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Countering digital disinformation: Opportunities for Europe-Africa collaboration

ETTG Policy Brief 4/2024

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Ensure that EU-Africa dialogues on disinformation, be they at multilateral or bilateral levels, are inclusive of other key stakeholders fighting disinformation – civil society organisations (CSOs), media, regulatory bodies – so as to develop more holistic and relevant plans or approaches to tackle the threat. Here the EU can seek to utilise tools like Information Manipulation and Interference diagnostic (IMI) to ensure that the approaches being developed are both comprehensive and rooted in local realities.

2. Place a greater emphasis on development strategies at a bilateral level over the development of multilateral frameworks and policies that the African Union and regional structures have limited ability to ensure compliance with.

3. Explore ways to support continental and regional bodies' efforts to tackle disinformation across departments, beyond just those working on elections, through providing technical support to focal persons.

KEY MESSAGES (CONTINUED)

4. Coordinate efforts to create learning forums for credible CSOs, regulators and media both within Africa, but also between African experts and those in EU member states, particularly when it comes to identifying and countering foreign state engineered or supported interference and disinformation.

5. Share experiences of engagements with social media companies at bilateral and multilateral levels in order to think strategically and collectively on how to lobby social media companies to be more transparent and open towards independent research into their datasets and algorithms, in order to improve understanding of how they are manipulated.

6. Situating the EU-Africa partnership in tackling disinformation within a wider strategic framework, either at the continental or the regional level, can aid sequencing and joined-up approaches, and can facilitate cross-continental lesson learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of digital disinformation[1] (see Wardle, 2024) poses a rising threat to the credibility of election processes and democracy across the African continent. Whilst disinformation in politics predates the digital era, "the rapid expansion of access to mobile internet and to social media, combined with big data from platforms such as Facebook, Google and X, enabling the micro-targeting of millions of citizens with different messages for specific demographic groups, or individuals, has dramatically increased the reach and impact of digital disinformation" (Institute of Development Studies, 2024). This included domestic efforts to manipulate hashtags and coordinate digital disinformation campaigns during elections in Kenya (Le Roux et al., 2023); the sharing of doctored and falsified images to pollute democratic processes in Nigeria (Adebajo, 2023); and foreign interference efforts designed to shape and influence election outcomes (Jammine & Bottin, 2023).

This policy brief explores strategies and approaches for Africa-EU collaboration in countering the threat posed by digital disinformation to Africa's democratic, and wider, development. It begins by highlighting the importance of context for understanding how disinformation flows and resonates, how this makes it pertinent and powerful to the audience it reaches, and why this should be at the heart of efforts to counter it.

The core analysis then looks at strategies that have been deployed to try and stymie the prevalence and impacts of disinformation across Africa, with a particular focus on elections. This includes brief discussions of efforts to improve digital literacy and build societal resilience through improving individuals' capacity to identify disinformation but also through efforts to fill information voids with more credible information; the balance to be struck between creating a robust regulatory environment that tackles hate speech but which does not impinge on individuals' freedom of expression, especially around politics; and

the roles and responsibilities of social media platforms in ensuring that they support efforts to address digital disinformation challenges.

It concludes by offering recommendations for future partnerships that are in line with the four pillars identified in the EU's own disinformation action plan (2018). This includes recognising that growing anti-Western sentiment is a tangible threat to EU-Africa partnerships and that engaging with the roots of such sentiment must underpin efforts to tackle disinformation challenges. Efforts can also focus on building strategic partnerships to engage social media companies, establishing broad-based networks for sharing learning about efforts to counter foreign-led disinformation and supporting efforts to embed efforts to tackle disinformation in a cross-cutting fashion at the level of continental and regional institutions.

BACKGROUND

Although the African Union recently produced its first Artificial Intelligence Strategy (African Union, 2024a), which highlights the risks of advancements in technology for fighting disinformation, there is no clear Africa-wide strategy to address the disinformation threat. The European External Action Service on the other hand is increasingly focused on the issue of disinformation at home and abroad, with the topic becoming a priority strategic focus. A newly constituted taskforce focuses on exploring these issues in Africa with relation to the ways in which they can undermine EU-Africa partnerships and wider democratic development.

2024 has been a blockbuster year for elections globally, including in Africa where at least 15 national elections have either taken place or are scheduled. But given the prevailing threat posed by disinformation, there has been increased scrutiny on the quality of the information environment in which these processes are taking place. Digital disinformation is designed for, and circulates widely across, social media platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram and

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1. Disinformation is defined as the intentional spread of inaccurate information intended to deceive, and designed in order to do serious harm, whereas misinformation is unintentional and often shared in good faith by those unaware they are passing on falsehoods. These distinctions are important, even if sometimes difficult to apply in practice, and are preferred to one-size-fits-all terms like information manipulation which do not adequately capture these important nuances (see Wardle, 2024).

increasingly Tik Tok) and private messenger applications (WhatsApp and Telegram) which are accessible and have growing user bases on the African continent.

Election-focused digital disinformation tactics are multifaceted and sophisticated, with a range of strategies, actors and technology tools used to manipulate online discourse and influence public opinion. Computational propaganda techniques – algorithms, bot networks and troll farms and astroturfing and flooding - are a growing feature of political campaigns. They can create the illusion of widespread grassroots support or opposition, lend false credibility to fabricated stories and ultimately shape wider public perceptions to align with political agendas. Using social media, and to a lesser but growing extent, AI-generated deep fakes to create fake personas, websites and doctored chyrons is also among the tools deployed by political actors, social media influencers and others to try and win the online political battle. At the same time, well-established channels for distributing information – radio, newspapers and word-of-mouth networks – remain avenues for the spread of disinformation originating online.

Digital disinformation is embedded within vibrant 'pavement media', a term Gadjanova et al. (2022) use to capture "the everyday communication of current affairs through discussions in marketplaces, places of worship, bars and the like through a range of non-conversational and visual practices such as songs, sermons and graffiti". This vibrant pavement media, along with traditional outlets for the distribution of information, notably radio which remains the most accessible information source, allows for content produced online, or for an online audience, to cross into offline spaces, "creating a distinction not of the connected and disconnected but of firsthand [which is growing albeit unequally – see Conroy-Krutz et al., 2024] and indirect social media users" (Gadjanova et al., 2022). The ways that information travels across digital platforms, gets passed into offline settings, and then moves back to digital spaces again needs to be a critical consideration in efforts designed to tackle the threat posed by disinformation.

Both domestic and international actors involved in designing digital disinformation campaigns have recognised this online-offline interplay and the importance recipients attach to the credibility of the source sharing the information with them, as much as the content (see Fisher et al., 2019). This is why political actors seek to utilise grassroots supporter networks when circulating digital disinformation

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– in the case of Nigeria often through loosely affiliated WhatsApp groups – with content then cross-posted across other social media platforms and even targeted towards offline channels. As argued by Soto-Mayer et al. (2023), "Russian disinformation campaigns [which have grown in prevalence in West Africa alongside military takeovers – see African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024] appear to have taken careful account of African socio-anthropological and political contexts, as well as local factors and motivations for disseminating (dis)information. The recruitment of local political and communications experts, and the choice of influencers by Russia to promote its disinformation, bear witness to this strategic capacity". The narratives created through this approach have effectively tapped into bubbling citizen grievances about neo-colonialism, exploitation and the imposition of Western values – reiterating the important links between trusted sources and acceptance of information received.

These prevailing narratives, which are also being utilised by new military leadership in the region, have the potential to be significant for wider EU-Africa relations by threatening cooperation and collaboration and creating obstacles and challenges for the implementation of joint initiatives. They can also undermine confidence in the EU, its institutions and governments with which they partner, and increase suspicion and hostility about the 'real motives' that lie behind such interventions. But they also offer opportunities for shared learning between the EU and Africa given that the EU's action plan against disinformation (EU Commission, 2018) recognises that "foreign state actors are increasingly deploying disinformation strategies to influence societal debates, create divisions and interfere in democratic decision-making" and that this calls for "urgent and immediate action to prevent the Union, its institutions and its citizens from disinformation".

ANALYSIS: RESPONDING TO THE DISINFORMATION THREAT

Approaches to reducing the threats posed by a growing disinformation industry – employed by social media companies, governments, the media and civil society groups, often in partnership with international actors like the EU – have increasingly recognised the importance of multifaceted efforts that are responsive to the local context. Diagnostic tools developed by the EU, such as the Information Manipulation and Interference (IMI) Toolbox – along with a corresponding tool that focuses on the threat posed by foreign actors in the space – are designed to categorise and understand the tactics, techniques and procedures being used to spread disinformation, and provide frameworks and matrixes for assessing risks, threats and potential responses in four key dimensions: situational awareness, resilience building, disruption and regulation, and external action responses (EU, 2022). Although foreign interference tends to grab the headlines, it is often most successful when it works through local disinformation networks and therefore this contextual understanding is a critical baseline for understanding all disinformation threats facing a country. Watson and Habte (2024) point out the crucial importance of understanding the limits of the political and development context in which the intervention is to take place, and the need for nuance. Diagnosing the disinformation challenge, and its nuances, can therefore ensure that more effective responses are put in place, whether at multilateral or bilateral levels.

Educating citizens

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and media entities across Africa have been the recipients of significant donor support to boost efforts to improve awareness of, and an ability to identify, disinformation. Fact-checking is one of the most visible and well-supported of these efforts. However, the extent to which fact-checks actually change opinions is relatively unproven as shifting embedded beliefs and narratives that are rooted in everyday experiences, even when they are assessed as being untrue, remains a challenge. Furthermore, the ability of fact-checking entities to get their corrections

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circulating, both online and offline, in the same networks, in an effective format – which means not just the choice of text or audio, but also the language of the communication and whether the source is viewed as trusted – and at the same pace, as the original viral piece of disinformation is extremely difficult.

But beyond just seeking to provide a counterbalance to the spread of falsehoods, the approach also contains a component of digital education. In instilling the idea that information received should be verified or challenged before being accepted, it seeks to build a culture where information is critically analysed to discern its accuracy before being widely circulated and in doing so creating greater societal resilience to disinformation. Although this component is often more implicit than explicit, it ties up with broader civic education and digital literacy efforts that can be national or more targeted, but have been quite limited to date. A study of seven countries in Africa found that media literacy featured only marginally in school curricula, and that misinformation literacy was taught only in one province in South Africa (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021).

Filling the information void

Africa suffers from a lack of publicly available, authoritative and credible information. Tackling disinformation also includes empowering the citizens to request information – through ensuring that access-to-information laws exist and are functional – as well as the pro-active production of more accurate and accessible

credible information by institutional actors (see UNESCO, 2023). Institutional silence risks reaffirming existing mistrust in authorities to provide credible information to the citizens they serve, and creates an information void that is filled by an array of actors, utilising digital and non-digital tools, to push skewed narratives or to design disinformation to deliberately disinform. But more frequent, and more transparent, communication from governments and institutions has largely played second fiddle to more punitive approaches. However documents like the 'Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa', which were collectively developed and aim at enhancing the capacities of election management bodies and other relevant electoral stakeholders to harness the advantages of social media and tackle the adverse effects, are positive developments. The development of these principles also provides evidence of ways in which multilateral forums of like-minded institutions, not just states, can be a key part of Africa-wide efforts to tackle disinformation.

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Such efforts are further supported by a more credible and transparent information ecosystem. Although the majority of media outlets in Africa are challenged by a difficult financial operating environment, ownership structures that see influential political actors with controlling stakes and, in more repressive states, threats to their safety and security for exposing hidden truths, there are a handful of audience-financed, regionally focused investigative outfits such as *La Maison des Reporters* in Senegal that can play an important role in improving the quality of information

in the ecosystem. Citizen journalists, who are often known, trusted and respected in local communities, can also take advantage of the transparency and accountability functions of digital tools to improve the circulation of accurate information at more local levels. Empowered by social media, they can play an important role in improving local accountability and efforts to promote and strengthen sub-national and deliberative democracy that is less focused on elections. The link between the perceived credibility of a piece of information and the source of that information – be that the original creator or the person directly sharing it – remains integral to the perceived accuracy and validity of content across Africa.

Platform engagement

Whilst the EU has negotiated strong and enforceable oversight of social media companies for ensuring users adhere to company standards through the EU Digital Services Act, Africa's continental and regional country blocs have struggled to get their voice heard – a reflection of their position within global geopolitics and the lack of a common position, and common legal frameworks, among member states. Data protection legislation is patchy across the continent (Data Protection Africa, 2023) and even in places where it does exist its enforcement varies significantly, highlighting the importance of tailoring responses to context.

But social media platforms are some of the major conduits for the spread of disinformation, especially around elections. Although this is often the juncture when platform engagement is most pronounced in an African country,

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with support and tools offered to election management bodies, CSO partners and media, on the whole insufficient resources have been devoted to addressing the ability to uphold platform standards in an array of African languages, where disinformation is particularly rampant and largely goes unchecked. This lack of investment also limits the responsiveness of the platforms to act on, or take down, false and misleading content or problematic accounts in a timely fashion, rendering standardised complaint mechanisms ineffective. Social media companies have continued to show an unwillingness to understand – or allow others to have the information that can help them understand – the disinformation ecosystems, take steps to penalise repeat offenders, and demonetise disinformation, which is increasingly a profitable industry (for example see Madung, 2022). Furthermore, tools that researchers have relied on to track and monitor the spread of disinformation on social media platforms have been shut down by these companies in recent months (Ortutay, 2024).

Risk of repression

The approach of the African state has largely been to introduce punitive measures in response to digital disinformation. Access Now (2024) documented 17 internet shutdowns across nine African countries in 2023, with protests the primary driving force in 10 instances, making them the primary trigger for the third year in a row. Regulation has also frequently been used to target political dissent or opposition instead of, or alongside, efforts to tackle disinformation, highlighting the potential pitfalls of regulatory approaches to tackling the disinformation challenge in a context where institutions are more susceptible to political influence, whether in their approach or in those appointed to run the entities.

In West Africa alone at least six countries – Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo – have introduced cybercrime or cybersecurity laws since 2015 that outline punishments (which have often been applied selectively and in efforts to stymie political opponents) for the sharing of falsehoods. These punishments have generally involved a combination of time in prison and/or a substantive fine. Such measures risk limiting the space for public criticism of the state or can push individuals to self-censor to avoid the proscribed punishments. This highlights how poorly designed or selectively enforced legislative or policy responses to disinformation pose serious risks to human rights – particularly the right to freedom of expression (Watson & Habte, 2024).

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP(S)

The growing anti-Western sentiment that has emerged and resonated in parts of Africa, in particular among disgruntled youth, cannot be ignored. Engaging with the roots of such sentiment must be part of any partnership on disinformation that is thinking and working politically. EU-Africa partnerships to address disinformation should take careful consideration of audience receptiveness. The importance of holistic partnerships built around a nuanced contextual understanding through a process of shared learning is vital and can focus on:

1 **ENSURING THAT EU-AFRICA DIALOGUES ON DISINFORMATION, BE THEY AT MULTILATERAL OR BILATERAL LEVELS, ARE INCLUSIVE OF OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS FIGHTING DISINFORMATION** – CSOs, media, regulatory bodies – so as to develop more holistic plans or approaches to tackle the threat. Here the EU can seek to utilise tools like IMI to ensure that the approaches being developed are both comprehensive and rooted in local realities.

2 Given the importance of interventions having a nuanced understanding of the local context, **PLACING A GREATER EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AT A BILATERAL LEVEL**, over the development of multilateral frameworks and policies that the AU and regional structures have limited ability to ensure compliance with, can ensure that efforts are better tailored to specific needs and are more impactful.

3 **EXPLORING WAYS TO SUPPORT CONTINENTAL AND REGIONAL EFFORTS TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION ACROSS DEPARTMENTS**, beyond just those working on elections, through providing technical support to focal persons within these entities and their initiatives. For example, including a disinformation expert as part of the African Union's newly established working group on the Protection of Journalists (African Union, 2024b).

4 **COORDINATING EFFORTS TO CREATE LEARNING FORUMS FOR CREDIBLE CSOS, REGULATORS AND MEDIA BOTH WITHIN AFRICA, BUT ALSO BETWEEN AFRICAN EXPERTS AND THOSE IN EU MEMBER STATES**, particularly when it comes to identifying and countering foreign state engineered or supported interference and disinformation.

5 **SHARING EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGEMENTS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES AT BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL LEVELS** in order to think strategically and collectively on how to lobby social media companies to be more transparent and open towards independent research into their datasets and algorithms, in order to improve understanding of how they are manipulated. Lessons can be learned from how recent commitments made by technology companies to work together to detect and counter harmful AI content around elections have been achieved (see AI Elections Accord, 2024).

6 **SITUATING THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND AFRICA IN TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITHIN A WIDER STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**, either at the continental or the regional level, can aid sequencing and joined-up approaches, and can facilitate cross-continental lesson learning.

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