

#UpgradeDemocracy #InternetFreedomAfrica

Africa Disinformation Initiative Dossier and Regional Deliberation on Disinformation

DoubleTree by Hilton Nairobi Hurlingham,
Ngong Lane, off Ngong Road,
Nairobi, Kenya

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| BertelsmannStiftung



Introduction

This concept is the result of consultations between staff of the “Upgrade Democracy” Initiative of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA). It aims to inform potential actions to understand the disinformation ecosystem on the continent, the initiatives that are working to document and tackle the information disorder, and the actions needed in order to robustly combat disinformation, particularly that related to “crisis moments” such as civil strife, conflicts, and elections.

The Upgrade Democracy Initiative aims to strengthen democracy’s resistance to disinformation, hate and incitement, and polarisation in the age of digitisation by, among others, building bridges between diverse, international actors and disseminating solutions that successfully counter disinformation in their respective contexts or innovatively use digital tools to strengthen democracy. On the other hand, CIPESA’s work in this area is premised on the recognition that disinformation undermines the resilience and safety of human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists, hampers free expression and public participation, and impairs electoral integrity. Tackling disinformation therefore requires a keen understanding of the disinformation ecosystem (instigators, agents, its effects, the ‘disinformation hunters’) and garnering stakeholder perspectives on workable ways to tackle the problem.

Rationale for the Africa Disinformation Initiative Dossier and Deliberation

For many users of digital technologies in Africa, social media platforms are the primary gateway to the internet. Increasingly, social media is being used by individuals, governments, political parties, civil society, and human rights defenders to engage, organise, mobilise for a range of contemporary issues. In many countries, social media platforms have taken centre stage in driving transformations in the political arena, including by renewing political engagement, enabling critical conversations, and fuelling movements for democratisation. Further, these platforms have created a space for the public to influence, organise, and participate in online discourse, including in authoritarian countries where the scope for offline political engagement remains limited. Social movements and public mobilisation have garnered strength through social media as was witnessed during the 2011 Arab Spring, the 2019 removal of the Sudanese president from power, and the prevention of Algeria’s president from running for a fifth consecutive term that same year.

As a result, many African governments and political leaders have increasingly seen social media as a threat that provides the public with greater access to information, enables mobilisation to challenge the status quo and to expand political participation. Consequently, such governments are taking greater control and influence of the online space and the platforms to assert their agenda and stifle dissenting voices. Indeed, autocratic regimes in Africa, including in Angola, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, which had already deployed information-control strategies including repressive legislation and internet disruptions, have now begun to organise and deploy disinformation campaigns to add to their repertoire.

These types of disinformation schemes have the potential to undermine democracy and put the lives and operations of critical democracy actors at risk. Disinformation is growing to near-pandemic levels in various African countries yet the spectrum of its adverse effects on fundamental rights, civic participation and public safety is not fully known, nor is there a coordinated, multi-actor effort to tackle the vice. Disinformation erodes trust in democratic institutions and the media, hijacks political discourse, hampers citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and affects the right of citizens to hold individual opinions without interference. In Eastern Africa, research has shown that disinformation is undermining the safety of human rights defenders (HRDs), hampering free expression, promoting self-censorship, and handing autocratic governments an excuse to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters and to generally muzzle an open and free internet.

In Kenya, disinformation has had a weakening effect on democracy by reducing the perceived legitimacy of democratic processes such as elections, tarnishing the image of opposition leaders and civil society, and increasing distrust in the media. Further, the deluge of disinformation witnessed around the 2022 elections fanned hate speech and threatened electoral integrity. In Cameroon and Uganda, disinformation has intensified persistent forms of authoritarianism, enhanced repressive control over online activities, stifled independent voices including through the use of bots and keyboard armies, reduced access to pluralistic and credible information, and led to self-censorship among members of the media, civil society, and wider citizenry.

African governments and foreign actors continue to test and implement new disinformation tactics to influence narratives in the digital arena, including the operations of local groups and individuals. In addition, political parties, politicians, and the media have also been key drivers of disinformation campaigns on social media, especially during elections periods and times of civic strife. More specifically, governments and foreign actors, such as the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, have tested and deployed cyber-troops including use of private public relations firms, influencers and bots to manipulate public opinion on social media platforms. Growing social media manipulation, coordinated through cyber troop activity, has been identified in Angola, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe. These operations are geared to reporting, suppressing, discrediting, or drowning out dissent on the platforms.

Accordingly, if disinformation is not effectively combated through a coordinated multi-actor and multi-dimensional fashion, it will undermine social cohesion, undermine freedom of expression and the right to information, and deepen democracy deficits in Africa.

Proposed Interventions

In response to the consultations between the Upgrade Democracy Initiative the Bertelsmann Stiftung and CIPESA, have set out to establish innovative and impactful initiatives countering disinformation in Africa. The project aims to establish the current state of play, generate evidence on the successes and pitfalls of initiatives that are combating misinformation, and offer a platform for learning and knowledge transfer between initiatives and countries. It will focus on the different stages of the disinformation disorder, including production, detection, dissemination, amplification. It will also take an interest in initiatives working to understand the impact of disinformation on democracy and the protection of human rights, as well as those working to build resilience and digital literacy.

Agenda Day 1:

Getting an overview, meeting the actors, understanding the challenges

08.30 – 9:30

Welcome

Juliet Nanfuka, CIPESA

Ralph Müller-Eiselt, Bertelsmann-Stiftung

09:30 - 10:30

Lessons learnt:

Disinformation Pathways and Effects

Dr. Wairagala Wakabi/Victor Kapiyo,

CIPESA

Tea break

11:00 - 13:00

Getting an overview:

Africa's disinformation ecosystem; Spotlight on elections

Group Activity Inputs:

Moderation: CIPESA

Lunch

14:00 – 16:00

Case studies

Moderation: Dr. Joachim Rother, Bertelsmann-Stiftung

- Nelson Kwaje (Sudan)
 - Lassane Ouedraogo (Sahel and West Africa)
 - Kirsten Cosser (South Africa)
 - Nompilo Simanje (Zimbabwe)
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16:00 - 17:00

The power of unity

How can different approaches and disinformation fighters cooperate better?

Panel discussion

17:00-17:30

Wrap up of the day

CIPESA

18:00

Dinner

Day 2:

Analysis: Diving into the debate, connecting the dots

08.30

Reflections

Bertelsmann-Stiftung/CIPESA

09:00 - 10:30

Beyond fact-checking: Using innovation and current tech developments to combat disinformation in Africa

Input: Africa Check,
Justin Arenstein

Moderation: CIPESA

Tea break

11:00 - 13:30

How to fight back: Government and Platform perspectives

Input:

- Facebook Kenya representative
- Google Kenya representative
- Kenya Social Cohesion Network

Moderation: Charlotte Freihse, Bertelsmann Stitung

Lunch

14:30 – 15:30

Navigating Disinformation Research

Panel Discussion

Joshua M. Kitili, CIPIT

Tessa Knight, Atlantic Council, DFRLab

Abel Wabella, Addis Zeybe

15:30 - 17:00

Final Session: Zooming out: Lessons from Africa's fight against disinformation for the world

Working Groups

Moderation: Bertelsmann/CIPESA

16:30 – 17:00

Next Steps, future activities, farewell

CIPESA/Bertelsmann Stiftung

Participants' Profiles



Justin Arenstein @justinarenstein

The founding CEO of the continent's largest indigenous civic tech/digital democracy non-profit, Code for Africa (CfA). CfA has full-time staff in 22 African countries, and runs the continent's largest fact-checking and disinfo investigation initiatives. It's research is used by platforms ranging from Meta and TikTok, to multilateral organisations such as the UN and World Bank, as well as scores of watchdog CSOs and investigative media.

Justin is an award-winning investigative data journalist and civic tech strategist who works across Africa and also in the Caucasus region (he is currently based in Tbilisi). Justin serves on a number of digital democracy and civic data/tech bodies, including the Code for All governing board, the steering committee at the Partnership for AI, the World Bank/IMF's Data to Development advisory board, and FT Strategies' Next Generation News advisory board, amongst others.



kampire Nadine Temba @NadineKampire

A journalist and digital rights lawyer based in Goma city, DR Congo, and a fellow with CIPESA. She is the co-founder and coordinator of Afia Amani Grands Lacs, an online media outlet that undertakes fact-checking and defends press freedom in the Great Lakes Region



Clovis Boris Fokoubang @fokouabang

Born on 30/07/1990 in FOTO in the district of Dschang in the West Cameroon region. My initial training was in population and development sociology, social psychology (Bachelor's degree) and economic sociology (Master's degree). I joined ADISI-Cameroon as a project monitoring and evaluation officer in June 2019, doing a work placement there before joining the operational team. I am currently in charge of projects and programmes, ensuring that projects are implemented efficiently and effectively.

Dr. Joachim

@jo_rother **Rother**

A project manager at Bertelsmann Stiftung and member of the Upgrade Democracy team. He is responsible for contributing an international scope on what can be learned from anti-disinformation strategies and initiatives abroad. He is also in charge of the Reinhard Mohn Award 2024.



Charlotte
Freihse @CFreihse

A project manager in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Upgrade Democracy project, where she focuses on platform governance and disinformation, as well as the impact of digital technologies on public opinion-forming and discourse.



@bildungsmann **Ralph**
Müller-Eiselt

Ralph Müller-Eiselt has been working at the Bertelsmann Stiftung since the end of 2010 and currently heads the Digitization and the Common Good program there, which, in addition to preventing and combating digital disinformation, is primarily concerned with the social opportunities and risks of algorithms and artificial intelligence.



Kirsten
Cosser

A researcher at Africa Check, the continent's first independent, non-profit fact-checking organisation. Our work involves sourcing claims made in news and social media, and evaluating these by collating the best data available and consulting with experts in the field. We aim to reduce the circulation of mis- and disinformation, and increase the public's access to accurate information.



My background is in the social sciences, both in data and research communications and as a quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods researcher.

@nompilo_simanje @globalfreemedia **Nompilo Simanje**

The Africa Advocacy and Partnerships Lead at the International Press Institute. She is a lawyer by profession and has years of experience in advocacy and capacity building centred on promoting media freedom and freedom of expression, access to information and the right to privacy both online and offline. She is also a current fellow of the Open Internet for Democracy Leaders Program and also serves in the Advisory Board of the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise.



Tessa Knight *@awildknight*

Research Associate with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), focusing on disinformation and digital propaganda on the African continent. Before joining the DFRLab, she worked as a journalist in South Africa.

Knight has uncovered Russian influence operations in Sudan, government-sponsored social media manipulation in Uganda, and inauthentic political campaigns in DR Congo. She has also worked to geolocate footage crimes committed by military personnel in East Africa.



@ZolaOnMedia **Azola Dayile**

A scholar & practitioner in the fields of journalism, media and communications currently employed at Media Monitoring Africa as the programme manager for advocacy and lobbying. Over the years, he has gained vast experience working in the media, humanitarian and civil society sectors, undertaking, among others, the responsibilities of news reporting & analysis, advocacy on information rights, research & data analysis, critical, anti-disinformation and anti-hate speech initiatives online, media literacy as well as community and youth development.

I have wide-ranging interests which include news production and research, media ethics, media/press advocacy, strategic communications, technology for social activism, public policy and governance, community and youth development as well as education for social change.





**Francis
Stephen Nyonzo** @nyawale

I am a Program Officer at JamiiForums. In my position I work to strategically create quality content that triggers meaningful conversations in efforts to improve citizen participation in governance, democracy and accountability discussions. Since its launch in 2022, I have been working on JamiiCheck, JF's online factchecking tool which gives netizens an opportunity to fully participate in fact checking by identifying information that needs to be verified, submitting it through the tool contributing with additional information that leads the factcheck desk to the truth. I possess strong analytical skills, a talent for synthesizing complex information into accessible narratives, and a proven track record of success in research.

Virginia works as a freelance journalist between Rome and Hamburg. She works against prejudices, for more inner-European understanding and she is always curious what the next research will bring.

**Virginia
Kirst**



**Dr Lassane
Ouedraogo** @Lassaneo



Currently a research Fellow at the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD West Africa) which focuses on capacity building work, policy analysis and advocacy, and stands as a research reference point on democratic governance, human security, and people-centered development in the region. He has previously worked as an Adjunct lecturer at Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo de Ouagadougou and Université Libre du Burkina in Burkina Faso. He was an AIAC Inaugural Fellow (2020-2021) at the New School.

Dr. Ouédraogo's academic research focuses on contemporary African media, politics, and religion. As analyst of political governance, media, and conflict in the Sahel he regularly drafts policy reports and contribute to several news media outlets including SABC News from South Africa, News Central TV from Nigeria, and Al-Jazeera. Dr. Ouédraogo is a Fulbright alumnus. He holds a PhD in Media Studies, an MA in International Studies (Ohio University), a BA in Communication (Goshen College), a BA in English (Université de Ouagadougou).

Emmanuel Mkojera

A Digital Content Creator at JamiiForums specializing in Engaging and Informative Social Media Content with 7 years of Experience.

Working at Jamii Forums in the Departments of Public Engagement and Advocacy, helps me to use all my abilities to engage and inform netizens on different matters, especially Democracy, Accountability, Civil Rights, Digital Rights and Governance.



Nelson Kwaje *@nelsonkwaje @211check*



Nelson Kwaje is a South Sudanese technologist and human rights campaigner with over seven years of experience in ICT and digital rights advocacy, executing projects in Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, and Cameroon. Nelson is the chairperson of *f#defyhatenow* in South Sudan; an organization that focuses on Promoting digital rights and creating a framework for increasing trust between stakeholders and communities in Africa through mobilizing civic action against all forms of hate speech, misinformation, human rights violations, and incitement to violence. Nelson worked on the establishment of 211Check, the first fact-checking platform in South Sudan, the platform has been instrumental in combating hate speech and misinformation

relating to the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Sudan. He is also credited as the co-initiator of SafeytComm, the first publicly available cyber safety hotline in South Sudan, SafetyComm provides digital safety tools, methodologies, and resources for social media users and digital natives in South Sudan.

Nelson is listed among the 100 most influential young Africans for the year 2020.

nelson@defyhatenow.org

Chairperson

#defyhatenow, South Sudan"

Tess
Wandia

A researcher, project coordinator, an enthusiast of all things internet and African stories. Keen on discovering new and existing uses of technology, she seeks to explore how communities in their diversity, interact with and are impacted by technology.

Since 2015 Tess has worked with various organisations: iHub Nairobi, Freedom House, Netalitica, USAID and networks such as DIODE and GeDIA in various research and leadership capacities, where she contributed and expanded her expertise in investigating various internet governance and digital rights themes. Presently Tess is working with Africa Check as a senior researcher conducting research on dis and misinformation in Kenya, its impact on communities and ways to support communities in debunking it.



Grace
Githaiga @ggithaiga, @KICTANet



The Convenor of the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet), a multi-stakeholder think-tank for people and institutions interested and involved in ICT policy and regulation (www.kictanet.or.ke). She also hosts a television talk show Take on Tech, on Kenya's National Broadcaster the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). The Talkshow explores Technological concepts and debates with a panel of experts.

Wamathai
James

@wamathai

Director, Partnerships and Advocacy at the Bloggers Association of Kenya, content creator and digital rights advocate





Wambui
Wamunyu @MwalimuW

A Kenyan-based journalism researcher and university lecturer with professional experience in teaching, academic administration, curriculum development, writing and editing. She has consulted and published on the use of Internet governance and digital technology use in African newsrooms. As a member of the Kenya ICT Action Network, she has engaged in several research projects and co-authored a research report on disinformation in the Kenyan 2022 general election. Her other recent projects include a book chapter on Internet development in Kenya and a contribution to the Visualizing the Virus project, which showcases COVID-19's diverse global manifestations. She belongs to industry and academic associations, and has contributed to discussions on access to information, and gender and media.



Abel
Wabella @abelpoly

A media entrepreneur, advocate, and developer committed to media literacy, countering disinformation, and media development projects. He is the founder of Addis Zeybe, an emerging digital media outlet in Ethiopia. Abel's expertise extends to blogging, social media activism, humanitarian advocacy, localization, and various startup projects. He is also a co-founder of the award-winning bloggers collective, Zone Nine, and actively participates in local and international online initiatives.

Abel's involvement in countering disinformation and promoting media development is notable through his work with Inform Africa and HaqCheck. Inform Africa, a non-profit media development organization, benefits from his strategic guidance and efforts to enhance media literacy. In addition, Abel plays a vital role in HaqCheck, a respected fact-checking initiative, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information. Abel Wabella's multifaceted career journey reflects his dedication to driving positive change in the media landscape, both locally and internationally."



Makinia Juma *@Makiniah*

A senior researcher at Africa Check since 2021. She was previously a verification researcher and senior fact-checker at Pesacheck, Code for Africa's fact-checking project. Before then, she was a content editor at West Media Ltd and a proofreader and editor at Nonotes.

She has experience training journalists on fact-checking and information verification techniques and has produced several fact-checks on different topics. She seeks to explore more ways to combat misinformation and disinformation.



Joshua Kitili

I am an Advocate of the High Court of Kenya. I am also a research assistant at the Center of Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT). My specialisation area is in information technology law and I also have an interest in data protection matters. With ongoing developments in the digital sphere data is becoming an increasing important aspect that needs to be protected so that the rights of data subjects are not infringed. The impact of data in various sectors was a key contributor in publishing some of the research I conducted for instance microtargeting in the Kenyan 2022 elections and privacy and AI concerns in the e-Health sector. In CIPIT I do research in data governance and intellectual property mainly.



Dr. Wairagala Wakabi *@cipesaug*

The Executive Director and has extensive experience in integrating ICT in communications and development work. Wakabi holds a PhD in Informatics with a specialisation in e-Government from Örebro University, Sweden, an MSc in Informatics (Örebro University, Sweden) and an M.A in Media Studies (Rhodes University, South Africa). He has worked with CIPESA since 2006 and has also been involved in various collaborative researches with African, Asian and North American think tanks and NGOs.



Victor
Kapiyo *@cipesaug and @vkapiyo*

A lawyer, human rights defender, researcher, and a tech-enthusiast with over eight years experience in the legal sector. His areas of specialization include among others: legal practice, legal compliance, arbitration, human resources, project management, research, monitoring and evaluation, capacity building, strategic planning and public policy. He also has a keen interest in leadership, business, governance, ICTs and social justice. Victor is an alumni of the University of Nairobi School of Law, Strathmore Business School and the Kenya Institute of Management. He is also a member of the Law Society of Kenya, where he served in its criminal justice committee in 2015, the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (Kenya), the Internet Society (ISOC) and the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet) He also serves on the board of Youth Alive Kenya (YAK).

@cipesaug @ChewingStones **Juliet**
Nanfuka

Works with the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA). She is interested in the intersection of the human experience and technology. She works on issues such as digital inclusion, press freedom, internet disruptions, content moderation, and social media analysis.



