



# COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON **INFORMATION DISORDER IN THE 2020 GHANA ELECTIONS**

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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Information is a major defining product or factor voters use in making decisions during elections. However, the rise of technology and the ability to rapidly share information through several mediums and platforms has propelled the issue of information disorder commonly referred to as 'fake news' to the forefront of global discussions.

Information disorder is generally seen as any form of misinformation or disinformation. Most scholars define misinformation as the unintentional sharing of false information with no intention to cause harm whereas disinformation constitutes the deliberate sharing of false information with the intention to cause harm (Karlova & Fisher, 2012; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017; Thorson & Sheble, 2017). According to Maweu (2019) "Whatever we call it, propaganda, disinformation and misinformation is as old as mankind and has only been systematically blown to almost uncontrollable levels by the advent of digital media" (p.63).

Social media has emerged as one of the central areas through which voters get information but has also been identified to be a perfect platform or breeding ground for misinformation or disinformation and conspiracy narratives. Social media platforms and the many online platforms have presented voters with the challenge of encountering an enormous amount of information online, including false information. According to Chakrabarti (2018), the effects of information disorder are heightened especially because of the power of social media. The way this works is that ordinary citizens can now be part of the mass media space by sharing news immediately, journalists also tend to use the social media space as a sourcing mechanism to dig for news. The problem that this creates is that it hampers people's ability to discern truth and make discerning decisions on critical issues including on voting decisions.

The period before, during and after elections appear to be periods usually characterised by the rise in misinformation and disinformation particularly about candidates and policies, thus posing a major developmental challenge as a result of its potential to affect the credibility of elections and the sanctity of the competitive nature of elections as some parties seek to gain undue advantage.

The 2020 elections in Ghana were unique in more than one way. It was the first time that a one-term president (former president John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress, NDC) was seeking to come back to office. Also, the incumbent president Nana Akufo-Addo (of the New Patriotic Party, NPP) was seeking re-election but it was his second time facing the opposition candidate John Dramani Mahama in an electoral contest. The historical nature of the elections heightened the stakes thereby providing the fertile ground for a possible trend or

propagation of information disorder.

As Ghana moves to consolidate its democracy, research involving information disorder is necessary to attempt to address the ways in which the public sphere is polluted particularly during elections. There is no doubt that if this is not addressed it has the potential to mar the democratic record of Ghana. Though the notion of information disorder is not new as observed by Maweu (2019), it's current upsurge and lack of systematic research in this area makes this study significant. This report comprehensively analyses information disorder in Ghana before, during and after the 2020 elections.

## 2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

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The major problem that information disorder presents is that it distorts the quality of information resources available within the political spectrum, at least with cognisance to the focus of this study which is national elections. It distorts the social reality available to voters as they head to the polls to make decisions. With the current development of photoshops, visual designs, information posting, resharing, comments and the propensity to go viral, we are experiencing a major problem as far as news production, information production and consumption is concerned.

Because the sector of generating and reporting news is no longer the exclusive domain of news organizations, there is a clear and real danger involved as citizen journalists gather, produce, and disseminate news. Journalists themselves are also liable to contribute to the information disorder environment if they do not adhere to the time-worn values of verification, objectivity, truth, and public interest. Information disorder is a problem because it poses considerable threat to the smooth running of elections, the conduct of clean and professional campaigns and the growth of democracy in Ghana. With the desire to produce news on demand, the rise of vlogging as another way of garnering attention and the political appetite for smear campaigns and negative politics, misinformation, disinformation, fake news and other forms on information disorder become the spectrum through which the construction of social and political reality, the framing of events and the interpretation of issues becomes distorted and derails democratic gains.

This is clearly a major problem that needs investigation. Indeed, Zaryan (2017) has charged that audiences generally tend to take in information from various sources, mainstream, tradition and alternative sources on face value as the reality or truth. Alternative sources are sometimes even held in higher regard than the mainstream sources as some see mainstream news sources as doing the bidding of elites. This therefore creates a major problem where information from, influencers, politicians

and their allied groups as well as alternative sources tend to fill in an information gap and make up for a very information yearning society where everyone is on search for the latest news, trend or viral information in order to be in the loop.

The ways in which such disinformation manifested itself in the 2020 elections in Ghana will be the subject of this study.

## 3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

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Ghana's 2020 elections presented an opportune moment to analyse the occurrence of information disorder within the country. What are the archetypical forms of fake news that manifests within the country? Who are the major perpetrators and what we learn generally about how information disorder takes place in Ghana? These are the questions that this study seeks to address. The significance of this project is that by addressing these questions and engaging in further analysis it helps to learn more about one of the debilitating phenomena during elections. Learning, describing, and understanding such developments constitutes one of the first major steps in addressing the problem.

The fact of the matter is that online and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become hugely popular in Ghana. During the elections information was freely flowing in these mediums as the public sought to satisfy their curiosity concerning party positions, the latest events that were happening, the latest issues dominating the cycle and who the central players were. This gap was sometimes filled with information, was sometimes a mixture of truths and half-truths and was prevalent all over the country. In places where literacy levels are low and political knowledge was not deepened, the danger is that such false or fake information may be taken to be reality. People are generally influenced by what they see, hear and read and there is definitely the potential that information being passed around could shape behaviours and attitudes. It is therefore important to analyse these narratives, attributions and sources of information disorder in a systematic manner.

According to scholars such as Lokot and Diakopolous (2016), information disorder is entrenched within such an information saturated age because of the self-fulfilling nature of information seeking and information sharing. A post on Facebook or any social media platform may garner much attention because of the massive likes and reshares it attains but it does not mean that information is necessarily true. Audience sentiments are then formed because of this lack of information continence and circuitous nature of misinformation or disinformation, fake news has the potential of seeping into the very fabric of society and affecting political values, culture, and socialization. The study of fake news in Ghana using the 2020 elections is therefore a timely effort as we seek to gain insights in the production, nature and spread of disinformation in Ghana.

## 4.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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The overall goal of this research is to understand the nature of information disorder that were fact-checked by three full time fact-checking organisations in the country during Ghana's 2020 presidential elections. To do this the following research questions will guide the study: What is the nature of misinformation that was fact-checked by the various organizations used in this study? What framing techniques were used and were there any gender dynamics present? What were the major subject matters or focus of the information disorder messages and which mediums or platforms were used? These questions were addressed through the analytic and discursive process in subsequent chapters.

## 5.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INFORMATION DISORDER & FAKE NEWS

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Ghana, like many other countries, is experiencing an era of information disorder. According to Wardle (2018) "information disorder is not black and white, it's fluid" (p.952). It refers to an ecosystem that constitutes information which is generally deemed as problematic. Wardle (2018) sets forth seven types of information disorder. These include satire and parody, false connection, misleading content, false content, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content. Conceptually speaking information disorder constitutes various sources, formats and messages. The agents are those who create the manipulated messages, there are also those that falsify and that distribute the messages. It includes a network of people who spread, comment, share and interpret these fabricated communication products.

In conceptualizing information disorder several motivations for sharing misleading information have been identified. These include monetary rewards, political capital, social capital and emotional or psychological needs. One of the major aspects of information disorder is not just text but also visuals. Within the information disorder literature several phases are involved including the creation, production, distribution and reproduction. The creation phase involves the idea formation stage, the production phase involves the actual construction and publication of the material, the distribution phase involves the channels through which such information is spread and the re-production phase involves the re-sharing or re-manipulation of

the work.

A salient feature of information disorder is that it is often user-generated. Seen in this perspective, information disorder can be said to be the ability of users to dynamically alter content in a way that achieves personal or parochial interests through propagation on social networks. The individual and subjective slant given to such information is therefore a moderating factor when conceptualizing information disorder. He further calls on journalists to improve their fact-checking through participatory journalism to ensure that information found online is verified.

Institutions such as IGI Global (International General Insurance, Global) explain information disorder to be incorrect information that is shared “with or without the intention of causing harm (IGI, Global). Historically it has been noted that information disorder such as misinformation, fake news and propaganda have been part of human communication for a long time. It has been traced to the period of the Gutenberg press and the early days of advocacy where all sorts of rumour, propaganda and slant were used to advance various parochial and political causes. This ultimately led to misunderstandings, conflicts and governmental change. The emergence of the internet has only exacerbated the occurrence of misinformation and disinformation. This took on various forms such as hoaxes, trolls and outright recalibration of information through multiple distribution channels.

This disinformation may not only be user-generated but may function around media houses and political units who re-shape or reframe events to suit the ideological views. In light of this there is a palpably existent threat to journalism and discourse within the public space which is being contaminated by the various forms of disinformation. During elections information, discourse and dialogue within the public space and the news media have been held up as important conditions for the smooth elections and for healthy competition. The absence of this could have grave consequences as it affects the richness and quality of the public sphere in terms of its ability to be a true levelling force for democratic participation. Although disinformation happens to be the recurring problem of the current age, it must be noted that conceptually it also undermines free speech, pluralization and giving voice to certain members of the community. By sometimes stifling this space and filling it with various skewed agendas it affects the ability of democracy to be a positive force for national and community development.

Posetti and Matthews (2018) describes the digital age as one not only of opportunities but of “computational propaganda”. This is in reference to the various forms of information disorder that exist within this era. It is also described as the age of the weaponization of mistrust, harassment and the distortion of information either wilfully or through the pressures of immediacy and profit. Because of the increasing pressures of news on demand media organizations and other institutions may fall into the information disorder trap as a result of the lack of resources to



get to the bottom of issues or go the long haul in terms of verification. When it comes to citizen journalism, the traditional gatekeeping role is abandoned thereby leading to all sorts of information being peddled and going viral. This destabilises the democratic system especially during electoral campaigns which in and of themselves are very volatile periods. A single news item concerning the way the election is being conducted may heighten tensions and lead people to congregate and act inappropriately. As co-creators of content audiences are also a major player in the production of news and when this is not done in a responsible manner, it may pollute rather than enrich the information space.

## 6.0 REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

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### 6.1 Review of Related Studies

This section presents a compendium of previous research related to the topic under study. Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, Gondeve, Ndlovu, Sikanku, Tully, Umejei, & Uzuegbunam(2021) examined the driving factors and motivations for fake news use sharing in Africa. This research was carried out in six African countries including Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The article made use of focus group discussions to collect data between 2019 and 2020. A common focus group guide was developed for all countries involved. The specific objectives of the research were to find out the nature of fake news experience among citizens of these countries and how participants decide on usage and sharing of information.

The findings indicate the misinformation is something that African voters experience on a regular basis. Very important findings from the research indicate that users are sometimes unable to distinguish between what is fake and what is real. Users also deliberately share false news in order to tarnish the image of their political opponents. There were also statements from the data collected which indicated that there was a connection between politically motivated misinformation or disinformation and the fuelling of ethnic tensions. To share information users usually trusted traditional news sources such as print and radio. Sometimes citizens also inadvertently shared fake news because they were not aware.

A study conducted by Ahiabenu et al (2018) sought to ascertain the various ways to understand the gnawing problem of information disorder in Ghana. The study revealed seven types of fake news categories: Doctored Audio/Visual Material, Made-up Content, False Content, Misleading Content, False Headline without connection with content, Fabricated Content and Satire. The study found that most Ghanaians were unable to make clear distinctions between what constitutes fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. This indicates the need for increased



media literacy within the country.

Jamil & Appiah-Adjei (2019) researched the relationship between online technology, the popularity of mobile phone usage, the practice of journalism and how that affects the nature of information disorder in Ghana. They concluded that the rise in mobile journalism, the desire to be first; that is, the element of speed and profit motives were major factors that contributed to the spread of information disorder in the country. This is made worse through the advent of media convergence, merges and the formation of media empires where a potential fake news story will easily spread and filter across common platforms. Mobile journalism and phone usage has also exacerbated the risks involved in the spread and proliferation of misinformation. The research also indicates that there is a pervasive lack of verification and gate keeping culture among journalists and ordinary voters who work as citizen journalists. In this study participants also likened fake news to planted news by politicians and noted that this is a problem which has long existed. It was noted that print news publications fared much better when it came to verification of news. This research showed that more training is needed for both ordinary citizens in terms of media literacy and for journalists as well.

Maweu's (2019) research on disinformation during the Kenyan elections examined the role of social media in the spread of disinformation. The study found that cyber disinformation was prevalent during the electoral period through a qualitative textual analysis of information on twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. This attributed this to the fact that the elections were highly competitive and the race to the presidency was a hotly contested one perhaps leading to the kind of information war or disinformation culture that was present throughout the period. This extends to social media platforms where public relations teams used slant, inaccurate information as sometimes just plain fake news to campaign in favour of their preferred candidates.

The Afrobarometer Dispatch (2020) contains reports from research conducted by the Afrobarometer project unit under the Center for Democratic Development in Ghana. Reports from the Afrobarometer Dispatch indicate a certain view about the Ghanaians politicians. The report indicates that 78% of Ghanaians believe some information shared by Ghanaian politicians is likely to be false or fake. The reports indicate that many Ghanaians are engaged in citizen journalism, a reduction in trust for traditional media agencies and an increased use of social media for access to information, knowledge and news on events happening around them. Respondents also felt the government had a lot more work to do in terms of seriously and conscientiously combating disinformation. Ghana's Electronic Communication Act (2008) has sought to address this problem by setting forth fines and punishments for spreading false information.

Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) conducted comprehensive research on

disinformation and media trust in Africa. This study was conducted through an online panel field survey that measured perceived exposure to disinformation, the factors people attributed to the spread of fake news, the consumption of media trust and the credibility of information coming from the news media. The results showed a high level of exposure to fake news and disinformation indicating that this was not only a problem of the West. There was a confirmed substantial relationship between the encounter or exposure to fake news and the reduction in trust for the news media. It was observed that when consumers were repeatedly exposed to fake news and disinformation it led to an erosion of trust in media sources.

Wardle & Derkhsham (2017) investigated the different usages and applications of information disorder. They state that the term has been the subject of different interpretations and understandings. They found that sometimes politicians use it loosely to refer to the news media especially when news information does not go their way. Apart from disinformation and misinformation, the term mal-information is explained to mean when information is leaked without a person's permission and doused in half-truth and half-lies or false statements. This suggests an information disorder matrix made up of the agent, message and the interpreter and mentions that for information disorder to be addressed, these three elements must be critically attended to.

Jamiu (2020) investigated the role of stakeholders in addressing the bottlenecks related to information disorder in Nigeria. This was done by examining the broad landscape of fact checking within the country with the focus on media organisations. This is not surprising and in tandem with previous literature which find the media organisations as powerful influencing institutions as well as agenda setters. When an information disorder material is used by the media organisations, the potential for it to reach masses of people is highly accentuated. This is particularly so in Africa where people depend on the traditional news sourcing for political news, campaign information and general news. The study took off the various ways in which media organisations are seeking to fight information disorder. Findings indicate that the suppression of free speech, the lack of resources to verify, the lack of capacity building programs for journalists and the limited nature of media literacy advocacy programs unduly affected the preparation of information disorder. Awards and other initiatives were suggested in order to encourage institutions and individuals to indulge in more fact checking.

Together the compendium of this literature gives us a broad lay of the land as far as review of studies on disinformation in Africa is concerned. However no study has yet been done on misinformation on the 2020 elections in Ghana and this report seeks to fill this gap.

## 6.2 Framing

This research used framing as an additional conceptual framework because the project is concerned with how information disorder manifested itself in Ghana's 2020 elections. Framing theory is concerned with how issues are portrayed. The theory is one of the most popular and significant theories used in electoral studies. At the heart of this research is a discussion on the sources of fake news, how they were framed and the broader subject matters addressed. There is also a qualitative discussion on the content of the fake news creations. This is what makes framing theory relevant for this study. Sourcing is an important way of deciphering frames and perhaps even more importantly how these information disorder messages were portrayed as well as their implications is very close to the basic tenets of framing.

The assumptions of framing include analysing what people communicate, what they include, what they leave out, the ideological narratives they try to postulate, beliefs, values and worldviews being foregrounded. When people frame something into a poster or flyer and share such fake news stories, they are trying to shape people's minds and attitudes. They are trying to essentially send out certain preferred messages and create certain meanings. Framing theory therefore provides theoretical bases for analysing disinformation because of its descriptive, interpretive and explanatory power when it comes to communication messages.

According to Reese (2001), frames work "symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (p.11). In Entman's view (1993) frames are manifested "by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences which provide a thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements". The discursive power of frames cannot be underestimated as the creators of information and campaign messages seek to influence the public sphere through discursive construction and image constructions. One of the interesting things about the way this theory or concept works is that through the "frames" presented in the flyers, videos or viral content, we are able to immediately ascertain who the targets are, the harm that is expected to be caused, the slants that are given to information, what issues are left out and the kind of social reality that is being portrayed.

This social reality could be to portray or say that the electoral commission is rigging the election, that the incumbent is seeking to influence the process, that a winner has been announced or certain groups are being marginalized or discriminated against. Word, images and the perceptions they form are very critical to shaping attitudes, keeping peace or inciting people to act in a certain way. This research is therefore important to consider from a framing perspective because it helps us to understand how information disorder was manifested as part of efforts to improve democracy and maintain the peace and stability of the nation. It is widely known

that communication has the power to bring people together, maintain peace.

Framing scholars agree that unearthing how issues or images are portrayed helps to make meaning of issues and events. In a democratic campaign where things can get heated it is important to pick up on the various cues and symbols that are circulating within the public sphere. Our understanding of the meanings being created, the representations occurring will help us to know how the political and social world in Ghana is being structured in a crucial time such as an election. The main areas of emphasis will be looked at, the sources of these frames and the various institutions or personalities being targeted will also be looked at in order to safeguard and preempt a reoccurrence of such scenarios in the future. For instance, institutions such as the electoral commission and other bodies might be an easy target for the spread of disinformation. How did this play out in Ghana? The idea is that hopefully such institutions will be careful to monitor how they are being portrayed in order to quickly counter frame any messages that are being put out there.

## 7.0 METHODOLOGY

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The approach adopted for this study was content analysis and textual analysis. Data for the content analytic aspect of the study was gathered by applying the coding scheme to the websites of Dubawa, FactCheck Ghana and Ghana Fact. Neuendorf (2002) defines content analysis as the systematic, objective, and quantitative analysis of message characteristics (p. 1). According to Kerlinger (2000), content analysis is the method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (as cited by Wimmer and Dominick, 2006, p.150). Walizer and Wiener (1978) define it as any systematic procedure to examine the content of recorded information. In this process, quantification is necessary because it helps develop an accurate representation of a body of messages (Neuendorf, 2002, p.151).

A coding scheme was developed to collect data. This was made up of seven substantive variables. They included: the source of the fake news or who the fake news was attributed to, the medium or platform used to propagate the fake news information, gender of the person making the claim, themes of claims, rating assigned, subject matter of claim and the framing technique involved. Source of fake news refers to who the originator of the fake news information being coded for. This enables them to specifically know the major producers or sources of fake news information in Ghana. Medium or platform for fake news propagation: this refers to the channels through which fake news information was disseminated. This enables us to have a good idea of the major or predominant channels which serve

as catalysts for the spread of fake news information. Gender of person making the claim: this enables us to account for the gender dynamics in terms of fake news propagation. Themes of claims: from an analytical perspective, it is important to account for the various themes present in fake news or information disorder presence in Ghana. This enables researchers to map out patterns, compare the data available to them and help to bring depth, greater meaning and understanding to a phenomenon. Subject matter of claim refers to the rather broad or topical categorization of the claims. This includes if the issues can be placed as either a political, social, cultural, crime, economic, foreign affairs issue. Framing technique has been included in the coding categories because it enables the report to investigate the strategies, styles, and manner in which the perpetrators of fake news information propagated their message.

Convenient sampling was applied for the qualitative aspect. Specifically, textual analysis was used. Textual analysis is a research approach used in research to gain deeper insights and understanding of a communication material. Scott (1990) asserts that textual analysis involves comprehending “a text by understanding the frame of reference from which it was produced” (p.31). This underscores why the specific textual analysis technique is used to go beyond the numbers, figures, or statistics. To be sure, this method is different from quantitative content analysis because it seeks to “preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof, 2002, p.18).

The most visible examples of disinformation were gathered and analysed. The mixed method approach is rich and aids in thick description as we can account for broad representations as well as depth. This was necessary due to the evolving nature of the phenomenon under study as well as account for the critical and comprehensive representations, forms, role/functions and context of the disinformation material and occurrence. Descriptive statistics are used to explain broad themes and other variables.

What needs to be noted is that while this may not constitute a singular content analysis of the entire spectrum of fake news presence during the election, the mixed method approach helps to account for an exploratory insight of the different manifestations of information disorder during the elections. This should help draw out the framework for fake news during the elections, and provide some social cultural context as a basis for future research.

## **PROFILE OF FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS**

These websites were chosen because they are the leading fact checking organizations in the country and have established themselves as credible and non-partisan. A brief profile on each of these fact-checking organizations is

provided here:

Dubawa is a transnational fact-checking and verification project, launched by the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ). It is an independent organization that is not affiliated with any political party and follows the principles of the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN). The organization is focused on contributing to a culture of truth and verification in public debate and journalism by forming strategic relationships with the media, government, civil society groups, technological companies, and the general public. Dubawa's objectives include mainstreaming fact-checking within media houses and improving media literacy. The organization's work also includes research, digitization and data analysis to address issues of concern as determined by Dubawa.

Fact-Check Ghana is spearheaded by the Media Foundation for West Africa as its fact checking effort. The MFWA has national partner organizations in all 16 West African nations and is known for its media development and freedom of speech advocacy work. The mission of the organization includes contributing to improving the democratic space in Ghana through supporting credible information provision.

GhanaFact is a legally incorporated non-profit organization dedicated to fact-checking and news verification and launched in Ghana in August 2019.

It is an independent organization that provides unbiased, non partisan and independent fact checking in Ghana. Overall, its focus is on curbing the prevalence of misinformation and encouraging responsible behavior on social media.



## 8.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

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This section presents results from the investigation done and further analysis or discussion. Our analysis will begin from one of the core concerns of this study which is to look at the sources of fake news stories. What was observed was that certain websites had been cloned. Ghanafact.com became ghanafactcheck.com, bbc.com became thebbcghana.com, myjoyonline.com became joynewsroom.com, graphic.com.gh became graphicgh.com, citinewsroom.com became citynewsolinegh.com, ghanaweb.com became ghanaweb.mobi and the Ghana report became reportghana.com. The original websites are some of the major and credible news sources for many in the country thus by cloning these websites the goal was to reach unsuspecting consumers. These websites then became the hub of some of the most distorted news and information sources during the elections. Some of this information was shared by users on social media.

### 8.1 Attribution and Source of Fake News

One of the major objectives was to examine the source of fake news information. The results indicate that ordinary citizens are the biggest source of fake news information. This is consistent with previous findings that show that the accessibility of social media to individual citizens makes it possible for them to become instigators and perpetrators of such information. In an election period, people become so committed to their parties and beliefs that they are willing to go all lengths to propagate their claims. It was not uncommon in the period before, during and after the election to find individuals create their own memes and flyers with altered information to suit their own interests. Some of these eventually went viral, particularly on Facebook. The fact of the matter is that citizens derive psychological utility from these sorts of skewed information on a personal level. Voters are interested in creating a state of the world that is meaningful to them or maybe beneficial to them even if it means altering information. The hope is that this frame of the world will influence others to vote in such manner. In our understanding of fake news therefore, we posit that there is a personal incentive to produce and share fake news while deriving some psychological value from it. How can we understand this in the context of fake news broadly? The answer lies in the fact that producers of such information prefer to dangle in the short-term benefits that this information provides rather than the long-term effect. However, there are political and democratic costs associated with this since it tends to undermine the democratic process because some people may genuinely fall for such biased and fake information.



Table 1: Where Was the Claim From/ Who the Fact checker Attribute Fake News To?

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
ORDINARY CITIZENS	16	88.9	88.9
OTHER PARTY SOURCE	1	5.6	94.4
MEDIA	1	5.6	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

## 8.2 Medium or Platform

Facebook was the most popular avenue for the spread of fake news information. Using Facebook as a means for the spread of such information normally comes at relatively cheaper costs since most users are on Facebook anyway most of the time. However, this means that within the Ghanaian or African terrain it is mostly people in the urban areas and who have good access to the internet who can perpetuate this phenomenon. Facebook as a means for the spread of fake news becomes relatively easier and dangerous because people are usually ideologically segregated on Facebook. This means that it is likely that people have friends who share their own beliefs and values. It is therefore unlikely that information shared in this medium will be questioned since it already meets their personal beliefs and proclivities. Also, people may not necessarily have the time to go round verifying information that they see on Facebook. It is likely that people will be exposed to more election related news, use Facebook more as the election heats up and likely to be exposed to fake news information. However, it is important to point out that a medium does not simply infer effect as different intervening variables such as the education of the person and political socialization may affect their reception of fake news information. People who are highly educated or more politically exposed are likely, but not all the time, to make distinctions between what exists in the real world or the true state of issues as compared to those who are less educated and less politically exposed. In fact, it may very well be the case that for those who are not highly socialized politically, they may consume fake news as the veritable truth.

Table 2: Medium or Platform

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
FACEBOOK	8	44.4	44.4
TWITTER	5	27.8	72.2
ONLINE	5	27.8	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

## 8.3 Framing Technique

In this report, we do not make any claims of measuring the impact of fake news. However the results of the study seek to help us understand how it functions. Assessing the framing techniques used gives some indication of the strategies used and how or why it is sometimes so persuasive and likely to spread so rapidly. When information is sensationalized, it is likely to catch attention. It is therefore not surprising that fake news producers tend to sensationalize stories to catch the attention of voters. Exaggerated stories seem to have the same effect. They attract the same amount of attention as sensational stories. In fact, because news in general is unusual and striking, sensational and or exaggerated stories are more likely to be remembered.

Table 3: Framing Technique

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
SENSATIONAL	9	50.0	50.0
EXAGGERATION	9	50.0	100.0
Total	18	100.0	

## 8.4 Broader Subject area/Subject Matter of Claim

It is not surprising that politics became the major area or subject matter on which fake news stories revolved. What the report sought to investigate was whether other areas such as the economy came up strongly but that was not the case. All the stories were related to political issues. Most of it was leveraged for strategic and political reasons. In elections, the strategic and hire race frames are always prioritized by propaganda messages ahead of substantive issues. This is to stoke the emotions of voters and to get them to share more material.

Table 4: Broader Subject area/Subject Matter of Claim

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
POLITICAL	18	100.0	100.0

## 8.5 Gender of Person making the Claim.

The research also investigated the gender dynamics of the claim making. Males dominated while the rest of the fake news claims were mixed. It was unclear from this research to make attributions to the gender of the sources. However at least three could be traced to male sources with none related to females. Future research may consider gender motivations for sharing disinformation or otherwise

among voters. Also, the research did not find that female politicians bore the greater brunt of disinformation. However, because Prof. Jane Naana Opoku Agyeman was the female Vice-presidential candidate of John Mahama, it is likely that she would be susceptible to any such distortions or misinformation. What we found from a qualitative perspective was that sometimes there would be distortions or modifications of her image in a way that was less complimentary in some materials shared. Research indicates that female politicians are often the target of harassment and graphic sexual disinformation materials. Future research should dedicate resources to understand how this phenomenon is present in governance and how it affects democracy.

**Table 5: Gender of Person making the Claim**

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
MALE	3	16.7	16.7
MIXED	2	11.1	27.8
UNCLEAR	13	72.2	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

## 8.6 Rating Assigned

Out of the purported information trending which the fake news websites rated, 88.9 per cent of them were deemed to be false.

**Table 6: Rating Assigned**

	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
TRUE	6	33.3	33.3
FALSE	10	55.6	88.9
MISLEADING	2	11.1	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

## 8.7 Medium or Platform

The crosstab analysis involved two variables; the medium as well as framing technique. For Facebook there was 55.6% of exaggerated stories compared to 33.3% for sensational stories. For Twitter there was an equal number of sensational stories as there were for exaggerated stories. And for online, there was more sensational than exaggerated stories. This means that people are more likely to embellish facts on Facebook than any other medium. One of the ways Facebook is addressing this is by attacking the economic incentives of those publishing

misinformation. This therefore makes it harder for such people to buy ads or benefit economically. The organization is also building its own models for curbing fake news. This includes flagging stories, ranking improvements, making it easier for the Facebook community to make reports. Facebook has also moved to help people make more informed choices by establishing the Facebook journalism project and the news integrity initiative.

Other jurisdictions can learn from this by working across the various interrelated disciplines to at least reduce widespread occurrence of disinformation.

**Table 7: Platform and Framing Technique Cross Tabulation**

			FRAMING TECHNIQUE		TOTAL
			SENSATIONAL	EXAGGERATION	
MEDIUM OR PLATFORM	Facebook	Count	3	5	8
		% within FRAMING TECHNIQUE	33.3%	55.6%	44.4%
	Twitter	Count	2	2	5
		% within FRAMING TECHNIQUE	33.3%	22.2%	27.8%
	Online	Count	3	2	5
		% within FRAMING TECHNIQUE	33.3%	22.2%	27.8%
Total	Count	9	9	18	
	% within FRAMING TECHNIQUE	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

## 8.8 Qualitative Analysis

This report now moves to qualitatively analyse some fake news artefacts from the 2020 election. As has been the case in qualitative research, data is gathered conveniently with the selected data representing some of the most visible representations of a particular issue. The data is not gathered and coded as is the case in quantitative research but selected purposively in so far as the data is a good fit. Good fit technically means the data is an attestation or a good example of the issue under study.

One of the most viral stories/flyers was one that said CNN had declared Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo as President even before the official results from the electoral

commission were declared. True, Nana Addo eventually won the elections but this was a very dangerous act at the time especially when tensions were very high. Moreover, CNN had not actually put out any story to that effect. Further analysis revealed that the picture was from a template which had previously been used. It had a new anchor declaring Nana Ado as the winner with the CNN logo beneath.

Another fake news post that went viral was one that purported that renowned journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas was about to air a documentary to expose cheating and other irregularities that had taken place in Ghana's 2020 presidential election. There were several misleading claims in this instance including the suggestion that journalists had been bribed to call the elections on behalf of the NPP. There were also suggestions that this documentary, on the direction of the United Nations, was going to be shown in America and the United Kingdom. All these claims were false.

The next visible trending fake news post came from a trending video alleging that the NPP chairman in the Ashanti Region had been caught with already thumb printed ballot papers. The content was found to be untrue, and the video was said to have been related to a totally different scenario in 2016 but had been carefully edited to send an ulterior message. In another case, an image of police brutality is shown in a flyer with the police violently attacking civilians. This was accompanied by a text which read: "see how some Voltarians are being treated in the border towns near Togo because of the coming presidential election. Please share all over let it go viral". To put things into context, the Volta region is known to be a stronghold of the opposition NDC. The people there are called Voltarians. The narrative emanating from this post therefore seeks to suggest that because it is the stronghold of the opposition, the police is seeking to suppress the vote by brutalising people. The content and images accompanying this post were found to be untrue.

One of the fake news instances before the election was related to the selection of the running mate for the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Before the candidate was named, a fictitious press release connoting names of short-listed candidates circulated widely on social media. This took on a different form as it was a press release with the logo of the NDC but careful examination confirmed that the document was fake. This was even confirmed by official communication from the party itself when it released an official statement on their twitter handle asking the public to ignore what it called a "frivolous and fictitious" letter.

There was also a story put out by a cloned BBC website that said Nana Addo had refused to concede after losing and that the election was largely flawed at the same time. It sought to portray the idea that the President had unleashed security agencies particularly the military and police to hold on to power. This was even before the Electoral Commission came up with an official announcement. Clearly, this was another false story. The story had images of armed personnel in military

camouflage uniform holding AK 47 rifles. Clearly both the text and the imagery fed into the idea of a West African nation in which the incumbent was using force and violence to cling on to power.

One of the most sensitive fake videos that circulated was one in which incumbent Ghanaian President Nana Akufo Addo is seen to be suggesting that his agenda is to disenfranchise the people of Volta (mostly far north). This video was later noted to have been taken out of context to feed into a predetermined agenda. The original video had the President advising his team to focus on qualifications and competencies rather than tribal biases. Considering that there has historically been tension between the Akans and the Ewes which happen to be the stronghold of both parties, this was a very dangerous video making the rounds. This was one of the videos with the potential to cause conflict and mayhem since it could rile ethnic tensions which had probably been simmering. This is because this kind of information when believed by people can tend to foment inaccurate beliefs and perceptions in a certain central claim. The situation becomes increasingly volatile when people mistrust main news sources and therefore depend on alternative news as a source of information. Such people thus become not only prone or exposed to fake news but tend to easily believe it as well. When political actors seize on this to serve their own parochial interests, the situation can get terrible. They may rather label the mainstream media as fake while seeking to legitimize the inaccurate sources. If we combine this with previous research that shows that belief in fake news is correlated with extremism and fundamentalism, then such information in the hands of ethnic extremists and fundamentalists can be a dangerous weapon.

There was also a totally different kind of artwork showing that both Nana Akuffo Addo and John Mahama had above 50 % of total votes cast even though John Mahama had more votes. The artwork featured John Mahama having 1,121,839 of the total votes cast representing 53.83% while Akufo Addo had 1,098, 943 representing 52.47% of total votes cast. This appeared on December 8th, 2020. First of all this was statistically flawed apart from being factually inaccurate. The electoral commission did not announce on that day. It was way too soon. However, because of the figures attached it will not be surprising if some people believed this.

Still on the qualitative analysis of the fake flyers, there was one which had purported that the National Commission for Civic Education in Ghana (NCCE), had endorsed former President John Mahama. This was not true. The NCCE—though a government institution—is largely not supportive of any political party. Because of this credibility, producers of this flyer hoped to gain more clout for the NDC candidate. The flyer comes with a logo of the NCCE with the initial of the organization written on it. It is presented in the form of a ballot paper. John Mahama is the only one whose picture appears. The rest of the candidates are

represented by traditional adinkra symbols. There are only about three other slots. The rest are thumb printed in the wrong way while Mahama's picture is thumb printed in the right way. The flyer on the surface seeks to show people how to vote but indirectly promotes John Mahama. One of the things the NCCE did which helped to clear public doubt was that it came out to deny. This can be a strategy followed by other organizations to prevent false information from festering. In terms of structure, the flyer is made up of a white background with black boxes. It is very easy to follow. At the top of it is the NCCE logo to make it look credible and followed by the words "Don't let your vote be rejected. Vote the right way". All of this tries to give some credibility to the flyer. This should give us ideas in terms of the nature of the false information being passed around—a use of national symbols to make it look credible. There is also an appropriation of national organization and the use of logos to make it look real. One candidate is then promoted or prioritized over the other. This flyer could be believable because of the NCCE logos, tag line, image and name associated with it. The colours and design for the NCCE is rightly used.

## 9.0 CONCLUSION

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All over the world, societies are dealing with the upsurge of fake news. Due to the upsurge of social media, the dissemination of fake news has gained more prominence in recent times. More troubling is the fact that many people are unable to differentiate between real news and fake news due to how well it is presented to look like truth.

There might be several factors that account for the widespread nature of fake news or information disorder. This may be attributed to the ubiquitous nature of news and the spread of social media as a pluralized form of information access and discourse. Due to very weak control mechanisms and the element of profitability, this appears to be incentives that contribute to the exacerbation of false information.

Understanding the nature, phenomenon of fake news and coming up with enduring measures to combat is certainly a long-term effort. We conclude that traditional media were as guilty of inadvertently sharing of fake news as social media. The report also concludes that as Election Day drew closer, there was a preponderance of increasing spread of fake news. This study serves as an exploratory one to complement existing efforts around information disorder research. Furthermore, the report serves as one of the earliest studies on this phenomenon as far as the 2020 elections in Ghana is concerned.

One way of understanding fake news is to decipher the intent and processes of the



sources of fake news. While this research contributes to understanding the content and nature of the information disorder materials, there is the need for audience research regarding the voters' experience with fake news and the motivations for the use or spread of fake news. We have learned from this report as well as confirmed certain information that is consistent with previous assumptions. The cases we analysed showed that there is the use of false connections in just the titles, headlines and visuals in telling stories to confuse unsuspecting readers who in trying to make sense out of the information overload, may not pay much attention to detail and may take such headlines and pictures at face value. This happens on sites like Facebook where the visuals provided are sometimes not backed by the accompanying text or vice versa. What this means is that, media houses that are not rigorous enough may be caught up taking and spreading such information. We need to understand that the very nature of modern journalism which relies heavily on visuals also makes it naturally predisposed to disinformation. Newsmakers take advantage of the fact that "visuals are particularly powerful vehicles for disseminating misleading information, as our brains are less likely to be critical of visuals" Punongbayan, (2017). And in a bid to outdo competitors, grab audience attention and make more money, "editors increasingly have to write headlines to attract clicks, even if when people read the article, they feel that they have been deceived" UNESCO (2018).

We can conclude that fake news does not have any boundaries since it is found in all aspects of public communication, especially in political contexts where political actors are now seeing it as a tool for them to gain political advantage during elections. To make progress one of the emerging narratives is that, generally citizens view official sources with suspicion. Precisely because voters frequently view the government's official news output with great scepticism, they are often willing to believe rumours even bizarre ones about the ruling party and the President.

Apart from distrust of the mainstream media, ethnic motivations also remain a major component of the content that was spread.

In Africa, ideological motivations exist, but surely one of the ways to rile up tensions and get people worked up is to present information in an ethnically skewed manner. What was found was that most of this tension surrounded Ewes and Ashantis. Greater education to enable citizens focus more on other substantive aspects of the election will reduce the over concentration of this aspect.

New routines and processes in the newsroom need to be better attuned to filtering fake news content. We realize that when the system is flooded with false information it makes it all the harder for real and factual news to exist within the system. Democracy as we have known it—from an information perspective needs reconsideration and revitalization. The burning issue is to reimagine and consider a new information system that harnesses information and technology to serve the

needs of the democracy and citizens. Both citizens and the media as well as other stakeholders need to be at the centre of the overall transformation of electronic and digital communication. This implies addressing other dimensions of modern information which use various channels as a projection of fantasies, obsessions, fears, and various imaginations that undermine healthy discourse.

In our conclusion, this report asserts that journalists and other civil society groups should engage in paradigm repair to address the fractured manner in which news is presented to audiences. Media houses should be self-critical and should not shy away from expelling those who breach any house rules regarding fake news. According to Cohen (2002) journalists in a period of information crisis should be able to reproduce itself in such a way that the dominant paradigm of journalism which is objectivity superimposes itself on the prevailing crisis of information. One of the things that can be done is to perhaps set these boundaries in terms of which journalistic organizations are credible and which ones are not. Resource support must be given to civil society and academics to come up with a ratings standard for media houses which can then guide the public in their consumption of news.

## 10.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

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It is obvious that one of the things that could seriously threaten the peace and security of Ghana is if there is any information that stokes ethnic tensions. People can take advantage of this to propagate information that is slanted as we saw in some of the fake videos. Ghana needs to embark on serious efforts to bring the nation together to celebrate the diversity and appreciate each other's culture.

There needs to be some regulation and policy in the use and circulation of online information during elections. Mechanism must be used to ban or flag fake news so the public becomes aware of such existing programs. There must be a crackdown on information disorder involving the National Media Commission and the National Communication Authority. The Ministry of Communication or the Electoral Commission can issue some operatives or directives regarding the use of social media particularly during elections for political parties, organized bodies, and the public to comply.

In Italy for instance there has been legislation on fake news and perhaps the Ghanaian parliament can introduce draft legislation on this. In Europe, there have been recommendations to include trust marks so people will know credible information circulating.

Advertisers can also stop supporting media houses or institutions noted for churning out fake news. Identifying and countering accounts that are fond of disseminating

fake news will also be a step in the right direction instead of allowing them flourish as is the case in Ghana now. From an education point of view, the government can include information literacy to public school curriculums. Promotion of factual content can also help to reduce the effect of disinformation. This can be done through monitoring to make sure any negative or false information out there is quickly eliminated and the accurate information is rather promoted.

One of the ways to anticipate and counter disinformation is to monitor the presence and activities of any foreign websites and bots which could be operating in a way to undermine and pollute the information system during the elections for all sorts of reasons. Quickly identifying and countering any such interferences is crucial to prevent it from escalating to the levels we saw in the United States where foreign interference was found to have been present in the information system particularly to help candidate Trump in the 2016 Elections.

An area which also needs further studies will be fake news use on Twitter and the use of social bots. Social bots are programs capable of automating tasks such as retweets, likes and followers. They are usually used in a mass manner and can be applied to pressure media organizations or anyone through persistent postings. These bots can promote political propaganda and biased social messages.

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