

NIGER'S

# FAKE NEWS

ECOSYSTEM

AN OVERVIEW

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**N**iger's first private media entities emerged in the 1990s following the fall of the single party and military era. However, the birth of private media did not lead to a free and independent media. A bipolar media system quickly took shape, with public media tending to support the ruling party and private media siding with the opposition. This bipolarism continues today and Nigeriens' trust in a particular media correlates strongly with their relation to their political allegiance,

Radio is the most listened to, and is perceived to be, the most reliable source of information. Low literacy rates and the fact that most Nigeriens live in rural areas with no access to electricity can partially explain this. But with growing internet access via mobile phone connection, more and more Nigeriens are becoming social media users. Facebook and WhatsApp which allow users to record, share, and receive audio and video messages have become popular even amongst people who cannot write and read in French, the official language. While these social media platforms facilitate instantaneous communication and sharing of information, they have also become the privileged terrain for the dissemination of fake news.

Such fake news is not just confined to the online realm but spreads through pre-existing word of mouth networks. Marketplaces, family gatherings, and les grins, which are popular youth hangout spots, are places where gossips and fake news circulate with the potential of reaching far more people who may not have access to social media.

There is also a ludic aspect to fake news as some people may share sensational false information just entertain their acquaintances.

Key enablers of fake news include anonymous cyber activists and politicians themselves. Prominent and recent falsehoods in circulation centre around themes of the health of the leaders, the relationship between the former and current president, Covid-19, and the French role in fighting against violent extremism.

The state response to the spread of fake news has been to develop strong legislation – the cybercrime law was dubbed “digital authoritarianism” by critics - and to jail journalists. Fact-checking is still in its infancy and predominantly is run by non-governmental organisations. Building on the need to ensure that responses to fake news do so without infringing on individuals' rights to freedom of expression this report outlines some areas where more can be done to improve the quality of content circulating in Niger's information eco-system.





# INTRODUCTION

The 1990s were a transformative moment for media in Niger. *La Conférence Nationale Souveraine* (National Sovereign Conference) which was held from 29 July to 3 November 1991 heralded a new era of democratic governance.<sup>1</sup> The conference appointed a transitional government which was tasked with organising the country's first free presidential and legislative elections in 1993, putting an end to autocratic single regimes

and military rule.<sup>2</sup> This conference triggered a review of the governance system and favoured the emergence of private media and grassroots community media which were, until then, absent. The previous journalist practice guided by state official ideology has progressively given way to a bipolar model of media where opposition elites control a large fraction of print, radio, and television alongside with the government.

## 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. Gare, A. (n.d.). Expert Analyses of the State of Media: Niger. Media Landscapes. Available at [x2](#). Apard, É. (2015). Les modalités de la transition démocratique au Niger: l'expérience de la conférence nationale. In Salvaing, B. (Ed.), *Pouvoirs anciens, pouvoirs modernes de l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui*. Presses universitaires de Rennes

2. Apard, É. (2015). Les modalités de la transition démocratique au Niger: l'expérience de la conférence nationale. In Salvaing, B. (Ed.), *Pouvoirs anciens, pouvoirs modernes de l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui*. Presses universitaires de Rennes





Today, Nigerien politics continues to shape the media landscape with outlets either affiliated closely with the political opposition or with the ruling party. In this polarised media ecosystem, radio remains a significant provider of information and news. However, the popular group messaging platform WhatsApp and Facebook have also become instrumental for creating, accessing, and sharing information. These platforms also facilitate the mass circulation of fake news.

with Nigerien media professionals and student researchers. All interviews were done via WhatsApp calls. Follow up interviews with some of the informants were conducted through voice messages. Drawing from these interviews, this report presents the information flows, key enablers and actors of fake news and its impact in Niger. It also highlights key external shapers of fake news and how it is addressed before concluding and making some recommendations.

This report discusses the ecology of fake news in Niger. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and conversations

## UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION FLOWS

**N**igerien mainstream media remains unable to break free from political and financial constraints. Journalists working for public media such as the television station *Tele Sahel* and the daily paper *Le Sahel*, are government employees and they self-censure to avoid disciplinary sanctions. Journalists who respect this unwritten rule are rewarded with career advancement and other perks such as being included on paid foreign travels with officials.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as the main client of radio, television and print advertising, the government of Niger gives preference to public media in its placement of advertising depriving private media of access to financial resources.<sup>4</sup> These constraints limit the capacity of public and private mainstream media to be impartial providers of information.

For the most part, Nigerien mainstream media operates with a certain bipolarism in

3. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. (2007) Etude sur l'état de la liberté d'expression au Niger - pas de démocratie sans liberté d'expression et de presse –Article 19. Available at [https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Niger\\_nigeretude.pdf](https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Niger_nigeretude.pdf)

4. Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). Niger: Fall in violations, but freedoms far from consolidated. Available at <https://rsf.org/en/niger>





its editorial line: media that is linked to the ruling class and media that can be referred to as opposition media. This includes the media group called *Anfani* which belongs to Grema Boucar, one of the 2020 presidential candidates, and *Radio Ténéré* which belong to Hama Hima Souley, a businessman close to late president Ibrahim Bare Mainassara. This bipolarism cuts across print media, radio, television, and online media. Therefore, media consumers are served with content that is almost always tilted in favour of one side of the political spectrum. Fake news, especially political fake news, tends to have the same colouration. The perceived bias in mainstream reporting contributes to a general lack of trust in media and creates an environment for fake news to fare well.

Despite this general lack of trust, according to an Afrobarometer 2019 report, radio is the medium which most people turn to for news. In fact, the report indicates that 32% of the Nigeriens get their news from radio every day while 13% of them follow it on television, 6% through the internet, another 6% on social media, and 1% through newspaper.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of radio is due to the fact 84% of Nigeriens live in rural areas where access to electricity is limited.<sup>6</sup> Low literacy rates and a strong oral culture are also reasons that explain why radio is preferred. In Niger, a major characteristic of the fake news circulating on social media is that it tends to be in audio form and in local languages.

Although access to internet and use of social media are still relatively low, the numbers are growing. According to an online report by

DataReportal, as of January 2021, some 3.36 million Nigeriens representing 13.6 % of the population use the internet, whilst 2.4% of the population are active social media users.<sup>7</sup> Of those social media users 100,000 have joined in the last year. For those online the most used platforms are Facebook and WhatsApp. This data suggests that there is a growing improvement of social media access in the country. Facebook also now allows users to post texts or read basic texts even without internet access on smartphones through its free basics project. Free basics is available to users in 37 developing countries including Niger.<sup>8</sup> WhatsApp is a major channel that allows fake news to circulate, especially video and audio content. Audio files are easily shared from one smartphone to another via Bluetooth technology even when there is no internet. The possibility to join a WhatsApp group where everyone in the group have access to the same posts at the same time is also a key element that exposes larger numbers of people to fake news which can help boost the credibility if the information.

Many Nigeriens are introduced to fake news on social media while looking for credible information argues radio host Oumarou Salami. "In Niger, we tend to have the information about major events through fake news first. Then, the concerned people come in a second position to give us the true news. That means if there is no fake news already about something, chances are what you are hearing in the first place is fake".<sup>9</sup> Oumarou's claim is that fake news has become the driving force for accurate information in Niger: that almost every important issue or

5. Afrobarometer (2019) "Le Niger sur les ondes: La radio, première source d'information". Available at [https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno315\\_medias\\_au\\_niger\\_1.pdf](https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r7_dispatchno315_medias_au_niger_1.pdf)

6. Ibid

7. DataReportal (2021) "Digital 2021, Niger". Available at <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-niger>

8. Champeau, G. (2016). Free Basics de Facebook : la carte de tous les pays couverts. Numerama. 13 April. Available at <https://www.numerama.com/politique/162897-free-basics-de-facebook-carte-pays-couverts.html>

9. Key Informant Interview with Oumarou Salami, radio host. 10 June, 2021.





event becomes subject of fake news.

Whilst fake news often begins online its tentacles quickly extend offline. Frequently the same fake news item is recycled, distorted, reinforced, reinterpreted, and disseminated widely via word of mouth in marketplaces, youth hangout spots, called *grins*, and at family gatherings such as weddings and naming ceremonies. *Grins* are semi-public spaces where people with similar worldviews, ages or social class gather. They tend to constitute youth, predominantly male and unemployed or underemployed, who have similar hobbies such as supporting the same football club or the same political candidate. *Grins* are spaces for intense debate and discussion about everyday happenings. People tend to believe or validate what they hear or see when the person telling the story or sharing the video or audio is an acquaintance or a family member.

Listening to fake news or sharing it with friends and network is a form of entertainment too. "Here in Niger, we often consume fake news and share them with our friends not because we believe in the truth in them, but because they entertain us" said one online blogger.<sup>10</sup> There are WhatsApp and Facebook groups dedicated to sharing funny stories. Zakou Ibrahima, an online journalist in Niamey, agreed that "WhatsApp groups where you tend to see fake news are also those dedicated to sharing funny content".<sup>11</sup> The challenge is when the line between funny information intended to entertain, and credible information, becomes blurred in the eyes of the recipients. Ibrahima noted that in

one of the WhatsApp groups where he had subscribed to entertain himself, it is not rare for someone to share a political satire and from the reactions of some of the group members, he can see that they took it to be factual information. This suggests a lack of social media literacy among some users. But also, the incongruity of political satire can become a form of fake news with peculiar challenges. When the users don't have similar ideas and kindred values to access the humour in political satire, they can misinterpret it.<sup>12</sup>



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10. Key Informant Interview with Zakaria Mariam, blogger. 4 June, 2021.

11. Key Informant Interview with Zakou Ibrahima, online journalist. 6 June 2021.

12. Kutz-Flamenbaum, R. V. (2014). Humour and social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 8, 294– 304.





## KEY ACTORS AND ENABLERS

**A**nonymous cyber activists are key actors in the production and spreading of fake news. While it is hard to say who are directly behind some of the Facebook pages posting unverified controversial information, a common feature of those pages is their impersonal nature. In fact, most of the Facebook pages where fake news is first posted use impersonal names such as *Verité & Justice* which symbolises pushing for more accountability, and *Afrique Souveraine* which is in no small way an affirmation against France's neo-colonialism. The Facebook page of *Afrique Souveraine* has about 40,000 followers and *Verité et Justice* has a little over 18,000 followers. Both pages are active and share a lot of information every day, with the latter behind a recent false story that focused on protests against the French military presence in the country. According to Godo Ramatou Abdou, a doctoral student in

media studies, most cyber activists in Niger express their political opinion through sharing information they believe will awaken their compatriots to want to seek change. In the process, they are prone to sharing fake news, sometimes before they even realise it.<sup>13</sup> Malicious fabricated news that targets certain elites especially women is common. Women social media activists are prime subject of fake news.

Given the lack of political neutrality Nigerien mainstream media is also prone to publishing unverified misleading news designed to deliberately advance a particular narrative. But according to blogger Zakaria Mariam, *Le Conseil Supérieur de la Communication* (High Council of Communication) which regulates communication in Niger must work to be more impartial and independent. "As for now, it seems to be working for the people in power," she argues.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Key Informant Interview with Godo Ramatou Abdou, a doctoral student in media studies. 1 August 2021

14. Key Informant Interview with Zakaria Mariam, blogger. 4 June, 2021.







# FAKE NEWS INFLUENCE

In Niger, the fake news ecosystem is dominated by political and security related matters. Prominent and recent falsehoods in circulation centre around themes of the health of the leaders, the relationship between the former and current president, Covid-19, and the French role in fighting against violent extremism.

The health of the head of state and senior government officials is a regular subject of fake news in Niger. During the run up to the 2021 presidential election rumours also circulated that the incumbent president, Mahamadou Issoufou, who was stepping down after serving his constitutionally mandate two-terms in a first for the country, was suffering from a mystical ailment and was not likely to survive. “This disease is the doing of some powerful Marabout, so it is over. The president is no longer of this world. It is just a matter of time before officials announce his death”, said a widely circulated audio file in Hausa. In the context of a presidential election, this type of fake news about the president is likely to have been pushed by followers of his political opponents. Strategically, according to Adamou Diallo, this type of rumour contributes to blurred and confused communication surrounding the election and has the potential to start a conflict.

“In Niger it is normal for opposing parties to lead the conversation about their rival to a slippery non-political terrain where anything they say is still undermining them. Here if candidate Bazoum or anyone in the

president’s party responds to these rumours about the health of the president or the candidate, all what people will remember is that they have health problems. Getting people to turn their attention to negative topics will prevent them from talking about what matters”.<sup>15</sup>

A notable falsehood about disputes within the ruling party also emerged in the post-election environment. In April 2021, when Mohamed Bazoum took office, many people in Niger heard a rumour that their former president and the current one had a disagreement that led to a physical fight. Adamou Diallo, a university lecturer and a civil society leader in Niamey, first heard about the fight through word of mouth at a youth meeting. “The word going around was that the PNDS [the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism] is splitting into two because the new president and his predecessor, Mahamadou Issoufou, had an irreconcilable

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***In Niger, the fake news ecosystem is dominated by political and security related matters.***

15. Key Informant Interview with Adamou Diallo, university lecturer and civil society leader, 7 June 2021.





disagreement and most of the cadres of the party are siding with the former president". In a subsequent audio, circulating on WhatsApp, describing the fight between the former and current presidents, one man said it was not a fight, but instead President Bazoum received a single slap from Issoufou.<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence that exists that such a fight took place. However, this type of fake news has the potential to bring discord among supporters of different factions within the party.

Even accurate information about politics can be skewed by false context. On 30 March 2021, just as the newly elected president prepared to take office, the government declared that it had defeated an attempted coup-d'état. But shortly after this announcement a polemical message, which circulated on WhatsApp, claimed that the "so-call coup was staged by Bazoum in order to silence all protest against his illegitimate win".<sup>17</sup> There is no evidence to support this claim, but the fact that violent protests had erupted in Niamey following the confirmation of his victory in February, which were violently suppressed served to give credence to this narrative among opposition supporters.

Falsehoods about Covid-19 have also featured prominently in recent months. Nigerian featured prominently in recent months. Nigerian authorities had initially denied the existence of Covid-19 when a journalist posted on Facebook about the first suspected patient in the country in 2020.<sup>18</sup> This perhaps explains why a recent rumour

circulating on WhatsApp in Niger has gained so much traction. It claims that world leaders who refused to take the Covid-19 vaccines or criticise the World Health Organization (WHO) are being assassinated.

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**The names of five countries do not appear in the "Our World in Data" section of the WHO Covid-19 website: Burundi, Tanzania, Haiti, Eritrea, and North Korea. President Nkurunziza of Burundi was against the dictatorship of WHO and the false statistics it was spreading about Covid-19. He was killed. John Magufuli spoke against the pharmaceuticals and denounced their fake Covid vaccines. He was killed. Jovenel Moise refused to vaccinate his people, he was shot dead. Who is next? Isaias Afwerki or Kim Jun Un?**<sup>19</sup>

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16. Ibid.

17. Key Informant Interview with Zakaria Mariam, blogger. 1 October 2021.

18. Amnesty International. (2021). Niger. Le journaliste arrêté après un post sur Facebook portant sur un cas suspect de coronavirus doit être libéré. 13 August. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2020/03/niger-journaliste-facebook-coronavirus/>

19. WhatsApp content obtained from Key Informant Zakaria Mariam, blogger, 4 June 2021. Translated from French.





Proponents of this fake news in its various formulations argue that the Covid-19 vaccine is a covert operation to genetically weaken Africans, and that the Nigerien government knows about it, but their hands are tied. Therefore, the government should not be blamed when it advocates for people to come out and get vaccinated. Instead, people must simply refuse to comply. While it is difficult to establish a direct correlation between vaccine hesitancy nurtured by anti-vaccination fake news, Niger has so far recorded one of the lowest vaccination rates in Africa. As of 7 August 2021, only 1.75% of the population had received a Covid-19 vaccine.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the cooperation between the Nigerien and the French armies in Niger, in the context of the fight against terrorism, is often subject to farcical claims on social media that have the potential to impact bilateral relation between the two countries. In January 2020, France summoned the leaders of five West African countries, including then President Mahamadou Issoufou, to discuss the contested legitimacy of its military presence and counterterrorist activities in the region. These falsehoods tend to emerge when the Nigerien army loses many men in the battle against the jihadists; like the attacks in Inates in December 2019 which killed 71 soldiers and that of Chingodiar one month later which killed 89 soldiers. Whilst the Nigerien government does not support these allegations, it does very little to counter the rumours in which the French are accused of sharing intelligence with the terrorists to give them the upper hand.

In February 2020, one striking image that

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circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp alleged that the French military was delivering motorcycles, the preferred method of transportation for jihadists in the region, to violent extremist groups in the desert. The same images also circulated in Mali around the same period. Fact checks revealed that these were in fact photos of the French delivering motorcycles to the Malian army.<sup>21</sup> But these sorts of rumours are effective because they play into existing narratives and wider perceptions that are held. One journalism student noted that, “even if the french journalism student noted that, “even if the French are not unloading motorcycles in the desert for the jihadists, how come that the jihadists have hundreds of motorcycles and enough gas to live in the desert and the bushes to carry attacks on our soldiers?”.<sup>22</sup> The use of photos out of context with new captions that redefine and seek to give them a new meaning is quite common when it comes to fake news about the French military. In May 2021, a photo showing a crowd of

20. Statista, Number of administered coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine doses per 100 people in Africa as of August 7, 2021, by country. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1221298/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-african-countries/>

21. Capron, A. (2019). L'armée française a-t-elle livré des motos à des terroristes au Mali ? Attention intox. ... Les Observateurs - France 24. 5 December. Available at <https://observers.france24.com/fr/20191204-intox-motos-livrees-armee-francaise-terroristes-mali-aeroport-bamako>

22. Key Informant Interview with Hadissa Oumarou, graduate student, 12 June 2021.





protesters was widely shared on Facebook with the caption, “Nigeriens are marching to demand the departure of the French army”. But fact-checkers at *Studio Kalangou* determined that this was in fact an old photograph taken by a Nigerien journalist during a 2018 protest in Niger against a government budget law.<sup>23</sup> As well as

impacting bilateral relations the impact of these falsehoods can be to bury legitimate citizen criticism of France and its military presence in Niger and the wider Sahel region under an avalanche of falsehoods.

## EXTERNAL SHAPERS

The Nigerien diaspora contributes to some of the farfetched fake news in the country. They are politically active and use Facebook and WhatsApp to express their political views. Because they are outside the country, they have a certain freedom to criticise the government openly without any fear of reprisals and in doing so they sometimes fabricate fake news or simply share it without verifying first. This sort of digital participation is more susceptible to fake news since they are remote from the facts and happening in their home country.<sup>24</sup>

France, though not necessarily the state, is also exerting an influence through social media. In December 2020 Facebook announced that it has removed, 84 Facebook accounts, six pages, nine groups and 14 Instagram accounts “for violating our policy against coordinated inauthentic behaviour”.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst primarily targeting Mali and the Central African Republic, the “people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to pose as locals in the countries they targeted”<sup>26</sup>, which included Niger. The main themes that the content focused on were French policy in the region and the security situation. A consequence of this activity is that French media such as Radio France International and France 24, which provide information in the country including in Hausa language, may lose credibility in the eyes of local audiences through association.

23. Mamoudou, O. (2021). FAUX, ces images ne montrent pas des manifestations contre Barkhane au Niger. *Studio Kalangou - Au rythme du Niger*. Studio Kalangou. 27 May. Available at <https://www.studiokalangou.org/index.php/magazines/fact-checking/14361-faux-images-montrent-manifestations-barkhane-niger>

24. Key Informant Interview with Godo Ramatou Abdou, a doctoral student in media studies. 1 August 2021.

25. Gleicher, N., & Agranovich, D. (2021). Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia. About Facebook. 24 March. Available at <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

26. Ibid





## ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

In response to Covid-19 falsehoods, Niger tried to provide easily accessible information to citizens via WhatsApp. In May 2020, the authorities in Niger turned to Facebook, which owns WhatsApp, and UNICEF to help fight against the spread of false information and rumours about the virus. As a result of that collaboration, a chatbot was created to target fake news on WhatsApp. Nigeriens could get free official information on Covid-19 by interacting with the chatbot in French. The Nigerien health minister argued that providing the public with reliable official information would contribute to fight against fake news surrounding the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, at the time of writing this report, the chatbot is no longer functional and informants who interacted with it, when it was, said it did not provide responses specific to Niger. In general, there is a shortage of information coming from the government. By providing more regular and credible information, the government can reduce the prominence of falsehoods. According to The Media Foundation for West Africa, Nigerien journalists in zones of conflict have difficulty accessing information. The government does not make information quickly available to them, especially information related to the military operations.<sup>28</sup> When the official information is not available, it is easy for speculative and false rumours to circulate via social media and be picked up as 'news'.

Another way Niger has sought to fight the

proliferation of fake news is by reinforcing its media laws. In May 2020, the government passed a new, and controversial, cybercrime law to tackle the dissemination of fake news and other false information. Article 31 of the law criminalises the "dissemination, production and making available to others of data that may disturb public order or threaten human dignity through an information system".<sup>29</sup> This law has already been used to arrest journalists and civil society members as well as prosecute some private media houses. In July 2020, Ali Soumana, an investigative journalist, and director of the private daily, *Le Courier*, spent two days in police custody in Niamey for publishing in print and on social media about the embezzlement of military funds, that authorities allege was false. A month earlier, blogger Samira Sabou was also tried under the 2019 cybercrime law and detained for 50 days in prison for a Facebook post on the same matter on Facebook.<sup>30</sup>

Opponents of the law believe it infringes upon free speech and allows government to conduct unnecessary surveillance. According to Amnesty International, "the law does not provide for an independent authority to sanction surveillance requests, or for a body which could adequately oversee interceptions".<sup>31</sup> It is still unclear whether the Authority for the Regulation of Electronic Communication or the Higher Authority for the Protection of Personal Data oversees the interceptions in this new law. As a result this response to the spread of fake news has

27. UNICEF. (2020). Le Gouvernement du Niger et WhatsApp lancent un ChatBot pour répondre aux questions liées au Covid-19 avec l'appui de Facebook. 5 March. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/niger/press-releases/le-gouvernement-du-niger-et-whatsapp-lancent-un-chatbot-pour-r%C3%A9pondre-aux-questions>

28. Media Foundation for West Africa, (2021). Pratiquer le journalisme dans les zones des conflits au Niger : l'impossible accès aux sources d'information. Available at <https://www.mfwa.org/fr/pratiquer-le-journalisme-dans-les-zones-des-conflits-au-niger-limpossible-acces-aux-sources-dinformation/>

29. Toussi, S., & Robertson, T. (2020). Le Niger Adopte une Nouvelle Loi sur l'Interception des Communications Électroniques. Cipesa.Org. 26 August. Available at <https://cipesa.org/2020/08/le-niger-adopte-une-nouvelle-loi-sur-linterception-des-communications-electroniques/>

30. Reporters Without Border. (2020). Niger: Two journalists arrested in disturbing setback for press freedom. July. Available at <https://rsf.org/en/news/niger-two-journalists-arrested-disturbing-setback-press-freedom>

31. Amnesty International. (2021). The State of the World's Human Rights. p. 267





been dubbed “digital authoritarianism” by civil society and opposition legislators, who boycotted the bill before it became law. An equally authoritarian response – shutting down the internet – has also been used by the Nigerien authorities. In the aftermath of the 2021 election, the government shut down the internet for ten days and police dispersed crowds gathered in Zinder and Niamey. This is a pattern which has been repeated several times since the first shutdown in 2016.

Efforts to provide better quality information to combat the spread of fake news, have mainly been developed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as *Fondation Hirondelle* from Switzerland, in partnership with local media. *La Fondation Hirondelle* through *Studio Kalangou* works

with 46 partner radio stations, located in all the regions of the country, to produce and broadcast fact-checked information. The programming is produced by local Nigerien journalists in French, Tamasheq, Fulfulde, Hausa and Zarma. These types of initiatives which consist of making official information available do not necessarily prevent the circulation of fake news, but they allow citizens to access official information more easily and more often. While these few fact-checking platforms exist, there is no domestic fact-checking operation devoted to the phenomenon that covers local politics and security related falsehoods which are very prevalent.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Most Nigeriens still get their daily news from radio. But because of its heavy reliance on government subsidies, sponsorship and purchase of advertising time and space, Nigerien mainstream media often takes a politically skewed editorial line. This is contributing to a growing erosion of the credibility of the media and has given rise to WhatsApp groups and Facebook as a place to share and receive information. But these platforms are also prominent places where fake news circulates in the country.

In Niger false information merges with far-fetched information intended to entertain or disturb to have real world impacts on political events or health issues. So far, the response of Nigerien government has been to adopt a draconian legal framework or to clampdown on the flow of information online by blocking internet access. Whilst fact-checking initiatives are emerging, these are limited and mostly done by NGOs and as a result of a lack of credible information in the eco-system falsehoods continue to flourish.

32. Simone Toussi and Thomas Robertson. (2020). CIPESA: Niger passes new law on interception of communications. Available at <https://www.apc.org/en/news/cipesa-niger-passes-new-law-interception-communications>

33. CIPESA (2020). Niger passes new law on interception of communications. Ifex.Org. 1 September. Available at <https://ifex.org/niger-passes-new-law-on-interception-of-communications/>





## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges posed by fake news in Niger the report proposes the following remedies:

- 1** It is imperative to create more fact-checking organisations to help verify information and address fake news in circulation. Once an information has been fact-checked and found to be false or fake, further effort should be made to communicate that, not only on mainstream media and websites or blogs, but also across the same social media platforms where the fake news originates.
- 2** Official information must be made more readily available to the population by the government. Providing information about Covid-19 in local languages, not just official languages, for example could help mitigate the spread of fake news about it. Allowing journalists to access information in conflict zones is also necessary to counter speculative rumours about what is really happening.
- 3** Niger must foster a free and independent mainstream media ridden off the drastic constraints media professionals face in their job to inform the public. The fight against terrorism should not be instrumentalised to muzzle free speech and press freedom.
- 4** Repressive media laws will contribute to further weaken mainstream media and favour the circulation of fake news in end-to-end encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Therefore, Niger must decriminalise press offenses and revise its media laws in accordance with international standards.
- 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** Social media literacy must be cultivated through education curricula and mainstream media, Niger must develop social media literacy programmes to advance users understanding. This could contribute to reduce unintentional relaying of fake news and acting upon reception of fake news. It is not possible to stop the fabrication and dissemination of fake news, but it is possible for the willing social media user to develop critical skills allowing them to know when information is false.





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