

NIGERIA'S DIGITAL PEACEBUILDING ECOSYSTEM

**Insights & Recommendations from the
Reducing Online Conflict Community (ROCC)**

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Acknowledgments

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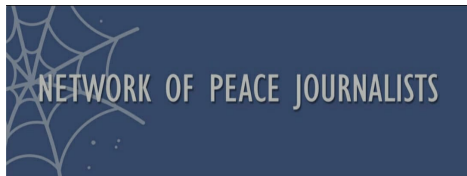
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Introduction

This paper is a detailed report of the Reducing Online Conflict Community (ROCC) generative workshop in Abuja in February 2024, capturing the essential findings, themes, and recommendations discussed during the event. It provides an overview of challenges within Nigeria's collaborative digital peacebuilding ecosystem, incorporating insights from practitioners actively addressing the Weaponization of Social Media in the Nigerian context. This document explores these actors' cooperative efforts and operational dynamics in response to surges of hate speech. It offers thoughtful considerations on improving these mechanisms to address such issues more effectively in the future. This paper aims to document the workshop's key findings and serve as a resource for enhancing stakeholder approaches to digital peacebuilding.

What is the Reducing Online Conflict Community (ROCC)?

The Reducing Online Conflict Community (ROCC) is a global working group headed by the Digital Peacebuilding team at Mercy Corps addressing the Weaponization of Social Media. By bringing stakeholders together, the ROCC cooperatively addresses social media threats and harms such as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation within conflict contexts. The ROCC's approach involves assessing opportunities, challenges, and gaps as collaborators and employing those lessons by taking a systems-thinking model to understand how stakeholders operate in a digital peacebuilding ecosystem.

Why Nigeria?

We selected Nigeria as the location for the inaugural ROCC workshop due to several compelling reasons. Nigeria stands out as a hub of digital use, with a high social media engagement rate and numerous corporate offices of major social media companies. It boasts one of Africa's largest social media user bases, with millions engaging on various platforms daily. As of January 2024, Nigeria has 37 million social media users. Nigerian citizens spend the highest average hours on social media platforms, with four hours daily (Forbes, 2024).

Nigeria has an active and vocal digital peacebuilding community, world-renowned fact-checking initiatives, and many international and local non-governmental organizations active in the peace tech space. These stakeholders' presence meant an Abuja event made sense for testing the collaborative ecosystem mapping approach of the ROCC.

In Nigeria, the discourse around Tech-Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV), cyber-bullying, harassment, and offline safety in the wake of online harms is crucial and front of mind for those navigating the digital peacebuilding space and beyond. High-profile cases such as the tragic murder of college student Deborah Yakubu, whose killing circulated widely social media, highlight the severe risks and harms that exist in both offline and online spaces. This incident, amid ongoing ethnoreligious tensions, has brought Nigerian stakeholders together to address the profound implications of digital threats and the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to ensure safety and mitigate violence both online and offline.

Social media influencers in Nigeria play a crucial role in shaping social movements, effectively having the leverage to act as peacebuilders through their influential platforms. Online journalism is also prominent, with bloggers offering diverse perspectives and daily news updates. However, Nigeria also faces significant challenges to maintaining peace both online and offline, including the spread of misinformation, online harassment and cyberbullying, censorship, and polarization driven by algorithms that promote divisive content.

Methodology

- *Exploring Scenarios through Simulation*
- *Systems-Thinking Understanding of Resilience and Response*
- *Relationship Building Between Participants*
- *Exploring and Assessing Collaboration*
- *Envisioning an Ideal Response*

What happens when a hate speech surge occurs in Nigeria's digital resilience and response ecosystem?

Workshop Simulation Overview

In a workshop scenario, participants simulated realistic responses and ideal mechanisms to address a surge in hate speech originating from WhatsApp. This hate speech targeted a woman journalist residing in the city of Jos in Plateau State from an ethnic minority, leading to offline conflict. Participants collaboratively mapped the activation, operation, and winding down of various actors within the response and resilience ecosystem across four distinct phases: the initial emergence of hate speech on WhatsApp, the rapid spread to other social media platforms, escalating tensions both online and offline, and the eventual threat of physical violence.

Response Sequence

Ideally, when a hate speech surge occurs, such as the one outlined in the scenario, a sequence of actions unfolds across various phases, initiated by the initial detection of such content. The response may begin with the emergence of hate speech, often first noted by fact-checkers monitoring digital platforms, including encrypted data or public groups on WhatsApp. This initial detection by fact-checkers, social media monitors, and watchdog organizations may trigger activation of the digital response ecosystem involving various actors from different sectors, including international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), academic institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), journalist networks, peacebuilding organizations, and most importantly, social media companies' responses. This activation crucially requires established partnerships and open communication lines to work effectively. These collaborative relationships may or may not already be in place, and many require improvement to manage detection and response to online harms efficiently. However, organizations are often activated when offline symptoms of online conflict after the initial detection of hate speech and surge in related content, mainly when operating outside of partnerships with those closely monitoring the origins of online conflict.

Analysis and Insights

Participants analyzed their individual and collective roles in this lifecycle, uncovering several critical insights. They recognized the deep interconnectedness between online conflict and other types of conflict, such as ongoing farmer-herder disputes, highlighting the broader implications of digital peace efforts in Nigeria. Key takeaways included the imperative need to dismantle operational silos to effectively address digital peace

issues, the complex interplay between individual and organizational involvement, and the significance of incorporating a tech-facilitated gender-based violence perspective into response and resilience strategies. Participants also identified existing moments of heightened collaboration in Nigeria's digital peacebuilding stakeholder community, particularly during election-related tensions, when planning and implementing capacity building in the information technology sector, and when forming strategic coalitions to pressure advocacy audiences, including government systems.

Throughout the discussion, participants noted ongoing work in this space beyond the simulation event. They emphasized a design phase before the occurrence of hate speech, focusing on pro-social design principles to prevent surges by fostering resilience among social media platforms and their users. This approach aims to stop harmful content from gaining traction, leading to offline consequences. Participants also considered the aftermath of the threat of violence, whether it be actual offline violence or de-escalation. In de-escalating conflict, mediation and community building are essential, involving dialogue and reconciliation efforts within affected communities to heal divisions central to the hate speech surge.

Charting a Path Forward

Throughout each phase of a hate speech surge that evolves into conflict, the reaction in Nigeria's digital ecosystem is not just about managing a single event. Still, it involves a continuous effort to strengthen systems against this issue. By identifying individual and organizational strengths and fostering collaboration, stakeholders can enhance the resilience of the digital ecosystem, promote social cohesion, and mitigate the real-life impacts of harmful content.

Key Thematic Findings

The key findings of the ROCC Nigeria workshop share a common thread of emphasizing the importance of collaboration and inclusion of diverse stakeholders in addressing the Weaponization of Social Media. The key findings highlight the role of youth in conversation with key stakeholders in driving intergenerational solutions and innovating comprehensive support mechanisms for individuals impacted by emotional trauma caused by online harms. Above all, these key findings emphasize the significance of fostering a broad and interconnected community of Nigerian digital citizens equipped with social media literacy and conflict sensitivity to navigate the complexities of the nexus of online and offline conflict. Overall, the ROCC findings advocate for a holistic, collaborative, and inclusive approach to reducing online conflict and bolstering digital peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.

1. Multistakeholder collaboration is crucial to respond as a cohesive ecosystem

The in-person ROCC event served as a participatory platform highlighting the importance of intentional multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing the intricate landscape of online harms and conflict dynamics in Nigeria. Throughout the gathering, it was evident that conflicts, whether manifested online or offline, present multifaceted challenges that demand a cohesive and all-encompassing strategy. While social media and technology companies, government actors, and policymakers were engaged to an extent, their participation in community-building events and activities can still be improved.

For platforms like the ROCC to make a substantive impact, it is paramount for community members to gain insights into mandates, lived experiences, and existing responses by the individuals and institutions who influence social media policy. Similarly, these stakeholders can better understand priorities, interests, and gain expertise for community-level organizations. This mutual understanding will be pivotal in promoting meaningful collaboration and ensuring that interventions on local and global scales are well-aligned with the realities and needs of the Nigerian context.

RECOMMENDATION

Open the lines of communication between Nigerian stakeholders and influencers of social media policy.

- Influencers of social media policy, such as corporate and government actors, must be willing to collaborate in good faith with regional actors that operate within their local stakeholder ecosystem. This collaboration includes opportunities for open dialogue with government actors and social media company representatives in Nigeria and within their global hubs.
- In partnership with social media actors, other actors addressing the weaponization of social media in the digital peacebuilding ecosystem can more effectively support their efforts. This support builds trust with community stakeholders such as civil society organizations, fact-checkers, academics, and peacebuilders.

2. Youth are essential actors for intergenerational solutions

Young people were consistently recognized as essential catalysts in digital peacebuilding efforts, bringing fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and a deep understanding of contemporary digital landscapes in Nigeria and globally. It is imperative that youth leaders are not siloed but actively engaged in intergenerational collaborations and initiatives. This collaboration entails engaging them alongside elders, community leaders, religious figures, and other stakeholders reflecting diverse age groups to bridge generational divides. By recognizing the crucial need for these conversations, communities can build consensus and understanding around conflict-related issues online, leveraging the collective wisdom of different age cohorts.

RECOMMENDATION

Create opportunities for meaningful youth participation in digital peacebuilding decision-making processes at the local, national, and international levels.

- Establish youth advisory boards, forums, and opportunities for consultation where young people can contribute their insights and lived experiences to recommendations on peace, governance, and best practices for cohesive communities on and offline.
- Encourage elders and community leaders to mentor young people and foster youth leadership. Encourage the same from key influencers such as government bodies and technology actors.

3. Comprehensive support mechanisms for victims of online harms and Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Throughout the discussions of the ROCC event, participants consistently highlighted the pressing need for comprehensive support systems for individuals affected by online harms such as surges in hate speech. Themes of cyberbullying and the prevalence of tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) were central during scenario work, shedding light on critical gaps and opportunities within the existing resilience and response ecosystem. Prioritizing the provision of psychosocial support services is paramount, recognizing the nuanced needs of individuals affected by harms uniquely existing in both online and offline spaces.

Yet, addressing these harms does not only manifest through psychosocial support interventions alone. Security assistance is also vital for many individuals impacted by these issues, particularly in cases of doxxing and offline harassment spilling over from online incidents. These survivors in the digital realm underscore the importance of culturally sensitive interventions tailored to their individual circumstances to address their needs effectively.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure psychosocial support for those negatively impacted by social media conflict drivers.

- Provide psychosocial support and develop psychosocial support resources for those traumatized by online harms, including cyberbullying, doxxing, TFGBV, etc. Recognize and name the unique challenges presented by online conflict. Tailor responses and develop resources based on needs expressed directly by those impacted.

- Raise awareness about the intersections of technology and gender-based violence, including online harassment, digital abuse, and targeted doxxing. Advocate for guidance on identifying the signs of TFGBV, reporting mechanisms in place, and available support resources for survivors of TFGBV.
- Recognize the mental and emotional toll of moderating online spaces for instances of hate speech, MDM, and violent imagery. Prioritize moderators' and fact-checkers' mental health and wellness by providing mental health resources, counseling services, peer support networks, or institutional strategies for promoting self-care.

4. A broad community of digital peacebuilders – social media literacy and conflict sensitivity

A critical finding between stakeholders underscored the importance of promoting digital and media literacy from a conflict-sensitive perspective.

Participants stressed the need to equip citizens with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape safely. This effort involves educating community members on critically evaluating information, understanding the propagation of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), and effectively identifying and countering hate speech.

Participants also highlighted the role of influential media entities in this endeavor. Whether journalists and reporters on television, radio, or online platforms, it is crucial that they grasp the intricacies and implications of conflict dynamics in Nigeria to convey news stories responsibly in a manner that informs while minimizing harm. This principle applies to social media influencers and bloggers who powerfully shape public discourse.

RECOMMENDATION

Equip individuals, especially youth and vulnerable populations, with the skills and knowledge to critically consume and analyze online content.

- Develop comprehensive digital and media literacy programs and policies tailored to the Nigerian context (and the many diverse contexts within Nigeria). Tailor these materials and lessons to the linguistic and cultural needs of target audiences throughout Nigeria, ensuring that all digital citizens access information relevant to their experience as social media and broader Internet users.
- Create educational opportunities to critically analyze one's experiences with biases, stereotypes, and hate speech online.
- Establish partnerships between educational institutions, media organizations, and technology companies to promote conflict sensitivity in content creation.

5. The urgency of taking preemptive action in digital peacebuilding

The ROCC workshop provided significant insight into the critical need to address digital peacebuilding challenges proactively. While reactive responses to online conflicts are crucial, participants emphasized the value of adopting a proactive stance that anticipates and mitigates potential sources of conflict before they escalate.

Proactive steps are necessary to promote stability and resilience in the ever-changing digital space, where misinformation can instantly occur, and conflicts can erupt at any moment. The best way for stakeholders to intervene in conflicts before they escalate and negatively affect communities is to identify and monitor emerging threats, vulnerabilities, and triggers.

Central to this proactive approach is cultivating situational awareness and forward-thinking among stakeholders. This cultivation involves closely monitoring social media platforms, analyzing trends in online discourse, changing social media algorithms, and staying attuned to shifts in public sentiment. Staying one step ahead will help digital peacebuilding communities develop strategies to address emerging issues before they spiral out of control. Fostering collaborative partnerships and information-sharing networks was identified as keys to enhancing preemptive measures in digital peacebuilding. By pooling diverse stakeholders' resources, expertise, and insights, communities can develop early warning systems, share best practices, and coordinate real-time responses to emerging threats.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish early warning systems and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

- Implement early warning systems by collaborating with fact-checking organizations that can utilize data analytics and machine learning algorithms to identify potential sources of online conflict before they escalate. These systems should monitor social media platforms, news outlets, and online forums for emerging trends, hate speech, and misinformation. Stakeholders can collaborate to develop customized algorithms tailored to the Nigerian context, ensuring accuracy and relevance.
- Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of proactive measures in digital peacebuilding continuously. Develop metrics and indicators to measure the impact of early intervention strategies, digital literacy programs, and cross-sectoral collaboration efforts.
- Through targeted training programs and digital media capacity-building initiatives, these influencers can develop a nuanced understanding of the strategies employed by malicious actors to manipulate public discourse, thereby enhancing their ability to safeguard against misinformation and propaganda.

Vision Moving Forward

The ROCC envisions a resilient and inclusive digital peacebuilding ecosystem in Nigeria that leverages technological innovation, proactive design, stakeholder trust, and community engagement to prevent and mitigate online and offline conflict. This ecosystem will empower users through education, strengthened content moderation, and active participation in shaping a peaceful digital environment. It will foster collaboration among stakeholders, including social media influencers, technology companies, journalists, and CSOs, to promote accurate information, constructive dialogues, accountable social media practices, and social cohesion. By integrating monitoring technologies and community-driven responses, the ecosystem aims to uphold digital literacy and counter misinformation, envisioning a society of social media users where peace prevails online, sustained by supportive partnerships and continuous learning and adaptation.

Concluding Thoughts

The ROCC workshop in Abuja underscored the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing hate speech and online harms in Nigeria. Participants highlighted the necessity of a coordinated, inclusive approach involving dismantling operational silos and integrating a tech-facilitated gender-based violence perspective. Effective engagement with social media companies, government actors, and policymakers is crucial for meaningful collaboration and aligning interventions with Nigeria's needs. Youth involvement in digital peacebuilding is essential, bringing fresh perspectives and understanding of contemporary digital landscapes. Comprehensive support mechanisms for victims of online harms, including psychosocial support and security assistance, are vital for addressing the unique needs of those affected.

Promoting digital and media literacy from a conflict-sensitive perspective emerged as a critical proactive measure. Educating citizens and ensuring media entities understand conflict dynamics can mitigate online conflicts. The urgency of preemptive action in digital peacebuilding was emphasized, with proactive steps such as monitoring social media, analyzing trends, and staying attuned to public sentiment being necessary for promoting stability. Fostering collaborative partnerships and information-sharing networks can enhance preemptive measures, enabling communities to develop early warning systems and coordinate real-time responses to emerging threats. By pooling resources and expertise, stakeholders can better address digital peacebuilding challenges and prevent conflicts from escalating, ultimately fostering a more resilient and cohesive digital ecosystem in Nigeria.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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