



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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An analysis of the role of disinformation in elections

An exploratory study of the Centre for Innovation and Technology's project on combatting electoral disinformation in the August 2023 national and December 2023 by-elections

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ABSTRACT

Electoral disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes, particularly in politically polarised environments like Zimbabwe. This paper examines the efficacy of the CITE project, a six-month high-impact initiative aimed at countering electoral disinformation during the August 2023 plebiscite. The primary objective was to mitigate the impact of disinformation on citizen participation by training citizens and community journalists to identify, flag, and combat misinformation. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, including workshops, social media campaigns, and a systematic desk review of existing literature and primary data sources. Key findings indicate that the project successfully raised awareness about disinformation, reaching over 100,000 people on Facebook with a campaign debunking election boycott rumours. However, the initiative faced limitations such as poor internet connectivity in rural areas and resistance from political actors benefiting from disinformation. The study underscores the importance of tailored strategies for different media platforms and highlights the efficacy of infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods in building trust. The research also identifies the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the potential of AI and machine learning in detecting disinformation. The significance of this work lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of disinformation in electoral processes and its practical implications for enhancing media literacy and democratic engagement. By comparing Zimbabwe's challenges and solutions with those of other countries, the study offers valuable insights for developing robust counter-disinformation strategies globally.

Key words: electoral dis-information, electoral mal-information, electoral mis-information, media literacy, elections, democratic engagement

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been in an indeterminant transition since independence in 1980. The political scene has been coloured by ethnic rivalry, fragile social contexts, deprived human conditions, inflation, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, and a weak economy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya, 2020), as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, and hatred (Coltart, 2016). Zimbabwe's political landscape is characterised by a history of contested elections, allegations of rigging, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) oversees the electoral process, but its impartiality has often been questioned (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). The political environment is highly polarised, with major parties like ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) often at odds. The 2023 elections saw the rise of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), adding another layer of complexity to the political dynamics (Hassan, 2023).

Both state and non-state media have played a central role in the Zimbabwean polity's evolution. All these issues are “offensively, progressively, and relentlessly destroying relationships, heightening animosities across communities, and threatening democratic survival in the country” (Pate, 2018; pg. 56). They are further aggravated by the spread of disinformation on social networks such as religious, ethnic, and political platforms.

Disinformation campaigns have been a significant concern globally, with studies highlighting their impact on democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). In Zimbabwe, disinformation exacerbates existing societal

divisions and undermines trust in public institutions (Mare, Mabweazara, & Moyo, 2019). The theory of motivated reasoning explains why individuals are more likely to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Bartels, 2002).

Disinformation has been defined by McGonagle (2017) as information that has been intentionally made up and circulated intending to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or not questioning verifiable facts, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. News plays a critical part in democratic societies; however, disinformation poses a challenge to liberal democracy as it misinforms people and significantly affects the deliberative process (Humprecht, 2019). Although the dissemination of disinformation was prevalent before recent advancements in information and communications technologies (ICT), the revolution in ICT has simplified its access and facilitated its transmission across space and time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The advent of the Internet, especially social media, has significantly accelerated the spread of disinformation, aided by the expansion of the mobile data subscriber base and the growing availability of affordable smartphones. Social media platforms present new opportunities for engagement through the ease of two-way communication. More than half of Zimbabwe's population uses the internet, and a significant majority use social media platforms, making the problem of the dissemination of disinformation in Zimbabwe very significant (IRI; 2023).

Lately, elections in both liberal and illiberal democracies have been preceded by political (online and offline) information disorders including misinformation, disinformation and mal-information (MDM). MDM has been weaponised by political actors

as information with politically charged content is manipulated. Of course, MDM is not a new phenomenon; however, what is constantly evolving is the context of dissemination. Digital and, especially, social media facilitate the widespread distribution of false assertions with a relatively professional layout at minimal cost. These MDM campaigns attempt to undermine voters' ability to make their decisions based on accurate beliefs about the political system. This poses a danger to the quality and legitimacy of the democratic process, as a well-informed electorate is essential for the collective autonomy of democracies. In some liberal democracies, this proliferation, supported by the burgeoning of personalised filter bubbles online (Sunstein, 2009), has been succeeded by the electoral success of populist candidates. However, in illiberal democracies where there is limited access to information and free speech, low media literacy levels and the lack of access to real-time verified alternative sources of information, states and ruling parties have weaponised and deployed MDM to undermine opposition political parties especially where opposing candidates are popular (Cantarella, Fraccaroli, and Volpe; 2022).

The spread of MDM news before the August 2023 general elections and the December 2023 by-elections in Zimbabwe largely sought to discredit Nelson Chamisa and his Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) party, while presenting Emmerson Mnangagwa and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) as the candidate and party of choice. Coupled with the unlevel media playing field concerning the coverage in elections, partisan politics largely influenced the portrayal of candidates in state and private media.

To mitigate some of the deficiencies highlighted above, the Centre for Innovation and Technology implemented a short-term, six-month, high-impact project to counter electoral disinformation during the August 2023 ballot. The project trained citizens and community journalists to identify, flag and combat misinformation; in addition, the organisation provided access to alternative, real-time verified electoral updates and provided regular updates by hosting conversations on elections. In this context, this paper discusses key issues, lessons and promising practices derived from CITE's experiences in countering electoral disinformation.

The CITE project aimed to mitigate the impact of electoral disinformation in Zimbabwe. A rapid assessment, post-project, revealed several key findings:

- **Efficacy:** The project successfully raised awareness about disinformation through workshops and social media campaigns. For instance, a campaign debunking the rumour that the CCC was boycotting elections reached over 100,000 people on Facebook (CITE, 2023).
- **Reach:** The project engaged with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, journalists, and community leaders. However, its reach was limited in rural areas due to poor internet connectivity (Mare et al., 2019).
- **Limitations:** The project faced challenges such as limited funding and resistance from political actors who benefited from disinformation (Hassan, 2023).
- **Key Lessons Learned:** Tailored strategies are essential for different media platforms. For example, infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods were effective in areas with low media literacy (CITE, 2023).

Many recent studies on the impact of disinformation on elections have focused on the 2016 US presidential election (Harsin, 2018). In relation to African politics, this study is one of the few (Hassan, 2023) that seeks to highlight the disruptive influence of disinformation on democratic processes (such as elections) from the perspective of civil society, in this instance, in Zimbabwe generally and Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces specifically. Our study focuses on developments limited to the general Matabeleland area. It provides sub-national and national examples as well that have emerged from media coverage and the existing literature to further strengthen relevant points. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February 2024. The interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, meaning interviewees' comments are considered but not attributed in this write-up. However, due to its exploratory character, this study has inherent limitations. Purposive sampling was used to select participants; the selection criteria were based on lived experiences and were, thus, prone to bias. Nevertheless, efforts were made to include diverse participants from each of the project areas in terms of age, social media usage, and professional and educational experience.

BACKGROUND

Access to unbiased and accurate information regarding elections and related political developments has always been a problem in Zimbabwe, as indeed elsewhere.

The age of digital media and platforms, the deeply fractured character of Zimbabwean society and the high political stakes involved, however, have deepened the possibilities of misinformation and disinformation. Recent events in Zimbabwe aptly demonstrate this. This includes what took place during the 2023 national elections and the December 2023 by-elections, as well as the disturbing events with particular reference to the CCC – notably, the activities of Sengezo Tshabangu and the resignation of Nelson Chamisa. Access to accurate and credible information becomes crucial in this context, particularly in real-time. Indeed, addressing and overcoming these information challenges is crucial for promoting a transparent and democratic culture in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe held the 2023 elections in a highly volatile and contested environment. To begin with, the July 2018 national elections in Zimbabwe witnessed a significant surge in the use of social media and other online platforms as sites for political contestation and campaigns. The bitter contest between the top two presidential contenders, Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa became evident as the war took to online platforms where “Varakashi”¹ and “Nerorists”² engaged in various tactics in casting aspersions on the other. Fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during these digital propaganda battles. The allegations and accusations from both sides were so extreme that voters might have found it difficult to separate facts from misinformation. The August 2023 general election and December

¹ Varakashi is a term commonly used in reference to online/cyber trolls that support the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.

² Nerorists are a group of cyber/online trolls that are viewed to be sympathetic to the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa.

2023 by-elections would likely be no different. In mitigation of this strong possibility, CITE undertook a project to empower citizens with basic knowledge on how to identify disinformation on electoral issues through media literacy and fact-checking of content and messages circulating on social media. CITE's countermeasures included fact-checking, media literacy workshops, and social media campaigns. These efforts were partially effective but faced challenges such as limited reach and resistance from political actors. Drawing from global best practices, CITE could enhance its strategies by collaborating with tech companies to develop AI tools for detecting disinformation (Pennycook, Bear, Collins & Rand, 2021). The desired impact was to mitigate the impact of disinformation in undermining citizen participation in electoral processes.

Post the project, CITE commissioned a rapid assessment to understand the influence and contribution of its work in mitigating electoral disinformation. The assessment uses a qualitative exploratory approach to establish major issues, trends, contributions, lessons learned and promising practices. Our research methodology also included a systematic desk review of the existing literature on disinformation, human rights and democracy, relying on four types of sources: official documents, communication from stakeholders, scholarly literature and press articles. In an uneasy and stifled democracy like Zimbabwe where electoral outcomes are always contested with allegations of rigging, voter intimidation and vote buying made against the state, there has been limited investment in probing the impact of disinformation and its impact on democratic processes and electoral outcomes. Additionally, disinformation combined with unresolved historical tensions generates insecurity, tearing cohesion asunder,

inciting hostility, and directly disrupting democratic processes. Moreso, disinformation confuses the electorate and lends citizens to manipulation, creating distrust in electoral governing bodies.

Analysing disinformation trends over multiple election cycles reveals evolving patterns. For instance, the use of deepfakes and sophisticated bots has increased, making it harder to detect disinformation. The long-term effectiveness of countermeasures requires continuous adaptation to these evolving tactics (Pennycook et al., 2021). Comparing Zimbabwe's disinformation challenges with other African countries reveals common issues such as low media literacy and political manipulation. Best practices from countries like Kenya, which has implemented robust fact-checking initiatives, can inform Zimbabwe's strategies (Mare et al., 2020).

In the Zimbabwean context, multiple actors are involved in news dissemination which lends the media to promote, intentionally and unintentionally, the spread of disinformation. Political commentators spread a combination of truth and falsehoods in favour of their political parties on multi-media platforms, in the process weaponising disinformation. In the same process, disinformation, while deployed for political mileage, weakens trust in democratic processes (elections), and institutions (electoral governing bodies). In addition, political parties, state media, and foreign actors use disinformation to achieve different objectives. Political parties use disinformation to delegitimise opponents and glorify their leaders (Guess et al., 2019), while the state often disseminates propaganda to maintain the status quo (Mare et al., 2019), with foreign actors spreading disinformation to destabilise political environments for strategic gains (Hassan, 2023).

Online and offline disinformation are intertwined, shaping and influencing each other. An online rumour started on social media networks can easily influence conventional media outputs and programmes and reach the offline audience in a few hours through well-established rumour networks. For instance, one of the most pervasive rumours that spread across many social media platforms during the August 2023 Zimbabwean general elections was that the CCC was boycotting elections and citizens were discouraged from casting their vote on election day. This fake news was backed up by tampered photos and fliers that were strewn near polling stations. Likewise, another piece of fake news widely circulated on social media suggested that the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) had rejected the outcome of the 2023 Presidential elections; to substantiate this rumour, multiple media stories were run with quotes from prominent regional leaders. The circulation of disinformation, particularly about the legitimacy of election results, can have deadly consequences.

During the 2023 elections, reports that the chair of SADC's Electoral Observer Mission refused to sign and endorse the election results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) were shared on a social media platform as if it were a confirmed story. Such disinformation can plague public discourse and decision-making, hindering the process of finding common ground and even threatening public safety. These incidents demonstrate the destabilising effect of the viral spread of disinformation, which can lead to political instability. Disinformation can incite people to violence and lead to the weakening of public confidence in the government. An increasing number of people rely on social media as a source of news. This has led to concerns that fake news can

manipulate public opinion and delegitimise opposing voices. However, research on the dissemination of fake news in Zimbabwe is very limited. Against this background, this study aimed to explore how disinformation impacts public participation in electoral processes.

DISCUSSION

This study underlines that disinformation is most effective when leveraged on existing narratives and contexts to reinforce/confirm dominant social, ethnic, political and religious divides. Electoral disinformation campaigns discussed here, deployed and led by Zimbabweans, local and in the diaspora, aimed to delegitimise institutions, groups, or personalities; glorify a leader; or, during elections, confuse voters, instigate apathy among people, or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the reach of social media extends far beyond those with direct access to social media platforms. Traditional media and pre-existing non-media structures for information dissemination, either intentionally or unintentionally, play an important role in the spread of electoral disinformation. Digital and other content, whether factual or false, is not restricted to online settings. Below is a nuanced discussion of key themes relating to disinformation and its impact on elections with reference to crucial developments marking the 2023 national and subsequent December by-elections.

Disinformation and its impact on democratic processes (elections)

Disinformation has an impact on the basic health and credibility of democratic processes. This has become the core of recent positions taken by international organisations,

such as Resolution 2326 (2020) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in expressing concern about the scale of information pollution in a digitally connected and increasingly polarised world, the spread of disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion, and trends of foreign electoral interference and manipulation. Information and shared narratives are a precondition for good quality democratic public discourse. This paper considers that disinformation erodes trust in institutions by impeding the ability of citizens to make informed decisions. It also warns that disinformation is set to polarise democratic societies by creating or deepening tensions and undermining democratic pillars such as electoral systems.

Nevertheless, this aggregation clouds the fact that exposure to disinformation is extremely concentrated and attributable to specific parts of the population (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). There are indeed fractions of the population that are highly exposed to disinformation, among these youth, women and People with Disability (PWDs). This can act as a gateway for the disruptive influence of disinformation. Hence, to address its direct influence on voter choice, one must focus on the individual rather than the aggregate level. Moreover, we do not assume mere exposure to disinformation has a huge impact in swaying citizens' opinions, but rather believing disinformation to make a difference regarding people's voting decisions has that influence. Studies show that distorted beliefs about a political issue can influence people's vote on a ballot question concerning that issue even when controlling for pre-existing views and political sophistication (Reedy et al., 2014; Wells, Reedy, Gastil, & Lee, 2009). Likewise, there are suggestions that the characterisation of Sengezo Tshabangu as a

CCC sell-out was fostered by prevailing rhetoric that "Ndebeles" (people from the Matabeleland region) are perceived sell-outs because King, Lobengula, 'sold' the country for a spoon of sugar. The same pattern applies to elections. Barrera, Guriev, Henry, and Zhuravskaya (2018) demonstrate that exposure to misleading statements regarding the presence of certain ethnic or religious traits significantly increases or decreases voting intentions for candidates. Additionally, people believing false rumours about candidates are less likely to vote for those candidates, as witnessed by losses in the by-elections experienced by candidates affiliated with the Tshabangu CCC faction.

Three possible circumstances remain for individuals to deal with political confusion and disillusionment at the ballot box. First, the electorate can remain loyal to the established political system and elect one of the popular parties. Second, citizens could voice their dissatisfaction by casting their votes for a right-wing populist or extremist party. And third, they could exit the party system entirely through abstention from the vote (Hirschman, 1970; Hooghe, Marien, & Pauwels, 2011). With no system of compulsory voting and a new populist party, CCC, on the rise, there was both a viable exit and voice option in the 2023 December by-elections. Hence, opting for loyalty does not seem a reasonable electoral consequence of believing disinformation. It should rather stimulate people to turn away from the political parties representing the established political system.

There are several ways in which disinformation weakens democratic institutions. These include the use of social media to channel disinformation in coordinated ways so as to undermine institutions' credibility. As trust in mainstream media has plummeted, alternative news

ecosystems have flourished. The online platforms' business model pushes content that generates clicks and this has increased polarisation. This is because it favours the creation of more homogeneous audiences and undercuts tolerance for alternative views. Research studies also show that disinformation can sow distrust in different pillars of democratic institutions, including public institutions such as governments, parliaments and courts or their processes, public figures, as well as journalists and free media. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that all individuals have the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. In this sense, the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government and must be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which promote universal and equal suffrage by either secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

In this context, voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind. Election interference can be defined as unjustified and illegitimate ways of influencing people's minds and voters' choices, thereby reducing citizens' abilities to exercise their political rights. Many governments' use of disinformation contradicts this injunction. Even where they are not directly using disinformation in electoral campaigns, they may be falling short in protecting this right on behalf of their citizens. Whether or not successful, manipulating elections by affecting voters' opinions and choices through disinformation damages democracy and creates a trail of doubt as to whether democratic institutions work well in reflecting citizens' choices.

Disinformation in entrenching pre-existing divisions

Emotive disinformation exacerbates existing ethno-religious and other divisions that can threaten the peace and stability of any nation. There are thus serious dangers inherent in all the distortions, fake news, and misinformation circulating on social media. For example, many crises are fuelled by these distortions, which may be accompanied by a photoshopped scene or an old image portraying members of one ethnic group attacking those of another ethnic group – on this basis, without putting too much thought into it, people may decide to act and take the law into their own hands. Our study does highlight the potential exacerbating effect of disinformation on existing ethnoreligious divisions and long-standing tensions. The cultural and racial categorisation and fabrication of myths by the public can destroy society (Soyemi, 2016). As different ethnic groups live across the breadth of Zimbabwe, a single act of violence fuelled by such disinformation can spark violent reprisals. A good case in point gained prominence in the build-up to the December 2023 by-election where unverified news circulated concerning the collusion between Tendai Biti, Welshman Ncube and Sengezo Tshabangu to bar CCC candidates from participating in elections. The sum effect of the rumour resulted in divided opinions that reproduced ethno-regional rhetoric around the general untrustworthiness of the Ndebeles as epitomised by Ncube and Tshabangu's 'sell-out' tendencies in undermining the "people's choice". Politicians have come to understand the wide reach of social media, and they employ social media platforms to push election propaganda and trade insults or spread false stories about their political rivals.

Linked to this, disinformation is not only spread by entities with specific interests, such as political parties. Guess et al. (2018) highlight that low media literacy, particularly among those who have just started using social media, contributes to the spread of fake news online. Individuals are more motivated to share posts that align with their personal opinions and avoid content that opposes their views and beliefs. This allows malicious actors to play with public sentiment. Low media literacy among citizens, paired with strong political support for certain parties, has allowed political parties to make advances in information warfare on social media. Thus, the best way to combat fake news is to increase media literacy among social media users.

Disinformation and public trust in independent institutions

Mere exposure to disinformation does not necessarily translate into believing it, which is a conceivable requirement for a direct electoral effect of truth claims. Therefore, our study takes into consideration the (institutional) reasons for perceiving disinformation as true. According to the theory of motivated reasoning, truth judgments are generally driven by two possibly conflicting motivations: the accuracy goal of trying to arrive at a preferably correct conclusion, and the directional goal of preferring a previously desired outcome. Interestingly, there is evidence that individuals are more likely to engage in the latter (Kunda, 1990). People evaluate (political) statements in the light of their predispositions so that factual beliefs align with their (political) stances (Bartels, 2002). Repeated studies have confirmed this partisan, or confirmation, bias in truth judgments (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories that correspond to their

political attitudes (Swami, 2012; Uscinski, Klobstad, & Atkinson, 2016). Furthermore, selective exposure to partisan (news) media and its content can evoke misperceptions in line with the user's views (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016). This holds especially true in online environments, where audiences have a wider choice of attitude-consistent messages (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). Taken together, political ideology is one of the most important predictors of the perceived truthfulness of online disinforming news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Disinformation and its temporal dimensions

The study underlined that disinformation is periodic or temporal and is usually issue or interest-based. For example, disinformation around elections is mostly a temporal issue, usually bound around the immediate period before and after voting day(s), with the obvious goal being to garner votes. In the same vein, disinformation also thrives around issues which are less understood by citizens or their communities, or where serious information gaps exist, a prime example being the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the interests of the person or entity sharing information, it becomes apparent that what information they eventually share is based chiefly on their interests. A case in point is the issue of 'land and land reform' in Zimbabwe which is a very emotive issue prone to significant levels of disinformation. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon of party-state conflation based on pure political interests is a key driving factor for disinformation. Again, this tends to ride on the extreme polarisation we find in most communities of Zimbabwe.

Another classic example is the electoral process. When looked at from its cyclic nature, it is evident that most citizens know and understand they can participate in the electoral process as voters by casting their votes. However, because of the disjointed character of the electoral cycle and civic and government programming around it, the other attendant processes which are supposed to complete the electoral cycle are often neglected. Resultantly, there has emerged a pattern where citizens view elections as a five-yearly event, rather than an ongoing cycle. As a result of this reality, where disinformation is infused into the governance process, uninformed electoral participation arises, where citizens ignorantly partake in processes, they neither know how to effectively do nor can accurately project what they must get out of partaking in the processes. This usually tends to discredit genuine governance processes as citizens cannot connect their participation to tangible developmental outcomes.

LESSONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

A closer look at the dynamics around how different media reach out and appeal to or are accessed by different individuals, shows marginality as a thread kneading through the dynamics of how disinformation reaches and influences social groups and their communities. Based on an extensive analysis of existing literature and primary data on key media and sources of news and information, it is evident that social media, mainstream media and traditional media (or word of mouth) are the most popular news sources. Strategies to combat disinformation must be tailored to the needs and peculiarities of each news source, balancing both online and offline strategies. The use of infographics and other low-literacy data packaging methods can shore up trust, especially in areas where

citizen trust in public institutions and processes is waning.

Several civil society organisations are engaged in different initiatives, mostly to raise awareness about disinformation. A few others have purposively incorporated actual activities to combat disinformation including CITE and ZIMFACT, which do fact-checking of stories for the benefit of the online public. However, combating MDM is sometimes hampered by poor coordination of stakeholders who are running various disparate anti-disinformation initiatives. In many instances, there is no inclusivity in terms of getting all possible allies on board; resultantly, where training is offered for example, very few, usually the same faces, continue to attend training initiatives.

Key to the success of any intervention intent on mitigating the impact of disinformation is its ability to contend with the political polarisation prevalent in Zimbabwe's polity. The political polarisation apparent in most communities also acts as a barrier to the effectiveness of initiatives that target citizens, as they seem to fall into default partisan positions when confronted with news or information, which then ultimately determines how they handle disinformation and political choices.

AI and machine learning can play a significant role in detecting and countering disinformation. For example, algorithms can identify patterns in disinformation campaigns and flag suspicious content for review (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Media literacy education empowers citizens to critically evaluate information and resist disinformation. Initiatives such as school programs and community workshops can enhance media literacy, particularly among vulnerable groups (Guess et al., 2019).

Another key lesson and promising practice is around the inclusion of marginalised groups. This is most acute for PWDs, many of whom are left out or excluded by news broadcasters emanating from insensitive or inappropriately packaged information. This is almost similar to cases where recipients of information are illiterate and therefore unable to decipher information on their own and have to rely on a third party to interpret information for them. In a similar vein, issues around literacy and technical know-how remain critical but are experienced differently by different social groups, mostly based on spatial considerations. The major driver of these disparities is traced back to how ICT infrastructure retains an urban bias, with rural and remote areas, the further you move from an urban centre, facing serious challenges of connectivity and bandwidths. This tends to limit the possibilities available to the rural population. However, even within the rural environs, the situation is also not homogenous. It will be found, based on literature, that business centres or growth points within the general rural setup actually experience good connectivity and bandwidth when compared to fast-track farms within the post-2000 FTLRP landscape.

CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal interesting views from diverse stakeholders on the effect of disinformation on Zimbabwe's political and electoral processes. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape fused with its insecure political and ethnic landscape offers productive ground for the spread of disinformation on traditional and social media platforms, which have an increasing number of users. Combatting online disinformation requires addressing certain broader challenges such as political

polarisation, insecurity and a lack of trust in government officials. However, at the same time, online information can be used to clarify facts that can promote government accountability and transparency. Moreover, it is important to recognise that online disinformation can influence offline content in newspapers or on television and radio. It is, therefore, imperative to strengthen the more positive elements of social media, thereby weakening the threat posed by disinformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government regulation of social media to curb the spread of disinformation has been proposed and implemented in some countries; however, it entails serious risks to citizens' freedom of expression. In countries like Zimbabwe, social media companies can play a far more proactive regulatory role by moderating content, particularly in local languages, and by creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between true and false information. Continued support should be provided to the media to improve the quality of reporting. Leading media houses should employ fact-checkers to reduce the reproduction or reporting of misleading online content across traditional media. Further, social media platforms should raise awareness among their users about how to report disinformation. In addition, technical support should be provided to government bodies to help them convey accurate and apolitical information using their social media handles.

Thus, we call for future research that explores more mediation and moderation pathways for the control of disinformation on social media platforms and that assesses more fully the impact of providing media literacy to the public on the spread of disinformation.

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