

Responses To Information Disorders: What can governments do?

- ❖ **Government actions to counter information disorders are compromised by lack of access-to-information laws, legislative loopholes and a limited understanding of the complex nature of information disorders.**
- ❖ **Lack of accountability of social media platforms and ineffective content moderation where it does exist, enables mis/disinformation.**
- ❖ **Lack of accountability of many governments in Africa creates an enabling environment for the circulation of mis/disinformation and in some cases the use of laws to deter state critics and defenders of human rights.**
- ❖ **Governments should prioritise the education of politicians as an important step in developing effective state responses to ameliorating information disorders. As well as collaborate with civil society organisations working on improving media and digital literacy for citizens.**
- ❖ **Governments, and particularly information regulators where they exist, could also support independent fact checking organisations to develop capacity to counter dis/misinformation.**

Introduction

Advancements in technology and improved internet connectivity have made it easy for anyone with access to it, and the skills to use it, to create and disperse information. While these advancements have positive impacts on democratic processes and have been especially beneficial to marginalised groups, an unintended consequence has been the rise of information disorder or the pollution of information ecosystems.

This has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic during which there has been an acceleration of the virality of false information and deepening of public distrust of institutions. Information disorders in Africa are further compounded by other issues such as lagging digital development, ethical challenges facing traditional media and non-mediated channels¹; and complicated dynamics behind the global political economy of information consumption. Which have a range of social and political ramifications. The importance of information, media and social networks in

¹ <https://theconversation.com/public-trust-in-the-media-is-at-a-new-low-a-radical-rethink-of-journalism-is-needed-155257>

managing the pandemic and the mass of information and disinformation on it, has become referred to as the infodemic².

Despite these context-specific nuances, studies of information disorders are disproportionately dominated by discourses in the Global North, which influence response mechanisms and models in the Global South. To bridge this gap, Research ICT Africa undertook a scoping study of efforts to counter information disorders in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study forms part of a wider global South project³ led by the University of Cape Town.

The project seeks to gain a better understanding of information disorders in the global south, as well as to identify opportunities for inter- and intra-regional cooperation through these interconnected objectives:

- to map the actors currently working to counter information disorders, and identify current frameworks upon which interventions are based;
- to learn from current approaches, tools and methods of countering disinformation;
- and
- to gain an overview of the research landscape and identify key issues and questions for further research.

This research brief draws on early findings of the sub-Saharan Africa study to highlight key areas requiring state intervention. Interviews with actors, primarily civil society organisations in the sub-Saharan region revealed a high level of distrust in government interventions to counter information disorders.

Historically, both colonial and independent states in sub-Saharan Africa have intentionally spread falsehoods and used media to incite fear and maintain political order and even precipitate genocide. The distrust in public institutions and governments is therefore not unfounded. However, an analysis of the actors' methods and their perceptions of the infodemic show that there is a need for government intervention.

This brief proposes ways governments in Sub-Saharan Africa can effectively counter the infodemic. It outlines some governance gaps in countering information disorders and recommends actions governments could take to close these gaps. The full report of the study is to be published later in 2022 and will include perspectives from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America.

“...providing ‘good’ information is not the simple fix to the infodemic, access-to-information laws are an important step to respecting citizens’ right to information.”

Governance gap 1: Lack of access to data and info sources

² <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>

³ <https://disinfoafrica.org/idrc-research-project/>

As stipulated in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa⁴, access to information allows governments to ensure that citizens can exercise their constitutional rights to make informed democratic decisions. Ideally, this would equip citizens to have informed dialogues about issues that affect their lives. Despite the benefits cited in the Declaration, less than 50% (21 out of 55) of the African Union member states have passed and adopted access-to-information legislation⁵.

Although the actors and organisations interviewed in the study agree that providing ‘good’ information is not the simple fix to the infodemic, access-to-information laws are an important step to respecting citizens’ right to information. It helps to bridge a lack of access to accurate and factual information which makes many Africans vulnerable to mis/disinformation.

Further, the efforts of non-state actors (such as ARTICLE 19), who are working to advocate for policies and legislations that will counter mis/disinformation⁶ are compromised by state actors. For instance, although the West African region has the highest number of countries that have access-to-information laws, governments in countries like Nigeria⁷ have passed other laws that undermine the effectiveness of the access-to-information legislation, including the blocking of certain social media platforms viewed as enabling dissent.

In terms of enabling legislation, there is therefore still room for the remaining 34 governments to act. Furthermore, it is not enough to only adopt these laws - countries should respect citizens’ rights of access to information. In some countries where these laws have been passed but are not fully enforced, governments continue to violate citizens’ rights to expression and to information.

Governance gap 2: Inappropriate use of legislation/policy provisions on misinformation

A legal analysis of legislation and policies across sub-Saharan Africa found that most of these regulations are specifically targeted at ameliorating ‘fake news’ or ‘hate speech’. Actors are, however, concerned that given some African states’ history of weaponising the media, the regulations’ vague descriptions or scope of what they define as ‘fake news’ or ‘hate speech’ could lead to the repression of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and press freedom. On the other hand, social media platforms appear less concerned about the moderation of dis/misinformation on their platforms in sub-Saharan Africa, in comparison to other regions around the world. A recent investigation by Time⁸ revealed that low wages and unfavourable working conditions faced by subcontracted Facebook moderators based in Nairobi, has a serious impact on Facebook’s ability to police

⁴ <https://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=69>

⁵ https://foip.saha.org.za/uploads/images/StateOfATI_Africa_2017_FullReport_20170928.pdf

⁶ <https://csirt.uct.ac.za/fake-news-misinformation-and-disinformation-same-same-or-different>

⁷ <https://www.article19.org/resources/kenya-and-nigeria-digital-rights-organisations-rebuke-restrictions-on-the-rights-and-freedoms-during-covid-19-using-cyber-crimes-legislation/>

⁸ <https://time.com/6147458/facebook-africa-content-moderation-employee-treatment/>

content in Ethiopia. In comparison to other regions around the world, Facebook moderators in Nairobi are not given the same considerations for mental healthcare. Furthermore, even when concerns were raised about the state of mental health in 2019, moderators were not compensated as was done to American moderators in 2020.

The lack of accountability by both governments and social media platforms has led to the deployment of rights-infringing strategies such as internet shutdowns, online surveillance, social media platform bans, amplification of online violence; or has placed vulnerable groups at risk of further abuse. There are also concerns that the uncommitted and inconsistent content moderation by social media platforms in Africa enable some African governments to use these vague disinformation laws to target critics and defenders of human rights⁹. Whatever the case, these strategies have unintended impacts on democratic political and electoral processes and places states at risk of major economic loss¹⁰.

State-centric approaches to content regulation and ultimately the amelioration of information disorder will need to reimagine new legislative and technical strategies without imperiling press and expression freedoms online, or leaving public discourse in the hands of private institutions. To start this process, policymakers in the region would have to educate themselves on internet governance-related matters such as the benefits and risks of emerging technologies. It is also imperative that they understand the benefits of functioning information systems. This education and understanding will allow them to gain new insights into how law and policy can be used to counter contemporary challenges arising from information disorder, through enabling strategies that empower citizens, rather than crude and blunt strategies, such as internet shutdowns.

Media literacy and content moderation alone are not sufficient to address the factors engendering information disorders.

Governance Gap 3: Recognition of the complex nature of the infodemic

The types of methods deployed by the actors in this scoping project revealed the complexity of the information disorder. Actors' perceptions of dis/misinformation were largely determined by the social or political context in which they are standing - influenced by historical or situational challenges. There is an array of compounding factors that engender the current information disorder in sub-Saharan Africa; additionally, media literacy and content moderation alone are not sufficient to address these factors.

For instance, people living with albinism in Ghana have been at risk of ritual murder because of 'myths' or 'cultural stereotypes' about albinism. The Ghana Association

⁹ <https://restofworld.org/2021/social-media-africa-democracy/>

¹⁰ <https://qz.com/africa/2043666/twitter-ban-has-cost-nigeria-over-360-million-in-two-months/>

of Persons with Albinism (GAPA) consider these ‘myths’ or ‘cultural stereotypes’ to be a form of mis/disinformation. While the myths primarily circulate offline, their virality has been increased by the adoption of social networking platforms.

In Uganda, the Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) network is using social media to counter coverage that misrepresents and poses potential harm to members of the LGBTQI+ community. These groups or organisations have found social, policy and legal advocacy strategies to be an effective method for countering the mis/disinformation faced by their communities.

Other organisations such as the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) are concerned about the effects of mis/disinformation on electoral processes and relate it to electoral or media illiteracy. EISA develops and supports various educational programmes and initiatives to fill informational gaps.

In contrast to government focus on content regulation and often-misguided legal actions, non-state actors are deploying a variety of strategies to achieve their aims:

- monitoring and fact-checking;
- education advancing;
- investigation efforts;
- technical and algorithmic interventions;
- media campaigns;
- empowerment and credibility labeling efforts;
- policy / legislative advocacy; and
- electoral focus

Conclusion

The wide range of actors and methods deployed to counter the mis/disinformation supports the need to strive for a multi-stakeholder approach. While governments in sub-Saharan Africa cannot deploy every method or address every classification of dis/misinformation they can promote a coordinated multi-stakeholder by investing (financial or resource capacity) in a variety of non-state actors. State actors would also benefit from investing in risk communication and community engagement strategies¹¹ that factor in the complexity of information disorders.

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa can reclaim public trust by:

- adopting and adequately enforcing access-to-information laws
- addressing legislative constraints that impede upon expression and press freedoms by capacitating themselves with the necessary information to adequately govern information systems such as the internet

¹¹ <https://researchictafrica.net/2021/10/31/south-africas-covid-19-information-app-most-popular-with-urban-dwellers-women-and-youth/>

- actively supporting existing and important state and non-state actors.

The findings of the forthcoming report will provide a more detailed analysis of the state of information disorders in the region.

For more updates on this project, sign up [here](#).

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