Policy Reinforcements to Counter Information Disorders in the African Context

Key Points

❖ Information disorders are best understood as emerging from social and cultural conditions that make certain kinds of information attractive to audiences.

❖ Like elsewhere, the information ecosystem in Africa is characterised by actors pushing to control narratives. Those that have resources and the control of infrastructure have more clout than others.

❖ There is value in shifting from "what digitalisation does to Africans" to "what Africans do with digitalisation".

❖ Information disorders propagate in information vacuums, like when governments fail to proactively share information with the public. They also propagate in tense political conjunctures where the perceived stakes are very high.

❖ The perceived high stakes of elections incentive political parties to invest in subtle platform-based misinformation campaigns with the hope that these practices help sway the electorate.

❖ States use digital technologies to stabilise their legitimacy while also viewing platforms as threats to their control of information flows.

Introduction

Global information disorders have been characterised by their large-scale contamination of the public sphere. These contaminants include rumours, hate speech, dangerous conspiracy theories, detrimental misunderstandings, as well as planned campaigns of deception. These disorders emerge from a quickly changing media ecology rife with contentious, populist, and affective charged politics (Wasserman, 2022, p. 8).

Due to distrust in governments and media, some actors feel information disorders are worse in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere (Wasserman et al, 2019). However, the precise effect of technology on societal trends are hard to pinpoint. There are too many non-technical elements, like a diversity of technological instruments, applications, and inventive repurposing that make it difficult to evaluate if technology facilitates or hinders collective political action (Timcke, 2021; Rydzak, Karanja, & Opiyo, 2020).

This means that effective regulatory efforts to tackle information disorders and the distrust they engender must be calibrated to the specific social and cultural conditions that make certain kinds of information attractive to audiences and publics.

This policy brief draws on Research ICT Africa's prior work on the International Development Research Centre's strategic study on information disorders in the Global South and our organisation's research outputs on African information disorders.

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Understanding Africa on its own terms

Prevailing narratives about the negative consequences of information disorders tend to emerge from American and European contexts where there is limited scope or political will to openly discuss how matters of political economy cause intense "anti-system politics" (Hopkin, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of common definitions and understanding of what constitutes information disorders has given rise to politicisation of the term and its use as a tool for information control (Manganga, 2012).

Without an African frame of reference there is a good chance that precepts generated from studies of information disorder elsewhere may take on a "Western gaze" when applied to the study of information in Africa. Explanatory frameworks for the causes of fake news in the Western world may be useful in those contexts, but "are not necessarily externally valid in spaces outside of the West" (Kirwin, Ouedraogo, & Warner 2022, p. 3).

What is needed is appropriate attunement to historical, material, and cultural dynamics found on the continent, in all of their plurality. As Francis Nyamnjoh explains, by "either essentialising Africa by treating her as 'different' or by ignoring her specificity by approaching her media via Western theoretical constructs" (2011, p. 19). There is value in policymakers recognising "the creative ways in which Africans merge their traditions with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both" (Nyamnjoh, 2011, p. 28).

In short, issues of trust and information disorders in Africa need to be studied in their own terms. This may mean "engaging with, rather than denouncing, authoritarian regimes or regimes that have been accused of corruption" (Gagliardone, 2014, p. 281). The point is to encourage researchers and policymakers to have informed appraisals of issues on the ground so that inventions are fit to purpose.

African media systems are understudied.

Historically, African media systems have been understudied despite their impact on public discourse, political processes, and cultural identities. And when undertaken, the study of these media systems often takes on a Western-centric approach, focusing on digital media while a unique set of circumstances exist for many sub-Saharan African countries. For example, while the recent rapid growth of digital technologies and social media platforms has changed the media landscape in Africa, much misinformation is spread by word of mouth, even if the information originated online. This reality reinforces the need for strategies to counter information disorders having online and offline components (Wasserman, 2022).

It is essential to examine African media systems in light of their particular situations. For example, a review of media studies curriculums in sub-Saharan universities found that media literacy and misinformation is rarely taught (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021). The researchers attribute this absence to a lack of political will. Still, the researchers maintain that broad media literacy training is not an antidote to phenomena like fake news. Further, new and existing policies on misinformation miss the target. In short, a one-size-fits-all approach to analysing media systems does a disservice to the particular characteristics that make sub-Saharan disorders distinct.

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The politics of information

Old paradigms erred in believing that digital technologies naturally encouraged freedom and that access to information would near automatically erode authoritarian state control, traditional hierarchies, and hegemonic orders by improving transparency, checking truth claims, and promoting justice. With similar thinking, some African authoritarian governments continue to believe that digital technologies and social media platforms pose a threat to the state as these platforms challenge a state monopoly over information flows. Believing the power of platforms to move citizens and drive social movements, authoritarian governments sought to co-opt social media to hold onto power (Lamoureaux & Sureau 2019, p. 36).

Newer paradigms understand the politics of information on digital platforms as concerning citizen– state relations. For authoritarian regimes, digital platforms and networks are seen as creating venues for opposition politics and participation. While digital technology can serve various desirable purposes for developing states with the appropriate institutional framework, these technologies are easily dispensed when a state's legitimacy and authority are challenged (Jacob & Akpan, 2015). Accordingly, states are inclined to use digital technologies to stabilise their legitimacy while also viewing technologies as threats to their control of information flows, thereby undermining the citizenry's ability to engage in political contestation.

People share information as a means of social currency, at least according to a five-country study examining the rationale behind sharing and consuming fake news in sub-Saharan African countries (Wasserman et al., 2019). By "social currency" we refer to peoples' aspiration to be in the loop and feel as though they are connected to society. So what may be seen as a facturing force could alternatively be interpreted as acts of making local social cohesion, at least for some groups. Group identities can be manufactured and mobilised for partisan political projects.

Elections and shutdowns

The increased use of platforms both during and outside of elections has changed the nature of how misinformation spreads. For example, the use of social media influencers to spread positive messages about politicians and their parties has led to more youth engagement in political discourse. At the same time citizen journalism and social media content have increasingly played a role in monitoring elections and providing additional contextual information about public affairs (Moyo, 2009; Brinkmann, 2019).

However, the relationship between mobile phone and Internet usage and political attitudes or political engagement remains uncertain. Large, multi-country surveys of African citizens are inconclusive about whether citizens who are more engaged in politics use their cell phones more frequently, or whether cell phone usage increases engagement (Gore, 2022).

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Connectivity related liberties have also caused states to look deeper at the link between elections and security, with the aim of providing states with reasons to limit the freedom of expression for the sake of state security. Oftentimes, states with authoritarian regimes tend to treat social media as a vector for political instability. This is often justified by scapegoating platforms as catalysts for unrest as they facilitate the mobilisation and coordination of protests.

This reinforces the perspective to securitise the Internet and "the use of more state violence in an effort to dissolve public dissent and stay in power" (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018, p. 3899). The view informs the character of regulatory exercises which is one of "command and control". By appealing to threats of terror and cybersecurity, some states have adopted laws that expand online surveillance and shut down powers for security forces and the intelligence community (Abraha, 2017).

The interplay between regime type, independence of institutions and prospects of violence also shapes the chance of Internet shutdowns. Between 2015 and 2016, half of the sub-Saharan African countries that held national or presidential elections experienced government-ordered Internet shutdowns as votes were being cast. Shutdowns are a means of exerting control when ruling authorities stand to lose during bouts of social turmoil. However, decentralised networks that allow for diversification of control over

infrastructure can mitigate some of the sharper edges of shutdowns (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018).

Judicature capture and access to legal remedies

The lack of entrenched judicial independence, fear of incumbent governments and witness intimidation in many African states makes litigation of Internet shutdown and digital censorship cases difficult. Seeking judicial redress for an immediate solution for Internet shutdown is rarely effective as courts in the regions take long to deliver rulings (Asiedu, 2020). In cases where national courts are compromised, regional courts can step in. The Economic Community of West African States court is the only one in Africa that has made a ruling and set a foundational precedent against Internet shutdown on the basis of human rights violation (Amnesty International & Ors v. The Togolese Republic 2020).

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State legitimacy

On a continent where the election results are often contested and rumours of rigging are rife, state legitimacy often needs to be reinforced by incumbent governments. Elections, even in rule of law context, do not automatically grant legitimacy. Instead, legitimacy is contingent on citizens' perceptions and expectations of the state and the degree to which the state meets them. A part of maintaining legitimacy is ensuring that civilian perceptions of government have good reasons to remain positive. However, the rapid adoption of digital technologies throughout Africa has empowered citizens, while also providing another vector for some states to exercise repressive capacity. Thus, state disruption of citizens' access to information and communications technology is often seen as a means of seeking to enforce state legitimacy. As Jan Rydzak, Moses Karanja, and Nicholas Opiyo elaborate: "governments that disrupt access to communication services are overwhelmingly authoritarian or hybrid regimes" (2020, p. 4270).

Areas for policy reinforcement

There are several pressure points for policymakers with regard to more effective governance of increasingly globalised digital public goods:

Platforms:

- ❖ Platforms should regulate information within the context of international human rights standards to guide their content moderation exercise. These are enshrined in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the International Covenant for Civic and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- ❖ To control authorities and other powerful actors from influencing narratives, platforms can increase their transparency in the African region. Especially

regarding content moderation in the region and the development of necessary contextualised language recognition and other identifiers in automated categorisation and removal of content.

❖ As elements of information disorders are often politicised to criminalise dissent, the role of researchers in understanding these terms in an African context should be recognised. This includes platforms increasing their transparency on content moderation for research purposes.

❖ Platforms should be transparent on their data collection and analysis practices to foster a trusted digital environment. This can be accomplished by platforms providing more information about how they make internal decisions, how they interpret regulations, and how they respond to claims about online harms.

Governments and regional bodies:

❖ In addition to guaranteeing the right to information, governments can proactively provide public information to the citizenry, especially about matters of public concern. To aid with this exercise, governments should also ensure equal access to this information, reaching users who lack access to the Internet.

❖ Policymakers, regional bodies and international organisations can use existing human rights frameworks and commit to support citizen engagement and generally provide oversight of notable political events through elections monitoring and constitution-making processes.

Media:

❖ Freedom of the media and independent journalism is critical in countering information disorders and keeping powers in check. Given the potential market for news consumption, strategic investments in African media houses can increase the capacity to provide authoritative news in a timely manner.

Academia and civil society organisations:

❖ More Africa-specific literature on information disorders may enable the judiciary to deal with cases of information disorders and set good case laws for the continent.

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