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the rise of disinformation

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BAD MEDICINE
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AFRiCA iN FACT

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GGA
Good Governance Africa

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A double-edged sword

We live in a world where new advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are announced on an almost daily basis. These developments are expanding the frontiers of vital sectors like healthcare (diagnostics, surgery, and therapies) and education, as well as media, retail, and financial services.

But, as with any tool, AI can be used for good and for bad, and this issue of *Africa in Fact* sets out to look at how the technology has enabled a flood of misinformation and disinformation, both of which pose a serious threat to good governance and human security on our continent, and proposes strategies to mitigate the risks.

AI-enabled misinformation and disinformation are two different things; misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent, often resulting from a lack of verification. Disinformation, meanwhile, is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information with the intent to deceive and manipulate.

AI technologies have drastically transformed the way information is created and spread. These advancements have democratised access to information, enabling individuals to communicate and share knowledge more efficiently. However, they have also lowered the barriers to producing and disseminating false information on an unprecedented scale.

An Africa Center for Strategic Studies research report, published in March this year, and quoted several times in this issue, said the 189 documented disinformation campaigns in Africa were nearly quadruple the number reported in 2022. Disinformation campaigns, the report said, had targeted every region of the continent, with

at least 39 countries the targets of specific information campaigns.

As the articles published in this issue of AIF confirm, AI's impact on information dissemination is particularly pronounced in Africa, where internet penetration and mobile phone usage have rapidly grown. Social media platforms, powered by sophisticated algorithms, can amplify false narratives quickly, reaching millions of users in no time. This phenomenon is not limited to harmless rumours; it encompasses a wide range of malicious content, including political propaganda, fake news, and misleading health information.

Good governance relies on transparency, accountability, and informed citizenry, and misinformation and disinformation undermine these in several ways: they erode trust in institutions (including elections); they can incite violence and intolerance in communities, particularly where ethnic tensions already exist, or the political landscape is highly polarised; they subvert the ability of both politicians and citizens to make informed decisions; they can damage public health; and enable malicious actors to manipulate public opinion and sway political outcomes, undermining the democratic process.

In their opening article, Africa Center for Strategic Studies researcher Mark Duerksen and co-writers, Harriet Ofori and Vanessa Manessong, write that Africa's information circuits are overloading under a surge of disinformation. "The growing problem is undermining the open dialogue and fact-based reality required to sustain democratic processes," they write, "and the outcomes are increasingly spilling into real-world instability."

A wake-up call for how quickly disinformation can escalate and incite deadly violence came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, they write, when disinformation

"pressure groups" ratcheted up rhetoric and conspiracies that led to the deaths of five peacekeepers and more than 30 protesters in the summer of 2022.

Contributor Neil Ford writes that there's no doubt technology is playing a growing role in African politics, including campaigning and voting. "By harnessing the power of big data and social media, politicians can target their messages at individual voters, " he writes, "[but] this threatens the democratic process by enabling the spread of inaccurate information, voter manipulation and even hate speech."

On the other hand, Ford points out that AI tools can also counter the worst excesses of social media by detecting and combating misinformation. AI, he writes, can also encourage people to vote by automating voter registration, with chatbots providing potential voters with information on registration and polling sites.

In his article, renowned digital strategist Chris Roper illustrates how the growing rollout of generative AI is eroding press freedom by "driving down the cost of production, allowing bad actors to scale propaganda campaigns, and reaching new audiences."

"There are no easy remedies to the damage disinformation is doing to press freedom across the continent," he writes. "News organisations will have to empower their staff to use the tools and techniques of organisations that combat disinformation and concentrate on building and maintaining a relationship of trust with their audiences."

Good Governance researcher Mmabatho Mongae agrees that improving information systems to mitigate misinformation is crucial. She writes that the consequences of failing to do so are already evident in political instability, such as coups in West Africa and skewed electoral outcomes. "These examples demonstrate

that disinformation poses a severe threat to democracy in Africa, potentially more so than in other regions due to the continent's unique vulnerabilities," she says.

Mitigation strategies proposed by contributors include strengthening media literacy, educating people on how to critically evaluate information sources and recognise fake news and content. Governments must also enhance regulatory frameworks, developing and enforcing regulations that hold social media platforms and other purveyors of information accountable for the content they host. Two other strands that weave through this issue are the need for a multi-stakeholder, collaborative approach involving governments, civil society, the private sector and international

organisations to combat the twin evil of misinformation and disinformation. Also, fact-checking initiatives must be equipped with the tools and resources to counter false information.

All of the articles in this issue of AIF make the point, one way or another, that AI-driven technologies have the potential to drive progress and development in Africa, but they also facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation, threatening good governance and human security. Fighting back requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to promote media literacy, enhance regulatory frameworks, develop ethical AI, encourage collaboration, and support fact-checking initiatives.

Susan Russell – Editor

THE FENCE FRAMEWORK

Fighting disinformation in Africa is a team sport

By Mark Duerksen, Vanessa Manessong, and Harriet Ofori

Africa's circuits of information are overloading under a surge of disinformation. The growing problem is undermining the open dialogue and fact-based reality required to sustain democratic processes – and the outcomes are increasingly spilling into real-world instability.

From the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, where pro-government actors and pro-Ambazonia separatists spread malicious falsehoods and urge followers to "*kumkumize* (kill) instantly", to recent elections in Kenya and Nigeria that were hotbeds of algorithmic tactics to skew the truth and underhandedly seize the narrative, to the Sahel states where insecurity is deepening while conspiracies and cynicism are mainlined into public discourse through deceptive and deliberate manipulations, political actors with self-serving – and often plainly anti-democratic – agendas are turning information into a weapon in Africa.

A wake-up call for how quickly disinformation can escalate and incite deadly violence came from the Democratic Republic of Congo when disinformation "pressure groups" ratcheted up rhetoric and conspiracies that resulted in the deaths of five peacekeepers and more than 30 protesters in the summer of 2022.

As of 2024, researchers have documented more than 189 disinformation campaigns targeting the African continent, a nearly fourfold escalation since 2022. These attacks interfere with the networks that

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa," Infographic, March 13, 2024.

connect the 400 million+ Africans now using social media regularly (up from just 100 million in 2016). Many of these users rely on platforms like Facebook and X as their primary source of news.

The head-spinning uptake of smartphones and social media platforms in Africa points to the appealing power these tools have to revolutionise information's accessibility and decentralisation. These technologies, however, have fundamentally recircuited the continent's networks and flows of information, bringing a trail of vulnerabilities and, because surge protectors are not yet in place, overriding what existed of fact-based constraints to

de-escalate rhetoric to ensure reliable news options and to enable conducive spaces for communication. Unlike analogue propaganda, social media platforms allow disinformation sponsors to easily cloak their identity while supercharging their reach to instantly mislead millions of users.

The result is what media sources in Burkina Faso have decried as a crisis of "anti-communication", what concerned Kenyans have described as a society wracked by "information disorder", and what other African media monitoring groups are calling an "infodemic".

This does not have to be the story of

How Disinformation Shifts the Conversation and Drowns Out African Voices

1. **Identify** a target information ecosystem with vulnerabilities

Intentional degradation of an information space
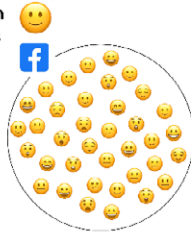
2. **Infiltrate** infospace with coordinated network of "trolls" (fake, bought, or bot accounts) to manipulate social media algorithms

3. **Inflame** and distract with falsehoods and conspiracies

4. **Inhibit** constructive conversations by driving polarization and driving moderate users away through harassment and by inauthentically dominating content
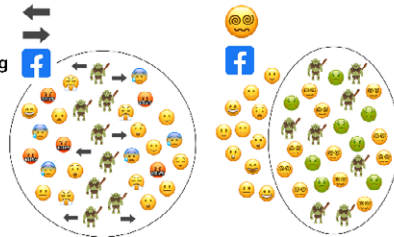
5. **Indoctrinate** and radicalize true believers and occassionally prime the pump with new disinformation

digitalisation in Africa. Like much of the world, a reckoning with these emerging tools and a creative restoration of credible hubs of information is sorely needed to re-anchor national politics and psyches to reality and away from extremist silos.

The immediate challenge is to create surge protectors – what we can simply call "fences" – to keep disinformation out and empower online users to protect themselves from manipulative interference. African researchers and practitioners, including more than 30 organisations that have contributed to documenting the extent of disinformation in Africa, are putting their heads

together with concerned citizens and partners to put this type of resiliency in place.

This counterstrategy works best when led from the ground up, with citizens recognising the threat and seeking to reclaim sovereignty over their info spaces. This approach has shown results in the Baltics, Taiwan, and Sudan (prior to civil war) when spearheaded by local non-governmental actors (NGAs). In these cases, a variety of NGAs combined forces to draw on their skills and specialties to respond quickly and adaptably to disinformation attacks in ways that resonated and cultivated trust with their fellow citizens. In

Sudan, groups like Beam Reports published Arabic reports on disinformation and took their findings to Facebook pages where they used humour and local dialects to puncture the appeal of foreign-backed disinformation. While each success story involves strategies tailored to individual contexts and practices, the approaches embraced by effective counterstrategies all involve a three-part process that we call the fence framework. Fences have three parts (posts, slats, and signs):

POSTS

Combating disinformation starts with data – good, rigorous information about how online and adjacent offline spaces are manipulated and polluted with fictions. Data scraping and digital forensics help gather and interpret insights and focus counterstrategies, providing sturdy foundations for fenceposts. Researchers have an expanding arsenal of tools and methods at their disposal for developing this knowledge base, including the ABCDE approach (uncovering disinformation actors, their behaviours, content they spread, the degree of its reach, and the effect it has), the concept of tracking identifiable malign TTPs (tactics, techniques, and procedures) through a taxonomy elaborated through the DISARM

framework, and the OpenCTI platform to organise data, explore connections, and share findings.

These tools enable more effective analysis of the content disseminated on social media, as well as a better understanding of the demographics and coordination of disinformation campaigns and the specific TTPs used in each campaign. For example, in some Sahelian countries, researchers have identified that brute force copy-paste techniques are a simple but effective means commonly used in Russian-linked disinformation campaigns.

Academic researchers, investigative journalists, factcheckers, and analysts from media, youth, tech, and civic NGAs are all part of generating these insights. We are starting to see trainings scaled up and toolkits become more accessible to African users, allowing this knowledge to be generated on the continent. Groups like Code for Africa, Debunk. org, and DFRLab all offer online courses for African analysts interested in fighting disinformation.

Locally generated insights are made sturdier when they go beyond digital data and involve ground truthing to better interrogate why certain TTPs are finding soft spots in a specific region or demographic. Historical inquiries and local interviews in African languages are indispensable to making sense of

Slats
(Networks, collaboration, teamwork)

Signs
(communicating)

Posts
(Evidence, data, and analysis)
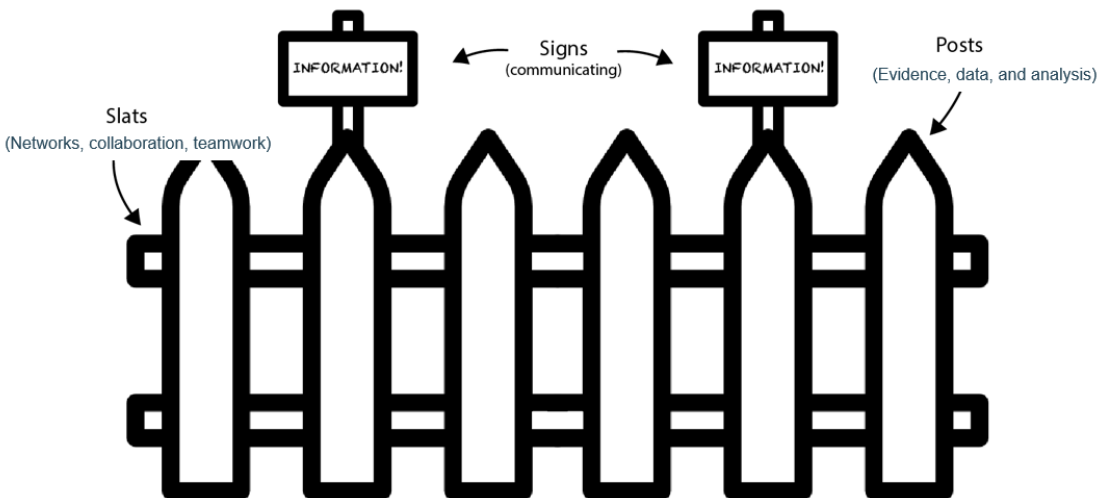
digital data. Here, researchers in Africa have excelled, offering a rich set of publications that reflect on why disinformation sticks in certain places and what ways it may be dislodged.

This grounded understanding of disinformation underscores the importance of basing research on the continent and expanding access to training and data for African researchers. This is an uphill struggle as social media companies continue to limit transparency and deprioritise African requests for assistance.

SLATS

Fighting disinformation effectively is a team sport. Slats are the connective and structuring elements of counter-disinformation. In practice, this means establishing standards, shared lexicons, trusted networks and collaborations to exchange information and collectively tackle the huge task of monitoring and addressing disinformation across boundless online spaces.

Research on disinformation campaigns

must be exchangeable and interpretable by practitioners to have an impact. Recently, there have been breakthroughs in establishing this type of interoperability with experts converging around a package of terms, methodologies, and taxonomies that establish (F)IMI [(Foreign) Information Manipulation and Interference] analysis standards. This set of shared definitions and approaches allows a democracy NGO in Accra to talk to a media monitoring analyst in Nairobi about the threats they are seeing in their information spaces and piece together the bigger picture. Because disinformation is borderless, this type of collaboration is essential for tracking sprawling campaigns and warning neighbours about emerging TTPs.

Setting up and sustaining trusted networks requires resources. African practitioners are creating these spaces but need support to fund workshops and conferences where NGOs can share strategies, learn about emerging technologies, and best practices, and form relationships that can lead to data-exchanges and collaborations. Often

Graphic: Model by StabilityAI

the problem of disinformation has been seen by partners as so immense and complicated that it has brought cautious approaches, that while thoughtful and measured, have verged on paralysis. Thankfully, more initiatives are coming online but will need to be coordinated to avoid redundancies and outdated trainings in this fast-moving space.

The vision for interoperable and open-source collaborations comes from cyber security, which has more than 30 years of lessons to offer counter-disinformation. Tools like OpenCTI and the Styx data model that underlie it are adapted directly from cyber defence systems. The gold standard of slats for cyber are ISACs (Information Sharing and Analysis Centers). Therefore, the goal is for African counter-disinformation organisations to set up a series of loosely affiliated ISACs – these can take a variety of forms and involve different levels of formality – that create a decentralised ecosystem of citizens defending their information spaces together. Through these efforts, hubs of credible information

can start to form a latticework of stability in our new information landscapes.

SIGNS

Fence signs inform and warn the public about the dangers of disinformation. This is the critical third step of leveraging data and networks and turning them into action that can mitigate disinformation. This includes strategic communication during moments of crisis or confusion, programmes to alert and arm the public over the long and short term, commitments from politicians to disavow disinformation, tailored regulations from policymakers, and pressure on social media companies.

Different disinformation campaigns need different responses. The degree and effect of a campaign informs what inoculation and communication strategies to draw on to remove or contain the threat. Tools like the kill chain model and the DISARM responder TTPs can help guide practitioners in effective responses, ranging

from long-term digital literacy programmes, to anticipatory pre-bunking campaigns, to lobbying platforms to take down abusive content. There is rarely a silver bullet, and the work of defusing disinformation is endless. Often, fast-paced responses require a different skillset from research and a different set of practitioners skilled in the arts of breaking through the noise and reaching people in their information bubbles.

In South Africa, Media Monitoring Africa, with its dashboards and outreach, provides an adept example of empowering the public to understand disinformation and navigate their digital spaces, especially during moments of information volatility, like elections.

Effective countering of disinformation also involves increasing the strategic approach of many fact-checking platforms that are already active and doing important work in Africa (like the country-level teams that are part of coalitions like the African Fact-Checking Alliance (AFCA), the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), and the Africa Facts Network). These platforms should coordinate to avoid redundancy and enable users to make requests to verify facts before any significant engagement on social networks. Systems should also be put in place to flag recurring sources of disinformation and to highlight, remove, or label them for users. AI tools – like chatbots and advanced dashboards – should increasingly be tapped to reach and inform individual users who are inundated with disinformation attacks that are already using AI to expand their reach.

As long-term strategies are developed, training to spot disinformation and to learn digital literacy skills should be expanded and incorporated into classroom curriculums. These efforts can increase their impact by prioritising young people who have a strong presence on social networks and disadvantaged populations who often do not have access to up-to-date or accurate information – or

may be tempted to become part of the growing disinformation-for-hire industry in Africa.

The last mile of communication to vulnerable users is too often an afterthought, even when disinformation is detected. Given the fragmented nature of information networks today, effective education and messaging increasingly must come directly from the sources people still trust, which, research shows, is often friends and family members. Finding ways to inform and equip these "micro-influencers" with key messages and factual talking points about disinformation and how to avoid it must therefore be part of the communications strategy. There is still much to learn about useful signposting, and more African examples and case studies of successes and lessons are needed.

African countries are staring down converging challenges of climate change, conflict, displacement, military coups, and economic crisis that are all worsened by disinformation, which is fuelling a sense of resignation and despondency. Escaping the trap of despair and disengagement with politics will require fostering different digital forums, where a future can be imagined and political pathways towards it can be constructed on firm and factual grounds.

Currently, counter-disinformation fences are sporadic and full of gaps in Africa (as they are in much of the rest of the world). But in the future, if sustained resources are focused on building these defences, there may come a point when we can start to conceptualise them less about what they keep out and more about their connective potential as hubs for information exchanges and engagement. In this scenario, we may start to think of disinformation resiliency efforts as creating public gathering places – as stages (with posts, platforms, and productions) in our digital forums where a future, and a way out of the nihilism of disinformation, can start to take shape. **GG⤳**

RESHAPING INFORMATION

Education will play a central role in curbing disinformation

By Mmabatho Mongae

Africa's digital landscape is rapidly changing. Over the past seven years, digital news sources have almost doubled. According to the Afrobarometer, four in 10 adults across 43 countries surveyed report turning to the internet or social media a few times a week or daily for news. Interestingly, the rise in digital sources coincides with a decrease in trust in news.

Digital media, meanwhile, is not only reshaping information landscapes but is also influencing politics. Alongside this is the resurgence of Russian and Chinese interest in Africa. The expansion of China and Russia is often analysed through economic and military influence, but to what extent do these countries influence media trust in Africa and what are the implications thereof?

The 2023 Digital News Report revealed that there had been a global reduction in trust in news.

ABOVE AND THROUGHOUT: Vintage Chinese and Russian propaganda posters...

Graphic: chineseposters.net

The report also found that digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram were becoming important sources of information for news, especially in the Global South. While most Africans (69%) use radio and television (54%) either every day or a few times a week for information, between 2014/15 and 2019/2021, the number of respondents who got their information from social media or the internet nearly doubled from 24% to 43%.

This year, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) reported that Russia hads led at least 189 known campaigns targeting 39 African countries – 72 campaigns in West Africa, 33 in East Africa, and 25 in southern Africa. The report also found that about 60% of disinformation campaigns on the continent were foreign state-sponsored, primarily by Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.
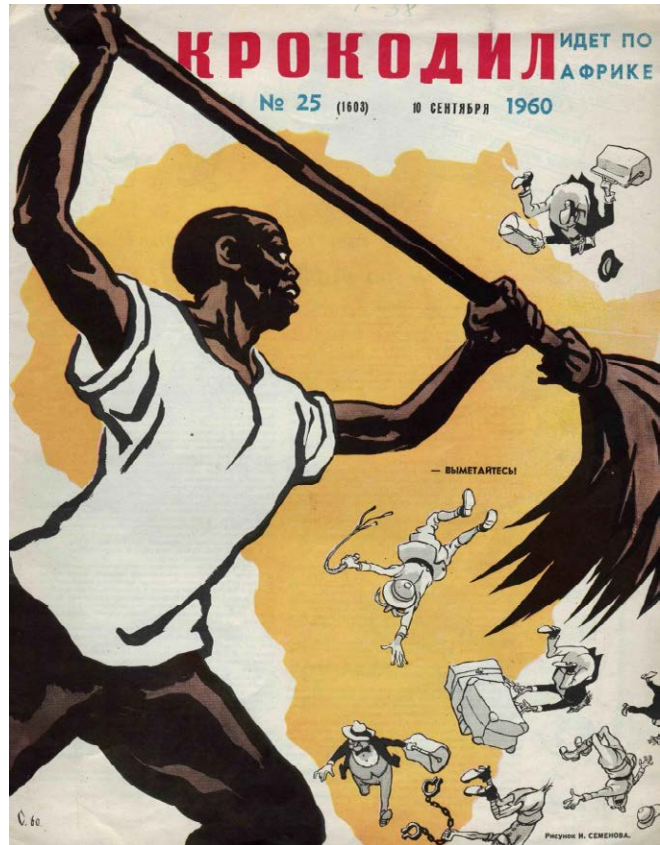
Disinformation, which is defined as the intentional dissemination of false information with the intent of advancing a political objective, blurs the line between fact and fiction. Often, the aim of disinformation is less about convincing the targeted audience and more about a strategy to confuse citizens. This negatively affects social trust, the ability to engage in politics fairly, critical thinking and, ultimately, the functioning of democracy. And while dis- and misinformation are not unique to Africa, vulnerable information systems make African countries more susceptible to manipulation

On 21 April 2022, Reuters reported that Ethiopians queued outside the Russian embassy in Addis Ababa to help Russia in Ukraine. The Ethiopian foreign ministry and Russian embassy both made statements refuting claims that Russia was deploying Ethiopian volunteers. Notably, there were no reports of Ethiopians offering their services to the Ukrainian embassy. Perhaps this can be explained by social media rumours in Ethiopia that claimed those who fought in Russia would be paid $2,000 and possibly work for Russia after the war had ended.

Russian disinformation has been particularly evident in West Africa, sometimes culminating in coups. Burkina Faso is an illustrative example: in 2022, the country experienced two coups in nine months. On 30 October 2023, the *Washington Post* reported that Russian operatives created fake social media accounts exploiting the legitimate fears and frustrations of Burkinabe. These accounts glorified

Russian President Vladimir Putin, advocated for closer ties between Russia and Burkina Faso, and overstated the success of the Wagner Group. Given the meticulous nature of Russia's disinformation campaigns, it is unclear if Russia orchestrated the September 2022 coup or merely capitalised on the unrest. However, it is believed that the first coup leader, Lt Col Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, faced pressure to align more closely with Russia.

Campaigns like these also use local actors groomed to influence opinion, online networks, and Russian state media. For example, Russia employs pro-Russian platforms to sub-contract African media and social media influencers to spread false information that is disseminated in African languages. Like China, Russia pushes the narrative that it has no colonial baggage and presents itself as a long-time friend and big brother.

Entertainment is another tool used in these campaigns. The 2021 Russian war film, *Le Touriste*

Graphics: chineseposters.net

(The Tourist), portrays Russian mercenaries as heroes fighting corrupt governments and jihadis on behalf of Central African Republic citizens. Similarly, animated comic content targets youth on platforms such as X, Instagram and WhatsApp. These campaigns use both fake and real people, making it difficult to detect and remove them. By using local actors, disinformation appears more relatable and locally authentic, complicating identification efforts.

Another example is Facebook removing several inauthentic, coordinated accounts operating in eight African countries in 2019 that had been engaged in long-term disinformation and influence campaigns that promoted Chinese and Russian interests. Dr Shelby Grossman, a research scholar, led the team that worked with Facebook to identify and analyse Russian-linked disinformation in Africa. During this investigation, Facebook pages linked to the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Russian mercenary military Wagner group, were discovered. These

pages were found to consistently promote content supportive of the incumbent authorities in various African countries, including Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Madagascar, and Libya. Grossman's findings revealed that the 73 inauthentic pages were posted 48,000 times, were liked by over 1.7 million accounts, and received more than 9.7 million interactions from users.

Compared to Russia, China's influence is more institutionalised. This involves training African journalists and editors through Chinese programmes aimed at discouraging criticism of African presidents and their ministries, along with Chinese officials. Additionally, China adopts a strategy of acquiring ownership shares in African media houses and directing their editorial practices towards the Chinese model.

When asked whether the government should have the authority to restrict or prohibit the dissemination of false news or information, hate

ЦЕПИ РВУТСЯ–ЭТО ОТЗВУК НАШЕЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ!

中、非人民情谊深

speech, or content critical of the president, 77% of respondents surveyed by the Afrobarometer expressed support for government intervention to limit the sharing of false news or information.

Following this, 7% believed that the government should restrict the dissemination of hate speech, while 47% said the government should block any news, information, or opinions of which the government disapproved. On average, 60% of Africans assessed the media as either completely or somewhat free. Perceptions were the highest in Gambia (82%), Namibia (80%), Burkina Faso and Tanzania (78% respectively), and Tunisia (77%). In contrast, perceptions were low in Liberia (19%), Gabon (22%) Eswatini (35%), Togo (45%) and Côte d'Ivoire (46%).

Similarly, 65% of Africans said that the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government control. It is worth noting that perceptions were the highest in the strongest and most democratic countries, including Botswana,

Mauritius, Seychelles, Gabon, South Africa, and Ghana. Notably, Eswatini features in the top 10 countries that support media freedom. Support for media was predictably lower in non-democratic countries, with Mali at 41%, Morocco at 46%, and Sudan at 47%.

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2021-2023) revealed that 65% of Africans believe that the media

should be free from government control, while 77% supported government efforts to limit the spread of false news. In addition, 51% of respondents viewed China's influence in their countries as somewhat or very positive. Those findings highlighted a nuanced perspective, whereby Africans valued media freedom but also recognised the need to curb misinformation.

Despite these insights, it's challenging to draw a direct correlation between public perceptions and the increasing influence of China and Russia, given the absence of longitudinal data. Nonetheless, the survey underscores the importance Africans place on credible information amid growing disinformation campaigns.

As Africa's digital landscape evolves and access to digital sources increases, improving information systems to mitigate misinformation is crucial. The consequences of failing to do so are already evident in political instability, such as coups in West Africa and skewed electoral outcomes. These examples demonstrate that disinformation poses a severe threat to democracy in Africa, potentially more so than in other regions due to the continent's unique vulnerabilities.

The Afrobarometer survey, alongside growing disinformation campaigns by foreign powers, demonstrates that African countries must prioritise the enhancement of their information systems. Ensuring the dissemination of credible information is essential to safeguarding democratic processes and countering the detrimental effects of disinformation.

Education will also play a central role in curbing disinformation. An educated population is better able to hold their government accountable and critically evaluate the information they receive. Advances in artificial intelligence have made misinformation and disinformation more sophisticated, further emphasising the need for educational initiatives that enhance critical thinking and media literacy. GG⬆

TRUST ERODED

By Chris Roper

The information landscape in Africa is dangerously compromised by information manipulation and interference campaigns stemming from various sources. These include foreign state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, as well as domestic bad actors ranging from political parties and governments to for-profit disinformation enterprises.

This "proliferation of disinformation", as the Africa Center for Strategic Studies termed it in a report in March this year, exists within a circular economy; disinformation is enabled by stressed and sometimes captured media ecosystems, but it also works to erode trust in media and compromise independent media's ability to function as the watchdog for open societies and democracies.

Although this piece largely focuses on the effect that disinformation has on press freedom and trust in news

ABOVE: Nigerien soldiers stand guard ouside the Niger and French airbases in Niamey as supporters of Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) gather in August 2023.

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Photo: Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina / AFP

in Africa, this is only one facet of the massive impact it has on all strata of societies. Recent campaigns across Africa have served to foment social instability, drive violence against minorities or opposition groups, and enable military coups in countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, as detailed in an African Defence Forum report in February this year. The conditions created by disinformation include the erosion of trust in authority and self-censorship by media and citizen whistleblowers for fear of targeted attacks, which is fertile ground for corruption and criminality.

Before we examine the impact that disinformation has on a free press, it's worth examining the terminology used to describe it. Russia and China are the two biggest state sponsors of disinformation in Africa, and the European External Action Service (EEAS) uses a less generalised term for this type of state-sponsored propaganda: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

FIMI is defined by the EEAS as "a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in nature and conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory."

The Reporters Without Borders 2023 Press Freedom Index highlights the debilitating effect that disinformation, or "the digital ecosystem's fake content industry", as they term it, has on press freedom. "In 118 countries (two-thirds of the 180 countries evaluated by the Index), most of the questionnaire's respondents reported that political actors in their countries were often or systematically involved in massive disinformation or propaganda campaigns. The difference is blurred between true and false, real and artificial, facts and artifices, jeopardising the right to information. The unprecedented ability to tamper with content is used to undermine those who embody quality journalism and weaken journalism itself," the report noted. And Africa, the report says, has seen some of the 2023 Index's biggest drops, with Senegal (104th) falling 31 places, and Tunisia (121st) falling 27 places.

TOP LEFT: Men hold a flag bearing the logo of private military company (PMC) Wagner as supporters of Niger's National Council of Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) protest in Niamey in September 2023 to demand the departure of the French army.
LEFT: Captain Kiswendsida Farouk Azaria Sorgho (C), member of the junta reading a statement next to coup leader Ibrahim Traorè (L) claiming to take power on Burkina Faso's national television.
ABOVE: Niger's CNSP leaders, Colonel Ibro Bachirou Amadou (C) speaks next to Colonel Amadou Djibo (L) and Niger's army artist Maman Sani Maigochi (R) in Niamey, Niger in Agust 2023.

While Russia and China dominate the FIMI space in Africa, they are by no means the only players. In 2020, for example, Facebook announced that it had taken down three separate networks that were displaying signs of "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" that targeted communities across Africa. One, targeting the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, was linked to the French military, while the other two, focused on CAR and Libya, were linked to the then head of Russia's mercenary group Wagner and founder of the Internet Research Agency troll farm, Yevgeniy Prigozhin.

According to Graphika, the company that exposed the networks and media in those countries suffered collateral damage as "the French and Russian operations in the CAR tried to expose each other, and repeatedly clashed in groups, comments, and cartoon wars." Graphika described this as "a rare exposure of rival operations from two different countries going head to head for influence over a third country",

although the company did highlight that "Facebook did not attribute the operation directly to the French government or the French military".

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Russia is the main purveyor of disinformation in Africa, targeting more than 22 countries with 80 documented campaigns and representing nearly 40% of all disinformation campaigns. "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – via the United Front and China Media Group – is the second most prolific Africa-wide sponsor of disinformation, with five known multi-regional campaigns."

But how do these operations play out, and what is the impact on press freedom? Media is both a target and arena for FIMI, impacting news organisations in several ways. A recent report by Code for Africa's (the author is the deputy director of Code for Africa) African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO) points out the various ways that foreign states attempt to influence media, and indeed to effect media capture. These methods are designed to take advantage of the increasingly dire financial straits and concomitant lack of resources of much of the news media in Africa. They include engaging in content-sharing agreements with media houses, allowing the spread of foreign state-produced content into trusted African media.

Examples are the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Xinhua news agency content and Russia's RT. According to ADDO, Chinese state media accounted for the most agreements with African news agencies at 17 agreements, followed by Russian state media at 15 and Türkiye at two. For an idea of the scale of content supplied, syndicated foreign state-supplied content from Xinhua formed a quarter of South Africa's African News Agency's published stories from 31 October 2022 to 31 October last year. In Kenya, Xinhua's content-sharing agreement with the Nation Media Group gives it access to eight radio and television stations in four East and central African countries, 28 million social media followers,
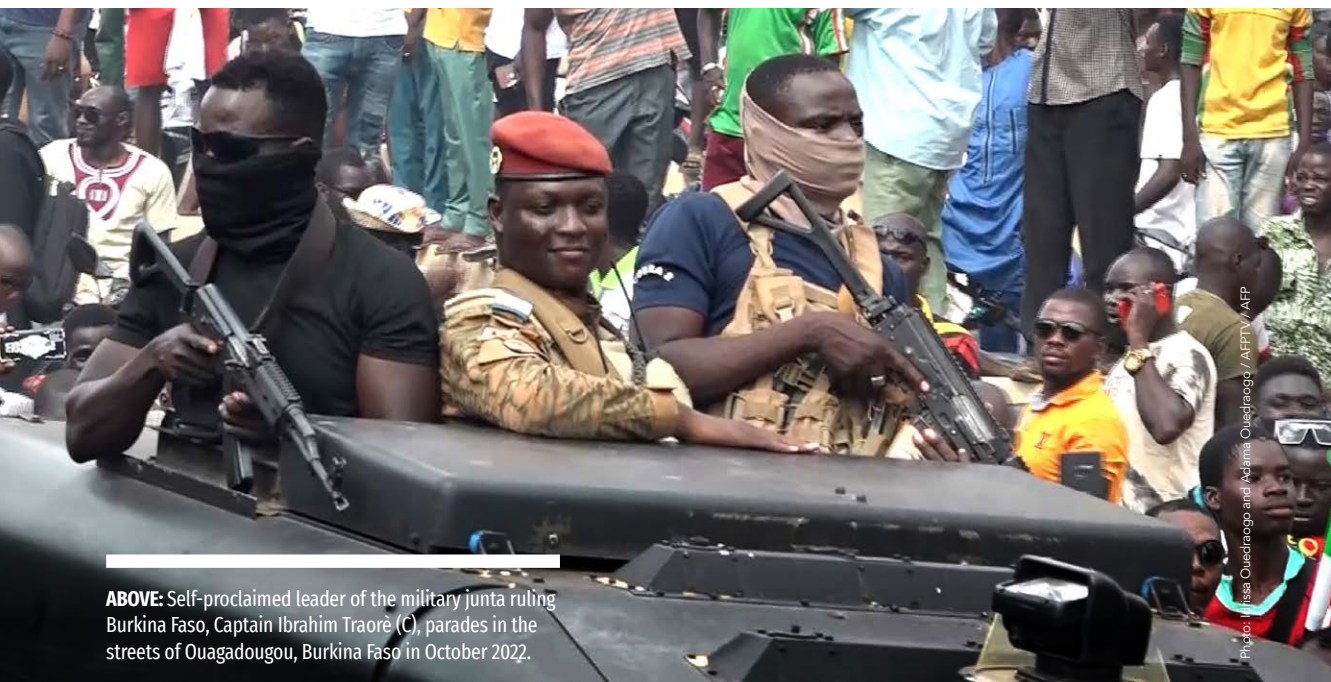
ABOVE: Self-proclaimed leader of the military junta ruling Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traorè (C), parades in the streets of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in October 2022.

11.3 million monthly viewers, and a daily newspaper circulation of 90,000."

Other ways of infiltrating state propaganda into news ecosystems are as simple as controlling media infrastructure. In Kenya, for example, the PRC's StarTimes broadcast network provides free digital satellite TV and solar-powered projectors for screening content in public squares to 10,000 villages across Africa, and PRC media have created an estimated 500 local media jobs, with hundreds more journalists being trained in the PRC.

It's not just trust in news that is impacted by disinformation and propaganda. It's trust in general. The Reuters Institute for Journalism's 2023 Digital News Report revealed that across the markets the report covers, 56% said they worried about identifying the difference between what was real and fake on the internet when it came to news, up two percentage points from 2022. It's much worse for the African countries surveyed, where the average was 77% (Roper authors the South African section of the Reuters DNR, and Code for Africa funds the reports for Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa).

As difficult as it is for reputable news organisations

to struggle against the tide of disinformation that hijacks audience and advertising revenue and erodes trust, more worrying is the way states use the threat of disinformation to justify cracking down on a free press and on access to information.

They do this in two ways. First, by implementing internet shutdowns, ostensibly on grounds of cyber security. According to *Africa Report*, "between 2020 and 2023, at least 22 African countries implemented complete or partial internet shutdowns. These straddled the continent – from Algeria in the Maghreb to Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Nigeria in West Africa; Chad, Gabon and the Republic of Congo in central Africa; Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi in East Africa; and Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe in southern Africa."

But while these shutdowns and the economic damage they cause have a deleterious effect on press freedoms, more threatening is the propensity of some governments to use the threat of disinformation to pass new cybersecurity and online speech laws restricting freedom of expression.

As the Africa Center for Strategic Studies puts

TOP LEFT: Gabon's new strongman General Brice Oligui Nguema (R) salutes as he is inaugurated as interim president, in Libreville in September 2023.
TOP RIGHT: A protester waves a Russian flag as he joins others demonstrating against France and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou following the country's second coup in less than nine months in October, 2022.
BOTTOM LEFT: A man holds a placard with the image of Niger's new military ruler General Abdourahamane Tiani as supporters of Niger's National Council of Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) protest outside the Niger and French airbase in Niamey.
BOTTOM RIGHT: A man rides his motorbike past the damaged entrance of the French embassy in Niamey after demonstrators called for the departure of French troops in Niger in August 2023.

it, "Increasingly, leaders are taking advantage of vague elements of recently passed cybercrime laws to expand executive powers to arrest activists and debilitate the free press." While states justify repressive legislation and tactics by claiming they are necessary to fight disinformation and its consequences, these laws essentially work to make governments less accountable to citizens and to erode democratic rights.

Tanzania's 2015 Cybercrimes Act, for example, "was ostensibly passed to fight rising digital crime. In practice, it bans "insulting" speech, empowers law enforcement officials to respond to violations without judicial checks, and allows authorities to crack down on whistleblowers who use government data to report wrongdoing. The Cybercrimes Act was followed by the 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications Regulations, which require bloggers to register with the government and internet cafes to keep surveillance videos of people using their services, the ACSS says.

The growing rollout of generative AI can exponentially increase disinformation's impact on press freedom by driving down the cost of production, allowing bad actors to scale propaganda campaigns, and reaching new audiences. There are no easy remedies for the damage disinformation is doing to press freedom across the continent. News organisations will have to empower their staff to use the tools and techniques of organisations that combat disinformation and concentrate on building and maintaining a relationship of trust with their audiences. GG

Graphic: Model by StabilityAI

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

AI technologies can help combat disinformation

By Nnaemeka Ohamadike

Leanne Manas is a household name in South African television. In late 2023, the morning news presenter's face appeared in fake news stories and advertisements, where "she" seemingly promoted various products and get-rich-quick schemes. She had fallen victim to "deep faking".

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, a finance worker was tricked into paying out $25 million in a sophisticated scheme whereby fraudsters impersonated the company's Chief Financial Officer and other colleagues in a video conference call using deepfake technology.

Deepfakes are media that have been digitally manipulated (typically using artificial intelligence) to replace one's likeness. This does not require cutting-edge technical know-how; free tools like FaceSwap and Zao mean that anybody can create deepfakes.

Once, "seeing was believing", but in today's age of deepfakes and other AI-assisted fabrications, the foundations

Photo: Olivier Douliery / AFP

ABOVE: A post on Elon Musk's Twitter account reacting to an allegedly fake video of him promoting a new cryptocurrency scam shown in the background.
RIGHT: "Deepfake" videos, manipulated with artificial intelligence to potentially deceive viewers are becoming more sophisticated and realistic as a result of advances in AI.

of trust and belief are being challenged as never before. The World Economic Forum identifies this and other forms of mis/disinformation as the biggest risk to global stability in the next two years, even more dangerous than interstate armed conflict, extreme weather, and inflation.

They predict that "…over the next two years, the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate it, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments. Resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism."

AI acts as a double-edged sword of disinformation. On the one hand, it fuels the development and spread of disinformation with frightening ease. Generative AI systems like GPTs and tools for creating deepfakes allow anyone to create and disseminate fake text, images, audio, and

video. This, in turn, presents threats to our socio-political and economic systems.

However, AI can also be a powerful ally in detecting and mitigating fake content. As AI technology advances in sophistication, relying solely on human capabilities becomes inadequate for detecting mis/disinformation. One key field in AI-based mitigation is machine learning, which enables computers to learn from large data sets and improve their performance over time without explicit programming.

Machine learning techniques like network analysis, classifiers, sentiment and semantic analysis, anomaly detection, and pattern recognition can be used to identify patterns, institutions, and actors linked to disinformation in social and news media. They can also be trained to differentiate authentic media from AI-generated ones.

Disinformation campaigns rarely operate

in isolation. Network analysis can combat disinformation by mapping the spread of false information and identifying key actors. Imagine a social media network where fake news spreads fast: by analysing the connections between accounts sharing the story, researchers can identify influential users or bots pushing the narrative. Similarly, in the news media, network analysis can be used to identify journalists, news outlets, and other actors associated with disinformation, especially given the recent rise in disinformation-spreading news outlets.

Machine learning classifiers, trained on large datasets of labelled information, can also be used to identify patterns and differentiate fake and authentic content using features extracted from the data.

In a recent working paper from the Brookings Institution, a think-tank based in Washington, Maryam Saeedi, an economist at Carnegie Mellon University, and her colleagues combined these two techniques to analyse 62 million posts from X (formerly Twitter) written in Farsi.

Their focus was on the wave of anti-government protests in Iran that began in September 2022, with specific interest in "spreader accounts", which they dubbed "imposters". These accounts initially posed as allies of the protesters but later shifted to disseminating disinformation to undermine the protests.

Initially, the researchers manually identified several hundred imposter accounts. Subsequently, they developed a machine learning classifier trained to detect more imposters with similar traits, including their posting behaviour, follower patterns, hashtag usage, account creation dates, and other metrics. The researchers managed to replicate the identification of these imposter accounts with 94% accuracy using network analysis alone without exploring the content of their posts.

According to the researchers, their methodology's advantage is that it identifies "accounts with a high propensity to engage

in disinformation campaigns, even before they do so." They propose that social media platforms could use these network analysis methods to compute a "propaganda score" for each account, visible to users, to indicate the likelihood that an account engages in disinformation.

Semantic and sentiment analysis are also important in fighting disinformation. When many accounts use the same wording, spotting disinformation is relatively simple. But the language of disinformation is often manipulative – it may take different shapes or use different wording to push the same narrative. Semantic techniques like embeddings can address this by converting text into numerical representations that capture meaning based on their contexts of use. The algorithm processes millions of documents, sentences, and word tokens, learning the meanings of text from the company they keep. Words, sentences, and larger text segments with similar semantic meanings are positioned close together in this vector space.

By using embeddings, sentiment analysis can, for example, go beyond simple keyword and dictionary-based matching to understand the context and nuances of disinformation language, which often aims to evoke strong emotional reactions such as fear, anger, or distrust.

Photo: Alexandra Robinson / AFP

Valent, a US-based social media threat monitoring organisation, uses similar techniques to fight disinformation. Its AI tool, Ariadne, takes in feeds from social platforms and looks for common underlying narratives and sentiments to spot unusual, coordinated action. This method, according to the organisation, outperforms keyword-based approaches used for sentiment analysis.

Media forensics are also essential in combating disinformation. Disinformation often relies on manipulating images and videos to bolster false narratives. Reverse image search algorithms, a staple of AI-powered search engines, can expose these forgeries. By comparing a suspicious image across vast online databases, AI can determine if it has been tampered with or originates from an unrelated event.

AI behavioural and physiological analysis techniques are also part of media forensics and can make a difference. This examines specific behaviours and physical characteristics of individuals in media content to verify its authenticity.

DARPA, the special projects research arm of the US Department of Defense, has been investing in the "semantic forensics" (SemaFor) programme to detect, attribute and characterise manipulated and synthesised media as well as creating a toolbox of defences.

For example, to differentiate between the authentic and fake video of a government official, the tool can identify the inconsistencies and errors that are often omitted in automated manipulation. By analysing for body inconsistencies like mismatched lip movements and earrings in videos or illogical object placement in images, such techniques can expose forgeries even when the technical manipulation itself is flawless.

Using authentic data of the person in question, it is also possible to train a model that learns their characteristics, such as patterns of head tilt or facial movements while speaking. This can be combined with other techniques, such as heartbeat detection from video, which is difficult to fake and can be spotted by looking for tiny variations in skin colour, particularly on the forehead. This "asymmetric advantage" can be used to identify one inconsistency, which can expose the entire fabrication, says DARPA.

Despite AI's immense potential, human expertise remains vital. Crowdsourced verification platforms employ the power of the public to verify information and identify disinformation. AI can pre-screen user content and flag potential instances of disinformation for human fact-checkers to review and act. This technique combines the best of both worlds: the speed and large-scale processing capability of AI with the critical thinking and judgment of experienced fact-checkers for complex tasks (like language understanding and ensuring fairness and applicability in the system). Tech giant Meta uses this technique on all its platforms to fight misinformation.

While AI offers a powerful weapon against disinformation, challenges remain. One major challenge is that training data bias can lead AI tools to perpetuate existing prejudices. For example, in a forthcoming article, researchers Nnaemeka Ohamadike, Kevin Durrheim, and Mpho Primus found that neural word embeddings trained on South African COVID-19 vaccination news data from 2020 to 2023 learned a wide range of race-based socioeconomic and health biases (e.g., that whites are rich and taxpayers and blacks are social welfare reliant). Such biases reinforce harmful stigma, discrimination, and inequality, especially against marginalised groups. AI tools can reproduce and amplify these biases when used in downstream tasks like disinformation detection.

Detection tools can also make mistakes, flagging real content as fake and vice versa. For example, OpenAI, the creators of ChatGPT, admitted that even
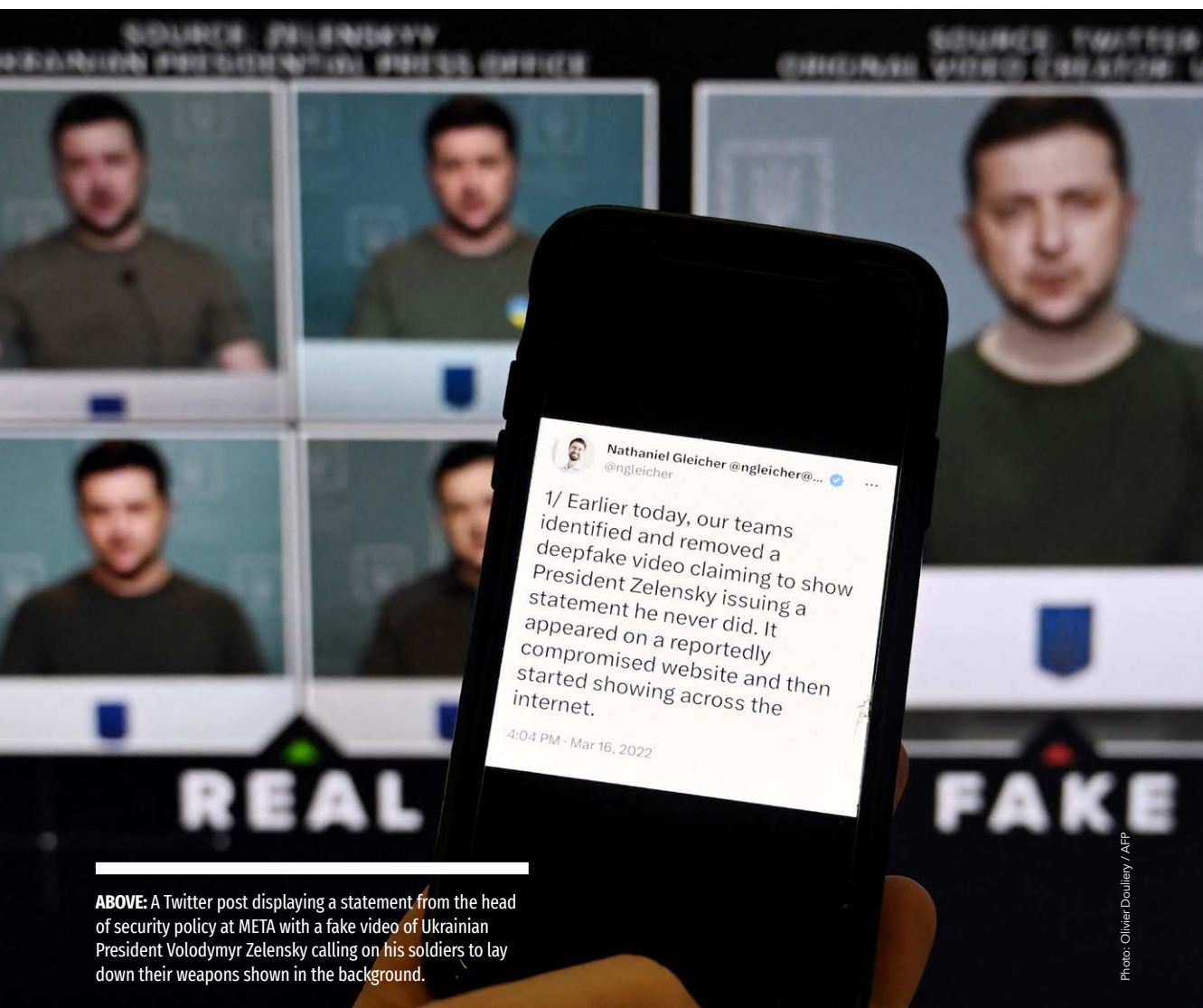
ABOVE: A Twitter post displaying a statement from the head of security policy at META with a fake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky calling on his soldiers to lay down their weapons shown in the background.

Photo: Olivier Douliery / AFP

their detection tool had a poor 26% success rate in identifying AI-generated text and recommended combining it with other techniques for better results.

Despite challenges, AI technologies remain vital in this fight. Although no single technique can detect all disinformation, combining several of them can greatly improve accuracy. Detection tools will also need to constantly evolve, considering the fast-changing nature of disinformation.

Renée DiResta, the research manager of the Stanford Internet Observatory, is less convinced about the potency of today's detection tools. While these tools might excel in controlled environments

with ample analysis time, she argues they are ill-suited for real-time situations where snap judgments are crucial.

DiResta highlights a deeper concern: even flawless detection of deceptive media does not guarantee everyone will believe the truth. She points to the example of manipulated audio that swung a Slovakian election in 2023 in which a politician (who later lost the election) was heard discussing election rigging with a journalist. People can be resistant to fact-checks, DiResta says, especially from sources they distrust. This means solutions beyond just technology are needed to combat disinformation. GG↱

Protecting truth vs preserving freedom

The impact of disinformation legislation on freedom of speech

By Mischka Moosa and Stuart Morrison

In recent years, Africa's digital landscape has rapidly evolved. Between 2017 and 2024, 300 million Africans came online and gained access to the internet and social media, according to an Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) report this year. With millions more Africans now connected to the digital world, the landscape of information dissemination on the continent has significantly altered; on one hand creating new avenues for communication, while on the other, it has exposed critical issues around the challenges posed by disinformation.

Disinformation is understood as the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information with the intention of exploiting or disrupting information networks to negatively influence public opinion. It becomes harmful because it often threatens political stability, erodes public trust in democratic institutions and undermines the principles of a free society. As the ACSS noted, "disinformation

campaigns have directly driven deadly violence, promoted and validated military coups, cowed civil society members into silence, and served as smokescreens for corruption and exploitation".

Disinformation efforts have targeted every region on the continent. ACSS data revealed that at least 39 African countries have been the target of specific disinformation campaigns that sought to trigger destabilising and anti-democratic effects across African information systems. As a result, efforts to combat disinformation have significantly intensified as governments attempt to mitigate the spread of disinformation through legislation.

Several African countries have imposed various legislative approaches to curb the spread of disinformation. Figure 1 highlights the various ways that governments have tried to address the problem. This includes specific anti-disinformation legislation (orange on map), general speech (blue on map), law enforcement action (purple on map),

DISINFORMATION LEGISLATION IN AFRICA

Mauritania

Nigeria

Ethiopia

■ Specific disinformation legislation

■ General speech related legislation

☐ No specific legislation

☐ No data

Government pressure

Proposed legislation

Law enforcement
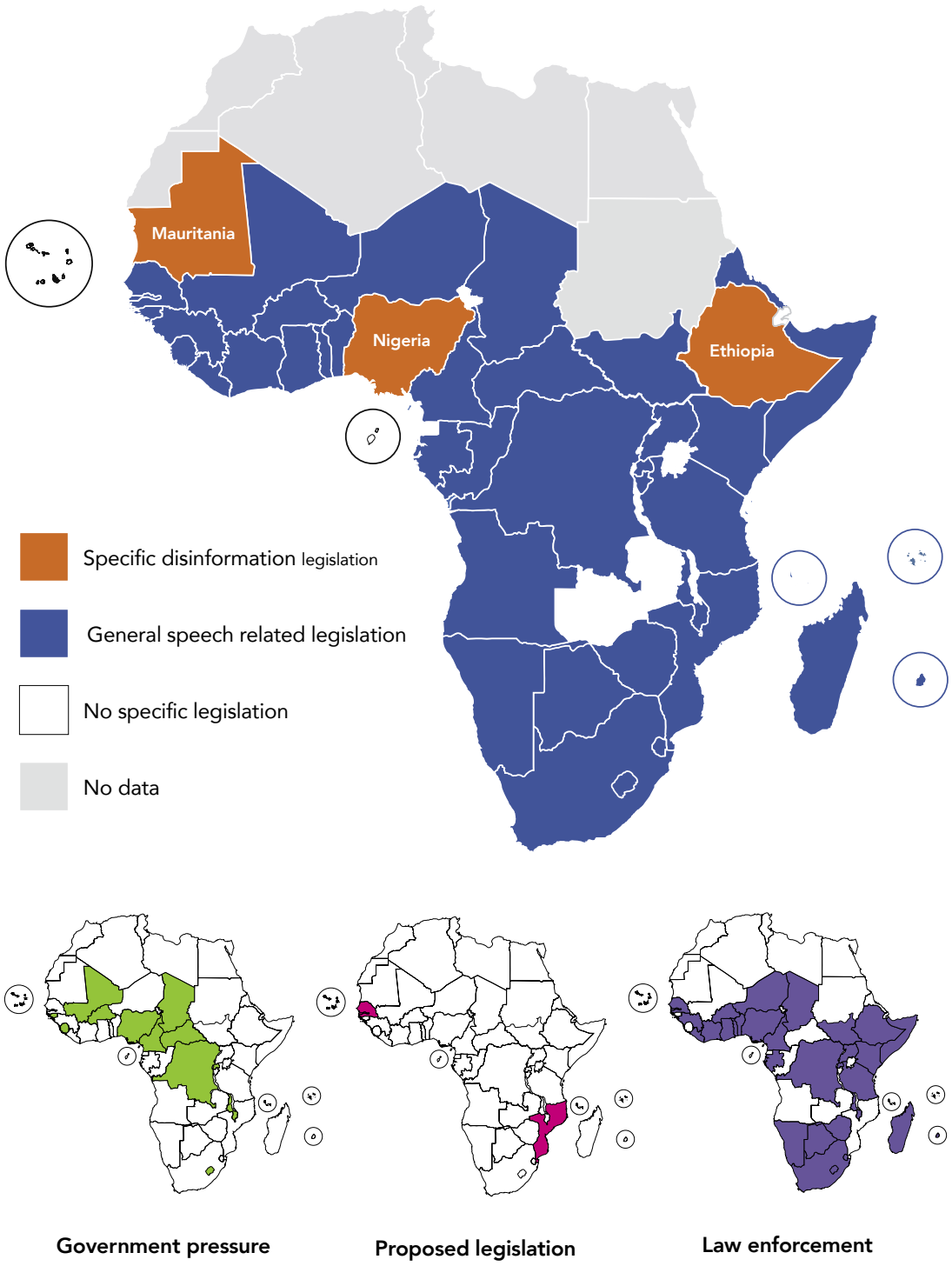
Source: Lexota

government pressure (green on map), and proposed legislation (pink on map).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the majority (42) of countries have imposed some general speech legislation, the scope of which does not specifically target disinformation but refers instead to broader legal frameworks related to general media laws, cybercrime, or others. Examples include the Electoral Act, 1998 in South Africa or the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775) in Ghana.

Law enforcement action extends to arrests, investigations, or other measures brought by the state against individuals or organisations accused of spreading disinformation. Government pressure, meanwhile, refers to state actions not grounded in law but intended to regulate how information is disseminated and controlled.

Lastly, specific and proposed legislation refers to legislation that directly seeks to combat false information spread intentionally to deceive people. Only three African countries – Ethiopia, Mauritania, and Nigeria – have imposed specific disinformation legislation.

However, the use of specific legislation to combat disinformation has raised questions about its limitations on fundamental democratic freedoms such as speech and expression. Researchers have argued that due to the complexity of disinformation, very specific legislation is difficult to implement without infringing on various human rights related to speech and expression. While these freedoms are not absolute, there has been rising concern that legislation like this is being used to repress

> **Researchers have argued that due to the complexity of disinformation, very specific legislation is difficult to implement without infringing on various human rights related to speech and expression.**

journalists, activists, and government critics.

This raises the interesting question of whether legislation is a useful approach to combating disinformation or if it opens doors for governments to misuse and undermine the democratic system.

Nigeria has one of the most developed legal frameworks for directly combating disinformation. Three key pieces of legislation (the Criminal Code Act of 1990, the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, and the draft Code of Practice for Computer Service Platforms and Internet Intermediaries of 2022) address disinformation specifically, with other laws complementing them.

Older laws, such as the Criminal Code Act of 1990, have roots in the country's former military dictatorship, while Nigeria's more recent legislation has largely arisen due to security concerns. According to the 2024 ACSS study, Nigeria has seen several disinformation campaigns originating with domestic extremist groups such as Boko Haram. These campaigns exacerbate security risks for the state, add to the current challenges posed by extremist groups, and deepen social divides by promoting hate speech.

However, human rights groups have highlighted the limitations of these various pieces of legislation, arguing they are vague in definition. For example, the 2022 legislation around internet practice does not define "prohibited content", enabling the law to be misused against journalists or members of the public who are critical of the government.

Questions have been raised about the proportionality between the crime and the punishment. Punitive punishment methods

such as harassment or detention, summary executions or media bans for the dissemination of false information have been widely criticised, and the government has used the legislation to repress government critics according to Amnesty International 2022).

Ethiopia enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation in 2020. This piece of legislation focuses on disinformation more generally and strongly emphasises disinformation in relation to hate speech.

This legislation was first introduced in the context of a wider democratic transition that took place between 2017 and 2018, when the dynamics of the country's ruling coalition shifted, and a new prime minister was elected. Before this, disinformation campaigns had been used to heighten social tensions and amplify violence against various ethnic and religious groups. As such, this legislation focused on preventing hate speech but also made provision for disinformation in general.

Civil society groups have heavily criticised the bill for several reasons, including the vague definition of fake information, which enables authorities to interpret it in ways that undermine a number of democratic freedoms, and its punitive approach. As an Associate Professor at Addis Ababa University School of Law, Girmachew Alemu Aneme has argued that the law relies on punishment as opposed to literacy to address the dissemination of disinformation.

Thus, while the legislation can be used to

prevent the dissemination of false and fake information, Ethiopia has one of the highest arrest rates of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, leading to concerns about the law's potential to undermine freedom of speech, especially for those criticising the government.

Unlike Nigeria and Ethiopia, both of whom introduced legislation amidst security issues,

> **The pandemic saw a huge wave of disinformation, making it difficult for governments to respond effectively.**

Mauritania introduced Law No. 2020-015 to fight the manipulation of information and address the surge of misinformation around COVID-19. The pandemic saw a huge wave of disinformation, making it difficult for governments to respond effectively.

While the law was mainly intended for public health emergencies and elections, it has the potential for wider application. Mauritania also has a history of media censorship and the repression of journalists. So, massive reforms to improve freedom of the press have been implemented, but the bill remains vulnerable to misuse. This is because its penalties are not explicitly related to the harm caused or the intent to harm, resulting in the possibility of enactment even where individuals unknowingly spread false information.

Thus, while Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mauritania have enacted specific legislation relating to disinformation, a concerning trend of using these laws to repress dissent and criticism of the government has emerged. So, what does this tell us about the role of specific legislation around disinformation and its ability to combat it?

The research suggests that specific disinformation

Graphic: Getty Images

legislation is often misused despite differing contexts and complex factors, offering two key insights.

First, in each of these three countries, the laws lack specificity within the legislation itself. As mentioned, Nigeria and Ethiopia have vague definitions of key terms, which leaves plenty of room for interpretation. This lack of clarity, in many cases, benefits the state and allows greater room for the legislation to be misused. To avoid this, governments should enable the public to provide comments and feedback on proposed bills, encouraging greater clarity and addressing overlooked issues.

Second, using punitive punishment to address disinformation issues is problematic. While in some cases, this might be appropriate, it also risks undermining efforts to combat widespread disinformation. In many cases, the problem arises from people's inability to identify fake news rather than the intentional spreading of such information. Punitive punishment also creates a dangerous precedent, which, as with the vagueness of language, can undermine democratic values and freedoms.

So, while legislation is important for addressing disinformation, it is often muddled by issues that undermine other democratic processes. Looking at the three countries used as examples here and which have specific legislation around disinformation, it's clear that the complexity involved requires time and the input of various stakeholders. Also, while legislation should be one of the key building blocks, combating disinformation requires more than just punishment; it requires active civic engagement and education. GG↯

A LEGAL BALANCING ACT

Regulating and enforcing AI regulation is as complex as the tech itself

By Raphael Obonyo

Used in the public interest, generative AI has the potential to increase access to information, enhance freedom of expression, and expand knowledge about healthcare, education, agriculture, transportation, and other issues.

However, recent studies show a dramatic rise in misinformation generated by artificial intelligence and presented as authentic news in Africa, driving the explosion of misinformation and disinformation. Discussions of AI and related risks often feature calls for regulation. However, establishing and enforcing AI regulation is as complex as the technology itself.

The 2024 World Economic Forum (WEF) global risk report has flagged disinformation powered by innovative artificial intelligence as a threat to democracy, a polarising force, posing serious risks to economies. The WEF report ranks fake news and disinformation as the most serious risks over the next two years, highlighting how rapid technological advances also create new problems or worsen existing ones.

In March this year, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) reported that the proliferation of disinformation is a fundamental challenge to stable and prosperous African societies. Disinformation campaigns for political purposes are increasing, with 189 documented campaigns in Africa, nearly quadrupling the number reported in 2022. Given the opaque nature of disinformation, this figure is surely an undercount the ACSS report said.

In a recent interview with the Voice of Africa, however, Kenya's special envoy on technology and advisory board member on AI for the United Nations Secretary-General Philip Thigo called on users to embrace artificial intelligence, particularly the opportunities it has created in the employment sector, and to improve lives.

Indeed, AI has the potential to do profound good for the world including Africa: to advance human rights and dignity, develop medicines to treat and cure diseases, improve agricultural production, and help with planning and disaster response.

However, to harness AI's potential effectively, Africa must establish mechanisms to address its socioeconomic challenges. This requires more collaboration and sustainable engagement between government, industry, academia, and civil society.

The Malabo Convention, a legal framework for data protection ratified by the African Union (AU) in 2023, serves as a standard for AI policy in Africa. The African Union Commission is developing a continental AI strategy to outline the potential benefits of the emerging technology for African development and the legal and regulatory safeguards needed to protect users and societies.

There is also other progress in AI regulation in Africa. Earlier this year, the AU published a White Paper titled 'Regulation and Responsible Adoption of AI for Africa towards Achievement of AU Agenda 2063'. This White Paper is expected to introduce greater policy coherence and provide frameworks for an AI regulatory regime aimed at ensuring data safety, security, and protection to promote the ethical use of AI.

The 2023 'State of AI in Africa Report' by the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT) reveals, however, that Africa still lags in creating an environment conducive to a responsible AI ecosystem. This includes financial support, AI enablers, and other incentives.

However, it's not all negative. African countries are increasingly developing or looking to develop

Graphic: Getty Images

national AI strategies to guide its adoption. Countries such as Mauritius, Egypt, Zambia, Tunisia, and Botswana have created national AI programmes, and others like South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya have approved data privacy legislation that could govern AI technology. Yet, these policy frameworks are nascent, leaving AI deployment largely unregulated.

African countries will have to develop an enabling environment and incentives essential for AI growth and ensure an ethical and responsible ecosystem similar to those in first-world nations like China, the United States, and the European Union (EU). The EU Artificial Intelligence Act (EU AI Act), passed on March 13 this year, is the first-ever comprehensive legal framework on AI worldwide and is viewed positively across the global AI landscape.

But, as noted at an event co-hosted in March this year by Global Affairs Canada and the International Development Research Centre in Nairobi, Africa should be cautious about the "Brussels effect". This refers to the extent to which EU regulations influence global norms due to doing business with the bloc. Speakers said African countries should not be forced to align with global regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) if they do not fit Africa's communal considerations or recognise the nuances of marginalised communities. It is crucial to tailor AI policies to local realities.

That said, African countries must accelerate the rate of initiating AI policy and regulatory frameworks, particularly those addressing responsible AI. Strategic policies that address the responsibility aspect of AI are deficient. This need has been discussed at various forums, including the Africa AI Conference in Rwanda last year and the Connected Africa Summit in Kenya this year.

There are undeniable challenges due to regulatory gaps. However, censorship concerns and the need to balance freedom of expression with the need to tackle harmful misinformation must

be considered when regulating AI in Africa. In an interview with *Africa in Fact*, Natasha Karanja, a tech policy researcher, emphasised the need for inclusive conversation in developing regulations to tackle AI-generated misinformation.

"Inclusive conversations in developing AI strategies, considering voices from marginalised groups, are essential, and so is the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to inform policy," says Karanja. "Policy and strategy development should be driven by a clear understanding of specific objectives, challenges, and opportunities AI presents in the local context."

Research ICT Africa's policy brief, 'Navigating the Intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Economic Development in Africa: Policy Requirements and Implications', published in April, shows that Africa faces significant disadvantages and disparities in adopting and using AI technologies compared to the Global North. For example, the capital investment landscape in AI is heavily concentrated in North America and Asia, with comparatively low investment in Africa.

The development of AI technology relies heavily on large data sets, which can perpetuate existing inequalities and biases, especially in regions like Africa, where data may not be adequately representative or regulated. Noteworthy, AI tools make decisions based on datasets. However, information sourced from African countries forms a small part of the data used by AI models.

The Research ICT Africa policy brief underscores the need for an enabling environment that mitigates risks. It recommends robust regulatory frameworks to address AI-related harms, holding providers accountable, nullifying liability exclusions, mandating algorithm disclosure for risky systems, and presuming AI fault for harm. It also calls for distinguishing the legal position of developers from service providers and granting qualified immunity to compliant researchers.

The UN University Centre for Policy Research's policy brief, 'Artificial Intelligence-Powered Disinformation and Conflict', highlights how disinformation on social media has fuelled political conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. The phenomenon has become more aggressive with the advent of generative AI, allowing false and dangerous content to spread rapidly, even to those without internet access. A key recommendation is that disinformation-related efforts should work within a multilateral system across global, regional, and national initiatives to govern AI and digital spaces.

The EU and UN General Assembly resolutions on AI, the latter passed in March this year, are seen by some as models for Africa to develop and adopt its regulatory framework. Some experts argue that Africa needs a regulatory framework to prevent AI manipulation from undermining election integrity, information integrity, and democracy.

But Giovanni De Gregorio, PLMJ Chair in Law and Technology at Catolica Global School of Law and Catolica Lisbon School of Law, speaking to *Africa in Fact*, cautions against following Europe's path on AI regulation without adaptation. He notes that effective AI regulation in Africa must consider the underrepresentation of African datasets, perpetuating biases in global AI systems. At the same time, effective oversight should account for local context and enforcement challenges.

"While government regulation is necessary to control hate speech and disinformation, some laws might threaten online freedom of expression and access to information," notes De Gregorio.

Landry Signe, co-chair of the World Economic Forum regional action group for Africa, agrees that Africa is lagging in investment and regulation. He emphasises that AI's complexity makes holistic governance challenging and advocates for strategies to leverage AI's benefits rather than just prevent harm.

Mulle Musau, the national coordinator of the election observer group in Kenya, in an interview with *Africa in Fact*, proposes regulatory frameworks to govern AI in generating and spreading disinformation, and he believes collaboration between tech giants, government institutions, and civil society is crucial for combating disinformation while upholding freedom of expression

"Comprehensive, clear, and enforceable regulatory frameworks are essential," says Musau. "The African Union's task force on AI is a positive direction that can be cascaded to regional blocs and individual countries. Transparency and accountability are vital for AI's ethical deployment."

Tech experts like Shain Rahim, Cisco's Country Manager for Kenya, argue against stringent AI regulations, fearing they might stifle innovation. Instead, they propose regulatory sandboxes and innovation hubs to facilitate AI application experimentation and testing.

During the Connected Africa Summit 2024 held in Nairobi in April this year, discussions favoured government support over strict regulation to foster seamless AI adoption and promote the fourth industrial revolution. Clear regulatory frameworks, robust data protection, and privacy regulations are essential to safeguarding individual rights and promoting trust in AI systems. GG♦

> **"While government regulation is necessary to control hate speech and disinformation, some laws might threaten online freedom of expression and access to information."**
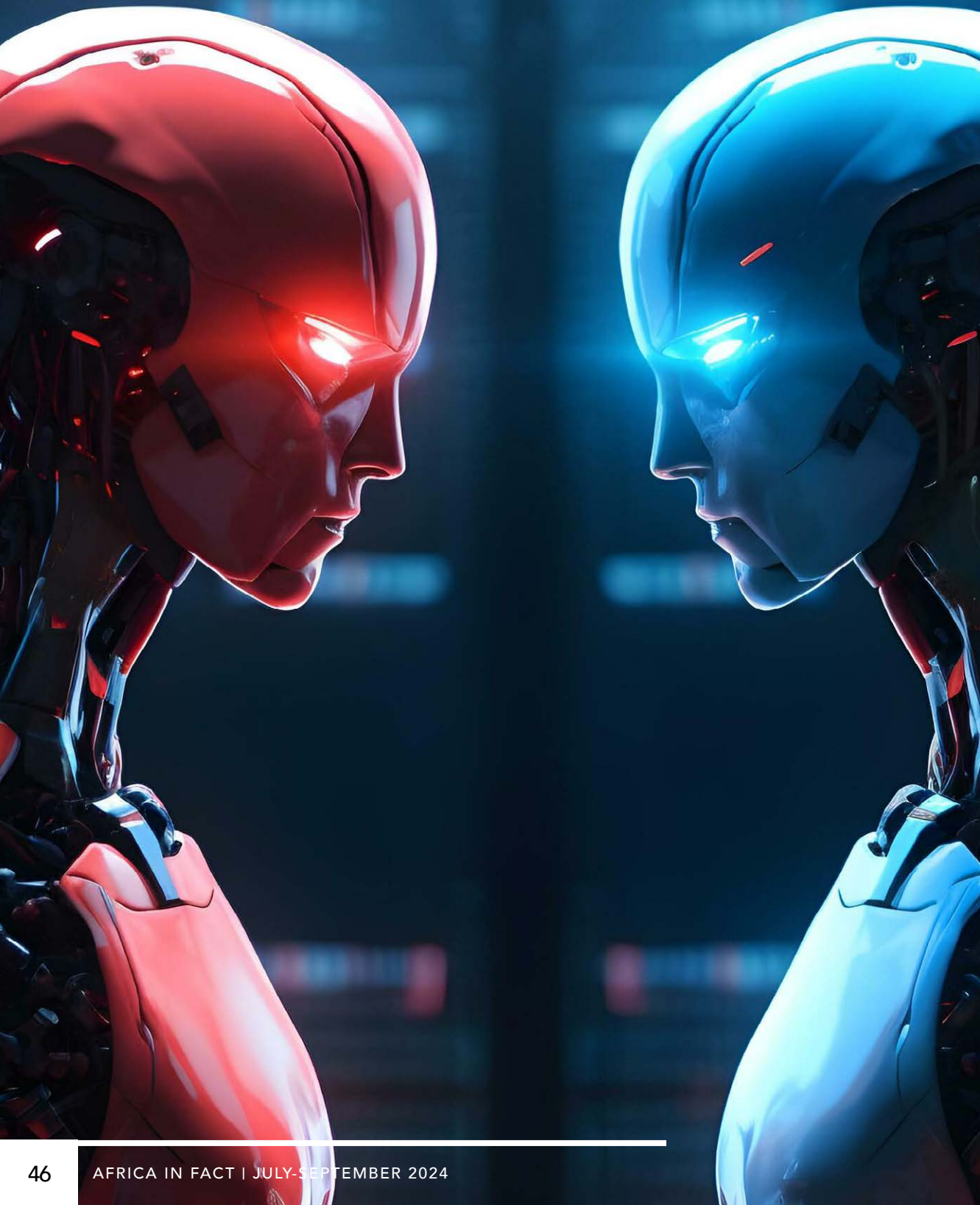
WRESTLING FOR
DOMINANCE

Africa cannot afford to get caught in the crossfire

By Ronak Gopaldas

In an era of great power rivalry, Africa has once again emerged as a theatre for competition among global superpowers. As the Cold War 2.0 narrative gains traction and spans areas such as mineral resources, trade, political and financial systems, and global institutions, another area requires careful attention. Digital technologies are increasingly becoming instruments of strategic and security importance, and the US-China technological rivalry carries global implications.

Due to weak regulation and economic dependency, African states are particularly vulnerable to these tensions. Yet, while there are significant risks, there are also emerging opportunities. African states will need to tread carefully between Beijing and Washington to balance these considerations.

As economist Henry Tugendhat noted in a 2021 analysis for the United States Institute for Peace, "a battle is unfolding between the United States and Chinese tech firms over who will control what millions of people in Africa can see, hear, read, and say."

China's Huawei is the market leader in 5G networks, which are set to dominate the telecommunications space for the foreseeable future. According to a 2023 Voice of America (VOA) article, "in sub-Saharan Africa, where less than 30% of people use the internet, most governments welcome China's investment in digital infrastructure – a part of the Belt and Road Initiative dubbed the 'Digital Silk Road'. Because of Chinese government subsidies, they see it as a cheaper path to greater connectivity." China is well aware of the strategic geopolitical advantage of such soft-power technology for its future literal and figurative Belt and Road initiatives. Similarly, many western nations are aware of the

Graphic: vecteezy.com

political and economic risks involved in allowing Chinese companies to set up virtual trading ports globally. The US has already banned Huawei at home, saying it's a risk to national security. There is also a push on Capitol Hill to ban TikTok.

Civil society activists across the democratic world have also expressed concerns over data security, personal privacy, and freedom of speech linked to Chinese-controlled technology. In the context of great power rivalry, the strategic threat of Huawei's 5G dominance is less about security and more about economic control over on-ramps and off-ramps to the virtual information highways that now represent the bulk of future global economic growth.

Advocates of the US-led approach argue that the quality and standards associated with US technology ensure that citizens are protected from exploitation and abuse of power. Moreover, they argue that corporate governance and transparency will benefit African citizens over the long term.

A 2023 Project Syndicate article by Nate Allen and Nanjira Sambuli observes that Africa's strategic importance is now dawning on American tech firms. They highlight significant investments by Microsoft, Amazon, and Meta in recent times, noting that "the impetus for these investments is the growing recognition that the future of America's technology industry hinges on expanding its African customer base." They go on to add, "Today, a little over a third of Africa's 1.4 billion people use the internet, representing a small fraction of the world's internet users. But the continent's population is projected to reach 2.5 billion by 2050 – one-quarter of the global total. The vast majority of Africans are expected to become internet users by then, offering tech companies opportunities that no other region can match."

Taken together, it is evident that competition for technological dominance in Africa is intensifying. While Chinese companies lead in some sectors, such as telecommunications hardware, US companies prevail in software platforms, operating systems, and search on the continent.

The 'tech trade-off' is something African policymakers need to wrestle with, given the contrasting versions of the internet offered by Beijing and Washington and the relative benefits of each. On the one hand, emerging economies stand to reap the benefits of Chinese technology – cheap communications, increased access to global markets, and economic opportunity – which, for many, outweigh the downside, namely a potential loss of autonomy and freedom. This is the primary consideration in regions where internet access matters more to citizens than data privacy.

Yet, at the same time, there are very serious and legitimate governance concerns associated with such technology. From a political perspective, a criticism of Chinese technology is that it may lead to increased censorship and control over information, reflecting China's authoritarian model of internet governance. For example, Chinese technology companies, such as Huawei and Hikvision, have developed advanced surveillance systems widely used to monitor public spaces, internet traffic, and individual behaviour. In the wrong hands, these systems can be used by governments to monitor and control dissent, restrict freedoms, and maintain political stability through surveillance, creating a form of digital dictatorship that, it is argued, would adversely affect the quality of governance in Africa and lead to greater illiberalism.

Second, there are also regulatory concerns. African countries may adopt different regulatory standards based on the technology they use, shaped by either US or Chinese norms. This divergence could complicate regional integration efforts and policy coordination, given the lack of uniformity among African states.

The third concern relates to sovereignty and national security. Relying on foreign technology providers is likely to limit states' control over critical

digital infrastructure and data governance, making states vulnerable to exploitation. This is especially relevant in the context of the "digital arms race" among major global powers and the emerging battle for AI supremacy. Geopolitical pressures will likely see African nations forced to pick sides, which may have financial and political consequences if mishandled.

Now, as the pace of technological decoupling increases, how can the continent's leaders navigate these challenges effectively? From a geopolitical perspective, African countries must hone and better project their agency, according to a 2023 publication by Mzukisi Qobo and Mjumo Mzyece for the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). The authors argue that Africa's meaningful participation in shaping the global system can be realised only by reducing reliance on major powers.

Central to this will be building strategic partnerships with diverse countries to ensure neither Washington nor Beijing entrench dominance. Meaningfully engaging with digital players such as India, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea would reduce dependency on any single country and leverage the strengths of different technological ecosystems.

These partnerships must then complement home-grown solutions and platforms, including building the digital infrastructure, upgrading digital skills, and broadening citizen participation in the digital economy. By leveraging its comparative advantages and exploiting shifts in global supply chains, Africa can turn the digital race between the US and China into a catalyst for its own benefit.

Greater regional coordination would improve the continent's collective bargaining power in negotiations. To this end, African leaders should leverage the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCFTA) to create a single continental digital market. Such a move would enhance economies of scale, attract investment, and facilitate the movement of digital goods and services across the continent. Policymakers will need to invest heavily in local R&D, skills, and digital infrastructure to build competitive workforces. This would allow for greater autonomy over critical digital infrastructure and data.

For Africa to capture the full benefits of potentially transformative technologies like 5G, African participation in the development of the associated technology standards will be essential. The importance of appropriate, customised regulation cannot be overstated.

But, as University of Cape Town's Mandira Bagwandeen warned in a 2021 analysis, external dependency and insufficient investment in the African tech industry carry significant risks. "Given the tussle for dominance between digital democracies and digital autocracies, Africa must, once more, avoid becoming a proxy for those with big sticks and deep pockets – albeit on a different kind of battlefield. Now more than ever, it is necessary that African policymakers and legislators advocate for ICT legislation and regulations to be transparent, accountable and open to reform."

She adds, "Africans at a local, national, and regional level must play an active role in ensuring that technology is designed, developed, and implemented to meet African needs and advance African economies." Robust regulatory frameworks will ensure digital sovereignty is not compromised and appeal to potential investors looking to take advantage of the continent's vast market size.

In conclusion, tech decoupling and geopolitical tensions between the US and China will present both challenges and opportunities for Africa. These impacts will be felt in areas such as political alignment, regulatory frameworks, institutional capacity, and the balance between state control and civil liberties. African governments must carefully navigate these influences to ensure they can leverage technology for development while maintaining sovereignty and protecting citizens' rights. GG⬇

A THUMB IN THE WALL

By Neil Ford

ABOVE: Electoral Commission officials count votes inside a polling station after the official closing of the polls during Kenya's general election in August 2022.

There is no doubt that technology is playing a growing role in African politics, including in campaigning and voting. By harnessing the power of big data and social media, politicians and their advisors can target their messages at individual voters. This threatens the democratic process by enabling the spread of inaccurate information, voter manipulation and even hate speech, but a growing number of organisations are now trying to counter these dangers with artificial intelligence (AI) applications.

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter provide political parties with new communication channels but also allow bigotry and xenophobia to flourish.

Photo: Luis Tato / AFP

Photo: Audu Marte / AFP

Photo: John Wessels / AFP

Photo: Michele-Spatari / AFP
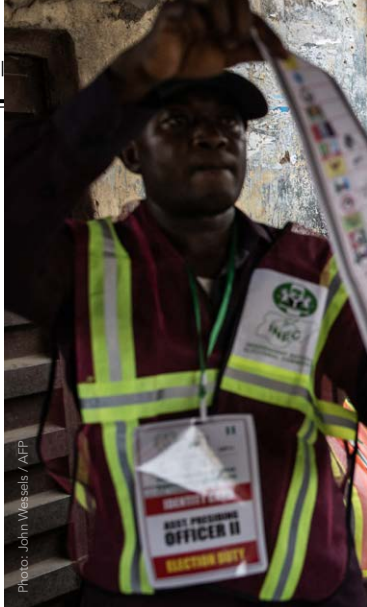
Some social media influencers are even paid to post false claims about politicians. For instance, a BBC investigation published in January 2023 identified Nigerian influencers who receive cash, expensive gifts, government contracts and even political jobs in return for false posts.

Social media companies claim that they invest heavily in moderators to check posts, but there is rarely sufficient capacity to cope with the sheer volume of content. Some moderators are based in Africa, but most platforms are based in the US, where few staff have much knowledge of the political context of individual African countries or their incitement laws.

Part of the problem is that almost all social media companies and regulation authorities are located outside Africa, and accountability is difficult when information structures are global. In 2019, the Kenyan political analyst Nanjala Nyabola posed the question in relation to controversial PR agency Cambridge Analytica: "What does accountability for political misinformation look like when a British company uses an American platform to influence political discourse in a Kenyan election?"

There is some concern from the US Department of Homeland Security and NATO among others, over the use of AI to manipulate platform algorithms to promote messages, including using deepfake videos that depict people doing or saying things they did not say or do. However, AI tools can also counter

the worst excesses of social media by detecting and combating misinformation because of the massive computing power available, where social media platforms cannot afford – or will not provide – the number of moderators needed.

AI can also encourage people to vote by automating voter registration, with chatbots providing potential voters with information on registration and polling sites. AI predictive analysis can also aid campaigners by identifying probable voters. At the same time, it can detect irregularities in voter registration.

African election results, including in Nigeria, Kenya, and Cote d'Ivoire, have been subject to appeals, with losing candidates and parties petitioning electoral commissions and courts over corruption or irregularities. However, when combined with electronic voting, blockchain-based

LEFT: Independent National Electoral Commission officials set up voting materials and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) during Nigeria's presidential and general election in February 2023.

decentralised ledgers enable real-time tallying and avoid the time-consuming process of transporting ballot boxes for counting. Real-time tallying can also counter ballot stuffing and monitor voter turnout for irregularities to ensure data integrity.

In the longer term, facial recognition could be used to authenticate voter identity, which should prevent some people from casting votes for deceased relatives. In the run-up to the 2022 election, Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) found 246,465 dead voters on its register, as well as 226,143 people registered with ID cards that did not belong to them and 481,711 people with duplicate records.

In Nigeria, the Voter Turnout Project leverages AI to identify unregistered voters and encourage them to participate. Also in Nigeria, an independent fact-checking initiative supported by the United

Nations Development Programme called iVerify uses AI to check for election-related misinformation to help voters find trustworthy information. Vote Compass even uses AI to help Nigerian voters decide who to vote for by comparing their views with those of candidates, although there are obvious potential problems with such an approach.

The African Union High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies (APET) has acknowledged the potential of AI to facilitate free and fair elections across Africa, including how governments engage with voters. An APET report published by NEPAD in October last year said: "AI's capabilities, including personalised outreach, predictive analysis of voter behaviour, real-time information dissemination, social media sentiment monitoring, targeted voter registration efforts, and the combating of voter suppression, collectively contribute to a more robust and inclusive electoral process."

AI resources in Africa are limited, so the first ever United Nations General Assembly resolution on AI governance related to Africa. In March this year, the General Assembly unanimously passed the resolution on "Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure, and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development", which was sponsored by Kenya and the US, among other countries.

The resolution asked the industrialised world

to provide African countries with technical and financial assistance to "bridge AI and other digital divides between and within countries and promote safe, secure and trustworthy AI systems to accelerate progress towards the full realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". It also calls for tools to be developed to detect AI-generated content and for AI developers to test their systems in Africa and other parts of the world before commercially deploying them. However, such resolutions are not legally binding, so it will be interesting to see how much is achieved.

Just like everywhere else in the world, it is vital not only that Kenya's elections are free and fair but that they are seen to be so. However, Kenya's needs are compounded by the fact that disputes over recent election results have led to violent attacks, with political divisions often heightened by ethnic divisions. More than 1,200 people were killed in the aftermath of the 2007 election, resulting in political leaders Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto being committed to trial by the International Criminal Court, although the cases were later dropped.

Chris Msando, the Kenyan Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC's) head of information, communication and technology was kidnapped and brutally murdered in the run-up to the country's 2017 election. Legal cases over hate speech can be long and difficult, so there have been few prosecutions in the country.

Yet solutions are emerging through Kenya's technological expertise, with the country well known as a centre of mobile money and mobile banking innovation. The original mobile money service, M-Pesa, now works with the IEBC to allow citizens to register as voters via their phones, while the Election Buddy app provides users with candidate profiles, the location of polling locations, and other election-related material.

As a result of past violence, Kenyan civil society has partnered with tech specialists to use AI to counter hate speech and misinformation. With help from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, the MAPEMA (Maintaining Peace through Early Warning, Monitoring and Analysis) consortium of Code for Africa (CfA), Shujaaz and AIfluence used AI and machine learning to identify more than 550,000 toxic posts on Facebook alone in the 2022 Kenyan

ABOVE: Electoral commission officials and voters at various polling stations during Kenya's general election in August 2022.

election. More than 800 of these were flagged and shared with platforms for action.

"Part of our work was to use the expert skill sets that we have in digital forensics and data analytics to monitor social media platforms and digital media for cases of hate speech and incitement and communicate these results to enable effective responses by our partners," Peter Kimani, a senior CfA investigative data analyst commented. CfA is the continent's largest network of civic technology and data journalism labs. MAPEMA also took more in-depth data from seven hotspot counties to get more detailed information.

CfA used a range of tools on the project, including a machine-readable database called

"hatelex", Meta's open-source CrowdTangle, and proprietary solutions like Meltwater to monitor conversations and identify networks involved in electoral disinformation campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. It also used media monitoring solution CivicSignal, which contains more than 410 Kenyan digital media collections, and proprietary system PrimerAI to track digital media. Shujaaz used the results of their analysis to produce messaging that was integrated into comic and animated content to counter misinformation.

It will be interesting to see how disinformation and social manipulation on the one hand, and AI monitoring on the other, have progressed by the 2027 Kenyan elections, when there will be 28 million voters. The IEBC should then be able to use AI algorithms to analyse huge amounts of electoral data, including voter registration, polling stations and campaign finance reports, to identify unusual patterns.

"Through continuous innovation and collaboration, Kenya can harness the transformative potential of AI to strengthen its democracy and electoral governance and become the 'sub-Saharan African hub of democracy'," wrote Joab Odhiambo, an actuarial science expert at Kenya's Meru University of Science and Technology, in May 2024 on Kenya's Citizen Digital platform

This is an optimistic vision, but given the level of concern over social media and tech meddling in elections in Africa and elsewhere, it is vital that voters are educated about the use of AI in elections to instil confidence and build trust in the process. **GG↝**

DISINFORMATION FUELS CONFLICT

By Hannah Krienke

W hat is disinformation, and what are its consequences for society? Social scientist Philip Howard says disinformation is "purposefully crafted and strategically placed information that deceives someone, tricks them into believing a lie or taking action that serves someone else's political interests." The distribution of misleading information shapes and affects people's perspectives, allowing a narrative to be built and used to advance specific goals.

These objectives, however, frequently foster and cause acts of violence in Africa; political, religious, and social conflicts are often triggered by information exchanged on numerous online platforms.

Increased accessibility to social media has empowered individuals to stay informed about current affairs and fostered information exchange. Social media platforms have also streamlined access, enabling users to engage with a wide array of content through likes, comments, and shares, potentially inciting intense emotions regarding relevant socioeconomic issues.

In a 2017 paper, researchers Hermann Wasserman and Nicholas Benquista highlighted that online media fuels the proliferation of rumours, falsehoods, and misinformation, posing a threat to the credibility of conventional news outlets. The rise of disinformation has also created a more urgent concern linked to three key factors. Social media platforms have created new avenues for circulating verified and unverified information, diverging from traditional

ABOVE: A man staggers with blood after he was beaten up by foreign nationals, defending themselves during xenophobic violence and looting in September 2019, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

information production through newspapers, television, and radio broadcasts.

The second factor is associated with the psychological impact of information on individuals; the employment of emotionally charged language not only serves to inspire but also to endorse extremist actions, heightening the risk of conflicts. Using specific phrases and terms can establish a harmful cycle of prejudice, suppression, and stereotypes. Lastly, disinformation can be disseminated by anyone seeking to advance, manipulate, or distort a narrative for their personal benefit.

Violence in Africa is often perceived as irrational and lacking a discernible rationale for its perpetuation. This assumption, however, is untrue, and a correlation exists between violence and disinformation cycles online. By examining several cases in this article, it is crucial to observe how information disseminated across various platforms has contributed to and even exacerbated violence.

Over the past decade, Russia's influence in both West and Central Africa has grown dramatically, expanding its footprint throughout the continent. Russia is known to be involved in 39 operations in both West and Central Africa, according to a Africa Center for Strategic Studies report this year. Disinformation is spreading across Africa as Russia's influence expands. Numerous incidents of Russian disinformation campaigns used to further geopolitical objectives have been reported. These have thrived because they play into long-standing resentment and anti-western and anti-democratic feelings.

Influenced by Russian disinformation strategies, West and Central Africa have both experienced cycles of violence by state and non-state actors. There is growing discontent with foreign forces in the Sahel that has resulted in attacks against UN peacekeepers, thanks in part to the use of social media platforms like Facebook, where pro-Russian

Photo: Thulani Mbele/Sowetan/Gallo Images via Getty Images

support was used as instances against an anti-western narrative in West Africa. In Mali, public support for the 2021 coup was increased by forces that promoted narratives calling for the overthrow of the democratic government.

In southern Africa, research suggests that authoritarian regimes are working with Russia to propagate disinformation campaigns, which are strategically designed to exacerbate societal divisions and are particularly targeted at opposing political parties within the nation. Samuel Ramani's 2023 publication, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender*, reveals how Russia's influence in countries like Madagascar, Kenya, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe is evident in its active participation in manipulating the electoral process as part of a campaign to prop up and normalise authoritarian regimes.

Reviewing Ramani's work for the website Democracy in Africa, researcher Joseph Siegle noted that: "Moscow realised it could deflect any reputational costs for propping up repressive regimes by spinning its actions as advancing multipolarity in a world dominated by the West, supporting African solutions for African problems, and resisting neo-colonialism. In addition to bolstering Russia's posture as a Great Power, the strategy provided an immediate entry point into Africa that would have taken Moscow years to

cultivate through conventional means such as trade, foreign direct investment, development assistance, or cultural and educational exchanges."

Siegle also noted that Africa had become an essential element of Russia's geostrategic posture as it attempted to evade its own international isolation and sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The rise of "Twitter courts" and online public spaces has also greatly shifted the discourse of current affairs, allowing people to share and express anti-immigrant sentiments – in South Africa, for example – directly exposing migrants to harmful attacks that shift from slurs and derogative speech to physical attacks.

South Africa has seen a rise in xenophobia against undocumented foreign nationals who are perceived to be usurping employment and other economic opportunities from unemployed citizens. These narratives gain traction through popular social networking sites like Facebook and X, which serve as platforms facilitating public displays of discontent through likes, comments, and shares, fostering conflict within these online arenas. This shifts to a physical space where a narrative emphasises the necessity to protect one's territory against such attacks by any means necessary. The extract included in the next paragraph below is an example of the narratives on X that construct stories about

ABOVE: Mozambican national Emmanuel Sithole is left to die in the street after he was attacked and stabbed in the heart in the township of Alexandra, South Africa, in April 2015.

foreigners receiving services like healthcare and education at the expense of South African taxpayers:

"Sibongile, a 20-year-old illegal foreigner from Mozambique, who came to South Africa when she was with her illegal foreign mother, asking for help to get documented. She was given free education for 20 years by South Africans while South African kids have been refused their right to education, she is now stuck she cannot make ends meet as she is undocumented, and all her family is in South Africa illegally. Tax money goes to waste while the EFF leader and Julius Malema wants to open borders for all African criminals to enjoy South African taxpayers' money while killing them".

This is just one of numerous posts that have circulated which have heightened tensions between disgruntled South Africans and foreigners. The other effect has been instances of retaliatory action towards South Africans and their establishments in other African countries. One example was an incident in Nigeria where MTN, a South African telecommunications company, was targeted and damaged in response to xenophobic attacks on Nigerians.

The impact of disinformation clearly has negative implications for a country's democratic processes. The capacity and ease with which online platforms can and are exploited to construct and shape narratives highlight the danger they pose when used to spread disinformation. This

significantly influences how African states should address political and social obstacles. That includes enhancing fact-checking systems that ensure that information that is disseminated is accurate, thus allowing greater access to information to large percentages of the population while promoting peaceful and democratic processes.

Enhanced strategies and mechanisms aimed at limiting the spread of inaccurate information among local communities could involve governmental implementation of policies that clearly stipulate the definition of misinformation, and necessary measures to educate individuals on recognising false news.

Additionally, it is imperative for social media platforms to be held accountable for allowing the circulation of untrue information by establishing and enforcing guidelines, in cooperation with government bodies and stakeholders to uphold freedom of expression, while ensuring reliable information dissemination. These policies will be the first step in ensuring greater monitoring of social media platforms while still promoting the democratic values of freedom of expression and the right to access information. **GG↗**

TRUST IN CRISIS

The case for digital literacy

By Fatima Moolla

In our increasingly connected world, the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) brings both promise and peril. While AI can drive innovation and societal progress, it also heightens the risks associated with disinformation. This is a global issue, but AI-fuelled disinformation can be particularly harmful in Africa, where trust in institutions is already tenuous. Given Africa's complex historical context and delicate socio-political landscape, rebuilding trust in institutions is an urgent necessity.

AI can amplify disinformation in various ways, such as through automated bots, deepfakes, and complex algorithms, all of which can spread false information rapidly and convincingly. For example, during Nigeria's 2019 elections, AI-driven bots spread misleading information, shaking public confidence in the electoral process. Similarly, deepfakes – hyper-realistic, manipulated videos that look and sound like real people – can spread false narratives about political figures, further straining political relationships and diminishing trust in leadership.

In countries and regions with histories of ethnic conflict or political instability, disinformation can intensify tensions and even incite violence. This was evident during Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election period, when false information spread through social media and led to violence.

The African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO) reports that disinformation campaigns in Africa have surged almost fourfold since 2022, with 189 documented incidents since 2023. These campaigns destabilise societies, threaten democracy, and undermine trust in institutions. As Africa's online population grows, the impact of these campaigns on social cohesion and political discourse becomes increasingly severe.

Institutional trust is essential for social cohesion and effective governance. Institutions provide the frameworks for society to function, and when trust in them is eroded, social order and progress are at risk. Many African nations have historically struggled with institutional trust due to colonial legacies, corruption, and governance issues. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer highlighted widespread distrust in leaders across Africa. In South Africa, for example, 82% of respondents believed their leaders deliberately misled them. This

Graphic: Getty Images

distrust, compounded by the rise of disinformation, further erodes institutional credibility.

In an article published by *New African* in January this year, Kenyan strategic communications specialist Gina Din-Kariuki argued that this trust deficit was pervasive, undermining confidence at all levels. She wrote that restoring institutional trust was crucial for harnessing the potential of Africa's youth, who make up nearly 60% of the continent's population. Din-Kariuki warned that without significant investment in education, healthcare, and employment, this demographic could become a source of social unrest.

As Din-Kariuki suggested, education is a key tool in combating disinformation. Digital literacy programmes can help citizens critically evaluate information and recognise falsehoods.

Uganda, for example, has launched national digital literacy campaigns to educate the public about disinformation and credible sources. Similarly, South Africa has begun incorporating digital literacy into school curricula, including a State Information Technology Agency (SITA) project to roll out cyber labs to schools across the country, starting with the launch of the first one at a school in the Eastern Cape in July last year.

Organisations like Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) in South Africa conduct workshops to teach students to discern credible information. These programmes stress cross-referencing sources and understanding the motives behind different types of information. Technological solutions such as AI-driven fact-checking tools, blockchain technology for verifying news sources, and platforms like

Graphic: Getty Images

Africa Check and Dubawa also work to counter false information. Africa Check collaborates with local media to provide accurate information and debunk false claims, promoting accountability and transparency.

Ironically, AI can also be leveraged to efficiently identify and flag disinformation. Advanced machine learning algorithms can detect patterns in data that indicate false information, aiding fact-checkers in verifying content quickly.

Effective policy measures are essential to addressing disinformation. Governments must enact and enforce laws that deter the creation and spread of false information while protecting freedom of speech. Ghana's cybersecurity laws and Ethiopia's anti-hate speech law are examples of such efforts. These laws need to be implemented transparently to avoid misuse.

Regional cooperation is also vital. The African Union (AU) can foster collaboration among member states to develop unified strategies against disinformation. The AU's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) can assess how effectively countries address disinformation and promote media literacy.

Civil society organisations and independent media are key players in combating disinformation and rebuilding trust. Groups like the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) promote media freedom, journalistic integrity, and public access to accurate information. These groups often collaborate with international partners to train journalists, conduct media monitoring, and advocate for policy reforms.

Independent media outlets, despite facing significant challenges, continue to provide

> **Ironically, AI can also be leveraged to efficiently identify and flag disinformation.**

critical information to the public. For example, investigative journalism by outlets like *The Daily Maverick* in South Africa has exposed corruption and mismanagement, holding leaders accountable and fostering public trust in the media as a watchdog.

International support is crucial in the fight against disinformation in Africa. Multilateral organisations, donor agencies, and foreign governments can offer financial assistance, technical expertise, and capacity-building support. Programmes like the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) support for media development in Africa are essential in addressing the challenge of disinformation.

Moreover, global tech companies have a responsibility to address the spread of disinformation on their platforms. Initiatives like Facebook's Third-Party Fact-Checking Programme, which partners with organisations like Africa Check, aim to reduce the spread of false information. However, these companies must continuously adapt their policies and technologies to keep pace with evolving disinformation tactics.

Rebuilding trust in African institutions in the age of AI and disinformation is a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive approach. Education, technology, effective policy, and strong leadership are all necessary components of this effort. By investing in these areas, African countries can mitigate the impact of disinformation, restore faith in their institutions, and unlock the potential of their youth, paving the way for a resilient and prosperous future. The collaboration of governments, civil society, international partners, and the private sector is essential to creating an environment where accurate information thrives and trust in institutions is rebuilt. GG↑

No Internet

Try:

- Checking the network cables, modem and router
- Reconnecting to Wi-Fi

ERR_INTERNET_DISCONNECTED

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Internet shutdowns during elections pose a significant threat to democratic processes

By Sandra Chauke

I n 1839, when Edward Bulwer-Lytton stated that "the pen is mightier than the sword", he had no way of knowing that this would transcend the passage of time, remaining relevant in the internet age.

Social media, in particular, has empowered global citizens. Most public expression of ideas, including political pronouncements, takes place on the internet, replacing the telephone, radio, and television, all of which have a finite capacity for conveying and sharing information. For the first time, the internet offered three unique features that no other media had; the ability to generate content oneself, interactivity among users, and the ability to start network relationships with others.

Political discourse, the mobilisation of voters, and holding leaders accountable have become the norm as societies

develop, with social media platforms increasingly playing an important role in amplifying the voices of electorates and empowering individuals to call governments to account. As a continent, Africa is no exception to this movement, with an estimated 570 million people with access to the internet and 340 million with access to social media, according to a 2022 Statista report. Earlier this year, Statista also forecasted that the number of internet users in Africa would increase by 377.3 million users, or by 51.79%, between 2024 and 2029.

In this context, therefore, the increase in government internet shutdowns, especially during periods of political sensitivity such as elections, poses a significant threat to freedom of expression and democratic processes on the continent. Governments have justified shutdowns on the premise that they are a measure to maintain security and public order, yet they undeniably have the effect of stifling dissent and limiting the flow of information.

The truth is that these internet shutdowns have the immense propensity to effectively stifle dissent and limit the flow of information. According to a 2020 Access Now report, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for more than a third of the world's

Where Internet Shutdowns Left People in the Dark

Increase in the search volume for VPNs* during global events between March 2020 and February 2021

■ Election ■ Coup ■ Armed conflict ■ School exams

Country		
Tanzania Oct 27-Nov 6, 2020		+18,823%
Myanmar Feb 4, 2021		+7,200%
Burundi May 20-21, 2020		+5,686%
Guinea Oct 23-27, 2020		+3,043%
Azerbaijan Sep 27-Nov 12, 2020		+1,646%
Guinea Mar 20-23, 2020		+1,257%
Uganda Jan 18-22, 2021		+1,015%
Algeria Sep 13-14, 2020		+828%

* compared with daily average of previous 30 days (or most similar time period possible)
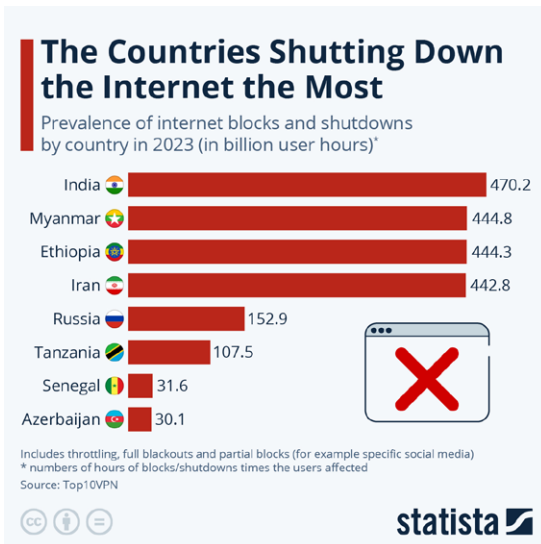Source: Top10 VPN

statista

internet shutdowns during elections in countries that included Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Benin, Mali and Zimbabwe.

Reporting on 2023 in May this year, Access Now said: "In 2023, we saw a resurgence of internet shutdowns in Africa, with 17 incidents recorded in nine countries, nearly double the nine shutdowns in seven countries in 2022. This spike in 2023 raises serious concerns about the ongoing use of shutdowns as a weapon of control in the region."

The organisation said 58.8% of these related to protests rather than elections in Senegal, Gabon, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mozambique, and Somaliland. On the other hand, Access Now also commends the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Sierra Leone for making and upholding commitments to maintain internet access throughout their elections.

While shutdowns have a societal impact that significantly reduces citizens' ability to exercise their democratic rights and access information, their economic impact is also profound.

According to a Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) report, African countries lost an estimated $2.16

The Countries Shutting Down the Internet the Most

Prevalence of internet blocks and shutdowns by country in 2023 (in billion user hours)*

Country	Value
India	470.2
Myanmar	444.8
Ethiopia	444.3
Iran	442.8
Russia	152.9
Tanzania	107.5
Senegal	31.6
Azerbaijan	30.1

Includes throttling, full blackouts and partial blocks (for example specific social media)
* numbers of hours of blocks/shutdowns times the users affected
Source: Top10VPN

statista

billion due to internet shutdowns in 2020 alone. This figure includes e-commerce losses, business operations disruptions, and decreased productivity.

But despite the challenges posed by internet shutdowns, African citizens and civil society groups have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. Many have turned to alternative communication methods, such as virtual private networks (VPNs), satellite internet, and offline messaging apps like Bridgefy, to circumvent government censorship. These tools have enabled activists and ordinary citizens to continue their work and maintain their digital presence, even during shutdowns. During the 2019 elections in Nigeria, for example, digital rights groups launched awareness campaigns to educate the public about using VPNs and other tools to stay connected in case of a shutdown.

"The pen is mightier than the sword" thus speaks volumes about the power of communication and information in shaping societies, a principle acutely relevant in the context of internet shutdowns during elections in Africa. These deliberate disruptions, orchestrated by governments, aim to stifle dissent and control the flow of information, undermining democratic processes. By severing access to social media platforms and other online communication channels, authorities effectively silence the voices of millions, curtailing their ability to engage in political discourse, report injustices, and mobilise for collective action.

This digital censorship not only infringes upon fundamental human rights but also erodes public trust in electoral integrity, as the free exchange of ideas and transparency are vital to the legitimacy of any democratic election.

It is in this light that the metaphorical pen, embodied today by digital communication, remains a potent force for advocacy and accountability, and its suppression is a troubling testament to the lengths some regimes will go to maintain power. GG⬆

ELECTIONS IN WHICH COMMUNICATION WAS DISRUPTED

UGANDA: On Wednesday, 13 January 2021, the night before Uganda's general elections, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) mandated that all telecom operators and internet service providers indefinitely shut down their internet gateways. The entire nation experienced a blackout starting at 7pm local time, effectively cutting off digital communication just as the country prepared to vote. The shutdown was seen as a tool to dismantle the campaign of the opposition, particularly as the general population and civil society organisations heavily relied on social media to mobilise and share information.

BENIN: In 2019, Benin's government blocked access to social media platforms during an election, citing the need to maintain public order. Civil society groups criticised the blackout, stating that it infringed on citizens' rights to freedom of expression and access to information. Human Rights Watch reported that the shutdown impacted the transparency of the election process and limited the ability of election monitors to report irregularities. The internet was restored after the election was over.

ZAMBIA: Zambian authorities imposed a deliberate blackout on social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, during the country's presidential election in August 2021. This orchestrated shutdown gravely impaired citizens' ability to communicate and access vital information throughout the electoral process, profoundly affecting their daily lives, work, education, and social connections.

ZIMBABWE: During Zimbabwe's elections last year, there were reports of significant disruptions to internet access, raising concerns about the impact on the democratic process. Until and during the elections, internet connectivity was notably degraded, with periods of restricted access. This created difficulties for citizens attempting to stay informed and participate in the electoral process. The Zimbabwean government has a history of imposing internet shutdowns during political unrest to quell protests and limit the spread of dissenting opinions. This situation underscores ongoing challenges to Zimbabwe's electoral integrity, with repeated concerns over the ruling party's attempts to control information flow and restrict opposition activities. GG⬆

Photo: Chris Hondros/Getty Images

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Disinformation has proven deadly for many Africans

By Michael Schmidt

ABOVE: Nigerian field workers for the World Health Organization inoculate a child with the polio vaccine, a disease health workers once had hoped to eradicate worldwide by 2005, but flared up in Nigeria after local Islamic leaders banned polio vaccines over suspicions of everything Western.

In February 2013, gunmen believed to have been members of the terror group Boko Haram shot dead nine female health workers outside two clinics in Kano state, northern Nigeria, where the women were preparing to provide polio inoculations. The killings occurred a full decade after the religious and political leaders of Kano, Zamfara, and Kaduna states urged parents not to allow their children to be vaccinated against the debilitating poliovirus.

Their opposition stemmed from a *fatwa*, or legal ruling, by Datti Ahmed, a Kano-based physician heading a prominent Muslim group, the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria, who stated that polio vaccines were to be avoided as they were "corrupted and tainted by evildoers from America and their western allies ... We believe that modern-day Hitlers have deliberately adulterated the oral polio vaccines with anti-fertility drugs and viruses that are known to cause HIV and AIDS."

As a result, there was a resurgence of the poliovirus in Nigeria, where cases increased five-fold over 2002-2006, whereas it has been all but eliminated in the rest of the world, and quickly spread beyond Nigeria. It took health authorities until 2008 to regain control over the virus,

Photo: Aminu Abubakar / AFP

Photo: Aminu Abubakar / AFP

as Sani-Gwarzo Nasir of Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health and colleagues said in a 2014 report, by getting the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'adu Abubakar, historically the most venerable Muslim ruler in Nigeria, to support a polio education roadshow based on convincing local imams and chieftains of the necessity to combat the disease.

However, many instances of so-called "fake news" – whether mistaken misinformation, deliberate disinformation, or outright propaganda – inflicted on communities across Africa in recent years, have proven far more dangerous to public safety. But, as with the health sector in Nigeria, many different communities of interest are fighting back.

The very colonisation of Africa, carved up by the imperialist powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, was driven by massive and sustained false information campaigns: that Africans were primitive "savages" in need of European enlightenment, or simply that much of the land was *terra nullius*, a rich landscape with no indigenous sovereignty and thus ripe for the taking.

While nowhere near as far-reaching in its impact and implications, some recent examples of false information peddled in different regions of the

continent have caused untold damage. This has mostly centred on public panic around pandemics such as HIV/Aids, Ebola, and Covid-19, because such health crises provoke a sense of extreme vulnerability in communities that are swamped with difficult-to-understand scientific information, and so often look towards unsubstantiated explanations and quack solutions.

Probably the most notorious example of public misinformation spread about HIV/Aids was that assiduously driven by South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki during his 1999-2008 presidency.

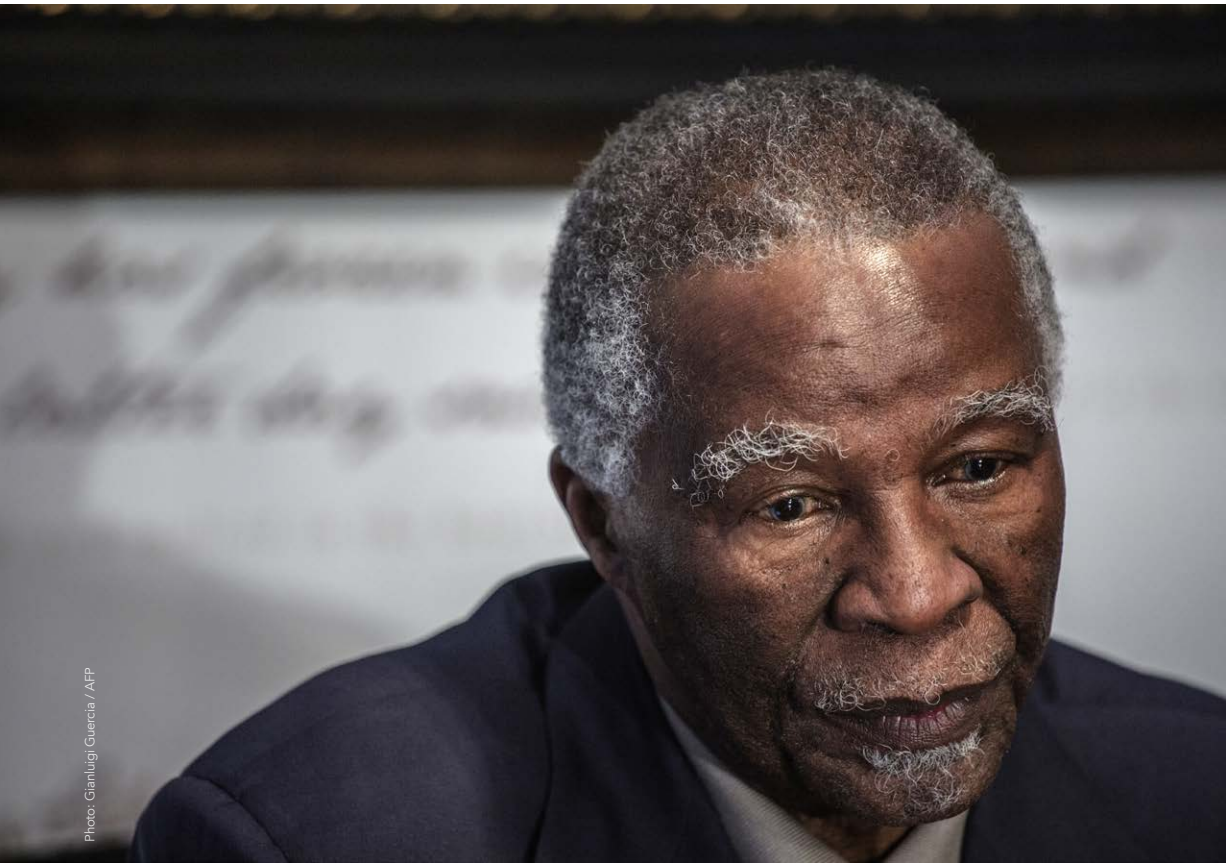Influenced by dissidents who disputed the

Photo: Gianluigi Guercia / AFP

TOP LEFT: People gather outside the Haye dispensary in the northern Nigerian city of Kano in February 2013 where gunmen killed seven female polio immunisation workers.
LEFT: Dried blood stains and abandoned polio vaccine kits litter the floor of the Haye dispensary.
ABOVE: Former South African president Thabo Mbeki.

global scientific consensus that the virus did indeed cause the killer immunodeficiency syndrome, Mbeki repeatedly publicly expressed his deep distrust of "western" science and big pharma, claiming anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) were poisonous and had been designed by whites to harm blacks, and that Aids was a disease of poverty that could be combated simply by better nutrition.

As a result, he instituted policies that for years denied ARVs to Aids patients and withdrew support from clinics using them to prevent mother-to-child transmission, instead backing a shady locally developed drug called Virodene, based on a toxic industrial solvent, against the advice of the Medicines Control Council.

Two communities combined to successfully challenge Mbeki's Aids scepticism: community activists such as the Treatment Action Campaign, which took the government to the Constitutional Court, compelling it to distribute ARVs, and scientists, 5,000 of whom in 2006 issued the *Durban Declaration* that strongly affirmed the consensus on the cause of Aids. This forced a reluctant reversal of ARV policy in October 2006.

A study by a researcher into Aids denialism, Prof Nicoli Nattrass of the University of Cape Town, concluded: "Demographic modelling suggests that if the national government had used ARVs for prevention and treatment at the same rate as the [province of the] Western Cape (which defied national policy on ARVs), then about 171,000 HIV infections and 343,000 deaths could have been prevented between 1999 and 2007."

Photo: Sumy Sadurni / AFP

In the case of an Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa that caused at least 11,323 deaths over 2013-2016, misinformation spread via social media had similarly disastrous consequences. A study by Melissa Roy of the University of Ottawa and others in 2019 into who affected communities blamed for the crisis showed that "emotional" social media users blamed, in descending order: governments for poor virus containment; neighbouring "others" and migrants for starting and transmitting the virus; the media for fearmongering; and global elites and big pharma for supposedly creating the virus to kill Africans.

Fact-checking non-profit organisation Africa Check was founded at Wits University's journalism department in Johannesburg in 2012 as the development arm of the international news agency AFP and now has offices in Dakar, Lagos, and Nairobi. It warned during the pandemic that wildfire social media claims such as that Ebola was airborne were false, and that the virus had no cure, so bathing in salt water or ingesting "nano-silver" would have no effect.

That Africa Check, which aims to foster "accuracy and honesty in public debate", was an outgrowth of journalism is no surprise, as legacy and new media are the nexus from which most widespread false rumour distribution radiates out into public healthcare, religion, the economy, and politics. Also, journalists themselves are often key victims (and perpetrators) of mis/disinformation campaigns; so, on that score the organisation has trained 4,500 journalists on verification techniques.

The issue has become so pressing that Africa Check, the continent's first fact-checking organisation and author of more than 1,300 reports in English and French, has seeded a proliferation of similar outfits abroad, 20 of them working together in the Africa Facts network, founded in November 2017 and covering most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Since false information causes such widespread damage in many fields, the USAID-funded pro-democracy Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) now has a lengthy directory of responses across various African

LEFT: Medical staff are sterilised before entering the Ebola isolation unit at a hospital in Bundibugyo, western Uganda, in August 2018.
ABOVE: Red Cross workers prepare to place a body bag, containing the body of a 3-year-old suspected Ebola victim, into a grave during a Safe and Dignified Burial on October 13, 2022 in Mubende, Uganda.
BELOW Health workers in their personal protective equipment before entering the red zone to check up on patients in Butembo, Democratic Republic of Congo, in November 2018.

Photo: Luke Dray/Getty Images

Photo: John Wessels / AFP

communities to mis/disinformation. That includes organisations that verify health issues such as BBC News Africa's Covid-19 MisinfoHub resource, correcting what it terms the "infodemic" of fake news on the coronavirus pandemic. Then there are those like Fake Watch Africa in Malawi, which monitors politicians' wild claims during election season.

Some are naturally located within investigative journalism, such as the African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR), which has an iLab project that "uses forensic data science techniques to expose the networks that disseminate and amplify misinformation, disinformation, and toxic content (such as hate speech or extremism) with a special focus on coordinated inauthentic behaviour and other influence/information operations."

Some are based within high-tech communities, such as Code for Africa, a non-profit based in Nairobi, which runs an AI/machine learning initiative called Civic Signal, "using large-scale media monitoring to map the content/creator landscape and underlying business models for disinformation profiteers." It uses "language processing tools to analyse the underlying narratives that shape public discourse and perceptions and make the public vulnerable to disinformation and extremism."

Code for Africa has its own continental network, the African Fact-Checking Alliance (AFCA), which brings together media and civil society organisations that work to counter misinformation, "[supporting] fact-checking missions to debunk dangerous content, including conspiracy theories and misinformation."

Photo: Pius Utomi Ekpei / AFP

Some verification organisations work within the developmental NGO space, such as the African Academy for Open-Source Investigations (AAOSI), an initiative of the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), "supporting media and NGOs in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal to identify and address problematic behaviour in the information space". As with Africa Check and Code for Africa, the ICFJ initiative provides training, mentorship, and organisational support.

For communities of interest, shooting down false information in which "disinformation profiteers" have invested so much is of course not without its perils, especially when they are political extremists, fly-by-night businessmen who employ mercenaries, or snake-oil "bishops" with tens of thousands of irrationalist followers easily roused to anger. For example, ersatz populist churches that use their tax-exempt status and cash-based operations to launder money for Latin American cocaine cartels penetrating Africa are notoriously litigious against exposés of the realities of their sources of funding.

And groups that undertake holding others to account have to themselves be rigorous in how they deal with statistics and interpret data. Africa Check, for example, was challenged in 2018 by the liberal Institute of Race Relations on the soundness of its interpretation of controversial farm murder statistics in South Africa.

An internal Africa Check survey on its 20-organisation Africa Facts network in 2021, by Charlotte Xiaou Wu, noted significant challenges to outfits monitoring accuracy in reporting in all fields, foremost among which was the need to "work hard to communicate their nonpartisanship and independence, both intellectual and financial, to build their audiences' trust".

As one of Wu's interviewees put it, "Staking out a role as arbiter in a highly disunified space and demonstrating professional neutrality builds the trust needed for organisations to reach audiences
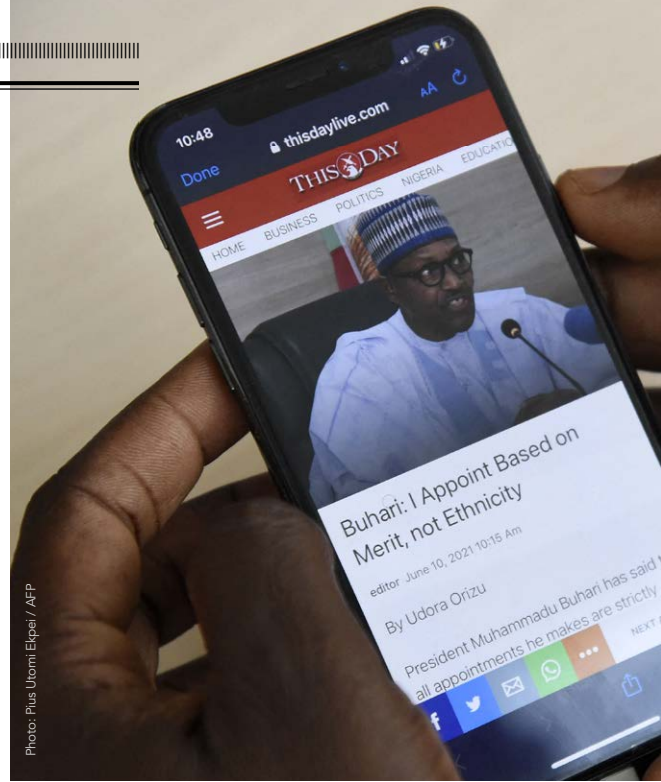
across the political divide." Against a backdrop of the difficulty of fund-raising and sustainability in a contracted post-Covid economy, it is vital that fact-checking organisation openly declare their sources of funding and assiduously avoid the merest hint of political inflections in their reporting.

And yet her interviewees noted "that government interference was one of the main challenges in media reporting in [their] countries... Many countries on the continent are younger democracies with less established political and health systems, where securing the quality of information and public debate is felt to be of existential significance."

The quality and accessibility of data was vital to verification, they told Wu. Even supposedly open, public information was often impossible to find, while the legwork involved in assessing data, already a labour-intensive yet time-sensitive task, was more extensive than that required in developed countries, where data systems were more complete and responsive.

Wu reported that government internet shutdowns to suppress dissent exacerbated Africa's low digital penetration and data literacy, creating

ABOVE: A journalist sources for information with a smartphone on the internet at the Arise News in Ikoyi neighbourhood in Lagos in June 2021. Nigeria's media and activists fear their country is slipping into repression after the government suspended Twitter in Africa's most populous nation, where hyper-connected youth embraced the platform as a means of protest.

conditions where verification organisations were forced to adopt additional strategies to reach communities that would otherwise not be exposed to corrective narratives. Congo Check, for example, she said, ran public roadshows to offline communities on key disputed facts in their society.

An equally huge challenge was the sheer diversity of languages across Africa: "In Nigeria, for example, more than 500 languages are spoken. This can present a challenging dynamic," Wu writes, citing an interviewee warning that if false information was published in one of the dominant, or official languages of the country, where it can be adequately combated by fact-checkers, it would still likely resurface "in local languages with no counter-narrative, and spread quickly…" Communicating counter-narratives, therefore, had to take place on multiple platforms and in many languages.

Wu drew attention to a blog by Check's Kenya editor, Alphonce Shiundu, that pointed out "false information can be particularly difficult to counter when it circulates in societies with shared 'experiential and communal worldviews', which give readers a perception if its 'innate accuracy'." These types of communal echo-chambers were amplified,

for example, by private WhatsApp groups, a popular source of information in many African countries, run by community or religious organisations.

Political interference via large-scale propaganda campaigns on social media by foreign powers such as France, the United States, China, Russia, or the United Arab Emirates can also have immense impact. For instance, the Russian state-linked mercenary Africa Corps' (formerly the Wagner Group) troll farm, the Internet Research Agency, pilloried the West and promoted Russian interests on West Africa social media, which created the zeitgeist, which since 2021 has toppled three pro-western governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Thus, with even established western democracies revealed to be vulnerable to rapidly evolving and spreading disinformation campaigns, verification organisations must repeatedly upskill and continually identify the many gaps in public-interest reporting – especially as it affects people's services and livelihoods. **GG⬇**

Russian paramilitary group

WAGNER

Wagner paramilitary group once again made headlines following the death of its head, Yevgeny Prigozhin

The merceneries continue to have a significant presence in Middle East and Africa

- Co-founded in 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin
- Involved in ongoing Russia-Ukraine war
- Withdrew its troops from Ukraine after short-lived mutiny in June
- Draws attention with its increasing activities in Africa every year

COUNTRIES WHERE WAGNER GROUP IS BELIEVED TO OPERATE

August 24, 2023

Graphic: Getty Images

AI AND NIGERIAN POLITICS

By Emmanuel Orakwe

The 2023 election cycle saw Nigerian voters overwhelmed with disinformation. Sponsored news blogs, social media accounts, and other mass media spread disinformation at a rate unprecedented in the country's fragile democracy. Artificial intelligence-generated images and videos, as well as media posts, falsely linked candidates to terrorist groups, ethnocentric dialogues, and other criminal vices in the bid to besmirch their public image and tarnish their political chances. This disinformation was also used to rouse ethno-nationalist and religious sentiments among the voters.

Across the major political divides emerged three candidates, who had followings of devout cult-like believers. The ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), had its candidate in Bola Ahmed Tinubu and his supporters called "BATists"; the major opposition, the Peoples

Democratic Party (PDP), had its candidate, a former vice president, Atiku Abubakar, with his supporters known as "Atikulates"; and the third rising force, the Labour Party (LP), had its candidate, Peter Obi, who had a cult following commonly referred to as the "Obidients". The political competition between these three divides was vicious, with slews of accusations thrown at each other in all manner of media.

The enthusiasm leading to the elections was high. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission Nigeria 2023, a record-breaking voter registration was captured, with an additional 9.5 million voters (mostly youths), bringing the total eligible voters to a record 93.4 million people. Youths in Nigeria were excited about the 2023 presidential

elections for several reasons, including the emergence of a third force and the absence of an incumbent running in the presidential race. However, this enthusiasm was short-lived, as the outcome of the elections disappointed citizens. Other factors, such as hate campaigns, AI-generated disinformation, and attacks on voters and election officials, further soured the mood leading up to the election.

Nigeria is no stranger to political disinformation. Arthur Nwankwo noted in 2005 that since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been beset by conflicts over the attainment and control of power, which led to deadly pogroms such as the Action Group crisis of 1962-63, the Western Region election crisis of 1965, the military coup of 1966, the Igbo

massacre in northern Nigeria between May and October 1966, the 1967-1970 civil war, and a slew of inter-ethnic wars and riots. In fact, propaganda has remained a mainstay of Nigeria's electioneering process, with caricatures and disparaging information about opponents created and published in newspapers, magazines, calendars, and on posters.

The months leading up to the 2023 election cycle saw a great deal of media campaigning for and against candidates, especially concerning the presidential election. Journalist Eric Davis commented that AI-generated deep fakes used in media campaigns were not subtle. He argued that the supporters of the Labour Party candidate used AI-generated images and videos to enhance the public perception of their candidate, Peter Obi, in various instances, including deep fake videos depicting Nollywood actors, and even American celebrities like Elon Musk and Donald Trump, endorsing Obi for the presidency. Similarly, deep fakes were also used to undermine public opinions of candidates, such as the video depicting PDP candidate Atiku Abubakar and his supporters planning to rig the election. There was also the video, debunked by Reuters, which showed APC candidate Bola Tinubu incoherently responding to questions at the Chatham House leading up to the elections.

Explaining the effects of AI-generated disinformation is critical to the growth of African democracies. AI-generated images and videos often appear very real, and it would take great discernment to identify them as fake. This has enormous implications for Nigeria's democracy and nation-building. Political scholar Gideon Isika commented in 2021 that Nigerian voters were not as politically educated as their counterparts in South Africa and Ghana, for example, and even when they were, they were too polarised by religious and ethnic sentiments to admit certain truths.

Isika also argued that most Nigerians had no access to fact-checking applications or websites, making it difficult for an organic pursuit of political truth. This, in turn, left citizens at the mercy of the media to which they were exposed. Likewise, most Nigerian citizens are poor (in fact, the World Bank's 2023 multi-dimensional poverty headcount ratio points out that 63% of Nigerians are poor), may not afford gadgets to follow up on election trends, and are more likely to follow the behest of the party leaders.

Nigeria often prides itself on being a bastion of peace, freedom, unity, and progress. However, evidence over the country's six decades of existence shows that its citizens have lost faith in these virtues and have aligned their interests and political aspirations with distinctive ethno-religious identities. Hence, election cycles in the country emphasise these socially constructed identities, which are readily exploited by the political class.

A 2024 Africa Centre for Strategic Studies paper argued that "the proliferation of disinformation is a fundamental challenge to African democracy, as it can intentionally polarise the voters, lead to deadly violence, serve as smokescreens for corrupt regimes, validate military interventions, and cow civil societies into silence."

During the 2023 elections, independent analytics like HumAngle analysed thousands of media posts on Twitter, finding a pattern of inorganic hashtags and misinformation being spread by social media influencers and bot accounts in an effort to undermine competitors and take advantage of voter sentiment.

Even though INEC had not yet revealed the official results, election results started to leak on social media platforms like Facebook and X on the evening of 25 February 2023. The fact that votes were still being counted in several local government areas raised doubts about the leaked results, the objective of which was to evoke voter mood and heighten dissent regarding the official results.

Claims and election results flooded the internet from numerous partisan accounts on X (some of

Photo: Getty Images

which have been deactivated), including the APC Presidential Campaign Council (@APCPresCC2022), Babakura Modu (@Babakuramadu), Nìyí Akinsiju (@AgbaakinImodoye, @biyora1, @dipoaina1, @gen_buhar, @kashimmedias, @sparkle_akoga, and @theml007). Meltwater, an online media monitoring platform, claimed that 375,000 people were reached by these platforms, who either saw or responded to their posts. Since misinformation can be used to influence voters' thoughts and feelings, these sorts of activities pose a serious threat to democracy.

For Nigeria and most of sub-Saharan Africa, the interplay of democracy and nationalism only became important after independence from their colonial masters. Owing to the struggle for control of resources, ethnic-motivated democracy continues to shape allegiances within these countries.

Ethnicity is sociologically significant in the discussion of democracy and nationalism in Nigeria. It can be construed as a situation where members of a group associate importance with their distinctive socio-demographic characteristics, such as language, dress, symbols and beliefs. Therefore, the democratic

process in Nigeria (which is a game of numbers for and against sensibilities) is critically affected by these ethnic sentiments, creating obstacles to achieving a true nationalist ideology or even, at the very least, a viable nation-state. Addressing ethnicity is critical, since AI-generated disinformation can stimulate these sentiments, creating feelings of discord, distrust or even violence.

In addition to polarised ethnicity and culture, Nigeria's electoral system has other challenges, such as inadequate electoral planning, execution and evaluation; the romance between electoral umpires and the political class; corruption and mismanagement in the electoral governing body, INEC; the country's multi-party structure; as well as the size and population of the country. However, AI could be a useful tool in tackling election challenges due to its speed and versatility. AI trackers could be employed in subsequent elections to verify statements and reduce the lies and disinformation fed to voters. It could also be used in end-to-end systems, collating polls in real-time, even in remote areas, which would enhance transparency and accountability in the electoral process. GG

CASE STUDY: NIGERIA AND GHANA

By Anthony Ademiluyi

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into governance presents both opportunities and challenges for African democracies. A report by Research ICT Africa highlights how the impact of AI on democratic processes depends on the policies and regulations governing its use. Effective AI governance can enhance transparency and efficiency, but without proper regulation, AI risks exacerbating issues like corruption and disinformation. This article looks at how Nigeria and Ghana are navigating AI's complexities within their governance frameworks.

In November 2020, Nigeria's then Minister for Information, Communication, and Digital Economy, Dr Isa Pantami, inaugurated the National Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (NCAIR) in Abuja. As the first centre of its kind in Africa, NCAIR reflects the ambitions of Nigeria's National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) 2020-2030, launched in 2019. The strategy identifies AI as a key pillar for advancing the digital economy and aims to leverage digital technologies for economic growth and improving governance.

NCAIR, a digital laboratory for advancing AI skills development and innovation, was launched as a response to a directive for agencies under the Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy to formulate practical strategies for enhanced implementation of the digital economy, according to a November 2021 policy brief published by Paradigm Initiative (PI), an organisation that works to create improved livelihoods for underserved young Africans through digital inclusion and digital rights programmes.

The PI, which has offices in several countries, including Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Senegal, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, said Nigeria, which has 103 million internet users –

the most of any country on the continent – was beginning to formulate more laws, policies and guidelines to regulate AI use and application.

"A national policy on AI is critical for the country, and therefore, the Nigerian government and other relevant stakeholders [must] think carefully about how this policy can be created to support an AI economy that will maintain standards like algorithmic accountability, data protection, the explainability of decision-making by machine-learning models, and the protection of citizens' human rights from infringements," the PI brief said. "The formulation of this policy requires an understanding of how AI and other related technology developments can be used to achieve Nigeria's national goals and help solve many local problems ranging from food security to healthcare."

The brief also noted that AI was transforming the workforce and its use would increase in the decades ahead. "With a median age of about 18 years, and recording the second-highest unemployment rate globally, Nigeria must massively expand upskilling and reskilling efforts within its teeming workforce to leverage the opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution and to sustain the nation's labour economy."

In an interview with *Africa in Fact*, Dr Olusola Sayeed Ayoola, the CEO of Robotics and Intelligence Nigeria, a technology hub and research centre, said AI could also be a tool against corruption by providing an intelligent method to assess government programmes. It could also be used to monitor government contracts by tracking their progress, ensuring compliance and reducing corruption. He agreed that it was also a tool for helping to support public policy formation, including more targeted policies to improve the lives of young people.

"AI can, for instance, analyse demographics and the employment and healthcare needs of youth to identify areas where they are underserved or

ABOVE: Students visit the NCAIR centre to learn about emerging technologies such as the the development of robots, circuit board manufacturing, 3D printing and laser cutting.

Photo: x.com/ncairnigeria

overlooked," he said. "AI can also be used to analyse social media and other online feedback from them to better understand their needs and preferences."

Ayoola stressed the importance of regulating AI to prevent misuse, suggesting a regulatory council of AI experts. "This council could oversee AI applications and technology, ensuring they align with ethical standards and societal standards," he told *Africa in Fact*. "The government could also validate the AI training curriculum and monitor and detect rogue AI systems."

An article in the *MIT Technology Review*, published in March this year, described the projected benefit of AI adoption on Africa's economy as "tantalising", saying that, according to estimates, "four African countries alone – Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa – could rake in up to $136 billion worth of economic benefits by 2030 if businesses there begin using more AI tools."

Ghana shares Nigeria's enthusiasm for AI but faces distinct challenges in regulation. A 2021 International Bar Association report highlighted the lack of a formal AI regulatory framework in Ghana, noting that there would clearly be a need for

one. Nonetheless, a UNESCO report the same year recorded the Ghanaian government's interest in developing AI policies, though concrete actions had yet to materialise.

Earlier this year, however, Ghana's Finance Minister Mohammed Amin Adam said the country would work closely with other countries on the continent and development partners, such as the IMF, the World Bank and the African Development Bank (AfDB), among others, to provide funding, technical and implementation support for AI projects, as well as the development of national AI strategies. In the meantime, Ghana has already developed a digital national identity card and is extending fibre connectivity in the country.

Nigeria and Ghana's experiences illustrate AI's multifaceted challenges and opportunities in governance. Effective regulation and ethical AI use are essential to harnessing its potential benefits while mitigating risks. Both countries are on a journey to integrate AI into their governance frameworks, with success depending on robust policies, ethical standards, and collaborative efforts to address disinformation and other emerging challenges. GG⬆

FACT AND FICTION IN THE SAHEL

By Monique Bennett

Russia's use of disinformation campaigns to sway narratives is increasingly evident

War has been marked by the use of propaganda and disinformation for centuries. Individuals, states, and non-state groups have used them to collectively rally people towards their own narratives, ideologies or causes. Although these practices are not novel, the advent of the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence have advanced the speed and scope of their influence. Identifying what's real and what is not has become increasingly difficult and some platforms, like X, are unable to adequately deal with accounts which spread disinformation.

The manipulation of information, narratives or discourse has always been a key feature of war and conflict. Information is power and can play a key part in advancing foreign policy positions and objectives for states. Fake news and online propaganda have increasingly played a role in inciting violence

and dissent, while some governments have manipulated content or disrupted internet access during periods of political contestation.

For the first time, the epicentre of terrorist fatalities is no longer in the Middle East but the Sahel. In 2023, Burkina Faso accounted for 25% of all terrorism-related fatalities worldwide. The Sahel region accounted for 50% of deaths in the same period, and this is evident in the continued escalation of violence and instability where these groups operate. The tri-border region of Liptako-Gourma, where the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger meet, has been the focal point of violence and instability for more than a decade. The complex and diverse set of jihadi groups, along with other regional Tuareg and local armed groups, has created a dangerous environment with which international and regional military operations have failed to grapple.

The unfortunate outcomes of the French Operation Barkhane (August 2014-November 2022) and the United Nations mission in Mali (MINUSMA April 2013 - December 2023) and their exit opened an opportunity for a change in security partnerships. Russia's growing interest in improving its diplomatic relations

ABOVE: A banner of Russian President Vladimir Putin's support for the Burkina Faso interim military president Captain Ibrahim Traore in January 2023.

with African states has coincided with growing anti-western sentiment on the continent due to increasing dissatisfaction with their lack of agency and representation in international politics.

Russia has moved to position itself as an ally to African states who want to resist influence from traditional western economic and political partners. Military cooperation is at the heart of Russia's current strategy to develop stronger relations with African states, and the Sahel is where it's been met with open arms by military juntas and parts of the civilian population.

Russia's use of disinformation campaigns to sway narratives and frame historical or current events to promote a specific interpretation or solution has become increasingly evident.

Putin's foreign policy objectives form part of the framing that happens in his country's disinformation campaigns. Russia aims to broaden its soft power and influence in Africa through different means (not foreign aid, for example). Thus, its framing aims to undermine citizen sentiment toward western influence and favour Russian cooperation instead.

The digital age has provided a convenient and self-serving platform for Russian-sponsored and endorsed political narratives. Research published by the Rand Corporation in 2020 concluded that during

TOP LEFT: Men hold photos of Burkina Faso President Captain Ibrahim Traore, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and other military leaders during a protest to demand the departure of France's ambassador and military forces, in January 2023.
ABOVE: A poster of Russia's President Putin and Burkina Faso's interim military president Traore with the slogan "Support for the transition" in the Burkina Faso capital Ouagadougou.

the 2016 US presidential election, Russia sought to manipulate public opinion on divisive issues and exacerbate cracks in the political process. The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) was accused of involvement in these social media campaigns; it is commonly known as the harbourer of "internet trolls" who impersonate American users on social media accounts to spread propaganda. Subsequent reports, including one published by five Australian universities in July 2021, indicate that the IRA had direct authority from Putin and funding from former Wagner boss, the late Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Russian state-sponsored international

broadcasters like RT and Sputnik have been key sources of repeated scepticism around the intentions and objectives of UN and western forces in Africa. The emphasis on national sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of states is key to Russia's media narrative on Africa. In the Sahel, Russia has used Russosphère, a network of social media groups that promote Kremlin-sponsored messaging in French. Memes are generally the content medium of choice, and they help trigger reactions to anti-French and anti-West sentiments. The accounts attempt to latch onto real-time politics and help to drive existing dissatisfaction or discontent. Russia and authoritarian regimes alike also use disinformation to pre-emptively offset narratives that challenge their legitimacy or actions.

Wagner has been central in driving anti-French content and has helped run social media propaganda as part of their security service offering, according to an African Defence Forum February 2023 report. The report included interviews with a Belgian Russosphère orchestrator, Luc Michel, who revealed that the network had helped to legitimise Russia's war in Ukraine and saw its influence in the Sahel as the security solution for the region's fight against Jihadi groups.

Striking evidence of the outcome of Russia's disinformation campaigns in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger was made public through a wave of protests that took place in each country after the military takeovers that occurred there. Some analysts have suggested that the disinformation helped drive anti-French and UN sentiment, leading to their withdrawal. However, the withdrawal of troops was unlikely to have been linked to those disinformation campaigns; rather, it resulted from an accumulation of factors, including fractures between the military approaches of France and the US, as well as Russia's liberal arms deals.

Moreover, both Russia and the US were

Photo: Olympia De Maismont / AFP

involved in the military training of Malian officials who were later involved in orchestrating the subsequent coups. However, while the escalation of insecurity in the Sahel cannot be blamed solely on disinformation campaigns, in the long term the integrity of media freedom and access to critical and reliable information about the security situation in these countries is at risk of deteriorating with Russia's presence.

Media freedom across the Sahel has deteriorated since the domino of military coups between 2019 and 2023. Journalists in Mali and Guinea have faced increasing intimidation and censorship by authorities since the military takeovers took place. Media outlets have also faced pressure to broadcast patriotic and nationalistic messages that favour those in authority, strikingly like the messaging delivered by Russia's RT and Sputnik.

In Burkina Faso, where the media has historically been more robust, the Damiba-led junta that led the first coup, cracked down on the country's media regulator by changing its leadership and allowing social media accounts to be investigated and censored. Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the second coup leader and current authority figure in Burkina Faso, followed suit by restricting media coverage by

French-run broadcasters and continuing to censor the activities of local and international journalists in the country.

The use of disinformation in today's ever-more complex wars and conflicts across the world and on the African continent presents a new challenge to states and regional bodies that aim to bring peace and stability. These trends add a new dimension to the difficulties in maintaining truth and justice during and after contexts of armed violence and humanitarian suffering. Many civil society and corporate organisations are working to counter disinformation through holistic approaches, which include harnessing tech-savvy youth who are fostering skills to debunk false news online.

Media and information literacy education in West African universities has been shown to help students accurately identify false information online before sharing or distributing it. These strategies are crucial because we cannot rely solely on social media platforms to regulate the content space. Developing and strengthening agency remains the solution to countering disinformation and the conflicts in the Sahel because overreliance on external solutions has and will only cause more instability and human suffering. GG⬆
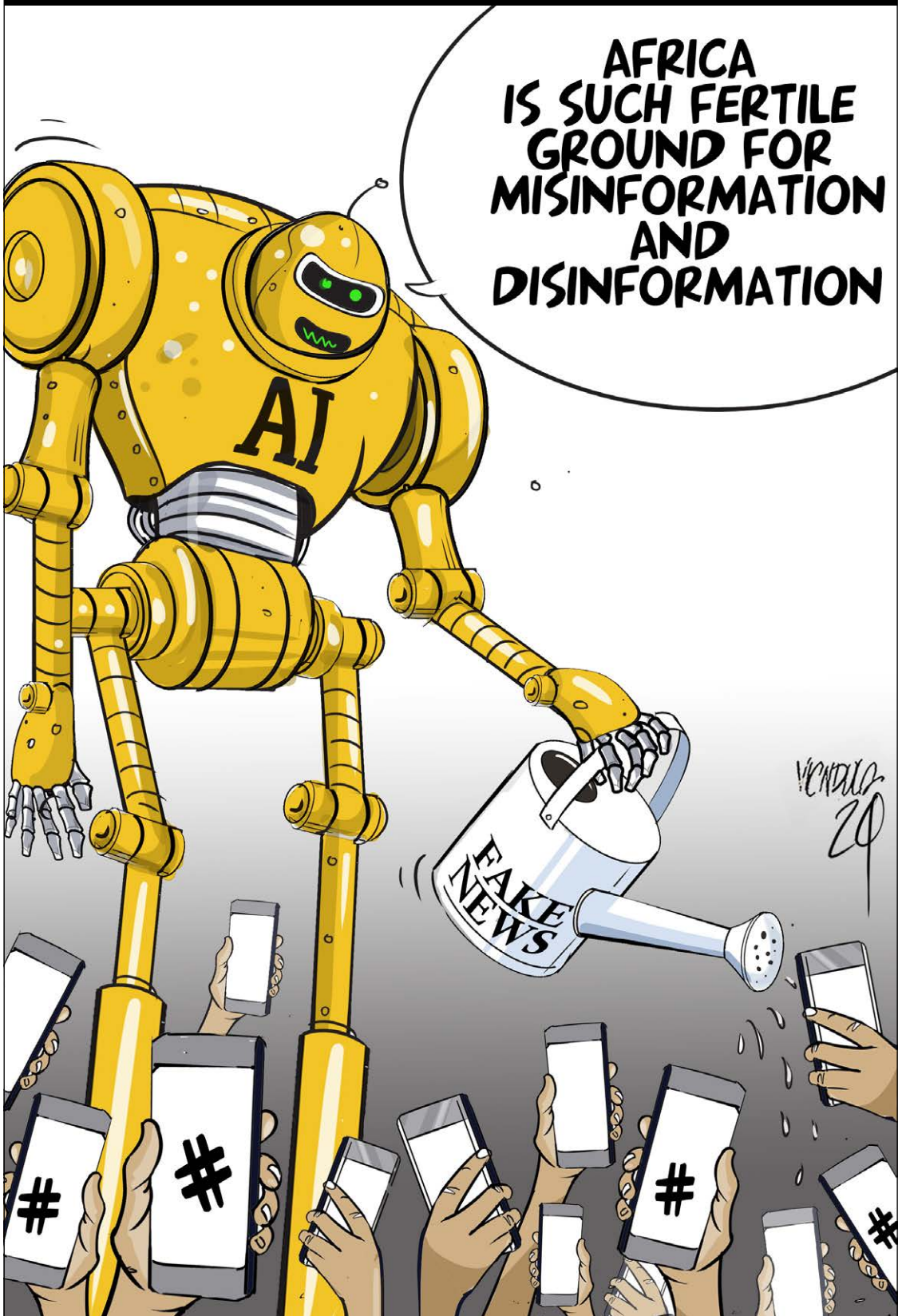
FEEDING ON ILLITERACY

By Issa Sikiti da Silva

Members of the Forum of Friends of the Sahel (FFS), a shadowy anti-West and pro-Sahel group operating in Cotonou, Benin's economic capital, begin their daily "meeting" by discussing a video purporting to show a secret French military base in Kandi, northern Benin, located about two hours from the Niger border.

The fake video, which went viral, is one of the numerous products of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated deepfakes currently wreaking havoc in West Africa. Relations between the two countries have deteriorated since the 2023 military coup that toppled Niger's democratically elected president, Mohamed Bazoum.

"This is the site where France stores all the weapons it supplies to terrorists who kill our people and soldiers, and this is where French and Beninese soldiers are planning an attack on Niger to reinstate Bazoum," one member told *Africa in Fact* in broken French, which seemingly demonstrated his precarious level of education.

Pro-Russia and China, the FFS is a cohort of migrant workers from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea who specialise in collecting AI-generated fake videos, which it anonymously distributes to its network of followers across the region.

The FFS claimed to have "hard evidence" pointing to the complicity of the European Union to destabilise West Africa, However, a Sahelian activist and

ABOVE: Amputees mutilated by RUF rebels during the civil war take a literacy course in June 2001 in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Photo: Chris Hondros/Getty Images

former schoolteacher, who fled to Benin in the aftermath of a military coup in his country, said FFS members could not be trusted because they were a bunch of illiterate folks who could not even write their own names.

"Most of them are a disaster, and easy targets to manipulate by those who supply them with deepfakes because they are illiterate. None of them has even a little understanding of geopolitics, international diplomacy, economics, regional integration and humanitarian law, let alone artificial intelligence," the man named here as Amadou said.

He described the discussion he had with group members as hollow and totally unintelligent. "I was quickly branded a traitor and a pro-France supporter when I tried to make them understand that most of what they described as hard evidence of the West's funding terrorism was baseless, untrue and cooked up by Russia-allied groups from artificial intelligence."

Amadou said Russia's AI-generated disinformation campaign, some of which is produced by groups such as Copycop, seemed to be bearing fruit across the world.

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, disinformation campaigns seeking to manipulate African information systems have surged nearly fourfold since 2022, triggering destabilising and anti-democratic consequences and targeting at least 39 African countries.

Nearly 60% of disinformation campaigns on the continent are foreign state-sponsored – with Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar as the primary sponsors, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies found.

Dr Mark Duerksen, Strategic Communications Manager and Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, told *Africa In Fact* that Russia, targeting Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, was sponsoring a number (18) of sophisticated campaigns that were using synchronised fake, hired, and bot accounts (coordinated inauthentic behaviour).

"The campaigns seem to be operated by real people either in the region or abroad. Elsewhere, Russia is starting to use AI to generate content that these accounts post and is giving it specific instructions to create content that drives cynicism and anger, so it is possible that the Russia-linked Sahel networks are doing something similar," Duerksen said.

> **"The more people are illiterate, the more they will accept fake news and believe in everything they see on social media."**

False and misleading information, supercharged with cutting-edge artificial intelligence that threatens to erode democracy and polarise society, is the greatest immediate risk to the global economy, the World Economic Forum (WEF) said in its Global Risks Report 2024, published in January.

The authors worry that the boom in generative AI chatbots like ChatGPT means that creating sophisticated synthetic content that can be used to manipulate groups of people will no longer be limited to those with specialised skills.

Amadou said it was obvious that disinformation and fake news fed on illiteracy. "The more people are illiterate, the more they will accept fake news and believe in everything they see on social media," he said. "West Africa is swimming in a sea of AI-generated disinformation, leading to worrying levels of anti-West sentiment."

The region's literacy rate, which stands at 54.1%, is the continent's lowest and lags far behind southern Africa's 80.3%, Africa's highest. Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, South Sudan and Central

African Republic have the lowest literacy rates in Africa and are ranked among the world's "illiterate" nations located on an "illiterate" continent.

Prof Tawana Kupe, independent media academic and former vice-chancellor and principal at the University of Pretoria, seemed to agree, telling *Africa in Fact* that there was a correlation between illiteracy and levels of belief in sources of information, legitimate or illegitimate.

"An illiterate person cannot question information they receive because they are not in the habit of consuming and cross-checking information they receive," he said. "They also do not have the context gained from multiple sources [to assess] the information they receive. So, there is a strong tendency to believe the information received, especially if it resonates with myths, general beliefs, and talk circulating in their circles.

"They also do not have the means to check and double check information. Finally, lack of indication predisposes them to believe what comes from media platforms."

Melody Musoni, policy officer at the European Centre for Development Policy Management's (ECDPM) digital economy and governance team, said not everyone was aware of the fact-checking tools available, which led them to accept fake news at face value. "Also, the more trending a fake social media posting is, the more people are likely to believe it to be true."

She also noted that people also believed fake news because social media and digital platforms were not doing enough to take down this material. "These companies need to do better."

Though Musoni agreed that illiteracy played a role in the spread of disinformation to some extent, she said it was not about lack of intelligence or education but rather about generational habits. "Those who have always read print media (usually the older generation) still rely on the electronic versions of their news platforms.

She also pointed to the younger generation's aversion to following the news and reading newspapers. "We need to ask ourselves why," she told *Africa in Fact*. "One thing that jumps out for me is that traditional forms of media [in Africa] are still state-owned. There is very little diversity in terms of what is offered.

"There is a lot of state propaganda (Zimbabwe, where state broadcasters have been criticised for lacking the diversity of offerings to attract a younger viewership, is a good example). This makes it boring for young people to keep up. I also think that 'trustworthy news' from traditional sources is now subjective. Personally, I don't believe everything I read from state-owned media either. There is also misinformation depending on the narrative they want the masses to believe."

On 10 May this year, Niger's state-owned Tele-Sahel (ORTN) broadcast fake images of the Benin-based French military base mentioned above. The fake video was also broadcast on the YouTube channel of Russia-funded mouthpiece Afrique Media, where it was viewed, liked and commented on thousands of times.

"It is not only Russia, China and Gulf countries that are bombarding Africa with fake news; governments, armed groups, the corporate sector and ordinary citizens have also taken advantage of AI to manufacture their own deepfakes to promote their respective agendas," Amadou said.

The Center for International Governance Innovation said it all in a 2022 report that noted that fake news came from numerous sources. "In West Africa, several online and offline actors typically create and disseminate fake news," the report said.

"These can include individuals, the state, foreign actors, diaspora communities, the media, specialist consultancy firms, online influencers and automated bot networks. Some do it for financial gain; some, for political influence; still others are part of wider efforts to maintain authoritarian systems." GG↑

Cashing in on the liar's dividend

Countering fake news and disinformation is complicated, the solution elusive

By Terence Corrigan

Two decades back, a minor story emerged from Khartoum. A mysterious West African man had allegedly been visiting local merchants and offering a friendly handshake that would cause the merchant's penis to wither. Panic ensued, with warnings passed on by SMS. The disjunct between the message and the medium was glaring.

As the commentator Mark Steyn wrote: "The telling detail of the vanishing penis hysteria is that it was spread by text message. You can own a cellphone yet still believe that foreigners are able, with a mere handshake, to cause your penis to melt away."

The point is that the march of technology does not imply greater rationality and understanding of the world, neither in the past nor now. The Egyptian Pharaohs were loath to record their setbacks, hoping to communicate a legacy befitting their divinity. Radio broadcasts could fortify dictators and – as the Rwandan genocide showed – be a tool to
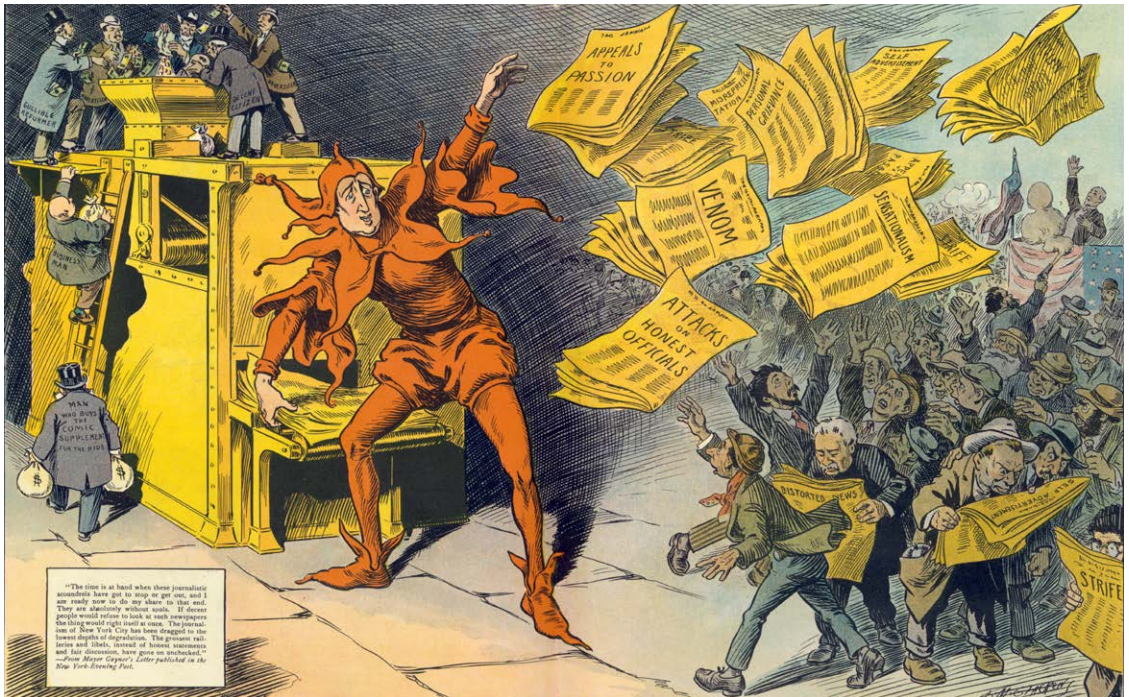
encourage mass murder. As digital access grows, the possibilities and threats must be assessed.

And growing it is. Digital technology has long been seen as a step-changing opportunity for Africa. It represents new, cost-effective means of connecting a continent whose infrastructural deficiencies have long retarded its development. The key to this has been the mobile phone.

According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2023, some 523 million people, or 63% of the continent's population, owned a mobile phone. The proportion of Africa's population covered by a mobile network grew to 93.3% in 2023, while those covered by at least a 3G network stood at 83.6% in 2023, up from 22.2% in 2010. Perhaps most importantly, 37% of Africa's population used the internet, up from a mere 6% in 2010.

Isabel Bosman of the South African Institute of International Affairs notes the expansive use of this technology in both commercial and socio-political spaces. "Civil society," she remarks, "has been using social media as a platform for sharing ideas, civic engagement and education, and increasingly as a tool to hold government accountable."

There is an underside, however. Bosman adds: "It is also interesting to note that with these increases in mobile phone and internet usage, the internet and social media often become the first avenues authoritarian regimes seek to close when protests or other major political events occur." Technology is not always the companion of liberty and democracy.

During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, Soviet intelligence seeded a hoax in media in the developing world that the disease was a US bioweapon. This was intended to play on tropes of imperialism, racism, and genocide. For those sharing this outlook, it was a convincing line. One proponent was an exiled South African communist intellectual, Jabulani Nobleman Nxumalo, in a 1988 article, 'AIDS and the Imperialist Connection'.

Years later, some would point to it as the origin of AIDS denialism in the government of President Thabo Mbeki. Certainly, the narratives, involving racist assumptions about Africans and profiteering corporations, showed a great deal of continuity.

To understand this, recall the prominent phrase of the past decade: "fake news", the manufacture

and spread of false information masquerading as the truth. Not only empirically incorrect, "fake news" is also deliberately produced and disseminated. In its more benign form, this may be for simple amusement; amusing "urban legends" are common in Africa.

But as the case of AIDS illustrates, information has a long pedigree as a weapon. Strategically placed, it can influence decision-makers. Spread within a suitable information ecosystem, it can shift public opinion. And where information is misleading, it can manipulate policy and public action.

Africa in Fact spoke to Steven Boykey Sidley, author, technology entrepreneur and Professor of Practice at the Johannesburg Business School, an institution specialising in the digital economy. Politics and elections, he notes, are intertwined with communication, which is now a function of technology. "Elections are always accompanied by spin," he says, "and this is often ugly. This gets uglier as polarisation rises, and the spin itself gets uglier."

Nevertheless, where channels for information distribution are limited – as they have been historically, such as needing space in a printed newspaper – the information environment is at least contained. Differing views were typically rooted in a common understanding of basic facts. As news and information have moved online, these limits no longer apply.

Online platforms allow millions of people an unmediated voice; with minimal investment, new media "outlets" could be set up to cater for distinct political perspectives. Established media groups had to adapt to these new realities. Straight, factual reporting came under pressure, partly to satisfy increasingly polarised audiences. Narrative creation assumed heightened importance in a fragmented and contested information space.
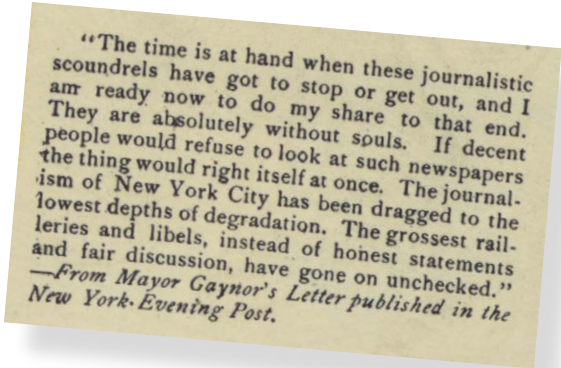
Social media platforms, most prominently Twitter/X, accelerated this process. Designed for short, appealing messages, they were particularly useful for spreading visual and audio content – like the ubiquitous meme and video clip – that required scant reflection by the user.

Hence, the centrality of the mobile phone with an internet connection also exists. It is a technology that fits a planet-worth of information into the user's hand, allowing virtually up-to-the-minute interaction, typically with those sharing one's outlook. Frustration, indignation, and partisanship could be constantly available. Naturally, this could be applied to politics.

Examples of this are legion. In South Africa during Jacob Zuma's presidency, a network of compromised, politically connected businesspeople pushed a narrative presenting themselves as victims of "white monopoly capital". Spread by a combination of fake websites and social media accounts, automated applications, and some cooperative activists, this was designed to sow societal division, stirring up historically attuned bitterness.

In the 2021 election in Uganda, social media accounts sprang up promoting the candidature of the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement. Some of these were run directly by government institutions, while others were purportedly independent. A particular target was opposition presidential candidate Bobi Wine, whom the campaign

"The time is at hand when these journalistic scoundrels have got to stop or get out, and I am ready now to do my share to that end. They are absolutely without souls. If decent people would refuse to look at such newspapers the thing would right itself at once. The journalism of New York City has been dragged to the lowest depths of degradation. The grossest railleries and libels, instead of honest statements and fair discussion, have gone on unchecked."
—From Mayor Gaynor's Letter published in the New York Evening Post.

depicted as a homosexual, implying that Wine was fundamentally opposed to the values espoused by the society he aspired to lead,

During last year's election in Nigeria, the electorate was hit by videos of Hollywood celebrities, along with business mogul Elon Musk and former US president Donald Trump, applauding Labour Party presidential candidate Peter Obi. These were weighty endorsements for a candidate with a particular appeal to aspirant young people. They were also bogus. Each of these was produced by artificial intelligence and only genuine to the extent that they impersonated their subjects.

Deepfakes seem to have emerged around 2017. Their initial application was in the adult entertainment space, with images of mainstream celebrities manipulated into explicit footage. Fakes of celebrities and historical personalities have existed for decades, typically as "photoshopped" still images. AI, however, allowed this to be done with a degree of intricacy and in a format that had never been possible before.

For Ivo Vegter, freelance journalist and technology aficionado, this is the nub of the problem. "It is now possible to use and alter video footage to lip-synch. During the opening phase of the Ukraine war, there was a video showing Volodymyr Zelenskyy telling Ukrainian forces to lay down their weapons. The way the body moved made it obvious that this was a fake, but it raises questions about the future. Technology only gets better."

Indeed. Sidley points out that in the 19th century, the photograph became the "gold standard" for communication. It could reproduce and communicate information in a manner that was hitherto unimaginable. Video footage took that to a new level, and the ability of AI is to simulate reality. "Audio is there already," he remarks, "and video is getting there with existing apps."

"AI is a completely different kettle of fish from the fakes we've seen in the past; it has changed the game," he says. "AI algorithms can target individuals as individuals, and they do this at an exponential rate. Also, AI can produce content autonomously, at scale and hyper-realistically. The possibilities for propaganda are enormous. Think of it as a factory that churns things out at a rate that was never possible before."

AI-generated deepfakes have the potential to create alternative realities tailored to the predilections of almost any person, indistinguishable from the genuine articles. Indeed,
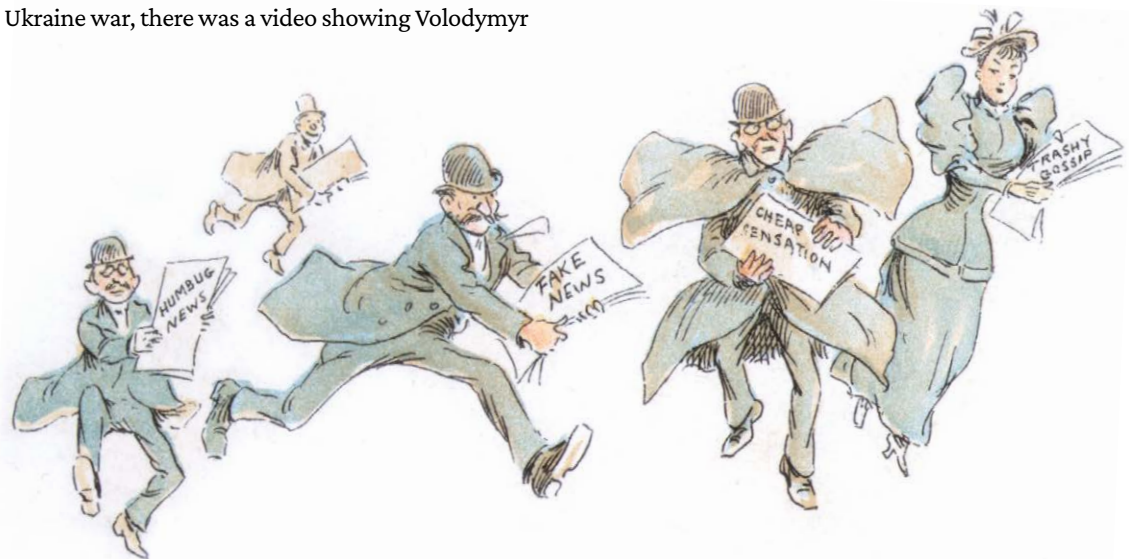
since AI is itself able to learn, it can constantly improve its effectiveness in an extraordinarily short space of time. So, the future might not just be about fake footage of riots or press conferences that never took place – it could be an entire virtual world with its own invented celebrities and commentators, faux media houses and academic journals, and even AI-generated university websites for added credibility.

So far, politically motivated deepfakes have been rare in Africa, but there is plenty of evidence of its uptake. Following a coup in Burkina Faso in 2022,

videos began to do the rounds on social media in which enthusiastic pan-Africanists endorsed the military's actions and called on Burkinabe to do likewise. Yet the pronunciation was off, and the video images were poorly aligned with their words.

These were made using software developed by AI firm Synthesia, the "pan-Africanists" avatars. It was unclear who was behind the fakes, though they seemed to be pushing a line about pernicious western influence and African sovereignty, along with the dispensability of democracy. Much has
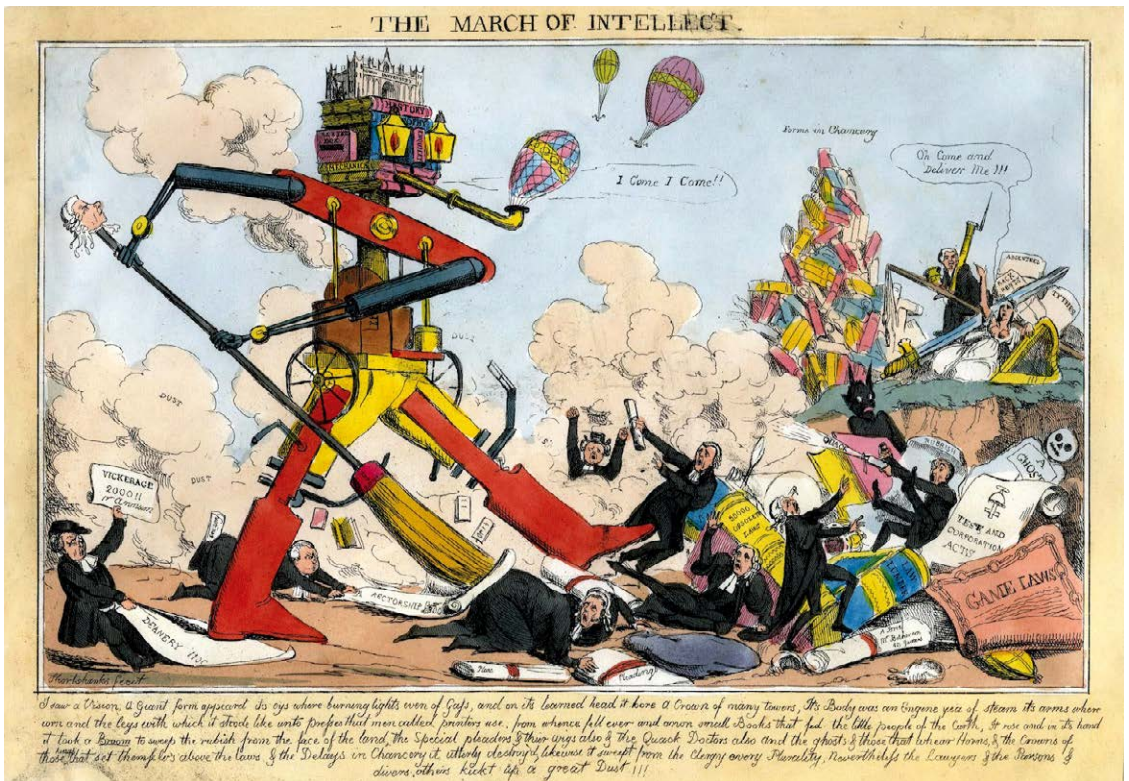
been speculated about these being possible Russian disinformation operations, a legacy of the expertise developed during the Cold War.

In 2019, President Ali Bongo of Gabon delivered a customary New Year's broadcast. There had been speculation about his health for some time, and his appearance in the video encouraged suspicion that he wasn't there at all. This was alleged to be a deepfake, and parts of the army mutinied in an attempt to seize power.

Bongo remains alive (he left office in 2023). This vignette illustrates the knock-on effects of deepfake technology: how it poisons the communication and information ecosystem. This is what the American academic Danielle Citron has termed "the liar's dividend"; this technology can call into question virtually all claims of fact, empowering those seeking to stoke division and conflict. Reality becomes increasingly subjective.

Vegter comments that fake information has found a willing audience in more developed and technologically engaged societies – sophistication

and familiarity with technology have offered little protection. In fact, it may even aggravate the problem as more activity is carried out in these spaces. A degraded information environment seems capable of sweeping all before it, irrespective of context.

For Africa, the threat to democracy is especially acute. For one thing, despite widespread support for democracy as an ideal, its actual practice is uneven, sometimes amounting to no more than elections of dubious probity. Indeed, the continent has suffered some dreadful reverses, including the return of the coup. Challenged societies are at particular risk of polarisation and politically charged violence.

With global tensions on the rise, Africa has become a site of contestation for global influence: authoritarian powers, such as Russia and China, have offered kindred governments on the continent not just economic and security support, but also ideological legitimation. They have also been active in trying to shift public opinion through information operations.

Africa's vulnerability is highlighted by a

recent report by information technology security firm KnowBe4. Interrogating adults across five countries – Mauritius, Egypt, Botswana, South Africa, and Kenya – it found that 51% were aware of deepfakes, 21% were aware of them without much understanding, and 28% were not aware at all. Around three-quarters admitted to having been duped by one. Expect this number to rise as the technology improves and ill-intentioned users become more adept at deploying it.

Malleable communications and a toxic information environment are frightening resources for opportunistic politicians, identarian hustlers, and malign external actors. It is hard to see how a competitive political system can be sustained under these conditions. Just as communication was foundational to civilisation, making it incoherent would bring its very endurance into question.

If the problem is complicated, the solution is elusive. Fake news and AI-generated fake media are inserted into heated and divided environments, spinning narratives that are difficult to counter. Not only are they able to constitute a convincing simulation of reality, but the very act of challenging them requires that they be referenced and described, perhaps by creating links to the images or video material in question. Unfortunately, this provides another avenue for their spread, or at least a trace of their influence to endure.

Fact-checking services are one attempt to do so. The Real411 initiative in South Africa – primarily driven by the NGO Media Monitoring Africa – encourages people to report disinformation (and other pathologies), which are then checked and rated. Recognising the danger of disinformation to a democracy, it has partnered with the country's electoral commission and has dealt with an extraordinary volume of allegations.

However, the weaknesses here are obvious. Not only is it unclear who is conducting the assessments (there may be biases at work), but it is likely that

soon, AI's capacity to process this output will simply outstrip fact-checkers' capacity.

Observers and media experts are generally at a loss as to how to counter all of this with any confidence. The deployment of technology would be an essential countermeasure. Vegter says that using digital signatures to verify the provenance of information is a good start. A consortium of companies and NGOs, the Content Authenticity Initiative, is working on this, producing open-source tools to assist in proving that content is legitimate.

However, even solutions like this come up against people's desire to accept information that confirms their views and that they deem credible. Sorting through deception, distortion, and disinformation is tedious and time-consuming, and beyond the interests of many media consumers. A more vigilant media culture must be cultivated to meet this threat, and whether this is possible is, at best, uncertain.

Can it be done? Reflecting on the dangers posed by a toxic information environment – the liar's dividend writ large – Professor Sidley is deeply concerned. "I've got nothing for you," he sighs. GG

THE "NEW JOURNALISM" BEATS HIM.
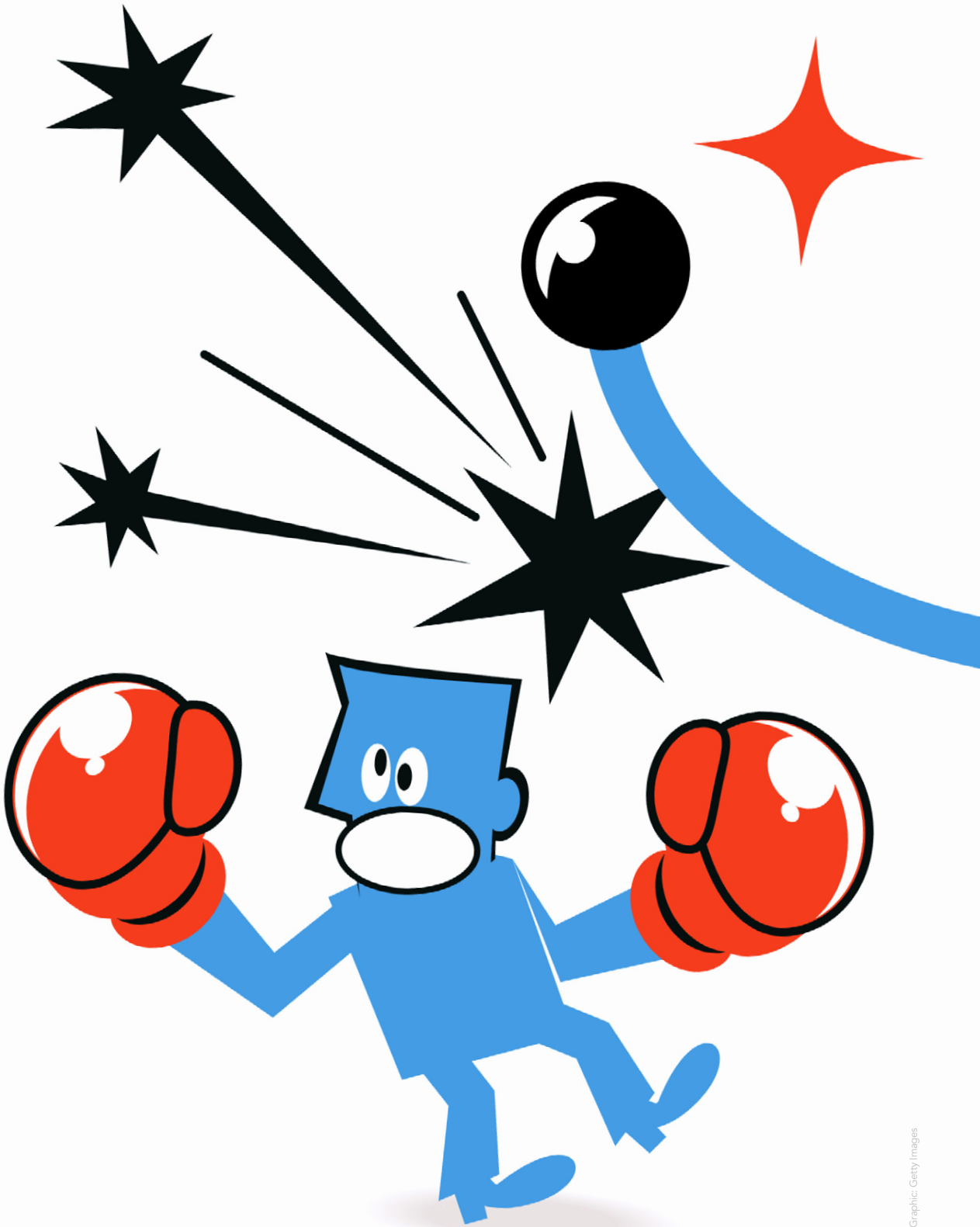
OLD WINE, NEW BOTTLE

By Malcolm Ray

Touted as a revolutionary game-changer in the West, the surge in digital technologies masks a lacerating pattern of uneven development in the African continent.

It was sometime in early 2002, and a young South African tech entrepreneur named Gustav Vermaas was kicking around data from his payment processing company, Ventury, which provided an intermediary service between GS networks, banks and end consumers in Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania.

Then he observed something unusual in Nigeria, where Ventury had a contract with mobile cellphone operator Celtel to transact top-ups on prepaid cellphones. Instead of averages running at 200 Naira

(less than a dollar at the current exchange rate), individuals purchased top-ups worth 3,000 (about $2-3) to 5,000 Naira.

That may have seemed normal in a populous country where informal trading was everyone's business. But it wasn't the volume of airtime top-ups that piqued Vermaas's interest; the value of airtime exchanging hands, based on a relatively few large top-ups, seemed to him an anomaly for another reason: "If there was such a large volume of top-ups,

why was this not reflecting in the Ventury transaction data?" he recalled when I met him in 2006.

When Vermaas dug deeper, he found something quite astonishing. "Instead of purchasing a prepaid voucher from an accredited cellphone retail outlet, a small number of people would purchase large airtime top-ups on their phones," he said. "So, you would go to Celtel and buy airtime worth 10,000 Naira, and then stand somewhere in a remote rural village, where the logistics of getting hard cards were a nightmare, and sell airtime worth, say, 200 Naira on to the next person in exchange for hard currency."

Very soon, people in rural areas in just about every sub-Saharan African country were purchasing prepaid airtime from formal vendors in cities and selling it on to informal merchants in rural areas, who in turn either rented the use of mobile phones to rural dwellers or sold the airtime on to them at a profit.

In other words, airtime had become a thriving secondary market for informal vendors and rural consumers, along with another transactional means of exchanging goods and services – a "wallet in your phone" (or second currency) based on the stored value of prepaid vouchers.

It was an ingenious innovation, driven purely by pragmatism, until cellphone service providers and banks muscled onto the scene. MTN Nigeria announced its prepaid top-up cards in Nigeria and Britain, allowing Nigerians living in Britain to buy airtime for family members back home as a convenient alternative to remitting small amounts of money through banks. Other large network providers and cellphone companies, including

Vodaphone and Safaricom in Kenya, followed suit.

Suddenly, banks, traditionally accustomed to the high-end formal market, woke up to the massive opportunity of a cash-based, largely unbanked African market, where 80% of trade was informal, to deploy mobile banking applications that extended the formal financial services system to the unbanked.

Predictably, banks argued that the benefits of scale helped. A year after I met Vermaas, in 2007, most banks operating in Africa were offering products for mobile banking in low-income markets. This meant they offered bankable services to the poor by leapfrogging a prior development stage of banking: building brick-and-mortar branches, installing ATMs and charging for point-of-service cash transactions.

> **"It created a whole new digital ecosystem where the possibilities for leapfrogging the economic divide in trade by breaking down infrastructural and geographical barriers were enormous."**

These days, that's par for the course, but when I met Vermaas in 2006, the innovation was a game-changer: "It created a whole new digital ecosystem where the possibilities for leapfrogging the economic divide in trade by breaking down infrastructural and geographical barriers were enormous," he said.

However, another side to the mobile banking story was masked by the dissembling language of "inclusive development" – or what is referred to with gentle understatement as "digital leapfrogging" – that has been doing the rounds in the policy circuit since the 2008 global financial crisis. Barely discernible in those early days of the digital economy, mobile banking prefigured a pattern of uneven development: the appropriation of value by large technology and financial companies in developed countries and its social costs in developing ones.

In the ensuing decade, two moments suggested a tipping point had been reached. The 2008 global financial meltdown and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 were more than a decade apart, but they seemed to have a kinship. They betrayed a generalised systemic crisis that was becoming incompatible with the exigencies of trade and investment. Transfigured and ravaged by the impact of the 2008 crisis and pandemic, businesses, led by large technology monopolies, seemed to abandon traditional physical regimes of production that had been prevalent since the first industrial revolution in favour of remote, or "gig" work, and, over the past five years, the exponential growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) based on new machine learning techniques and massive datasets in production.

As the economist and former finance minister of Greece, Yanis Varoufakis, observed in his book *Techno Feudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, "The financial bailouts by the US government of financial institutions were invested in tech monopolies that took off around 2015-16 and significantly accelerated during the 2020-21 pandemic."

It all seemed like the received verities of the 2008 carnage were suddenly being swept away, only to be replaced by another dystopia. The new rules of the game during the pandemic – social distancing, remote work, controlled gatherings – disappeared in the shadows of an emergent class of precarious gig workers on the margins of the international digital division of labour between developed countries and developing economies on the African continent.
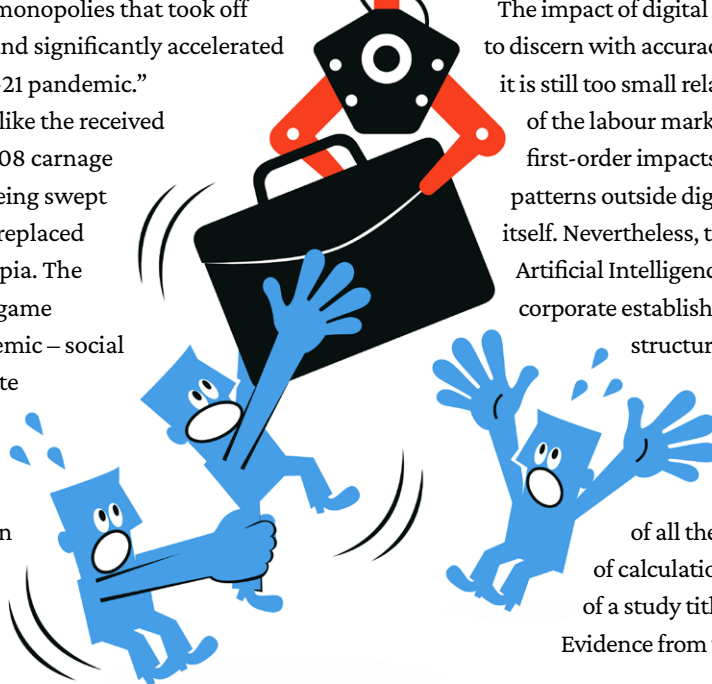
To understand this evolving social and economic dynamic, one must see why official talk of exponential growth and digital leapfrogging is so dissembling. It is to see past the policy abstractions of what World Economic Forum (WEF) head Klaus Schwab called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, to what the digital regime really means.

One of the most abiding myths that resurfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the potential of digital production to grow at rates that benefit the poor. Yet the impact on developed and developing economies has been entangled, with cruel disappointment for the latter born of the growth of the former. The irony is those informal sector-driven innovations in Africa, like digital currency, driven by the basic instinct of informal communities to survive, became appropriated and monetised by large tech companies and banks in the West.

The impact of digital technology is hard to discern with accuracy, not least because it is still too small relative to the scale of the labour market to have had first-order impacts on employment patterns outside digital production itself. Nevertheless, there is evidence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption by corporate establishments with a task structure suitable for AI use that suggests a developing pattern. Perhaps the most incredulous stretch of all the data was a series of calculations by the authors of a study titled 'AI and Jobs: Evidence from vacancy rates', in

Graphic: Getty Images

2020. In a classical industrial economy, jobs, by definition, are simply the measure of tasks in an occupational structure.

To understand the impact of AI, the study used traditional occupational structures in 2010, before the digital surge, as a baseline measure of AI exposure and machine learning during 2014-18 to the occupational structure in select industries in the United States. Among the key findings was the strong association of AI exposure with both a significant decline in some of the traditional skills and the emergence of new skills, but with this difference: rather than broad occupational categories, AI has been decomposing traditional occupations and radically altering the task structure of jobs, displacing some human-performed jobs while simultaneously replacing new tasks accompanied by new skill demands.

This finding does not, of course, tell us how digitally-based tasks are distributed across the division of labour between developed and developing countries. Evidence from relatively developed economies in Africa like Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa points to the COVID-19 pandemic as a moment when companies, in their attempts to adapt to the vicissitudes of the pandemic, began replacing traditional jobs with digital technology and slashing wages.

By focusing on micro-tasking data, the authors of a recent study on the digital production regime in Africa, 'Digital Labour in Africa: A Status Report', found that the acclaimed benefits of top-flight digital work in the US were in stark contrast with menial, unpaid labour in Africa.

The resulting imbalances were startling. Since the pandemic, a large labour precariat, or cheap gig labour engaged in menial tasks, has grown on the back of old structural barriers.

Although microtasks tend to vary in complexity, the results of the study were robust across sectors: "Given Africa's very high economic inequality in the labour market, with the relative shortage of high skills versus the oversupply of un- or semi-skilled labour, individual digital labour issues right across the spectrum are much more pronounced than in the developed world."

Apart from skills, some of the root causes relate to a lack of reliable and affordable bandwidth in most, if not all, of Africa; limited access to the internet; limited infrastructure; low ICT literacies and education levels in science and technology; a lack of indigenous tech companies, and weak digital platform-based policy regimes. However, the study's authors acknowledge as a limitation that very few "hard facts" are known from available data. Despite the difficulties of collecting and harmonising statistics in a diverse, under-resourced continent where national statistics offices are porous and often subject to political pressure, it should be possible to improve current statistics by focusing on qualitative data.

Graphic: Getty Images
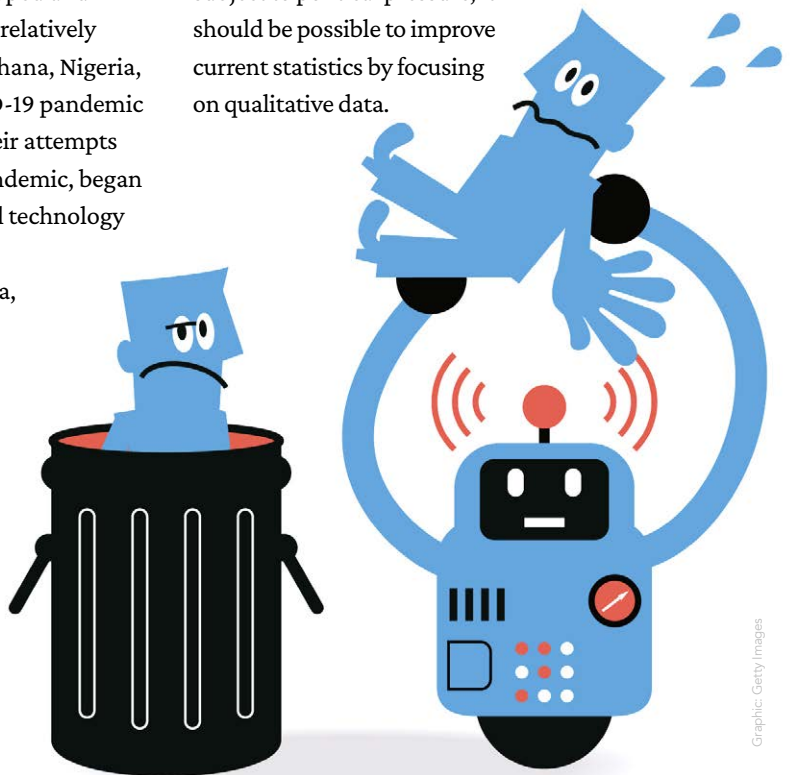
To fill the research gap, I interviewed a sample of South African gig workers in the media and advertising industry on the gig platform Upwork in mid-2023. By prioritising humanistic aspects such as to what extent the phenomenon of the gig economy, crowdsourcing and micro-tasking casualises labour, removes safety nets and traditional labour institutions, and allows for exploitation, the other side of the story came into focus.

When I asked a 55-year-old female participant who turned to Upwork for work during the COVID-19 pandemic how the digital work regime had impacted her livelihood, she shrugged. Her previous position as an advertising executive earning a top-flight income in a medium-scale firm was decomposed into menial tasks distributed to remote workers worldwide using AI as an enabler. "Most work orders on the platform reflect a division between semi-skilled labour in South Africa and highly skilled tech workers in the United States," she said.

Other interviewees reported being alienated from the business process or unaware of the clients they were working for. Unlike their US counterparts, this information asymmetry means that the majority of previously skilled digital workers in South Africa are not only poorly paid but also deprived of further skills development and social mobility.

To put the potential macro impact in perspective, digital offshoring has grown exponentially, doubling to $4.4 billion between 2014 and 2016 and more than tripling by 2020. In theory, platform-mediated digital labour removes transaction costs, and therefore allows for the full value added by the work to be shared or "captured" by buyer and seller, even if "sharing" is not equitable due to power imbalances.

And therein lies the rub: the veneer of "sharing" masks large imbalances between Africa and the West. With almost proprietary regulatory, the digital revolution has been consistently portrayed by African statesmen since the pandemic as a potential pathway to socioeconomic development and unemployment alleviation on the continent. Beneath the veneer, however, are more desolate conclusions about the economic impact on livelihoods: the vast swathe of rural dwellers like the early pioneers of digital currency in Nigeria, where the swathe of informality had placed a heavy burden on their capacity to meet their needs, do not count.

The real storyline is that life since the COVID-19 moment has never been tougher. A new "cybercariat", a term currently used to describe the new digital division of precarious labour, has arisen in little more than a decade. The semi-skilled and unskilled, especially, have been marooned. Many of those remaining have been put on part-time employment contracts.

These indelible images are not confounded in the post-pandemic era. In fact, much of what passes as "digital production" in Africa is not really digital. This is reflected in the meagre participation of African contractors on gig work platforms such as Upwork compared to emerging and developed economies. Many, if not most, jobs in the African IT and mobile telecoms sector alone, which makes up a not-insignificant share of the continent's GDP, such as mobile money agents or mobile phone retailers, perform traditional, largely informal non-digital jobs but within a digital economy environment.

Based on these results, what are the prospects for the continent's emerging cybercariat? If the phenomenon of precarity originated in the West in an attempt to normalise the discourse of remote work and shift its meaning towards a certain ambiguity, denouncing its consequences but also showing many of its possible outcomes, the potential impact on Africa is less ambiguous. Perhaps a confidential internal memo from the CEO of a large multinational gig work platform to staff in June last year is a harbinger of a jobless future: "Upwards of 60% of all work inputs and outputs must be AI-driven." GG↘

Revolutionising
HEALTHCARE

By Paul Adepoju

In March 2023, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) launched its Digital Transformation Strategy, in which it emphasised the potential of digital health solutions to improve public health outcomes on the continent by enhancing disease surveillance and response, improving healthcare delivery, and supporting sustainable development.

While the document highlighted the potential of digital health solutions to improve health outcomes in Africa, artificial intelligence (AI) is bringing long-term goals into short-term reality. The potential impact AI could have on Africa's healthcare sectors is already being played out in the rapid growth and expansion of some forward-thinking innovations and start-ups. LifeBank is one of these.

Launched by Temie Giwa-Tubosun in 2016 after she suffered complications while giving birth to her son, LifeBank began with the goal of improving the delivery and efficiency of medical logistics in Africa. The company soon made public its commitment to leveraging AI to make transfusion blood, medical oxygen, and other essential medical commodities it stocks and distributes more easily available. One way it saw AI helping it become more efficient was in predicting demand.

Nowadays, its leaders are not just talking about integrating AI into LifeBank's operations; they are also amplifying the voice of AI in Africa's health sector by facilitating Africa-focused AI in healthcare masterclasses. During one such session, Ayo Olufemi, LifeBank's director of technology and innovation, noted that AI could help Africa's healthcare sector optimise hospital supply chains, mitigate risks, reduce costs, and enhance patient safety.

"AI in healthcare is not just about innovation; it's about fundamental transformations. It's changing how hospitals operate, saving costs, and, most importantly, improving patient outcomes," Olufemi said.

In late May 2024, in Geneva, Switzerland, a side event at the 77th World Health Assembly focused on how AI can enhance health service delivery at the last mile. Sameer Pujari, lead AI, Department of Digital Health and Innovations at the World Health

Organization (WHO) expressed excitement about AI-driven health solutions and ensuring they were ethically implemented.

While noting that African countries, and most of the rest of the world, may not in the short term be prioritising AI use for robotic surgery, he saw the continent benefiting from AI in cases like cervical cancer screening, where AI could reduce costs and improve outcomes.

"Cervical cancer screening has been a massive problem in rural Africa," he said. "It is one of the most aggressive forms of cancer that can be treated if diagnosed early. Women have to come to different centres for testing, which costs hundreds of dollars. Now, with AI, we have seen cases where

an algorithm can do the first triage and reduce those several hundred dollar costs to a few dollars. That's the impactful AI that we're looking at from a public health perspective."

Vivek Natarajan, research lead at Google, argued that the rapid expansion of technology access and usage, and widespread internet connectivity, are putting Africa and the rest of the developing world on the path to being "data rich". And as more healthcare and other information becomes digitised and available online, from diverse sources and populations worldwide, this will result in the emergence of a rich source of information for training advanced AI models to help people globally.

However, HealthTraka, a Nigerian health tech company founded by its CEO, Ifeoluwa Dare-Johnson, sees this playing out slightly differently for Africa since a significant proportion of the African population is either not using high-end devices to fully access and use the available AI tools, or is reluctant to allow individual apps to occupy the very limited space on their devices.
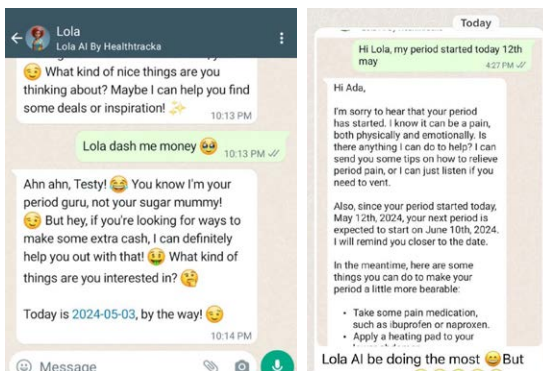
In April this year, HealthTraka introduced Lola AI, a menstrual tracker that works as a WhatsApp chatbot. "She's a friendly and informative conversational AI – a supportive friend right on WhatsApp," Dare-Johnson told *Africa in Fact*.

Lola helps users monitor their cycles, sets personalised reminders, and helps its users gain insightful information about their menstrual health. She also dispels myths with accurate, up-to-date information, providing a non-judgmental space for questions and emotional support.

"It's perfect for low-resource communities, acting as a tool for health literacy and information dissemination for women. The potential is huge considering Lola can help with contraception and pregnancy tracking within maternal health systems," Dare-Johnson said.

Within two weeks of its launch, more than 1,000 women had already used Lola. Dare-Johnson described it as a better option than those available on app marketplaces. "Who can access them? Definitely not women in low-resource communities, not women that don't have space for another app on their phones because of limited data," she said.

Within Africa, initiatives are also underway to support and/or localise drug discovery by leveraging AI. Abasi Ene-Obong, the founder of another Nigerian medical start-up, Syndicate Bio, told *Africa in Fact* that AI would play a role in Syndicate's work around improving discovery, clinical trial matching and patient segmentation using the diverse genomic dataset the company was building. He said AI had shown an ability to identify the causes of diseases from datasets without additional information, which could enhance genomic (the study of structure, function, mapping and editing of the entire genome of an organism) discovery work.

Meanwhile, PATH, a global collective of medical experts who focus on product development and access and health and disease management, is working on other AI solutions to Africa's medical challenges. Laurie Werner, the director of PATH's Center of Digital and Data Excellence, told *Africa in Fact* that the organisation had, for example, worked on a project using machine learning to predict vaccine stockouts in Tanzania based on historical, population, and meteorological data, which reduced stockouts by 10% and could save over 300,000 lives.

However, Annie Hartley, an assistant professor at the Laboratory for Intelligent Global Health Technologies at Yale University, warned that the "great medical data divide" – a lack of data sharing and the need for decentralised and transparent AI tools in both high-income and low/middle-income countries like those in Africa – posed a significant challenge.

To address these and other AI ethical regulations-linked issues as they affect African countries and elsewhere, where regulations are not catching up with the speed of innovation, Pujari emphasised the need for governance mechanisms to incentivise innovation while protecting well-being and human rights. Hartley, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of ethical frameworks and evaluating models for patient outcomes and safety.

Rachel Adams, the founder and CEO of the Global Centre on AI Governance, which launched the African Observatory on Responsible AI in 2022, said caution should be taken against using AI to solve problems humans can't, but rather aim for a multifaceted approach. She said that the hype around what AI could do was making stakeholders "slightly blind", and the key players could be ignoring the key ethical principle of proportionality.

"AI should be used where AI can solve a problem humans can't," she told *Africa in Fact*. Adams said providing frontline workers with the technology to be able to serve 100,000 to 200,000 people did not solve the structural problem, and there was a need to train more doctors and more nurses. "AI is not the solution; it is part of a suite of solutions. And I think we need to remember that," she concluded. 🔴

MISBELIEF

**What makes rational people believe irrational things, by Dan Ariely
Published by Heligo Books**

'Thoughtful, moving and well-written' Yuval Noah Harari

MISBELIEF

What Makes Rational People
Believe Irrational Things

DAN ARIELY

Bestselling Author of *Predictably Irrational*
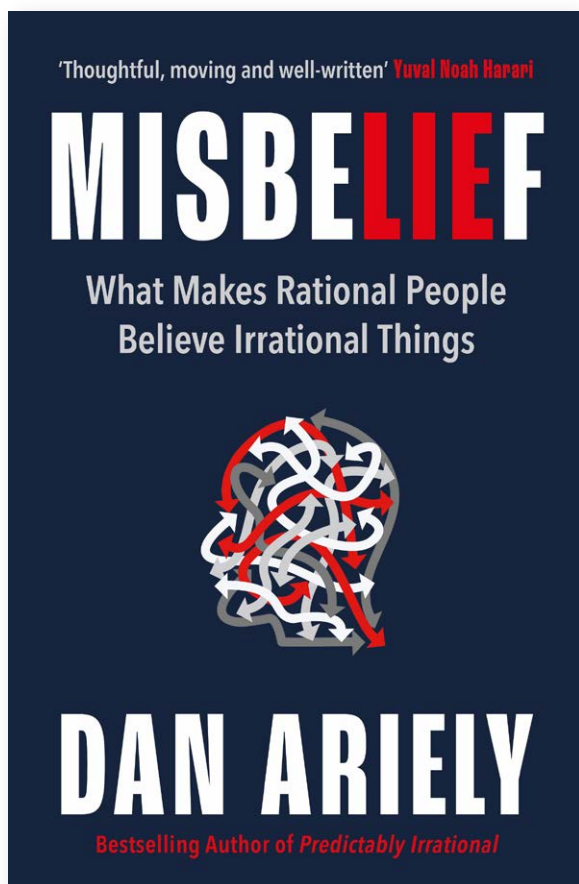
In journalism, objectivity is the holy grail, a prize to be pursued but never attainable. This is because objectivity is an illusion, and yet understanding why it's elusive is critically important for journalists, for them to remain aware of – and to try and limit – the slants and prejudices in the stories they produce.

The rule therefore in any reputable media house is always to find more than one source or opinion in a story you produce, and in contested terrain, balance a report with diverse and opposing viewpoints. It's the best shot we have at the unicorn of objectivity.

Enter social media and the yawning infinity of the internet, enhanced by artificial intelligence (AI), and what you have is a huge melting pot of information, containing best-practice journalism mixed in with a lot of intentionally fake or skewed news, but with few tools, aside from authoritative source verification, to discern which is which.

Misbelief, by Dan Ariely, professor of behavioural economics at Duke University in the US, is a deep dive into why

misinformation (fake news) and disinformation (propaganda) proliferate like the viruses they are, which in turn provides insight into where your truth filters may be lacking. By the end of it, you will certainly get to "know thy enemy", which it turns out lurks within you as much as outside of you.

The premise of his book is a deconstruction of how one might fall for a conspiracy theory, by comparing it to a "funnel of misbelief".

"When first entering this funnel, a person might have a few niggling questions about accepted truths in science, health, politics, the media etc... As people progress down the funnel of misbelief, they reach a point where healthy scepticism evolves into a reflexive mistrust of anything 'mainstream', and genuine open-mindedness slides into dysfunctional doubt," he writes.

Ariely identifies the constituent elements of the funnel of misbelief as emotional, cognitive, personality and social. Emotions drive many of our actions, he writes, and in the funnel of misbelief, emotions centre around stress and the need to manage it, which set up the conditions for the other elements to come into play.

The cognitive element is how we rationalise something when motivated to move in one or other direction. "Cognitive bias kicks in and leads us to seek information that fills that need, regardless of its accuracy," he says. "Then the story gets more complex: we construct narratives to get to the conclusions we want to get to."

The personality element is the combination of traits that make up a person's distinctive character, such that, for example, two people exposed to

the same stressors can react very differently. One personality trait that Ariely spotlights as a protector against misinformation is "intellectual humility", an openness to changing a belief if there's good enough evidence to question a current belief. Narcissism, on the other hand, lends itself to misbelief, he says, largely because there must always be someone or something else to blame in the narcissist's world.

The social element in the funnel of misbelief is essentially social pressure to belong, a deep human need. A social group is solidified by shared and consolidated viewpoints and positions, Ariely says, especially in groups formed in response to a stressful event or situation, such as Covid-19.

"Once people reach a certain point in the funnel," he writes, "they are so deeply embedded in social networks of people who share their views that those networks and the social forces within them begin to play an outsized role in accelerating misbelief and making it very hard for them to escape the funnel."

Actions (committing time and resources to a cause) fuel the belief in that cause, even if that cause turns out to be unreliable, Ariely argues. "The vast majority of possible actions are social: talking to other people, protesting, posting unverified information, reacting online, arguing with those who don't agree, breaking ties with former friends and family, and so on."

The most damaging effect of the funnel of misbelief is the erosion of trust, Ariely says, which is one of the basic ingredients of a functioning society. "A lack of trust creates real risks for our ability to work together and overcome future obstacles together... We

> **"A lack of trust creates real risks for our ability to work together and overcome future obstacles together..."**

trust our doctors, lawyers, car mechanics. We trust Amazon with our credit card information.

"We trust that the government will set safety standards for roads, bridges and elevators, and then we trust corporations to comply with these standards. We trust in democracy, the police, the fire department and the justice system... Though the importance of trust in our modern society is somewhat hidden from sight, it does play a crucial role."

Psychology and cognitive neuroscience make much of the relevance of pattern recognition, which allows us to predict and expect what is coming, and Ariely draws on this research to help explain why the more we hear something, the more we believe it.

"The more we encounter a piece of information (or misinformation), the more intensely the piece of information is coded in our brains as familiar and true, and the 'stickier' it becomes," he writes. Joseph Goebbels, picking up on this to take advantage of this human quirk, said, 'Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth'." The antidote to this, Ariely suggests, is to reduce exposure to an untruth, and counter it each time with a truth, along with the evidence supporting that truth.

It's not as easy as that, though, because of what Ariely describes as "solution aversion", which is where ideology kicks in. It means that if we don't like a proposed solution to a problem, we use motivated reasoning to deny that the problem exists in the first place. For example, if you propose cutting back fossil fuels as a solution to climate change to someone whose livelihood depends on selling coal, they may well deny climate change exists in the first place.

> ## "Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth"

"If we want to change people's opinions, we need to understand in more detail where their resistance is coming from," Ariely writes. "Often it is resistance to the solution, packaged in motivated reasoning, which means that until we come up with solutions that are more acceptable to both sides, one side will not give the information a chance."

By now, you'll have an idea of how complex a person's belief system is, and why blunting the force of misinformation/disinformation requires a multidisciplinary approach, far beyond just policing social media and suspicion of everything (and yes, you do need to be suspicious of everything).

Thus, getting to the root of the problem is what this book mostly sets out to do, rather than laying out a map of how to tackle it. That said, it is peppered with good directives on ways to armour yourself, and Ariely has inserted columns titled "Hopefully Helpful", containing useful tips like "don't assume malice" (when something bad happens and we imagine it was done by someone intentionally).

One of these tips looks at how to "paradoxically persuade", for example, if someone tells you that all pharma companies are evil, agree with them, then suggest they should stop taking all medications and cancel their medical aid. "This approach turns out to be rather effective at making people reconsider their extreme positions," he writes, tongue-in-cheek.

This brings me to my last observation about this book: *Misbelief* thankfully dispels lofty pontificating in favour of an easy-to-understand, and often humorous and anecdotal style, with plenty of identifiable examples and research to illustrate and give weight to his theories. It's an important book of our time. GG↑

GGA

Good Governance Africa

Good Governance Africa strives to improve citizens' lives by strengthening governance performance across the continent.

We believe transparency, accountability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability are the basic building blocks of successful development; to strengthen the rule of law; and instill an active citizenry that institutionalises constraints on executive power.

We conduct sound demand-driven, evidence-based, **research consultancy services** geared toward building efficient, productive and practicable policies to solve Africa's challenges in environmental degradation, climate change, under-development, and mass youth unemployment, which combined, threaten to undermine Africa's human security and ecological integrity.

Why do we do it? Because improved governance results in better economic, social, and environmental performance, and a greater wellbeing for all citizens.

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AFRICA BY THE NUMBERS

Map labels (number of disinformation campaigns):

TUNISIA (2), MOROCCO (2), ALGERIA (2), LIBYA (6), EGYPT (3), WESTERN SAHARA, CABO VERDE, MAURITANIA (1), MALI (12), NIGER (7), CHAD (3), SUDAN (14), ERITREA (1), DJIBOUTI (1), SENEGAL (6), GAMBIA, GUINEA-BISSAU, GUINEA (2), BURKINA FASO (11), BENIN (1), TOGO (3), NIGERIA (11), ETHIOPIA (2), SOMALIA (3), SIERRA LEONE (1), CÔTE D'IVOIRE (10), GHANA (5), LIBERIA (1), CAMEROON (3), CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (9), SOUTH SUDAN, EQUATORIAL GUINEA, SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE, CONGO, GABON, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (6), UGANDA (2), RWANDA (70,3), KENYA (9), BURUNDI (4,2), TANZANIA (1), SEYCHELLES, COMOROS, ANGOLA (2), ZAMBIA, MALAWI (1), MOZAMBIQUE (4), MAURITIUS, ZIMBABWE (4), MADAGASCAR (1), NAMIBIA (1), BOTSWANA (1), ESWATINI, LESOTHO, SOUTH AFRICA (11)

Legend — Number of disinformation campaigns on the continent:
15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, NO DATA

Disinformation in Africa

NUMBER OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS ON THE CONTINENT

Country	Value	Country	Value	Country	Value	Country	Value
Algeria	2	Djibouti	1	Libya	6	Seychelles	No data
Angola	2	Egypt	3	Madagascar	1	Sierra Leone	1
Benin	1	Equatorial Guinea	No data	Malawi	1	Somalia	3
Botswana	1	Eritrea	1	Mali	12	South Africa	11
Burkina Faso	11	Eswatini	No data	Mauritania	1	South Sudan	No data
Burundi	No data	Ethiopia	2	Mauritius	No data	Sudan	14
Cabo Verde	No data	Gabon	No data	Morocco	2	Togo	3
Cameroon	3	Gambia	No data	Mozambique	4	Tunisia	2
Central African Republic	9	Ghana	5	Namibia	1	Uganda	2
Chad	3	Guinea	2	Niger	7	Tanzania	1
Comoros	No data	Guinea-Bissau	No data	Nigeria	11	Zambia	No data
Congo Republic	No data	Kenya	9	Rwanda	No data	Zimbabwe	4
Côte d'Ivoire	10	Lesotho	No data	São Tomé and Príncipe	No data		
DR Congo	6	Liberia	1	Senegal	6		