DEALING WITH DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION DURING ELECTIONS

A TOOLKIT TO GUIDE WAEON MEMBERS

WEST AFRICA ELECTION OBSERVERS NETWORK (WAEON)

SEPTEMBER, 2021

WAEON ROASE

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The Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) is an independent, non-governmental and not-for-profit organization that promotes and supports, through research, education, advocacy, and policy engagement, efforts to build democracy, good governance and inclusive development in Ghana and throughout Africa. CDD-Ghana's research outputs and other products are available to and used by governmental and non-governmental agencies, Africa regional bodies, development partners as well as researchers and the public.

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ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

Across West Africa, democratic transitions and consolidation are best highlighted by the conduct of regular and competitive elections. Nevertheless, nearly all countries in the sub-region continue to face enormous recurrent challenges in election administration. Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have adopted new technologies to address these challenges, compelling civil society observer groups to re-assess how they observe elections. However, political disinformation/misinformation is skewing credible coverage of electoral processes; increasing the risk for violence. This raises the question about the role of election observer groups during elections. How can these groups, who are at the forefront of supporting credible elections, be prepared to deal with the phenomenon of disinformation/misinformation, which is rapidly threatening the integrity of election results?

The toolkit provides an essential guide for member organizations of the West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON). The kit is intended to provide members with appropriate resources for their election observation programs in order to improve their capacity to plan on how to overcome the negative impacts of disinformation/misinformation on elections. The toolkit gives an overview about elections misinformation and disinformation on the continent and West African subregion. It clearly conceptualizes the information disorder and explains its manifestation in the electoral cycle, while providing readers with brief case studies of disinformation experienced during recent elections in some West African countries. It then proceeds with highlighting the implications of disinformation on elections and concludes with some practical approaches and programmatic considerations for election observer groups and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that are seeking to mitigate the effects of misinformation and disinformation in elections.

This toolkit is an addition to other existing WAEON Field Guide Series, which includes the following:

- Systematic Methods for Advancing Election Observation;
- Outreach and External Communication;
- Materials for Professional Election Observation: Designing Forms, Manuals and Training; and
- Materials for Professional Election Observation: Observing Technology-Driven Elections.

This toolkit, as with the previous Field Guides, is published in English and French, and is available on WAEON's website: www.waeon.org.

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ABBREVIATIONS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission of Sierra Leone
APC	All People's Congress
CDD West Africa	Center for Democracy and Development, West Africa
CEOGs	Citizen Election Observer Groups
CODEO	Coalition of Domestic Election Observers
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
EMBs	Election Management Bodies
ICT	Information Communications Technology
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
NDI	National Democratic Institute
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative for West Africa
PDP	Peoples Democratic Party
URL	Uniform Resource Locators
WAEON	West Africa Election Observers Network

SECTION ONE 1

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The issue of misinformation/disinformation has become one major challenge confronting the world today. Misinformation/disinformation is however not a modern phenomenon– as it existed long before established information disseminating entities like news organizations started operating. This menace is as a result of people's desire to manipulate information for their personal gain or to promote a particular agenda. What has made it rather alarming in the modern-day world is the advent of the internet and social networking technologies. With its benefit of making information reach more people faster in a timely manner, its unintended consequence has also been that the internet can be used to manipulate and disseminate misinformation/disinformation. Misinformation is also widely disseminated and amplified via social networking sites. Misinformation/disinformation happens in almost every aspect of life. From health hoaxes to deaths of popular political figures, misinformation has become a menace the world over at different points in time. Anecdotal evidence indicates that election seasons are often characterized by higher incidences of misinformation/disinformation.

The impact of disinformation/misinformation on elections in Africa cannot be underestimated. Peddlers of disinformation may not necessarily want to change the outcomes of polls - their goal, however, is to overshadow the truth, cause people to question the truth and cause a change in voting patterns. African elections have been greatly affected by these phenomena. While the least impact may be an electoral loss for one politician, its damaging consequences may range from the precipitation of civil conflicts, destruction of properties, and the rerunning of entire electoral processes. What is more concerning is that people who propagate misinformation during election seasons may not have malicious intentions. In most cases, their aim is to convince other people to vote for their political party or whichever philosophy they believe in. At the core of this is that politicians have managed to use the same technique to instill some kind of party loyalty among supporters and this tends to make them believe any message that is propagated by politicians. To these party loyalists, there is no need to check the authenticity of any message once it is coming from their favorite politician. Once politicians manage to win elections with any form of mis/disinformation, it becomes difficult for facts to prevail.

The sensitivity of elections has presented various threats which confront the stability of elections, thereby necessitating the need for election observation. The information ecosystem in many African countries (as it is in other countries across the world) is seen to be in serious decline. Misinformation and misinformation are becoming a major issue as one of the possible risks to elections, threatening the stability of electoral processes,

undermining electoral integrity, and jeopardizing democratic processes.

New Information and Communication Technology (ICT) such as the proliferation of mobile phones and social media are among the disruptive drivers of misinformation around the world (Lewandosky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). Even though a number of scholars have shown the positive impacts of social media in promoting effective governance and influencing political and social change (Bohler-Muller & van de Merwe, 2011). Other scholars also note that it can have negative effects on the populace during politically-motivated events. For instance, Adegoke (2017, p. 1) noted that "social media has been so influential and consequential in the lives of young Africans over the last five years that some governments now target social media specifically for blockages around elections and political protests''. A typical example is the case of Benin when the entire country was disconnected from the internet leaving them no access to social media, and other cyber spaces on the day of their parliamentary elections in April 2019. Even without the internet to further feed election-related disinformation and spearhead organized violence, the legislative elections were marred with rioting and property fires when former President Thomas Boni Yayi called for an election boycott. The ensuing violence was met with brutal backlash from the police, which resulted in numerous riot suspects being held without a warrant. Many protestors got hurt, some fatally. Researchers, government regulators, and political and social activists have attempted to tackle the increasing menace of disinformation/misinformation and its consequences in Africa through dialogue, research and various interventions.

Media literacy, statutory regulation, self-regulation, and the application of technology have all been recommended and instituted in many African countries to control this rising menace of disinformation on the continent (Okon, Musa & Oyesomi, 2021). Scholars such as Okon et al., (2021) believe that some legislative frameworks protect cyber security and provide mechanisms for organizations to control disinformation operations on the Internet. A technical application for fact-checking is one example of this. The majority of actions in West Africa to combat disinformation and misinformation are controlled by governments.

Due to the various implications of information disorder on a countries' electoral, political, and socioeconomic landscapes, it is critical for institutions such as election observer groups that support democracy and good governance to implement the best practices in its management to mitigate its effects on the society.

SECTION TWO 2

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF INFORMATION DISORDER

Definitions and descriptions of the information disorder system

According to First Draft (2021), information disorder refers to the many ways by which the information ecosystem is polluted. This definition categorizes three distinct types of the phenomenon namely: disinformation, misinformation and malinformation.

(a) Disinformation is the deliberate creation of false content with the intent to cause harm. This is often seen when the sharer of information intentionally puts out false content.

For instance, during the Ondo elections in Nigeria in 2019, a viral mobile message, with the sender posing as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), sent 335 text messages claiming that the Ondo State People's Democratic Party (PDP) Governorship candidate, Mr. Eyitayo Jegede had stepped down from the election. This was found to be false, according to a Dubawa Nigeria fact-check. INEC spokesperson, Festus Okoye indicated that the message was a hoax meant to disrupt the election. This was done in an attempt to cause vote loss for Jegede (Dubawa, 2020).

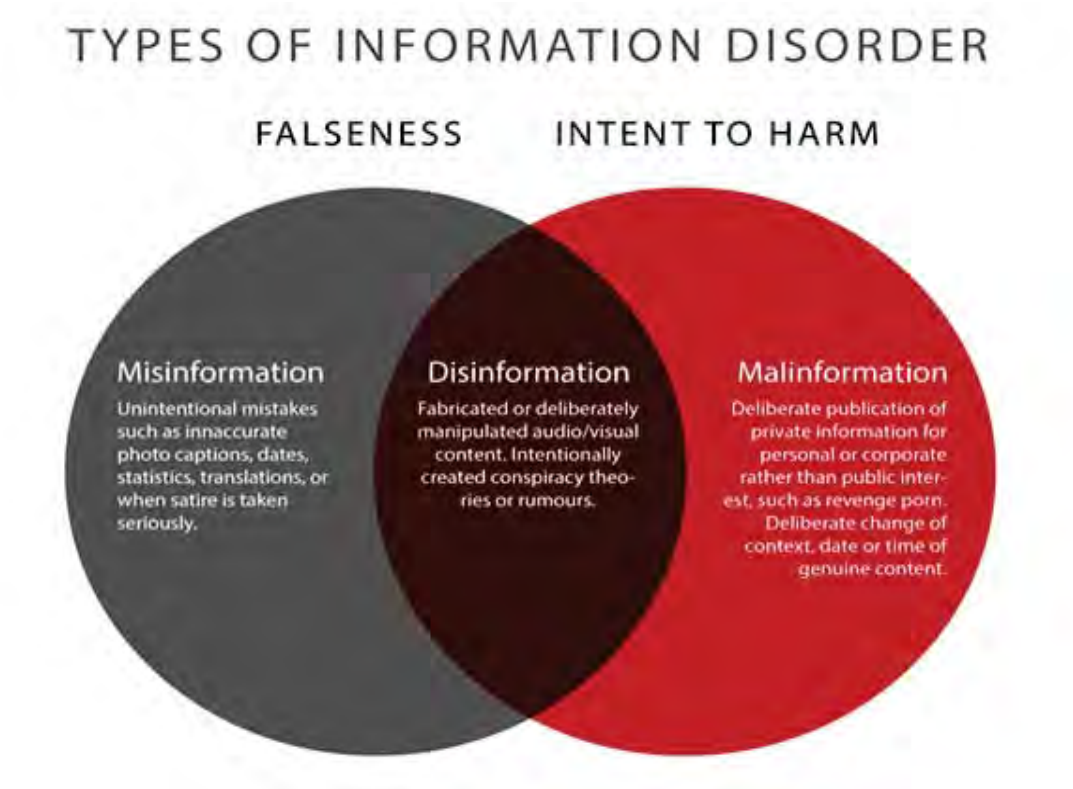
(b) Misinformation refers to information that is false but was not created with the intention of causing harm. More often than not, the information being shared is unverified.

In April 2021, a viral video was circulated on social media suggesting that a large number of Chadians were crossing the Ngueli bridge into neighboring countries following the death of their former president, Idriss Déby. The video was shared to create awareness of the issue and cause some government action. The video was however checked and found to be contrary to what was being suggested. The unverified video, which was widely shared, caused some stir in social media spaces (Ahiable, 2021).

(c) Malinformation is information based on reality but used to inflict harm on people, organizations or countries.

For example, a viral social media post suggested that All People's Congress (APC) thugs and supporters were destroying roads in the North because of White Paper and because Ali Baba and his thieves will be facing the Anti-Corruption Commission

(ACC) of Sierra Leone. A fact-check conducted by Dubawa Sierra Leone revealed that although the image used was a real image, it was taken from an incident that happened in South Africa, not Sierra Leone. The image was used to tarnish the image of the APC (Tarawally, 2020).



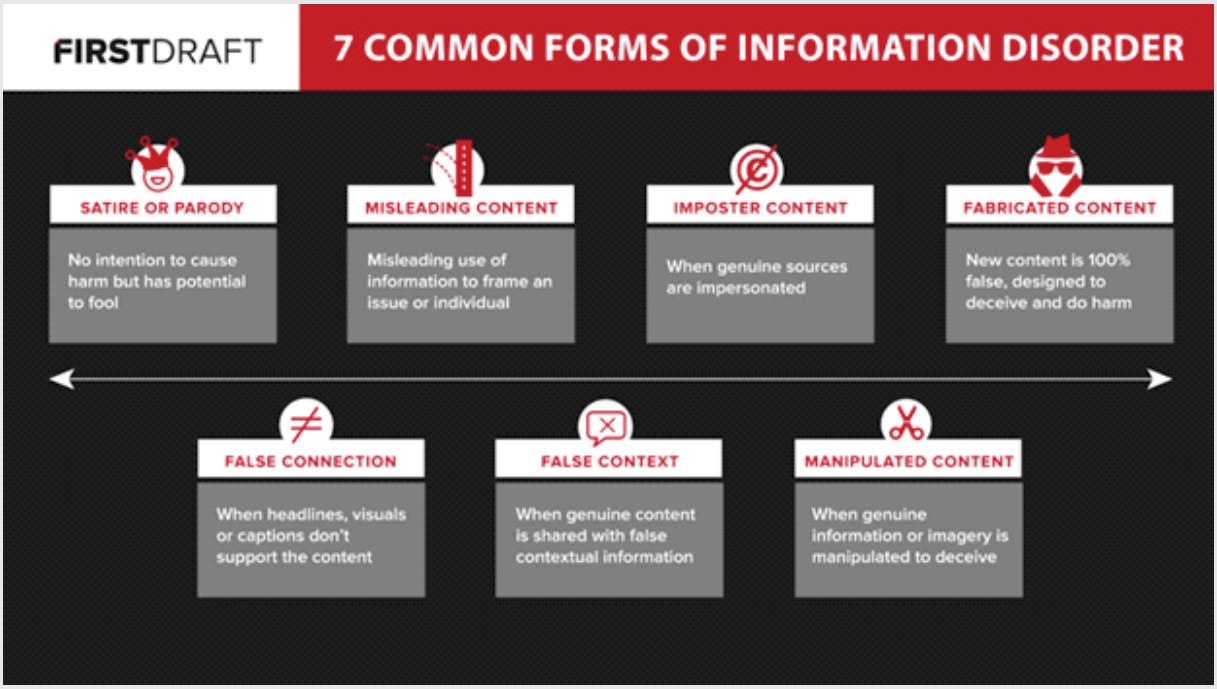
Source: First Draft Credit: Wardle & Derakshan (2017).

Wardle (2017) further categorizes information disorder into seven (7) categories, based on the elements of information disorder; i.e. the agent, the message and the interpreter.
The Agent is the creator, producer and distributor of information based on a motive. Actors can be official or unofficial, they can be individuals, organizations, or groups formed around common interests. Their motives may vary widely from financial, political, social, or psychological. The actors can determine the intended audience of the information, the medium by which the information will be sent and the intention behind creating and sharing the message, be it to harm or to mislead.

The message encompasses the type of message, the format of the message and the characteristics of the message created and circulated. It can be conveyed through agents in person (through speeches, gossip, etc.), via text (newspaper articles, brochures or pamphlets), or in audio/visual material (images, videos, motion graphics, edited audio-

clips, memes, social media live stories, etc). Wardle (2017) further breaks down information disorder into seven (7) forms:

- Satire or parody: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool
- Misleading content: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual
- Imposter content: When genuine sources are impersonated
- Fabricated content: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm
- False connection: When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content
- False context: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information
- Manipulated content: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive



Source: First Draft; Credit: Wardle (2017).

The final element is the interpreter; the recipient of the message. This focuses on how the message was received and the interpretation drawn from it and consequently, the action taken, if any. Individuals interpret the information they receive based on personal experiences, political affiliations, positions, and socio-cultural status. Thus, there is no single mode of information reception.

The recipient is also the target of misinformation or disinformation. Targets cut across individuals, groups of people, organizations and countries. For instance, during an election, mis/disinformation which may be shared is most likely targeted at the electorates in general in a bid to persuade votes for or against a particular candidate(s). In that same scenario, parliamentary contestants may direct their misinformation to the constituents while private

sponsors of political parties may create and disseminate content to create favorable images of candidates that will benefit them. At the hilt of this is the role recipients play in the spread of false information. Studies have found that on a large scale, humans, through their actions, are more likely to spread false news and therefore are the major propagators of false information (Buchanan 2020; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

Manifestation of dis/misinformation in the electoral cycle

Disinformation and misinformation manifest in various forms throughout the electoral cycle; it appears in the form of text, images, audio-visuals (deep and shallow fakes), memes, motion graphics among others. Particularly during the period of elections disinformation and misinformation also surfaces through propaganda. Propaganda is mischievous, biased, or misleading information that has an agenda to prove a political point or amplify a political ideology (Neale, 1977). Even though disinformation can serve the interests of propaganda, propaganda is not the same as disinformation. Propaganda is usually more openly manipulative than disinformation, typically because it thrives on emotional rather than informational messaging (UNESCO, 2018). The manifestations of false information carry through the various phases of the electoral cycle: pre-election, election day and post-election.

► Pre-election phase

This is the period leading to elections. It is a competitive period as political parties and candidates put in lots of effort to campaign for votes. In Ghana for instance, this is also the period within which party manifestos are launched and campaign promises made. Candidates seek to highlight their previous achievements or interrogate the performance of their opponents. This period is often riddled with hordes of political falsehoods and blatant mistruths which are widely disseminated to paint opponents in unfavorable light or in order to gain political advantage among the voting populace. Within this period as well, there are attempts by agents to create an atmosphere in which the public doubts the processes and outcomes of pre-election activities of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) such as voter registration and voter exhibition exercises.

► Election day

Misinformation and disinformation on election day tend to appear as issues that have to do with voter rights, voter turnout or its lack thereof, and fear-inducing content. The aim of some of this false information may be to wear eligible voters out with fear to reduce voter turn-out and the performance of

voters' civic rights. Reducing voter turnout impedes true electoral representation and tends to induce a sense of indifference where individuals begin to believe that their vote may not make a difference or have value.

By spreading false information of violence in certain locations, voters may get deterred from venturing to their polling centers to vote which disrupts the voting process.

► Post-election phase

Vote tabulation usually gives rise to false news as multiple agents independently broadcast varied results and, in some instances, fabricate results that are then shared with voters. Common errors such as wrong number entries also constitute false information during this phase of the election cycle, owing to manual entries of figures collated by news and media organizations. It is at this point in the election process that uncertainty and disputes erupt easily as major electoral stakeholders such as the media and news organizations, election observer groups, and Election Management Bodies (EMBs) make efforts to put out election results.

During this phase, political party agents make efforts to give hope to their followers by proclaiming themselves as winners even before the official announcement of results is done by the EMB. This creates a sense of mistrust among citizens.

In all these phases of the electoral cycle, the role of election observers is critical in the sanitization of the information ecosystem to safeguard electoral integrity.

CASE STUDIES OF DISINFORMATION IN WEST AFRICAN ELECTIONS

► Nigeria

Widespread reports of violence broke in Kano state during the 2019 elections following the inability of the police to manage situations that led to violence and unchecked intimidation of voters during the supplementary governorship elections. This is believed to have contributed to a lower turn-out because of the fear of an outbreak of election violence. Claims had been made by one of the two major political parties that thugs had been brought into Kano from neighboring states by their opposing political party resulting in the intimidation and stopping of some party supporters from voting in the polls (Onyeji, 2019).

► Côte d'Ivoire

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Côte d'Ivoire held its elections on 31st October, 2020. Prior to election day, social media was flooded with false information regarding the epidemic, with viral social media posts suggesting that the virus and its spread were orchestrated by the government. These posts further suggested that the masks being sold were contaminated with the coronavirus by the Chinese, causing distrust in the protective gear. Further, there were rumors Africans were being used as "guinea pigs" in the testing of the COVID -19 vaccines.

False information of this sort has the potential to incite fear and panic, as well as mistrust in governments as citizens, which was the case for Cote d'Ivoire as Ivorians criticized authorities in charge of mismanaging the health crisis. This resulted in low voter turnout on the election day due to perceived challenges to the electoral process (National Democratic Institute (NDI), 2021).

► Ghana

The 2020 general elections in Ghana were historic on many fronts. It was the first to have been conducted in the country during a pandemic, the first to feature a sitting president and a former president from two major political parties, and it was the first since 1993 to feature a female running mate from one of the major political parties. Stakes were high as preparations began, leading to the creation and circulation of some false contents in the bid to win over the electorates.

A major story that broke just before the 2020 general elections was an alleged bribery scandal involving the sitting president who was allegedly caught on camera accepting a bribe in 2017 in his capacity as President of the Republic of Ghana. The video caused widespread disapproval as the president was purported to have accepted the bribe in order not to sack the then Director of Urban Roads, Alhaji Abbas. Using forensic analysis, it was later revealed that the video had been doctored. A full and clearer version of the video revealed that the context of the video was different from what had been presented (Danso, Jonathan & Anipah, 2020).

► The Gambia

In January 2017, Gambia was hit with news alleging the death of president-elect Adama Barrow. The news, which made rounds on social media, increased tension in the country as the out-going president refused to step down. The spread of the news was fueled by online circulation by blogs and online news websites, causing fear and panic among citizens.

Efforts from the camp of the incumbent as well as media input were necessary to debunk the false news, prompting citizens to ignore the rumor in preparation for the inauguration of the president-elect (Akwei, 2021).

► Sierra Leone

There was an upsurge of tribal rhetoric during the 2018 elections in Sierra Leone. Abdulai Baratay, the presidential spokesperson, accused opposition supporters of voting along tribal lines, a language which he later denied using as he claimed to have rather said that citizens were voting based on "regionalism", a word seen as a euphemism for tribalism. People took to the street, resulting in increased incidents of violence in the country. The entire environment was riddled with fear and tension with the increasing risks of sparking tribal tensions (Inveen & Maclean, 2018).

► Senegal

Senegal's last presidential election in 2019 was a battle among about 80 aspirants. A few weeks before the 2019 presidential elections, there was widespread information on one of the opposition presidential candidates, Ousmane Sonko. Sonko was alleged to have been involved in a bribery scandal with an European oil company, Tullow Oil. During this period, social media and many websites published this article accusing Sonko, who later denied the allegations in an interview. Tullow Oil also denied the allegations. Several investigations carried out on the article by independent fact-checking organizations revealed that all the documents used in the article to push the bribery narrative were fake. Senegalese journalists confirmed that they were bombarded with so much false news in the run-up to the 2019 elections, with this article being the most prevalent. It was viewed as just another piece of misinformation aimed at undermining the opposition presidential candidate (Okanla, 2019; Madsen, 2020).

INFORMATION DISORDER

SECTION THREE 3

IMPLICATIONS OF DISINFORMATION ON ELECTIONS

Effects of disinformation on electoral integrity

Disinformation and misinformation have dire consequences on electoral integrity. By global democratic standards, elections are meant to be free, fair, transparent, and peaceful. Yet, this is not always the case as one of the ways in which the stability of electoral processes is compromised, is by the dissemination of false election-related information.

As the world adapts to new Information and Communications Technology (ICT), the fast-paced nature of social media and the anonymity characterized by both the Internet and social media have caused the spread of false information to soar. Governments and individuals have weaponized the use of these digital tools: to attack political candidates by spreading propaganda; to discredit democratic institutions and civil society groups through defamatory statements; and to cause public unrest and public violence, by posting malicious election-related content. Undoubtedly, all the afore mentioned ways by which manipulators of information have spread misinformation and disinformation has led to an obstruction of electoral processes and posed risks to electoral credibility, integrity and the quality of democratic deliberation. More specifically, disinformation can skew election outcomes, delegitimize the credibility of the electoral process, corrupt judicial processes, compromise the data of citizens and affect the ability of citizens to hold the elected representatives accountable.

Effects of disinformation on the work of election observers

The role of election observation is key in protecting the integrity of elections. Election observers, who are mandated with this task, could also be inundated, even as targets with false election-related information that consequently seek to discredit and impede the success of their work. It is for this reason that election observers need a hands-on approach in tackling the effects disinformation has on their work, and elections, as a whole.

SECTION FOUR 4

ADDRESSING DISINFORMATION: THE ROLE OF ELECTION OBSERVERS

Countering disinformation and misinformation is a long-term project and election observers stand to play a vital role in ensuring that this is achieved. Throughout the electoral cycle, opportunities exist for election observers to help address issues associated with electoral disinformation/misinformation. An essential step in this process is to incorporate disinformation monitoring into their observation programming and to a larger extent their methodology.

This process would involve five main steps which are: conducting a preliminary assessment of the information environment, identifying the objectives, defining the methodology, identifying the tools that fit the methodology and implementation.

1. Conducting a preliminary assessment of the information environment: This is done by interrogating existing laws on misinformation/ disinformation, and determining the extent of their applicability online. It is also important to ensure that the assessment covers the legal framework and regulatory, traditional and social media environments as well as other sources of information for the public. Further it must consider media ownership, history, trends and themes of misinformation/disinformation around elections and the biggest risks to electoral integrity. Consideration should be given to what the election observer group is concerned about, for instance voter suppression, and or online intimidation. The assessment should also determine what other organizations have planned or ongoing initiatives to fight misinformation and disinformation. Mapping these organizations (eg. academics, human rights groups, fact checkers etc.) and their initiatives will help assess their success or otherwise in protecting informational credibility.

2. Identify objectives: Since inaccurate information can be disseminated during the electoral cycle, it is important to identify specific objectives in order to narrow the scope of monitoring. This is because it is nearly impossible for anyone to monitor the entire Internet for disinformation and misinformation. It is important to define the scope of what constitutes potential inaccurate information around the electoral process. Therefore, setting objectives would help

election observers to have illustrative findings and tangible actions that can be pursued based on the findings. To arrive at this, a keen focus should be on data collection and analysis that ensure the following:
i) produces information that can be used
ii) enables removal of misleading online content
iii) sanctions the disinformers; and
iv) advances voter and public education

After this is achieved, stakeholders should be identified and briefed on findings in an event of actions being violated by their policies. Stakeholders include political parties, government agencies and media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

3. Define the methodology: It is necessary for observer groups to establish what is being measured, and to define parameters of the platforms and actors that will be monitored. This can be done by setting monitoring timelines, mapping out the duration of the given electoral cycle, determining how the data will be categorized and measured, and noting the limitations to data collection and analysis. All of this should be considered under the organization's specified budget for the project.

4. Identify appropriate tools for methodology: Observer groups should identify what tools best fit in their methodology in cognizance s of their strengths and weaknesses for the platforms being monitored. The following should be considered when selecting the most effective tool:
i) the nature of the tools
ii) the tools' compliance with the platform to be monitored
iii) the organizational workflow
iv) the ability of the tool to accommodate multiple users
v) the affordability of the tool

A few of such effective tools are suggested for consideration. These include Free bot detectors (helps to verify handles), CrowdTangle (helps in fact-checking) and R Studio and Python (helps to interact with the Application Programming Interface (API) of platforms).

5. Implementation: When there is a conclusion on the process of monitoring, observer groups need to implement them accordingly. Implementation is largely dependent on the organization's budget and the strength of the staff. The following should be

considered when budgeting:
i) staff time;
ii) equipment/tools needed;
iii) subscription cost for tools; and
iv) server cost

Election observer groups are largely focused on other parts of the observation program. Thus, a staff unit designated solely for combating misinformation/disinformation, under the direction of a manager, should be constituted. The team should have a communication plan that details the team's work updates and effectively disseminates its information to all staff. There should also be a strong regard for ethics and privacy by making anonymous the data that was gathered.

Observer groups and CSOs must note that in their methodology, it is unethical to act as spies in hate groups. They should consider the electoral standards and social media policies on the platforms in their monitoring process.

How election observer groups help mitigate disinformation during elections

Election observation is becoming more challenging due to interventions that seek to undermine the electoral process. To counter misinformation and disinformation, there is a need for coverage, commitment, and the deployment of resources from election observer groups. Observers must also transition from passive to active observers, constantly engaging in observation work before, during, and after elections while remaining neutral, because being perceived as biased by other stakeholders can undermine their credibility and compromise election integrity. , Because elections are considered to be a process and not an event, interventions by election observer groups must take into consideration the mitigation measures that can be undertaken in each phase of the electoral cycle, that is, the pre-election, election day and post-election.

Pre-election Phase

Election Observer Groups should:

- Build the capacity of election observers and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to understand the complexity of misinformation and disinformation and how they can contribute to countering it
- Partnerships with organizations that have similar mandates should be established to create a community of practice and to learn about what they are doing right

Partners can together create public digital literacy awareness about the ills of misinformation and disinformation. They can explore ways to positively leverage digital media, as indicated by a study by the Abuja based Center for Democracy and Development (CDD West Africa) there is the need to focus on digital and civic literacy

- Observers should invest in comprehensive public education on the dangers of misinformation and disinformation to the electoral process. It is also vital that voters be well equipped with truthful information on existing legal frameworks that exist to curb disinformation and basic awareness building in order to promote positive behavioral change that ensures peaceful elections. Aside from the conventional approaches to public education, modern outreach approaches like social media are useful for quickly disseminating information through various forms like memes, animation, fact-cards, and short video sketches, ensuring reach to the vast majority of people in a shorter time
- Observers should be trained with basic media literacy skills such as recognizing a phony website, determining the source of information, navigating dubious and doubtful material, and establishing contact with authorized fact-checking groups; Train and work with the media to counter misinformation and disinformation and to importantly, ensure only verified information is circulated. Additionally, fellowships should be provided to journalists so they can strengthen their independence
- Observer missions should seek financial and technical collaborations. Organizations such as the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) have tools developed by young bloggers that are sophisticated and can be used for fact-checking
- Develop a formal structure to counter misinformation and disinformation
- Election observers and CSOs should advocate for legal frameworks on electoral misinformation and disinformation to be established, where it is absent and subsequently push for its enforcement
- Engage a cohort of volunteers who are incentivized to deal with misinformation and disinformation; and
- Citizen Election Observer Groups (CEOGs) should consider engaging the services of social media/disinformation experts as part of the election mission

Election day

Election Observer Groups should:

- Produce local languages fact-checks in order to reach a wider audience and consequently stem the communal spread of misinformation and disinformation
- Deploy technology to trawl information online
- Use influencers to counter misinformation and disinformation
- Deploy disinformation monitors to debunk false information

- Stronger collaboration is needed between international observer missions and CEOGs who are under-resourced but have enormous human resource capacity, a wider coverage, and know the country's terrains better
- EMB's and Election Observer Groups should collaborate with social media platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation. This should involve engaging with social media platforms on their misinformation and disinformation mitigation protocols, and on how platforms can respond quickly to queries and reports of misinformation and disinformation and enforce deterrent measures
- Trained and equipped youth should be utilized to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation. They can constitute a team to help crosscheck information and to help track social media as they are more tech savvy
- Experts should be allowed to carry out fact-checking with support from observers; and
- Observer missions should incorporate fact-checking platforms into incidence reporting desks

Case Study: Domestic Observer Group collaborates with a Fact-Checking Organization during Ghana's 2020 elections

During the 2020 general election in Ghana, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) and Dubawa Ghana collaborated to fight electoral misinformation and disinformation. The collaboration facilitated the incorporation of a fact-checking platform into the incident reporting desk of CODEO, using CODEO observers as verification points during the election.

CODEO, as Ghana's largest election observer group, brought into the collaboration access to the various polling stations across the country, which was useful in providing information from the field and for verification where and when needed. In addition to this, CODEO lent its reach to the fact-checking organization, Dubawa Ghana, by retweeting fact-checks and fact-cards on their social media platforms.

Dubawa, prior to the election day, conducted training for relevant media personalities, like journalists from media houses across the country, and bloggers. Dubawa was also responsible for setting up an election fact-checking desk where verified reports were produced, deploying fact-checkers to the CODEO incident desk and also sharing CODEO's content on their social media platforms.

The collaboration was highly successful as quick and real-time verification was enabled due to on-ground assistance from the observers on site. There was also a wider reach for fact-checked reports along with improved visibility for both Dubawa and CODEO.

Post - election phase

Election Observer Groups should:

- Maintain collaborations with fact-checking organizations to debunk and verify post-election related information
- Monitoring organizations should involve and partner with the judiciary, as electoral judges ultimately have the responsibility of determining electoral outcomes in instances where misinformation and disinformation contribute to contentious election outcomes; and
- Election observers should produce detailed and truthful reports that capture all incidents related to misinformation and disinformation during the electoral cycle

Additional measures:

- Research should be conducted and centered on election observation and fact-checking so that election observers can be updated with credible information
- There is the need to collaborate with security agencies to name and shame the purveyors of misinformation and disinformation
- New legal frameworks should be enacted to mitigate the limitations of existing frameworks in addressing incidences of misinformation and disinformation; and
- Election Observer Groups and CSOs should improve their knowledge of legal frameworks intended to deal with misinformation and disinformation, and utilize them as appropriate
- Election Observers need to conform to code of ethics and best practices when it comes to the organization of elections

Tools, resources and skills for fighting misinformation and disinformation during elections

It is of utmost importance that Election Observer Groups stay updated with digital tools that can assist in the fight against misinformation and disinformation, as well as invest in acquiring the necessary skills required in that regard.

The basic skills needed for fighting misinformation and disinformation cut across the various forms of false information. Fact-checking as a tool for fighting disinformation during elections requires keen observation and analytical skills. It is also important that all biases be put aside in the process to ensure that correctly verified and bias-free information is produced and distributed to audiences.

Based on the different manifestations of false information, different tools and skills are needed to conduct verifications.

- When staged scenes, art, ads or movies are encountered during elections, it is critical to seek out reliable sources to confirm such content or to contact local authorities to ask about it
- Photoshopped images such as gory pictures shared during violent conflict or tense environments should be looked at cautiously and questioned. Seeking reliable sources to confirm, or the relevant authority to probe is necessary
- Fake accounts on social media are very common during election periods for various reasons. On social media applications like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, it is easy to spot verified accounts of famous or prominent people by looking out for blue tick marks on their profile page. This can help clarify if the source of the information being questioned is from the right source or not. Be wary however of hackers who can get into accounts for malicious reasons. In such instances, ask for evidence to authenticate the individual. You may also check previous posts to see if they are consistent with the individual
- Always check if you can find original posts regarding fake tweets, phone conversation screenshots, social media wall posts, etc.

Images/Photos

Tools:

- Reveye Reverse Image Search: Useful for verifying pictures to find out where else a photograph has been used and when it was used
- TinEye Reverse Image Search: Helps to find out where else a photo has been used and allows you to check whether the one you have has been altered or manipulated. It also helps find the newest, oldest, and most changed versions of a photo
- FotoForensics: Helps in determining whether a photo was modified and the process which facilitated the modification of the photo

Videos

Tools:

- Video vault: This tool can be used to preserve videos, take screenshots for reverse image searches, slow down and speed up videos to simplify the verification process.
- YouTube Data viewer: This tool gives details of the video and when it was uploaded. It also takes screengrabs from videos for reverse image search to find other iterations and earlier posts of the same video if they exist.

Other Useful Tools

Geolocation Tools: Google Earth, Google Street View are useful for getting satellite images

of locations or places across the world over. It also provides internal images of some structures, close ups and videos of places, as well as street level views. It can show help with claims about events or violence taking place at specific locations.

Exif Data viewer: Helps to pinpoint coordinates of where the photos are taken. It can go as far as to tell you which device on which the photograph was taken. Regardless of some limitations to this tool, it can be helpful in finding great information on some original images.

Integrating tools into election observation methodologies

Customizing verification tools and processes to suit election observation methodologies may provide a fluid opportunity for fighting misinformation and disinformation without drawing focus on the core role of the observer.

1. Media strategies should be included in election observation strategies. This will ensure that information sent to the public domain is protected from distortion.
2. The West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON) should undertake training for member organizations to prepare them for spotting and verifying election-related disinformation.
3. Fact-checking should be adopted and deployed as part of the election observation strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation. Partnerships with accredited fact-checking organizations is recommended.
4. Election monitoring organizations should engage religious leaders and community stakeholders in efforts to counter false information during elections.
5. A platform/mechanism should be created for easy access to verified and truthful information.
6. Partnerships should be forged with mainstream journalists, bloggers, security agencies, traditional leaders and other stakeholders.

Dealing with unverified, suspicious or false information

How to spot a fake website

- Check if the Uniform Resource Locators (URL) is misspelt: A common trick among people who clone websites is to use a similar name. However, as no two exact domain names can co-exist, one letter in the domain name is usually misspelt. An example would be mimicking an original site such as **WAEON.org** to be **WAE0N.org** or something close.
- Check the domain age: A site can be checked for how long it has been in existence. **WhoisLookup** domain is a helpful tool in assessing some basic details of a website such as who the domain is registered to, its location et cetera.

- Check for a site seal: A site seal means that the site is authentic. A site seal also gives more information on the website and how it was verified. When a site seal shows nothing when it is clicked on, the site seal should not be trusted as it may also be an imitation of an original one
- Look for a lock: The "s" in https:// which is found in the address bar means "secure". Therefore, a site that usually has no "s" such as http:// means it is not secure. This is also usually symbolized by a padlock on the domain name
- Scan the site: The site can be subject to a virus scan through free resources such as IsitHacked?, VirusTotal, PhisTank and FTC Scam Alerts
- Check for grammatical errors and contacts: Websites usually saturated with many spelling mistakes are often fake. Equally, there should be at least some contact provided reachable to confirm information from

Some tips on what to do when you encounter questionable information

It is critical that recipients of information of any kind that may seem questionable or in a way suspicious refrain from sharing immediately. Consider the following:

- Read beyond the headline to find out the entire story. It just may be a click-bait headline.
- Ask pertinent questions:
    - Who is this information coming from?
    - Should this type of information be coming from this source?
    - What evidence is used to back the information?
    - Is there a way to find out if it is really from the claimed source? (There usually is, if the source is credible)
    - Has any credible media organization published this information, i.e. if it is a news story?
    - When was this written and what is its purpose?
- When dealing with information from websites, consider finding out if the website is a satirical website or not. You may find this in the "About Us" section of the page.
- Contact experts who can help verify the information for you.

Contacts to Active Fact-Checking Organizations in West Africa

Country	Organization	Contact Information
Ghana	Dubawa Ghana	Telephone: +233(0)542818189 Email: contact@dubawa.org
	GhanaFact	Telephone: +233302438064 Email: info@ghanafact.com
	Fact-check Ghana	Telephone: +233302555327 Email:info@fact-checkghana.com/ factcheckghana@gmail.com
Nigeria	Dubawa Nigeria	Telephone: +234 (0) 913 116 7621 Email: contact@dubawa.org
	Africa Check	Telephone: +234 08377 7789 Email: nigeria@africacheck.org
	AFP Fact Check Africa (Nigeria)	https://factcheck.afp.com/contact
	People's check	Telephone: +234(0)9077420450 Email: info@peoplescheck.org
	ICIR factcheck	Telephone: +234 903 078 5265 Email: info@factcheckhub.com

Sierra Leone	Dubawa Sierra Leone	Email: contact@dubawa.org
Gambia	Dubawa Gambia	Email: contact@dubawa.org
Liberia	Dubawa Liberia	Email: contact@dubawa.org
Côte d'ivoire	FLV Africa Check	Telephone: +221 78 386 67 32
Senegal	FLV Africa Check	Telephone: +221 783866732
	AfricaCheck	Telephone: +221 33 824 1720 Email: senegal@africacheck.org
Ivory Coast	AFP Factual	https://factuel.afp.com/contact
Guinea	PesaCheck (Guinea)	Email: info@pesacheck.org

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