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**ADDRESSING INFORMATION DISORDERS AHEAD OF THE 2024 NATIONAL
ELECTION: CONTEXT, DRIVERS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, honourable members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us to speak to you on the topic of addressing information disorders ahead of the 2024 national election. My name is Dr. Scott Timcke, and I am here with my colleague Hanani Hlomani. We are research staff from Research ICT Africa (RIA), a telecommunications, data and AI governance think tank headquartered in Cape Town, South Africa with a continent wide footprint. We are part of RIA's AI, Democracy and Misinformation Team, and our email addresses are on the slide.

Our team has been actively studying the political, economic, social and cultural drivers of misinformation, disinformation and information disorders for three years, as well as the interventions by various actors to address information disorders. Included within our research agenda is the study of AI and democracy, AI ethics and content moderation policies, platform injustices, data governance and data justice. Since forming in 2019, RIA's AI, Democracy and Misinformation Team has produced four technical reports, six policy briefs, six op-eds, and several academic publications on these topics. Our methodological toolkit includes legal analysis, evaluative reviews, stakeholders interviews and event tracking. As we follow development in many African countries we also draw upon techniques from comparative political sociology.

In this presentation, we will lay out the context in which information disorder operates in Africa, outline the challenges identified with addressing information disorder, provide a look into emerging trends and anticipated areas of concerns. We also offer recommendations for election officials, elected representatives, civil society organisations, journalists, internet service providers and platforms, and the public.

We understand information disorder as a broad term that encompasses misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information that is spread unintentionally or without malice. Disinformation is false or misleading information that is spread deliberately or with malicious intent. Mal-information is true information that is used to cause harm or damage reputation.

Information disorder is not a new phenomenon in Africa. It predates the so-called 'post-truth era' and can be connected to the marriage of corporate media and state-sponsored propaganda that has been prevalent in many African countries for decades. However, the

advent of digital technologies and social media platforms has amplified the scale, speed and reach of information disorder, as well as its potential negative impact on democracy and human rights.

Democracy involves challenge, contention and disagreement. This extends into meanings, understandings and presumed implications of events, policies and actions. Platforms are central venues where actors struggle over the creation of narratives that shape public opinion and influence political behaviour that factor into the meanings, understandings, and presumed implications. WhatsApp appears to be the key headwater for information disorders in African countries, followed by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Information is often shared to confirm paradigms and reinforce existing beliefs, rather than to inform or educate.

Elections are friction points for information disorders, as they are high-stakes events that involve competition, polarisation and uncertainty. Information disorders can undermine the credibility and legitimacy of elections, erode trust in democratic institutions and processes, incite violence and conflict, manipulate voter behaviour and preferences, and disenfranchise or suppress certain groups of voters.

Existing literacy comprehension rates are low in South Africa. One notable study found that most Grade 4s in South Africa cannot read for meaning. This means that many people may not have the necessary skills to evaluate the information they encounter online or offline. While connectivity has improved in recent years, digital divides mean that much misinformation is spread by word of mouth, even if the information originated online.

GENERAL CHALLENGES OF MISINFORMATION

There are several challenges that hinder the effective detection and response to information disorders in Africa. Some of these are:

- Lack of platform accountability: Platforms provide tools to report misinformation and other harms, yet they are also slow to respond to these reports, some of which may need urgent attention. Platforms also have opaque policies and algorithms that govern what content is amplified or suppressed on their platforms. For example, recommendation systems may promote sensationalist or divisive content over factual

or balanced content, oftentimes because repeated user engagement on a platform is core to the business model.

- Deceptive design: Platforms use features such as likes, shares, comments and notifications to increase user engagement and retention. However, these features may also create social pressure or influence user opinions by creating a false sense of popularity or consensus around certain topics or viewpoints.
- Lack of funding for fact-checkers: Most fact-checkers are media houses or independent organisations working in the public interest. They rely on grants or donations to sustain their operations. Lack of funding also means lack of human resource capacity to cope with the volume and variety of misinformation circulating online.
- Algorithmic content moderation to detect misinformation: There are problems with data sets being biased or incomplete, as well as ethical issues around privacy, transparency and accountability of AI systems. Moreover, most of the data and AI tools are developed and funded by foreign companies based in the global north, which may not reflect the local context or needs of African countries.
- Lack of access to data to train AI and research: Platforms often do not share data with researchers or fact-checkers, citing privacy or security reasons. This limits the ability to understand the nature, scope and impact of information disorders, as well as to develop effective solutions or interventions.
- Unsettled law on misinformation: Different African countries have different definitions and approaches to misinformation, ranging from criminalization to self-regulation. Some laws may be vague, broad or disproportionate, and may infringe on freedom of expression or other human rights.

EMERGING TRENDS

As we approach the 2024 national election, there are some emerging trends and threats that we should be aware of and prepared for. Some of these are:

- Domestic operations: We may see more cases of undisclosed political advertising, where candidates or parties use online platforms to promote their agenda or attack their opponents without disclosing their identity or affiliation. This may create confusion or deception among voters, as well as undermine the transparency and accountability of political financing.

- Foreign influence/interference: We may also see more attempts by foreign actors to interfere in the election process or outcome, by spreading false or misleading information, hacking or leaking sensitive data, creating fake accounts or bots, or amplifying divisive or polarising narratives. This may undermine the sovereignty and security of the country, as well as erode trust in democratic institutions and processes.
- Coordinated (and/or stochastic) harassment campaigns against investigative political journalists: Journalists play a vital role in informing the public and holding power to account. However, they may also face harassment, intimidation or violence from online mobs or individuals who disagree with their reporting or views. This may create a chilling effect on freedom of expression and press freedom, as well as endanger the safety and well-being of journalists.
- Election integrity as perceived through platforms: Platforms may influence how people perceive the integrity and legitimacy of the election, by providing information or tools that affect voter registration, turnout, access, verification, counting, reporting or auditing. Platforms may also be used to spread rumours or allegations of fraud, rigging, hacking or manipulation of the election results. This may affect voter confidence and participation, as well as trigger protests or violence.
- Image, video and audio manipulation: We may see more cases of image, video and audio manipulation using generative AI techniques such as ‘deep fakes’ and ‘cheapfakes’. These are synthetic media that can create realistic but fake representations of people or events. They can be used to confirm narratives and tropes, impersonate or discredit public figures, fabricate evidence or scenarios, or manipulate emotions.
- Micro-targeting: Micro-targeting is the practice of delivering personalised messages or ads to specific segments of users based on their demographics, preferences, behaviour or location. It can be used to persuade, mobilise or de-mobilise voters, as well as to exploit their vulnerabilities or biases. However, there is no conclusive evidence that micro-targeting is effective at changing voter behaviour or preferences at the moment.
- Vulnerable population targeting: We may see more cases of targeting vulnerable populations such as minorities, immigrants, refugees, women, youth, or people with disabilities with misinformation or disinformation that exploits their fears, insecurities, or grievances. This may create resentment, hatred, or violence against these groups, as well as undermine their rights, representation, or participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these challenges and threats, we offer the following recommendations for different stakeholders:

- For election officials: We recommend that they establish clear and consistent rules and guidelines for online political communication and advertising, as well as monitor and enforce compliance with these rules. We also recommend that they collaborate with platforms, fact-checkers, media, and civil society to detect and counter misinformation, as well as educate and inform voters about the election process and procedures. We also recommend that they enhance the security and resilience of the election infrastructure and systems, as well as conduct regular audits and verifications to ensure accuracy and transparency.
- For elected representatives: We recommend that they refrain from spreading or endorsing misinformation or disinformation, as well as condemn any attempts by others to do so. We also recommend that they engage in constructive and respectful dialogue with their constituents and opponents, and address their concerns and grievances in a factual and evidence-based manner. We also recommend that they support legislation and policies that promote platform accountability, data protection, and digital rights.
- For civil society organisations: We recommend that they monitor and expose misinformation and disinformation campaigns, as well as advocate for platform accountability.
- For journalists: We recommend that they cultivate authoritative sources on elections, including election officials, independent experts, and credible witnesses, who can provide accurate and timely information and analysis on election-related matters. Report pre-election stories on confusing or new topics such as voting procedures that may affect voter confidence. Lastly, we recommend that they publish and amplify credible election information that can inform and educate voters about their rights and choices.
- For ISPs and platforms: We recommend that they publish clear and transparent policies to minimise election misinformation, such as defining what constitutes misinformation, how it is detected and removed, how users can report or appeal it, and what sanctions or penalties are applied to violators. We recommend that they

create infrastructure to impede election misinformation, such as effective education tools that help users identify and flag misinformation, algorithmic interventions that slow the spread of misinformation or reduce its visibility, and human oversight that ensures quality and accountability of automated systems. Additionally we recommend that they actively liaison with CIRTs that can help monitor and respond to cyber threats or attacks.

- For citizens: We recommend that voters learn how to recognize online misinformation through building media literacy. This may include checking the source, date, author, evidence, and motive of any information they encounter online, verifying the information with multiple reliable sources, avoiding sharing or spreading unverified or suspicious information, reporting or flagging any misinformation they find on platforms, and seeking out diverse and balanced perspectives on issues that matter to them.

CONCLUSION

We would like to thank the committee for giving us this opportunity to share our insights and recommendations on addressing information disorders ahead of the 2024 national election. We would also like to thank our partners and collaborators who have supported our work and contributed to our research. We hope that our prepared remarks will help inform and guide your efforts to promote democracy and human rights in South Africa.

SOURCES

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