliamy, Ed (2008), How a tiny West African country became the world’s first narco state, The Guardian Newspaper, accessed <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/09/drugtrade>

7. Embalo, Birgit (2015) Guinea-Bissau-Conflict Analysis, United Nations Development Group Report





UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries in West Africa. Its population acutely feels the lack of basic provision of goods, services and security, “outside the capital, for example, there is no access to electricity or clean water, and in the capital Bissau, despite some recent improvements, electricity is extremely limited and sporadic”.⁸ Poor infrastructure and economic underdevelopment contribute to the poor condition of telecommunications, roads, bridges, river transportation and port facilities. This context is important as it illustrates how access to the internet is limited in parts of the country, even if the user base is growing.

In January 2020 internet penetration in the country stood at 13%, with the number of internet users having increased by 52,000 between 2019 and 2020 bringing the total to over 250,000.⁹ Over half of those connected to the internet are Facebook subscribers. Facebook is the most used digital platform by Bissau-Guineans both in the country and abroad. According to one respondent, “I get all of my news from what happens in Guinea-Bissau from Facebook. Blogs used to be so popular a couple of years ago but now even these blogs have created Facebook pages and the news is more immediate that way rather than having to search through different blog posts”.¹⁰

Blogs have been a key part of the information ecosystem since 2004. *Ditadura do Consenso*, a critical voice against the current government, is a prominent example of a blog that many Bissau-Guineans use for news and analysis of current events. The blog, which has over 30,000 followers on its linked Facebook page, is run by António Aly Silva, the most active and visible face of Guinea-Bissau’s blogosphere. But Aly Silva has consistently been the target of political and military reprisals over the years for his efforts. In March 2021 he was abducted by four men in plain clothes, who drove him out of the city, threatened and robbed him, and beat him unconscious.¹¹ Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Aly Silva’s blog and Facebook page are often highly cited and recommended as a trusted source of information. His readers and followers seem to trust Aly Silva given his former background and training as a journalist.¹² It has also been the case that new sources outside of Guinea-Bissau often rely on blogs such as Silva’s, due to the lack of access to data from Bissau. However, the blog space is not just dominated by opposing voices, there are also prominent blogs in favour of the current regime such as *Doka Internacional- Denunciante*.

But most of these blogs now also have Facebook pages and respondents spoken to for this research reiterated that Facebook was

8. Massey, Simon, (2016), Geopolitics and the failures of Securitization, in Chabal, Patrick & Green, Toby (2016), (eds), Guinea-Bissau: Micro-

State to Narco-State, Hurst & Company London

9. DataReportal, DIGITAL 2020: GUINEA-BISSAU, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-guinea-bissau>

10. Key Informant Interview with social media user, based in Portugal. 8 July 2021.

11. “Guinea-Bissau Editor António Aly Silva Abducted and Beaten.” 2021. Committee to Protect Journalists. March 16, 2021. <https://cpj.org/2021/03/guinea-bissau-editor-antonio-aly-silva-abducted-and-beaten>

12. Key informant interview with Bissau-Guinean working in the private sector.





the most used platform for sharing and finding information. As more and more young people have started gaining access to the internet the use of social media has become an increasingly important vector for the transmission of news and information. This has been clear during the current Covid-19 pandemic which has birthed, “a lot of information circulating online, but not all of them are correct”.¹³ Informants emphasised that generally information moved quickly from Facebook and YouTube to WhatsApp groups where they circulated further, although the main platform where fake news was created appears to be Facebook, mostly through posts and pictures.

One respondent observed that fake news comes in several forms, “posts on social media, rumours in communities, radio speeches, comments made by public figures, printed statements.”¹⁴ There is an overlap between these as well, meaning that something which may start as a community rumour can start circulating on Facebook, in the same way that a public figure can have a speech relayed across the country on radio and television networks. This evolving ecosystem has created a more difficult environment for those aiming to know what is real and what is fake or fabricated. It also enables anyone to post, comment or drive narratives without (m)any checks on the veracity of their output.

Despite the growth of social media as a source of information, many Bissau Guineans still rely on traditional news vectors such as television, radio, and local newspapers such

as *No Pintcha* or the *O Democrata* for current information. Even if state and private media operations are not immune from undue influence given that the Guinean state has regularly interfered with journalists’ work through direct or indirect intimidation.¹⁵ Radio is important, with private stations such as Radio Bombolom, Radio Jovem and Radio Solmanci listened to by a significant percentage of the population. The way content from these audio platforms is then shared through word of mouth networks, further highlights the importance of language and community in the country. The Crioulo language is the lingua franca, spoken across ethnic groups, so information in this language spreads easily across different communities. This means that rumours are rarely confined to just the offline or online realm but overlap as they are shared among networks of friends and family, which in and of themselves give a degree of credence to the information being shared. Like elsewhere in West Africa, the source of a piece of information can matter as much as its content.



Despite the growth of social media as a source of information, many Bissau Guineans still rely on traditional news vectors...

13. Key informant interview with Caludinecia Cabral, NobasChecker, June 2021

14. Key informant interview with Claudinecia Cabral, NobasChecker, June 2021

15. Silva, Yasmina Nuny. 2021. “Guinea-Bissau’s Journalists Are under Attack.” World Politics Review. June 2021. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29714/press-freedom-disappears-under-guinea-bissau-president-sissoco>





KEY ACTORS AND ENABLERS

Political party supporters and activists are some of the leader creators and spreaders of fake news. The fake news ecosystem is dominated by news about politics and the political and military elite mainly on blogs and social media platforms. Images shared on social media platforms have become a key element in the spread of false news during the different political crises in the country. According to a Bissau Guinean lawyer, supporters of the main political parties use images that do not correspond to reality, to project a false impression of support or to expose an act of corruption.¹⁶ These supporters are not necessarily acting on behalf of political parties, but showing their allegiance. As a matter of fact, we have already seen several documents that contain government and party logos, which circulated on social networks to implement political agendas. These are often official government documents that are leaked to discredit certain politicians. Another tactic used on some of these Facebook pages is for different political factions to post fake posts regarding rival factions to incite a reaction, to showcase how certain politicians are not fit for office.¹⁷

Guinea-Bissau has also seen an explosion of Facebook and YouTube pages in the last couple of years, where individuals talk about social and political issues affecting their lives. But their allegiances to political parties often

shape their analysis creating the spread of falsehoods.¹⁸ Whilst social media, in particular Facebook and its relative anonymity, has allowed for uncensored debates and criticism of political life in Guinea-Bissau, it has also led to the proliferation of fake news and oftentimes the use of violent language.¹⁹ From our analysis, these pages do not seem to give their real names and it is not always clear whether these are individual accounts, or whether they are managed by several people. This is potentially to avoid any reprisals by the government or rival political factions as known bloggers based in Bissau have been violently reprimanded by armed forces linked to the government. But it can also be to keep a political agenda hidden. Users seem to be aware that the pages are using pseudonyms, but claimed that the main reason they kept following these accounts was because of their ability to access very current information in Bissau.

16. Key informant interview with a lawyer based in Bissau, July 2021

17. Key informant interview with a lawyer based in Bissau, July 2021

18. See Facebook pages Abner Bauer Caier

19. See Facebook pages (Preta Fixe; Carlos Santiago)





FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

There have been multiple Facebook posts claiming politicians are unwell or even dead. This is to discredit political opponents and potentially showcase that they are neither reliable, nor are they fit for office. One Facebook profile claimed, in August 2021, that seven military officials, accused of attempting to assassinate the army chief of staff, Biague Na Tam, had been arrested. This piece of news was not accurate at the time, but in October 2021, Biague Na Tam himself denounced potential attempts of a coup against him highlighting the ways in which effective falsehoods rely on elements of truth or elements of what readers might perceive to be possible, to create narratives that are believed.

The new wave of political propaganda on social media can also be a danger to ongoing electoral processes because it can potentially influence or compromise them. Pages on Facebook, for instance, include posts that often try to indicate the 'real' number of votes or which candidates are involved in drug trafficking or in extra judicial activities. Often with little or no evidence to support the claims. The real world impact of these tactics is hard to ascertain but further research is needed to look into the correlation between the spread of fake news and election outcomes in Guinea Bissau.

Finally, fake news surrounding Covid-19 has circulated widely in the country with

particularly prominent rumours being that the virus was not real or that taking local herbs would cure the disease. Another inaccurate cure that circulated offline through church groups in the country was that if you bathed in local rivers your body would be able to fight the virus.²⁰ The team at *Nobaschecker*, a fact checking initiative supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that was launched in 2020, noted that these were relatively easy to counter with constant messages, posts and regular radio programmes which brought in teams of doctors, health officials and lawyers. However, whilst they believe that their impact was relatively significant in the capital, and this was broadly supported by a strong level of public uptake for the vaccine when it eventually arrived in the country, they were not sure how far it went beyond the capital.

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The new wave of political propaganda on social media can also be a danger to ongoing electoral processes...

20. Nobaschecker Facebook page





EXTERNAL ACTORS

The main external actors in the information eco-system are the diaspora. The 1998-1999 civil war, and the subsequent years of instability and poverty, displaced a consequent number of Bissau-Guinean.²¹ This diaspora is dispersed throughout Africa, Europe, USA, and Brazil.²² Social media increasingly plays an important role in maintaining its strong link with the motherland, and within the diaspora community itself.²³ But recently, social media has been increasingly used by the diaspora to engage with political space and challenge political issues at home as well.²⁴ In *The Guinean Diaspora after 1998*, José Lingna Nafafé identified the internet blogs *Ditadura de Consenso* based between Bissau and Portugal, *Didinho*, *Doka International*, *Guineendade* and *Intelectuais Balantas na Diaspora* as key sources of information for everyday news about the country.²⁵

Unregulated by state control and often hidden behind a cloak of anonymity, they can discuss the complicated politics in Guinea-Bissau.

As a result, the diaspora has been influential in shaping political discourse in the country through blogs. Their credibility stems, in part from the fact that they are abroad which grants some sort of authority. This is further reinforced if the blogs they oversee are managed by 'educated' expats. But this influence can be utilised to spread falsehoods and rumours into circulation in the information ecosystem such as *Doka Internacional-Denunciante* which often runs false stories.

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...the diaspora has been influential in shaping political discourse in the country...

21. Chabal & Green (2016), p.143

22. Chabal & Green (2016), p.148

23. Chabal & Green (2016), p.153

24. Chabal & Green (2016), p.154

25. All of these are based in Portugal





ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

The internet remains a relatively free space with little checks and balances if one is not transgressing any technology platforms terms of service. This despite the Bissau governments attempts at intimidation and violence. There have been several attacks on journalists and other bloggers who reside in Bissau by what many believe are government orders²⁶. Furthermore, in July 2021, the government accused TV channels *Internacional - Rádio Portugal* and *Sociedade Independente de Comunicação* of 'interference' and 'political intervention' blaming them for the political instability in the country.²⁷

In terms of civic engagement efforts, *Nobaschecker*, (nobas meaning news in Crioulo), was launched in 2020, but it has now run its course due to lack of funding. The fact that during a serious health crisis, it was not the government but a UN funded project that took on the colossal task of tackling the spread of fake news indicates an unwillingness or inability of the Bissau-Guinean government to tackle the issue. The fact-checking platform was set up to be an information space; a sharing forum; and a space for proposals and ideas, as well as to fact-check health related rumours.²⁸

Nobaschecker gathered a broad community of fact verifiers involving journalists, doctors, economists from Guinea-Bissau and around the world, to fight misinformation and unmask false news around the pandemic.

Nobaschecker recognised that fake news was not just disseminated with the help of the internet and social media but via the radio and informal discussions amongst people. In response the team produced counter messages, videos and programmes – in both Portuguese and Crioulo - and shared them online and through radio such as *Radio Solmansi* and *Radio Difusão Nacional*. A total of 80 posts about Covid-19 were analysed and verified by *Nobaschecker's* team over a period of six months. However, the *Nobaschecker* team were also keen to emphasise that while they faced no pushback due to the subject of what they were addressing, they feared that if they had veered into politics, they would have faced serious challenges and possible threats.²⁹

26. Silva, Yasmina Nuny. 2021. "Guinea-Bissau's Journalists Are under Attack." *Www.worldpoliticsreview.com*. June 2021. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29714/press-freedom-disappears-under-guinea-bissau-president-sissoco>

"Guinea-Bissau Editor António Aly Silva Abducted and Beaten." 2021. Committee to Protect Journalists. March 16, 2021.

27. Ministro guineense avisa: "Não vamos admitir esta forma de fazer jornalismo", DW, <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/ministro-guineense-avisa-n%C3%A3o-vamos-admitir-esta-forma-de-fazer-jornalismo/a-58141240>

28. Key informant interview with Luana Natali, UNDP- NobasChecker, based in Guinea-Bissau

29. Ibid





CONCLUSION

The spread of fake news, both online and offline, is an increasingly serious problem in Guinea-Bissau. This is likely to continue to grow given the ongoing political instability and increasing levels of access to the internet. For a country which has such a volatile and fragile political context, the production and circulation of unverified news, propaganda and information online poses risks to its very stability. Not only is fake news on Facebook becoming more common, but it is also accompanied by abusive and violent language that goes as far as incitement to violence on erroneous and defamatory grounds. Several of these accounts have significant followership and play an influential role in what then happens in the social and political sphere in the country.

At the same time social media has offered a means of communication and coordination amongst Bissau-Guineans, which for once has not noticeably discriminated across class, age or gender. In fact, social media platforms have provided a space for civilians to engage more deeply with political issues in their country, something they would have otherwise not been able to do so freely previously.

However, this has given legitimacy to anyone who has an opinion even if it is based on fake premises, manipulation or disinformation, to voice their opinions.

It remains to be seen how this complex ecosystem will continue to evolve as the country remains in political flux, with constant military interference in civilian life, news of increased drug trafficking and ongoing poverty. But with little funding available for fact checking initiatives and digital literacy it will be increasingly difficult to tackle the spread of misinformation in the country. It remains to be seen if this new ecosystem is eroding already fragile democratic processes or perhaps further eroding an already fragile media landscape.





RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Further fact-checking is needed in Guinea-Bissau. The small efforts made so far were heavily focused on Covid-19, yet the country faces serious challenges around the spread of information on political life which are often rife with contradictory messaging, fake news, and misinformation.
- 2 Fact-checking work needs to consider both online and offline information flows and ensure both social media platforms and the radio, together, continue to be used to reach out to the population in both Portuguese and in Crioulo.
- 3 Social media platforms already do significant amounts of work and provide tools to counter fake news, but there is a lack of digital literacy training about the tools available to citizens.
- 4 Due to Guinea-Bissau lack of geopolitical and strategic interest, content in languages such as Crioulo is not moderated by leading social media operators. Pressure needs to be applied to platforms like Facebook to ensure that they can provide this service to Bissau-Guinean users.
- 5 There is a need to address the communal aspect of the spread of fake news by engaging in nationwide digital literacy campaigns that can help members of the public uncover falsehoods. Interventions should target communities, not just individuals, particularly in rural areas and among low literacy voters. This should be an effort conducted by both the government and civil society, in coordination with social media companies.
- 6 There is a real fear in Guinea-Bissau to tackle fake news regarding politics. Support and protection must be offered to fact checkers to protect them from potential political harassment.





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