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Social media, the press and the crisis of disinformation in Africa

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Abstract

The crisis of disinformation in Africa has upended the role of the media in democratic processes on the continent. While social media and platform companies such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp have taken most of the blame for the rise in disinformation, the role of the mainstream media in all this cannot be ignored. The four papers in this special issue interrogate the contemporary manifestation of misinformation and disinformation in sub-Saharan Africa. They focus on the outbreak of these invasive weeds in the context of fragile democracies in Africa, most of which are dogged by political violence, disputed elections, vote buying and rigging, uneven political playing field and captured electoral management bodies. The special issue looks critically at the digitally-enabled conflicts between supporters of ruling and opposition parties and how these political gladiators enlisted the services of fake news and propaganda to manufacture consent and dissent. It also shines the spotlight on the role of the mainstream media and professional journalists as ‘critical stakeholders’ in the news production and fact-checking ecosystem.

Keywords: Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, cyber propaganda, cyber troops, political campaigns, elections, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria, post-truth

Introduction

Contemporary manifestations of ‘fake news’ and its related monikers such as cyber-propaganda, misinformation (defined as the unintentional behaviours that inadvertently mislead), mal-information and disinformation (which refers to the intentional and purposive spread of misleading information) have raised concern about the quality and credibility of news and information circulated via mainstream and social media platforms across the globe (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019, p. 14; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019; Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo, 2019). In Africa, for instance, what we refer to as the ‘crisis of disinformation’ in this article, has ravaged electoral, social and cultural processes with devastating consequences.

Although ‘fake news’ is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it has been recalibrated and amplified by the mass permeation of social media platforms and smartphones into ordinary people’s everyday lives. Evidently, the spill-over effect of the amplification of ‘fake news’ especially through digital media technologies has negatively affected the reputation of mainstream media organisations and digital-born start-ups. This has contributed towards the ‘rise of the disinformation society’, where misleading and false information and narratives are deliberately weaponised for political, cultural and economic gain.

The transformation of the public sphere has led to a situation where journalists are no longer the only curators of verified and credible information (see Mare et al 2019). In other words, the actually existing communication ecologies in Africa have been invaded by what some scholars have termed ‘citizen’ journalists (Moyo, 2009). Although the usage of the concept of ‘citizen journalism’ has become fashionable in mainstream literature over the past decade, there is a realization that in a continent where dual political identities coexist (citizen vs. subject) as theorised by Mamdani (1996), its usage is no longer associated with transformative and democratic potential. The argument here is that political identities like citizen and subject which were constituted through indirect rule during colonialism and apartheid continues to rear its ugly head in ‘post-colonial’ Africa. As a result, not everyone is privileged enough to enjoy the rights of a ‘citizen’ because others still occupy political identities of ‘subjects’, with limited rights to speak truth to power especially in authoritarian, heteronormative, and patriarchal societies.

Buoyed by the former US President Donald Trump’s arbitrary deployment of the term ‘fake news’, politicians in some African countries have appropriated it in their political rhetoric as a way of rationalising their disproportionate clamping down on media and Internet freedom in general (Mare, 2020). This problematic concept has also been used to justify the passage of draconian cyber-security and data protection laws and the implementation of unnecessary and disproportionate state-ordered Internet shutdowns (Mare, 2020; Ayalew, 2019). Even more daringly, some politicians have also deployed this floating signifier as a stigmatizing label used to critique anything that they do not agree with which is circulating in the public sphere. As intimated earlier, this unprecedented ‘crisis of disinformation’ has tended to take

advantage of heightened periods of political contestation such as electoral seasons, service delivery protests, natural disasters and military coups, During these periods, news and information appealing to fear, emotion and pre-existing ideological orientations often have a ready audience. In the cases featured in this special issue, Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe have witnessed an upsurge in the production and distribution of ‘fake news’ via social media, mainstream media and popular forms of communication during specific moments in history.

Most research thus far has focused on the *complicit role* played by social media platforms in the production and dissemination of ‘fake news’ in different social contexts. As Tsfati, Boomgaarden, Strömbäck, Vliegenthart, Damstra and Lindgren (2020, p. 157) observe, “thus far, only limited attention has been directed to the role of mainstream media in the dissemination of disinformation.” Be that as it may, anecdotal evidence posits that traditional/mainstream media platforms are not entirely innocent from these invasive weeds. In highly polarized contexts, traditional media platforms have been implicated in the process of systematically amplifying ‘fake news’ on behalf of their political and economic handlers. The weaponisation of ‘fake news’ by ruling and opposition parties in some African countries have contributed to the normalization of media polarisation. In such authoritarian media systems, the press becomes the battleground for the circulation of ‘fake news’, propaganda, half-truths, fabricated stories and concocted lies aimed at manufacturing the necessary illusions and winning the hearts and minds of the electorate during elections (Mare, 2020). Thus, the public press has assumed the role of the chief purveyor of government and ruling party propaganda in some African countries. In this special issue, Munoriyarwa and Chambwera as well as Asak and Molale focus on the role of the mainstream media and journalists in the context of the ‘crisis of disinformation’.

Similar to ‘fake news’, propaganda has always existed since time immemorial, however, the advent of digital media technologies have seen it being digitized (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Although scholars to use the term ‘cyber-propaganda’ (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, 2018), it is noteworthy to highlight that this corrosive phenomenon is part and parcel of what Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) call ‘information disorders’. Instead of using the popularised term ‘fake news’, Derakhshan & Wardle (2017) argue that continuing with that tradition is not only self-

defeating but also contributes towards the over simplification of a very complex problem. As part of this ‘crisis of disinformation’, scholars in Asia and Europe have also looked at the role of ‘cyber-troops’ (also referred to as troll armies, cyber-brigades, keyboard warriors and so forth) in the production and distribution of fake news and propaganda. By ‘cyber-troops’, they refer to government, military or political-party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). These ‘fake news’ producers and distributors take advantage of their unfettered access to mainstream and social media platforms to manipulate public opinion. Through the strategic deployment of cyber-troops and bots, research (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Mare, 2020) has shown that governments, political and civic actors across the world are occupying social and mainstream media platforms to generate content, direct opinion and engage with foreign and domestic audiences. In some contexts, cyber-troops have targeted opinion leaders, including prominent bloggers, [investigative] journalists, opposition politicians, human rights defenders and activists in their coordinated smear and character assassination campaigns. In this special issue, Chibwe reflects on the strategic recruitment of ‘varakashi’ and ‘nerorists’ by the ruling and opposition parties during the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe.

An overview of papers in this special issue

Chibwe’s paper discusses the Twitter war between supporters of the two leading political parties, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-Alliance) in the run up to the 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe. The elections pitted two Emmerson Mnangagwa (ZANU-PF) and Nelson Chamisa (MDC-Alliance) in their quest to succeed Robert Mugabe, who had ruled the country for 37 years. Because of the political stakes at play, a vicious cyber-political contestation ensued between Chamisa’s followers nicknamed ‘Nerorists’ and Mnangagwa’s nicknamed ‘Varakashi’. These political gladiators used ‘fake news’, hate speech and mudslinging in their digital propaganda battles. Deploying salient insights from the (digital) public sphere and alternative public sphere theories, Chibwe critically examines the nature of the Twitter war and the ‘discussions’ around key electoral candidates and their implications for democracy. The article also investigates how these issues cascaded

from the online platforms to offline spaces. It concludes that although social media gained prominence in the election, its contribution to democracy is paradoxical. It also demonstrates that political communication and/or the production and distribution of political advertisements, just like journalism, has been de-professionalised and de-institutionalised. It argues that there is a blurring of boundaries between the offline public spheres (both official and unofficial) and social media public sphere.

In the second paper, Mutahi and Kimari cast their gaze on how ‘fake news’ was used to advance different political agendas by political parties during the closely contested 2017 elections in Kenya. They argue that while social media fostered access to important information on the elections, it was also used to spread fake news intended mainly to win over voters, create fear and alarm, and sometimes disparage some of the independent institutions that were managing the elections. Using data collected between August and October 2017 (during a repeat of the presidential contest), Mutahi and Kimari explore the nature of fake news and the implications and significance of its spread during the 2017 elections.

The article argues that that the spread of fake news in the 2017 elections is attributable to a number of different factors including availability of affordable internet access and social networking sites like WhatsApp. In addition, the influence of players such as Cambridge Analytica and Aristotle Inc, which have specialised in online profiling and messaging involved in this election, had implications for the information produced and circulated on both mainstream and social media. Second, it points to an increase in the use of social media and reliance on it as a source of news about the elections, suggesting greater potential for fake news to be utilised to undermine confidence in elections and other political processes as well as to heighten polarisation. Third, it highlights that social networking sites have amplified the ease of creating and sharing content without the need for verification.

Asak and Molale’s article interrogates whether mainstream media are the major purveyors of fake news on which other media feed. The study provides selective evidence that mainstream media are not necessarily purveyors of fake news because they do not deliberately carry fake news on their news outlets. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, Asak and Molale show that mainstream media journalists believe in their social responsibility mandate of reporting information that they think

is of public interest. This is in line with the social responsibility theory, which accentuates an accountability framework that journalists adhere to with respect to their professional practice and ethical conduct. Their article recommends a number of strategies for minimising the threat posed by fake news. First, it highlights a dire need to strengthen trustworthy and legitimate sources of authentic news as extrapolated in mainstream media by finding ways to endorse, support and partner with new media in order to increase the reach of high-quality, factual information, thereby making the truth 'louder' on digital platforms. Second, it recommends that since the new media is a major challenge for mainstream media in suppressing authentic news and projecting 'fake news', traditional and conventional journalists must be better trained to compete on digital platforms on doing their jobs. Third, it emphasizes the need for mainstream media to embark more on advocacy against fake news through dedicated consistent news holes to fake news related stories in order to create more visibility and to continually inform and educate the public.

In the last article, Munoriyarwa and Chambwera look at mainstream journalists' responses to fake news during political crises (such as military coups). Relying on the conceptual framework provided by the sociology of news (as evidenced by the social organisation of news work) and methodological approach anchored on qualitative interviews with purposively selected political reporters from mainstream daily newspapers, Munoriyarwa and Chambwera explore how they responded to 'fake news' during the coup in Zimbabwe. Their study found that faced with an avalanche of fake news, journalists responded by re-evaluating their news sourcing routines and engaged in collective efforts to identify sources and pressure points of fake news that interfered with their work. The authors recommend that journalists develop a "triangular approach" and evolve their own platforms and mechanisms to verify and challenge fake news prevalent on social media and other websites.

Overall, all the four papers point to a deepening crisis of disinformation on the continent, with potentially disastrous consequences for both democracy and social well-being. The papers certainly address some of the missing nuances in the ever-growing debate on fake news, its manifestations, drivers, drivers and implications in Africa.

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