



ADVANCING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

o6: DISINFORMATION – A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY (Part 1)

The deluge of information online has certainly not made it easier for citizens - and journalists in particular - to orient themselves in the world. What is true, what is wrong, what are half-truths, what is simply propaganda? Disinformation, misinformation, "fake news", information disorder - all these phenomena are spreading at an alarming pace.

THE TERMINOLOGY

Fake news and false news

“Fake news” is the frequently used term - and the most problematic. It should be avoided because it has no precise meaning and has been “weaponized” by politicians to denigrate the news media as a whole. “Fake news”, shouts a President, when he does not want to answer a question from a reporter or when a piece is uncomfortable or harmful to his reputation. And many, even in the media itself, have accepted the phrase without much thought.

Many governments in Africa pass new legislation on “fake news” to penalise journalists under the guise of fighting cybercrime (dealt with later in this INFO BITE). And many regimes also actively exploit vague colonial-era laws on “false news” to criminalise reporters and bloggers – including with the hugely disproportionate responses action of meting out jail sentences.

Disinformation

The correct term for a ‘fake’ piece of news is “disinformation” – information which is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country. Lies, in other words. When false information is shared unknowingly and with no harm intended, the correct term is “misinformation”. These are misunderstandings or people simply being misinformed .

Unfortunately, the two may often go hand in hand.

A fairly common origin of misinformation is that someone has deliberately produced it as disinformation in the first place. In that case, lies will often be included within a bunch of facts, to give them credibility and authority. And the mix is usually flavoured with emotions – so as to appeal to people’s hearts, at the expense of requiring them to use their heads.

Disinformation causes “information disorder” around the world. Studies have shown that false information tends to spread faster and more broadly online than the truth does.

Even news media themselves, traditional or online, may engage in – or take up - such disinformation without checking the facts. In so doing they fail to fulfil their core role as providers of information and instead become key enablers of disinformation disorder.

In countries with controlled media, especially state-owned outlets, the role of media institutions as amplifiers of disinformation is often well entrenched. As a result, many audiences have come to mistrust all mainstream news and expect it to represent the ruling group's self-interested "facts" and explanations of reality. Babies get thrown out with the dirty bathwater – because sometimes there are nuggets of truth to be extracted from the narratives of power which cannot have credibility over time if they are totally at odds with reality in its entirety.

DISINFORMATION CAUSES DISTRUST

When people lose trust in media generally, analogue or digital, many will simply shy away from news altogether. They do not read newspapers, will avoid newscasts on radio and TV, and use their phones only for gaming, chatting and entertainment. They may fill the self-created information vacuum by looking for simple "solutions" or extreme religious or political answers in order to make some sense of what's happening around them.

In a worst-case scenario, they may join groups in the underground "darknet", where members communicate anonymously and securely, and even traffic guns, drugs or child sexual abuse material. It should be borne in mind, though, that because such platforms are anonymous and relatively secure, they can (and do) also allow civil society groups and pro-democracy activists in authoritarian regimes to communicate and organize below the radar of surveillance and detection. In another scenario people rely on non-public channels on services like WhatsApp groups, where there is less anonymity and more trust, but the risk is that they get their sense of identity based on disinformation within these groups.

Important in the context of disinformation is that purveyors of lies and hate don't stop their mobilisation within closed and encrypted groups. They use these as stepping stones to organise co-ordinated disinformation operations on public channels like social media – and they also try to get their content into mainstream news media.

DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

International forces undertake digital battles to advance their geostrategic interests and shape narratives that undermine democratic processes. This includes disinformation seeking to promote ethnic violence, even coups in Africa, and to stoke anti-Western and anti-United Nations sentiment, or to spread confusion about climate change science, among others. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies described Russia in particular (16 campaigns) and China (5) as the leading sponsors of such operations, with expansive reach throughout the continent in 2023 and 2024.

Both domestic and international actors are increasingly resorting to disinformation as a tool to sway public opinion in favour of certain policies or politicians. There is clear evidence of how Facebook, X and other services' algorithms based on user data can be exploited to manipulate sentiment and democratic participation, not just in the targeted distribution of disinformation items, but also through the use of 'bots'. These are fake accounts, not those of actual users, but computer scripts that auto-generate content, often massive amounts of content. Generative Artificial Intelligence – like ChatGPT – is supercharging this. The output is, amongst other things, in the form of online text, images, video and audio that may appear credible but contain lies. "Influencers" may be co-opted, often without transparency, to spread disinformational and hate content.

There also seems to be increasing use of "mal-information", meaning content which is based on fact, but removed from its original context in order to mislead, harm, or manipulate. All this threatens Information Integrity.

PLATFORMS AND DISINFORMATION

Platforms such as Facebook, X and YouTube are constantly being urged to take steps to filter out disinformation, hate speech and racist or sexist content – and they have previously professed their willingness to do so. In 2022, Facebook and others committed to better monitor platform content and remove hate speech, disinformation and incitement to violence. Though inconsistently applied (especially in African languages), this gave a small degree of protection to the rights of those being targeted by abuse and disinformation.

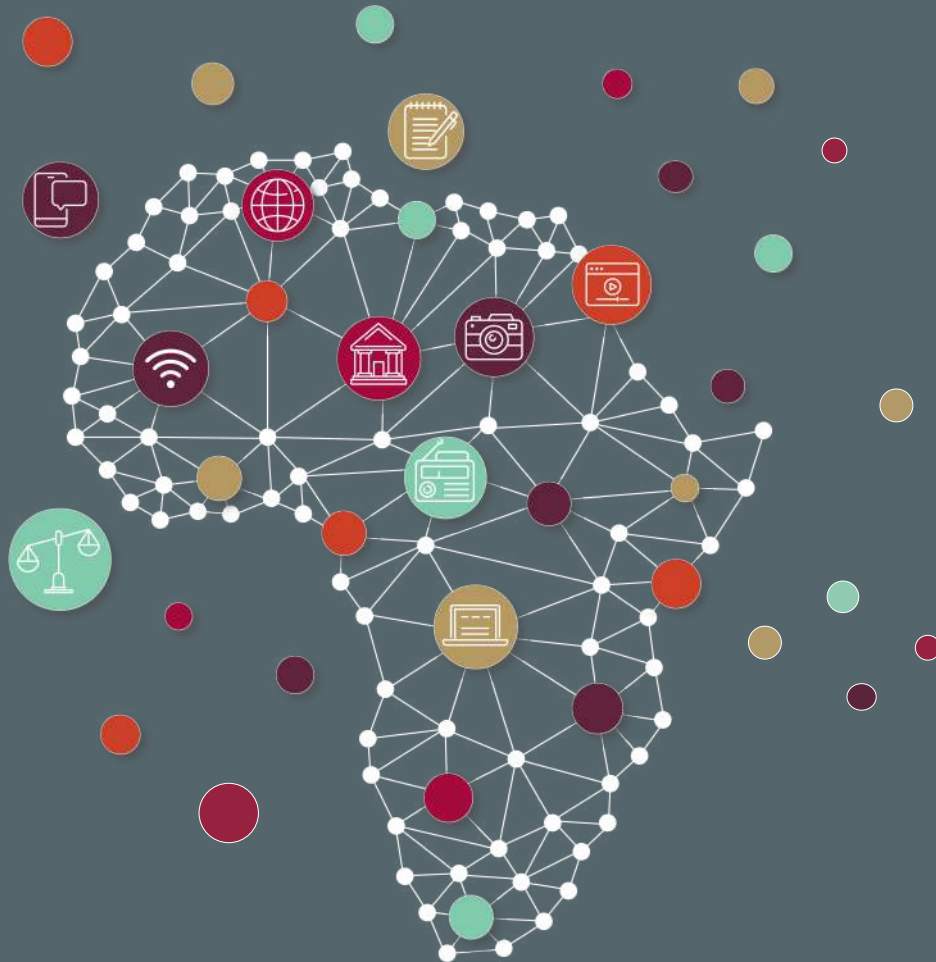
In January 2025, shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Meta – which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp –

changed its policy. In effect, the company declared that gender-based and other hate would now be allowed on its platforms. YouTube followed on. Already, X under Elon Musk had been allowing this kind of content.

Meta also announced the end of its fact-checking programmes, saying that the users themselves should correct inaccurate and false posts. This move followed the precedent of Musk, who on buying Twitter, threw out the company's restrictions on false and hateful content. He installed a system called [Community Notes](#), where the onus of exposing false and misleading content is now conveniently shifted away from his platform to users.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights reacted to these developments in March 2025 when it adopted Resolution 630 on information integrity. The resolution notes the "weaponisation of a particular social network, and its related AI services, as representing a departure from the role of being a neutral platform". It refers to the so-called 'community notes' introduced by Meta and X, noting that such "mechanisms are not an alternative to the companies' own responsibilities to uphold their corporate responsibilities and 'community standards". It added adding that "'community notes' are not a substitute for independent fact-checking", while also warning that the system could easily be manipulated.

Check out PART 2 of this info bite on responses to disinformation.



This INFO BITE is selected from the online course on Media and Digital Policy in Africa, offered by Stellenbosch University in association with Namibia Media Trust.

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