Disinformation in Côte D'Ivoire

Trends and Recommendations

August 2021

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Disinformation in Côte d'Ivoire

Trends and Recommendations

Monitoring Period: March 2021 - August 2021

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Acronyms

AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
API	Application Programming Interface
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
CfA	Code for Africa
CNN	Cable News Network
Covid-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FPI	Front Populaire Ivoirien
PDCI	Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire
REPPLECI	Réseau des Professionnels de la Presse en Ligne de Côte d'Ivoire
RHDP	Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix
WAFM	WhatsApp FM

Executive Summary

Introduction

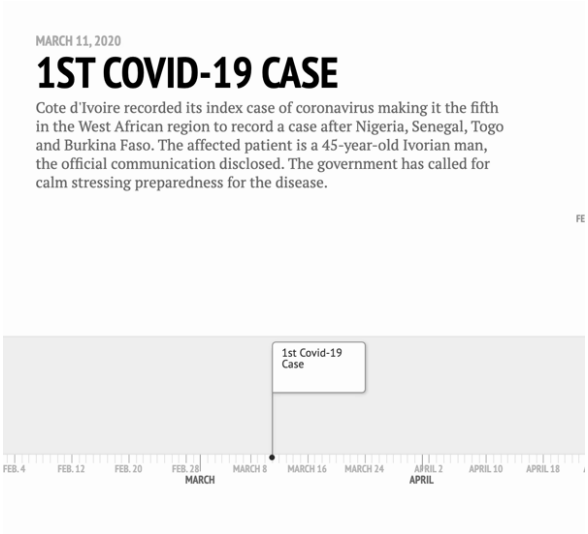
At the height of Cote d'Ivoire's recent elections, there was a sudden surge of high-quality, provocative videos and images on social media platforms that used disinformation narratives to drive a strong anti-government sentiment. Local fact-checking and anti-disinformation outlets have recorded fake or misleading news pieces circulating daily on traditional media and social networks like WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as on Facebook-based discussion groups.

We undertook a process to monitor the social media information environment, conduct social media network analysis, and track down accounts working in a coordinated manner to share anti-government, anti-vax and pro-Russian messaging in Côte d'Ivoire.

Analysis And Key Takeaways

The following were the key takeaways after three months of monitoring social media and disinformation trends in Côte d'Ivoire.

1. We identified that several key events in the country led to significant spikes in social media conversations and were subject to mis/disinformation campaigns.



A timeline of key events over the monitoring period (Source: KnightLab/ CfA)

2. We also noted that the three major platforms used to publicly disseminate information were WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook.
3. Pro-Russian & pro-(former Ivorian President Laurent) Gbagbo disinformation networks pushed claims that leaders/elites are faking Covid-19 vaccination to drive the adoption of the vaccination drive.
4. The shift from mainstream social media channels to 'dark socials' highlighting Covid-19 disinformation narratives. Following the intense scrutiny done on public social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, disinformation actors are redirecting users to closed and encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, to evade scrutiny.

5. Covid-19 narratives and conspiracy theories are taking hold in WhatsApp groups and most of them are foreign or imported disinformation. Some of the claims identified from tracking WhatsApp through local in-country sentinels include: claims that Covid-19 is not airborne; that Covid-19 vaccines contain harmful components including HIV/malaria & nanoparticles; that AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine causes widespread blood clotting disorders; that micro-magnetic particles have been infused into Covid-19 vaccines; claims of fake Covid-19 vaccinations and "disappearing" needles; and, that Covid-19 vaccines have led to the deaths of recipients.

Recommendations

Use extensive fact-checking mechanisms through local media

Journalists are the first line of defence against information abuse and mis/disinformation. Specific training strengthens their ability to respond to the threat on an ongoing, everyday basis. We recommend that local media should continuously be trained to monitor all social media channels, including WhatsApp and Telegram, by tracking some forms of harmful content and without breaking the end-to-end encryption of such platforms.

Establishment of a local fact-checking network/ alliance

Coordination between organisations looking into mis/disinformation is a key strength when it comes to fighting disinformation. Bringing together think tanks, civil society organisations and newsrooms in Côte d'Ivoiree to share knowledge and resources will be an important driver in the fight against persistent misinformation in the country.

Use of advanced data analysis skills to fight coordinated campaigns

Fact-checking alone is not enough. It is important, and a first line of defence against mis/disinformation because it focuses on the spread of individual content. But the use of social network analysis and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to investigate disinformation campaigns has gained prominence in the recent past. These data analysis techniques go a step beyond fact-checking, as they help to identify the origin, sources and key actors of disinformation content and therefore stop the campaign at the source. Such techniques also act as a detection rather than an investigative measure, which enables organisations to counter disinformation before it gains traction.

Section 1

Background, Objectives, and Methodology

Project Background

Combining disinformation with people's existing distrust of and disdain for their governments' decisions makes citizens increasingly vulnerable in the era of Covid-19. Rumours surrounding the disease, as well as fake news, misinformation and disinformation, are all dangerous.

Côte d'Ivoire is a case in point. At the height of the West African country's recent elections, EAI staff noticed a sudden surge of high-quality, provocative videos and images on social media platforms that used fake events and images to drive a strong anti-government narrative. Over the last few months, local fact-checking and anti-disinformation outlets Réseau des Professionnels de la Presse en Ligne de Côte d'Ivoire (REPPLECI) and WhatsApp FM (WAFM) have recorded fake or misleading news pieces circulating daily on traditional media and social networks like WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as on Facebook-based discussion groups such as the Democratic Observatory of Côte d'Ivoire and the Free Observatory of Côte d'Ivoire.

Objectives

The purpose of this research is to provide EAI and the general public with a better understanding of disinformation in Côte d'Ivoire. This research will serve to:

1. Train part-time sentinels in Cote d'Ivoire on tools and techniques used to identify, investigate and verify information obtained on social media platforms;

2. Monitor the social media information environment, conduct social media network analysis, and track down accounts working in a coordinated manner to share anti-government, anti-vax and pro-Russian messaging in Côte d'Ivoire

Project Context And Methodology

The primary research and writing of this report was conducted by the iLAB and editorial oversight and research guidance was provided by Code for Africa's (CfA) executive committee.

Our analysis used open-source investigative techniques to study disinformation narratives linked to Côte d'Ivoire and its political environment to identify indicators of coordinated inauthentic behaviour and disinformation campaigns both from domestic and foreign actors.

Our methodology to identify disinformation and influence operations included:

Monitoring for viral social media posts

Viral social media posts included those that received high engagement on different social media platforms under observation within the monitoring period. We monitored such posts to assess whether the information was factual or authentic. Several posts were identified as mis- or disinformation; these examples are documented in subsequent sections of the report.

Social media network analysis

For posts that resulted in trends such as unique hashtags and topics, we collected the social media data using Meltwater's Explore, a social monitoring and analytical tool, and CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook. Further analysis using basic Google Sheet commands, Python, and visualising the datasets using tools such as Gephi and Flourish, enabled us to identify suspected coordinated behaviour.

Profiling of influential accounts

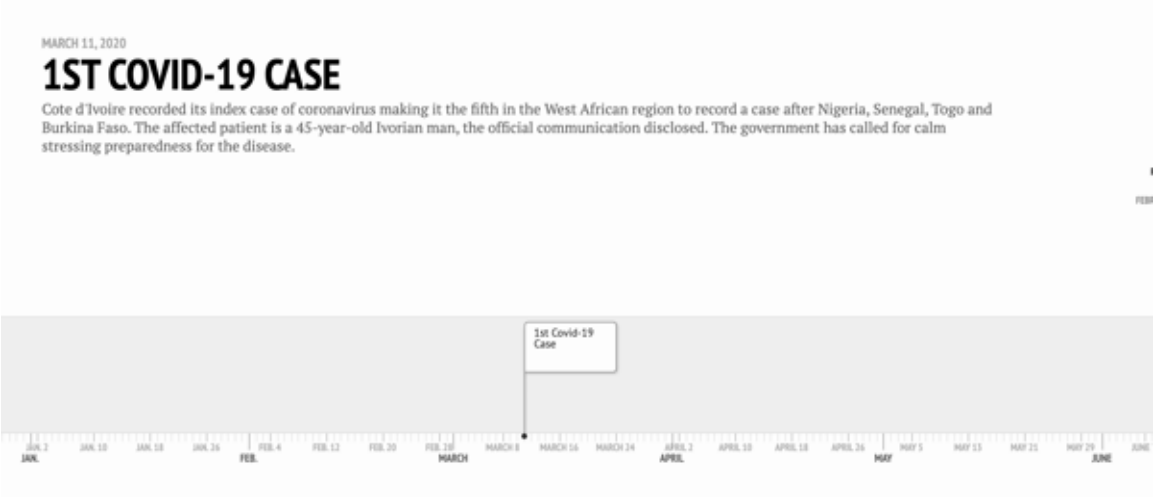
Social network analysis enabled us to identify key accounts with some control over online conversations. Our forensic researchers then performed an in-depth review of the accounts to categorise them as real accounts, bots, sock puppets, etc. Attribution has been included in the report.

Section 2

Research, Analysis, and Insights

Background

As a part of this project, we looked at mis- and disinformation targeting the Côte d'Ivoire information environment, with a key focus on anti-vax narratives and foreign interference. So far, we have identified several key events that were subject to disinformation campaigns during this monitoring period.



A timeline of key events in Cote d'ivoire over the monitoring period (Source: KnightLab/ CfA)

The following are the key events highlighted in the timeline above:

- 11 March 2020: Côte d'Ivoire had its first case of Covid-19
- 26 February 2021: Côte d'Ivoire received its first batch of vaccines
- 25 March 2021: Vaccination of the UN Coordinator
- 01 April 2021: Announcement of the return of the former president
- 17 June 2021: Gbagbo's return to Côte d'Ivoire
- 03 July 2021: Gbagbo meets (another former President) Henri Konan Bédié
- 27 July 2021: Gbagbo meets (President Alassane) Ouattara

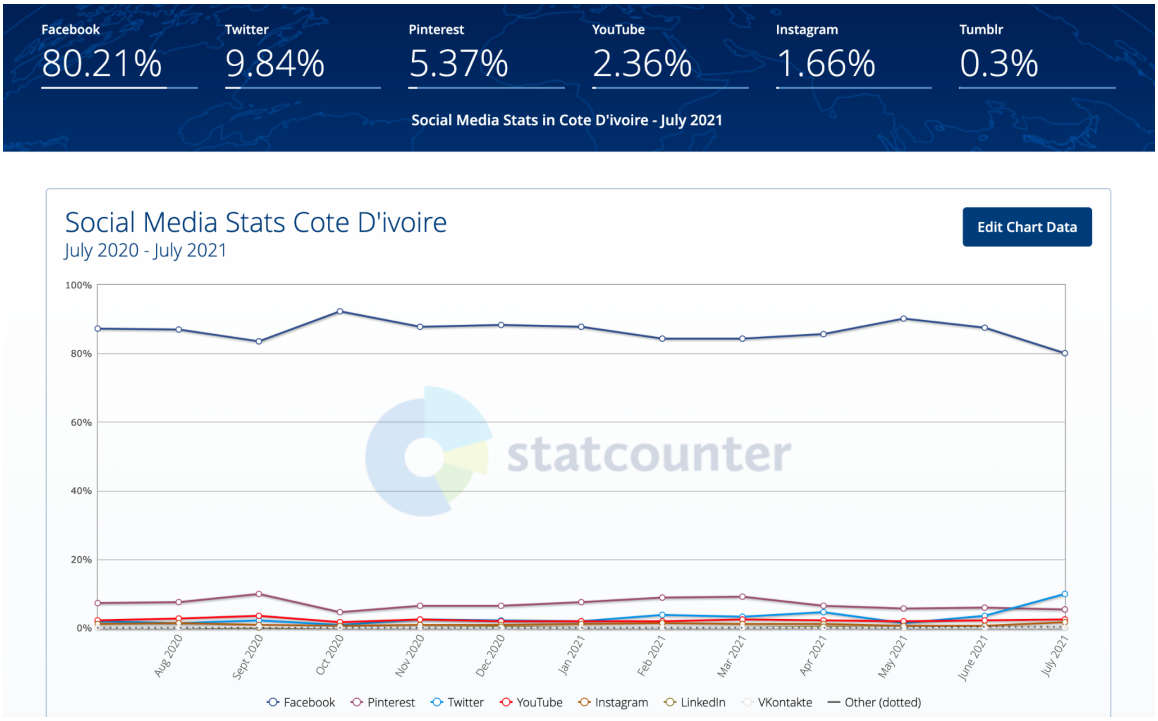
Disinformation Actors And Pathways

Social platform analysis

In Côte d'Ivoire, we noted that three major platforms are used to publicly disseminate information. These platforms were the main focus when identifying, monitoring and reporting on mis/disinformation in the country. They are:

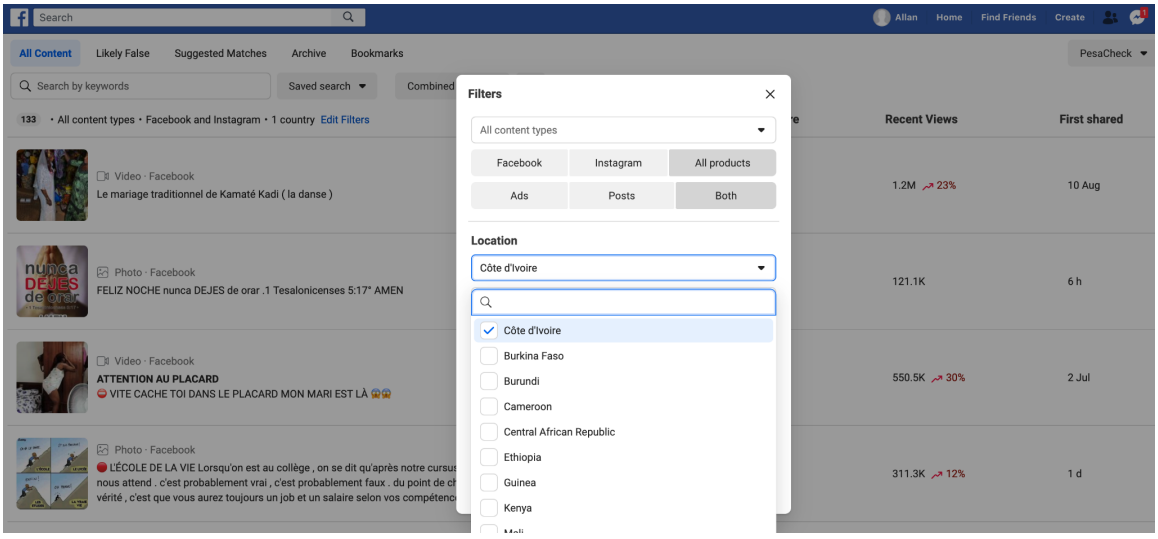
- Facebook
- WhatsApp
- Telegram

Analysis from statcounter for the period ending July 2021 confirms that Facebook is the most used platform, averaging at 80% usage as compared to other social platforms. Twitter comes in second, with around 9% average usage rate.



Social platform usage statistics for Cote d'ivoire July 2021(Source:Statcounter)

Together with PesaCheck, an independent fact-checking network incubated by CfA, we have been monitoring the AI-driven Facebook misinformation and disinformation queue (composed of flagged posts taken from our fact-checking partnership with Facebook) to identify any flagged or potential mis- or disinformation that might warrant further investigation.



Screenshot from Facebook queue showing the results of a search for Cote d'Ivoire. (Source: Facebook)

We have also been monitoring other social media platforms such as Twitter, and closed platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, with support from local in-country sentinels.

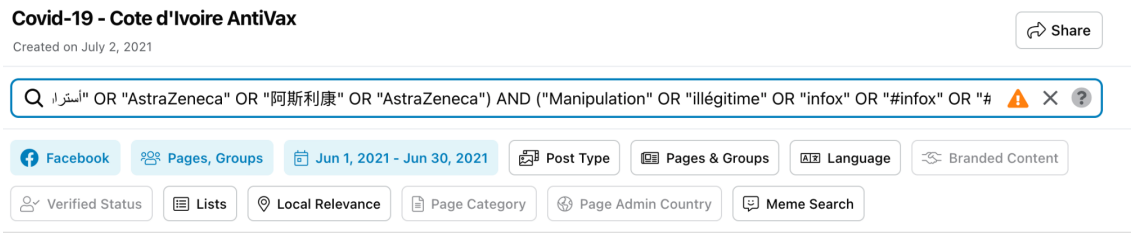
Twitter

The level of activity and interaction observed on Twitter confirmed that the platform is not highly used in the country.

Suspicious viral or trending topics, hashtags, and terms on Twitter are usually a key indicator for manipulation. Identifying such indicators provides key insights on coordinated behaviour, whether authentic or inauthentic, and gives a clear indication of influence operations from foreign countries. This is mainly through use of bots and fake personas on the platform. For the period we monitored the platform, we did not identify any topics that trended on Twitter in the country.

Facebook

Each month during the monitoring period, we used a variety of search terms to identify anti-vaccination posts on Facebook, using publicly available data from CrowdTangle, a Facebook monitoring and analytical tool.



Example search string (cut off by search bar) using CrowdTangle. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)

What Effect/Impact Are We Seeing On The Ground?

Covid-19 Mis/Disinformation

Since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged - most likely from Wuhan, China - the world has experienced rapid transformation and many changes. The major changes that occurred during these times remain unprecedented.

There has been an urgent need to investigate the overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in African countries as well as to provide novel insights about access to information on Covid-19 in rural Africa.

As African countries accelerate the deployment of Covid-19 vaccines, significant obstacles stand in the way of ensuring global access to the vaccines. The process has been fraught with logistical inefficiencies and mismanagement, including issues around equitable access and distribution.

Côte d'Ivoire was among the first countries to receive the first wave of COVAX vaccines[1] after UNICEF's transport planes carrying 504,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/ Oxford Covid-19 vaccine touched down at Abidjan International Airport on 26 February 2021. As at 19 August 2021, 52,583 cases of Covid-19 had been confirmed in Côte d'Ivoire, with 369 deaths, as reported to the WHO. As of 15 August 2021, a total of 1,131,037 vaccine doses had been administered. This represents approximately 4.3% of the country's total population, based on the most recent population statistics available.

Vaccine hesitancy, driven in part by mis/disinformation, represents a key obstacle to ensuring people are protected. Identifying misinformation and countering it with reliable and trustworthy information is critical to the success of Covid-19 vaccination campaigns. Understanding the threat posed by anti-vaccination efforts on social media is critically important. An evaluation of the effect of social media and online foreign disinformation campaigns on vaccination rates and attitudes towards vaccine safety in the country was the key motivation for this research.

Dominant narratives and conspiracy theories identified as part of this research have contributed significantly to vaccine hesitancy in the country, facilitated by the amplification of such narratives on social media.

CfA's iLAB team monitored and mapped vaccine disinformation and narratives in the country. The findings reported below are based on that monitoring exercise and additional investigative research.

Coordinated anti-vaccination campaigns

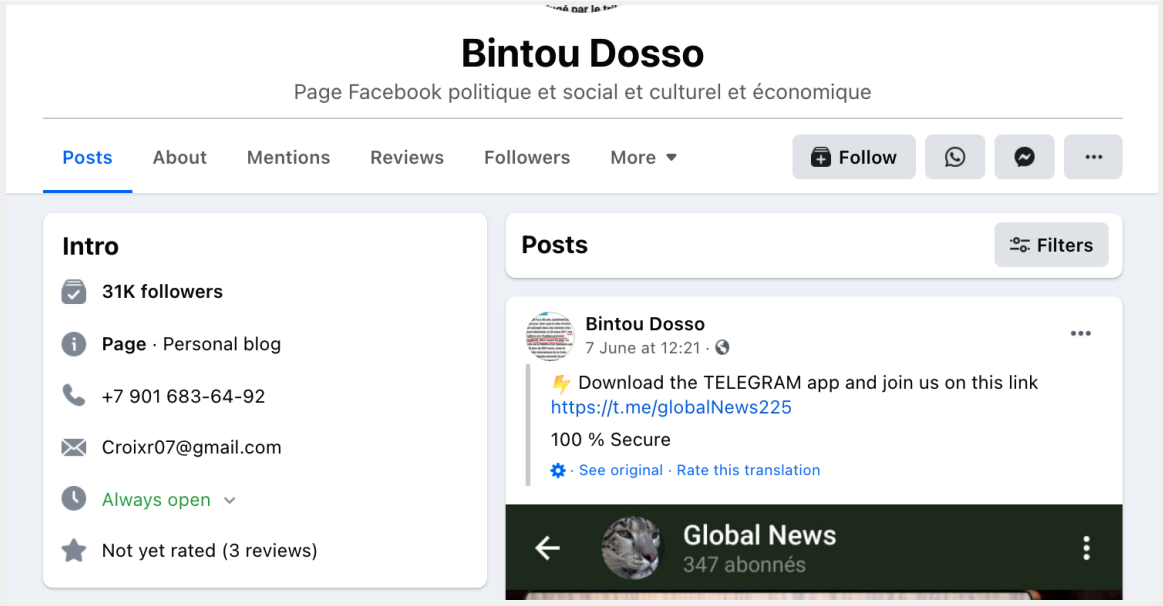
Through our monitoring and research, several key findings stand out related to anti-vaccination campaigns in Côte d'Ivoire:

[1] https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/cote-divoire-among-first-countries-receive-first-wave-covax-vaccines

Pro-Russian & pro-Gbagbo disinformation networks pushing claims that leaders are faking Covid-19 vaccination to drive the adoption of the vaccination drive.

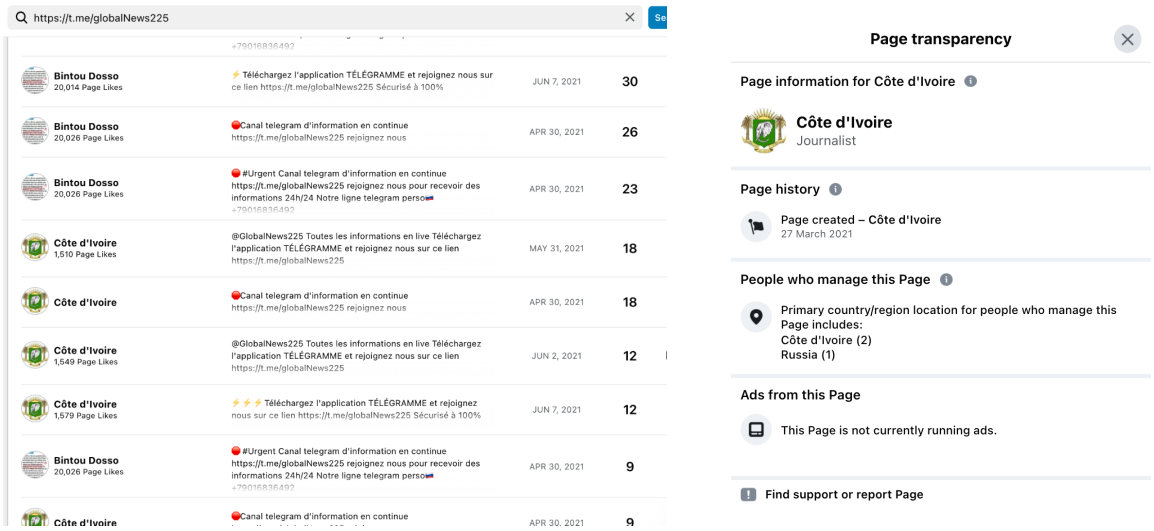
Throughout our monitoring project, we identified a number of messages on social media linked to Côte d'Ivoire that amplified Covid-19 disinformation narratives. Some of these messages originated from pro-Russian online sources and were subsequently amplified on Facebook groups and pages targeting the Côte d'Ivoire population.

In March 2021, we observed several videos circulating on social media networks that contained an extract from a newscast showing the vaccination of Philippe Poinsot, Coordinator of the United Nations Development System in Côte d'Ivoire. Bintou Dosso was one of the accounts with the highest interactions on Facebook that shared this video. An analysis of the account indicated that it was possibly being run by an individual located in Russia.



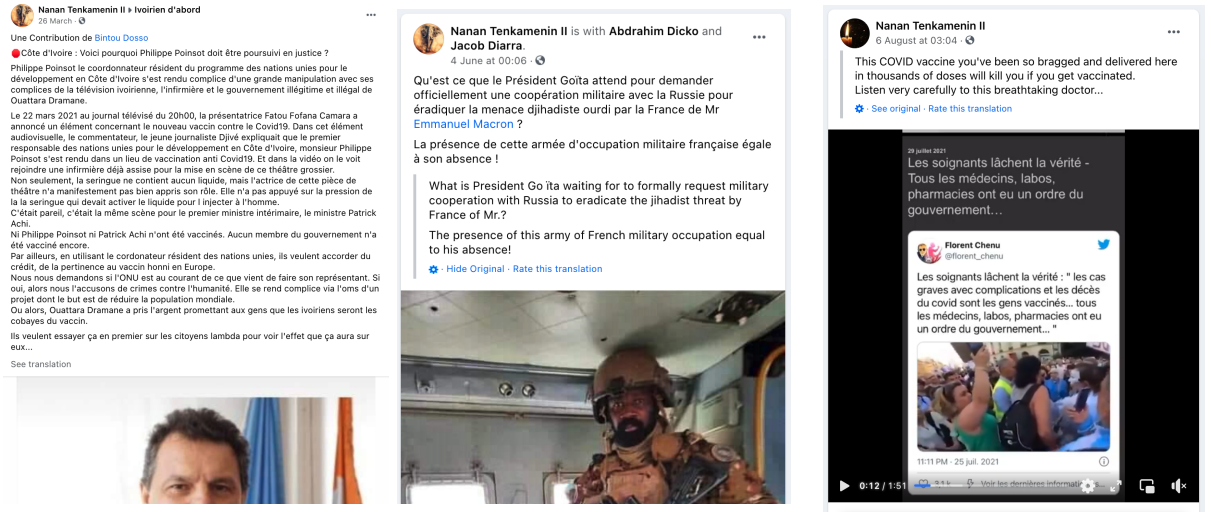
Profile information of the Bintou Dosso account (Source: Facebook/ CfA)

The account also frequently shared pro-Russian content. The post originating from this account was widely shared by a network of other pro-Russian and pro-Gbagbo accounts. Some of the accounts appear to be run by individuals within the country, but further investigation revealed that the accounts were also linked to individuals/administrators based in Russia.



Pro-Russian Facebook assets targeting Cote d'Ivoire (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)

A number of the Facebook accounts that are part of the network which frequently shared anti-vaccination content originating from the Bintou Dosso account also re-shared pro-Russian content from sites such as RT and other pro-Russian groups/pages. Notably, accounts Nanan Tenkamenin II, and Guy Charles Nguessan were identified as sharing such content.



Sample anti-vaccination and pro-Russian content from the network of accounts (Source:Facebook/ CfA)

Aside from the Bintou Dosso account, the network also reshared content from a user called Chris Yapi Officiel, an account that is alleged to be part of an anonymous cyber activist group comprised of other accounts such as Kyria Doucouré, Mouhamadou Soumahoro, Serge Koffi le drone, Les Justiciers du net (buzz de tonton ahoko) and Enquête Média. These accounts primarily share narratives and sentiments against the current regime in the Côte d'Ivoire.

The shift from mainstream social media channels to 'dark socials' highlighting Covid-19 disinformation narratives

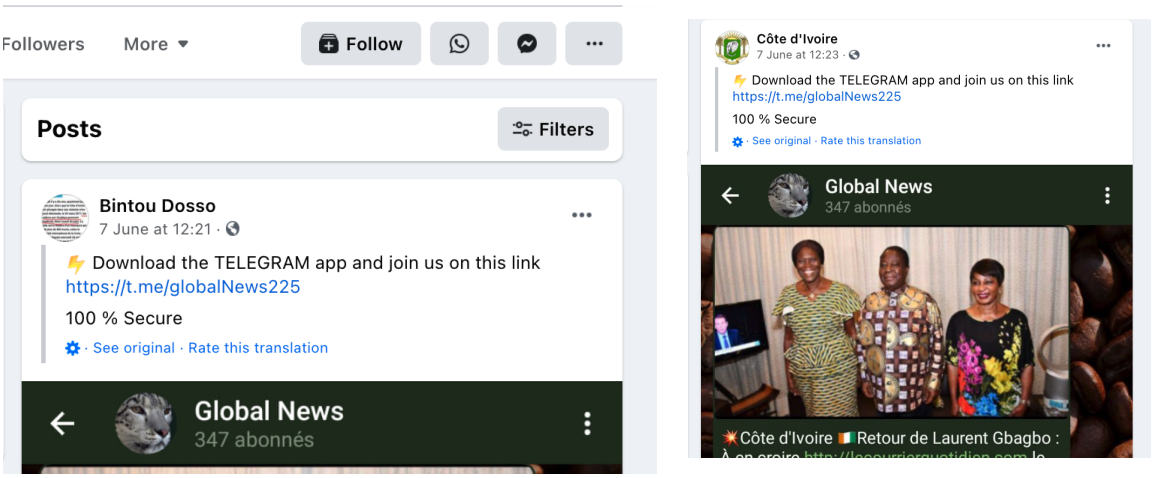
The public nature of communication on Facebook and Twitter has contributed to a large and growing body of research about how disinformation campaigns on those sites work and the actors involved in propagating such narratives or content. But because of the encrypted, private nature of communication on platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp, we have an extremely limited understanding of the mechanics of disinformation campaigns on such platforms, especially those focused on spreading misinformation and disinformation content. It is important to note that platforms including Facebook and Instagram have their own direct messaging functions which are themselves private.

One of our research goals was to study the people and groups who launch coordinated disinformation communication campaigns using these platforms. We engaged local in-country sentinels and trained them to identify, join and monitor for disinformation content shared on these platforms. We noted that there are two main themes from the monitoring process:

Users being redirected to Telegram channels and other encrypted platforms

One of the tactics used by disinformation actors on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is to share content that attracts users, then once the groups or pages have a high number of followers, they tend to redirect the users to closed encrypted platforms like Telegram to evade scrutiny of the information they share.

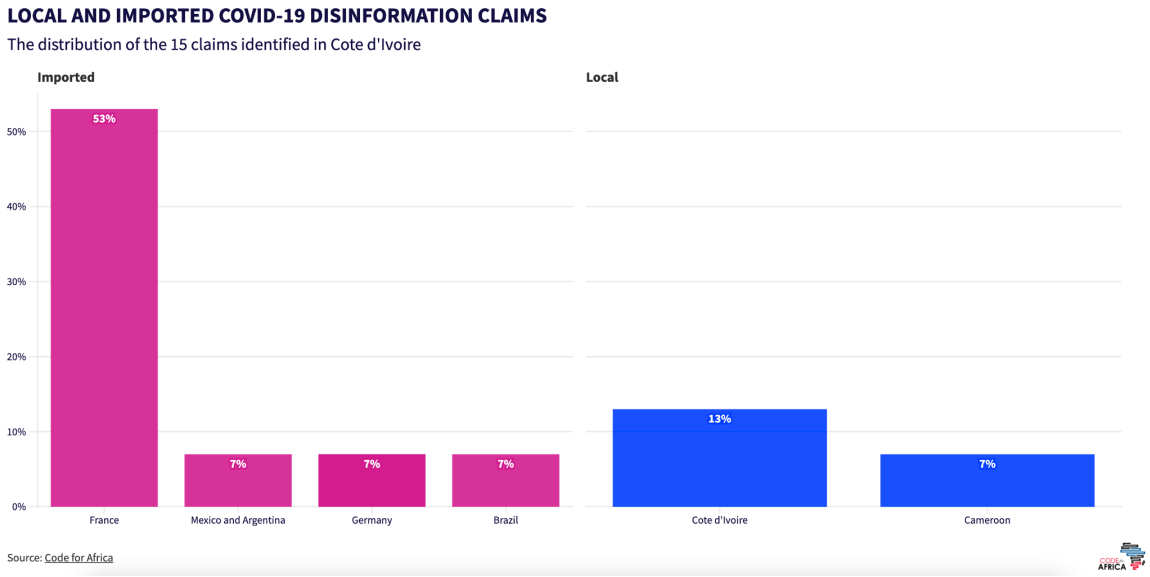
An example of this can be seen on the Bintou Dosso account and the 'Côte d'Ivoire' Facebook page, discussed in the previous section of the report. It redirected users to follow a Telegram channel (https://t.me/globalNews225), which was used to further share pro-Russian, pro-Gbagbo, anti-French and anti-vaccine narratives.



Sample accounts redirecting users to encrypted platforms e.g. Telegram (Source:Facebook/ CfA)

Local and imported anti-vaccination narratives being propagated through WhatsApp groups

Through our monitoring and research, one finding stood out: Covid-19 narratives and conspiracy theories are taking hold in WhatsApp groups, and most of them are foreign.



We trained our local in-country sentinels to scan and collect links to WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. From the three-month monitoring period, we identified a number of Covid-19 disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories primarily shared as videos in Côte d'Ivoire WhatsApp groups. The following are the claims identified during our analysis:

Claim 1: Covid-19 is not airborne

This video was shared on both TikTok and WhatsApp with the aim of dissuading the public from wearing masks during the Covid-19 pandemic. The video is a snippet of the speech by the former French MP Martine Wonner during a session in the French national assembly on 05 October 2020. In her speech she affirms that, according to research released by the US Centers for Disease Control, Covid-19 was not an airborne virus and so there was no need to wear masks as part of fighting it. This claim has since been debunked and the CDC confirmed that masks are an essential preventive measure for fighting Covid-19. Using the InVid Video analysis tool, we conducted a reverse look-up of the shared video in order to find copies of the same video online. We noted that the video has been posted multiple times both on YouTube and Twitter; however, there is enough evidence online showing that the international fact-checking community has published debunks refuting the claims from the MP.

Claim 2: Covid-19 vaccines contain harmful components including HIV, malaria & nanoparticles

This video claims that the following harmful components are included in Covid-19 vaccines: fragments of HIV, DNA sequences from the malaria germ, additional DNA and protein sequences whose presence and role are unexplained, and nanoparticles which will allow definitive control of vaccinated people because of 5G. It also claims that Covid-19 is an artificial virus manufactured in France by the Institut Pasteur from the natural coronavirus SARS-CoV. It further argues that there are potential long-term effects of vaccination, mainly characterised by a weakening of the immune system, leading to diseases such as malaria or AIDS. A reverse look-up of the video using the In-Vid Video analysis tool identified several copies of the video posted on Facebook. However, some of the content has since been removed from the platform. We noted that some of the videos are still active on the platform and PesaCheck has since flagged this with Facebook for review and action. The video has been debunked by Le Jalon media, which is part of the Mali Check initiative.

Claim 3: AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine causes blood clotting disorders

This video was taken from a news broadcast on a French news channel which highlights serious cases of blood clots, allegedly among people vaccinated with AstraZeneca and the suspension of the vaccine by many countries. The video was shared with the aim of dissuading people from accepting the AstraZeneca vaccine. Since the video was broadcast on mainstream media, a reverse look-up did not yield significant results. However, we did find that the earliest instance of the video online was on YouTube, posted by 'Face cachée Mag Tv' on 13 March 2021. The claims in the video have been fact-checked by a number of organisations e.g. Rappler.com, which found a similar claim to have missing context. The fact-check highlights a study funded by AstraZeneca which confirmed that there is a small risk of rare blood clots with low platelets after the first shot of its Covid-19 vaccine and that there are no extra risks after the second.

Claim 4: Micro-magnetic particles infused into Covid-19 vaccines

A total of eight videos identified during the research claimed that the Covid-19 vaccines contain micro-magnetic & electric particles that can hold magnetic objects such as phones and coins in place when put next to the point of injection and light up electric devices such as light bulbs. A reverse look-up of the videos to track the original sources online did not yield any results. However, there is evidence of similar claims in other regions of the world and fact-checkers have since debunked the claim. One of the arguments the people in these videos are making is that Covid-19 vaccines have metal in them. In the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's list of ingredients for the three Covid vaccines given emergency use authorisation in the United States, the agency specifically points out: "All Covid-19 vaccines are free from metals such as iron, nickel, cobalt, lithium, rare earth alloys or any manufactured products such as microelectronics, electrodes, carbon nanotubes, or nanowire semiconductors. But the list does show that all three contain some form of sodium, including sodium chloride or sodium acetate, and one of them contains potassium chloride. Both potassium and sodium can be metals. Potassium and Sodium are only metallic in solid form, but they are not solid as additives

in the injected solution. The individual ions are dispersed in the solution, a liquid composed of mostly water, individual potassium and sodium ions, in addition to the active components of the vaccine. The ions in this solution are basically like dissolved salts, like those in Gatorade or Pedialyte, which our body needs to work properly but which get depleted during exercise. And, of course, neither potassium nor sodium is ferromagnetic. They couldn't cause a magnetic interaction with normal objects.

Claim 5: Claims of fake Covid-19 vaccinations, "disappearing" needles

The identified video was a compilation of different videos that showed politically influential people being vaccinated. In an attempt to assuage others' fears and encourage people to get vaccinated, several elected officials have opted to be vaccinated publicly. The video tries to demonstrate that the individuals never received Covid-19 vaccines. Lots of people have also been sharing images and videos that they say show politicians manipulating the public by pretending to be vaccinated in other countries. The most prominent of these claims is the vaccination of Philippe Poinsot, Coordinator of the United Nations Development System in Côte d'Ivoire with videos showing a nurse who allegedly pretends to prick the arm of the UN official, but does not inject anything and does not even press on the syringe. After verification, it turns out that the UN team and its main representatives *were* actually vaccinated that day. They were also photographed during and after the process.

Claim 6: The Covid-19 vaccines have led to the deaths of a vaccine recipients

This video claims to show a list of individuals who died a short time after getting Covid-19 vaccines. It highlights that most of those individuals were young and in good health. Allegedly basing their comments on research studies, the panelists in the video conference claimed that individuals who got vaccinated would be in danger of death within six to 18 months from the date of vaccination; they added that these individuals would be more contagious. Additionally, the individuals in the video claimed that Covid-19 vaccines contained high doses of mercury and aluminium, which can destroy recipients' immune systems. A reverse look-up of this video to identify its origin online enabled us to identify an account named Jasper Mader on the video sharing platform, Rumble, containing several additional anti-vax videos. A further search of the profile online revealed that the account claims to be "a free media to denounce corruption in France and Europe". The account was registered by a user based in France.

Claim 7: Covid-19 vaccines can cause body pains, Covid-19 and even lead to death

This video contains explanations from an alleged doctor about the effects of getting Covid-19 vaccines. He claims that many people, mostly older ones, who receive mRNA or viral vector vaccines experience difficulties, body pain, can contract Covid-19 and can sometimes even die. He highlights that the cause and effect relationship between these symptoms and Covid-19 vaccines is yet to be proved and adds that there are many questions around vaccines, particularly their diverse nature and how quickly they've become available. He emphasises that he will never get vaccinated and that he can't recommend the vaccine to his patients. A reverse look-up of the video shows that the first

copy of the 7-minute clip available online was published on www.bitchute.com by a channel called 'fockr'. The video description, written in German, gives the name of the doctor, claiming that he is a chief physician for anesthesia and intensive care medicine in Henstedt-Ulzburg, Germany. An online search of his name resulted in a possible match to a LinkedIn profile that shows Dr Robert Kleinstäuber works at a German hospital called Elbe-Elster Klinikum GmbH.

Claim 8: Covid 19 pandemic is not a real medical pandemic

The 28-minute video clip shared by sentinels was identified while in circulation on WhatsApp. The video showed alleged doctors from different parts of the globe, "sounding their alarm calls to the world" about Covid-19 vaccines. They claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is not a real medical pandemic and that the medical process used to diagnose Covid-19 has never been tested or used before. They also claim that doctors and hospitals are getting financial incentives to diagnose Covid-19. They also argue that the vaccines are experimental because they are proposing to use modified mRNA or modified DNA synthetic to the human body, which is the first time this has been ever done on human subjects. Further, they claim that the vaccines have not been proven to be effective since there has not been enough time to conclusively verify them. All the doctors conclude their comments by affirming that they will not take the Covid-19 vaccine and will not recommend it to any of their patients. A reverse-lookup shows that the original copy of the video was also posted on Rumble, a video streaming service, on 23 Jun 2021 by a channel called France Réinfo. This was picked up on 25 Jun 2021 by a Twitter user who wrote a thread with a comprehensive list of claims from the video.

Claim 9: Bill Gate refused to get his children vaccinated

This one-minute video clip was identified circulating on Côte d'Ivoire WhatsApp and TikTok groups. It claims that there is evidence Bill Gates refused to get his children vaccinated. It also claims that one of Pfizer vaccine staff members was arrested at Israel's border and that the staff member had refused to be vaccinated with Pfizer vaccine. A reverse lookup of the clip shows that an online copy of the video was posted on https://odysee.com on 11 April 2021. We noted that the clip was part of a longer video, clocking in at just more than an hour, as seen on Odysee.com, and that several other users on the website had uploaded the video clip.

Claim 10: Covid-19 vaccines supplied to African countries are different from those dispensed in the West

This four-and-a-half-minute video clip shared by the sentinels shows Nathalie Yamb, a Cameroonian-Swiss activist, who describes a Western conspiracy in relation to Covid-19 vaccinations. She claims that there is evidence of two types of vaccines being manufactured under the same brand: one for the West and one for Africa. She also claims that the African version is not recognised by the EU and UN, and doesn't give access to health passports for international travel to Europe. She claims that the West's real intention is to keep Africa in poverty and disease, and to exterminate people. She therefore recommends that individuals in countries that use vaccines from the COVAX

initiative should not accept vaccination. As described in a previous report, Yamb is an outspoken activist against France's involvement in Africa and claims to advocate for a free Africa. Notably, she was a guest speaker at the Russia-Africa conference in Sochi, held in October 2019.

Claim 11: Health facilities/WHO inflate numbers to financially gain from Covid-19 funding

This video was identified on Facebook, shared by a pro-Russia/pro-Gbagbo account. The account actively shares videos containing Covid-19 conspiracy theories, making claims against France and the World Health Organisation (WHO). One of the posts claims that the former President Laurent Gbagbo is against the vaccination drive in Côte d'Ivoire. The claims also come from several anti-France groups on Facebook. The video supports and argues about the links between China's Wuhan P4 laboratory; France and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic. It claims that health facilities inflate numbers to financially gain from Covid-19 funding. It also claims that health institutions gain financially from reporting high Covid-19 numbers, and that as a result the number of cases reported by the WHO is highly inflated. Using In-Vid, we conducted a reverse look-up of this video to identify its origin online and noted that the name of the individual being interviewed is Patrick Jaulent. The video was traced to *France Soir*, a French website which features several additional interviews with Covid-19 conspiracy theorists.

Claim 12: Covid-19 vaccines contain digital markers that will be used for global digital identification

The video, identified on WhatsApp, contains claims about the link between Covid-19 vaccine manufacturers and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The claims originate from the Kla.TV media channel. The writer claims that one of the purposes of vaccines is to introduce a digital marker inside human cells to be used for large-scale digital identification of vaccine recipients. Using In-Vid, we conducted a reverse look-up of this video to identify its amplification online. We identified an English version of the video, published on ceflix.org. Notably, an article published by watson.ch claims that Kla.Tv is a propaganda and conspiracy channel and part of a network of fake news outlets linked to Swiss sect leader Ivo Sasek.

Claim 13: Covid-19 variants come from vaccinated individuals

This video was identified circulating in one of the Côte d'Ivoire WhatsApp groups. The video contains claims from the Professor and Nobel Prize winner Luc Montagnier about the origin of Covid-19 variants. He claims that the variants originate from people who have been vaccinated against Covid-19. He also claimed that he doesn't intend to be vaccinated because the current vaccination drive is "an extreme medical error". We conducted a reverse look-up of this video to trace other copies online and possibly identify the origin of the video. We identified a copy published on Le Média en 4-4-2, a website created in 2020 and hosted in France. The website frequently publishes conspiracy and propaganda videos against Covid-19. We also identified a copy shared on the Facebook page called MUN. The page describes itself as a political movement based

in the French department of Martinique and has also posted several videos containing anti-vaccination narratives and claims.

Claim 14: Fake Covid-19 vaccinations

This video, circulating in Côte d'Ivoire Whatsapp groups, claims that Brazil's health secretary, Benedita Oliveira, faked her vaccination in order to persuade the public to get vaccinated. This is one of the many videos identified with claims that government officials and political leaders are faking Covid-19 vaccination. A reverse look-up of this video to trace its copies online helped us to identify a number of YouTube links that contributed to its virality. A YouTube video titled "*Vejam no vídeo câmera lenta ele joga fora a vacina que estava na seringa antes de aplicar..joga fora atrás da mão dele*" which means "Watch in the slow motion video, he throws away the vaccine that was in the syringe before applying it... throws it away behind his hand" has also been shared on Linkedin by Côte d'Ivoire accounts and on Twitter by an account named Pascal Voyer, which often retweets conspiracy videos.

Section 4

Conclusions

Disinformation in Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire's information environment has been marred by significant levels of Covid-19 related disinformation claims, narratives and campaigns. The investigation revealed that a number of pro-Russian, anti-French and pro-Gbagbo social media networks have been driving disinformation related to key events in the country and related to the Covid-19 pandemic. We also observed a significant shift of disinformation to the encrypted chat platforms indicating that more resources need to be allocated to investigating disinformation on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. The investigation also revealed that Covid-19 narratives and conspiracy theories are taking hold in WhatsApp groups and most of them are foreign or imported disinformation. This indicates that disinformation can no longer be investigated within regional contexts, but should now include coordinated efforts across several countries, especially those that have some level of history or partnerships.

Section 4

Recommendations

Use extensive fact-checking mechanisms through local media

Journalists are the first line of defence against information abuse and mis/disinformation. Specific training helps strengthen their ability to respond to the threat on an ongoing, everyday basis. We recommend that local media should continuously be trained to monitor all social media channels, including WhatsApp and Telegram, by tracking some forms of harmful content, without breaking end-to-end encryption of such platforms.

Establishment of a local or regional fact checking network/ alliance

Coordination between organisations looking into mis/disinformation is one key strength when it comes to fighting disinformation. Bringing together think tanks, civil society organisations and newsrooms within the country or regionally to share knowledge and resources will be an important driver in the fight against persistent misinformation in the country.

Use of advanced data analysis skills to fight coordinated campaigns

Fact-checking alone is not enough. It is important, and a first line of defence against mis/disinformation because it focuses on the spread of individual content. But the use of social network analysis and Natural Language Processing techniques to investigate disinformation campaigns has gained prominence in the recent past. These data analysis techniques go a step beyond face-checking, as they help to identify the origin, sources and key actors of disinformation content and therefore stop the campaign at the source. Such techniques also act as a detection rather than an investigative measure, which enables organisations to counter disinformation before it gains traction.