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Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life (CITAP), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill • What Comes After "Disinformation"?

"Factforward:" Foretelling the Future of Africa's Information Disorder

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It's not easy to talk about the future of something you don't know.

Perhaps that explains why not everyone is comfortable discussing the future of disinformation in Africa, where what truly amounts to disinformation is a heavily contested subject. "First of all, we don't know what it is," an Ethiopian journalist told us during a May 2022 interview in Addis Ababa, the capital. **"We hear about misinformation, disinformation. It's an elite discussion. Many of our people just see everything as being the same. They only know about 'information.' That is what matters."**

However, what awaits the continent of more than a billion people is nothing short of catastrophic if the words of an Ethiopian journalism lecturer, who studies the blatant information disorder, are anything to go by: "The future of disinformation," he says, "does not look bright." He identifies a set of challenges and opportunities, including the brazen but difficult attempts to control the production and dissemination of false information online. He is adamant that media literacy training and fact-checking will be central to curbing the surging, rampant digital disinformation campaigns across the continent. He hopes for a future where truth rather than false information flourishes.



Luca Bruls, May 2022, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), "A Media Store"

The hopeful but also mixed outlook shared by this Ethiopian academic along with other experts we interviewed is one reason that led us to the idea of "factforward," a word invested with hope and open to diverse interpretations. Realizing we are already living in a world dominated by online falsehoods, experts we interviewed show us how disinformation could evolve on a continent dominated by growing media usage, intersectional inequality, conflicts, and country-specific ways of managing information flows. **"Factforward" points to the optimism in these experts' belief that facts rather than disinformation will be the guiding principle in Africa's future information**

flows. We are convinced only more research investments in the African information ecosystem will truly reflect the real meaning of "factforward."

Although the aforementioned Ethiopian academic draws a distinction between several categories of false information such as disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, propaganda, conspiracy, and hoaxes, he prefers to collectively refer to them as "fake news," in contrast to UNESCO's local usage of "information disorder." The "fake news" concept was selected as the word of the year by Collins Dictionary in 2017, given that the use of the phrase had increased 365% since 2016. The definition according to Collins, is "false, often

sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.” However, as a term, “fake news” is disputed. Journalists, for instance, have been concerned that the expression is an anachronism since news by definition must be true.

While the characteristics of the information ecosystem differ from country to country and the challenges play out differently at the local scale, interviews with selected experts from Mali, the Sahel, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Senegal uncover imaginaries on the future of the disinformation ecosystem in sub-Saharan Africa. They suggest that **Africa-specific dynamics of democratization, state control, and mobility shape the creation of a difficult information disorder and link pervasive social media usage with growing ethnic, religious, and political tensions in many African countries.** In the following section, we present insights from the interviews to develop an argument on the deepening intersectional inequality of information access and media literacy, as well as escalating state failures to administratively and technically dismantle convoluted information flows.

Understanding Africa’s Information Disorder through Expert Interviews

The expert interview is a method used in empirical social research to get expert knowledge on a particular issue (Bogner, Littig & Menz 2009, 1). It is particularly useful for researchers who seek to understand an issue across a large region and draw comparisons, without being involved in complex, time-consuming data-gathering processes. This method was beneficial to us because we wanted to gain relatively quick insight into structural contexts, as well as local knowledge pertaining to Africa’s information disorder from various fields such as anthropology, law, public health, media, politics, and religious studies. The interview cohort had a selective bias of one woman and four men. Although researchers have carried out country-specific misinformation and disinformation studies across Africa (e.g., Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022; Tully et. al, 2021; Cheeseman et. al, 2020), only a handful of these have sought to investigate how disinformation connects with the continent’s conflict ecology. Funded by the Norwegian Research Council, our project, [Decoding Digital Media in African Regions of Conflict \(DDMAC\)](#), seeks to fill this gap.



Current Misinformation and Disinformation Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa

To constitute what beholds the future of the information disorder, it is necessary to reflect on existing studies in Africa. We have to stress that research exploring digital falsehoods in Africa is still in its infancy with most studies focusing mostly on the motives of sharing false information online. There seems to be less focus, for example, on how conflict and hatred are at the core of disordering narratives. **People share misinformation because they find it funny to do so, findings from a recent study of university students in six African countries, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, concluded (Madrid-Morales et. al 2021).** Indeed, misinformation and disinformation spreads come in all shapes and sizes including as xenophobic messages or violence-inciting messages. Based on surveys in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) provide evidence that people often came across misleading and completely made-up news stories about politics. A thematic analysis of messages by Twitter influencers in Nigeria also confirmed that these users share mis- and disinformation in order to spread transregional xenophobic narratives about South Africans and show solidarity with Nigerians living in South Africa (Umejei 2020). There is a connection between these studies and what the experts we interviewed said particularly when it comes to the use of digital media to express political opinions and national and ethnic bias within a context where institutions do little to control these information flows. Experts we interviewed agree that current conditions associated with the disinformation ecosystem across the African online sphere will likely shape what is to come. To anticipate “factforward,” it is necessary to link these past, present, and future practices and conditions.

Focal Points for the Future of Disinformation

Identity-Based Access

The dynamics determining the distribution of disinformation are heavily influenced by users' race, gender, ethnicity, and class. A professor of anthropology, based in Dakar, Senegal commented:

The distribution of information has a gender, class and ethnic bias because of the localization of communities and their connectivity. The most well connected are young men, who more easily discuss political, social and economic issues online. Women have less access online, when they do, their interest is mainly in other questions.



Mirjam de Bruijn, August 2022, Bamako (Mali), "A meeting among Fulani about the conflict in Mali"

This gender divide is also emphasized by the fact that female journalists and communicators are more exposed to hatred and prolific online violence (Posetti et al, 2021). Another expert, a Nigerian-born political anthropologist based in the United States, emphasized the need to look at class in order to determine what future disinformation patterns will look like. Elite groups, he suggested, are responsible for developing misinformation strategies "to actualize their objects." Middle-class groups also have "their own interests and agendas and they amplify these messages." The third layer, vulnerable communities, "may rely on upper classes and middle classes for information and see them as authentic representatives." **So intersectionality, that is, how multiple identity aspects such as gender, class, and ethnicity together contribute to systematic injustice and marginalization, is an important concept for understanding people's variable access to information.** This concept should influence strategies seeking to put facts first.

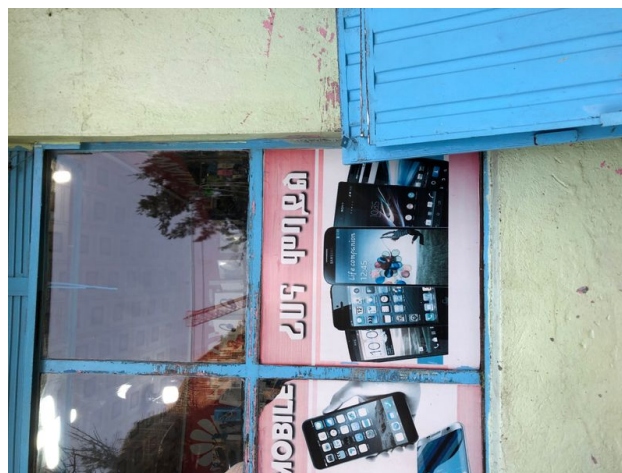
Increased Usage

The predicted growth in access to digital media in Africa is likely to exacerbate the spread of disinformation. The Nigeria-born professor already cited above was adamant that as Africans continue to use social media, the

threat of disinformation will continue to grow.

Although disinformation and misinformation have always existed, it circulates faster and more widely due to social media. Moreover, it is easily altered and remade by people, with the result that various layers of misinformation circulate.

Another expert, a Netherlands-based law professor reckons that as long as nothing is done to stem the tide against digital illiteracy, then it would be impossible to find sustainable solutions to disinformation. People struggle to “filter, frame and judge the information they receive on their phones.” It has been argued that the increased spread of disinformation is linked to ‘bots’ or software programs that perform automated tasks. However, research published in *Science* in 2018 indicates that it is humans rather than robots who spread disordering information; people are 70% more likely to share disinformation on social media than true stories (Vosoughi 2018).



Luca Bruls, May 2022, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), "'Life Companion': Advertisement for Smartphones"

Another expert, trained as a political scientist, suggests that people in local communities in Senegal largely get their information from social media. Senegalese people prefer information shared by individuals rather than by governmental institutions on social media. Simultaneously, the Netherlands-based law professor states that “there is a discrepancy between the development of these media and the state, administrative and technical capacity.” Present-day institutions are incapable of guaranteeing the security of media usage even while “public information is becoming more and more popular.” Hence, he argues that rather than controlling information on social media, finding solutions to the information disorder more likely results from the interplay of counternarratives, anticipating fact-check agencies, and initiatives stressing the power of media usage.

Country-Specific

Our Netherlands-based law professor underscored the need to conduct country-specific studies in forecasting the future of disinformation in Africa, a continent of over 50 countries. For example, he thinks that “it may become worse in Mali,” a west African country, which is currently bearing the brunt of what he considered a “hardening authoritarian regime.” In neighboring countries, there might be more political openings that could have influence on the “management of misinformation.” He therefore believes current socio-political conditions will determine what is on the horizon. **Complicating matters, some African countries have come up with regulatory regimes to curb disinformation and others haven’t. Those who have come up with**

regulation against false news, including Uganda and Kenya, have faced accusations of attempting to stop dissent and of using the laws as a tool of censorship (See Ogola, 2019). Deep-seated conflicts, experts told us, will have a big say on the diffusion of disinformation in Africa.

“Factforward”

Based on a summary of these expert viewpoints, it is rather difficult for us to give a positive outlook on the future of disinformation. Although the future is uncertain and non-linear, contemporary and historical conditions indicate that the information disorder may continue to flourish. The combination of class, gender, and ethnic disparities in media access and literacy, the presence of violent groups and politicians who benefit from confusion, the lack of governance and appropriate laws concerning digital media, and the lack of cooperation between civil society organizations, religious authorities, and political groups are a breeding ground for the continuation of the information disorder on the African continent. Additionally, experts argue that disinformation may further escalate and instigate conflicts in a region that houses diverse ethnic and religious communities.

However, experts do not take developments mapping the contemporary world for granted. They are hopeful that civil society involvement will have a hand in controlling the production and dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. **State-sponsored campaigns are not sufficient, they argue, because local authoritarian governments take financial and political interest in covering things up.** The experts clarify that training Africans in media literacy to learn to filter, frame, and judge information, the presence of fact-checking agencies, the employment of moderators who are aware of linguistic and cultural subtleties to tackle disinformation discourses, and Afrocentric AI monitoring systems are among solutions to push facts forward. These imaginaries indicate that what comes after disinformation depends on action and negotiation. The expert interviews prove the necessity for disinformation and misinformation scholars to concentrate on imaginaries to gain an understanding of local and regional questions that are essential to curb the spread of falsities.

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