

# Disinformation Pathways and Effects:

Case Studies from Five African Countries

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# 1 Introduction

This research responds to the growing prevalence of disinformation and the dearth of evidence-based research that could provide a granular understanding of its pathways and effects on digital rights and democracy in Africa. Disinformation, especially targeting the political landscape, is on the rise, perpetuated by both local and foreign actors.<sup>1</sup> On a continent where most countries face some degree of democratic regression, 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. Disinformation campaigns have also been used to **perpetuate** hate speech while serving to grant autocratic governments an excuse to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters as well as to generally muzzle an open and free internet.

As of 2021, it was **estimated** that only 33% of Africa's 1.37 billion population used the internet.<sup>2</sup> A majority of these internet users use social media platforms, with an estimated 255 million active on Facebook alone. As of March 2021, the market share for social media in the continent **showed** Facebook (58.74%), YouTube (23.01%), Twitter (11.75%), Pinterest (4.93%), Instagram (1.24%), and LinkedIn (0.17%).<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, 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.

Today, social media platforms are driving transformations in the political arena by renewing political engagement, reviving critical conversations, and fuelling revolutions.<sup>4</sup> Further, these platforms have created a space for the public to influence, organise, and participate in online discourse. Following the digitally-enabled protests associated with the Arab Spring which started in 2011, online mobilisation has continued to impact regional change, including the 2019 **removal** of the Sudanese president from power and the **prevention** of Algeria's president from running for a fifth consecutive term. 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. Having seen the potential power of social media, 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Domestic Disinformation on the Rise in Africa*, <https://bit.ly/3vFunAN>

<sup>2</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2021*, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Stat Counter, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/africa>

<sup>4</sup> André-Michel Essoungou, *Social media and politics in Africa: The good, the bad, and the ugly*, <https://bit.ly/3MJHgRj>

<sup>5</sup> *Despots and Disruptions: The Five Dimensions of Internet Shutdowns in Africa*, [https://cipesa.org/?wpfb\\_dl=283](https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=283) and *Africa in the Crosshairs of New Disinformation and Surveillance Schemes that Undermine Democracy*, <https://cipesa.org/2019/12/africa-in-the-crosshairs-of-new-disinformation-and-surveillance-schemes-that-undermine-democracy/>

Such disinformation schemes have the potential to undermine democracy and put the lives and operations of critical democracy actors at risk. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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,<sup>7</sup> coordinated through cyber troop activity, has been identified in Angola, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe.<sup>8</sup> These operations are geared to reporting, suppressing, discrediting, or drowning out dissent on the platforms.<sup>9</sup>

According to Facebook, it has disrupted many schemes displaying Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB), which the platform defines as “domestic non-government campaigns that include groups of accounts and pages seeking to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing while relying on fake accounts”.<sup>10</sup> In October 2019, Facebook dismantled a Russian campaign that targeted the Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan which appeared to have been testing new techniques for later deployment elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> In December 2020, Facebook suspended three networks totaling almost 500 accounts, groups and pages for CIB that primarily targeted CAR, Libya, Mali and Sudan and to a lesser extent Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger and South Africa, which were being pushed by French and Russian disinformation campaigns.<sup>12</sup> Earlier in March 2020, Facebook and Twitter said they had taken down dozens of accounts linked to a non-governmental organisation in Ghana that were linked with Kremlin-based Lakhta Internet Research, which also reportedly outsourced its influence operations to companies in Ghana, Mexico and Nigeria to try and influence the 2021 United States (US) elections.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.1 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the study was to understand the nature, perpetrators, strategies and pathways of disinformation, as well as its effects on democratic actors such as civil society, bloggers, government critics, and activists. Further, the study reviewed the adequacy and effectiveness of remedial measures by social media platforms as well as government responses to disinformation. It is hoped that the evidence generated will inform multi-stakeholder advocacy for greater transparency and robust action by platforms and governments to minimise harms and to combat disinformation.

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<sup>6</sup> Domestic Disinformation on the Rise in Africa, <https://bit.ly/3y0oUqU>

<sup>7</sup> Social media manipulation can be defined as a process where actors leverage specific conditions or features within an information ecosystem in an attempt to generate public attention and influence public discourse through deceptive, creative, or unfair means, and it is distinct from media control- The Media Manipulation Casebook, <https://bit.ly/3vqLA1J>

<sup>8</sup> Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation, <https://bit.ly/3Kwr7Nk>

<sup>9</sup> Content Moderation Is Particularly Hard in African Countries, <https://bit.ly/39r7OIC>

<sup>10</sup> June 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, <https://bit.ly/38xw4Z1>

<sup>11</sup> Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from Russia, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia/>

<sup>12</sup> Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from France and Russia, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

<sup>13</sup> Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from Russia, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia/>; and Facebook, Twitter Remove Russia Linked Accounts in Ghana Targeting U.S., <https://tinyurl.com/bdd26ek4>

## 1.2 Methodology

The study employed various data collection methods. Key informant interviews were held with 90 respondents, who included human rights defenders, telecom regulators, judicial officials, telecom intermediaries, digital rights advocates, social media activists, influencers, bloggers, journalists, disinformation researchers, fact-checkers and lawyers with experience in litigating disinformation cases. To improve generalisability, a common in-depth interview guide was developed and used across the five countries. The study also relied on an extensive review of literature that included news articles and reports from fact-checking organisations and disinformation researchers (e.g. Graphika, Africa Check, Digital Forensic Lab (DFLAB), EU Disinfo Lab), NGOs, governments, intergovernmental and international organisations. In addition, the researchers reviewed laws and regulations relevant to disinformation, digital rights and free speech as well as how they address disinformation, or have been employed to tackle disinformation, “fake news”, and hate speech. Researchers also analysed several pieces of disinformation, including from fact-checking initiatives and previous disinformation research, with the aim to understand the manifestations, perpetrators, tactics, and pathways of disinformation in the region.

The primary interest was in disinformation related to governance and human rights as well as hate speech, especially around periods of electoral and other social and political contestation (such as protests or civil wars). Social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, through which disinformation commonly manifests and spreads, were of special interest.

The research for this report was conducted across five African countries (Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda). The choice of these countries was informed by a need to have representation from different parts of the continent, including Anglophone and French-speaking Africa, and a mix of countries with different democratic credentials and levels of penetration of digital technologies. This blending, while only involving five countries, would give us a glimpse into the nature of disinformation across disparate countries in the region.

## 2 Country Contexts

### 2.1 Cameroon

With a population of 28 million, Cameroon has 9.15 million **internet users**, which represents a 34% internet penetration. The key drivers of disinformation in the country include the government crackdown on Boko Haram militants near the border with Nigeria, the civil strife associated with the active secessionist movement in its Anglophone regions, and the strident political opposition to a president who has been in power for 39 consecutive years. Domestic disinformation is fuelled by both state and non-state actors. In particular, the 2018 presidential elections brought a strong wave of disinformation, despite a **warning** from the communication minister against "the inappropriate use of the Internet [that has become] a source of threat to the right to good information, especially during an election period".<sup>14</sup>

Despite these warnings, the Cameroonian state was complicit in the production of disinformation campaigns, including by **hiring foreign companies** to spruce up its image ahead of the 2018 elections through the **spread** of false news.<sup>15</sup> The eve of the elections also saw the opening of partisan social media channels allied to the government, such as **@CameroonTruth** and **@AgenceCamPress**, which publicised alleged atrocities committed by Anglophone separatists without mentioning the complicity of the Cameroonian army in the atrocities. Moreover, under the pretence of training Cameroonian intelligence services to help in the war against the Boko Haram militants, the Russian private security firm **Wagner Group** turned out to be providing information and neutralising protest movements to help in President Paul Biya's 2018 electoral campaign.<sup>16</sup> In response, Facebook reportedly **dismantled** the Wagner Group's disinformation campaign in October 2019.<sup>17</sup>

Non-state actors have also been **cited** for their participation in the dissemination of false information aimed at manipulating public opinion.<sup>18</sup> These include the **diaspora community**, which has been accused of inflaming tensions online, often through use of fake accounts that regularly share hateful content targeting rival political factions. Such disinformation is mostly linked to elections and to the civil strife in the Anglophone parts of Cameroon.<sup>19</sup> During the 2018 elections, there were various social media posts believed to have originated from the diaspora which claimed that President Biya had died. Biya won the disputed elections, and three years on, **social media content**, often from the diaspora, continues to fuel political and ethnic tensions.<sup>20</sup> Some of the disinformation has related to the fatal violence and protest action against the alleged "**francophonisation**" and **marginalisation** of English speakers who say that the central government privileges the majority French-speaking population.

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<sup>14</sup> Autorités et ONG appellent à lutter contre les "fake news" au Cameroun, <https://www.voafrique.com/a/autorites-et-ong-appellent-a-lutter-contre-les-fake-news-au-cameroun/4568991.html>

<sup>15</sup> How the dictator of Cameroon gives millions to American companies to polish his reputation with "fake news", <https://www.mo.be/en/analysis/how-dictator-cameroon-gives-millions-american-companies-polish-his-reputation-fake-news> and Cameroon: Atanga Nji cautions Equinox TV, STV, Le jour, Radio Balafon, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-paul-atanga-nji-threatens-equinox-tv-stv-le-jour-radio-balafon/>

<sup>16</sup> The Increasing Presence and Role of Private Security Firms in Africa: The Russian Company Wagner as a Model, [https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-increasing-presence-and-role-of-private-security-firms-in-africa-the-russian-company-wagner-as-a-model#\\_edn32](https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-increasing-presence-and-role-of-private-security-firms-in-africa-the-russian-company-wagner-as-a-model#_edn32)

<sup>17</sup> Facebook Suspends Russia Linked Accounts for Meddling in Africa, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/30/facebook-suspends-russia-linked-accounts-for-meddling-in-africa>

<sup>18</sup> Cameroun Les Etats Unis Dementent Toute Intervention Militaire Dans Le Pays, [https://www.koaci.com/article/2020/10/10/cameroun/politique/cameroun-les-etats-unis-dementent-toute-intervention-militaire-dans-le-pays\\_145736.html](https://www.koaci.com/article/2020/10/10/cameroun/politique/cameroun-les-etats-unis-dementent-toute-intervention-militaire-dans-le-pays_145736.html)

<sup>19</sup> Inside the Virtual Ambazonia: Separatism, Hate Speech, Disinformation and Diaspora in the Cameroonian Anglophone Crisis, <https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1158/>

<sup>20</sup> Easing Cameroon's Ethno-Political Tensions on and offline, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/295-easing-camerouns-ethno-political-tensions-and-offline>



Moreover, there has been increased uptake of digital tools for political participation by political parties. Cameroon has more than 300 **political parties**, with the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), dominating the country's politics since independence in the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> The Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC) leads the opposition. **According** to the International Crisis Group, the country has continued to experience post-election inter-ethnic rivalry between the supporters of the CPDM and the MRC against a background of tribalism and hate on social media.<sup>22</sup> Between January 2017 and March 2018, the strife-stricken Anglophone regions of Cameroon experienced **240 consecutive days of a government-ordered internet shutdown**, at the time the longest in the history of the region.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 Ethiopia

As of January 2021, Ethiopia had a population of **116.4 million**, the second largest on the continent behind Nigeria. Of this population, 23.9 million are internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 20.6%. With **6.8 million** users as of January 2021, Facebook is the most used social media platform.<sup>24</sup> **In 2020**, Ethiopia shut down the internet four times.<sup>25</sup> The country has a large **illiterate population** and media literacy is low with limited knowledge about disinformation.<sup>26</sup>

The ongoing armed conflict in Tigray since November 2020, has seen wide-scale violent clashes between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) regional forces, threatened the government's hold on power and handed it yet another excuse for continuing its long-standing assault on digital rights. One primary result has been the shutdown of several media organisations, and the detention of journalists and bloggers, with some being forced to flee into exile. To-date, much of the media sector remains dominated by state-owned and government-affiliated media organisations. While state-affiliated media outlets have long dominated the information pipelines in the country, the expansion of the use of social media has played a big role in the increasing information disorder as it makes the **spread** and the **damage** of disinformation harder to control.<sup>27</sup>

Disinformation has characterised the three-year confrontation between the TPLF and the federal government. For instance, HaqCheck fact-checked social media posts that claimed the TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael had been **captured** and that he had been found **dead**, as well as claims that the Ethiopian army was bombing Tigray with **white phosphorus**. Further, there was a large amount of disinformation around the 2021 **election**.<sup>28</sup> **False claims** from different sides were also **made** regarding the conflict around the Ethiopia-Sudan border.<sup>29</sup>

Social media companies have come under renewed scrutiny for their inaction in tackling Ethiopia-related harmful content on their platforms. In February 2022, **Meta** was criticised for its content moderation policies on Facebook, which allowed activists to incite ethnic massacres<sup>30</sup> and the group reportedly did little to stop the harmful practice despite being **aware**.<sup>31</sup> Earlier in 2020, the company **acknowledged** that it had insufficient moderation capabilities in Amharic, a

<sup>21</sup> The CPDM (since 1985) is the new name of the Cameroonian National Union – CNU – founded by the first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and dissolved by Paul Biya following his election as the Chief of the party in 1983, <https://bit.ly/3LXBRfx>

<sup>22</sup> Apaiser les tensions ethno-politiques au Cameroun, en ligne et hors ligne, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/central-africa/cameroon/295-easing-camerouns-ethno-political-tensions-and-offline>

<sup>23</sup> The Story of Africa's Longest Internet Shutdown, <https://qz.com/africa/1349108/camerouns-internet-shutdown-in-black-out-documentary/>

<sup>24</sup> Facebook Users in Ethiopia, <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-ethiopia/2021/01/>

<sup>25</sup> Shattered Dreams and Lost Opportunities: A Year in the Fight to #KeepItOn, [https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/03/KeepItOn-report-on-the-2020-data\\_Mar-2021\\_3.pdf](https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/03/KeepItOn-report-on-the-2020-data_Mar-2021_3.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Ethiopia Education and Literacy, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/et>

<sup>27</sup> Does Social Media Intensify the Conflict in Northern Ethiopia, <https://addiszebybe.com/featured/politics/currentaffairs/analysis/does-social-media-intensify-the-conflict-in-northern-ethiopia>

<sup>28</sup> Disinformation Trend During Ethiopia's 2021 General Elections, <https://addiszebybe.com/featured/haqcheck/analysis/election-2021/disinformation-trend-during-ethiopia-s-2021-general-elections>

<sup>29</sup> Does the Picture Show the Sudanese Soldiers that Attacked the Ethiopian Military Base? <https://addiszebybe.com/featured/haqcheck/factchecking/does-the-picture-show-the-sudanese-soldiers-that-attacked-the-ethiopian-military-base-and-Does-the-Picture-Show-Sudanese-Troops-Destroyed-an-Ago-industry-in-West-Gondar?> <https://addiszebybe.com/featured/haqcheck/factchecking/does-the-image-show-sudanese-troops-destroyed-an-agro-industry-in-west-gondar>

<sup>30</sup> Facebook 'lets vigilantes in Ethiopia incite ethnic killing', <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/feb/20/facebook-lets-vigilantes-in-ethiopia-incite-ethnic-killing>

<sup>31</sup> Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread, documents show, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/25/business/ethiopia-violence-facebook-papers-cmd-intl/index.html>



local language, and that language barriers prevented users from reporting problematic content despite the surge of hate speech on Facebook that triggered mob violence.<sup>32</sup> In December 2021, the Oversight Board **recommended** that Meta conducts an independent human rights due diligence assessment related to how its platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, have been used to spread hate speech and unverified rumours that heighten the risk of violence in Ethiopia.<sup>33</sup> In November 2021, **Twitter temporarily disabled** its Trends feature in Ethiopia, stating that inciting violence or dehumanising people was against their rules and that the measure would “reduce the risks of coordination that could incite violence or cause harm.”<sup>34</sup>

In response to the disinformation surge, the Ethiopian government enacted the **Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation** in 2020 to “prevent and suppress by law the deliberate dissemination of hate speech and disinformation.”<sup>35</sup> The law has been criticised for containing broad and vague definitions and lacking clarity.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, its impact on the spread of misinformation and hateful content is almost negligible as disinformation continues unabated.

## 2.3 Kenya

Kenya, with a population of 54.38 million, has a vibrant internet community of 21.75 million, or an internet **penetration** of 40%. Of these, 11 million people were reportedly active on social media as of January 2021. The country is also experiencing a rise in misinformation and disinformation and social media remains a potent and influential platform for their propagation. Some of the challenges in the recent past include COVID-19 misinformation and myths; the amplification of fake news on social media by mainstream media due to poor fact-checking of the authenticity of information and sources; low awareness and poor fact-checking skills among the public; and a culture of sharing information without fact-checking. Others include the use of coordinated political propaganda **machinery** to disseminate fake news online, including the deployment of social media influencers, fake accounts and bots created to drive content viewership, trend topics, and support narratives.<sup>37</sup>

The country witnessed considerable disinformation campaigns in the 2013 and 2017 elections, a trend that continues unabated in the lead-up to the August 2022 polls. In the 2017 election, British political consulting firm **Cambridge Analytica** purportedly manipulated narratives on social media platforms e.g. Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to spread disinformation and cyber propaganda.<sup>38</sup> Their **tactics** included the use of sponsored posts, as well as fake news and attack advertisements towards competitors on Facebook and WhatsApp.. The company engineered a digital campaign that painted incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta in a positive light while smearing the image of the then leader of the opposition, Raila Odinga.<sup>39</sup>

As the 2022 election approaches, these issues and methods are very likely to be replicated, if social media companies do not address the spread of harmful content and practices on their platforms. Further, there has been an emergence of news websites and blogs, such as Tuko ([www.tuko.co.ke](http://www.tuko.co.ke)) and Opera news ([www.ke.opera.news](http://www.ke.opera.news)), that are not run by journalists, with information that is rarely, if ever, verified.

<sup>32</sup> Why Facebook keeps failing in Ethiopia, <https://restofworld.org/2021/why-facebook-keeps-failing-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>33</sup> Facebook to Assess Feasibility of Hate Speech Study in Ethiopia,, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jan/14/ethiopia-facebook-to-assess-feasibility-of-study-into-impact-on-human-rights>

<sup>34</sup> Twitter temporarily disables its 'trends' section in Ethiopia, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/twitter-temporarily-disables-its-trends-section-ethiopia-2021-11-06/>

<sup>35</sup> Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation 2020, <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/05/Hate-Speech-and-Disinformation-Prevention-and-Suppression-Proclamation.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Ethiopia's New Hate Speech and Disinformation Law Weighs Heavily on Social Media Users and Intermediaries, <https://cipesa.org/2020/07/ethiopias-new-hate-speech-and-disinformation-law-weighs-heavily-on-social-media-users-and-internet-intermediaries/>

<sup>37</sup> Inside the Shadowy World of Disinformation for Hire in Kenya, [https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report\\_Inside\\_the\\_shadowy\\_world\\_of\\_disinformation\\_for\\_hire\\_in\\_Kenya\\_5\\_hcc.pdf](https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report_Inside_the_shadowy_world_of_disinformation_for_hire_in_Kenya_5_hcc.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Cambridge Analytica and Its Role in Kenya's 2017 Elections, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/23/cambridge-analytica-and-its-role-in-kenya-2017-elections.html>

<sup>39</sup> “We’d stage the whole thing”: Cambridge Analytica was filmed boasting of its role in Kenya’s polls, <https://qz.com/africa/1233084/channel-4-news-films-cambridge-analytica-execs-saying-they-staged-kenya-uhuru-kenyatta-elections/>

In response to the proliferation of such sites, the government is already enforcing the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018 (CMCA), which criminalises the publication of fake news and false information. Unfortunately, some individuals, including activists and journalists involved in legitimate expression have been arrested and detained under the CMCA allegedly for publishing fake news.

## 2.4 Nigeria

As of January 2022, at least 51% of Nigeria's population of 214 million people had access to the internet. There are an estimated 32.9 million active social media users in the country, equivalent to 15.4% of the total population, with YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat and Twitter being commonly used. The Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedoms of expression, opinion as well as freedoms to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions.<sup>40</sup>

The Freedom of Information Act of 2011<sup>41</sup> further guarantees free access to public information, but many exemptions outlined in the same law limit the right. In recent years the government has consistently taken measures to limit access to and the free flow of information through persistent censorship of social media and some mainstream media, attacks, and arrests or killing of journalists. This environment has partly contributed to the rise of disinformation.<sup>42</sup> Major disinformation drivers have included elections, internal armed conflicts, and public protests such as the EndSARS protest against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) accused of police brutality, harassment and extortion.<sup>43</sup>

A 2020 Afrobarometer study found that Nigerians were most likely to blame politicians and political parties (69%) for spreading fake news, followed by government officials and "social media users" in general (60%). Journalists (50%) and activists and interest groups (40%) were slightly less likely to be seen as knowingly spreading false information.<sup>44</sup>

In the 2015 and 2019 general elections, Nigeria experienced a storm of disinformation, with both the ruling party and opposition parties actively involved as instigators and spreaders. Worryingly, little has been done to address these concerns as the country heads towards its next general election scheduled for February 2023.

During the 2018 election, a presidential aide was among those who spread disinformation as part of a smear campaign against opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, Atiku Abubakar, by publishing falsified images intended to reduce his support.<sup>45</sup> In southeast Nigeria, a Twitter account falsely accused the former governor of Anambra State of unlawful deportations of "northerners" from the state yet in fact it was a case of repatriation of street children. The account in question, which was run by supporters of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) and routinely discredited opponents, was suspended.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Nigerian Constitution of 1999, Section 39, <https://bit.ly/3ME7Xqd>

<sup>41</sup> Nigeria, Freedom of Information Act, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3krNIQA>

<sup>42</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Nigeria. Climate of permanent violence, <https://rsf.org/en/country/nigeria>

<sup>43</sup> Peter Mwai, Nigeria SARS protest: The misinformation circulating online, <https://bbc.in/3KwAjRQ>

<sup>44</sup> Majority of Nigerians Want Unrestricted Access to Internet and Social Media ,

[https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/press-release/Nigeria/news\\_release-nigerians\\_want\\_unrestricted\\_access\\_to\\_social\\_media-afrobarometer-30oct20.pdf](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/press-release/Nigeria/news_release-nigerians_want_unrestricted_access_to_social_media-afrobarometer-30oct20.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Lauretta

[https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/1069875953646624768?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1069875953646624768%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ef\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.premiumtimesng.com%2Fnews%2Fheadlines%2F311532-analysis-how-nigerian-politicians-supporters-use-fake-news-as-campaign-strategy.html](https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/1069875953646624768?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1069875953646624768%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ef_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.premiumtimesng.com%2Fnews%2Fheadlines%2F311532-analysis-how-nigerian-politicians-supporters-use-fake-news-as-campaign-strategy.html)

<sup>46</sup> Twitter was a Minefield of False Information During the 2019 Nigerian Elections,

<https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2019/11/08/twitter-was-a-minefield-of-false-information-during-the-2019-nigerian-elections/>

In another case of misinformation on Twitter, a post alleging that American Public Relations (PR) firm Ballard had conducted an opinion poll on the outcome of the elections went viral, reaching an estimated two million users. However, Ballard Partners dismissed the publication and stated that they had not conducted any survey on behalf of PDP in Nigeria.<sup>47</sup> Further, a PDP campaign aide posted false and misleading information to discredit an opponent, stating that numerous firms had closed in three years due to President Muhammadu Buhari's failed government.<sup>48</sup> The allegations dated back to 2021 and not 2018 as claimed by the aide.

The country is headed for its next general election in February 2023 and the government keeps intensifying pressure and censorship on the media. The most recent occurrence is the seven-month ban of Twitter<sup>49</sup> in Nigeria, from 2021 to January 2022, after the social platform removed a post in which President Buhari threatened to punish secessionists.

## 2.5 Uganda

With a population of 46.4 million people, Uganda has an estimated 12.1 million internet users equivalent to an internet penetration of 26%.<sup>50</sup> Social media users stood at 3.4 million as of January 2021. Like elsewhere on the continent, the rapid growth in connectivity and access to the internet and social media has provided new channels for users to share information easily and quickly to large audiences, mobilise citizens, engage and hold government officials accountable. It has also seen the proliferation of fake news and disinformation on social media platforms.

In a bid to control the digital space, the government has gained notoriety for curtailing digital rights, including through network shutdowns and disruptions, disinformation campaigns, online surveillance, and imposition of social media and internet taxes. During the 2011 Walk-to-Work protests over the high cost of living, the government blocked access to Facebook and Twitter, saying they were being used to fuel and mobilise protests.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, during the 2016 general elections, it blocked social media and mobile money services in what President Yoweri Museveni described as “stopping people from telling lies.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly the government instituted a total shutdown of the internet ahead of the January 2021 general elections.<sup>53</sup> Although the internet and most social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter were restored five days later, Facebook remains blocked as of May 2022 and can only be accessed through virtual private networks (VPNs).

With internet access disrupted during the 2021 election, disinformation became prevalent. The 2021 polls were supposed to be “scientific elections”, with much of the campaigns being conducted online, as only small numbers of citizens were allowed to attend physical gatherings, in order to limit the spread of COVID-19.<sup>54</sup> Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp not only became key avenues for information related to the elections, but were also major sources of disinformation. Fact-checking platform Africa Check documented cases of election-related disinformation during the internet shutdown, including use of outdated photos and videos on Facebook and Twitter depicting violence being meted out against civilians, which were found to be either from the 2016 elections or previous campaign-related protests in the country.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Fake Ballard Letter Pops Up Ahead of Nigerian Elections,

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2019/02/14/fake-ballard-letter-pops-up-ahead-of-nigerian-elections-393917>

<sup>48</sup> Reno Omokri Caught Posting Fake News About Closed Factories (Photos),

<https://nigerianbulletin.com/threads/reno-omokri-caught-posting-fake-news-about-closed-factories-photos---nairaland.366546/>

<sup>49</sup> Nigeria lifts Twitter ban seven months after site deleted president's post, <https://bit.ly/3OZ8KnZ>

<sup>50</sup> Data Reportal: Digital 2021 Uganda, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-uganda>

<sup>51</sup> Now Facebook and Twitter Blocked in Uganda, <https://echwaluphotography.wordpress.com/2011/04/15/now-facebook-and-twitter-blocked-in-uganda/>

<sup>52</sup> Uganda Election: Facebook and Whatsapp Blocked, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35601220>

<sup>53</sup> Internet Shutdowns in Uganda Erode Citizens Human Rights, <https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/concerns-internet-shutdowns-uganda/>

<sup>54</sup> A Digital Rights View of Uganda's 2021 Elections, <https://cipesa.org/2021/01/policy-brief-a-digital-rights-view-of-the-uganda-2021-general-elections/>

<sup>55</sup> See for instance, <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/fbchecks/no-some-scenes-violence-video-more-two-years-old-unrelated-ugandas-2021>

Days before the election, Facebook **shut down several accounts** it said were linked to the government and were using duplicate and fake names to impersonate and boost the popularity of ruling party posts, with the aim of influencing the election narrative.<sup>56</sup> The accounts were uncovered in an investigation by the Atlantic Council's DFRLab which also **revealed** a collection of Twitter accounts and Facebook pages engaging in suspicious online behaviour in support of the government and damaging to the opposition.<sup>57</sup>

During the same period, the government **requested** YouTube to block channels belonging to opposition political groups for what it termed "spreading and disseminating false news".<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the communications regulator **required** content producers, including bloggers and social media users with a large following to be registered, in a move meant to make it easier to monitor their content.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the government has enforced the Computer Misuse Act of 2011 and arrested and prosecuted a number of people accused of spreading inciteful, annoying, or false information. Critics argue that the law has been selectively applied to silence government opponents.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Uganda elections 2021: Facebook shuts government-linked accounts, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55623722>

<sup>57</sup> Prominent Ugandan news websites implicated in government-aligned social media campaign, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/prominent-ugandan-news-websites-implicated-in-government-aligned-social-media-campaign-56f9ffb59380>

<sup>58</sup> Government wants Google to close 14 Ugandan YouTube channels, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/government-wants-google-to-close-14-ugandan-youtube-channels-3229752>

<sup>59</sup> UCC Public Advisory Notice on Circulation of Fake Information, <https://uccinfo.blog/2020/03/22/public-advisory-notice-on-circulation-of-fake-information/>

<sup>60</sup> How Uganda is using old and new laws to block activists on social media, <https://theconversation.com/how-uganda-is-using-old-and-new-laws-to-block-activists-on-social-media-121823>

# 3 Results

## 3.1 Manifestation

### 3.1.1. Forms

The study found that the prevalent use of manipulated multimedia content included use of deep fakes across the selected countries, especially in perpetuating disinformation on politics and armed conflict. Deep fakes are **defined** as images, audio and video that falsely depict people, objects and scenes to appear, act or interact in a particular way.<sup>61</sup>

In politics, current uses range from what appears innocent depictions (such as **this video**,<sup>62</sup> which **purports to show** Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga watching his rival, Deputy President William Ruto, singing a gospel song) to more ominous ones that purport to show killings in armed conflicts in countries such as Ethiopia and Cameroon.<sup>63</sup>

**Photo manipulation** was prevalent in all countries under review. Disinformation creators often manipulate old photos, including those showing events from other countries, to make it appear as if such events occurred recently in a different country. This has been witnessed across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, where it tends to relate to criminal events such as killings by the state security apparatus. Visuals are engaging and require little literacy and time to read, rendering them **popular** with disinformation instigators.<sup>64</sup> Yet the low media literacy levels imply that few recipients of manipulated images question their authenticity as they consume or share them. Manipulated images are also easier to make relative to manipulated videos and they are consumed even by those with limited internet/data access.

In Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, where large portions of the population can afford data, **manipulated videos** are gaining currency. In October 2021, an image was posted on a Facebook page with more than 240,000 followers, depicting 18 trucks transporting TPLF rebel forces to Afar that were purportedly destroyed by the Ethiopian air forces. The image was in fact a screengrab from a **video** the New York Times had shared on February 13, 2021 of an exploded fuel tanker in western Afghanistan.<sup>65</sup> At the time this post was **fact-checked as false**, it had been shared more than 90 times and obtained more than 1,600 reactions. Also, the TPLF's verified Facebook page shared a post showing a burning national army helicopter shot down by the TPLF fighters.<sup>66</sup> The image was, in fact, **taken from a 2016 post** by The Times of UK, in an **article** about the war against ISIS in Iraq.<sup>67</sup> According to HaqCheck, at the time it verified the post as false, it had been shared more than 400 times and received more than 2,000 reactions in an hour.

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<sup>61</sup> What are Deep Fakes and How Can you Spot Them, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them>

<sup>62</sup> Viral Video of Raila Watching Ruto Sing Kikuyu, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWgDwaUrqHQ>

<sup>63</sup> Autorités et ONG appellent à lutter contre les "fake news" au Cameroun, <https://www.voafrique.com/a/autorites-et-ong-appellent-a-lutter-contre-les-fake-news-au-cameroun/4568991.html>

<sup>64</sup> A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies? The Effects and Mechanisms of Multimodal Disinformation and Rebuttals Disseminated via Social Media, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2019.1674979>

<sup>65</sup> Afghanistan Fuel Tanker Explosion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/world/asia/afghanistan-fuel-tanker-explosion.html>

<sup>66</sup> False: The Image Does Not Show a Helicopter Shot Down by the Tigrayan Forces, <https://addiszebe.com/false-the-image-does-not-show-a-helicopter-shot-down-by-tigrayan-forces>

<sup>67</sup> I was blown up and trapped by Isis guns, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-was-blown-up-and-trapped-by-isis-guns-kxvs7bc7l>

In Nigeria, a short video of the President's Special Adviser on Media and Information, Femi Adesina, was found to have been manipulated to show him dismissing the objectives of the 2020 #EndSARS protests. #EndSARS was a mass social protest across the country against police brutality. Investigations by BBC News revealed that the video had been edited to remove the part where context had been provided to clarify Femi's message.

**Fabricated content** is commonly used in Nigeria to discredit individuals, particularly in political campaigns, and is usually mass-shared through Facebook and Twitter. This was widely used by presidential aide Lauretta Onochie against the campaign of opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar in the build-up to the 2019 election. Also common in Nigeria is **manipulated content**, which distorts genuine information or pictures for sensational usage, while typically pairing these distortions with mass sharing tactics to grow audience reach.

In 2019, the BBC **reported** that photos, written posts, and videos were shared on social media, particularly on Facebook and WhatsApp, spreading unsubstantiated rumours about candidates, the government and the ruling party.<sup>68</sup> The disinformation included reports that the incumbent president Buhari had died and had been replaced by a clone.

Manipulated content was deployed during Nigeria's 2020 #EndSARS protests.<sup>69</sup> For instance, it turned out that an image that was shared on Twitter claiming Catholic bishops had joined the protest had in fact been **taken** more than seven months earlier during a march by the bishops against the killings and kidnappings in the country.<sup>70</sup> The ruling APC party also promoted disinformation and misled the public about the protest by sharing a video on social media purporting to show #EndSARS protesters looting a shopping mall. However, the video had been taken during attacks by Nigeria protesters on South Africa-associated businesses back in 2019.

Besides manipulated videos and images, disinformation content in **text form** is prevalent, particularly on social media - most notably Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. The disinformation narratives are often packaged in memes, infographics, screenshots, and posters. Visual content is of great appeal in today's environment where citizens are constantly bombarded by multiple types of information, and have no time or inclination to fact-check everything they consume. An unproven claim went viral during the protests in Nigeria indicating that Nigerian soldiers were not permitted to shoot anyone with the Nigeria flag. The BBC reported that a former senior officer had informed them no such practice existed. This false information led protesters to adopt a false sense of security and keep vigil at the protest ground, believing that Nigerian soldiers would not hurt them.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.1.2. Tactics

The most common disinformation tactics in the study countries are political astroturfing, mass brigading, mass sharing, and fake accounts.

**Political astroturfing** refers to a centrally coordinated disinformation campaign in which the perpetrators pretend to be ordinary citizens acting independently and sharing content en masse.<sup>72</sup> It could also take the form of a smear campaign designed to discredit or ridicule opponents and advance specific manufactured narratives to the unsuspecting public, with these campaigns often dressed up to mimic genuine public opinion or grassroots support for particular views. This has been witnessed in Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Uganda. In Nigeria, for instance, the social media handle of the leading political party, APC, was used to promote disinformation and mislead the public about the #EndSARS protests.

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<sup>68</sup> Nigerian Elections 2019: The Spread of False Information, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47226397>

<sup>69</sup> Nigeria Sars protest: The misinformation circulating online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54628292>

<sup>70</sup> No, this photo isn't of Nigeria's Catholic bishops in #EndSARS protest, <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/fbchecks/no-photo-isnt-nigerias-catholic-bishops-endsars-protest>

<sup>71</sup> Nigeria Sars protest: The misinformation circulating online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54628292>

<sup>72</sup> Political Astroturfing on Twitter: How to Coordinate a Disinformation Campaign

**Mass brigading**, which is the opposite of astroturfing, has also become popular. For this tactic, a group of users will band together against one or more users who are expressing a different opinion with the aim of discrediting the latter's stance.<sup>73</sup> Eventually, the user's opinion may be drowned out amid other comments and anyone who catches sight of it will be inclined to doubt its accuracy due to all the negativity from other users. In Cameroon, political astroturfing and mass brigading are mostly used by the ruling party and opposition groups. Russian private security company Wagner Group has been found to have created fake accounts on Facebook to help polish the reputation of President Biya.<sup>74</sup>

**Mass sharing** is another technique of disseminating inaccurate information. When a piece of information is widely circulated and trends, the likelihood of it being believed increases, and mass sharing plays a significant role in increasing the information's reachability. It is used in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda and by both governments and opposition parties. In Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, "influencers" are also paid to come up with particular rhetoric, hashtags, trending topics or posts to deliberately misinform. It is these influencers who are used by government, opposition groups, and senior politicians for astroturfing and creating widespread grassroots support for individuals or causes.

The **Use of Fake and Pseudonymous Social Media Accounts** is another technique used in the spread of disinformation. A number of those fuelling disinformation often create fake accounts impersonating prominent personalities, politicians, celebrities, media personalities, corporations and media or news organisations.<sup>75</sup> The use of well-known names of individuals, brands or organisations is a commonly used ploy in disinformation campaigns in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda to create a perception of credibility, trust and name recognition, and to enhance the authenticity of the information that these accounts put out to the intended recipients. In Cameroon, ghost social media accounts, such as Agence Cameroun Presse and Cameroon Truth, some created on the eve of the 2018 presidential election, were used to drum up government propaganda. The phenomenon of fake social network accounts targeting public figures is also endemic, and feeds into disinformation campaigns.<sup>76</sup> In Uganda, several fake Twitter accounts (bots) by both ruling and opposition parties were uncovered during the 2016 and 2021 general elections.

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<sup>73</sup> Phoenix CS Andrews, "Social Media Futures: What Is Brigading?" <https://institute.global/policy/social-media-futures-what-brigading>

<sup>74</sup> Facebook suspends Russia-linked accounts for meddling in Africa, <https://bit.ly/3vwNrCw>

<sup>75</sup> Volz, D., Barry, R., & Strasburg, Fake Twitter accounts posing as news organizations prematurely declare election victories, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fake-twitter-accounts-posing-as-news-organizations-prematurely-declare-election-victories-11604541638>

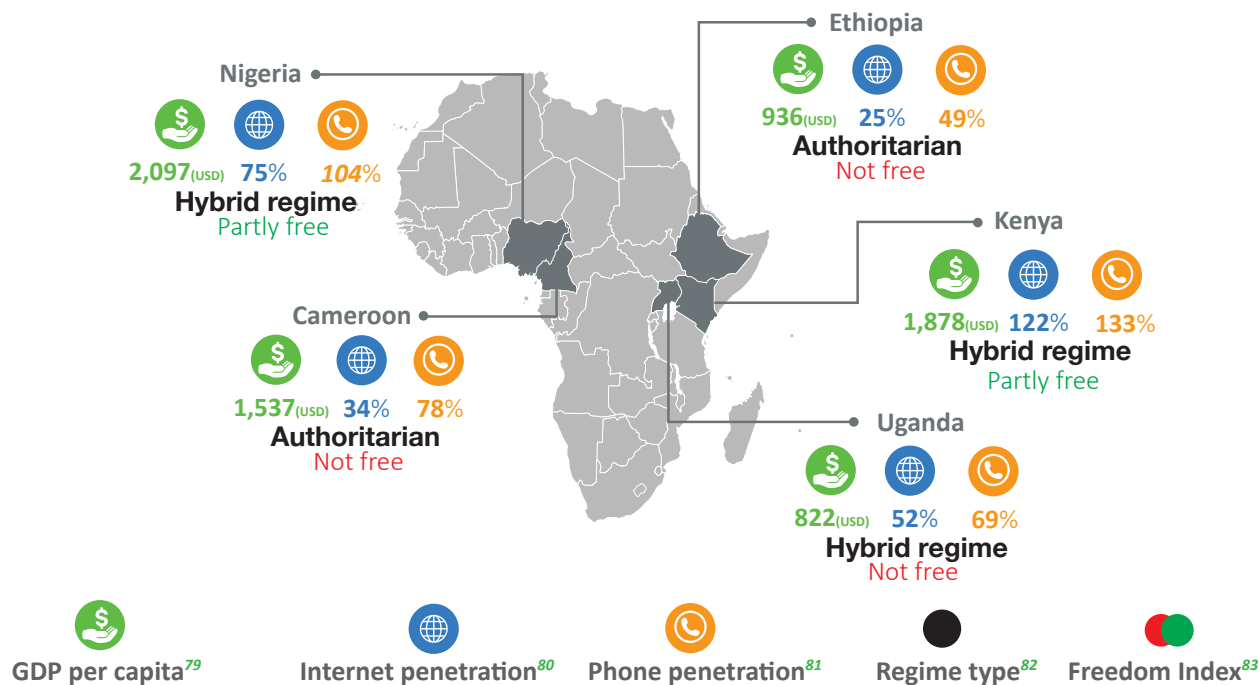
<sup>76</sup> Odanga Madung, In Kenya, influencers are hired to spread disinformation, <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-in-kenya-influencers-are-hired-to-spread-disinformation/>



## 3.2 Drivers and Trends

Social media is very popular and forms a key driver of internet usage in all the countries studied. According to various statistics, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are among the most used platforms in the study countries. Yet the unfiltered nature of information shared on social media is a key driver of disinformation particularly given the low digital literacy skills among users who are unable to verify information they receive and are often eager to share social media content, without taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

The increased use of digital technologies, low media literacy levels, the lucrative nature of disinformation, the fractious politics (Kenya and Uganda), conflict situations (such as in Ethiopia, Cameroon and Nigeria), and the closure of civic space that makes offline speech dangerous (Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon) fuel disinformation. Most of the countries studied have fundamental democracy deficits and their governments have been taking measures to shrink civic space. According to the Democracy Index,<sup>77</sup> none of the countries studied is a full democracy, with Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda classified as hybrid regimes which refers to countries with some elements of democracy and strong doses of authoritarianism;<sup>78</sup> while Cameroon and Ethiopia are ranked as authoritarian. In Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Report*, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Uganda are ranked "Not free" while Kenya and Nigeria are categorised as "Partly free".



### 3.2.1 Elections as Disinformation Drivers

Disinformation tends to spike during election periods. Election results in most of these countries are routinely disputed, notably in Cameroon and Uganda, where the presidents have been in power for 39 years and 36 years respectively. In Kenya, the past three presidential elections have been disputed, and the 2017 election was nullified by the country's Supreme Court. In Ethiopia, a ruling coalition has been in power since 1991 and in 2019 it merged into the Prosperity Party.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2021-less-than-half-the-world-lives-in-a-democracy/>

<sup>78</sup> The Democracy Index has four types of regimes: Full democracies; Flawed democracies; Hybrid regimes; and Authoritarian regimes. Hybrid regimes are a rank above authoritarian regimes.

<sup>79</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=ZG>

<sup>80</sup> Datareportal, Digital 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Kp7AhW>

<sup>81</sup> Datareportal, Digital 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Kp7AhW>

<sup>82</sup> EUI, Democracy Index 2021, <https://bit.ly/3krYBlq>

<sup>83</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World Report, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

As such, governments have sought to control the spread of disinformation by disrupting the internet during election times. Notably, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Uganda are among the most notorious internet disruptors in Africa - a record linked to their governance failings. Ethiopia has disrupted the internet multiple times over the last six years. Uganda disrupted internet access twice around the 2016 presidential elections, and initiated a total internet blackout for five days during the January 2021 elections. Uganda has since January 2021 kept Facebook blocked in retaliation for Meta's **removal** of several Facebook accounts linked to the government and ruling party for involvement in CIB in favour of president Museveni's candidature days to the elections.

Cameroon experienced one of the longest-running internet shutdowns in Africa which lasted for 240 days between January 2017 to March 2018. Furthermore, Cameroon throttled and blocked messaging apps during the October 2018 elections. In 2021, Nigeria **blocked access to Twitter** between June 2021 and January 2022. The government's move against Twitter was occasioned by the platform's removal of a tweet by President Buhari, which threatened to punish secessionists.

In Uganda, false claims about candidates and endorsements proliferated during the electoral period with inaccurate claims of **ballot stuffing, protests, torture and murder** surging online. In Kenya, the country's 2017 election witnessed synchronised disinformation efforts, including the registration of websites that disseminated fake news and the use of social media "influencers" to push disinformation on social media in order to shape public opinion.<sup>84</sup>

In Nigeria disinformation has also been prominently used to discredit political opponents especially those from the ruling party - the APC - and incumbent president Buhari. In the 2015 and 2019 elections, Nigeria experienced a storm of disinformation, with the ruling party and opposition parties actively involved as instigators and spreaders.<sup>85</sup> A CNN video that was widely shared on WhatsApp and other social media platforms as an incident during the 2019 election<sup>86</sup> later emerged to be related to 2016 coverage of illegal smuggling of weapons discovered at a Nigerian port.<sup>87</sup>

### 3.2.2 Disinformation During Armed Conflict

A disinformation trend analysis by HaqCheck found that false videos were a common form of disinformation in Ethiopia. Of the nine disinformation incidents verified by the group in July 2021, eight **related** to the armed conflict between the government and the TPLF forces. In August, four of the five major misinformation incidents **refuted** by the fact-checker were also related to that conflict. Similarly, most of the information debunked in **September, October, and November** were related to internal conflict and politics. These findings by HaqCheck are in line with a 2021 research by the European Institute of Peace, which found that ethnonationalism and federalism were the topics most likely to feature examples of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech in Ethiopia.<sup>88</sup>

For example in September 2021, a video claiming to portray fighting between Ethiopian government soldiers and TPLF forces **turned out** to have been taken during fighting between the Saudi-led military and Yemeni forces near Saudi Arabia's border.<sup>89</sup> Earlier in March 2021, a Facebook post claimed the European Union had **sanctioned** Eritrean government officials over human rights violations during the ongoing armed conflict in Tigray but a fact-check established this as false.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Maweu, J.M., "Fake elections"? Cyber propaganda, disinformation and the 2017 general elections in Kenya, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1719858> and Freedom House, Kenya Freedom on The Net 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya/freedom-net/2018>

<sup>85</sup> Nigerian elections 2019: The spread of false information, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47226397>,

<sup>86</sup> CNN World, How fake news was weaponised in Nigeria, Nigeria Election 2019: How fake news was weaponized - CNN

<sup>87</sup> CNN, Nigeria Seized Weapons, (3198) NIGERIA SEIZED WEAPONS - YouTube.

<sup>88</sup> Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech in Ethiopia

<sup>89</sup> September 2021 Disinformation Trends in Ethiopia, <https://addiszebye.com/featured/haqcheck/analysis/the-major-misinformative-contents-in-september>

<sup>90</sup> Did the European Union Sanction the Eritrean official Due to Human Rights Abuses in Tigray?

<https://addiszebye.com/featured/haqcheck/factchecking/did-the-european-union-sanction-the-eritrean-official-due-to-human-rights-abuses-in-tigray>

Nigeria has also been plagued with deadly ethnic and religious conflicts which have been fuelled by false information, satire, parody, sharing of old and unrelated pictures to incite violence. According to the BBC, the absence of information from government officials, especially from the Ministry of Interior, often creates a vacuum that is filled by rumours. Misinformation and disinformation have been blamed for fanning conflict, as well as reprisal attacks, between farmers and herders in Benue State, Nigeria.<sup>91</sup>

In Cameroon misleading images in the daily print *Le Jour* in December 2021 showed bodies of individuals killed in an inter-ethnic clash in the far north of the country.<sup>92</sup> There were also false reports that the army had killed General Alhaji of Bafut, the head of a secessionist armed group.<sup>93</sup> Because of the widespread disinformation in circulation, the government has routinely denied all claims that cast it in bad light, including a video showing soldiers torturing and killing innocent civilians including women and children, which turned out to be genuine.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Fake news and Nigeria's herder crisis, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44655148>

<sup>92</sup> NON, cette photo de cadavres qui jonchent le sol n'est pas celle des affrontements entre Arabes choas et Mousgoum, <https://tinyurl.com/yy56kabv>

<sup>93</sup> Fact-checking: Media Reports that Military Killed "General Alhaji" of Bafut Not True,

<sup>94</sup> <https://datacameroon.com/fact-checking-media-reports-that-military-killed-general-alhaji-of-bafut-not-true/>

Cameroon atrocity: What happened after Africa Eye found who killed this woman, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-48432122>

## 3.3 Disinformation Instigators and Agents

There are various actors in the disinformation chain, from the instigators and creators to the agents or key disseminators. The main instigators of disinformation include governments or their agents, politicians, political parties and their supporters, the media, journalists, bloggers and influencers. The primary motivation of the instigators and agents is political gain attained by manipulating and influencing public perception or tarnishing the image of their opponents. The instigator may act on their own or be sponsored to spread disinformation.

### 3.3.1 Social Media 'Gurus'/ Digital 'Influencers'

Bloggers and influencers, many of whom are paid, are among the most well-known spreaders of disinformation. Influencers are typically individuals with a large social media following who are hired to push content, hashtags and trending topics. The term influencer connotes their ability to guide or sway individuals' opinions or decisions about a product, service or an individual in a certain direction based on whether they endorse or disapprove of it.<sup>95</sup>

Disinformation instigators often outsource the spreading of disinformation to other individuals who they pay to create and curate disinformation content. Indeed, a 2021 [research paper](#) by Mozilla Foundation showed that disinformation campaigns in Kenya were well coordinated with individuals behind-the-scenes providing influencers with money (USD 10-15 for every three campaigns per day and some on a retainer that can go as high as USD 250 a month), instructions, and the information to be shared. Such "Twitter influencers for hire" would then push content and hashtags on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Consequently, they not only skewed conversations in a particular direction, but also advanced political ideologies and narratives that contribute to disinformation.

The research also found that some individuals rented out their verified accounts with large following in exchange for payment, while also using WhatsApp groups to disseminate disinformation content even further.<sup>96</sup> The activities of [online political trolls](#) and paid influencers that are operating on social media raise the spectre of a repeat of the controversial [Cambridge Analytica](#) manipulation ahead of Kenya's 2022 general elections.<sup>97</sup>

In Nigeria, Linda Ikeji, a prominent blogger, has been implicated in a number of disinformation campaigns including a post she shared accusing John Abayomi, a former online editor of Vanguard news and current online editor of Punch, of being the owner of [instablog9ja](#), a popular gossip blog on Instagram.<sup>98</sup> Abayomi claimed that Ikeji had put his life and that of his family in danger. Linda later retracted and corrected the false information. The blogger was also accused of misinforming the public by tweeting that the MTN office in Lagos had been burnt down as part of a reprisal attack on South African-owned businesses in Nigeria. The information was found to be false, and many social media users appealed for sanctions by the communication regulators.<sup>99</sup> Cameroonian influencers and bloggers are also known to [disseminate](#) disinformation to attract attention, boost the audience of their pages,<sup>100</sup> or to [tarnish](#) the reputation of either specific individuals or groups.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bernstein, B., A brief history of the influencer, <https://medium.com/@bhbern/a-brief-history-of-the-influencer-1a0ef2b36c6e>

<sup>96</sup> Inside the Shadowy World of Disinformation for Hire in Kenya, [https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report\\_Inside\\_the\\_shadowy\\_world\\_of\\_disinformation\\_for\\_hire\\_in\\_Kenya\\_5\\_hcc.pdf](https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report_Inside_the_shadowy_world_of_disinformation_for_hire_in_Kenya_5_hcc.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> Disinformation campaigns: "Lies can turn deadly or threaten the stability of societies"

<sup>98</sup> John Abayomi denies ownership of Instablog9ja, threatens to sue Linda Ikeji, <https://guardian.ng/news/john-abayomi-denies-ownership-of-instablog9ja-threatens-to-sue-linda-ikeji/>

<sup>99</sup> PM News, Xenophobia: Linda Ikeji's journalism license should be withdrawn, Xenophobia: Linda Ikeji's journalism licence should be withdrawn- Fans - P.M. News ([pmnewsnigeria.com](https://pmnewsnigeria.com))

<sup>100</sup> FACT-CHECKING: OUI, IL Y A EU PLUSIEURS INCIDENTS LORS DES ÉLECTIONS RÉGIONALES AU CAMEROUN, <https://datacameroon.com/fact-checking-oui-il-y-a-eu-plusieurs-incidents-lors-des-elections-regionales-au-cameroun/>

<sup>101</sup> AUCUNE PERSONNALITÉ DU CAMEROUN CIBLÉE PAR WASHINGTON POUR LE MOMENT, <https://datacameroon.com/fact-checking-aucune-personnalite-du-cameroun-ciblee-par-washington-pour-le-moment/>

### 3.3.2 Political Actors

Disinformation in the past has served as a weapon of the weak, in that it has enabled groups engaged in asymmetric political competitions to attack the legitimacy of incumbent governments without having to expend vast resources. However, much of the recent literature indicates that states have come to dominate the use of disinformation over the course of the last decade.<sup>102</sup> The evidence from the five countries involved in this study shows that governments are key instigators of disinformation, using a wide array of resources and tactics. Non-state actors, including political opposition groups and activists, are also key instigators and agents of disinformation.

Political actors such as politicians from both ruling and opposition parties, government critics and sympathisers alike have become disinformation instigators in all the countries studied. As earlier mentioned in the disinformation trends, politicians and political parties have been caught often using misleading information to discredit opponents. In Ethiopia, opposition political groups are the key instigators and spreaders of disinformation, including that related to the armed conflict in Tigray and political opposition to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. The TPLF's verified Facebook page is among those that are **complicit** in propagating disinformation.

In Nigeria, in the run-up to the 2019 general election, political parties in the opposition **weaponised** fake news to discredit the government and influence, manipulate and deceive voters.<sup>103</sup> Likewise, the government used misleading information to create dishonest reviews of other parties, especially those seeking political positions. The volume of disinformation was unprecedented and exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions in the country. For example, a Facebook user shared a post in March 2020 claiming that Nigeria's Minister of Finance had informed the public that the government would restrict funding to regions with majority Igbo ethnicity because they were pro-Biafra, a region that had once sought self-independence, leading to a 30-month civil war. Africa Check identified the Facebook post as false.<sup>104</sup>

During the 2019 elections, Laretta Onochie, an aide to President Buhari, was among those who **produced** disinformation against the opposition. A former minister shared false information about railways to smear the previous PDP administration as part of a coordinated smear campaign against opposition PDP candidate Atiku Abubakar.<sup>105</sup> Onochie also posted a tweet with images that quoted a non-existent US Department of African Affairs. Onochie's objective was to create a false story about how Atiku Abubakar secured a visa to the US, considering the corruption charges levelled against him.

In Cameroon, opposition party MRC activists **published** false videos that purported to show many demonstrators urging a boycott of the elections and demanding that the president steps down.<sup>106</sup> Another false video **purported** to show Cameroon government soldiers robbing a financial institution.<sup>107</sup> In fact, between December 2019 and November 2021, the fact-checker **Data Cameroun exposed** 100 fake news items circulating in Cameroon, most of which were related to **COVID-19** and the political tension.

In Uganda, evidence of government officials' involvement in disinformation emerged during the 2021 election. After several Facebook accounts were reported to the platform, Facebook **removed** 32 pages, 220 user accounts, 59 groups and 139 Instagram profiles for engaging in CIB on behalf of President Museveni.<sup>108</sup> The suspended accounts included those belonging to officials of the Government Citizens Interaction Centre (GCIC) and the ICT Ministry as well as that of a spokesperson for Museveni's son. Others included accounts associated with two PR firms (Robusto Communications and White Bear Communications), which had a combined following of over 10,000 accounts at the time of their removal. Also around the 2021 election, Twitter **removed** a network of 418 accounts engaged in coordinated inauthentic activity in support of president Museveni and his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM).

<sup>102</sup> Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*

<sup>103</sup> Nigerian Political Parties are Weaponising Fake News, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-02-21-nigerian-political-parties-are-weaponising-fake-news/>

<sup>104</sup> Africa Check, No Nigeria minister said Igbo would be denied funds because of Biafra, No Nigerian minister said Igbo would be denied funds because of Biafra - Africa Check

<sup>105</sup> Reno Omokri Caught Posting Fake News About Closed Factories,

<https://www.nigerianbulletin.com/threads/reno-omokri-caught-posting-fake-news-about-closed-factories-photos-%E2%80%93-nairaland.366546/>

<sup>106</sup> Afrique : réseaux sociaux et désinformation, nouvelles armes de destruction massive de la démocratie,

<https://www.agencececofin.com/reseaux-sociaux/2509-80648-afrique-reseaux-sociaux-et-desinformation-nouvelles-armes-de-destruction-massive-de-la-democratie>

<sup>107</sup> No, Military Did not Rob Mitacul Bamenda, <https://datacameroon.com/fact-checking-no-military-didnt-rob-mitacul-bamenda/>

<sup>108</sup> Facebook Removes Inauthentic Assets Linked to Ugandan Government, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-linked-to-ugandan-government-c3949be9f810>

A growing rise in coordinated online disinformation has led platforms such as Facebook to introduce new policies to counter the harms caused by online spread of misinformation and hate speech.<sup>109</sup> Incidents of CIB linked to government officials have been reported in other African countries. For instance, a 2019 study by the Oxford Internet Institute stated that Angola, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zimbabwe governments were employing tactics to suppress, discredit, or drown out dissent on platforms.<sup>110</sup> Social media manipulation by major political parties has been reported in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya. In Tanzania, Twitter removed a network of 268 accounts utilised to file bad faith reports targeting members and supporters of FichuaTanzania - a human rights organisation - and its founder as well as pro-government accounts associated with #ChaguaMagufuli2020 - the campaign for former president John Pombe Magufuli's reelection. Also, a 2020 research found a network of 94 Facebook pages exhibiting coordinated behaviour in support of President Alpha Condé in Guinea's October 2020 elections.

### 3.3.3 Foreign Actors

Foreign actors often use disinformation to disrupt societies or push agendas in society, and Africa has not been spared. Foreign actors from Russia and France have sought to influence and control political narrative in several African countries.

Cameroon was among the eight African countries targeted by fake accounts promoting Russian interests in the region. The fake accounts, which were taken down by Facebook in October 2019, were linked to Russian financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin.<sup>111</sup> Other African countries the operation targeted were Madagascar, Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan and Libya. The following year in December 2020, Cameroon was once again among the countries targeted by disinformation networks originating in France and Russia suspended by Facebook. The three networks, totalling 500 accounts, groups and pages also targeted the CAR, Libya, Mali, Sudan, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger and South Africa.<sup>112</sup> Meanwhile, foreign companies have been cited in PR campaigns to help polish the reputation of President Biya by providing information and neutralising protest movements ahead of the 2018 elections.<sup>113</sup> In Kenya, the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica is reported to have influenced online narratives in favour of president Kenyatta.

Foreign interest disinformation networks have also reportedly been working from within Africa while targeting various countries on the continent. In May 2020, Facebook removed various accounts, pages and groups originating from Tunisia and targeting Francophone countries on the continent.<sup>114</sup> Earlier in August 2019, Facebook removed online assets connected to Egypt and Nigeria.<sup>115</sup>

Given that authoritarian governments are on the rise in Africa, analysts warn that platforms might also have to deal with an acceleration in state-sponsored coordinated attacks in the region, where governments tend to combine repressive laws and authoritarian practices to pressure platforms.<sup>116</sup> It is also emerging that several digital communications firms are now providing "disinformation as a service" to governments to run campaigns to influence conversations across the continent.<sup>117</sup> These covert activities are growing in number and tactics.

<sup>109</sup> Facebook Announces New Policy Against Coordinated Social Harm That May Lower Bar on Who Gets Banned,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/09/16/facebook-announces-new-policy-against-coordinated-social-harm-that-may-lower-bar-who-gets-banned/>

<sup>110</sup> The Global Disinformation Order, 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation,

<https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour From Russia, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia/>

<sup>112</sup> Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from France and Russia, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

<sup>113</sup> How the dictator of Cameroon gives millions to American companies to polish his reputation with "fake news",

<https://www.mo.be/en/analysis/how-dictator-cameroon-gives-millions-american-companies-polish-his-reputation-fake-news>

<sup>114</sup> May 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour Report, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/may-cib-report/>

<sup>115</sup> Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour in UAE, Nigeria, Indonesia and Egypt,

<https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-in-uae-nigeria-indonesia-and-egypt/>

<sup>116</sup> Moderate Globally Impact Locally: Content Moderation Is Particularly Hard in African Countries,

<https://law.yale.edu/isp/initiatives/wikimedia-initiative-intermediaries-and-information/wiii-blog/moderate-globally-impact-locally-content-moderation-particularly-hard-african-countries>

<sup>117</sup> See for instance <https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/operation-carthage-002.pdf> and

<https://www.recordedfuture.com/disinformation-service-campaigns/>

### 3.4 Pathways

Social media platforms have fuelled the spread of disinformation through their algorithmic power and ability to ensure anonymity through pseudonymisation and end-to-end encryption. Disinformation is often spread using fake accounts on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as WhatsApp groups and bulk messaging services, all of which have a vast reach and ease in transmission of messages. Though not the focus of this report, traditional media is also known to play a significant role in the spread of disinformation.

Social media is very popular in Africa and forms a key driver of internet usage in all the countries studied. According to various statistics, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp are among the most used platforms across all the studied countries,<sup>118</sup> with Tik Tok<sup>119</sup> and Signal growing in popularity. These platforms have become major sources for the spread of disinformation due to their virality and the unfiltered nature of information shared on them and the low digital literacy skills among users who are unable to verify information they receive and are often eager to reshare the content.

Social media platforms allow users to connect by following and friending, sharing information and commenting on other people's posts.<sup>120</sup> Facebook posts, for instance, have the 'share post' option while Twitter allows users to retweet content. Further, algorithms on these platforms are designed to distribute and amplify posts to various audiences following or interested in specific topics. Platform diversification contributes to the transmission of disinformation between online platforms. For instance, unverified yet problematic posts are often shared on WhatsApp groups, whose members then share such contents with their contacts, ultimately propelling such content into public online spaces. Perpetrators also rely on a combination of various forms of media, including videos, photos and audio recordings as well as hard copies of propagandist leaflets and pamphlets.

In Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, disinformation is spread through both traditional media channels and social media platforms. A lot of the dissemination first surfaces on WhatsApp given its support for multimedia content and wide reach within groups which have created virtual communities built around common interests (e.g. family, religion, workplace, politics, etc). As a result of these tight connections, content is easily passed on based on mutual trust, enabling the propagation and discussion of the disinformation within and outside the groups.

Across all countries studied, information from social media was often amplified through distribution of hard copies in the form of leaflets and pamphlets as well as traditional print and broadcast media. On mainstream media as agents of disinformation, the Global Disinformation Index (2021) noted that even established mainstream media outlets with online publications were at risk of spreading false information based on weak operational structures, journalist retrenchments and pay cuts.<sup>121</sup> In addition, media organisations lack enough skilled personnel to verify disinformation amidst a scarcity of resources to invest in robust fact-checking. As a result, unverified information on social media platforms has in some cases been amplified in traditional media, particularly radio and newspapers.

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<sup>118</sup> Social Media Stats - Africa, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/africa>

<sup>119</sup> Tik Tok Takes Africa by Storm, <https://www.dw.com/en/tiktok-takes-africa-by-storm/av-55715401>

<sup>120</sup> Altoff, Leskovec and Jindal, 2017

<sup>121</sup> Global Disinformation Index, 2021, <https://www.disinformationindex.org/>



## 3.5 Responses to Disinformation

### 3.5.1 Weaponisation of Disinformation Laws to Silence Critical Voices

In many African countries, such as Kenya, Burkina Faso, South Africa, and Ethiopia, a common response to disinformation, misinformation and “false news” has been enactment of laws whose provisions criminalise the spread of disinformation and hate speech.<sup>122</sup> A 2021 study showed that since 2016, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda nearly doubled the number of laws and regulations related to “false information”.<sup>123</sup> However, one in three of these laws requires no evidence that the “false” information caused or risked harm for it to be penalised; the process for determination of falsity or harm by courts is not specified or well articulated; and the laws are framed and applied in ways that target journalists and political critics, rather than the individuals who often create and spread most of the identified disinformation.



In Uganda, there is no specific law on disinformation, but the government has over the years relied on its ability to repurpose both new and old laws, including the Penal Code Act, the Computer Misuse Act, 2011 and the Uganda Communications Act, 2013 to regulate false or harmful information. However, these laws provide a broad scope of what can be considered disinformation, misinformation or false news and give room for subjective interpretation by authorities. These laws promote censorship and undermine legitimate speech, with government critics, the political opposition, activists and the media becoming key targets for prosecution.

Indeed, a growing number of government critics, human rights defenders and activists have been charged with the offence of publishing “false news” or “offensive communication” under the Computer Misuse Act 2011 despite the law not explicitly referring to disinformation or false news.<sup>124</sup> Section 25 of the Act provides that:

**“Any person who willfully and repeatedly uses electronic communication to disturb or attempt to disturb the peace, quiet or right of privacy of any person with no purpose or legitimate communication whether or not a conversation ensues commits a misdemeanour and is liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding four currency points [80,000 Uganda shillings or USD 20] or imprisonment not exceeding one year or both.”<sup>125</sup>**

As of February 2022, the Computer Misuse Act had been used in nine successful prosecutions, according to the Director of Public Prosecutions.<sup>126</sup> Notable cases include the arrest of former presidential candidate Joseph Kabuleta who was charged with offensive communication over a Facebook post in which he reportedly called the president a liar and a gambler, as well as the arrest in July 2021 of a man who allegedly circulated “falsified news” that Uganda’s president had died.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Legislating on Hate Speech and Disinformation – Lessons from Ethiopia, <https://bit.ly/3utESbl>

<sup>123</sup> Bad Law – Legal and Regulatory Responses to Misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa 2016–2020, <https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/chapters/m/10.16997/book53.b/>

<sup>124</sup> How Uganda is using old and new laws to block activists on social media, <https://theconversation.com/how-uganda-is-using-old-and-new-laws-to-block-activists-on-social-media-121823>

<sup>125</sup> Computer Misuse Act, 2011, <https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/2011/2/eng%402011-02-14>

<sup>126</sup> Computer Misuse Act: State has won only nine cases since 2011, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/127832/computer-misuse-act-state-has-won-only-nine-c>

<sup>127</sup> Court Remands Man Accused of Announcing Museveni’s Death, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/court-remands-man-accused-of-announcing-museveni-s-death-3474640>

Widespread use of these laws has stretched beyond the central political sphere, as shown in a recent case where a Ugandan human rights activist was **charged** with “offensive communication” after sharing a post on his Twitter handle that parodied the police spokesperson.<sup>128</sup> While the law on publication of false news under the Penal Code Act was declared null and void in 2002, a rise in COVID-19 related false news and misinformation saw the government rely on other sections of the Act to prosecute individuals for disseminating what it termed false information related to the virus. In March 2020, a pastor was arrested by police for “**uttering false information** and spreading harmful propaganda” about the coronavirus,<sup>129</sup> as was journalist **Samson Kasumba** and writer Kakwenza Rukirabashaija.<sup>130</sup> In a related incident, a Kampala City Council employee was arrested and **charged** with spreading false information after posting on social media that Uganda had registered its first death from COVID-19.<sup>131</sup> Kakwenza was re-arrested in December 2021 following a series of tweets he posted criticising the president and his son and later fled into exile.<sup>132</sup>

The Uganda Communications Act, 2013 gives wide powers to the communications regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) to licence, monitor and regulate the sector. Specifically, section 31 prohibits the broadcasting of any programme that fails to comply with “minimum broadcasting standards”, which as a result requires that what is broadcast is free from ‘distortion of facts.’<sup>133</sup> Controversially, the UCC has taken to regulating online media and some of its directives have directly hindered access to information and free speech.<sup>134</sup> Ahead of the 2021 general elections, the UCC issued guidelines and regulations to media houses and online platforms that restricted how they could cover the elections.<sup>135</sup>



In Kenya, article 33 of the Constitution provides that “every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom to seek, receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research”. However, article 33(2) specifies that the right to freedom of expression does not extend to propaganda for war; incitement to violence; hate speech; or advocacy of hatred that constitutes ethnic incitement, vilification of others or incitement to cause harm, or is based on any ground of discrimination. Further, article 33(3) provides that in the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, every person shall respect the rights and reputation of others.

Laws that touch on disinformation include the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (CMCA) 2018, The Kenya Information and Communications Act, 2013 (**KICA**) and the National Cohesion and Integration Act, 2008 (NCIA). Under section 22, the CMCA makes it an offence for a person to “intentionally publish false, misleading or fictitious data or misinforms with intent that the data shall be considered or acted upon as authentic, with or without any financial gain”.<sup>136</sup> It is also a crime under section 23 of the law to publish information that is false in print, broadcast, data or over a computer system, that is calculated or results in panic, chaos, or violence among citizens, or which is likely to discredit the reputation of a person. Both offences attract a fine of five million Kenya shillings (USD 50,000), which may be supplemented with imprisonment for a term of two years in the case of the former and 10 years for the latter offence.

Similarly, section 44(a) of KICA makes it an offence for a person using radio communication to send or attempt to send a message which they know to be false or misleading. The Act in Section 46(l) also places an obligation on licensed broadcasters to gather and present news and information accurately and impartially before airing it, while also ensuring that the news is impartial.

<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Activists Condemn Charges Against Tweep Mike Muhima,

<https://www.ntv.co.ug/ug/news/national/human-rights-activists-condemn-charges-against-tweep-mike-muhima-3407620>

<sup>129</sup> Uganda: Pastor Arrested for Claiming 'Simple Flu' COVID-19 Doesn't Exist in Uganda, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202003300086.html>

<sup>130</sup> Uganda Security Forces Arrest Writer, TV Anchor After Coronavirus Posts,

[https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_ugandan-security-forces-arrest-writer-tv-anchor-after-coronavirus-posts-6187944.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_ugandan-security-forces-arrest-writer-tv-anchor-after-coronavirus-posts-6187944.html)

<sup>131</sup> KCCA pay roll officer arrested for spreading false information on COVID-19, <https://www.independent.co.ug/kcca-pay-roll-officer-arrested-for-spreading-false-information-on-covid-19/>

<sup>132</sup> Uganda Author Flees After Alleged Torture Says Lawyer, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/9/ugandan-author-flees-after-alleged-torture-says-lawyer>

<sup>133</sup> Uganda Communications Act, 2013, <https://www.ug-cert.ug/files/downloads/UCC%20Act%202013.pdf>

<sup>134</sup> Registration of Online Publishers and Broadcasters Threatens Free Expression in Uganda,

<https://cipesa.org/2020/09/registration-of-online-publishers-and-broadcasters-threatens-free-expression-in-uganda/>

<sup>135</sup> UCC Guidelines on the Use of Media During Elections, <https://www.ucc.co.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GUIDELINES-ON-THE-USE-OF-MEDIA-DURING-THE-GENERAL-ELECTIONS-.pdf>

<sup>136</sup> The section states that a person who intentionally publishes false, misleading or fictitious data or misinforms with intent that the data shall be considered or acted upon as authentic, with or without any financial gain, commits an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine not exceeding five million shillings or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, or to both.

Kenya's laws are targeted at those knowingly spreading disinformation where the law specifically criminalises the dissemination of false information, as it requires the perpetrator to have been aware of the untrue nature of the information they disseminated. To this extent, laws such as the CMCA and KICA use words such as 'willfully', 'knowingly' or 'intentionally' to denote prior intent or knowledge.

There has also been a consistent debate in Kenya over what the state perceives as disinformation, especially by bloggers and activists. Since the enactment of the CMCA, many have been arrested for allegedly disseminating false information and charged under its provisions, which suggests that this law has been weaponised as a tool to combat dissent. Bloggers and activists such as Edgar Obare<sup>137</sup> and Mutemi wa Kiama<sup>138</sup> are among those who have been arraigned in court over violations related to the statute. However, the state has been unable to conclusively prosecute those who have been arrested. This inability to make the charges stick demonstrates that the state may simply be attempting to silence dissent amongst bloggers and activists.

***“The Cybercrimes Act criminalises what some of us in the media do but ... it's a step in trying to get some accountability from the general public in terms of spreading information that is not true.”***  
A digital journalist in Kenya

Notably, the constitutionality of sections 22 and 23 of the CMCA were challenged in the case of Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE) v Attorney General (Petition 206 of 2018), which is currently on appeal.<sup>139</sup> Previously, section 29 of KICA which prohibited the “misuse” of telecommunication systems and was used to arrest and detain several bloggers, was declared unconstitutional in the case of *Geoffrey Andare v Attorney General & 2 others*.<sup>140</sup>

In Nigeria, no extant laws define disinformation or misinformation. However, various laws have been used to arrest and charge individuals for the publication of “false”, “fake”, or “defamatory” information. For example, under section 59 of Nigeria's Criminal Code Act<sup>141</sup> it is an offence for any person to publish or reproduce any statement, rumour or report which is likely to cause fear and alarm to the public or to disturb the public peace, knowing or having reason to believe that such statement, rumour or report is false. The penalty upon conviction is imprisonment for three years.

In addition, the Cybercrimes Act 2015, Section 24(1)(b) states that:

***Any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter using computer systems or network that he knows to be false, to cause annoyance, inconvenience danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent: commits an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than Naira 7,000,000 (USD 16,768) or imprisonment for a term of not more than three years; or to both such fine and imprisonment.***

Under the Penal Code, section 41, “Whoever circulates, publishes or reproduces any statement, rumour or report which he knows or has reason to believe to be false with intent to cause or which is likely to cause fear or alarm to the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the public peace, shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to three years or with fine or with both.”<sup>142</sup> In February 2022, journalist Omoyele Sowore was arrested under section 418 of the Penal Code and section 59 of the Criminal Code for cyberstalking the

<sup>137</sup> Public Statement by the Directorate of Criminal Investigations on the arrest of Edgar Obare for contravention of Section 23 of the CMCA

<sup>138</sup> Kenya: Release and cease attacks on Edwin Mutemi wa Kiama

<sup>139</sup> Court dismisses bloggers' cybercrime law case, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/court-dismisses-bloggers-cybercrime-law-case-252192>

<sup>140</sup> Petition 2016 of 2018, <http://kenyalaw.org/caselaw/cases/view/121033/>

<sup>141</sup> Criminal Code Act, <https://lawsofnigeria.placng.org/laws/C38.pdf>

presidency and publishing false information.<sup>143</sup> Previously in March 2017, Kemi Olunloyo, a blogger, was arrested under the Cybercrime Act and detained for 90 days for a post on social media alleging adultery by a prominent pastor.<sup>144</sup>

Meanwhile, the proposed Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, 2019 (viewed as an Anti-Social Media Bill), which passed the second reading in the Senate, aims to criminalise the spread of damaging and false information.<sup>145</sup> The Bill was opposed widely by civil society and human rights activists for stifling freedom of speech. The Senate has not adopted the Bill.



In March 2020, the Ethiopian government enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation n° 1185 to address hate speech and disinformation. The Bill specifically targeted disinformation on the internet, which was seen as posing a threat to the country's "social peace, public stability, national unity, and human dignity...".<sup>146</sup> However, the Proclamation is not likely to alleviate these societal issues, and instead may restrict freedom of expression, limit access to information, suffocate the press, and silence dissenting voices.<sup>147</sup> The proclamation contains broad definitions of "hate speech" and "disinformation" and provides criminal penalties of up to 100,000 Birr (USD 1,937), five years imprisonment or both for persons found culpable of the offence.<sup>148</sup>

The Proclamation defines disinformation as "speech that is false, is disseminated by a person who knew or should reasonably have known the falsity of the information and is highly likely to cause a public disturbance, riot, violence or conflict." However, this definition is broad and gives authorities wide discretion to determine what is or is not false. In March 2020, Yayeew Shimelis, a journalist, was the first person to be arrested, detained and charged under the law over a post on his Facebook and YouTube accounts about COVID-19 which the Ministry of Health condemned as false.<sup>149</sup>



Cameroon's constitution provides for freedom of communication, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association "under the conditions set by law." Yet articles 75, 77 and 78 of law no. 2010/012 of December 21, 2010 relating to cybersecurity and cybercrime, and article 113 of law no. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016 on the Penal Code, have been used repeatedly to threaten, arrest and imprison journalists accused of disseminating false news.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the government has issued threats against those it said used social media to tarnish the image of public officials or to "sabotage" government actions.<sup>151</sup>

The Law on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime<sup>152</sup> prohibits publishing and propagating information online "without being able to attest its veracity" or truthfulness. Articles 75 to 78 prohibit cyber harassment, hate speech and publishing or spreading false news. Under article 78, the penalty for publishing or spreading news by electronic communication without being able to provide proof of its veracity is imprisonment of between six months and two years, a fine of between five million and 10 million Central African Francs (CFA), equivalent to USD 8,288-16,577, or both.

<sup>142</sup> Penal Code Act 1960, [https://policehumanrightsresources.org/content/uploads/2016/07/Peal-Code-Northern-States\\_-Federal-Provisions-Act-1960.pdf?x96812](https://policehumanrightsresources.org/content/uploads/2016/07/Peal-Code-Northern-States_-Federal-Provisions-Act-1960.pdf?x96812)

<sup>143</sup> Police arrest Sowore in Abuja over alleged fake news peddling, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/02/police-arrest-sowore-in-abuja-over-alleged-fake-news-peddling/>

<sup>144</sup> Police Arrest Kemi Olunloyo Over Blog Post Accusing Pastor of Adultery, <http://saharareporters.com/2017/03/17/police-arrest-kemi-olunloyo-over-blog-post-accusing-pastor-adultery>

<sup>145</sup> Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019, <https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Protection-from-Internet-Falsehood-and-Manipulation-Bill-2019.pdf>

<sup>146</sup> Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation n° 1185/2020, <https://chilot.me/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HATE-SPEECH-AND-DISINFORMATION-PREVENTION-AND-SUPPRESSION-PROCLAMATION.pdf>

<sup>147</sup> Ethiopia's hate speech and disinformation law: the pros, the cons, and a mystery, <https://www.accessnow.org/ethiopias-hate-speech-and-disinformation-law-the-pros-the-cons-and-a-mystery/>

<sup>148</sup> Ethiopia's New Hate Speech and Disinformation Law Weighs Heavily on Social Media Users and Internet Intermediaries, <https://cipesa.org/2020/07/ethiopias-new-hate-speech-and-disinformation-law-weighs-heavily-on-social-media-users-and-internet-intermediaries/>

<sup>149</sup> Prosecutors charge journalist Yayeew with newly enacted hate speech law, <https://addisstandard.com/news-update-prosecutors-charge-journalist-yayeew-with-newly-enacted-hate-speech-law/>

<sup>150</sup> In Cameroon, journalists are being jailed on charges of 'fake news', <https://wapo.st/3FT0Uan>

<sup>151</sup> Social Media: Government Warns Against Irresponsible Usage, <https://www.crtv.cm/2020/07/134444/>

<sup>152</sup> Loi n°2010 / 012 du 21 décembre 2010 relative à la cybersécurité et à la cybercriminalité

Meanwhile, article 85 of the law governing electronic communications in Cameroon<sup>153</sup> punishes "whoever knowingly, transmits or puts into circulation" on electronic communications channels, "false or misleading distress signals or calls" with imprisonment of six months to one year and a fine of 1,000,000 to 10,000,000 CFA francs (USD 1,654 to 16,540). In addition, according to article 113 of the Penal Code,<sup>154</sup> anyone who issues or propagates false news, when such news is likely to harm public authorities or national cohesion, is liable to imprisonment of three months to three years and a fine of 100,000 to two million CFA francs (USD 166-3,315).

In all the studied countries, there have been no visible efforts on the part of law enforcement agencies to counter disinformation stemming from within the government, ruling party or other senior government officials. While these parties are complicit in instigating and spreading disinformation, action is rarely taken against them by local law enforcement agencies and regulators.

### 3.5.2 Adequacy and Effectiveness of Remedial Measures by Platforms

Platform operators have taken different approaches to tackle misinformation and disinformation. Some have introduced community guidelines, implemented content moderation strategies, and improved their [transparency reporting](#). However, they remain under pressure from authoritarian governments to take down unfavourable content and shut down the accounts of critics or face regulatory sanctions, while attempting to safeguard their business interests. The African Commission in its [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information](#) (2019) has called upon states and intermediaries to mainstream human rights safeguards when moderating or filtering online content. Likewise, the [Santa Clara principles](#), [Reports](#) of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression,<sup>155</sup> and the [Manila principles](#) on intermediary liability,<sup>156</sup> have proposed best practices to foster internet freedom. However, compliance with these guidelines remains a challenge.

While there is widespread consensus that disinformation needs to be addressed, the efforts by intermediaries to stem misuse of their platforms have widely been criticised by civil society for lacking efficiency and transparency; threatening digital rights; muzzling demands for transparency and accountability; and limiting public education. Platforms have been blamed for not doing enough to reduce harms perpetrated over their mediums in several countries where they operate, [such as Ethiopia](#).

Platforms have also been blamed for their high-handedness in content moderation; unfair account takedowns; limited [understanding of local contexts](#),<sup>157</sup> culture and language; and widespread use of algorithms without adequate [human oversight](#),<sup>158</sup> which is seen as having led to the removal of legitimate content where problematic content is left to slip through the cracks. For example, in June 2020, Facebook [deactivated](#) accounts of several high-profile Tunisian political bloggers and activists initially without offering an explanation.<sup>159</sup> It was later blamed on a technical error. Additionally, intermediaries are struggling to strike a balance between meeting their business objectives and attending to the competing interests from governments and civil society. As a result of these tensions, it remains difficult to ensure a level playing field that promotes the respect for freedom of expression online.

Platforms use a blend of human (e.g. third parties such as fact-checking organisations) and technological resources to detect, counter, or prohibit disinformation. Platforms also often either remove content or ask the users who generated the content to amend it; label the content; restrict the accounts of repeat offenders; make the content difficult to find;

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<sup>153</sup> Loi n° 2010/013 du 21 décembre 2010 régissant les communications électroniques au Cameroun,

<sup>154</sup> Loi n° 2016/007 du 12 Juillet 2016 portant Code Pénal.

<sup>155</sup> Human Rights Council, <https://freedex.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2015/files/2018/05/G1809672.pdf>

<sup>156</sup> Manila Principles, [https://www.eff.org/files/2015/10/31/manila\\_principles\\_1.0.pdf](https://www.eff.org/files/2015/10/31/manila_principles_1.0.pdf)

<sup>157</sup> Inside Facebook's Content Moderation Plans for Africa, <https://www.iafrikan.com/2019/08/16/inside-facebooks-content-moderation-plans-for-africa/>

<sup>158</sup> What Happened When Humans Stopped Managing Social Media Content, <https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-content-moderation-automation/>

<sup>159</sup> Facebook Deactivates Accounts of Tunisian Political Bloggers and Activists,

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/04/facebook-deactivates-accounts-of-tunisian-political-bloggers-and-activists>

and enable users to identify and report disinformation. Twitter's [rules](#),<sup>160</sup> Facebook's [community standards](#),<sup>161</sup> Instagram's [community guidelines](#),<sup>162</sup> and WhatsApp's guidelines on [responsible use](#)<sup>163</sup> also provide users with guidelines on the types of content that can not be published. The grounds for prohibiting publication include safety, privacy, and authenticity. In addition, the community guidelines, rules or standards of several of these platforms regulate issues such as violence and crime, sexual or other forms of exploitation, harassment, hate speech, violent and graphic content, false news, manipulated media, and spam. However, disinformation continues to spread rapidly across each of these platforms.

Some platforms such as Facebook collaborate with third-party fact checking entities such as Pesa Check, [Africa Check](#), [Media Monitoring Africa](#), [iLab](#) and Agence France Press (AFP) to monitor and debunk some of the most egregious and widespread disinformation online. In Uganda for example, PesaCheck collaborated with Facebook to dismantle a pro-government disinformation campaign under the hashtag #StopHooliganism, which was used to spread disinformation in the wake of protests organised around the arrest of the National Union Party (NUP) leader Robert Kyagulanyi (a.k.a. Bobi Wine) between November and early December 2020.<sup>164</sup> Similarly, following the publication of the DFRLab report, Facebook and Twitter took down accounts associated with the spread of disinformation in the lead up to the 2021 election.<sup>165</sup>

In addition to partnering with third party entities, companies such as Meta have held dialogue with governments in fighting disinformation. For example, in August 2018, the Cameroonian government held a meeting with Facebook seeking to address the spread of "fake news" and to [remove](#) false information, offensive and hate speech from the platform.<sup>166</sup>

However, there remain issues with the lack of timely responses by platforms in taking down content that has been flagged as disinformation as well as limited publication of information on defined timelines within which platforms aim to act against perpetrators. Further, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems as a first level of content review is not sufficient or ideal. Similarly, the use of human content reviewers who may not fully understand the local context or indigenous languages remains a challenge.

According to a [report](#) by TIME, guidelines which a Facebook contracted firm issued to content moderators requires them to watch only the first 15 seconds of a video before determining whether or not it was cleared to remain on the platform.<sup>167</sup> As long as the title, transcript, top comments and thumbnail of the video appear to be innocent, and no users nor Facebook's AI systems have flagged specific points in the video, it was cleared. According to the report, the prioritisation of speed and efficiency above all else, might explain why hate speech and incitement content from Ethiopia have remained on Facebook. Facebook has AI detection and content moderators, but hate speech continues to be posted, potentially due to a lack of comprehension of contexts or on purpose. A linguistic barrier exists as well; aside from dialect differences, several words are susceptible to incorrect interpretations.

Additionally, given the conflict between national laws and the platform standards and community guidelines, often content that is considered unlawful is not removed by the platforms. Analysts state that social media companies are caught in a tenuous position given the tension between their desire to apply their global standards in content moderation on one hand and aiming to defer to local contexts on the other.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Twitter Rules, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>

<sup>161</sup> Facebook Community Standards, <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/>

<sup>162</sup> Instagram Community Guidelines, <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119>

<sup>163</sup> Whatsapp Guidelines on Responsible Use, <https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/security-and-privacy/how-to-use-whatsapp-responsibly/?lang=en>

<sup>164</sup> Uganda in Crisis, [https://investigate.africa/wp-content/themes/ancir/dist/assets/reports/Uganda\\_in\\_crisis\\_dossier\\_04\\_03\\_2021.pdf](https://investigate.africa/wp-content/themes/ancir/dist/assets/reports/Uganda_in_crisis_dossier_04_03_2021.pdf)

<sup>165</sup> Medium.com, Facebook removes inauthentic assets linked to Ugandan government, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-linked-to-ugandan-government-c3949be9f810>

<sup>166</sup> CRTV.CM, "Government officials and Facebook team discuss ways to check cyber crimes," August 8, 2018, <https://www.crtv.cm/2018/08/government-officials-and-facebook-team-discuss-ways-to-check-cyber-crimes/> and Facebook Discusses "Fake News" with Authorities in Cameroon, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/facebook-discute-des-fake-news-avec-les-autorit%C3%A9s-au-cameroun/4520343.html>

<sup>167</sup> Facebook Africa Content Moderation Employee Treatment, <https://time.com/6147458/facebook-africa-content-moderation-employee-treatment/>

<sup>168</sup> Content Moderation is Particularly Hard in African Contexts, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/08/social-media-content-moderation-african-nations.html>



## 3.6 Effects on Democracy and Human Rights

Disinformation erodes trust in democratic institutions, hampers citizens' ability to take informed decisions, and **affects the right** of citizens to hold individual opinions without interference.<sup>169</sup> According to a report by DW Akademie, disinformation also **threatens** the right to democratic participation by polarising citizens' beliefs and processes of democratic institutions, which can distort free and fair elections and lead to violence.<sup>170</sup> The study found that disinformation was undermining political discourse, hampering free expression, and perpetuating hate speech. It has also reiterated the ways in which the wider disinformation discourse has presented autocratic governments with a pretext to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters while enabling them to further muzzle an open and free internet.

Scholarship has delineated some of the common effects associated with the use of social media, which include faster dissemination of disinformation and the propagation of additional threats to the health of democracies. Some of these effects arise from the way in which freedom of opinion and access to reliable and pluralistic information are undermined by disinformation. Information disorders, described as "an environment in which distorted and manipulated information is ubiquitous", are believed to play an important role in **affirming authoritarianism** and destabilising democracy.<sup>171</sup> Disinformation can also serve to confuse or manipulate citizens; create distrust in international norms, institutions or democratically agreed strategies; and disrupt elections.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, counter-disinformation measures can also have a prejudicial impact on human rights and democracy.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, measures such as retrogressive laws enacted to combat disinformation often end up stifling legitimate expression and hampering access to critical and pluralistic information.

### 3.6.1 Impact on Electoral Processes

The effects of disinformation are not well known, or well-studied, including in areas related to its impact on election outcomes.<sup>174</sup> However, new research has pointed to ways in which disinformation can affect the integrity and outcomes of elections, as can occur when disinformation reaches an audience that is vulnerable to the promoted messages; when it serves to energise or suppress voters; when it drives the news agenda or when it is seen as "infecting" legitimate news, as was witnessed in the 2016 US presidential election as well as the UK's Brexit referendum.<sup>175</sup>

Other researchers have **argued** that manipulating elections by affecting voters' opinions and choices through disinformation **corrodes democracy**, undermines political systems, buttresses authoritarian rule and creates a trail of doubt as to whether democratic institutions actually serve to reflect citizens' choices.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, recent research has pointed to a link between disinformation and politically motivated **violence**,<sup>177</sup> such as in **Ethiopia**,<sup>178</sup> Myanmar, US, and India. Nonetheless, much work remains to be done in this area to provide further clarity regarding the short-term and long-term effects of disinformation on political systems in different contexts.

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<sup>169</sup> *The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653635\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

<sup>170</sup> *Disinformation Campaigns: Lies Can Turn Deadly or Threaten the Stability of Societies*, <https://www.dw.com/en/disinformation-campaigns-lies-can-turn-deadly-or-threaten-the-stability-of-societies/a-59299651>

<sup>171</sup> *How Information Disorder Affirms Authoritarianism and Destabilises Democracy*, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00Z3JC.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z3JC.pdf)

<sup>172</sup> *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression*,

<sup>173</sup> *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653635\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

<sup>174</sup> *Anastasia Kapetas, The case for a 'disinformation CERN'*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-case-for-a-disinformation-cern/>

<sup>175</sup> *Political Disinformation* <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/authenticating-information/impact-misinformation-democratic-process/political-disinformation>

<sup>176</sup> *Disinformation in Elections*, [https://brill.com/downloadpdf/journals/shrs/29/1-4/article-p24\\_24.xml](https://brill.com/downloadpdf/journals/shrs/29/1-4/article-p24_24.xml)

<sup>177</sup> *Misinformation is Inciting Violence Around the World and Tech Platforms Don't have a Plan to Stop it*, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/misinformation-is-inciting-violence-around-the-world-and-tech-platforms-dont-have-a-plan-to-stop-it/>

<sup>178</sup> *Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech in Ethiopia: A Vulnerability Assessment*, <https://www.eip.org/publication/fake-news-misinformation-and-hate-speech-in-ethiopia-a-vulnerability>



In the countries included in this study, disinformation was seen to be particularly rife during electoral periods, which see hordes of politicians and political parties battle to out-do each other in pumping out false and often harmful content. During these periods, disinformation, pushed by powerful actors and amplified by influencers with a wide reach and considerable believability, often gains virality and captures attention within the wider public discourse. In the process, disinformation hijacks the political discourse around elections at a time when citizens need access to credible, factual and pluralistic information about candidates, parties, and issues in order to make informed choices. In this regard, the candidates that have the inclination and resources to deploy disinformation campaigns gain undue advantage over those that run clean campaigns. Disinformation thus affects the ability of some social and political actors to both mobilise online support and offer alternative ideas to citizens. It has become well-known that political parties actively use disinformation to discredit opponents. As a result, political parties are often no longer viewed as neutral entities with individuals' best interests. Instead, among certain segments of the population they are increasingly perceived as entities that only seek to divide the people.<sup>179</sup>

At the same time, disinformation can alienate potential voters from the electoral process by accentuating negative sentiments towards candidates, political parties, and electoral processes to the extent that in some cases citizens end up concluding that none of the candidates are worth voting for. The doubt and confusion created by disinformation during election periods leads in some cases to voter apathy and abstentions. In others, it can lead some to cast votes that do not reflect their genuine preferences. Disinformation can also engender mistrust as well as lack of clarity among citizens as to where they can go to acquire credible information. Yet citizens need quality information to play a more active civic role. Without credible information, it becomes increasingly difficult for citizens to assess whether or not leaders have effectively provisioned public resources, for instance. Worse still, a large section of the public who consume, share or disseminate disinformation content are unaware that it is disinformation or the overall consequences of the actions they take to further its spread.

### 3.6.2 Perpetuating Hate Speech

In Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria, disinformation is becoming a major concern in exacerbating challenges related to hate speech, ethnic violence and internal conflicts, leading to political instability. In Ethiopia, where the Tigray and Oromo federal states have been waging armed conflict against the government, hate speech is exacerbated by disinformation on social media. In Nigeria, hate speech is prevalent online and is fueled by decades of deadly religious, regional, ethnic and political conflict.<sup>180</sup> In Cameroon, hate speech has not been limited to politics, but extends to include favouritism of one tribe to the detriment of others. There have also been tensions between supporters of President Biya and opposition leader Maurice Kamto, whose collective online expressions are often intertwined with narratives around ethnic contempt, a phenomenon that could threaten the country's stability.<sup>181</sup>

In addition, opposition leaders, activists and journalists have been threatened or had their reputations tarnished through the spread of targeted disinformation and related forms of cyber violence. For instance, in 2018, much of the online discussion in Cameroon revolved around a video purportedly showing the leading opposition presidential candidate in a same-sex intimate liaison.<sup>182</sup> More recently in 2021, whistleblower Paul Chouta was wrongly accused of sodomy by officials of an opposition party.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>179</sup> Madung, O. & Obilo, B., *Inside the shadowy world of disinformation for hire in Kenya*, [https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report\\_Inside\\_the\\_shadowy\\_world\\_of\\_disinformation\\_for\\_hire\\_in\\_Kenya\\_5\\_hcc.pdf](https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Report_Inside_the_shadowy_world_of_disinformation_for_hire_in_Kenya_5_hcc.pdf)

<sup>180</sup> Social media and conflict in Nigeria: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54257189e4b0ac0d5fca1566/t/5ad8ac65352f53351112a200/1524149358850/4.18+Nigeria+Lexicon\\_v4.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54257189e4b0ac0d5fca1566/t/5ad8ac65352f53351112a200/1524149358850/4.18+Nigeria+Lexicon_v4.pdf)

<sup>181</sup> The groups that fan violence include Section RDPC de Facebook, Jeunes militants et partisans du MRC, Maurice KAMTO Président, le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun-LCCLC and Kmer-Kongossa & nostress.

<sup>182</sup> *Présidentielle au Cameroun: sextape, coalitions et observateurs internationaux*, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/alex-devechio/blog/061018/presidentielle-au-cameroun-sextape-coalitions-et-observateurs-internationaux>

<sup>183</sup> Death of Mirabelle Lingom: The Moving Testimony of Paul Chouta, <https://www.camerounactuonline.com/death-of-mirabelle-lingom-the-moving-testimony-of-paul-chouta/>

Similarly, Kenyan activist **Boniface Mwangi** has been a victim of hate speech through trending hashtags (#BonifaceMwangiTheCon and #BonifaceMwangiUnmasked) on Twitter. In October 2021, the activist's home, which was then under construction, was allegedly bombed by State actors following an online campaign targeting him. In Uganda, a report by PesaCheck highlighted a connection between online disinformation campaigns and the deadly November 2020 protests, in their report "**Uganda in Crisis**". According to the report, a disinformation campaign active in the country at the time and posting under the hashtag #StopHooliganism claimed that opposition supporters were looting and destroying property. The narrative further fuelled the protests during which security forces killed at least 54 people.

### 3.6.3 Undermining Free Speech and the Flow of Information

A concomitant effect of the spread of disinformation in the online public sphere is that it hampers free expression. Disinformation undermines the integrity of information, opinions and ideas by interfering with citizens' access to both reliable and pluralistic information. The actions of "keyboard armies" and social media influencers, who are paid by disinformation instigators control narratives, retaliate and antagonise other online users. Ultimately, these efforts serve to silence critical and independent opinions online. Such environments restrict the participation of many citizens in online political discourse and limit their ability to express themselves without fear of retaliatory attacks.

In addition, the proliferation of disinformation online has handed autocratic governments an excuse to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters. As described earlier, laws that have been enacted to tackle disinformation and false news have had a chilling effect on free expression. They have been invoked by autocratic governments to target journalists, activists, human rights defenders and political opponents. In this regard, the governments have weaponised disinformation laws to silence dissenters.

Moreover, despite the presence of disinformation countermeasures, which are often partially implemented, individuals remain afraid of expressing themselves freely due to fear of sanctions where information can be retroactively flagged as fake or false. Such laws also make it difficult for **the media** to effectively execute their watchdog role.<sup>184</sup> Intimidation of the fourth estate, including through the arrest of journalists accused of spreading fake news, have encouraged self-censorship by journalists and activists. Indeed, the indiscriminate enforcement of such laws does not create room for retraction or correction by those accused, despite both being essential journalistic practices.

*When governments impose information blackouts or curtail the free flow of information online through other means, disinformation thrives as fact-checking and the production of counter-narratives are hampered. In the case of Cameroon and DR Congo, that disinformation, much of it originating from the diaspora, propagates hate speech and disinformation that threaten to exacerbate civil strife and undermine electoral integrity. In turn, the shutdowns and the disinformation propagated by state and non-state actors are eroding technology's potential to enhance electoral integrity, civic engagement and the fight against diseases such as Covid-19.*

CIPESA, *Charting the Link Between Disinformation, Disruptions, Diseases and the Diaspora in Cameroon and DR Congo*

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<sup>184</sup> Journalists Paying the Price, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/journalists-paying-the-price-3205068>

At another level, narratives detailing the fight against the spread of “false information” have been invoked by governments on several occasions to justify internet disruptions. Most network disruptions in Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Uganda have been ordered to thwart organising efforts among the opposition as well as to monitor voting processes. As such, evocations related to ‘fighting disinformation’ or false news have provided a convenient excuse for governments in countries justifying disrupted networks. Moreover, when governments attempt to create information blackouts by disrupting networks, they create fertile ground for disinformation to thrive. This is because, without access to digital networks, citizens lack the means to verify the accuracy of the information they encounter.

Instructively, research by Guy Schleffer and Benjamin Miller posits that disinformation can have one of four effects, which can vary depending on the typology of the regime. According to their research, disinformation can have a weakening effect on strong democratic regimes; an intensifying effect on strong authoritarian regimes; a radicalising effect on weak democratic regimes; or a destabilising effect on weak authoritarian regimes.<sup>185</sup> Their work provides further evidence that the effects of disinformation vary depending on the specific political institutions and social rights present in the country of study. Indeed, the current research found that disinformation has had various effects on the countries under study, including intensifying authoritarian control through enhancement of repressive control of online activity and stifling of independent voices, undermining trust in the media and opposition leaders, and reducing access to pluralistic and credible information, whilst forcing many democratic actors to self-censor.

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<sup>185</sup> Guy Schleffer and Benjamin Miller, *The Political Effects of Social Media Platforms on Different Regime Types*

# 4 Conclusion and Recommendations

## 4.1 Conclusion

The internet and social media platforms play a key role as one of the main sources of information across the region, given the speed, scale and volume of information shared through them. These digital platforms have given their users the opportunity to speak, communicate and engage in public and semi-public ways, and at an unprecedented global scale over a short period of time. Likewise, given the utility of these platforms to rapidly disseminate information, they are easily exploited and have become a fertile ground for the proliferation of coordinated disinformation campaigns. Such campaigns muzzle critical voices, distort the truth, advance propaganda, devalue fact-based debate, sway public opinion, amplify public confusion, perpetuate hate speech, exacerbate social divisions, and undermine democracy. The disinformation industry is growing in the continent and is prevalent during election periods and whenever there is ethnic, political, religious or other social conflicts.

Moreover, this study has found that the perpetrators, channels, tools and tactics used in disinformation campaigns are increasingly becoming complex, diverse and more widespread. Governments are key instigators of disinformation. However, non-state actors, including political opposition groups and activists, as well as foreign agents, have at times also served as key instigators and agents of disinformation. In some states, notably Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, “influencers for hire”, who create and spread disinformation for financial gain, have become the primary agents of disinformation. There has also been a notable rise in coordinated inauthentic behaviour that involves the use of bots, trolls and “keyboard armies”.

Disinformation continues to spread rapidly in an environment characterised by a proliferation of digital technologies, low media and digital literacy levels, an increasing digital divide, and poor fact-checking skills. Further, the lucrative rewards associated with disinformation, the persistence of fractious politics (Uganda, Kenya), extant conflict (Ethiopia, Cameroon and Nigeria), and the closure of civic space (Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon) fuel disinformation. Though most of the countries studied possess fundamental democratic deficits, disinformation efforts have allowed ruling governments to undertake new measures to further shrink civic space. Yet these efforts are not distributed equally, with disinformation efforts spiking during election periods.

Ultimately, authoritarianism remains the primary driver of disinformation in the region. Governments have used both disinformation and the response to it to further entrench themselves in power, shrink civic space and target opponents and critics. Across the countries studied, it is evident that governments have begun to assert greater control over digital media environments, enabling them to promote their political agendas and stifle dissenting voices. Authoritarian African regimes that led in deploying information control strategies, such as regressive laws and internet disruptions, have added disinformation campaigns to their arsenal. Thus, unsurprisingly, some of the most notorious internet disruptors in Africa, including Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Uganda, are among the governments which have been most directly involved in promoting disinformation. These same countries have also been involved in efforts to undermine digital rights through the arrests of social media users, and the promotion of widespread state surveillance apparatuses.

This study contributes to what remains a limited body of knowledge on the effects of disinformation by showing how it hijacks the political discourse and undermines elections by limiting access to credible, factual and pluralistic information about candidates, parties, and issues, in order to make informed choices. If not stemmed, candidates that deploy disinformation will continue to receive an undue advantage that threatens the legitimacy of electoral institutions. In this regard, the social and political actors who do not deploy disinformation strategies may be disadvantaged in mobilising online support and reaching citizens with their alternative ideas. Disinformation further undermines the integrity of information, opinions and ideas by interfering with citizens' access to both reliable and pluralistic information.

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. 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. In Ethiopia, it has had a destabilising effect on the already weakened authoritarian regime by increasing the fragility of the state after years of conflict, heightening ethnic divisions, and accelerating the spread of hate speech.

Governments have weaponised disinformation laws to silence critical voices. Rather than serving to counter the ills of disinformation, related laws have in most cases been used to target political critics while government officials involved in the promotion of disinformation are protected. Moreover, retrogressive laws enacted to combat disinformation have been used to further stifle legitimate expression while hampering access to critical and pluralistic information. Instructively, some of these laws are vague and ambiguous and fail to distinguish between disinformation or falsified information, often making their enforcement open to the subjective interpretation of law enforcement agencies, who become the arbiters of the truth. Supplementary efforts by intermediaries to address the effects of disinformation have been criticised for lacking efficiency and transparency while further threatening digital rights. These criticisms include messaging targeted at platforms themselves, which have been blamed for failing to reduce the harm perpetrated over their mediums throughout the region.

Given the foregoing, media literacy and the presence of independent media outlets capable of providing the public with factual, accurate and verified information remain essential. Indeed, citizens need to play a more active role in assessing the accuracy of the information they receive, which can include efforts to verify information prior to sharing with both online or offline networks. In many cases, the laws do not make a distinction between disinformation and falsified information, which increases ambiguity. There is a need to address gaps within these laws as well as a need for further work aimed at improving their implementation.

Overall, this study serves to document and draw attention to the pathways and effects of disinformation across five African countries. While more work remains to be done, it contributes to the literature tracking the effects of disinformation in Africa.

## 4.2 Recommendations

### Government

- Desist from selectively applying laws used to counter disinformation by targeting critics, media, political opposition and human rights groups.
- Repeal repressive laws and amend existing ones such as Kenya's Computer Misuse Act, 2011, Uganda's Communications Act, 2013, Ethiopia's Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, 2020, Cameroon's Law on Cyber Security and Cybercrime, 2010 to provide clear definitions of disinformation and ensure they conform to international human rights standards.
- Train and sensitise law enforcement agencies as to what constitutes disinformation as well as how to combat it without stifling citizens' rights.
- Partner with non-state actors including the media, civil society and independent content producers to promote media literacy and raise awareness on the harms of disinformation and hate speech.

### Intermediaries

- Deepen collaboration with local media and civil society groups in various African countries to identify, debunk and moderate disinformation.
- Support initiatives to help raise awareness and build the capacity of regulators, law enforcement and non-state actors to promote a free and open internet while fighting disinformation.
- Continue to support fact-checking platforms and build the capacity of journalists to conduct fact-checking while promoting pluralism and diversity.
- Work to reduce the processing and response times for complaints regarding disinformation content reported to encourage reporting and to minimise the circulation of disinformation.
- Increase transparency in content moderation measures and conduct periodic reviews of policies that are informed by broad public consultations.

### Media

- Build the capacity of journalists and editors on fact-checking and countering disinformation online.
- Work closely with fact-checkers to identify and expose disinformation at all levels.
- Regularly report on disinformation campaigns and their effects on digital rights and democracy.
- Put in place measures and systems to enhance fact-checking and information verification.

### Civil Society

- Deliberate with policymakers and media representatives regarding how best to promote the uptake of digital literacy and fact-checking skills initiatives that ensure that users of digital platforms are able to easily identify and report disinformation.
- Undertake strategic litigation to challenge retrogressive laws and practices that undermine access to the internet and digital rights under the guise of fighting disinformation.
- Advocate against laws and practices that hamper the ability of journalists to provide accurate information, and hamper citizens' rights to information and free expression.
- Monitor, report and hold States accountable for their violations of international human rights principles including restrictions on the enjoyment of digital rights.
- Collaborate and partner with other relevant stakeholders to fight disinformation campaigns, create awareness and build capacity.



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