

The Materials of Misinformation on the African Continent:

Mid-year Report, 2023

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About the Resisting Information Disorder in the Global South Project

Principal Investigator: Herman Wasserman, Stellenbosch University

Despite information disorder being a widespread problem in countries in the Global South, the study of this phenomenon remains dominated by examples, case studies, and models from the Global North. A previous scoping project (Wasserman 2022) supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) made a start to map the actors, strategies and approaches working to counter information disorders across the Global South. In its study of organisations and actors in Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, Latin America and Asia, the study found that organisations working in the Global South address information disorder as a multi-levelled problem embedded in a range of social, political, and economic conditions. These conditions map onto historical experiences and wider concerns among civil society actors about the quality of communication and public sphere governance in these regions – and actors and organisations working to counter mis- and dis- information increasingly link various issues such as freedom of expression, access to digital platforms, communication rights and media literacy together in their work. This project builds on this pre-existing research and its recommendations. It will take a thematic approach to identify the key drivers of information disorder in the Global South and evaluate appropriate responses and strategies. The goal is to support and influence future policy and governance interventions.

About Research ICT Africa

Research ICT Africa (RIA) is an African think tank that has operated for over a decade to fill a strategic gap in the development of a sustainable information society and digital economy. It has done so by building the multidisciplinary research capacity needed to inform evidence-based policy and effective regulation Africa. RIA's dynamic and evolving research agenda examines the uneven distribution of the benefits and harms of the intensifying global processes of digitalisation and datafication.

On this basis, we seek to provide alternative policy and regulatory strategies that produce different outcomes that will address digital inequality in Africa and enable data justice. Through rigorous research and analysis RIA seeks to build an African knowledge base in support of digital equality and data justice, and to monitor and review developments on the continent.

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1. Introduction

Africa's strategic importance in the global political economy is changing.¹ Major powers aim to secure access to critical minerals for the next wave of industrialization. Concurrently, African demographics mean the continent will drive consumer goods tastes for most of this century. So far few African leaders seem willing to curtail extractivism and otherwise insist that the continent manufacture consumer goods. Meanwhile any misappraisal of the central drivers of—and politics surrounding—this development would likely result in errors of judgement that may have ramifications that could last for decades. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) project 'Resisting information disorder in the Global South' provides funding to understand the role of information in mediating social and political life in Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Latin America. – Research ICT Africa (RIA) is co-ordinating the Sub-Saharan African component of the project, with Prof. Herman Wasserman (Stellenbosch University) as the principal investigator. This internal mid-year review is intended to ensure that RIA remains focused on the core outcomes of the project such as identifying the primary drivers of information disorders while concurrently tracking pertinent issues and interests on the continent. While we have provided an extended conceptualisation of information disorders in our concept note, for the purposes of this report we define information disorders as 'problematically inaccurate information furthering de-democratisation ends'. Archival methods were used for information collection.

Despite information disorder being a useful partial explanation for a range of political problems in countries in the Global South,² the study of this phenomenon remains dominated by case studies, models and theorisation developed in and for the Global North. Fully recognising that information disorders are a multi-levelled problem embedded in a range of social, political, economic, and cultural conditions, at RIA we are studying information disorders using the existing intellectual archive, while also making a concerted effort to foreground conceptualisations that account for African circumstances, ideally in a way that gives rise to new conceptual products that have suitable explanatory potential for these circumstances. We give priority to African scholarship that exists on any given topic and aim not to be led by frames likely to be more familiar to Western audiences. The ultimate goal of this project is to develop the conceptualisation of information disorders by, with and for Africans.

As pointed out below, a critical starting point for this project is the statement that organisations like RIA have a duty to promote democratic self-determination. This is because the political underpins the shape and nature of information disorders, and is a component of their analyses. Among the many developments on the continent, there has been a recent surge of military takeovers and unconstitutional changes of government.³ Since 2021 there have been six successful coups in Africa out of twelve attempts. Meanwhile Teodoro Obiang has extended his rule in Equatorial Guinea that he has enjoyed for the past 43 years, himself having taken power via a coup.⁴ As we discuss in the report, coups and insurrections have been a prime source and site of information disorders.

As this project matures, we are certain of three things: first, stability and peace in Africa is of paramount importance; second, while Africa is a site of geopolitical struggle, Africans are engaging in politics to select partners and models of governance that are deemed suitable to their circumstances; and third, that information disorders play out at the intersection of these

¹ See materials by the [World Bank](#) and [UNCTAD](#) for recent assessments of the economic climate.

² See Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (Eds.). *Disinformation in the Global South*. Wiley.

³ Mwai, P. (2023, January 4). [Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?](#) *BBC News*.

⁴ York, G. (2022, 21 November). [World's longest-ruling dictator to extend his 43 years in power](#). *The Globe and Mail*.

dynamics. Amidst these developments, organisations like RIA have a duty to promote democratic self-determination.

Since the project began in November 2022, RIA has produced several outputs, including two policy briefs, an annotated bibliography, and a series of public essays and presentations at public events and conferences. A full list of these engagements can be found in Appendix A. Appendix B contains a list of key stakeholder interviews the research team has conducted since November 2022.

What Counts as Political Communication?

Concept formation

The research organisation Data & Society has been at the forefront of calling for greater analytical clarity around terms like ‘fake news’ or ‘post-truth’ that aim to label “problematically inaccurate information”.⁵ The first general difficulty with the naming and analysis of problematically inaccurate information and the systems and structures that enable its reproduction is that “longstanding terminologies” do not capture “new complexities” wrought by “networked media, accelerating news cycles, and declining faith in social institutions”.⁶ The second general difficulty is that the rapid search for new terms has created several concepts that overlap, are imprecise, inconsistent, or lack a solid empirical anchoring. This development of many plural and parallel concepts exemplifies conditions where there is no reasonable cohesion in the analysis of politics,⁷ which may also be a testament to the contemporary nature of politics itself.

A third general difficulty RIA would add is that when terms like ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’ are found to lack empirical support or explanatory utility for the phenomenon they are applied to – like polarisation – these terms are not quickly removed from policy circles.⁸ Policy researchers need to be more ruthless in withdrawing weak concepts from their work and from the vocabularies of policy makers. Without firm concept formation important distinctions may get lost. The result is that researchers contribute to disordering information. As much as bad data undermines good ideas, bad ideas undermine good data.

Finally, the evaluation of what is problematically inaccurate information presupposes a specific normative evaluation that might be problematic in itself.⁹ As Michel Foucault explains “problematization doesn’t mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It is the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)”.¹⁰ These dynamics are in play when it comes to the critique of the systems and

⁵ Jack, C. (2017). *Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information*. Data & Society, P. 1.

⁶ Jack, C. (2017). *Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information*. Data & Society, P. 1.

⁷ Also see Lenoir, T., & Anderson, C. (2023). *Introduction essay: What comes after disinformation studies*. Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life (CITAP), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸ See Bruns, A. (2019). *Are filter bubbles real?* Wiley.; and Arguedas, A. R. et al (2022) *Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: A literature review*. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford.

⁹ Timcke, S. (2021). *Algorithms and The End of Politics*. Bristol University Press.

¹⁰ Foucault, M. (1988). The concern for truth. In Lawrence Kritzman, & Michel Foucault. (Eds.). *Politics, philosophy, culture. Interviews and other Writings, 1977–1984* (p. 257). Routledge.

structures that reproduce problematically inaccurate information.¹¹ The point is that disinformation narratives are formed that view information and democratic contention from a depoliticised vantage point. But the assessment of information disorders is a political task in itself and an ignorance of it can be harmful to the overall goal of understanding information disorders from and in Africa. This is one reason why RIA is explicit in stating our endorsement of democratic self-determination and insists upon a political reading of the field as well as the formation of its objects of study. Data & Society's Caroline Jack well captures the spirit of this project when she writes that "[t]he stakes are high: culture, profits, politics, and the notion of truth itself are in the balance".¹²

Can fighting misinformation and disinformation have a negative spillover effect?

In a different manner, recent studies point to the direction that this distrustful environment in society might have been partly shaped by news and narratives about misinformation and disinformation itself. Researchers observed that information ecosystems increasingly include narratives regarding the threat of misinformation and disinformation. A study by van de Meer et al. assesses how this 'priming' of people through the mere salience of articles about misinformation and disinformation is causing people to assess factual news as less credible.¹³ This negative spillover effect could have consequences for trust in news, media and democratic institutions.¹⁴ Additionally, the social effect of misinformation and disinformation may be overestimated due to the third-person effect, which can be described as the belief that others are generally more gullible than oneself.¹⁵ This research points to the value of an holistic assessment of the African information ecosystem and studies which is also informed by psychological research to actually understand how misinformation and disinformation narratives imposed on the African continent in itself shape the African media and information landscapes. This also needs to be seen in the light if and how misinformation and disinformation narratives offer in itself simplistic solutions (e.g. regulation of platforms) for complex problems¹⁶ instead of acknowledging the various social and political factors like race, class and inequality that underline current politics.¹⁷ With these points in mind we empathise with the view Théophile Lenoir and Chris Anderson articulate in their introduction to the set of essays collected in *What Comes After Disinformation?* They ask whether

¹¹ As Judith Butler explains, "critique will be dependent on its objects, but its objects will in turn define the very meaning of critique. Further, the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects—social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse—are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself". Butler, J. (2002). What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue In David Ingram (Ed.). *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* (pp. 212-227). Basil Blackwell.

¹² Jack, C. (2017). *Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information*. Data & Society. P. 16.

¹³ van der Meer, T. G. L. A., Hameleers, M., & Ohme, J. (2023). [Can fighting misinformation have a negative spillover effect? How warnings for the threat of misinformation can decrease general news credibility](#). *Journalism Studies*.

¹⁴ van der Meer, T. G. L. A., Hameleers, M., & Ohme, J. (2023). [Can fighting misinformation have a negative spillover effect? How warnings for the threat of misinformation can decrease general news credibility](#). *Journalism Studies*.

¹⁵ Altay, S., & Acerbi, A. (2023). [People believe misinformation is a threat because they assume others are gullible](#). *New Media & Society*.

¹⁶ Altay, S., & Acerbi, A. (2023). [People believe misinformation is a threat because they assume others are gullible](#). *New Media & Society*.

¹⁷ Lenoir, T., & Anderson, C. (2023). [Introduction essay: What comes after disinformation studies](#). *Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life (CITAP), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.

“it’s time for disinformation studies (at least in its current form) to fade away – or become something new”.¹⁸ At RIA we are busy thinking about what comes next.

Recent studies and technical advances relevant to this research

In the past few years there have been several studies of information disorders that are likely to be relevant to our work, as well as developments that are likely to reshape what we understand about information disorders. These are discussed below.

The commercial machinery of election interference

Democracy in Africa is uneven. In 2021 notable successes in forming this kind of government included a presidential election in Gambia and the peaceful transfer of power in Zambia, Niger, and the Seychelles. Concurrently, Benin, Senegal, and Tanzania have seen restrictions on opposition parties while in Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda there were allegations of vote rigging. In this context, Afrobarometer’s survey of 34 African countries between 2019 and 2021 found a general commitment to democracy: “[Africans] believe that the military should stay out of politics, that political parties should freely compete for power, that elections are an imperfect but essential tool for choosing their leaders, and that it is time for the old men who cling to power to step aside”.¹⁹ Respondents to the survey also indicated that the supply of democracy was low with worsening corruption, leaving political systems unable to deliver social goods. Afrobarometer concluded that “although citizens find myriad ways to voice their concerns, they feel that their governments are not listening”.²⁰ For a discussion of internet shutdowns see RIA’s annotated bibliography on information disorders.²¹

In the context of information disorders, this poses the need to ask if and how commercial interests might interfere with the democratic hopes of Africans. African political parties are in the market for commercial advertising tools to assist with election campaigning. Candidates use platforms and employ trolls, influencers and foreign microtargeting companies to influence polls to their favour.²² It is a newly emerging commercial sector that provides governments and parties with the means for their ends while generating economic value.

While in Kenya voters have received unrequested campaign messages from parties during elections at least since 2021,²³ in 2013 interference in the country’s elections escalated to a new level through Cambridge Analytica. While Cambridge Analytica scraped Facebook’s data to access personal information that was later used to spread fear through political advertising in the Kenya 2013 elections, possible avenues for data mining for political parties included local and national

¹⁸ Lenoir, T., & Anderson, C. (2023). Introduction essay: What comes after disinformation studies. *Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life (CITAP), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.

¹⁹ Afrobarometer. (2023). Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening. Policy paper no. 85. Afrobarometer. P. 1.

²⁰ Afrobarometer. (2023). Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening. Policy paper no. 85. Afrobarometer. P. 1.

²¹ Timcke, S., Orembo, L., & Hlomani, H. (2023). Information disorders in Africa: An annotated bibliography of selected countries. Research ICT Africa.

²² Mude, H. (2021). Political micro-targeting in Kenya: An analysis of the legality of data-driven campaign strategies under the Data Protection Act. *Journal for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law*, 1(1).

²³ Oyugi, C. (2021, 28 June). Kenyans can sue political parties for illegal registrations. *Journalism Hub*.

government registries, service providers database such as Safaricom's Mpesa and manual security registers collecting personal data when accessing buildings.²⁴

Misinformation and disinformation have also been rife in the Kenyan elections, commonly distributed over the TikTok platform. TikTok posts tend to have more viewership than other social media platforms and as such misinformation and disinformation on the platform spreads widely with significant spillovers. However, a report by Mozilla highlights that despite having developed policies that limit spread of hate speech and disinformation, content violating these policies on TikTok have been left unmoderated.²⁵

The same can be seen regarding elections where the machinery used for election interference is advancing. In 2020, an Israeli influence company used 'deep avatars' to discredit major organisations and gathered intelligence by recruiting and managing unsuspecting journalists and political activists in Burkina Faso.²⁶ This sophisticated disinformation machinery used a network of online assets where plausible personas were created with bots. In the 2022 Kenyan elections, an Israeli company was also contracted to hack into the networks of political opponents.²⁷ At this time there is little public information about the efficacy of these operations, but it is clear that political parties and governments are spending funds in the hope that these efforts are effective in shifting the result of an election.²⁸

In Uganda's 2021 presidential elections, campaign teams from the main candidates used pictures from events that had occurred in the past but were misrepresented as current to compete with narratives evoking emotions of sympathy and fear amongst the public.²⁹ A similar trend was also experienced in Kenya during protests occurring at the time of writing this report. The Directorate for Criminal Investigations used images from previous events to cast the protests in a negative light and call for the arrest of protesters³⁰.

Arguably this entire area of work needs to be a priority for RIA's information disorders project as it shows the necessity to take economic circumstances and the algorithmic capitalist working of commercial practices into account when researching and assessing the role of misinformation and disinformation in elections on the African continent. To reiterate other portions of this report, information disorders are not only a product of bad will, but a by-product of commercial aspirations.

²⁴ Mutung'u, G. (2018). *The influence industry data and digital election campaigning in Kenya*. Tactical Tech.

²⁵ Madung, O., (2023). *From dance app to political mercenary: How disinformation on TikTok gaslights political tensions in Kenya*. Mozilla Foundation.

²⁶ Sperber, A, & Arenstein, J. (2023, 8 March). *Age of disinformation: Building a next level bot to subvert Africa's elections*. *Daily Maverick*.

²⁷ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. (2023, 21 February). *Cyber mercenaries are Hacking elections globally. Here's an example of how they do it*. *The Wire*.

²⁸ Ekdale, B., & Tully, M. (2019). *African elections as a testing ground: Comparing coverage of Cambridge Analytica in Nigerian and Kenyan newspapers*. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(4), 27–43.; Maweu, J. M. (2019). "Fake elections"? Cyber propaganda, disinformation and the 2017 general elections in Kenya. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(4), 62–76.

²⁹ Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa. (2021). *How online narratives played out on Twitter during and after the 2021 Uganda elections*. CIPESA.

³⁰ Citizen reporter (2023, 25 March). *DCI on the spot over images released on chaos during Maandamano rally*. *Citizen Digital*.

Recommendation systems

Experimental audits of recommendation algorithms show that there is a difference between how automated accounts follow recommendation algorithms and how people do. Whereas automated accounts responding to these algorithms do result in feeds with niche “partisan, conspiratorial, or false content” users themselves typically do not pursue this kind of niche content. When looking at practices, “users rarely consume niche content when given the option because it is of low utility to them, which can lead the recommender system to deamplify such content.”³¹

This finding underscores how recommendation systems are complex, and involve the tastes of the people who form part of that complex system. Adequate auditing cannot simply be done with automated systems as it does not account for the cultural production of habits. Additionally, as Arvind Narayanan explains, “much of the debate over online speech, particularly the problem of mis/disinformation, reduces the harms of social media platforms to a false binary—what should be taken down, what should be left up. However, the logic of engagement optimization rewards the production of content that may not be well-aligned with societal benefit, even if it’s not harmful enough to be taken down. This manifests differently in different areas”.³²

On the topic of social media consumption habits, a 2023 study by Claire Robertson and her colleagues found that people are likely to consume news with negative words in the headlines; conversely they are significantly less likely to come to news with headlines containing positive words.³³ The findings are based on 22 743 randomised controlled trials of a dataset that had about 105 000 new stories from Upworthy.com’s research archive. These stories had generated about 5.7 million clicks from 370 million impressions. Analysis also shows that negative news about politics and the economy are most likely to be consumed. This unintentional, or intentional selective consumption, could ultimately lead to polarisation and inter-group conflict. The researchers argue that there is a difference between motivations for news consumption and motivations for sharing news and more comparative studies need to be carried out.³⁴

Dark patterns and deceptive design

Dark patterns are a design method which is used to deceptively shape the decision-making, autonomy, or even the behavioural patterns of users that ultimately favours the interests of the designers.³⁵ Several issues arise from ordinary online business practices compromising the autonomy of users. Rights involving freedom of thought and conscience are stifled, for example, as users are treated simply as objects to be manipulated for profit making exercises.³⁶

Deceptive design has been a pervasive issue in the e-commerce and retail industries, with businesses using dark patterns to manipulate consumers into making purchases or signing up for subscriptions. However, the impact of deceptive design extends far beyond consumerism and can have serious implications for democracy and the spread of misinformation and disinformation. In

³¹ Ribeiro, M. H., Veselovsky, V., & West, R. (2023). [The amplification paradox in recommender systems](#). *arXiv:2302.11225*. Cornell University.

³² See Narayanan, A. (2023, 9 March). [Understanding social media recommendation algorithms: Towards a better informed debate on the effects of social media](#). *Knight 1st Amendment Institute*. Columbia University.

³³ Robertson, C. E. et al. (2023). [Negativity drives online news consumption](#). *Nature Human Behaviour*.

³⁴ Robertson, C. E. et al (2023). [Negativity drives online news consumption](#). *Nature Human Behaviour*.

³⁵ Campbell-Dollaghan, K. (2016, 21 December). [The year dark patterns won](#). *Fast Company*.

³⁶ Singer, S. (2016, 15 March). [When websites won’t take no for an answer](#). *The New York Times*.

the context of information disorders, deceptive design can be found on platforms where the interface and code are orientated towards collecting and analysing user generated data for the targeted advertising sector. These can also be repurposed to amplify misinformation and disinformation. For example on social media sites, the 'like' button, the 'what are you thinking prompt' represent how a platform is 'supposed' to work but these 'likes' and 'thoughts' are also used to curate a user's timeline so that a person views more content that aligns to their likes. The goal is to amplify content on the timeline that designers prefer. The larger point about deceptive design is to create a media experience in which there is an impression of believability. Adedolapo Adegoroye, policy analyst at Tech Hive Advisory says that "with the rise of fake news and the manipulation of social media algorithms to reinforce users' existing beliefs, it is becoming increasingly clear that design must be held accountable for its role in shaping our perceptions of the world."³⁷

Despite deceptive design being a core component of the everyday internet experience, there are rarely any regulations in Africa that address these unfair practices although arguably some existing competition laws, consumer protection laws, electronic transaction laws and data protection laws could be somewhat useful if regulators wish to address these issues. A common theme across most of these laws is the principle of fairness wherein transparency is a requirement as it relates to data collection and usage. The combination of these laws can serve as a good springing board for specific laws dealing with deceptive design.

As we enter a new era in both technology and government, there is a growing need for design to empower users to challenge the products and information they are presented with, rather than simply engaging and entertaining them. In the opinion of African experts, deceptive designs will become more commonplace for African users. For example, Ridwan Oleyede, technology policy lead of Tech Hive Advisory says, "It's going to seep into more products, services, digital interactions and that's why it's important that we need to amplify and bring attention to its existence in everyday products and services."³⁸

Identity propaganda

A study of images with political content scraped from Facebook during the 2020 US election campaign found that about 23% of all images contained misinformation.³⁹ Some 40% of images by right-leaning entities were misleading, compared to about 5% of left-leaning images, indicating that visual misinformation was more prevalent in right-leaning groups. The researchers sampled from a collection of more than 14 million posts from 14 000 pages and 11 000 public groups between August and October 2020. At the same time there was "little evidence that misleading images generate higher engagement" in the elections.⁴⁰

Nevertheless efficacy should not be confused with function. A disproportionate amount of right-leaning visual misinformation sought to discredit women and racial minorities who were public figures. This visual 'identity propaganda' reinforced white supremacy and patriarchy and seeks to delegitimise the authority and expertise of women and minorities with respect to the necessary

³⁷ Interview with Ridwan Oloyede (technology policy lead) & Adedolapo Adegoroye (policy analyst) 'Tech Hive Advisory Interview on Dark Patterns/Deceptive design with Hanani Hlomani' (30 March 2023).

³⁸ Interview with Ridwan Oloyede (technology policy lead) & Adedolapo Adegoroye (policy analyst) 'Tech Hive Advisory Interview on Dark Patterns/Deceptive design with Hanani Hlomani' (30 March 2023).

³⁹ Yang, Y., Davis, T., & Hindman, M. (2023). [Visual misinformation on Facebook](#). *Journal of Communication*.

⁴⁰ Yang, Y., Davis, T., & Hindman, M. (2023). [Visual misinformation on Facebook](#). *Journal of Communication*.

representational aspects of democracy. As it applies to our study, the key point is that RIA must be attentive to any racial, ethnic or gender bias in misinformation and disinformation in African countries.

Artificial intelligence chatbots and deep fakes

With the rollout of artificial intelligence (AI) large language models like ChatGPT, there are growing concerns that AI can allow actors to “pose as anyone, anywhere, anytime”.⁴¹ When combined with advances in ‘deep fake’ and other facial filter technologies, the calculations about the costs and returns of deception greatly change.⁴² AI generated images are getting better at creating believable scenes, making it more difficult to distinguish between real and fictitious images. Currently US Special Operations Command is seeking to procure these capabilities.⁴³ Aside from warfare, there is a prospect that this constellation of technologies may damage democratic political systems, through for instance creating distrust or a sense of inauthenticity in digitally mediated encounters. Questions of trust, authenticity and reliability also apply to online notaries and contracts. One consequence of the automated creation of plausible lies is that existing democratic processes cannot contain trust, rendering these systems illegitimate in the eyes of citizens.

Indeed Open AI’s Safety Card admits that ChatGPT “has the potential to cast doubt on the whole information environment, threatening our ability to distinguish fact from fiction”.⁴⁴ This may make it harder to detect information disorders. “I’m particularly worried that these models could be used for large-scale disinformation,” Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI said. “Now that they’re getting better at writing computer code, [they] could be used for offensive cyberattacks.”⁴⁵ The main point is not the automation of disinformation or misinformation. Rather it is the creation of conditions in which distrust prevails and in which people are further alienated from one another leading to them not wanting to engage in politics.

Topics of concern: Conflicts

RIA’s position is that information disorders are context dependent.⁴⁶ Accordingly we provide a survey of conflicts on the African continent, as well as those that affect African populations, as these are some underlying sources for information disorders. This effort is also aimed to generate a consistent tracking of local situations influencing information disorders during the course of this project.

⁴¹ Foroohar, R. (2023, 19 March). [We need to create guardrails for AI](#). *Financial Times*.

⁴² Hsu, T. (2023, 22 January). [As deepfakes flourish, countries struggle with response](#). *New York Times*.

⁴³ Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Directorate Of Science And Technology. (2023). [Broad agency announcement USSOCOM-BAAST-2020, amendment 3 for technology development and advanced technology development](#). SOF AT&L-ST.; Biddle, S. (2023, 6 March). [U.S. Special Forces want to use deepfakes for psy-ops](#). *The Intercept*.

⁴⁴ OpenAI. (2023). [GPT-4 system card](#). P. 11.

⁴⁵ Ordonez, V., Dunn, T., & Noll, E. (2023, 16 March). [OpenAI CEO Sam Altman says AI will reshape society, acknowledges risks: ‘A little bit scared of this’](#). *ABC News*.

⁴⁶ Hlomani, H. et al. (2023). [Policy reinforcements to counter information disorders in the African context](#). Policy brief. Research ICT Africa.

The Tigray war

The armed conflict in Ethiopia between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Government of Ethiopia has seen information control played out in multiple ways by both parties in the conflict. As the government restricted access to information by shutting down the Internet and power in the Tigray region, the TPLF allegedly destroyed telecommunications infrastructure.⁴⁷ Much of the misinformation and disinformation originated from the Ethiopian diaspora which incited violence for both sides of the conflict.⁴⁸ When Facebook responded by shutting down government pages, the government announced plans to develop its own social media network.⁴⁹

Foreign correspondents were affected as it became difficult to get verified information. As with other conflicts in the region, the conflicting parties courted Western support. In November 2022, the TPLF and the government signed an agreement to end the conflict. However, there are doubts whether this agreement will last, as it fails to elaborate issues of power balance in the establishment of the Inter Regional Administration.⁵⁰

The conflict in Cabo Delgado

Militant attacks and insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado have claimed more than 3000 lives and nearly a million displaced.⁵¹ Although there are reports of the Islamic State claiming ties to the insurrection, the lack of clarity over who is spearheading the insurrection has led to a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation.⁵² In the absence of credible claims, disinformation surrounding the motivations for the insurrection has flourished.

In asserting media control, the government has also amended the Anti-Terror Bill which now criminalises terrorist-linked activities, including anyone spreading misinformation or disinformation about the country's insurgency in Cabo Delgado. The law also criminalises the "reproduction of statements" that are false or misleading. Since reproducing statements (e.g. citing sources or interviewees) is central to journalism, the media has been put on notice. By introducing onerous accreditation costs and procedures, the Government of Mozambique has made it difficult to report on the crisis for foreign media outlets. Notably in 2018, the government denied the BBC accreditation to report on the violence, saying it would shame the country.⁵³ In the same year, the government began arresting reporters who covered northern Mozambique, including Estacio Valoi and David Matsinhe, a researcher for Amnesty International.⁵⁴ Both were imprisoned in the city of Mocimboa da Praia. These practices suggest that the government is willing to restrict knowledge from the public about events in Cabo Delgado.

⁴⁷ Reuters. (2020, 17 November) [Ethiopia accuses Tigray forces of destroying bridges leading to regional capital](#). Reuters.

⁴⁸ Agence France Presse. (2021). [Ethiopia's warring sides locked in disinformation battle](#). France24.com.

⁴⁹ Reuters. (2021, 24 August). [Ethiopia: Govt. to develop own social media platform after Facebook recently suspended pro-govt. accounts](#). Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.

⁵⁰ Tronvoll, K., & Maru, M. T. (2023, 9 March). [Tigray's precarious transition: On the establishment of an Interim Regional Administration](#). Democracy in Africa.

⁵¹ Sheehy, T. (2021, 28 July). [Five keys to tackling the crisis in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado](#). United States Institute of Peace.

⁵² Timcke, S., Wiegatz, J., & Paterson, C. (2021, 28 September). [The securitisation of capitalist rule in Africa](#). *Review of African Political Economy*.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch. (2019, 21 February). [Mozambique: Media barred from insurgent region](#). Human Rights Watch.

⁵⁴ Media Institute of Southern Africa. (2018, 19 December). [Journalists detained in Mozambique](#). [Press statement].

The complexity of the Eastern Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo joined the East African Community in 2022,⁵⁵ with that community agreeing to use military forces to stabilise the eastern part of the country.⁵⁶ By some estimates there are 120 militant groups operating in the area,⁵⁷ with many combatants perhaps more appropriately described as pursuing banditry as a livelihood in part due to the absence of other economic pathways.⁵⁸ Felix Ndahinda and Aggée Mugabe's research in South Kivu has found simmering anti-Banyamulenge and anti-Tutsi hate speech propagated by users of platforms.⁵⁹ As they write in another venue, "[i]n addition to being labelled as foreign invaders, occupants, and hegemonists, Congolese Banyarwanda, Banyamulenge, or Tutsi in general, are frequently portrayed as snakes, vipers, cockroaches, vermin, chameleons, greedy, deceptive, manipulators, and ruthless killers. These dehumanizing attributes are routinely invoked to justify violence, including killing members of these communities in what is construed as acts of self-defence."⁶⁰ Platforms afford the reach and circulation of these lethal narratives, especially when platforms underinvest in moderation efforts in African languages.⁶¹ RIA has published several papers on the topic of local language content moderation.⁶²

Sudan as an emerging conflict zone

The National Congress Party (NCP) led Sudanese government was overthrown in 2019, with a military coup following in October 2021. In 2021, Facebook shut down a network of 1 000 accounts linked to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and other groups that advocated for a military coup.⁶³ The detection of these disinformation campaigns was based on Facebook's technical content analysis approach which detected patterns of information sharing among these accounts. Beam Reports found out that disinformation campaigns preceded actual events.⁶⁴ Misleading information calling for the dissolution of the Government of Sudan was spread days before the 2021 coup, for instance.

Local experts like journalists and political analysts attribute the salience of misinformation and disinformation to the turbulent nature of the period following the overthrow of the NCP, NCP

⁵⁵ East African Community. (2022, 8 April). *The Democratic Republic of the Congo formally joins EAC after signing of the Treaty of Accession to the Community*. [Press release].

⁵⁶ Holland, H. (2022, 22 April). *East African Community agrees on regional force to try to end Congo unrest*. Reuters.

⁵⁷ Holland, H. (2022, 22 April). *East African Community agrees on regional force to try to end Congo unrest*, Reuters.

⁵⁸ See Stearns, J. (2022, May/June). *Rebels without a cause: The new face of African warfare*. *Foreign Affairs*.

⁵⁹ Ndahinda, F. M., & Mugabe, A. S. (2022). *Streaming hate: Exploring the harm of anti-Banyamulenge and anti-Tutsi hate speech on Congolese social media*. *Journal of Genocide Research*.

⁶⁰ Ndahinda, F. M., & Mugabe, A. S. (2022, 23 September). *Hate speech on social media nurtures the protracted conflict in Eastern D.R Congo*. *Africa at LSE*.

⁶¹ For general discussion of this underinvestment, see Tankosić, A., & Dovchin, S. (2021). *The impact of social media in the sociolinguistic practices of the peripheral post-socialist contexts*. *International Journal of Multilingualism*.

⁶² Research ICT Africa. (2023). *Digital platform governance and the challenges for trust and safety*; ARTICLE 19. (2022). *Content moderation and freedom of expression: Bridging the gap between social media and local civil society*. ARTICLE 19.

⁶³ Elthahir, N., Tapper, M., & Abdelaziz, K. (2021, 19 October). *Facebook shuts fake accounts in Sudan, as fight for public opinion rages online*. Reuters.

⁶⁴ Beam Reports (2022). *Share mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan from September 2021 to October 2022*. Beam Reports.

supporters seeking to regain power by any means, and the reluctance of a precarious coalition that formed the transitory government to chart a clear political path lest it jeopardise the coalition. According to Haider Al Makashfi, “The political, security and economic environment helped the spreading of disinformation and contributed to its dissemination and promotion [of disinformation] ... The instability of the country’s conditions across all areas, in addition to the constitutional and executive vacuum, the atmosphere of anticipation and expectation, and the absence of candidness and transparency, have all opened the door wide for the spread of rumours.”⁶⁵

In addition to Sudanese state security forces pursuing their own agendas, foreign powers are also involved in the country. The Wagner Group has operated in Sudan and is believed to have a joint role with the Sudanese army on the spread of disinformation to the public.⁶⁶ One analysis holds that “Russia is striving to gain a foothold on the Red Sea coasts in order to facilitate access to African countries that have Russian military troops therein.”⁶⁷ Although the network is relatively small, with less than 100 accounts on Facebook, and about \$500 of advertising on the platform.⁶⁸ There is weak evidence of the United Arab Emirates, Egyptian, and Ethiopian states seeking to try to shape public perceptions in Sudan.

The Ukraine-Russia war

Despite the Government of Russia having adopted a ‘Return to Africa’ policy from 2018 onwards,⁶⁹ African countries have generally taken a cautious approach to the Ukraine-Russia conflict by emphasising the importance of dialogue and a peaceful resolution to the conflict even as Western and Russian diplomats crisscross the African continent.⁷⁰ This is partly because of the role of the conflict in food shortages and price increases which have a great bearing on the daily life of many Africans.⁷¹ In recent years African countries have imported 44% of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine.⁷²

There are nevertheless outliers. In late January 2023 Cyril Ramaphosa, the President of South Africa, received Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russia. The African National Congress’s (ANC) reluctance to critique the Russian government has been attributed to ‘historical ties’. But even setting aside how Russia is not the USSR and that communism is different from revanchist nationalism, this explanation does not explain why in 2018 the ANC-led government in South Africa expelled several Russian diplomats in solidarity with the UK, the latter which had accused

⁶⁵ Beam Reports. (2022). *Share mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan from September 2021 to October 2022*. Beam Reports. P. 6.

⁶⁶ No author. (2021). *Facebook purges content linked to Sudan’s RSF*. *Dabanga*.

⁶⁷ Beam Reports. (2022). *Share mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan from September 2021 to October 2022*. Beam Reports. P. 7.

⁶⁸ Beam Reports. (2022). *Share mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan from September 2021 to October 2022*. Beam Reports. P. 36.

⁶⁹ See Stronski, P. (2019, 16 October). *Late to the party: Russia’s return to Africa*. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. For evidence of pro-Kremlin media and Russia’s military footprint in Africa, also see Osadchuk, R. (2023). *Undermining Ukraine*. Atlantic Council.

⁷⁰ Gruz, S. (2023, 28 February). *The Russian invasion of Ukraine still sends ripples into Africa*. *South African Institute of International Affairs*.

⁷¹ Fabricius, P. (2022, 10 June 2022). *Africa must separate the wheat from Russia’s geopolitical chaff*. *Institute of Security Studies*.

⁷² Associated Press. (2022, 4 June). *Grain supply tops Putin’s talks with African Union leader*. *Associated Press*.

Russia of poisoning a former Russian spy in Britain. Neither can ‘historical ties’ explain the Electoral Commission of South Africa’s third quarter reporting that the R15 million—nearly half of the R32 million—donated to the ANC came from UMK, a company partly owned by Viktor Vekselberg, a Russian oligarch. Viktor Vekselberg also paid for the ANC’s December 2022 party conference.⁷³ Additionally, in 2018 the ANC received a loan from UMK which allowed the party to increase its stake in Majestic Silver Trading 40 leading to R523 million in dividends in 2020.⁷⁴

In February 2023 a resolution opposing South Africa’s hosting of military exercises with China and Russia was introduced in the US House of Representatives.⁷⁵ With USD21 billion in two-way goods in 2021 and about 600 US businesses operating in South Africa, the resolution called for the Biden Administration to review relations with the country. The US is South Africa’s biggest trading partner.

In mid-March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin.⁷⁶ The South African Communist Party declared that “[t]he ICC has proven itself to be a supra-national institution at the service of imperialist states under their hegemony”.⁷⁷ Vladimir Putin is scheduled to attend the August BRICS summit hosted by South Africa. As a signatory of the Treaty of Rome, the Government of South Africa has a legal obligation to enforce the arrest warrant. Previously, in 2015 the government refused to enforce an arrest warrant against Omar al-Bashir, against court orders.⁷⁸ South Africa’s Minister of International Relation Naledi Pandor has confirmed that Putin has been invited to attend the August summit.⁷⁹ The government could ignore its legal obligations, but at the cost of reinforcing the impression that it stands adjacent to the international rules-based order. In late March 2023, the ANC undertook a formal visit to Russia to engage the United Russia Party, an entity presented as a “long standing ally and friend”.⁸⁰ By contrast a Brenthurst Foundation survey in November 2022 “74.3% of South Africans believe that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is ‘an act of aggression that must be condemned’”;⁸¹ a January 2023 IPSOS survey found that 60% of respondents believed that South Africa “must support sovereign countries when they are attacked by other countries”.⁸²

⁷³ Bhengu, C. (2023, 1 March 2023). ANC declares R15-million donation from company linked to sanctioned Russian oligarch. *News24*.

⁷⁴ van Rensburg, D. (2022, 9 May). ANC’s manganese ‘gold’ mine joint venture with sanctioned Russian oligarch. *Daily Maverick*.

⁷⁵ H.Res.145 — 118th Congress (2023-2024). Opposing the Republic of South Africa's hosting of military exercises with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and calling on the Biden administration to conduct a thorough review of the United States-South Africa relationship. (2023, February 21).

⁷⁶ International Criminal Court. (2023, 17 March). Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. *International Criminal Court*. [Press release].

⁷⁷ South African Communist Party. (2023, 18 March). SACP denounces imperialist bias by the International Criminal Court. *South African Communist Party*. [Press release].

⁷⁸ Ngari, A. (2017, 10 July). The real problem behind South Africa’s refusal to arrest al-Bashir. *Institute of Security Studies*.

⁷⁹ Khoz, A. (2023, 23 March). Russia’s Vladimir Putin invited to attend Brics summit in SA, Pandor confirms. *Times Live*.

⁸⁰ Fabricius, P. (2023, 2 April). Digging ever deeper: ANC visits Moscow to meet its new BFF — Putin’s united Russia party. *Daily Maverick*.

⁸¹ Mills, G., & Hartley, R. (2022, 21 November). Brenthurst survey shows vast majority of South Africans condemn Russia.

⁸² IPSOS. (2023). The world’s response to the war in Ukraine. IPSOS. P. 7.

Topics of concern: Trends

This section provides updates on selected salient issues being tracked on the project.

Media and Internet freedom

The 2021 World Press Freedom Index demonstrates uneven conditions for press freedom in Africa. Some countries, such as Ghana, Namibia, and South Africa, are ranked relatively high for the exercise of press freedom, while others like Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti are ranked low. Internet freedom in Kenya and Uganda in 2022 were rated partly free with scores of 68/100 and 50/100 respectively. Rwanda, Ethiopia and Sudan are considered not free with respective scores of 37, 27 and 29 out of 100.⁸³ Several factors contribute to the state of press freedom, including government policies, media ownership, and levels of corruption and political instability. In some African countries, media outlets are indirectly controlled or influenced by the government, and critical journalists can face censorship, harassment, or even imprisonment.

The rise of platform mediated citizen journalism has provided alternative channels for news, but several governments have attempted to aggressively assert control over the flow of information. Additionally, some governments have enacted laws that restrict the ability of journalists to report on certain issues or to operate independently. While there are some positive developments for press freedom in Africa, including the growth of independent media outlets and the emergence of investigative journalism, journalists continue to face significant obstacles in reporting the news and holding those in power accountable.

Uneven distribution of Internet infrastructure, income disparities, and rural-urban divides represent and reproduce digital inequalities. Despite these barriers, governments have increased telephone and Internet taxes, partly as an effort to make up for revenue lost during the coronavirus pandemic.

Ethnic struggles and digital xenophobia

Ethnic entrepreneurs mobilise identities during elections.⁸⁴ The types of internal conflicts and fights for political power demonstrate inequalities within the region.⁸⁵ Ethnic entrepreneurs spread misinformation and disinformation while also propagating hate if it is deemed advantageous for their political goals. For example, during Covid-19 lockdowns in South Africa anti-immigration hashtags circulated on Twitter.⁸⁶ #AllForeignersMustLeave, #WeWantOurCountryBack and #CleanUpSA trended, with the hashtag #PutSouthAfricaFirst used

⁸³ Freedom House. (2023). *Internet Freedom Status*. Freedom House. Retrieved April, 23, 2023 from

⁸⁴ Eiffert, B., Miguel, E., & Posner, D. (2010). *Political competition and ethnic identification in Africa*. *American Journal of Political Science*, 54(2): 494–510.

⁸⁵ Kisaka, M., & Nyadera, I. N. (2019). *Ethnicity and politics in Kenya's turbulent path to democracy and development*. *Sosyal Siyaset Konferansları Dergisi/Journal of Social Policy Conferences*, 76:159–180.

⁸⁶ Charles, M. (2020, 19 October). *#PutSouthAfricaFirst movement causing alarm with xenophobic sentiment*. *iol.co.za*.

about 16000 times on 27 April 2020, Freedom Day in South Africa.⁸⁷ The Put South Africans First network propagates narratives that Pan-Africanism is harmful as it leads to young South Africans becoming displaced and denied opportunities at the expense of ‘foreigners’.⁸⁸ The message of this network is that first, South Africa must be reclaimed through and by preventing ‘African’ migrants replacing national subjects, and second, that citizenship meaningfully grants priority to national resources, public goods and services. Key organising figures in these xenophobic networks include black South Africans.⁸⁹ (More generally, it does not help that “Black South African intellectuals went from pan-Africanism to insular afrophobia”, as Moses E. Ochonu argues.⁹⁰ “Furthermore, many black South Africans still talk about the rest of Africa as if they were not part of it,” observes Adekeye Adebajo.⁹¹)

While attendance at public rallies and marches seems to suggest that the Put South Africa First and Operation Dudula⁹² grouping are small networks,⁹³ perhaps indicating a current lack of organisational capacity,⁹⁴ the increase of xenophobic digital content on platforms like YouTube also seems to indicate that “South Africa has entered the second wave of xenophobic violence targeting mainly black immigrants from other African countries”.⁹⁵ One conjecture about the nature of this second wave is that it will be more “relentless” in using platforms to frame migrants as the primary cause of crime, poverty, inequality and unemployment in South Africa.⁹⁶ While loose networks like Put South Africa First and Operation Dudula have demonstrated some limited offline abilities – and have taken part in targeted violence – the nature of online virality means that networks can quickly scale.

At the height of the 2016 xenophobic violence, influential voices like the Zulu monarch King Goodwill Zwelithini asked foreign nationals “to please go back to their countries”. Zwelithini had previously called foreign nationals “criminals”, implying a sinister reason for their presence in South Africa. And while he claimed that the media misquoted him, Zwelithini’s words led to violent attacks on foreign nationals in KwaZulu-Natal.⁹⁷ More recently, South Africa’s Minister of Home Affairs Aaron Motsoaledi said that foreign nationals were exploiting the country’s hospitality, a remark which preceded a wave of visa revocations and tougher migration

⁸⁷ Dratwa, B. (2023, 7 March 2023). [Digital xenophobia is on the rise in South Africa](#). *Africa at LSE*.

⁸⁸ Dratwa, B. (2023). ‘Put South Africans first’: Making sense of an emerging South African xenophobic (online) community. *Journal of Southern African Studies*.

⁸⁹ Bornman, J. (2020, 4 November). [#PutSouthAfricansFirst relies on false claims](#). *New Frame*.

⁹⁰ Ochonu, M. E. (2021, 3 March). [Black South African intellectuals went from pan-Africanism to insular afrophobia](#). *Africa at LSE*.

⁹¹ Adebajo, A. (2016, April 24). [Mbeki’s dream of Africa’s renaissance belied South Africa’s schizophrenia](#). *The Conversation*.

⁹² A xenophobic vigilante organisation.

⁹³ Bornman, J. (2020, 4 November). [#PutSouthAfricansFirst relies on false claims](#). *New Frame*.

⁹⁴ Charles, M. (2020, 18 October). [#PutSouthAfricaFirst movement causing alarm with xenophobic sentiment](#). *iol.co.za*; Soweto Urban. (2021, 18 June). [Soweto residents say they are gatvol with crime](#). *Soweto Urban*.

⁹⁵ Hlatshwayo, M. (2023). [South Africa enters the second wave of xenophobic violence: the rise of anti-immigrant organisations in South Africa](#). *Politikon*.

⁹⁶ Hlatshwayo, M. (2023). [South Africa enters the second wave of xenophobic violence: the rise of anti-immigrant organisations in South Africa](#). *Politikon*.

⁹⁷ South African Human Rights Commission. (2016). [Zulu king’s comment on foreigners ‘hurtful and harmful, but not hate speech’: SAHRC](#).

regulations.⁹⁸ Certain authorities foster xenophobia. In South Africa coordinated xenophobia attacks are experienced most acutely by black African immigrants and are perpetuated mostly– but not exclusively–by poorer black South Africans in major urban areas like Cape Town.

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied recently made utterances which insinuated that the immigration of largely black people from Sub-Saharan Africa was irregular and would turn Tunisia into “just another African country that doesn't belong to the Arab and Islamic nations”.⁹⁹ Black Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia are victims of violent assaults, robberies, vandalism, and arbitrary evictions, with many losing their jobs. Despite being the first country in North Africa to legally penalise racial discrimination, Tunisia has seen campaigns of anti-black hatred circulate on platforms and in the media. The Tunisian Nationalist Party, which believes black Africans in Tunisia are changing the social composition is frequently invited to speak in the media and openly expresses its ideas online. In Ghana, meanwhile, Nigerian traders are said to ‘steal jobs’ from ‘hard working’ Ghanaians. In June 2020 several armed Ghanaian citizens used a bulldozer to demolish the residential building of the Nigerian High Commission in Accra.¹⁰⁰

Events like these exemplify the xenophobic attitudes in geographies where targeted overt and covert violence is common. Efforts to mitigate xenophobia are met with perverse rhetorical frames, suggesting that integration, for instance, will make the underlying tensions worse. As a result all policy efforts are said to be futile. While it is an error to scapegoat platforms for root social troubles and weaknesses in state social protection policy, anger is directed to the most vulnerable on platforms thereby jeopardising the integrity and image of platform companies. Platforms are co-opted into projects which circulate narratives of hate, highlighting what prompts these narratives to be shared, and how users bolster their prominence within a network through deploying extreme speech.

Online gender-based violence

A non-representative survey of approximately 3 300 women in Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Kampala, Dakar and Johannesburg conducted in 2020 by Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Sandra Nabulega found that nearly 40% were somewhat or very concerned with their online safety. Nearly 30% of these women became more concerned about digital safety in the five years prior to the survey.¹⁰¹ In conjunction with testimonial evidence from focus groups, the researchers reported that women were facing more aggressive forms of intrusion from men. Hostilities had escalated to threats of physical harm as well as calls for murder. They reported that 71.2% of online gender-based violence incidents against the respondents occurred on Facebook.¹⁰² The researchers found that “only 12.4% of the women who had suffered from online violence reported the incident to the website or online platform”.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Institute for Security Studies. (2022, 27 June). [The rise of xenophobia: The road to ruin](#). *ISS Africa*.

⁹⁹ Amnesty International (2023, 10 March). [Tunisian president's racist speech incites a wave of violence against black Africans](#). *Amnesty International*.

¹⁰⁰ Onyeama, G. (2020, 28 June). [Demolition of Nigeria's high commission in Ghana: Diplomatic obligation versus diplomatic rascality](#). *This Day*.

¹⁰¹ Iyer N., Nyamwire, B., & Nabulega S. (2020). [Alternate realities, alternate internets: African feminist research for a *reminist Internet*](#). Association for Progressive Communications. P. 16.

¹⁰² Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabulega (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. P. 25.

¹⁰³ Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabulega (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. P. 34.

Using data from other geographies and testimonials from focus groups, the researchers conjecture that African women who aim to influence the public, like journalists, face excessive critique and scrutiny which is intended to marginalise, silence, and drive them from the public arena. At the core of these coordinated harm are “pervasive structures of patriarchy, dominance and surveillance”.¹⁰⁴ State responses to online gender-based violence are slow-moving, likely a combination of ineffective administration and normalised patriarchy within the state-society complex. This means that when laws do exist they may not be responsive to the new forms of threats that women face.¹⁰⁵ There are affective and somatic costs for any one woman while there are social costs to the civic status of women as a whole. Accordingly specific legislative strategies are required to address online gender-based violence; these legislative strategies must work towards installing material equality for all while also focusing on behaviour change as well as a change in fundamental values.

Finally, African women are typically depicted as a stagnant, monolithic group. This “oversimplified” representation, sometimes promoted by some African women, is one of many causes “erasing the multiplicities of women’s identities”.¹⁰⁶ There is a difference between forming a coalition and comprehending the different situations members of a coalition may confront. By their nature monolithic representations or presentations exclude particular salencies.

Literacy

Notwithstanding how literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa has improved due to efforts by countries to facilitate access to education, the continent’s literacy level is still behind the world averages by about 20%.¹⁰⁷ Countries have applied different combinations of solutions that include providing free education and access to digital materials. Most recently, South Sudan planned to expand access to free education.¹⁰⁸ Rwanda meanwhile has established more digital libraries and digitised education content to promote access to this content through institutional platforms.¹⁰⁹

As education stakeholders recognise the value of media literacy in tackling information disorders, South Africa has begun to incorporate media literacy into its school curriculum across several subject areas.¹¹⁰ However media literacy training in South African schools is impaired by unequal access to technologies and the Internet.¹¹¹ With the assistance of external agencies, similar efforts are being undertaken throughout Africa, with some states using nation-building rhetoric.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabulega (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. P. 19.

¹⁰⁵ For discussions of specific laws see, Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabulega (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. Pp. 38-42.

¹⁰⁶ Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabulega (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. P 6.

¹⁰⁷ Tasamba, J. (2019, 18 October). [African countries push for higher literacy](#). *Anadolu Ajansi*.

¹⁰⁸ Tut Pur, N., & Sheppard, B. (2023, 13 February). [South Sudan expands access to free education](#). *Human Rights Watch*.

¹⁰⁹ Tasamba, J. (2019, 18 October). [African countries push for higher literacy](#). *Anadolu Ajansi*.

¹¹⁰ Cunliffe-Jones, P. et al. (2018). *Misinformation policy in sub-Saharan Africa: From laws and regulations to media literacy*. University of Westminster Press.

¹¹¹ Madrid-Morales, D., & Wasserman, H. (2022, 29 June). [Media literacy education in South Africa can help combat fake news - here’s what’s needed](#). *The Conversation*.

¹¹² See African Centre for Media and Information Literacy (nd) [Guidelines](#). AC MIL.

Limitations of fact checking

Fact checking is often discussed as a crucial corrective intervention to address disinformation and misinformation. Several fact checking organisations have been established across the continent, and some media houses have introduced fact checking segments as part of their media output, like the Kenyan newspaper *The Star*. Fact checking covers a range of topics, but most assess the validity of claims made by public institutions or politicians.¹¹³ Contrary to the prominence of fact-checking organisations and initiatives, there is a lack of research consensus on the effectiveness of fact checking as a tool to mitigate the circulation of disinformation and misinformation. “It is clear that corrections work in some circumstances but not others”,¹¹⁴ but currently there is no research consensus on why this is the case, whether success or failure is due to issue type, or the source of a corrective message.¹¹⁵

Fact checking in Africa faces difficulties effectively countering the spread of problematically inaccurate information. In East Africa, fact checking is Anglo-centric and prioritises wealthy countries or regions, as well as countries with greater media freedom. Whereas the fact-checking organisation Pesacheck does cover Burundi, other countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan and Somalia receive significantly less coverage. Fact checking organisations tend to use platforms to source and fact check content. While there are pragmatic considerations, this approach does have limitations.¹¹⁶ Misinformation and disinformation often circulates informally through communities, for example, amongst commuters on public transport, or at places of worship or other public gatherings.¹¹⁷

Major commercial platform’s business operations

In 2022, Meta contracted Sama Source, a company originating from the Silicon Valley, to review harmful content on its Facebook platform. In an incident involving the contracted responsibilities between Sama Sauce and Meta, Meta was sued in 2022 for allowing violent and hateful posts on Facebook to exacerbate Ethiopia’s civil conflict.¹¹⁸ The lawsuit claimed that Facebook’s recommendations systems amplified aggressive posts, leading to the spread of violence and the death of a plaintiff’s father. The lawsuit argued that Meta neglected to train its algorithmic recommendation system to identify harmful messages and hire employees to monitor police material for the languages used in the Nairobi regional moderation hub. Previously Meta has

¹¹³ Walter, Nathan, et al. (2020). Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom. *Political Communication*, 37(3), 350-375.

¹¹⁴ Weeks, B. E. (2018). Media and political misperceptions. In Emily A Thorson, Laura Sheble & Southwell, & G. Brian (Eds.). *Misinformation and mass audiences* (p. 148). University of Texas Press.

¹¹⁵ van der Meer, T. G. L. A., & Yan, J. (2020). Seeking formula for misinformation treatment in public health crises: The effects of corrective information type and source. *Health Communication*, 35(5), 560–575.

¹¹⁶ Chair, C. (2017). Internet use barriers and user strategies: Perspectives from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Rwanda. Beyond Access policy paper no. 1. Research ICT Africa.

¹¹⁷ Cunliffe-Jones, P. (2020). From church and mosque to WhatsApp – AfricaCheck’s holistic approach to countering fakenews. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(3), 596–599.

¹¹⁸ Perrigo, B. (2022, 14 December). New lawsuit accuses Facebook of contributing to deaths from ethnic violence in Ethiopia. *Time*.

admitted being ‘too slow’ to act on similar incidents in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Cambodia.¹¹⁹

Datasets and transparency reports from platform companies show significantly lower engagement from African countries with regards to government requests for information from the platforms. Countries that have actively pursued engagement with platforms have made requests for court proceedings for regulatory purposes, with the relevant government agencies initiating such engagements.

Regional assessments (Sub-Saharan Africa)

Central and East Africa

East African countries face long periods of insecurity with complex causes that involve internal conflicts, civic unrests, terror threats, and border conflicts. Regional institutions are weak and countries have failed to adhere to regional peace-building agreements,¹²⁰ even while Uganda and Rwanda have nominally sought to intervene to bring peace to the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹²¹ In East Africa, governments are also known to use various means to control the flow of information and limit public discourse. For example, some governments have resorted to censorship tactics such as advertising spending.

East African governments use advertisement spending as a proxy for material censorship.¹²² In the run-up to the August 2017 elections, the Government of Kenya directed government agencies to divert advertising to its online news and newspaper portal, my.gov, for example. Parts of the African news media ecosystem depend on advertising revenue from the government agencies, its parastatals and local private sector monopolies. Transgressions from the state on media freedoms can go unreported, as governments use spending decisions as a pretext to moderate media reporting.

Governments are also explicitly involved in media and other rights violations. In Rwanda, the High Court sentenced Théophile Ntirutwa, an opposition politician, to a seven-year prison term for “spreading false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against [the] Rwandan Government”.¹²³ In another disquieting event in that country, John Williams Ntwali, the editor of *The Chronicles* and notable investigative journalist died in January 2023 from a motorbike accident in Kimihurura, Kigali. Authorities did not furnish basic details like where the accident took place. For these and other reasons Human Rights Watch described this as a “suspicious death”.¹²⁴

Early in 2023 the Government of Uganda refused to allow the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to operate in Uganda.¹²⁵ In March, a bill explicitly targeting queer

¹¹⁹ For an extensive report on Meta and Myanmar see Amnesty International. (2022). *The social atrocity: Meta and the right to remedy for the Rohingya*. Amnesty International.

¹²⁰ Levine, D. H., & Dawn, N. (2015). *Security and governance in the Great Lakes Region*. Africa Portal.

¹²¹ Clark, J. F. (2021). *Explaining Ugandan intervention in Congo: evidence and interpretations*. *The Study of Modern African Studies*, 39, 2 (June), 261–287.

¹²² Rhodes, T. (2014). *Advertising and censorship in East Africa’s press*. *Committee to Protect Journalists*.

¹²³ Human Rights Watch. (2023, 18 January). *Politician convicted for harming Rwanda’s image*. *Human Rights Watch*.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2023, 20 January). *Rwanda: Suspicious death of investigative journalist*. *Human Rights Watch*.

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2023, 21 March). *Uganda threatens to close UN human rights office*. *Human Rights Watch*.

identities and sexuality was introduced in the Ugandan parliament.¹²⁶ The bill follows the ban of Sexual Minorities Uganda, an LGBT rights organisation. Like with the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act, the 2023 bill violates several fundamental human rights related to expression, consciousness, privacy, equality, association and nondiscrimination. Oppressive views are common among parliamentarians as well as state officials.¹²⁷ For example, “on February 5, Maj. Gen. Francis Takirwa, the deputy commander of land forces in the Ugandan military, used the handover of a renovated community health facility to call for excluding gay people from receiving health services, saying, ‘Don’t use our health facilities to treat homosexuals.’ On February 24, the state minister for sports, Peter Ogwang, called for the introduction of the death penalty for same-sex conduct”.¹²⁸ In late March 2023, Ugandan parliamentarians passed an anti-gay law which made homosexuality punishable by death.¹²⁹ The African Union has mechanisms to allow member states to take collective action against gross human right violations, like those in Uganda. Researchers will have to pay attention to whether through lack of action member states are complicit in these violations.

Amidst charges of an attempted coup by forces aligned with François Bozizé, a former president,¹³⁰ and mass displacement,¹³¹ citizens of the Central African Republic went to the polls in December 2020. The turnout was 35%, with Faustin-Archange Touadéra re-elected with 53% of the vote. These results were contested by Coalition of Patriots for Change, a group which conducted a military attack on Bangui, the capital city in mid-January 2021.¹³² The UN’s MINUSCA peacekeeping force claimed that it, along with the Central African Republic’s military, had repelled the attack¹³³ – although other news reports point to the contributions made by the Wagner mercenary group in the defence of the capital.¹³⁴

Meanwhile the Government of Eritrea continues restrictions on freedom of expression and consciousness.¹³⁵ In Cameroon, prominent anti-corruption investigative journalist, Martinez Zogo was killed in early 2023.¹³⁶ Lastly, US Africa Command has conducted airstrikes in Somalia. Publicly US Africa Command says that the bulk of the casualties are ‘terrorists’ even while their internal documentation suggests that civilian casualties are higher than press releases suggest.¹³⁷

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2023, 9 March). [Uganda: New anti-gay bill further threatens rights](#). *Human Rights Watch*.

¹²⁷ Titeca, K. (2023, 10 March). [Unpacking the geopolitics of Uganda’s anti-gay bill](#). *African Arguments*.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2023, March 9). [Uganda: New anti-gay bill further threatens rights](#).

¹²⁹ Madowo, L., & Nicholls, C. (2023, 22 March). [Uganda parliament passes bill criminalizing identifying as LGBTQ, imposes death penalty for some offenses](#). *CNN*.

¹³⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation. (2020, 20 December). [François Bozizé: CAR former president denies ‘attempted coup](#). *BBC*.

¹³¹ UN (2021, 15 January). [Central African Republic: Displacement reaches 120,000, as another deadly attack leaves one UN peacekeeper dead](#). *UN News*.

¹³² Surprenant, A. (2021, 14 January). [In pictures: Panic grips Bangui residents after rebel attack](#). *Al Jazeera*. [As background, the Coalition of Patriots for Change is an alliance of several major rebel groups who between them control two-third of the country.]

¹³³ UN (2021, 13 January). [Peacekeeper killed in ‘heinous attacks’ in Central African Republic](#). *UN News*.

¹³⁴ Posthumus, B. (2022, 20 May). [Analysis: The curious case of Russia in Central African Republic](#). *Al Jazeera*.

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2023). [World Report 2023. Eritrea, Events of 2022](#). Human Rights Watch.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2023, January 27). [Cameroon: Prominent investigative journalist killed](#). *Human Rights Watch*.

¹³⁷ Turse, N. (2019, 10 July). [Pentagon document shows U.S. knew of “credible” reports of civilian casualties after its attacks in Somalia](#). *The Intercept*.

Southern Africa

In recent years, rulers in eSwatini have repeatedly stalled the movement for pro-democracy political reform. Against a general background of mass unemployment, few meaningful life chances for citizens, and a judiciary hostile to the media, the “pent-up anger and frustration over the lavish lifestyle and dictatorial rule of King Mswati III boiled over in violent protests” in late June 2021.¹³⁸ Powered by decentralised youth mobilisation, the hashtag #KungahlwaKwenile (“at night it’s ripe for the taking”) was used to convey grievances and justifications for targeting the property of the beneficiaries of the dictatorship in the protests.¹³⁹

In addition to an Internet shutdown in which Internet service providers Eswatini Post and Telecommunications, MTN Eswatini and Eswatini Mobile followed the orders of the Monarchy, the military was deployed against the protesters. Between 34-50 people were killed. Notably no security forces were killed. The Government of eSwatini estimated damages to infrastructure totalled R3 billion. Bheki Makhubu, the editor of *The Nation*, eSwatini’s only independent press, described the event as an “insurrection”.¹⁴⁰ The government claims that the pro-democracy movement is driven by foreign influences, like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a South African political party. It alleges that the EFF had supplied the movement with weapons. The pro-democracy movement alleged that foreign mercenaries were used to put down the riot.¹⁴¹

Since the protests, the Government of eSwatini has abducted, imprisoned and tortured key members of the pro-democracy movement, from students like Sambulo Shongwe and Lwazi Maseko in January 2023,¹⁴² and activists like Mvuselelo Mkhabela and Bongzi Mamba in February 2023.¹⁴³ Tensions escalated in January 2023 when Thulani Maseko, a leading human rights lawyer and effective government critic, was assassinated.¹⁴⁴ Campaign for Free Expression reports that the government has infiltrated newsrooms “to sow discord and mistrust amongst journalists”.¹⁴⁵

Lesotho has limited news and media sources, most of which are state owned. The media have often been accused of being biased and spreading misinformation and disinformation in a bid to control public opinion. The government has also proposed the Lesotho Communications Authority rules of 2020, designed to police and regulate online communications. These rules indirectly discourage people from sharing content online either through fees for the use of platforms or fees that are required from online bloggers. The law forces local platform users with more than 100 followers to register with the Lesotho Communications Authority as “internet broadcasters”.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁸ Harber, A. (2021). The year pent-up anger boiled over. In *Dark days in Eswatini* (pp. 4–5). Campaign for Free Expression. P. 4.

¹³⁹ eSwatini youth stage rare rural protest against monarchy. (2021, 20 June). *News 24*.

¹⁴⁰ Makhubu, B. (2021). At night it’s ripe. In *Dark days in Eswatini* (pp. 6–19). Campaign for Free Expression. P. 8.

¹⁴¹ Makhubu, B. (2021). At night it’s ripe. In *Dark days in Eswatini* (pp. 6–19). Campaign for Free Expression. P. 16.

¹⁴² Communist Party of Swaziland. (2023, 26 January). Mswati’s police arrest students in latest attack on the democracy movement [Press release].

¹⁴³ Communist Party of Swaziland. (2023, 9 February). Update on detained members of the Communist Party of Swaziland [Press release].

¹⁴⁴ Fabricius, P. (2023, 27 January). Thulani Maseko’s assassination roils Eswatini’s democracy project. *Institute for Security Studies*.

¹⁴⁵ Manda, H. (2022, 20 October). Meeting report: Eswatini Freedom of Expression Summit. Inhlase & Campaign for Free Expression. P. 11.

¹⁴⁶ Karombo, T. (2020, 12 October). More African governments are quietly tightening rules and laws on social media. *Quartz*.

Worryingly, the proposed rules authorise regulators to investigate “online broadcasters” who are suspected of violating Lesotho's broadcasting regulations and “may direct or enable the removal of such posts or content”. Internet freedom and access to information rights advocates are concerned that this would lead to self-censorship or, worse, the persecution of Internet users, as has occurred in other African nations and elsewhere.

In Mozambique, the Cabo Delgado region has been experiencing a violent conflict since 2017, involving armed groups that claim allegiance to the Islamic State. The human toll of this violence is grave, with more than 3 000 killed, nearly a million displaced and an acute hunger crisis.¹⁴⁷ One of the challenges facing journalists and researchers who want to report on the situation is the role of misinformation and propaganda. The Mozambican government has been accused of repressing and intimidating journalists who cover the violence, as well as expelling foreign reporters.¹⁴⁸ The armed groups have also been using social media to spread their messages and recruit followers. This makes it difficult to verify facts and sources, and to provide accurate and balanced information to the public.¹⁴⁹ In 2022, the United States government issued a terror alert on the possibility of an attack in Sandton, South Africa, which it claimed was tied to the Islamic State. In the absence of clarity or more details, mass hysteria and panic ensued, encouraged by social media.¹⁵⁰

The Government of Angola has been accused of using state-owned media outlets to manipulate public opinion, particularly during elections. Opposition parties have alleged that the government engages in disinformation campaigns to suppress dissent and control the narrative. The state media has also been accused of ignoring or discrediting alternative voices and perspectives. For example, the state media has been criticised for its coverage of the protests that took place in late 2020 and early 2021, which were met with excessive force and violence by the security forces. The state media portrayed the protesters as violent and unpatriotic, while downplaying the human rights violations committed by the police.¹⁵¹ In addition online journalists covering protests and election-related rallies were subject to harassment and detention during and after the coverage period.

The country also experiences fake news spread through platforms such as WhatsApp, with the spread of misinformation and disinformation being a common occurrence in the country. For instance, Russian-backed disinformation campaigns have been identified in Angola, spreading false or misleading information about international affairs and domestic politics.¹⁵² In response to these challenges, civil society organisations in Angola have been working to promote media literacy and fact-checking initiatives. The government has also taken steps to address the issue, including the creation of a National Council for Social Communication, which aims to regulate the media industry and combat fake news. However, there are concerns that these efforts may be undermined by political interference and the lack of independent media in the country.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Sheehy, T. (2021, 28 July). Five keys to tackling the crisis in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado, *United States Institute of Peace*.

¹⁴⁸ Lemos, A., & Rawoot, I. (2021). Mozambican journalists' lives are on the line in Cabo Delgado. *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴⁹ Davey, D. (2023). Cabo Delgado, Mozambique: Reflections on the state of conflict after five years. *Mail & Guardian*.

¹⁵⁰ Stoltz, E. (2022, 30 October). Islamic extremists cannot be “left to linger” in Mozambique. *Mail & Guardian*.

¹⁵¹ Freedom House. (2022). *Angola*.

¹⁵² The Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2022). *Mapping disinformation in Africa*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>

¹⁵³ Angola, M. (2016, 16 August). Angola to silence social media with new regulatory body. *Daily Maverick*.

West Africa

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was contested by four main candidates: Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar, Bola Tinibu, and Rabiun Kwankaso. As some researchers have put it, the issue is whether Nigeria will be a “major player in the global economy or poverty capital” by 2050.¹⁵⁴ Bola Tinibu was declared the winner with 35% of the votes, but many expressed dissatisfaction with the result, citing fraudulent practices and unfairness.¹⁵⁵ This dissatisfaction was fueled by the prevalence of fake news, misinformation and disinformation during the election. Some 93 million people voted. While the majority of voters were under 35 years old (with 53.5% Muslim and 35% Christian) turnout was 29%, putting Tinibu’s endorsement at about 10%. As Kabir Yusuf writes, “the voter turnout was abysmal, the lowest since Nigeria’s independence. In 36 states, less than half of the eligible population turned out to vote, and no state had a turnout above 40 per cent”.¹⁵⁶

Fact checkers who monitored the election coverage investigated allegations of irregularities and election violence and discovered that some of the information shared was false. This includes alleged attacks on Igbo people by All Progressive Congress (APC) party members in Lagos;¹⁵⁷ an incident that did not occur and which the official police Twitter account dispelled.¹⁵⁸ There were also reports of the labour party winning in most states before results were announced and there were rumours of unauthorised people allegedly uploading fake results to the electoral commission’s servers, which was also refuted.¹⁵⁹ The circulation of fake news on platforms like WhatsApp had a significant effect on the perception of the legitimacy of the outcome of the election as it fuelled sentiments of dissatisfaction with the election results and ensuing conflict in certain parts of the country. Misinformation and polarisation spread along religious, partisan, and ethnic lines.

Miscellaneous

In February 2023, the government of Djibouti announced that the company Hong Kong Aerospace Technology will invest US\$1 billion to construct a spaceport in Djibouti, the first in Africa.¹⁶⁰ Through a service arrangement with SpaceX, the Kenya Space Agency put an Earth observation satellite, Taifa-1 satellite into orbit on April 11, 2023.¹⁶¹ On related matters of extending

¹⁵⁴ Yeboua, K., Cilliers, J., & Le Roux, A. (2022, 15 March). *Nigeria in 2050: major player in the global economy or poverty capital?* Institute of Security Studies.

¹⁵⁵ Clowes, W. (2023, 22 March). *Nigerian runners-up challenge Tinibu’s presidential victory.* *Bloomberg.*

¹⁵⁶ Yusuf, K. (2023, 5 March). *Analysis: Trend of low voter turnout continues in Nigerian elections.* *Premium Times.*

¹⁵⁷ Chlorpheniramine #OBIdients NG [@VictorIsrael_] ‘Emergency Information APC Thugs Are on the Rampage on the Streets of Lagos Because Peter Obi Won Tinibu. In Abibu Oki Street off Broadstreet in Mandilas Market Lagos Island, They Are Chasing the Igbos, Robbing Them and Destroying Properties Please Share to Save Someone 📌’, *Twitter*, available at: https://twitter.com/VictorIsrael_/status/1630120567184543744.

¹⁵⁸ SP Benjamin Hundeyin [@BenHundeyin] ‘This Is Fake News. The Market Association Agreed That Shops Would Remain Closed Yesterday and Today. Igbo Traders This Morning Decided to Renege on the Agreement and Open Shops. Some Hoodlums Took It upon Themselves to Enforce Compliance. The Police Was Alerted. 1/2 <https://t.co/9d21YQZw2k>’, *Twitter*, available at: <https://twitter.com/BenHundeyin/status/1630136884851625986>.

¹⁵⁹ Gabriel [@Gabriel24133695] ‘Labour Party Won the Presidential Election in Almost All the States in Nigeria but the INEC Refuse to Upload the Results Because Tinibu Lost in Almost All the States. They Are Now Changing the Results in Favor of APC. God in Heaven Will Fight Fo Nigerians. <https://t.co/JECrlavLWi>’, *Twitter*, available at: <https://twitter.com/Gabriel24133695/status/1629695136815874048>.

¹⁶⁰ Douet, M. (2023, 20 February). *Djibouti announces construction of first spaceport in Africa.* *Le Monde.*,

¹⁶¹ Ombati, C. (2023, 3 April). *Kenya to launch first Earth Observation Satellite with SpaceX.* *The Star.*

connectivity, Orange Liberia aims to build 200 telecom towers to improve network coverage in rural Liberia.¹⁶² In South Africa, Netstar and Vodacom announced that they are installing free-to-the-user Wi-Fi services in commuter taxis.¹⁶³ Certainly increased connectivity does create conditions for data harvesting and corporate surveillance practices, but these are not inevitabilities.

Conclusion

Information disorders are expressed in a variety of ways, and arise from a variety of circumstances. This variety is partly attributable to each African country's specific circumstances of political stability and economic development. One theme we have identified in this report is how social and economic inequalities within countries are vast, then the contest for political power takes on an 'affective charge'. Ethnic entrepreneurs leverage linguistic and social differences to help advance their goals. It is critical to understand the challenges of information disorders through these national competitions. At the same time while underlying challenges of inequalities, authoritarianism and conflicts do provide fertile grounds for misinformation and disinformation to take hold at the national level, cross border actors do exploit these circumstances to promote their interests. Cross border forces further complicate the challenge of the influence of disinformation in African democracies.

African governments have used information disorder techniques to shape official narratives. Some of these techniques include directly manipulating media actors to using extra-judicial force to suppress dissent. Investigative reporting suggests that African political parties are drawing upon data analysis consultants to help influence elections. Without more details, some of the reported tactics, like hacking and surveillance, may be compromising human rights. Data extractivism is also a phenomenon that shapes information disorders in Africa. This is a topic RIA will explore in greater detail in an upcoming report. Meanwhile, cheap African labour is used to train corporate AI content moderation algorithms.

Finally, RIA's approach to the study of information disorders in Africa aims to connect economic circumstances with the routine operation of algorithmic capitalism, but in a way that is not platform-centric nor simply attributes many social ills to platforms. Commerce in capitalist countries relies upon many extra-market mechanisms to create this kind of social order, including hierarchical social differentiation and victimisation. There is also a central role for the state. Given how states can make markets, elections in Africa (as elsewhere) can be intense contests to gain the spoils of state-building projects, with incumbents having much to lose and opposition parties having much to gain. These kinds of factors explain internet shutdowns. While it is not strictly within the scope of this report, the legacies of neoliberal governance, austerity and structural adjustments in the 1980s and 1990s also have an impact on information disorders by, for example, starving state education systems of resources.¹⁶⁴ While this report has focused on contemporary events, many causal factors of information disorders themselves have a history. In subsequent work Research ICT Africa will discuss how the past connects with the present. The larger point is that information disorders are not only a product of bad will, but of the history of social organisation.

¹⁶² Barton, J. (2023, 31 March). [Orange Liberia taps Vanu for rural tower deployment](#). *Developing Telecoms.*,

¹⁶³ The Motoring Reporter. (2023, 5 April). [Netstar and Vodacom to bring free Wi-Fi to taxi commuters](#). *The Sowetan*.

¹⁶⁴ Guzman, R. (2022, 9 August). [The structural adjustment of education](#). *Africa Is A Country*.

Appendix A: List of outputs

Research materials

Timcke, T., Orembo, L., & Hlomani, H. (2023). *Information disorders in Africa: An annotated bibliography of selected countries*. Research ICT Africa.

<https://researchictafrica.net/publication/information-disorders-in-africa-an-annotated-bibliography-of-selected-countries/>

Policy briefs

Timcke, S., Orembo, L., Schroeder, Z., & Hlomani, H. (2023). *Policy reinforcements to counter information disorders in the African context*. Research ICT Africa [Prepared for UNESCO's Internet for Trust Conference].

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Essays and blogs

Timcke, S., Hlomani, H., Gaffley, M., Orembo, L., & Schültken, T. (2023, March 21). Dissent and Resistance to Silicon Valley AI narratives. *Tech Policy Press*. <https://techpolicy.press/dissent-and-resistance-to-silicon-valley-ai-narratives/>

Timcke, S. (2023, January 12). Generative language models in algorithmic social life: Some concepts and considerations. *RIA Blog*. <https://researchictafrica.net/2023/01/12/generative-language-models-in-algorithmic-social-life-some-concepts-and-considerations/>

Timcke, S. (2023, January 24). Generative language models and social progress: Concepts and considerations. *Tech Policy Press*. <https://techpolicy.press/generative-language-models-and-social-progress-concepts-and-considerations/>

Schültken, T. (2023, February 17). Regulating digital platforms to boost trust: A review of the UNESCO Guidelines. *RIA Blog*. <https://researchictafrica.net/2023/02/17/regulating-digital-platforms-to-boost-trust-a-review-of-the-unesco-guidelines/>

Timcke, S., & Mastey, D. (2022, December 13). What happens to African digital publics when platforms fold? *Review of African Political Economy*. <https://roape.net/2022/12/13/what-happens-to-african-digital-publics-when-platforms-fold/>

Presentations and conferences

Hlomani, H. (2023, April 3). *GPT-4 and the law: Opportunities, challenges and policy dimensions*. [Presentation] LawyersHub Kenya and Intaka Centre for Law and Technology. LawTech festival pre-event round table discussion, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

Timcke, S., & Schroeder, Z. (2023, February 27). *How should AI be regulated in the public interest?* [Presentation]. Media Futures seminar, Stellenbosch Department of Journalism, Cape Town, South Africa.

Timcke, S. (2023, March 7). *The near horizon of AI: Considerations for African publics* [Presentation]. Centre for Film & Media Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

Timcke, S. (2023, March 17). *Responsible AI: Policies, laws, and frameworks* [Presentation]. 2023 Conference on the State of Artificial Intelligence in Africa (COSAA), Strathmore University, Nairobi, Kenya.

Appendix B: List of interviews

Ridwan Oloyede, Technology Policy Lead, Tech Hive Advisory, with Hanani Hlomani, 30 March 2023, Online video call.

Adedolapo Adegrooye, Policy Analyst, Advisory, with Hanani Hlomani, 30 March 2023, Online video call.