

Policyweekly

Navigating Misinformation in the Sahel: Regional Impacts and Nigeria's Stake



Policy Recommendations

- 1 There is a need to increase funding and training of local media for enhanced local reporting and accurate coverage of governance, development, and security issues.
- 2 There is a need to boost media literacy through media literacy programmes.
- 3 Organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can coordinate to counter disinformation.
- 4 There is a need to support independent fact-checkers who can verify information and debunk false narratives.
- 5 Collaborating with social media platforms is critical to enforce stricter content regulations in misinformation-prone regions.

Introduction

The Sahel has become an essential theatre of operation for foreign influence. Russia and China, responding to strategic and economic interests, have used misinformation and disinformation to extend their influence at the expense of, or in rivalry with, Western powers, especially the United States and France. These [industrial-scale campaigns](#) are now mainly promoted through social media and finding fertile ground in disaffected or vulnerable populations, exacerbating security and socio-economic crises. Consequences spill over into Nigeria, where misinformation fosters distrust, undermines regional stability, and undermines good governance. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly explores the strategic misinformation and disinformation efforts by Russia, China, and other actors in the Sahel, examining their impact on regional stability, security, and Nigeria's geopolitical landscape.

Understanding the Strategic Interest of Foreign Powers in the Sahel

The complex socio-political landscape of Sahel presents a very attractive target for influence by global powers. Russia and China seek stronger positions within Africa because of the rich natural resources, extensive virgin markets, and potential political alliances within the continent. The Sahel, marked by all forms of state fragility, such as weak governance,

political instability, and security vulnerabilities, serves as a channel for these powers to increase their regional influence.

[Russia's involvement in the Sahel](#) primarily focuses on strengthening relationships through military cooperation, economic alliances, and targeted influence campaigns. This is partly achieved by spreading anti-Western narratives, which resonate strongly in countries with historical grievances against Western colonial powers. China's approach, in contrast, is framed around economic diplomacy and investment, yet it also includes strategic media influence, often amplifying narratives that align with its political stance and economic ambitions.

How Misinformation and Disinformation Spread in the Sahel

Misinformation (unintentional falsehoods) and disinformation (deliberate falsehoods) exploit deep-rooted vulnerabilities in the Sahel. High illiteracy rates, limited internet regulation, and extensive social media use provide fertile ground for misinformation to thrive. Also, high levels of unemployment, especially youth unemployment, political and economic marginalisation, political violence, armed conflict, terrorism, colonial history, experience and relationships have aided the activities of misinformation in the region. In the Sahel, where legitimate media outlets often struggle to remain financially viable, social media fills an informational void, enabling foreign actors to spread narratives unchallenged by local fact-checking mechanisms.

Dating back to 2018, Russia has [fuelled disinformation in the Sahel](#), with 19 efforts targeting Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Russian networks have assisted in the preparation and promotion of military coups in all three nations. The [raising of Russian flags and burning of the French tricolour](#) during rallies in favour of the reigning military junta in Bamako, Mali and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, throughout 2022 and early 2023 is an unsettling indication. [Russia's strategy](#) includes disseminating anti-Western, particularly anti-French, narratives that capitalise on local resentment toward former colonial powers. Reports indicate that Russian-backed groups, often linked to entities like the Wagner Group, are active in spreading propaganda that portrays the group forces as saviours and "[warrior angels](#)". The propaganda also portrays Russia as a benevolent ally against Western exploitation. This narrative has contributed to a surge in pro-Russian sentiment across the Sahel, where traditional Western allies like France and the U.S. are increasingly viewed with scepticism.

China's approach to influence in the region leverages a broader "[united front](#)" strategy, which includes media partnerships, academic exchanges,

and cultural diplomacy. Through these channels, China cultivates a favourable image and subtly promotes anti-Western narratives, particularly regarding human rights and governance issues. While less overtly antagonistic than Russia's, this approach serves a similar purpose in shaping local perceptions and consolidating China's influence.

The Role of Proxies and Local Allies

Foreign influence efforts are amplified through proxies and local influencers, who provide a domestic veneer to external narratives. Figures like Kemi Seba, a prominent anti-Western activist, have gained large followings by advocating [for African sovereignty while promoting pro-Russian sentiments](#). Such individuals serve as conduits, relaying Russian disinformation under the guise of African-led resistance against Western neo-colonialism. The influence of these actors is further reinforced [through networks of local media outlets](#), which often reproduce content that aligns with Russian or Chinese narratives. This indirect strategy allows foreign powers to shape public opinion without overtly appearing as instigators, making it difficult to trace the origins of specific narratives and further complicating efforts to counter them.

Misinformation and Disinformation's Impact on Sahelian Security and Governance

The prevalence of disinformation narratives in the Sahel is not without consequences. Perpetuating distrust of Western institutions has helped to [erode partnerships](#) between Sahelian governments and their Western allies and has further complicated any effective counterterrorism and governance strategy. In some instances, this has extended to the [expulsion of Western forces from host countries](#); for example, in Mali, anti-French sentiment led to the ouster of French troops.

Moreover, disinformation exacerbates current divisions and deepens ethnic, religious, and ideological fault lines that insurgent groups leverage as they seek to recruit members and undermine a state's authority. Misinformation, while inducing distrust in government institutions and international allies, nurtures extremist narratives, building support for groups that frame themselves as defenders of local autonomy from foreign "oppressors."

The Nigerian Perspective: Misinformation's Spillover Effects

Nigeria, though not within the Sahel proper, shares significant social, political, and economic

ties with the region. The disinformation trends seen in neighbouring countries have started to influence Nigerian public opinion, especially among communities already vulnerable to socio-economic insecurity and ethnic tensions.

Anti-Western narratives originating from Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns have found resonance in parts of northern Nigeria, which have both cultural, traditional, religious and ethnic relationships with Niger and Chad republics. This is often promoted by the citizens' mistrust of government institutions and interventions of Western allies. For instance, [the nationwide hunger protest](#) in the country assumed a curious twist in the hoisting of Russia's flag by youths in some states in the North. This raised the question, "Could a more subtle but organised group in the background be pushing them in that direction?". Mistrust, exacerbated by online propaganda, has the potential to weaken Nigeria's partnerships with Western allies, impacting its capacity to address issues like terrorism, illegal migration, and border security.

Moreover, Nigeria faces [misinformation challenges](#), particularly concerning ethnic conflicts, religious tensions, and political disputes. The infiltration of foreign disinformation only complicates the situation, as it amplifies local grievances and diverts attention from constructive solutions. For instance, anti-Western sentiment could impede the critical humanitarian and development assistance of Western partners in that part of the country. This could directly undermine Nigeria's efforts to address the affected regions' pressing social and economic challenges because of the likelihood of reduced development support by Western development partners.

Countering Misinformation: Challenges and Strategic Responses

Efforts to counter foreign disinformation in the Sahel require a nuanced approach.

1. **Strengthen Local Media:** Reliable, well-resourced local media reduces reliance on foreign-controlled outlets, providing communities with trusted information sources. Increased funding and training can enhance local reporting and ensure accurate coverage of governance, development, and security issues.
2. **Boost Media Literacy:** Media literacy programmes help individuals critically assess information sources. In regions like the Sahel, where misinformation is rampant, these initiatives empower citizens to identify and resist disinformation.
3. **Engage Regional Bodies:** Organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can coordinate to counter disinformation. By sharing resources, intelligence, and strategies, regional bodies can implement cohesive, culturally sensitive responses to foreign influence.
4. **Support Independent Fact-Checking:** Independent fact-checkers operating in local languages can verify information and debunk false narratives. When accessible and widely trusted, fact-checking entities serve as essential tools for combatting disinformation, especially in isolated communities.
5. **Encourage Digital Platform Accountability:** It is critical to collaborate with social media platforms to enforce stricter content regulations in misinformation-prone regions. Effective moderation policies on disinformation could curb the spread of harmful foreign narratives, especially when platforms work closely with local stakeholders for context-appropriate enforcement.

Navigating a Complex Information Landscape

Misinformation in the Sahel epitomises the macro-geopolitical contest playing out across Africa. What is clear is that the strategic deployment of disinformation by Russia and China speaks volumes about the extent to which these powers will go toward securing influence and shaping perceptions in their favour. The consequence of these campaigns is deepening divides, weakening governance, and complicating international cooperation on security and development issues.

However, the ripples of Sahel disinformation have consequences for Nigeria that cannot be overlooked. As one of the leading states in West Africa, Nigerian stability is nearly inextricably linked with that of its neighbours. Indeed, the spread of misinformation generally endangers regional stability and Colleague Nigeria's security and development goals in its own right. The response to this challenge has to encompass tempering counter-disinformation efforts with respect for local sovereignty while being conscious of the complex socio-political landscape of the region.

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