



The 2023 Election in Liberia: Platform Interventions in a Low-Trust Election Environment

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Introduction

Problem Area: Definition and Manifestation of Misinformation and Disinformation In Low-Trust Election Environments

Elections are, by their very nature, very visible and public events, and as a result, they are often the targets for mis- and disinformation. As a result, manipulation of this kind has the potential to upend processes, primarily through undermining the credibility of authorities and results, as well as empowering bad actors to take advantage of the information vacuum that results when there is a lack of credible information.

The media in these low-trust environments is particularly important during elections, given its role in holding leaders accountable. However, in these environments in particular, there is a high likelihood for information to be weaponized and used to advance agendas for political gain, made worse by factors such as an increased likelihood of [media capture](#) to limit the scope of political debate, the lack of capacity and reach, implicit bias and vested interests as well as existing gaps in fundamentals such as basic literacy.

Measures such as fact-checking and verification seek to respond to these gaps in information integrity. The organizations that do this work operate as not-for-profit initiatives³ that carry out multiple forms of journalism, including investigative, public service, advocacy, and watchdog journalism⁴. Depending on the prevailing media landscape, fact-checkers operate either as facilitators or as alternatives to legacy news media, and in some instances, they operate as both.

Another potential risk manifests as a result of the information vacuum that often accompanies elections, where authorities do not have a clear picture of what is happening on the ground. What ordinary citizens may be seeing is likely not reflective of the true situation, and they may choose to act on this in a way that could potentially worsen the security situation.

The resulting lack of trust in official sources of information is likely to cause people to turn to unofficial sources, including social media, hearsay and fringe websites, making it harder to obtain the actual facts of what may be going on. This negatively impacts media and information literacy overall.

The long term impact of all this is the erosion of trust in individuals, organisations and other entities that, in low-trust, high risk contexts, are likely to be the only credible sources of information. When people are constantly bombarded with contradictory or

³ [Checking every corner: Structures, perspectives, and funding of fact-checkers around the world](#)

⁴ [Data Journalism Beyond Legacy Media: The case of African and European Civic Technology Organizations](#)

false information, they are much less likely to believe information that goes against what they hold to be true, and this leaves room for information disorder to flourish, particularly in remote and underserved areas, with potentially negative consequences.

The Liberian context

Liberia is a country in West Africa with a population of 5.5 million⁵. The country was established following the settlement of freed slaves from the US beginning in 1822, and became a republic in 1847. Liberia experienced a military coup in 1980, which led to a decade of authoritarian rule, and eventually two civil wars between 1989 and 2003.

A 2003 peace agreement ended the civil war, and the first post-war elections were held in 2005, when Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected as president, becoming the first woman elected head of state in Africa. In the ensuing peace, Liberia has undergone a period of post-war reconstruction, but there are enduring social and economic impacts of the conflict.

According to the World Bank, 48.3% of Liberian adults are literate, and the secondary school completion rate is 13.3%.⁶ This is a direct result of the conflict, in which close to 60 per cent of school buildings were damaged.⁷ This has had an impact on media production and consumption in the country, with a scarcity of quality journalists.⁸

The internet therefore has been seen as a democratising force in Liberia, removing barriers of citizens taking part in political discourse. There were 1.8 million internet users in Liberia, and 642,000 social media users in the country in January 2023 according to data from Kepios.⁹ This data also showed that Facebook had 623.9 thousand users in Liberia, while Twitter had 25,000 users, and LinkedIn had 140,000 users, meaning that the overwhelming majority of social media users were on Facebook.

The majority of Liberians live in rural areas, where internet access is often limited or unavailable. The average cost of data is also high, with research from the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) showing that [the country does not meet](#) the UN Broadband Commission's affordability threshold¹⁰. While the highest 20% of income earners on average pay 8% of their monthly income for 1GB of data, it costs the lowest 20% of earners 48% of their income to access the same, meaning that any online information

⁵ [Liberia - The World Factbook](#)

⁶ [Liberia - Education - Country Dashboard](#)

⁷ [Basic education | UNICEF Liberia](#)

⁸ [Quality journalism struggles in Liberia | Jamlab](#)

⁹ [Digital 2023: Liberia — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights](#)

¹⁰ [The Internet is unaffordable in Liberia: action is needed to 'SET' the agenda for positive change](#)

containing debunks and fact-checks is difficult for this section of the population to access.

There were an estimated 500,000 Liberians living abroad¹¹ in 2017, with 100,000 of these living in the United States. This diasporan population has, according to Adeoti Dipeolu, sought to assert its influence directly through remittances, as well as financially supporting candidates, as was seen in the 2005 post-war election¹².

Therefore the information ecosystem in Liberia can only be understood through a proper contextual assessment of the country's most recent history and its implication thereof - civil wars, the influential diasporan community, Ebola virus outbreak and COVID-19 pandemic.

Liberia's profile fits that of a number of other African countries that are relatively new democracies, have experienced internal conflicts and periods of military rule, have small but significant online populations, an emerging media landscape that is now recovering from years of persecution and significant politically engaged diaspora populations. These countries include Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger and Sierra Leone, which remain largely ignored by social media platforms in terms of allocation of content moderation resources and a budget to tackle mis/disinformation. As a result, many of these African countries in low-trust environments shaped by their most recent history, with low digital literacy levels and faced with the obvious inaction of platforms remain majorly vulnerable and impotent in their demand for accountability.

The media landscape in Liberia

Liberia is ranked 66th in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index¹³. According to the RSF Liberia country report, media in the country has experienced a boom following the cessation of fighting in the civil war.

There are currently over 200 media houses licensed to operate in the country, according to the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA).¹⁴ Of the 214 outlets identified by EISA, 164 are radio stations, 11 are television stations, and 41 are print and online media outlets. Most of the radio stations in Liberia broadcast in English and other local dialects including Bassa and Kpelleh.

Radio is the major source of media consumed in the mainstream media space, and radio is the dominant source of information outside the capital, Monrovia. The

¹¹ [Capacity-building for Diaspora Engagement in Liberia | International Organization for Migration](#)

¹² [Understanding diaspora influence through remittances in Liberia](#)

¹³ [Liberia | RSF](#)

¹⁴ [LIBERIA GENERAL PRE-ELECTION MEDIA ASSESSMENT REPORT Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa \(EISA\)](#)

popularity of radio is due to its accessibility in remote areas, as well as the low literacy rates that limit access to other media formats.

Online media is a growing sector in Liberia, with a number of news websites and blogs. Some of the most popular online media outlets are online versions of the country's leading newspapers. The government has in the past limited access to social media platforms, as was seen in June 2019, when protests against corruption led to the restriction of access to WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and other apps.¹⁵

Due to financial constraints, Liberian media outlets often struggle to hire skilled journalists, run investigations, or diversify their coverage to include topics that may otherwise be outside their audiences' areas of interest. Consequently, they tend to focus heavily on political reporting, neglecting matters of social interest to the detriment of their audiences, thus creating a heavily politicized media landscape that hampers genuine civic engagement.

The EISA report also found that a significant portion of the Liberian populace trusts the information they receive, and do not critically evaluate this information before sharing it with others. The likely outcome of this scenario, as the report points out, is a situation where influential actors, including the government, politicians and others likely to gain from the weaponization of information in this way can influence media discourse and disseminate manipulative propaganda while stifling dissenting voices.

On 18 October, 100 armed individuals attacked the headquarters of New Dawn, Liberia's leading privately-owned newspaper. This incident happened a week after the country's general election. The newspaper's premises had been attacked in the previous year in a similar fashion.

Overall, Liberia's media landscape is partially free, but the resource limitations and existing political pressures mean that this freedom is sometimes difficult to exercise. The media is polarised along political lines, with pro-opposition outlets experiencing some difficulty operating, and as a result, the outlets are largely self-censored in order to avoid scrutiny. Journalists in the country routinely find themselves facing challenges such as [intimidation, censorship, legal challenges, and concerns over their personal safety](#), and the outlets they work for find themselves operating in an extremely fragmented and underregulated space.

¹⁵ [CPI calls on Liberian authorities to ensure access to internet and social media services](#)

This contributes to the lack of trust in mainstream media.¹⁶ Furthermore, the lack of resources has limited the ability of newsrooms to attract and retain talent, innovate and cover the country effectively. This lack of capacity means that they are unable to take risks and cover risky and potentially harmful stories, leaving them vulnerable not just to economic pressures, but also to manipulation by politicians to their detriment.

2023 election

In 2023, Liberia had an election on October 10, with voters choosing the president, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Over 2.4 million of the country's citizens were expected to cast their ballot across 2,080 voting precincts and 5,890 polling places. The country's electoral commission had cleared candidates from 46 political parties, as well as a number of independent candidates.

The [presidential race](#) was contested among twenty candidates, including two women. The candidates included the incumbent president, George Opong Weah, as well as Joseph Boakai, who had served as the 29th vice president of Liberia under former president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

With neither of the two leading candidates winning a majority in the first round, a runoff election was held on 14 November 2023, with Boakai defeating Weah 51% to 49%.

Due to the combination of low levels of literacy, government regulation of social media, and limited access to the internet in Liberia, misinformation and disinformation spread through word-of-mouth after emerging on social media, or vice versa, posing a significant challenge to democracy and stability in the country.

Misinformation manifests as a phenomenon referred to as "*Dey Say*," referring to a statement that cannot be attributed to a single person. *Dey Say* rumours often target political figures, ethnic groups, or religious communities, leading to fear and distrust¹⁷, and as the majority of the population is offline and lacks access to the internet, these rumours are hard to track once they spread offline and cause harm.

According to Alpha Daffae Senkpeni, a Liberian journalist and Executive Director of the Local Voices Media Network, Liberians have always experienced this phenomenon, but it is now at a much larger scale given the platforms involved. Social media, Senkpeni states, has made spreading mis- and disinformation faster and more sophisticated.

¹⁶ [AD483: Liberians want a free media – within limits – and unrestricted access to social media – Afrobarometer](#)

¹⁷ [Detecting Fake News Using AI in Liberia](#)

Previously, disinformation was spread by word of mouth, and while it led to attacks and violence, its reach was limited. However, messaging and social media apps have greatly shrunk the social and physical distance that previously served as a limiting factor preventing the spread of harmful narratives and rumours by bringing Liberians together and in effect, creating filter bubbles based on nationality. These factors, Senkpeni points out, have essentially supercharged the *Dey Say* phenomenon, which spreads through audio content, and is able to bypass the literacy divide in the country.

Additionally, the Liberian diaspora¹⁸ has been identified as a source of politically motivated disinformation¹⁹, with some actors being identified by the US ambassador to Liberia as “media personalities and political personalities have intentionally disseminated rumours or misinformation into Liberia’s political environment from the safety of their studios and offices in the U.S.”

The influence of the diaspora, as [Bettie Mbayo](#), a Liberian journalist and partner at [The Stage Media](#) adds further, is evident when considering the effect it has on decision making in the country.

Liberians from the diaspora campaigned heavily for Boakai, contributing financially to his campaign.²⁰ Their influence is most felt on social media and online, as Senkpeni also confirms, adding that these stories may be picked up by local media with no corrections applied to the distortions within, in the process influencing Liberians who encounter it.

“Liberians in the diaspora have a major say on things that are happening back home. But the way they do it is problematic because some of them spread disinformation because they are trying to paint a certain picture of the situation at home and sometimes they’re trying to hold folks responsible for the problem. But the manner in which they do it, sometimes is based on propaganda and sometimes based on fake news”

- Alpha Daffae Senkpeni, Liberian journalist and lawyer

As a result, Liberians have been exposed to disinformation that seeks to discredit politicians, manipulate public opinion against certain candidates, and sway election results through the use of fabricated stories, manipulated images or videos, and false claims about opponents' policies or personal conduct.

Interventions such as [training journalists](#) on basic reporting skills, including key aspects of media and information literacy, conflict resolution and reporting on elections were

¹⁸ [“Stop Using The Media For Misinformation” - NewRepublicLiberia- News on Liberia](#)

¹⁹ [Ambassador McCarthy’s Remarks at Press Conference with Anti-Corruption Coordinators - U.S. Embassy in Liberia](#)

²⁰ [Diaspora Liberians Arrive in Country to Strengthen Boakai’s Presidential Campaign - FrontPageAfrica](#)

integral in ensuring that the effects of this disinformation were somewhat contained. These training workshops also provided an opportunity for media practitioners to learn more about reporting guidelines that had been established ahead of the elections, as well as civic education best practices.

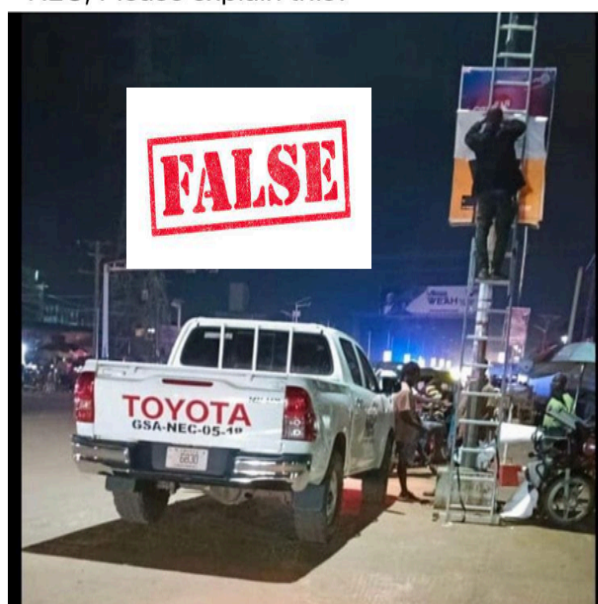
Impact of misinformation and disinformation on electoral processes in Liberia

The overall impact of political misinformation and disinformation in Liberia is the undermining of democracy. According to the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) report, mis/disinformation focused on electoral processes ahead of the election, such as the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR), with false information about the requirements for one to register as a voter circulated either deliberately by bad actors or inadvertently by people believing it to be true.

Another wave of disinformation emerged once the official campaign period had commenced, with two instances of photos claiming that a Magistrate of the National Election Commission was seen putting up ruling party CDC posters, one in Nimba and another in Grand Bassa.

<  **Truth Breakfast Show (TBS)** ...
Sylvester Wonplue · 1h · 📷

NEC we are watching your back!
NEC Car was captured and been use by
putting CDC/ Weah Banner!
NEC, Please explain this?



Fact-checked image of NEC Upper Nimba Magistrate putting up a pro-government poster, from [FactCheckLiberia](#)

These instances of misinformation and disinformation could lead to a loss of trust in electoral processes and the bodies tasked with managing them, in this case the Liberian National Elections Commission. By putting the credibility of an electoral body in question, the results that they announce can further be brought to question, and this loss of trust can have serious consequences, especially in a fragile democracy.

Given the recent history of civil war in Liberia, misinformation and disinformation has been identified by the government as [one of the factors](#) preventing Liberia's democratic process from moving forward, and that it had the potential to cause social unrest and instability by inciting violence and hatred between different groups in society.

Efforts to combat election misinformation and disinformation in Liberia

Like many other African countries, fact checking initiatives led the way when it comes to the fight against harmful political content during elections in Liberia. The country has two fact-checking organisations certified by the International Fact-Checking Network operating in the country - [Dubawa Liberia](#), a local chapter of the [Dubawa](#) fact-checking initiative, and [The Stage Media](#), established in 2020 by Liberian journalists Bettie K. Johnson Mbayo and Hannah Geterminah.

These two initiatives, as well as Local Voices Liberia's [iVerify](#) and [Campaigners against Misinfo and Disinfo](#) performed verification and scrutiny of political and electoral content before, during and after the election.

iVerify, which was supported by UNDP, found that online hate speech and disinformation targeted female candidates with the goal of discouraging them from running for office.^{21 22} Some of the candidates experienced violence, as a result.²³

The phenomenon of gendered online misinformation has been documented elsewhere in the continent, with Policy, a Uganda-based feminist data, design and technology

²¹ [Liberia Adopts Innovative iVerify Digital Tool To Stem Hate Speech | United Nations Development Programme](#)

²² [Liberia's iVerify combats hate speech and disinformation ahead of 2023 elections | International Journalists' Network](#)

²³ Ibid

initiative recording the same in Uganda ahead of the country's elections in 2022 and in Kenya in 2023.²⁴

Meta has a limited presence in Liberia, and the platform did not have a local trusted partner who could perform debunking and moderating functions as has been seen in other countries such as Kenya and Nigeria. This, the Mission pointed out, meant that the election-related information available for voters on Facebook in Liberia was either largely missing or was of poor quality due to the lack of local insights to inform such an intervention²⁵.

Liberian journalist Bettie Mbayo also pointed out that social media platforms have been largely unresponsive when approached to collaborate. Her newsroom, The Stage Media, has tried to reach out to the platforms to collaborate, but to no avail.

Prior to the 2023 election, FactSpace West Africa deployed a team to monitor online and offline conversations on Liberia's multi-tier elections to elect a new President, Senators and Members for the House of Representatives.

This followed a voter education campaign, where FactSpace's researchers produced fact sheets and explainers to educate the electorates about the voting process.

On election day, the team monitored social media platforms - Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter and TikTok - to identify viral election claims, suspicious information, hate speech and misleading content targeting the election process, starting with the accounts of 5 media outlets including Liberia Network Television (LNTV), the State broadcaster, [OKfm Liberia](#), [FrontPage Africa](#), [Spoon Tv](#), [KM TV](#) and [Freedom Radio](#), paying attention to their posts on YouTube and Facebook, where they provided real-time election coverage.

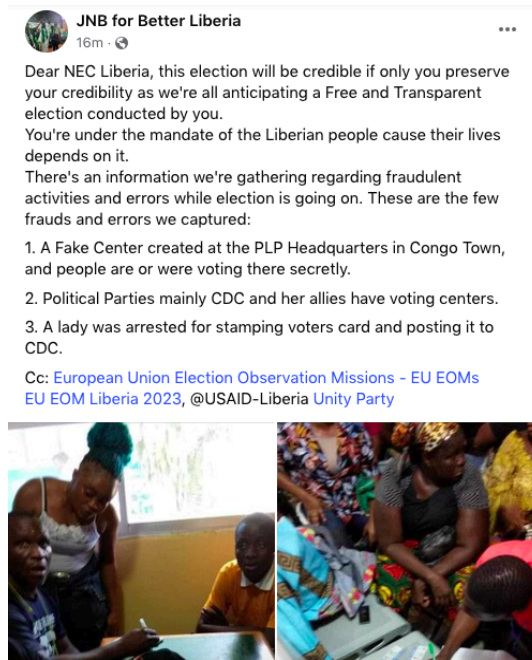
The team monitored posts from the National Election Commission (NEC Liberia), as well as various actors including local and international organisations and elections observer groups, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union Election Observer Mission in Liberia.

The team also identified multiple Facebook accounts streaming events from various polling centres. The team debunked the following claims:

²⁴ https://pollcity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Byte_Bullies_report.pdf

²⁵ [European Union Election Observation Mission Liberia General Elections – 10 October 2023 PRELIMINARY STATEMENT](#)

(1) *Secret balloting at PLP Headquarters leading to the arrest of a lady – **False***



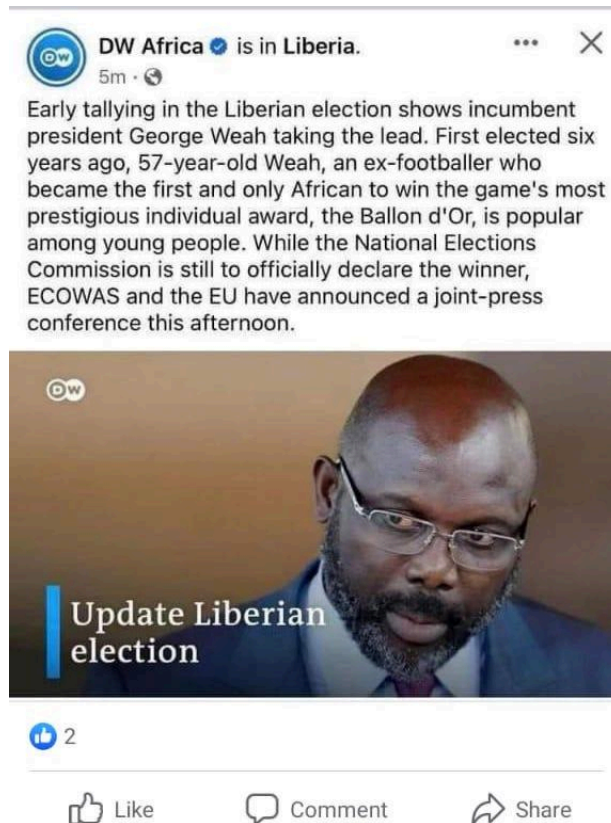
A screengrab of a Facebook post claiming of the existence of a fake voting centre

(2) *CDC officer arrested for possessing multiple Voter ID cards – **Partly True***



A screenshot of a Facebook post alleging voter fraud in the Liberian election

*(3) Joseph N. Boakai has been declared president-elect of Liberia - **True***



A now-deleted Facebook post by DW Africa wrongly suggesting George Weah was leading in the polls

(4) The fourth debunk was a controversial post by the DW suggesting the incumbent president was leading the post as of Thursday, October 12, 2023, which sparked reactions from social media users and political analysts. The team at DW made a correction, and an apology was rendered.

Some of the major themes identified after assessing the work of the fact-checking platforms (The Stage Media, Local Voices Liberia, Dubawa Liberia, FactSpace West Africa) that helped in tackling mis/disinformation during the elections include:

1. Targeted misinformation campaigns against the National Elections Commission, Liberia;
2. Attacks on the reputation of national observer groups;
3. Attempts to undermine the electoral results by the spreading of conflicting results; and
4. Misrepresentation/doctored of audios and videos.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The low levels of internet and social media use in Liberia meant that fact-checking in the traditional sense, where information is debunked and the fact-checks are published on the same platforms where the claims have appeared, was not a viable option.

For the fact-checkers working in the country, it was difficult to access live feeds and updated information from broadcasters in Liberia despite there being several media outlets with a social media presence. As a result, there were fewer live streams covering the election.

Access to this data is essential in ensuring that the electorate remained informed throughout the tallying process, and that the results announcement would essentially confirm the results that may already have been tallied in the public domain. Therefore, the recommendation here is that the electoral commission makes the election results data as widely available as possible, ensuring as much access to the granular polling place data all the way up to the national tallies.

Also, information from the rightful authorities was either delayed or was never released. The fact-checking team at FactSpace sometimes got stuck in the middle of producing a debunk, because credible information was not forthcoming as much as viral unverified claims.

Ultimately, the key to sustainable and long-term interventions to reduce the spread of misinformation and disinformation is in media and information literacy training. Liberians need the skills to identify and critically evaluate information sources in order to make them less susceptible to political misinformation.

Effective media and information literacy training should encompass a range of strategies, tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by Liberian communities. This may include:

1. **Enhancing Fact-Checking Expertise:** Liberia has a small but growing fact-checking community, with the organizations working in this space also doubling up as regular media outlets that publish other stories as well. These fact-checkers are working in a difficult environment, and their needs include training and resourcing to enable them to go beyond the work they have done during the elections. The expertise they have gained from verifying information is useful in reporting on everyday stories, and by building on the existing initiatives set up to respond to election misinformation, more journalists in the country can learn about fact-checking techniques, enabling them to verify information,

identify inconsistencies, and debunk false claims through reliable sources and evidence-based approaches.

2. **Language and Culture-Appropriate Content Moderation:** Liberia, though small in size, often finds itself overlooked when social media platforms allocate resources, unlike larger countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya. This oversight, as noted by local experts like Betty Mbayo, results in inadequate tools and resources for Liberia. To address this, a thorough analysis of Liberia's online landscape and media consumption patterns is crucial, as it reveals potential blind spots overlooked by platforms. Additionally, Liberia's linguistic diversity, including English, Pidgin, and various local dialects, underscores the need for inclusive content moderation strategies. With elections approaching, interventions like fact-sheets, fact-checks, and explainers must be tailored to cater to these linguistic variations, ensuring equitable access to essential information.

Conclusion

In this piece, we've looked at Liberia as an example of what post-conflict states with significant online populations are going through. The country's civil war has had a long shadow, visible in indicators such as the level of literacy and the impact of the Ebola epidemic on the healthcare system. Liberia's political space is dominated by elites, who are backed by an influential diaspora that is much more able to navigate the online spaces that extend their reach.

The country's 2023 election was significant in that all these factors came into play, and in response, the country's media, government and civil society came together in various ways to address the challenges identified.

One way that the momentum of this collaboration can benefit Liberia in the long term is if all the stakeholders - government, civil society, the media, internet platforms and the public - work together to build a more informed and resilient society. As was previously pointed out, this requires significant structural changes in the media and information ecosystem in the country.

Sustaining this momentum needs fundamental structural reforms within Liberia's media and information ecosystem. For example, more work needs to go into addressing skills, representation and regulatory gaps, with responses such as training more women to be journalists and to take up leadership positions in the newsroom, introducing and sustaining fact-checking desks within the newsrooms, and enforcing codes of conduct.

For the online ecosystem, more media and information literacy work needs to be done within online spaces. This entails not only responding to false claims with facts, but also enabling access to reliable information for people to debunk the false information themselves, and ultimately, using the media literacy skills gained as a way to promote this type of response offline. The creep of false information off of digital platforms and into offline spaces characteristic of *Dey Say* rumours is a phenomenon that requires further study.

Ultimately, this study of the Liberian context can be used as a template to understand how the problems identified also manifest in other countries that have a similar set of fundamentals, especially in the way misinformation and disinformation emerge following the erosion of trust. Straightforward interventions are less likely to succeed, but a more nuanced approach that takes local circumstances into account is best. Elections essentially 'supercharge' the online and offline conversations by making actors and their actions more visible makes it easier to identify patterns for further study, and so this would be a useful starting point.