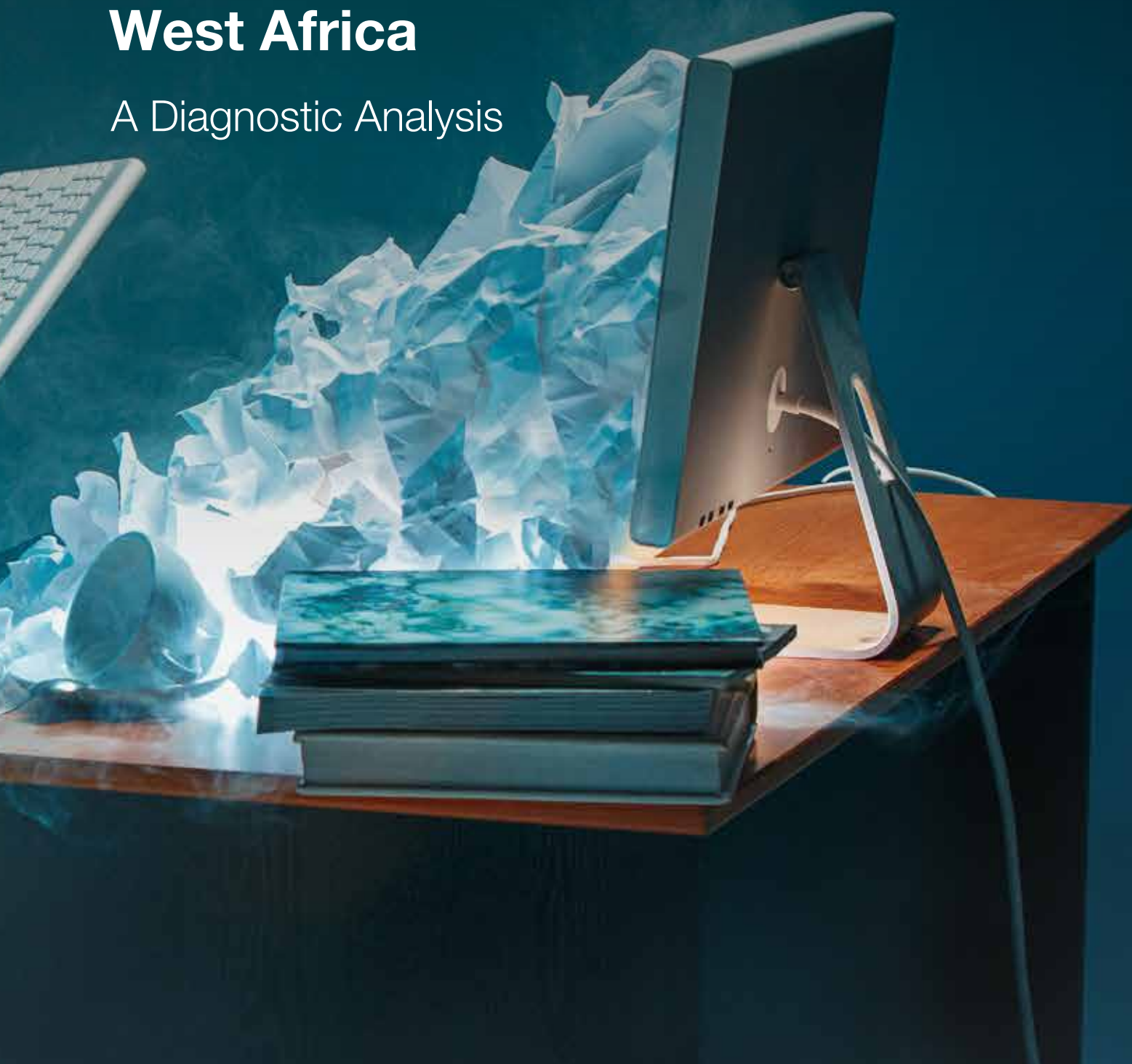


POLICY BRIEF



Information Pollution, New Technologies and Extremism in West Africa

A Diagnostic Analysis



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BBYDI remains committed to fostering constructive dialogue, promoting evidence-based policymaking, and contributing to positive social change in Africa and beyond.

About Us

Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative (BBYDI) is a female-led non-profit organization dedicated to promoting good governance, youth civic engagement and sustainable communities. As a youth-led organization, our team harnesses the power of technology, conducts comprehensive research, and utilizes data-driven methodologies to enhance the information landscape in Nigeria. In the last eight years, we have reached over 500,000 Nigerians across the 36 States of the Federation through a series of civic tech projects. Notably among them remains our;

1. **YvoteNaija Platform**, a civic tech tool that is aimed at enhancing youth participation in election and governance.
2. **Conflict Report Platform**, a UNDP-funded civic tech and community-inclined strategy to address violent extremism in the north-central region of Nigeria, we adopted the EWER (Early Warning Early Response) model to detect and de-escalate incidents that could lead to violent conflict.
3. **Election Violence Incidence Tracker (EVIT)**, is a citizen-focused platform created to understand, analyze and track violence incidents before, during, and after elections.
4. **KnowCovid19 Project**, a U.S.-funded innovative initiative to counter information manipulation and provide citizens with accurate and reliable information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, we launched a Fact-Check Elections platform in an attempt to flatten the curve of information manipulation and misinformation thereby promoting peace and safeguarding Nigeria's democracy through innovative engagement with young people, voting-age individuals, traditional media professionals and universities.



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young journalists across all 36 states
in Nigeria, empowering them with
accountability and transparency tools.

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1 Introduction

From health management to security, electricity to agriculture, information is a treasure for state and non-state actors.



Information is crucial to any democratic setting. It is what drives democratic decision making and serves as the link between those in power and the people upon whom power is exercised. There is hardly any sector of a country's life that is not driven by the exchange of information between power holders and the citizenry. From health management to security, electricity to agriculture, information is a treasure for state and non-state actors.

However, for countries in Africa, especially in the West African sub-region, the information ecosystem has witnessed the incursion of information pollution. This is a concept used to describe attempts to contaminate the flowing water of information in every facet of life in the countries of the region with far reaching implications on citizen-government trust, security and socio-economic stability and democratic gains.

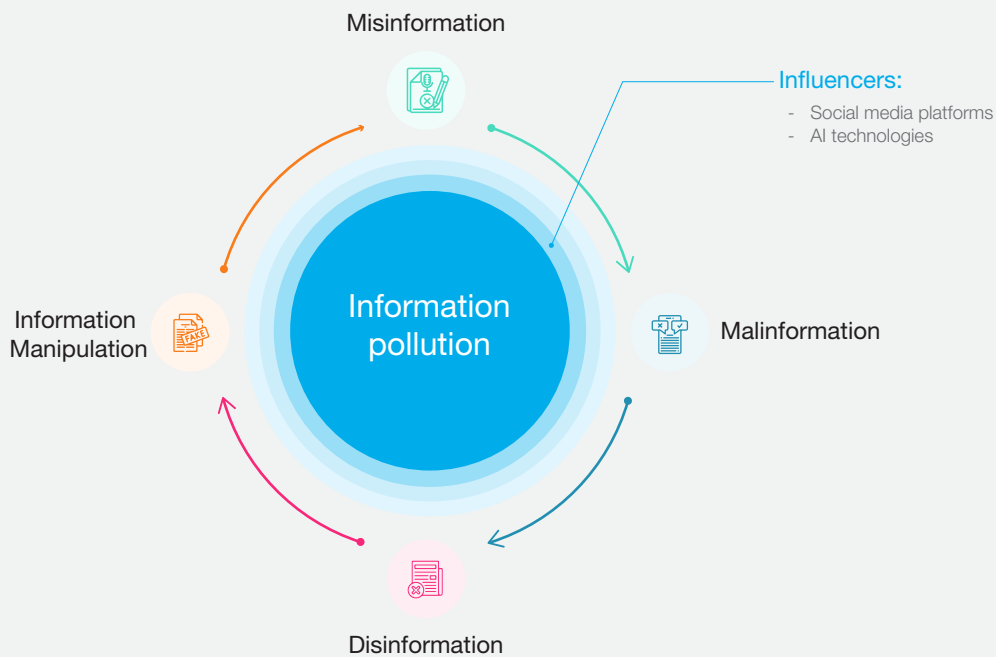


Information is crucial to any democratic setting.

Information pollution as reflected in its various formats such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and information manipulation have consequential effects on a lot of problems confronting each of the countries in the region, individually as well as those problems with wider interborder implications such as health emergencies and security concerns. This does not also leave out attempts to entrench democratic culture and processes. The emergence of social media platforms and the use of AI

technologies has also made the creation, distribution and wider spread of all varieties of information pollution easier in the sub-region leading to hate speech, violent extremism and deepened insecurity in the countries of the Lake Chad region.

Using a multi-faceted research approach, this report investigated the relationship between information pollution, digital technologies, and violent extremism in the selected case countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire.



② Our Approach

The report employed an integrated research strategy using both secondary and primary data sources.



The report employed an integrated research strategy using both secondary and primary data sources. The data sources included survey, news stories, fact checked materials, Google trends and YouTube data from the 4 case countries. Across the sources, we focused on the types of information pollution, media channels for spreading information manipulation,

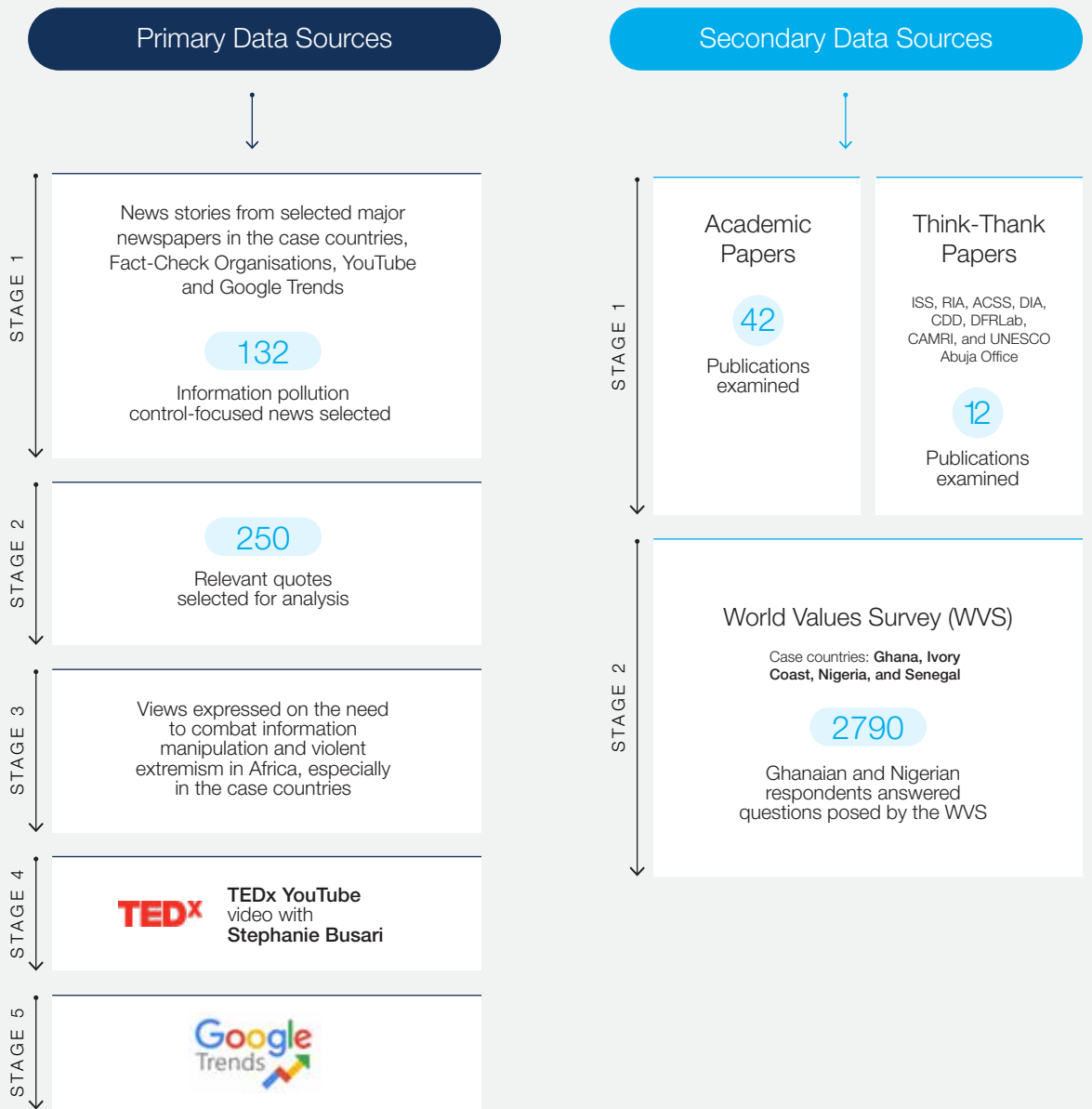
misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. digital tools used for verification, conveyors of polluted messages and possible impacts in terms of hateful and violent extremism, verdicts employed by fact-checkers and moral entrepreneurs. We also examined regulations and laws, sentiments, and public rationalisation of information pollution and its impacts in the selected countries

3 Key Results

3.1 Nature and dynamics of fact-checking practices of information pollution in West Africa

In understanding the nature and dynamics of fact checking practices in the sub region, our insights validate existing insights about the creation and distribution of various forms of information pollution using different media in the region. In specific terms, we observed from data extracted from fact checking organisations (Dubawa, Africa Check, FactCheck Hub, and PesaCheck) that digital and mainstream media such as social media- Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, newspapers, blogs, YouTube, websites, television, and LinkedIn were the dominant media used for conveying polluted messages, while politicians, influencers and other actors were involved in sharing and spreading of contaminated information across the sub region. We also discovered that fact checking organizations deployed digital fact checking tools such as Google Image Reverse Search, Google Search, TinEye, Yandex Reverse Image Search, Google Lens, InVID, Scam Doc,

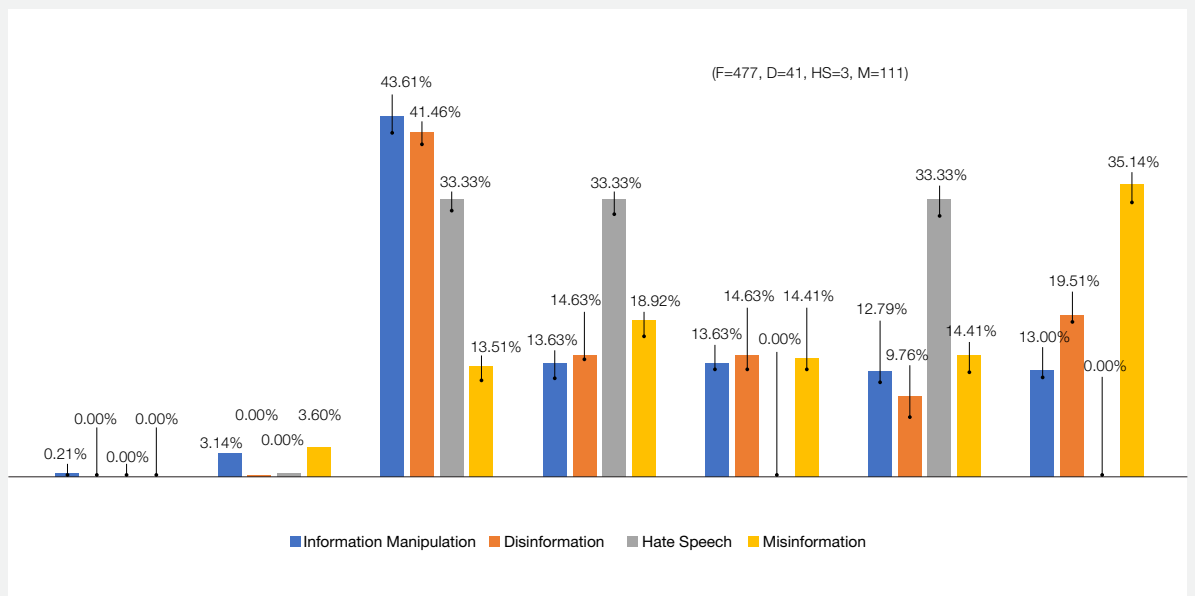
SEMrush, YouTube Data Viewer, and Deepware. This indicated the sophistication of their efforts to ensure critical pieces of information that have tendency to disrupt socio-economic activities and peaceful co-existence in the region. Also, the report observed that issues relating to politics, elections, security, health, and personalities of individuals and groups dominated the fact-checking discourse and were among the most recurring claims verified by the organisation. The trend of claims in this category was predominant between 2017 and 2023. However, there were variation on the categories of claims verified by the fact checking organisations. For instance, it was observed that out of the four types of information pollution discussed in this research, the four fact-checking organizations validated claims about information manipulation and misinformation more than they debunked allegations about disinformation and hate speech.



↑ **Figure 1:**

Volume of relevant select information pollution types fact-checked between 2017 and 2023 in Africa

Source: Africa Check, Dubawa, FactCheck Hub, Pesewa, 2017-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024





information manipulation claims were more fact-checked in Kenya and Nigeria than in any other countries in Africa.

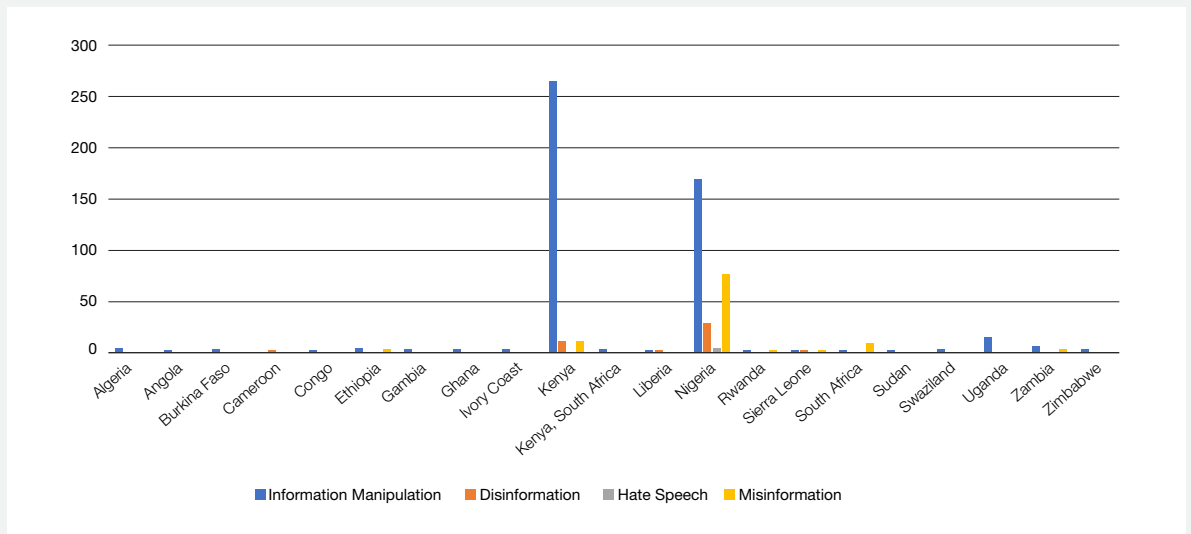
As a matter of fact, Figure 1 illustrates that there were more information manipulation claims in 2019 than in previous years, particularly in 2017 and 2018. However, this is not to suggest that there were no claims involving the form. We believe that these organisations simply validated the number of claims that were available to them. Our findings showed that hate speech received similar attention from 2019 to 2022. In our understanding, this range of years covered the period for general elections (in Ghana and Nigeria) and health emergencies in the sub region. This points to the tendency for increase in information pollution when there is a high need for information such as election or health emergency situations. As a

result, fact-checkers may have discovered that the makers and disseminators of polluted messages would take advantage of the opportunity to enhance the information pollution type in order to achieve their goals. We also noticed that information manipulation claims were more fact-checked in Kenya and Nigeria than in any other countries in Africa. Data indicated that Nigeria led Kenya in disinformation and misinformation, while Uganda joined the ranks of information manipulation, with fewer than 50 claims confirmed by the fact checking organizations. Overall, these types of information pollution appear to be widespread throughout West and East Africa.

↑ Figure 2:

Volume of relevant select information pollution types fact-checked between 2017 and 2023 in Africa by country

Source: Africa Check, Dubawa, FactCheck Hub, Pesewa, 2017-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024



To understand better the nature and dynamic of fact checking practices in the sub-region, it is equally critical to identify the specific verdict types used by the fact-checkers. In our investigation, we discovered that the four fact-checkers used misleading,

hoax, and fake verdict categories more than altered and incorrect ones. One of the most startling findings is that a sizable number of claims were proven correct. In this regard, we note that not all information may be classified as polluted or disordered.

TABLE 5 Key verdicts from fact-check organisations by year on information pollution

	Altered	Fake	Hoax	Incorrect	Misleading	True
2017	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
2018	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(14.29%)	0(0%)	1(4.76%)
2019	0(0%)	1(3.23%)	26(78.79%)	0(0%)	2(5.13%)	13(61.90%)
2020	1(8.33%)	1(3.23%)	5(15.15%)	0(0%)	6(15.38%)	2(9.52%)
2021	3(25.00%)	7(22.58%)	1(3.03%)	0(0%)	6(15.38%)	2(9.52%)
2022	7(58.33%)	16(51.61%)	1(3.03%)	0(0%)	4(10.26%)	1(4.76%)
2023	1(8.33%)	6(19.35%)	0(0%)	6(85.71%)	21(53.85%)	2(9.52%)
2023	12(100%)	31(100%)	33(100%)	7(100%)	39(100%)	21(100%)

Source: Africa Check, Dubawa, FactCheck Hub, PesaCheck, 2017-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024

Table 5 shows the dominant verdicts across organizations. Analysis over the years suggests that misleading verdicts were issued in 2020, 2021, and 2023. In 2019, hoax verdicts were most commonly employed. True and altered verdicts were used in 2019 and 2021, respectively.



3.2

Policies, laws and regulatory framework for curtailing information pollution in West Africa

Though, fact checkers in the sub region are doing a yeoman's job to ensure that the sanity of the information ecosystem is maintained, yet there is need to control the production, distribution and spread of the different varieties of information pollution through different regulatory mechanism such as enabling laws, policies and initiatives to stop information contamination.

This made us to examine the legal and regulatory framework available in the different case countries. Data indicated a varying level of legal provisions across the countries. For instance, we observed an abundant, robust policy and legal framework to curb information

pollution in Nigeria, Cotedivoire, Ghana, and Senegal respectively. A further examination indicated that Nigeria led the pack with not less than 7 legal instruments to curb information pollution (Criminal Code Act, 1990; Cyber Crime Act, 2015; the Constitution of the Federal Republic, 1999; Freedom of Information Act, 2011; Electoral Act, 2022; Social Media Act 2019 and the National Broadcasting Act, 2016). Cotedivoire followed with 3 legal instruments (Code Penal, 1998; Loi, 2013; Loi, 2013 while Ghana (Criminal Code Act, 19600 and Senegal (Penal Code, 1967) has a single legal document each to address information contamination.

Policy and legal framework to curb information pollution in **Nigeria**



- Criminal Code Act, 1990;
- Cyber Crime Act, 2015;
- Constitution of the Federal Republic, 1999;
- Freedom of Information Act, 2011;
- Electoral Act, 2022;
- Social Media Act 2019
- National Broadcasting Act, 2016

Policy and legal framework to curb information pollution in **Cotedivoire**



- Code Penal, 1998;
- Loi, 2013;
- Loi, 2013

Policy and legal framework to curb information pollution in **Ghana**



- Criminal Code Act, 1960

Policy and legal framework to curb information pollution in **Senegal**



- Penal Code, 1967

It was, however, noted that curbing information pollution is beyond having a comprehensive legal and policy framework. The political will, on the part of government, and the acceptability of the citizenry to enforce these legal provisions also matter. Across the four country cases, we noted a tug of war between government and non-state actors on the deployment of these instruments. Media professionals, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations are questioning the use of these

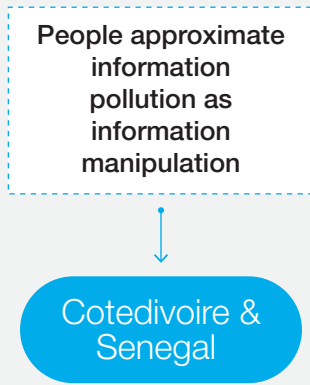
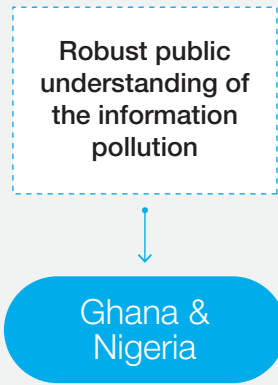
legal instruments alleging that they are being exploited by political elites to silence the media and their critics in politics. These actors view laws as being restrictive and protective of political leaders. A palpable tension was observed in the fight against information pollution. Concerned actors in the ecosystem are perceiving efforts to combat information disorder as attempts to muzzle free speech and press freedom.

3.3

Public perceptions and attitudes towards information pollution and violent extremism in West Africa

Ghana and Nigeria has a robust public understanding of the information pollution ecosystem unlike Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal where people approximate information pollution as information manipulation. In Cote d'Ivoire, overall analysis indicated that within the general web search section, the Ivorian public utilized specific keywords to get information regarding specific information manipulation that had already been obtained from human and media sources, including newspapers, blogs, and social media. This

implies that the Ivorian public showed more interest in information manipulation than other variety of information pollution. This same scenario also played out in Senegal. We discovered that Senegalese people became highly interested in information pollution. Like the Ivorians, they were more interested in information manipulation than other forms of information pollution. Over 5,000 searches for information manipulation were made using various search engines, mostly Google Search Engine, according to the data.



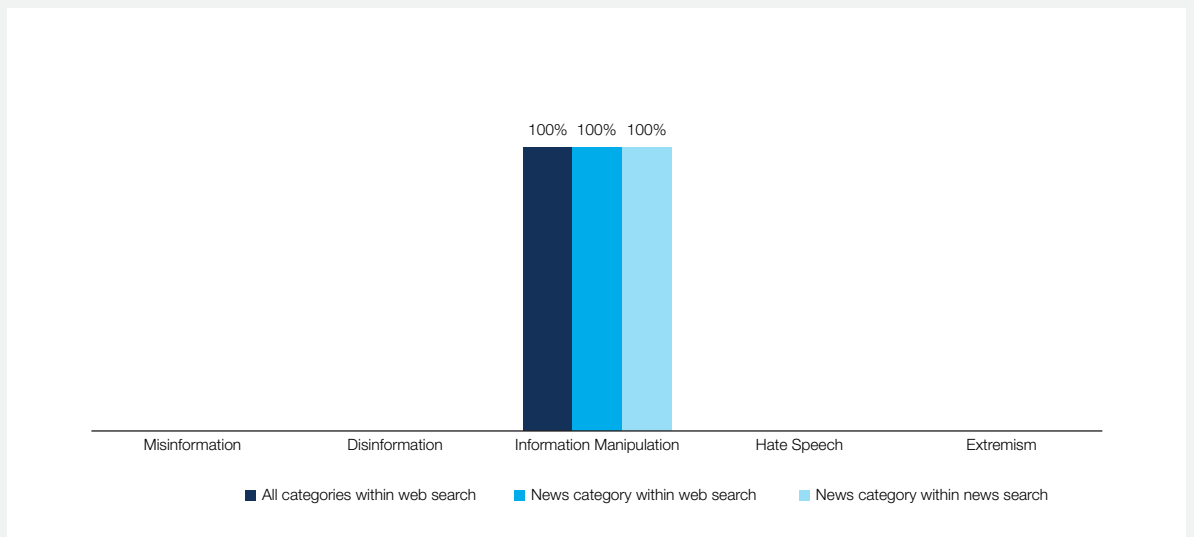
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searches for information manipulation were made using various search engines, mostly Google Search Engine, according to the data in Senegal.

↑ Figure 3:

Information seeking behaviour about information pollution and extremism in Côte d'Ivoire between 2013 and 2023

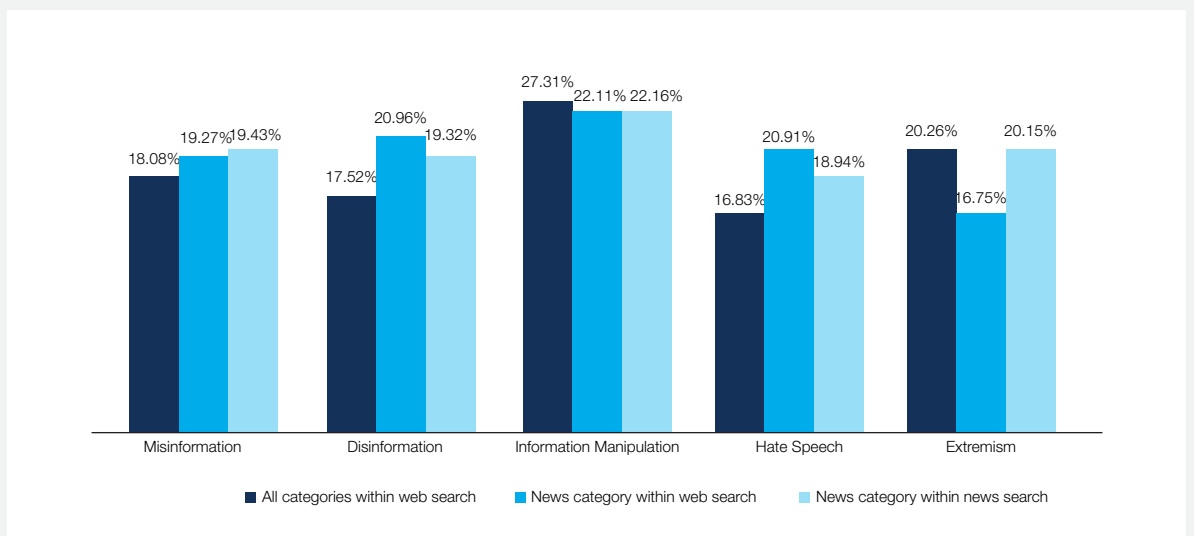
Source: Google Trends, 2013-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024



↑ Figure 4:

Information seeking behaviour about information pollution and extremism in Ghana between 2013 and 2023

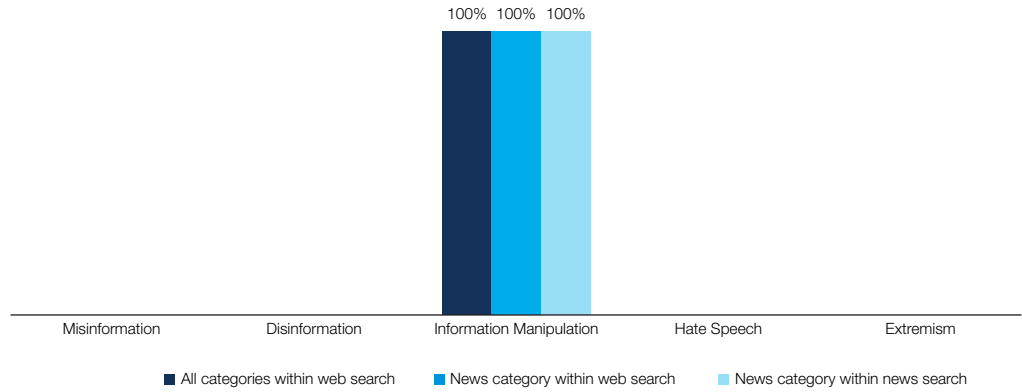
Source: Google Trends, 2013-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024



↑ Figure 5:

Information seeking behaviour about information pollution and extremism in Senegal between 2013 and 2023

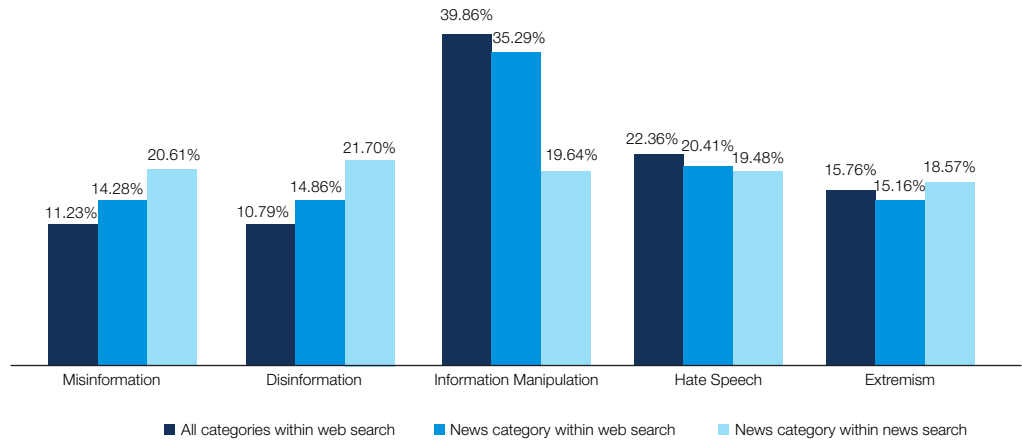
Source: Google Trends, 2013-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024



↑ Figure 6:

Information seeking behaviour about information pollution and extremism in Nigeria between 2013 and 2023

Source: Google Trends, 2013-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024



However, we observed that having a comprehensive understanding of the information pollution ecosystem is not enough, there must be willingness of the citizens to accept preventive measures from the government. Against this background, we checked the link between citizen's understanding of information pollution and violent extremism. Overall, our data establishes that the public became considerably interested in misinformation, information

manipulation and disinformation with varying degree of interest in extremism across the case countries. In Ghana, data indicates that the public has become considerably more interested in misinformation, information manipulation, and disinformation while showing a comparatively greater interest in extremism. In other words, the more the interest in information pollution, the greater the interest in extremism.

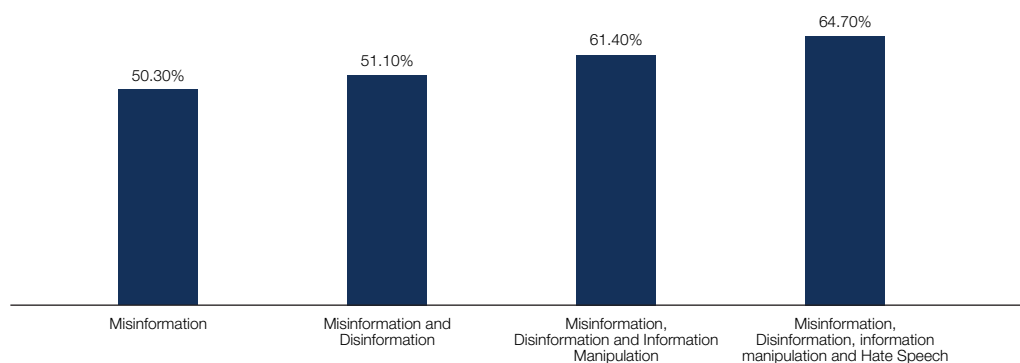
For Senegal, concerns in information pollution was more linked to its impact on security, terrorism and conflicts. Senegalese also regarded various forms of information pollution as threats to democracy. In Nigeria, the frequency with which public interest in the identified information pollution types leads to significant interest in seeking and consuming information about extremism. For the Nigerian public, one unit of searching

misinformation, and misinformation with other types leads to over 50 to 60 times of searching information related to extremism. Therefore, the public across the countries of study linked information disorder to extremism. Yet, it cannot be easily proved that information pollution leads to extremism. However, there could be tendency for violence when the exposure to disordered information becomes high.

↑ Figure 7:

Link between information seeking in Nigeria about information pollution types and extremism

Source: Google Trends, 2013-2023; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024

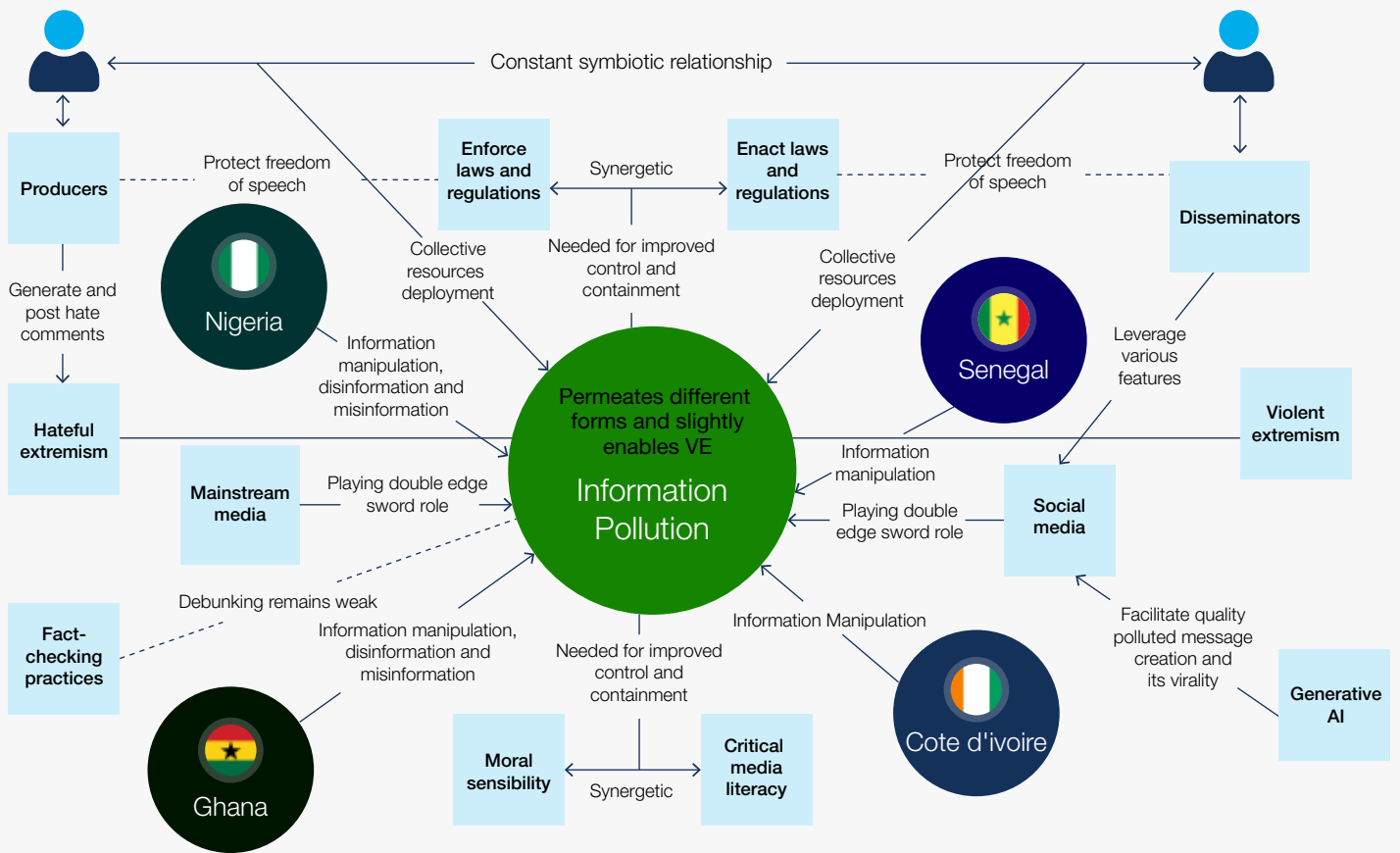


3.4

Emerged System of Information Pollution, New Technologies and Extremism in West Africa

Based on our findings, we argue that fact checking is a component tool for fighting information pollution, it is not enough to combat the menace. It can only help to call the attention of the demand side to the contaminated information ecosystem. Equally, it cannot stop the suppliers from creating, distributing and spreading

information pollution. There are non-state actors working against every mechanism put in place to fight the production and sharing of unhealthy information. We therefore, suggest that moral sensibility should introduced to the fight against information manipulation, misinformation, disinformation and mal information.



Source: Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative's Conceptualisation, 2024



4 Recommendations

Enhance Moral Sensibility



There is a need to introduce moral sensibility as an integral component in the fight against information pollution in West Africa. All stakeholders should work together to develop comprehensive strategies that imbue individuals and institutions with a deep ethical consciousness to counter the spread of disordered information effectively.

Galvanize Political Will



We recognize the robust legal framework in place to combat information disorder in West Africa, but we call on governments to mobilize political will to enforce these laws. Governments across the region must demonstrate unwavering commitment and resolve to implement and uphold legal mechanisms aimed at curbing the dissemination of disinformation and extremism.

Institute Critical Media Literacy



We recommend the launch of expansive critical media literacy initiatives within the public domain across the four case countries. These would lead to the implementation of robust educational programmes in various public forums, including educational institutions, places of worship, and community centers, to equip citizens with the analytical tools necessary to discern and combat misinformation effectively.

Forge Media-CSO Collaborations



There is a need to foster collaborative partnerships between traditional and digital media outlets, civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to spearhead public education campaigns. This also include developing and disseminating informative content aimed at raising awareness about the grave repercussions of engaging in the propagation and consumption of disordered information.

Deploy Moral-Centric Campaigns



We task orientation agencies and governmental bodies across the case countries with launching extensive moral-centric campaigns to mitigate the production and dissemination of disordered information. this would involve crafting compelling messaging that underscores the ethical imperatives of responsible information sharing, thereby instilling a culture of accountability and integrity within society.

Empower Citizenry for Collective Action



We suggest the mobilization of citizens and non-state actors to actively support governmental efforts in combating information pollution. This advocacy is important for collective action in safeguarding core human rights and freedoms while simultaneously safeguarding societal well-being from the deleterious effects of disinformation.

Fortify Fact-Checking Processes



We suggest strengthening the infrastructure and methodologies of fact-checking organizations to ensure timely, accurate, and comprehensive verification of information. This would lead to the bolstering of resources and capabilities to facilitate rigorous fact-checking procedures, thereby enhancing the reliability and credibility of information dissemination channels.

Legislative Reform for Comprehensive Frameworks



We recommend legislative reforms within the legislative arms of Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Senegal to establish comprehensive legal frameworks tailored to combat the multifaceted nature of information disorder. This would lead to the proposition of stringent measures and penalties commensurate with the severity of disinformation offenses, thereby fortifying legal deterrence against perpetrators.

Leverage Existing Regulatory Bodies



We suggest harnessing the capabilities of existing regulatory bodies tasked with overseeing media and communication sectors in West Africa to strengthen measures aimed at dis-incentivizing the spread of information pollution. These regulatory bodies should be empowered with enhanced enforcement authority and resources to effectively monitor, investigate, and penalize individuals and entities found guilty of disseminating false or misleading information.



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2 Shalom Street, TKP
Junction, University Road,
After Femtech, Tanke,
Ilorin, Kwara State

Contact: **07068775529** | brainbuilderedu@gmail.com

www.thebrainbuilders.org

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