

Disinformation Pathways and Effects: Case Studies from Five African Countries

Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda

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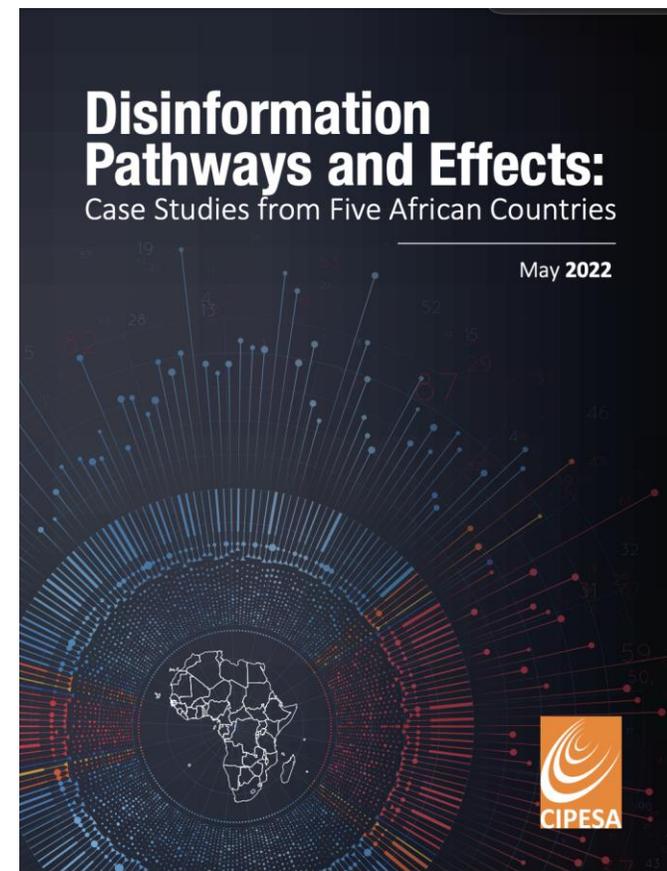
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1. Introduction

- As of 2021, it was estimated that only 33% of Africa's 1.37 billion population used the internet.
- The market share for social media in the continent showed Facebook (81.93%), YouTube (5.31%), Twitter (4.96%), Pinterest (2.11%), Instagram (5.21%), and LinkedIn (0.24%).
- Social media is being used by individuals, governments, political parties, civil society, and human rights defenders to engage with the public, promote their campaigns, and interact with the wider public about a range of contemporary issues
- Disinformation campaigns have added to the arsenal of tools and tactics used by governments to stifle digital rights, distort the truth, advance propaganda, sway public opinion, manipulate the online sphere and consequently undermine the respect for human rights and democracy



1. Introduction - Cont'd

- This study is based on the observation of an unprecedented increase of disinformation in Africa, the main cause being the increase in connectivity and the adoption of social networks and the main drivers being political, security and socio-economic conditions.

**Rising Internet and Mobile
penetration/adoption**

**Politics (elections), Conflicts,
Socio-economic crises
(Covid_19 pandemic)**

**New dimensions,
manifestations and
exponential evolution
of
Disinformatio
n**

“One of the biggest reasons for democracies’ weakening is the profound change that’s taken place in how we communicate and consume information”_

Barack Obama
Address at Stanford University, 22 April 2022

1. Introduction – Cont'd

Aim of the study

- Understand the nature, perpetrators, strategies and pathways of disinformation, and its effects on democracy actors in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda
- Review the adequacy and effectiveness of remedial measures by social media platforms, as well as government responses to disinformation
- Generate evidence to inform multi-stakeholder advocacy for greater transparency and robust action by platforms to minimise harms and to combat disinformation

Methodology

- **Prioritised subject:** disinformation related to governance and human rights in electoral periods and other periods of social and political contestation
- **Main Focus:** Social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, on which disinformation commonly manifests and spreads
- **Approach:** Qualitative method with
 - ❑ Key informant interviews with 17 (UG), 20 (ET), (CMR 15) respondents
 - ❑ Literature review mostly entailing previous disinformation reports
 - ❑ Review and analysis of disinformation, digital rights and free speech policies, laws and regulations
 - ❑ Content analysis (pieces of disinformation) to understand the manifestation, perpetrators, tactics, and pathways of disinformation

2. COUNTRY CONTEXTS

CAMEROON

- Bordering (Boko Haram) and Internal (Anglophone crisis) conflicts (secessionist movement)
- Controversial 2018 elections with contested win of a 40-year ruling party
- Waves of post-electoral ethnocentric hate speech and tensions
- 34% internet penetration and 78% mobile penetration
- Press and Internet Not Free, Authoritarian regime
- History of internet shutdowns, false news-related law provisions and threats.

NIGERIA

- Internal armed conflicts and governance related protests (EndSARS)
- Endemic disinformation since 2015 through 2019 general elections, now accentuated with the Covid-19 pandemic controversial governance, upcoming 2023 elections
- 75% internet penetration and 104% mobile penetration
- Press and Internet Partly Free, Hybrid regime
- History of internet shutdowns, social media bans, false news related threats, social media bill in preparation and harsh media censorship.

ETHIOPIA

- Bordering (Ethiopia-Sudan) and Internal (Tigray) conflicts
- Controversial 2021 elections a large amount of disinformation and hate speech
- 20% internet penetration and 49% mobile penetration
- Press and Internet Not Free, Authoritarian regime
- History of internet shutdowns, false news related law and threats.

KENYA

- Trending use of coordinated political propaganda machinery at the approaching of 2022 elections
- Considerable disinformation campaigns in the 2013 and 2017 elections fueled by Cambridge Analytica
- 40% internet penetration and 133% mobile penetration
- Press and Internet Partly Free, Hybrid regime
- Existence of false news related law and threats

UGANDA

- Harsh government pressure on the digital space
- Large amount of elections-related disinformation
- 52% internet penetration and 69% mobile penetration
- Press and Internet Partly Free, Hybrid regime
- History of with multiple internet shutdowns, multiple and long social media bans, internet and social media taxes, false news related law provisions, threats and prosecutions.

3. MANIFESTATIONS : Forms

Prevalent use of manipulated multimedia content including deep fakes, photos, texts and audio content especially in creating and perpetuating disinformation on politics and armed conflict

- **Engaging and light visuals** in the form of photos that require little literacy, internet speed and time to read (Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda)
- **Thrilling images taken in totally different contexts** to elicit maximum reactions and engagement before they are fact-checked (Ethiopia, Nigeria)
- **Distortion of genuine information** or pictures for a more sensational usage and trigger mass sharing (Nigeria)
- **False claims** in form of text infographics, screenshots, and posters attributed to a public figure to stir up crowds and elicit opposed or vindictive reactions



3. MANIFESTATIONS : Tactics

- **Political astroturfing** with centrally coordinated disinformation campaign sharing misleading content or manufactured narratives dressed up to mimic genuine public opinions or grassroots support for particular views (Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Uganda)
- **Mass brigading** with groups of users coming against other to discredit their views or opinions deemed different (Cameroon)
- **Mass sharing** with wide dissemination of a specific information, often helped by paid influencers who create rhetoric, hashtags, trending topics to fuel the circulation of a particular message (Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria)
- **Use of social media fake accounts/pseudonym** names impersonating individuals or organisations to enhance the authenticity of the information that these accounts put out to the intended recipients (Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria)



4. Key Drivers and Trends

Most of the countries studied have fundamental democracy deficits and their governments have been taking measures to shrink civic space

KEY TRENDS

- Increase of Internet and Mobile Penetrations (All countries)
- Low media literacy levels (All countries)
- The lucrative nature of disinformation
- The fractious politics (Uganda, Kenya)
- Conflict situations (Ethiopia, Cameroon and Nigeria)
- Authoritarianism and closure of the digital space (All countries)

KEY DRIVERS

- **Elections** drive waves of disinformation in these countries through critics on governance, disputed results, internet disruptions, fake accounts and freshly created news/media websites
- **Armed conflicts** drive waves of disinformation through creation and sharing of false, old and unrelated pictures, videos, claims, to incite violence

5. Disinformation Instigators

- **Social media gurus/ digital 'influencers' (*often paid*):**
Bloggers and influencers, public relations firms (Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda)
- **Political actors:** Government and non-state actors – political opposition groups and activists – (All countries)
- **Foreign actors:** use disinformation to disrupt societies or push agenda in countries through diaspora, Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour, PR firms

6. PATHWAYS: Social Media & Mainstream Media

- **Social Media** (mainly Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) helped with their virality and unfiltered nature of information, low digital literacy skills of users
- **Platform diversification:** leveraging on the lack of filters, many platforms are combined, along with physical printouts to increase mass sharing and reach virality even where connectivity is low
- **Mainstream Media** helps the spread of disinformation due to weak operational structures, journalist retrenchments and pay cuts, lack of sufficient numbers of skilled personnel to verify information

7. GOV. RESPONSES: Weaponisation of Disinformation Law to Silence Critical Voices

- **Cameroon:** No specific disinformation law, but many scattered legal provisions on false news. Articles 75, 77 and 78 of Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Law 2010, article 113 of the Penal Code, 2016, article 85 of the law governing electronic communications.
- **Ethiopia:** Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation n° 1185, March 2020 has already been used to arrest, detain and charge a journalist
- **Kenya:** No specific disinformation law. Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018 (CMCA – sections 22 -23), The Kenya Information and Communications Act, 2013 (KICA – Sections 44 and 46(1)) and the National Cohesion and Integration Act, 2008 (NCIA)
- **Nigeria:** No specific disinformation law and no clear legal provisions on false news. Unclear provisions being used to tackle false news (Section 59 of Nigeria's Criminal Code Act, Section 24(1)(b) of the Cybercrimes Act 2015). Proposed Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, 2019.
- **Uganda:** No specific disinformation law, but legal provisions on false news. Penal Code Act, the Computer Misuse Act, 2011 (Section 25, Nine prosecutions so far) and the Uganda Communications Act, 2013 (Section 31)

8. Adequacy and effectiveness of remedial measures by platforms

Measures taken by platforms

- Community guidelines
- Content moderation strategies
- Transparency reporting improved on platforms

Subsequent concerns

- Lack of efficiency and transparency
- Threats to digital rights
- Muzzling demands for transparency and accountability
- Limitation of public education and emancipation online
- High-handedness in content moderation
- Unfair account takedowns
- Limited understanding of local contexts, culture and language
- Widespread use of algorithms without adequate human oversight

9. EFFECTS ON DEMOCRACY ACTORS

- **Impacts electoral processes** by energising or suppressing voters; setting the news agenda, undermining political systems, buttressing authoritarian rule and creates a trail of doubt on the liability of democratic institutions, creating politically motivated violence
- **Perpetuates hate speech** in multi-ethnic and fractious societies, leading to political unrest and instability
- **Undermine free speech and flow of information** by hampering the integrity of information and opinions, serving as pretence to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters, to shutdown information channels, enabling self-censorship

10. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Disinformation is a multistakeholders' and multifaceted concern to be addressed by various stakeholders on various levels

- **Government:** Repeal laws to provide clear definitions for what constitutes an act of disinformation, promote better understanding, desist from selectively applying them against dissent and partner with non-state actors to raise awareness on the harms of spreading disinformation and hate speech.
- **Platforms:** Deepen collaboration with country stakeholders, support regulation and fact-checking initiatives, reduce the processing times for content reported & have transparency in content moderation.
- **Media:** Build capacity in the use of fact-checking systems, partner with fact-checkers and expose disinformation campaigns to raise more awareness

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- **Civil Society:** media literacy, fact-checking and digital security skills; advocacy campaigns to challenge speech limitations; strategic litigation to challenge retrogressive laws and practices; and monitor environment
- **International organisations:** Ensure state compliance with international principles relating to freedom of expression and opinion, privacy and the right to information, and supports CSOs in awareness raising campaigns



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Discussion Questions

1. In an election context, who are:
 - i) the key actors in instigating and spreading disinformation;
 - ii) the common channels and formats
2. What initiatives are documenting and tackling the disinformation disorder in Africa (e.g., fact-checkers)
3. What methods do they use? (e.g., digital security and literacy training; research on the nature and impact of disinformation etc.)