



Liberia Election Observation Network (LEON)

Report on Social Media Monitoring for Liberia's Midterm Elections

Findings from September to October 2020

1. Executive Summary

LEON has been conducting Social Media monitoring of 51 key Facebook sites of politicians, commentators and government entities since March 2020. Sites are monitored for their own content but also for people posting, reposting or trolling those candidates. The monitoring was extended from October 1st to include more commentators noted through the initial research plus the 118 candidates standing for the senatorial elections.

From LEON's nationwide survey of 8339 Randomly selected individuals, conducted in August, just over one third (34.3%) of Liberia's population use social media, split evenly by gender. Penetration rises to 55% in urban areas where phone and Wi-Fi access is better. Facebook is the most widely used form of social media. Although WhatsApp is also popular, it is not possible to monitor since groups are closed. LEON has therefore concentrated on monitoring Facebook.

For the purpose of this report, a general context and definition used comes from the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019). The UN define hate speech as ***“any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”*** with specific considerations and objective to ensure that the Human rights protection of individuals; Prevention of atrocity crime; Preventing and countering terrorism and the underlying spread of violent extremism and counterterrorism; Prevention and addressing gender-based violence; Enhancing protection of civilians; Refugee protection; The fight against all forms of racism and discrimination; Protection of minorities; Sustaining peace; and engaging women, children and youth through peaceful dialogue is ensued.

Similarly, Disinformation is considered as a false or misleading content that undermines trust in the electoral process; false or misleading content that could suppress voter participation; false or misleading content that could trigger electoral violence; false or misleading content that discredits a political opponent and false or misleading content that advances a partisan agenda. While misinformation is spreading around information that is wrong, but one does not know it is wrong.

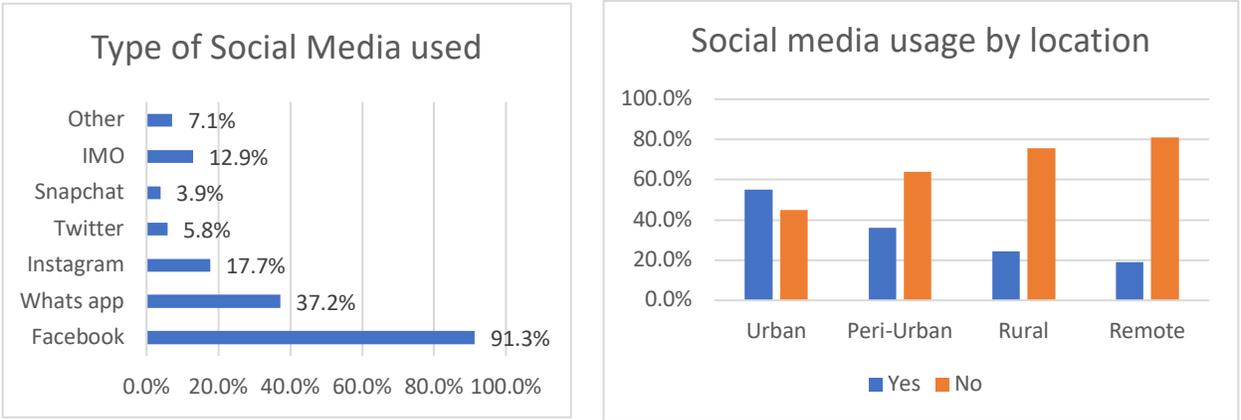
With Social Media, Hate Speech, and disinformation is being analysed as part of a campaign to reduce negative impact of the two. The Social Media landscape can be used to propagate both

information and disinformation. Gradually, it is perceived that disinformation may take over and dump democracy in a way that instability becomes the order of the day in all democratic regimes. For a population that is less educated, huge poverty and women rights far from being achieved, one can only assume that this could have an adverse effect towards: (1) Women Political Participation; (2) Challenges to the Integrity of good governance, political and integrity institutions; (3) The advancement of peace and the very democracy that is being sustained; (4) Threats towards individuals especially women reduce voter appetite as already indicated in the recently launched report by LEON on Violence against Women in Politics.

2. Use of Facebook

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Figures 1&2: Social Media usage amongst 8339 respondents from a nationwide survey conducted in August 2020

On the basis of the findings as represented by the tables above, LEON decided to chose Facebook as the idea social media platform to monitor and to analysed.

3. Definitions

As an ongoing process, the Social Media monitors continue to flag posts that they considered as hate speech, online threats, disinformation; or misinformation. They have been also looking at some general thematic areas to see what trending issues are over COVID-19, the constitutional referendum and the senatorial elections.

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Disinformation is considered as a false or misleading content that undermines trust in the electoral process; suppress voter participation; that could trigger electoral violence; that discredits a political opponent and that advances a partisan agenda. While misinformation is spreading around information that is wrong, but one does not know it is wrong. The purpose of the analysis is to reduce negative impact of these online threats. For a population that is less educated, huge poverty and women rights far from being achieved, LEON is concerned that online threats could have an adverse effect towards: (1) Women Political Participation; (2) Challenge to the Integrity of good governance, political and integrity institutions; (3) The advancement of peace and the very democracy that is being sustained; (4) Threats towards individuals especially women reduce voter appetite as already indicated in the recently launched report by LEON on Violence against Women in Politics.

4. Findings

From March to September 2020, 257 posts were flagged as problematic and analysed. 74.1% of the problematic posts were political, 3% were about protests and the rest were regarding COVID-19 which was being tracked for misinformation at this time. A sizeable number of posts tracked incidences perceived to be disinformation (8.3%), Incitement (5.3%) while threats stood at (3.3 %). The other posts flagged were negative in tone but did not meet the standard of misinformation or threats.

More than 1000 posts were reviewed in October, including many by campaigning candidates, their supporters and detractors. Among them, more than 200 posts were flagged as problematic. They indicate an increase in all categories over the previous six months with disinformation rising to 41% of posts flagged; misinformation at 30%. Hate speech is also increasing taking (9%) followed by Online Harassment (5%). These posts flagged were classified into categories as shown in the graph below.

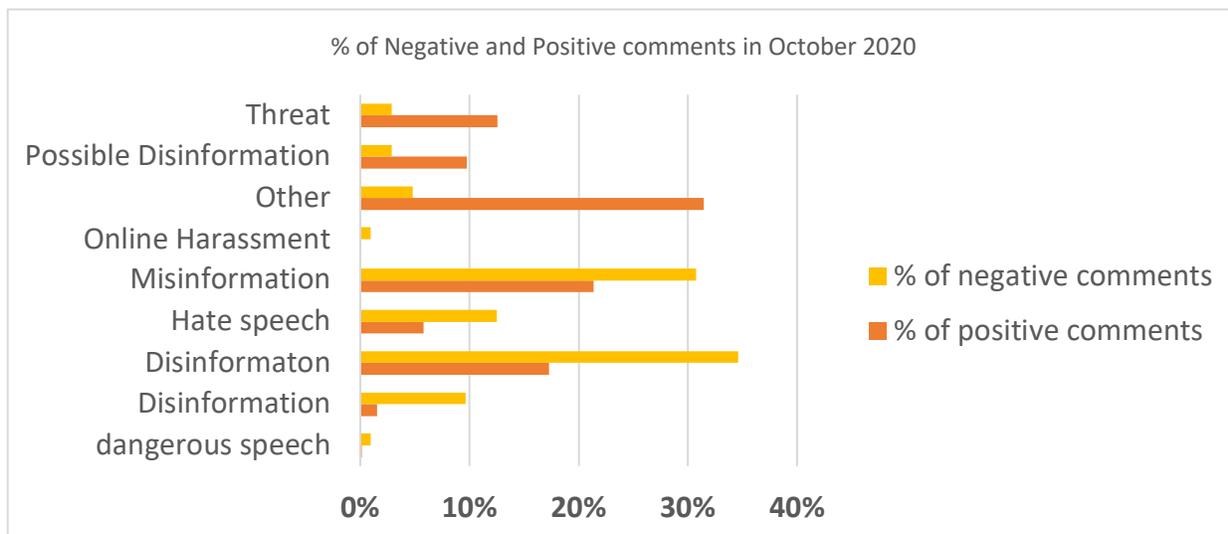


Figure 3: Comments flagged on posts categorized by the monitors.

The monitors checked the comments under all posts flagged as problematic and noted the number and percentage that were negative in tone (agreeing with the post) or positive (disputing it as misinformation or hate speech etc or calling for peace). We found that posts carrying disinformation or misinformation carry a higher percentage of negative comments. Dangerous speech generally only carried negative tone comments while outright threats received more positive tone comments calling for calm or for the protection of the person being threatened. The below graph shows each flagged posts and percent of either positive or negative comments posted under the posts. 50% of the comments flagged were negative and 11% hateful. While some comments are peaceful and neutral, the overall trend that does not anchor well for Liberia and the upcoming elections.

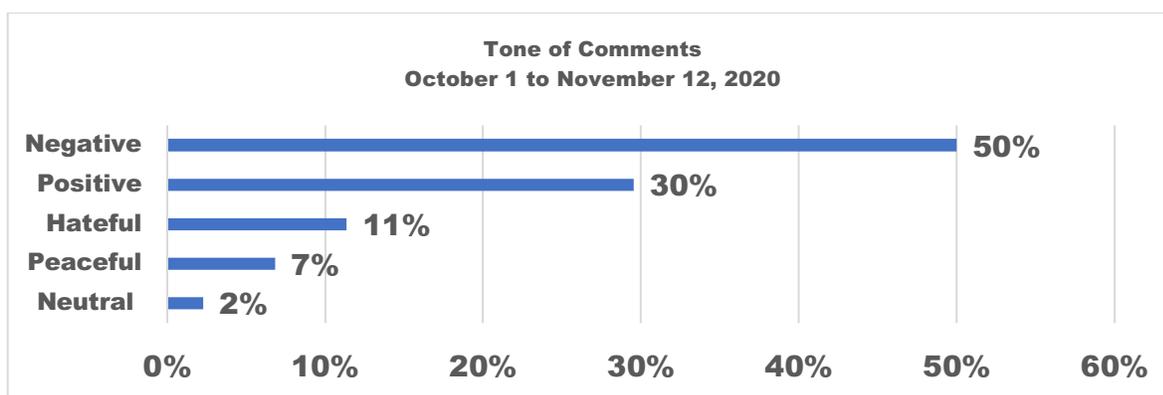


Figure 4: Comments on flagged posts categorized by tone

From monitoring conducted on specific high-profile individuals and institutions using social media during the period under review (October 1 – November 12, 2020), the below percentages present a comparison amongst these actors specifically on their political posts. The President

and government received by far the largest number of negative comments, mostly criticism of policies. These posts can be categorised as negative and sometimes exaggerate the situation, but we do not categorise them as misinformation since this criticism is healthy in a democracy.

For example, *‘Liberia isn't safe for investment under the leadership of ex-football legend George Weah. Bad leadership, Rotten justice system.’* attacks the president’s leadership while backhandedly criticising him for being an ex-footballer. However, it falls short of hate speech or misinformation.

The graph below shows key individuals who are being targeted by those commenting on flagged posts being monitored. Many negative comments were specifically identified against the only female Senator Hon. Nyomblee Karngar Lawrence of Grand Bassa. However, the majority of comments for each candidate were positive.

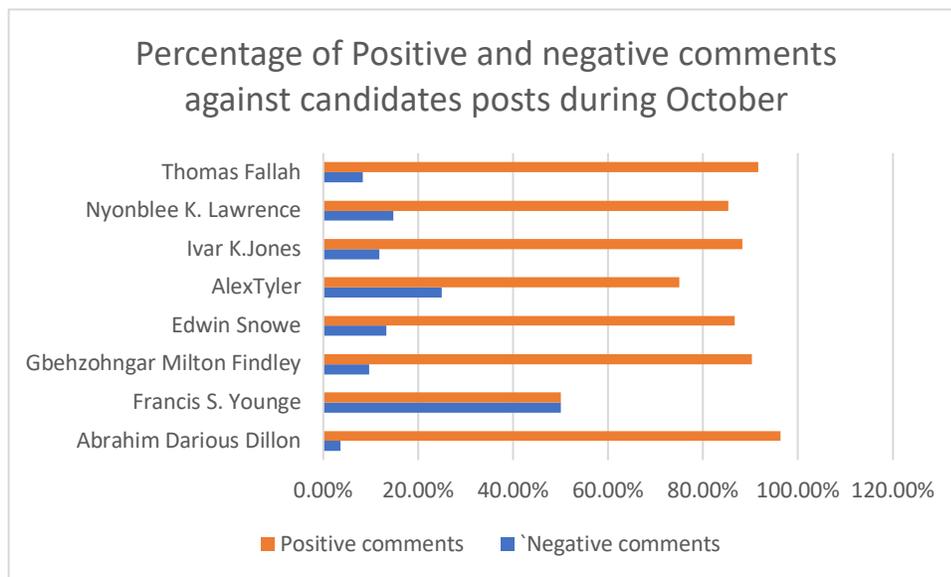


Figure 5: Percentage of positive and negative comments posted on the sites of candidates active on social media

Many comments may look positive on first glance but had a narrative of attacking someone’s religious beliefs or ethnicity behind them. For instance, *‘Meanwhile, Cdcians say they caught Abel Darius Dillon making medicine to win Election.’* is accusing Dillon of being a Pagan involved in witchcraft and not being a good Christian.

‘VP Jewel Howard Taylor has contracted unknown men to kill the Executive Secretary of Minister Mobutu Nyepan, since she (Secretary) refused to give the secret code to the saving of the late Public Works Minister.’ is an example of serious disinformation. The Executive Secretary of minister Nyepan, did leave the country shortly after the minister got sick, saying that somebody was trying to poison the Minister. However, he did not accuse the VP of this since the VP was the long-term partner of the Minister.

Although we have not seen any specific incitements to riot on Facebook, we did monitor the violence in Tubmanburg on 9th November between supporters of the Hon. Edwin Snowe and

those of Alex J. Tyler, since people were posting photographs and video of the attack in real time. it is highly likely that WhatsApp groups are being used to mobilise people.

Following those attacks, LEON monitored narratives on social media claiming that Tyler supporters had tried to assassinate Edwin Snowe. Such posts incite violence and fuel further tensions between the camps.

‘Incoming senator Edwin M Snowe Jr survives assassination plot as Alex J. Tyler’s supporters injured many of his (Snowe) supporters’, an example of situations that fuel violence.

LEON has deepened the monitoring of Senator Nyonblee K Lawrence since she has been the target of some particularly unpleasant dis-information bordering on hate speech over the last two weeks. LEON monitors Have traced these online attacks to a Mr Kangar GM Gendyu who has 3,642 friends on Facebook, which guarantees that these comments had been read extremely widely. Mr. Gendyu is believed to be a member of the CDC and a strong supporter of the Hon. Gbehzohngar Milton Finley.

The key posts targeting the Hon. Karngar Lawrence are:

<p>Sacrifice Mama Nyonblee Karnga Lawrence,Cousin JOSEPH GOFFA didn't Live Big Life &You're BUILDING POLITICAL GRAVE after Paining Us?</p>	<p>The post suggests that the Liberty party youth leader in Grand Bassa, Joseph Goffer, who died recently in a motorbike accident was killed by the senator. Other posts have suggested she used witchcraft</p>
<p>Why This Woman Nyonblee Karnga Lawrence Love 2 Have Sex Like She Coming to Die?Disgraced Grand Bassa County Again Pregnant Widow?</p>	<p>This post attacks the senator for being a widow and accuses her of being pregnant. this is the essence of hate speech against women candidates since nobody attacks men on their personal lives.</p>
<p>After Stealing and Never Give The Bassa People Any Legislative Report,U Begging Them 4 Money Heartlessly Pregnant Widow Nyonblee?</p>	<p>Although it is normal politics to attack somebody on their legislative record while in power this post again contains hate speech elements attacking the senator for being a widow and accusing her of being pregnant.</p>

LEON is reporting these comments and any other hate speech to Facebook so that the posts can be removed.