

**upgrade  
democracy**

June 13-14, 2023

Regional Experts' Workshop: Nairobi, Kenya

---

# Disinformation across Africa: Initiatives, Actors and Ideas to Counter their Spread

Focus: The Role of the media, fact-checking  
and elections

---

Observations and  
Key Take-Aways



## Background and rationale

The **Reinhard Mohn Prize 2024 – Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation** is looking for good examples and innovative approaches to countering disinformation worldwide. Digital disinformation is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. It is critical that we understand what is happening, where and how disinformation occurs – and that we tackle it accordingly. There are countless, successful and impactful examples, initiatives and organizations out there that are determined in countering disinformation every day and in every corner of the world. To cover the multitude of perspectives, we focus on three elements:

1. Providing an interactive overview of counter-disinformation initiatives from all over the world to go live towards the end of 2023,
2. Gaining analytical insights and lessons learnt from regional on-site research in Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond and
3. Connecting international experts on disinformation to share their views of the current challenges and trends in the (dis-)information ecosystem.

A key element of our **international good-practice research** are regional research engagements, consisting of workshops and bilateral discussions with international decision-makers, experts, and relevant stakeholders on-site. **The goal of these research engagements** is to create a trustworthy space for exchange amongst experts and mutual learning of each other's contexts to jointly explore the landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives and highlight particularly promising examples and good practices. In addition, networking with and among the respective actors aims at fostering strong collaborations, alliances, and knowledge transfer, including the identification of potential transfers of successful approaches to Europe and Germany.

**A research trip focusing on the African continent took place from June 12th to June 16th, 2023, in Nairobi, Kenya.** Together with our research partner, the **Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)**, we conducted a two-day workshop with 25 participants from over 15 different African countries who are all active and successful in the field. Below you will find a report with our key-findings from this event.

## Observations and Key Take-Aways

Editor: Charlotte Freihse

*With huge thanks to our regional partner CIPESA, Juliet Nanfunke and Wairagala Wakabi, the Upgrade Democracy team was able to draw a few initial conclusions, which will be elaborated on, reflected, and enriched through cross-regional feedback in upcoming regional engagements.*

- **#PerspectivesOnActors:** Civil society actors take an essential role in the fight against disinformation in various African countries. We observed well-organized structures with a high level of commitment that is further promoted and underpinned, among other things, by placing a strong focus on the local level as well as linguistic diversity. Many of the experts we met during our research expressed their concerns regarding the role of governments. Governments are often not seen as allies or worse, are viewed as instrumentalizing disinformation for their own benefit. Hence, questions of legislative regulation become ever more complex: Respective laws were and remain used regularly as a systematic tactic to silence critics under the guise of fighting disinformation, often with reference to international „role models“, particularly the German NetzDG from 2017, for instance in Uganda and Tanzania. „Copy-paste“ mechanisms of European legislations, such as the DSA is thus widely perceived as a potential danger.
- **#PerspectivesOnMethods:** Fact-checking stood out as the most used method in countering disinformation, especially in countries with no independent media systems. The projects Jamii-Forum or Africa Check present promising examples in dealing with the biggest challenges of this method: the lack of scalable reach for fact-checked information. Funding for initiatives and projects involved is a major issue: Sustainable funding models could make a real difference when it comes to scaling the impact and effectiveness of existent fact-checking organisations and complementary initiatives. In addition, more resources for the expansion of social media monitoring will be needed as well as complementary prebunking efforts, effectively focusing on (democratic) education.
- **#PerspectivesOnPlatforms:** We learned about some effective measures in countering disinformation ahead of the Kenyan elections in 2022 by Meta and in cooperation with the government and different NGOs. However, this promising alliance did not translate into sustained cooperation. Instead, Meta’s and other social platform’s behavior and respective (lack of) actions can be characterized as “fig leaf activities”: a lack of intrinsic motivation and financial incentives is reflected by a rather passive, hardly visible presence on the continent. Moreover, if platforms engage during election cycles, they do so with short-term measures, rather than long-term sustainable solutions.

Day 1

## Getting an overview, meeting the actors, understanding the challenges

### 08:30 – 09:30 Welcome

---

- Format: Speeches and introduction game
- Input/Moderation: Juliet Nanfungka (CIPESA, Uganda) and Ralph Müller-Eiselt (Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany)

### 09:30 – 10:30 Lessons learnt: disinformation pathways and effects

---

- Format: Presentation of study findings and discussion
- Input/Moderation: Dr. Wairagala Wakabi (CIPESA, Uganda) and Victor Kapiyo (CIPESA, Kenya)

### Summary:

In these introductory sessions, the highlights from a cross-country study conducted by CIPESA on disinformation pathways and effects were presented and discussed. The study focusses on five countries, namely Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, in which waves of disinformation during elections were observed. In addition to election periods, armed conflicts were found to drive waves of disinformation by creating the opportunity to share false, old and unrelated pictures, videos, and claims as tools to incite violence. The full study can be found [here](#).

### Key Take-Aways:

- Disinformation impacts electoral processes by influencing or suppressing voters as it sets specific agendas. It undermines free speech and the flow of information by hampering with the integrity and authenticity of information and opinions. It further provides dissenters and critics with a basis to crack down on legitimate expression, as it enables them to influence or even shut down information channels or to encourage a retreat/withdrawal for marginalised people (i. e. self-censorship).
- Disinformation undermines political systems, as in many instances, it furthers the polarisation that often underpins authoritarian rule and creates a trail of doubt on the liability of democratic institutions, which often fuels violence.
- Disinformation perpetuates hate speech in multi-ethnic and fractious societies, contributing to political unrest and instability.
- The research encourages various actors engaged in the countering disinformation ecosystem, including but not limited to governments, platforms, media, civil society and international organisations, to pursue actions such as reforming and creating laws, building collaborations and fact-checking capacity, and ensuring an overall increased media literacy.

### 11:00 – 13:00 Getting an overview: Africa’s Disinformation ecosystem; spotlight on elections

---

- Format: Group Activity Inputs
- Input/Moderation: Juliet Nanfunka (CIPESA, Uganda)

#### Summary:

This interactive group session focused on creating an overview of the disinformation ecosystem in Africa by looking at three focal points, including challenges in disinformation efforts in the African context, methods of identifying disinformation across the continent and outlooks on the future of disinformation on the continent.

#### Key Take-Aways:

- Challenges to countering disinformation in Africa include a lack of knowledge and awareness among societies, requiring more research and training of researchers to identify and push back against false information. Expanding training to actors beyond civil society and media networks is essential, along with stronger dissemination efforts to share research findings through various accessible formats and partnerships with media. Further there exists a lack of resources, strategic frameworks, and interdisciplinary collaboration, hindering effective countering of disinformation due to limited data, funding, and coordination. Pooling resources and extending disinformation studies can address these issues. The neglecting of offline sources, as most research has focused on online platforms, leads to overlooking the influence of offline spaces where disinformation spreads. There is limited understanding of the manifestations and developments of Artificial Intelligence (AI) hindering effective countering of disinformation in African contexts. Further exploration is needed to address new forms of disinformation introduced by AI, such as generative or synthetic media like speech synthesis.
- Methods of identifying disinformation across the continent: A range of tools were mentioned by participants as key resources in their work on identifying disinformation. These included the following: Open-Source Intelligence techniques (OSINT) in general, reverse image searches (e.g. TinyEye), interviews and investigations, assessment of administrative records, social media intelligence and analyses, geolocation, statements by government officials, and video analyses. Since a lot of data is not openly accessible like in the EU or US, research methods (particularly OSINT) are limited. The same goes for often poorly equipped organizations when it comes to server capabilities, broadband etc.
- Outlooks on the future of disinformation on the continent: role of state-actors and the role of AI: The rise in AI-generated media (deep and shallow fakes), targeted narratives, and cyber warfare will add to the complexity of work on countering disinformation. AI-driven disinformation will likely be created in textual (e.g. ChatGPT), audio as well as visual appearance (e.g. Adobe Photoshop). Regarding “disinformation for hire”, it was noted that AI-generated disinformation could be integrated into local narratives by foreign actors hiring locals for the multiplication of their content. Such an approach would make foreign influence look more authentic. Moreover, with the evolution of AI, it will become difficult to trust accounts due to the uncertainty of whether they are authentic or created to mislead. The increased weaponisation of disinformation by authoritarian regimes presents a threat. Such states can discredit counter-disinformation efforts standing in contrast with their narrative. There will likely be a rise in investment into disinformation by state-actors.



### 14:00 – 16:00 Case Studies

---

- Format: Panel discussion with round of questions
- Input/Moderation: Nelson Kwaje (#defyhatenow, South Sudan), Dr. Lassane Ouedraogo (Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa, Nigeria), Kirsten Cosser (Africa Check, South Africa), Nompilo Simanje (International Press Institute, Zimbabwe), moderated by Dr. Joachim Rother (Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany)

#### Summary:

The session entailed a diverse range of participants representing various expertise drawn from across the continent. The Sahel and West Africa, Eastern, Southern and Central Africa were represented through organisations working on countering disinformation specific to select countries and others with a broader regional focus. Elections, conflicts, and political interests were critical areas of focus.

#### Key Take-Aways:

While the more general challenges, such as a lack of resources and research, are similar across countries, there are differences contained in the country-specific socio-political, economic, cultural, and ethnic background. The context-specific structures at hand have a crucial impact on countering disinformation efforts working efficiently and to scale. Anti-disinformation organisations happen to constantly struggle with the wider systemic challenges of the regional context they are operating within.

### 16:00 – 17:00 The Power of unity – How can different approaches and disinformation fighters cooperate better?

---

- Format: Discussion
- Input/Moderation: Juliet Nanfunka (CIPESA, Uganda)

#### Summary:

A crucial question when it comes to countering disinformation is how different actors (i. e., civil society, the media, platforms, private sector, governments, etc.), initiatives, and approaches can cooperate and strengthen their mutual efforts. Various suggestions were made on this topic, all of which stressed more collaborative efforts amongst actors in the pushback against disinformation and the importance to shift away from working in silos. The role of established media as a key actor in countering disinformation was stressed. Suggestions how this could be implemented in practice included the following:

- Increased research, exchange and transfer of methodologies, findings, and science communication
- Expansion of fact-checking hubs in newsrooms of established media outlets. Mapping out disinformation narratives and tactics through research and sharing with a wider audience, for e. g. through radio.

- Especially in contexts where the national media system is rarely independent: Development and expansion of independent fact-checking entities and increased resources of those existent.
- Enhancing training on fact-checking and countering disinformation with a broader community including influencers and citizen journalists. Training should include details such as tips on spotting false information, image verification through to understanding the fact-checking process or how to find reliable data.
- Stronger relationships between established media outlets and academia.
- Addressing the decline of public trust in the media and fostering an environment for improvement.
- Advocacy efforts, digital peacebuilding and the pursuit of pre-bunking efforts.

Day 2

## Analysis: Diving into the debate, connecting the dots

### 09:00 – 10:30 Beyond fact-checking: using innovation and current tech developments to combat disinformation in africa (a case study)

- Format: Presentation and round of questions
- Input/Moderation: Allan Cheboi (Code for Africa, Kenya)

#### Summary:

Allan Cheboi, Senior Investigations Manager, Digital Forensics Specialist and Cyber Crime Investigator from Code4Africa, shared insights into his organization's OSINT and civic technology support network by sharing methods and data used to monitor disinformation campaigns. Code for Africa (CfA) is the continent's largest and in fact, one of a handful non-profit OSINT & civic-led technology support network, with 110 full-time analysts based in 22 African countries. CfA is part of several networks, such as WanaData, africanDRONE and sensors.Africa and coordinates various collaborative activities with international partners such as the Digital Forensic Lab by the Atlantic Council or the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

### 11:00 – 12:30 How to fight back: Government perspectives

- Format: Interview and Group Discussion
- Input/Moderation: Wycliffe Mwatu (National Cohesion and Integration Commission, Kenya), interviewed by Charlotte Freihse (Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany)

#### Summary:

The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) is a statutory body established under the National Cohesion and Integration Act No.12 of 2008. The establishment of NCIC recognized the need for a national institution to promote national identity and values, mitigate ethno-political competition and ethnically motivated violence, to eliminate discrimination on ethnic, racial and religious basis and promote national reconciliation and healing. The interview was conducted to get a glimpse of how the Kenyan government perceives its own role in combating harmful content, how they assess their relationship with civil society and platform owners and what challenges they face.

#### Key Take-Aways:

- In theory the NCIC could take up on an important role in combatting hate speech and disinformation with a focus on elections cycles. However, what was stressed by the other participants is the organization's lack of providing and/ or communicating information about (1) their own role and (2) valuable, high-quality information that can be used by researchers and civil society organizations.
- A lack of trust in the government and its associated entities makes cooperation between the NCIC and civil society organizations hard. Although there is a will and an understanding of the importance of better cooperation, in practice there is no continuous or mutually reinforcing cooperation.



- Especially when it comes to the governmental relationship with platforms and engaging owners into taking a more active role in combatting harmful content on their platforms, a cooperation of NCIC and civil society organizations could lead to a strong(er) alliance with a joint advocacy strategy.
- The observation that counter-disinformation actors tend to work in silos was highlighted throughout the workshop. Although highly demanded by civil society, national as well as international networks, allowing for the exchange of ideas and the debate of current trends and countermeasures, are lacking.

#### **14:30 – 15:30 Navigating disinformation research**

---

- Format: Panel discussion
- Input/Moderation: Joshua M. Kitili (Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law, Kenya), Tessa Knight (Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Lab, South Africa), Abel Wabella (Addis Zeybe, Ethiopia)

#### **Summary:**

In this session, the panelists shared insights, challenges and outlooks on disinformation research in the African context.

#### **Key Take-Aways:**

- Research reports on disinformation in the African context place a focus on foreign disinformation campaigns, i. e., those perpetrated by Russia, China or France. Domestic disinformation campaigns, however, led by local actors, such as governments tend to be overlooked, even though these often have an even stronger impact on societies.
- While the specific political and cultural contexts are very different from country to country, the researchers observe that the underlying dynamics (how disinformation works, spreads, impacts) and topics (conflict, societal groups, religion, gender, health) are very similar.
- Limited access to information is a major problem and impacts the efficiency of tools and techniques that have proven to be useful in Europe and the US. As a lot of information is not available in the African context (restricted, limited or simply not digitalized) research has to find ways around that, which often entails a lot of extra resources and time.

#### **15:30 – 17:00 Final session:**

##### **Zooming out: Lessons from Africa's fight against disinformation for the world**

---

- Format: Working Groups
- Input/Moderation: Dr. Joachim Rother (Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany)

#### **Summary:**

Participants called for multistakeholder meetings on dealing with disinformation, regulation that adequately addresses disinformation and more media literacy on the subject. It was highlighted that the use of traditional media platforms such as radio and television will be necessary in future work aimed at countering disinformation especially as in online spaces, key perpetrators will be influencers, politicians and fake accounts. Traditional media remains a dominant source of information in many countries. Observations around fact-checking, funding, and the role of governments were reiterated and elaborated by examples and details.

### Key Take-Aways:

- Fact-checking is a widely used approach, and organizations face similar challenges to their peers in Germany and the European Union: how to keep up with the speed, narrative and reach of disinformation campaigns, as fact-checked information still don't reach as many people as possible, let alone the fact that fact-checking as an approach still excludes the psychological factors of why people believe in disinformation.
- Funding is a major issue for almost all players when it comes to sustainable development or scaling the impact of measures being taken. Africa is a point in case where a constant lack of public resources leads to rather peculiar situations of NGOs, being oftentimes better funded than everyone else, ending up funding government branches via cooperations. Furthermore, there are cases, in which fact-checking initiatives sustained by non-domestic money are being attacked for being controlled by the 'other'. International funding thus tends to get weaponized by malicious actors trying to counter those initiatives.
- Anti-Hate Speech or Anti-Disinformation laws are sometimes instrumentalized to silence critics of governments or politicians, e.g., in Tanzania. This is often a result from laws that were implemented after a certain example, e.g., German NetzDG, but are applied to an African country without taking the different context into consideration ("Copy and Paste-Laws").