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## Countering Political Disinformation

Kevin Mudavadi, Indiana University-Bloomington  
Dani Madrid-Morales, University of Sheffield

The circulation of political disinformation – used in this chapter as an umbrella term to refer to false or misleading information deliberately spread to influence public opinion and impact election outcomes (see, Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, for a discussion on terminology) – has long been seen as a significant challenge to the democratic process, as it can deprive electors from acquiring the necessary political knowledge to make informed decisions at the ballot box (Bennett and Livingston 2020). Political disinformation undermines trust in elections, fuel division and hate speech (Sablosky 2021), and lead to social and political unrest (Soto-Vásquez and Sánchez-Santos 2020). As Rid (2022) reminds us, disinformation has been a feature of international and domestic politics for a long time. In the last one hundred years, there have been several waves of political disinformation, each of which has been preceded by the advent of a new form of information technology. For example, radio contributed to the globalisation of disinformation during World War II after decades of quasi-artisanal information manipulation in the interwar period. The latest wave of political disinformation, the origin of which Rid situates in the 2010s, is marked by the widespread use of new digital technologies, from mobile phones to social media platforms.

While political disinformation is clearly not a new phenomenon, scholarly interest has only begun to (re)emerge in recent years after multiple countries have seen elections tainted by politically motivated efforts to spread inaccurate information both online and offline. For reference, in the first edition of this *Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*, there were five mentions of the word “misinformation” and just one of “disinformation”. In this second edition, this chapter alone uses the word “disinformation” thrice as many times. As attention to the problems associated with political disinformation has grown, so have attempts to counter it.

In this chapter, we provide a review of this growing body of research on different approaches to curb the spread of poor-quality political information. Our review converges on the idea, raised by others previously (see, for example, Saurwein and Spencer-Smith 2020) that countering political disinformation requires multipronged and context-specific responses. We illustrate the argument with examples from Kenya in the second half of the chapter. Our focus on Kenya is not because we see it as an archetype. After all, many nations have seen the impact of fast-spreading falsehoods on politics in recent years (see, Roudik et al. 2019, for a global comparison). However, unlike other widely studied contexts, Kenya, provides a useful longitudinal perspective; the country is often referred to as one of the earliest cases in Rid’s (2020) fourth wave of political disinformation. By focusing on Kenya, we also hope to contribute to the re-centring of disinformation studies away from the Global North.

Table 1. Overview of Types of Approaches to Counter Disinformation

	Wardle and Derakhshan (2017)	Bakir and McStay (2018)	Posetti and Bontcheva (2020)	Durach, Bârgăoanu and Nastasiu (2020)	Helm and Nasu (2021)	Caled and Silva (2022)
Journalistic approaches	Stronger media	(1) Third-party Verification by Fact-checkers; (2) Listen to Advice from the News Industry	Responses that focus on identifying disinformation			Journalistic perspective (e.g., scrutinise information before publication)
Educational approaches	Educating audiences		Responses aimed at supporting the target audiences	Audience-centred solutions		Educational perspective (e.g., educate users on how to process information online)
Regulatory approaches	Regulation	Disrupt Fake News Economics	Responses governing the production and distribution of disinformation	(1) Co-regulation (e.g., between governments and institutions, and media platforms); (2) Direct regulation (e.g., legal sanctions)	(1) Regulation focused on correcting information; (2) Criminal sanctions (e.g., prosecution of spreaders of disinformation)	Government perspective (e.g., creating and enacting legal strategies to moderate online media content)
Technological approaches	Technological approaches (e.g., promoting quality information and remove false content)	(1) Technical Detection of Misinformation; (2) Labels on Stories Flagged as False; (3) User Reporting of Disinformation	Responses within the production and distribution of disinformation (e.g., platforms reducing transmission of disinformation)	Self-regulation by platforms.	Forced removal or blocking of content (either manual or automated)	(1) Digital platforms perspective; (2) Computational perspectives

## Approaches to Counter Disinformation

To capture the range of solutions proposed to tackle disinformation, in **Table 1**, we summarise six classifications put forward by scholars from different disciplines. We contend that there is a need to review typologies of responses because no single “one-size-fits-all” solution has been shown sufficient to curtail the circulation of political disinformation. As Tully et al. (2021, 15) note, different actors in society expect different types of solutions that pay “attention to contextual specificity and user agency.”. What has been shown to work in a media saturated country, for instance, might not necessarily be applicable to an information scarce one. Reviewing typologies across disciplines can also shed light on solutions that might have received limited attention because of the predominance of research in technology-driven solutions (Ong and Lanuza 2023).

Each of the classifications in **Table 1** has a different focus. For example, Helm and Nasu (2021) and Durach et al. (2020), emphasize solutions around regulation and governmental intervention. Other typologies, like those by Bakir and McStay (2018) and Caled and Silva (2022), offer more nuance by adding approaches that involve the use of technology. Most of these are implemented (or should be implemented) by media companies and/or social media platforms. In this chapter, we group the former type of solutions under the label *regulatory approaches*, while we bundle the latter under the term *technological approaches*. Both of these fall under the broader concept of “hard solutions”, if we use the terminology proposed by Rucinska et al. (2022). This is in opposition to what they call “soft solutions”, which includes both *journalistic approaches* (e.g., strengthening independent media, fact-checking news content) and *educational approaches* (e.g., media and information literacy campaigns).

### Journalistic Approaches

The digitalisation of news production and the lowering of costs to disseminate information, regardless of its veracity, has increased the number of information sources. In many parts of the world, this has brought a wider diversity of voices in the news. However, these developments might also be linked to disinformation's (re)emergence. Many journalists operate under growing time, commercial, and editorial pressures, all of which might increase the chances of them spreading falsehoods (Singer 2010; Posetti 2018). This happens in a context where perceptions of ubiquitous disinformation in the news industry are also on the rise (Balod and Hameelers 2019). Because of this, Caled and Silva (2022, 151) write, strategies need to be implemented to “support the strengthening of journalistic approaches for producing and delivering news content, while regaining public trust in news organisations.”

Fact-checking has been identified as one of “the most important non-governmental responses to disinformation” (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith 2020, 830), and its effectiveness has been demonstrated empirically. Walter et al. (2019) found that fact-checking has a significantly positive overall influence on political beliefs, even though participants’ pre-existing opinions can substantially attenuate it. Further challenges to fact-checking include the speed at which false narratives spread, often faster than authentic news content, and that they are more effective at attracting audience attention due to the nature of their presentation (Silverman 2015). In addition, fact-checkers are unable to address the entirety of inaccurate

messages, which means that false content reaches audiences before it is debunked (Graves 2016). Faced with these challenges, successful initiatives exist that focus on facilitating access to training, promoting industry partnerships, and agreeing on strict ethical guidelines for news organisation as a means of proactively preventing the spread of false narratives. This is part of what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) call creating “stronger media”. This would also mean that more is done to promote core principles of journalism such as accuracy, fairness, transparency and factual reporting (Steensen 2019).

### Educational Approaches

Faced with a multiplicity of views, perspectives, and “facts” in an increasingly cacophonous media ecology, audiences are required to filter content that is meaningful to them and decide what they believe is true, and what it is not (Grave 2016). Enabling audiences to make these decisions is at the core of a range of educational approaches to tackle disinformation. “It is no longer enough to just have better-trained journalists,” Caled and Silva (2021, 134) note, there is a need for a new generation of educated news consumers, “who are able to identify fact-and-evidence-based news.” To achieve this goal, a range of audience-centred approaches have been proposed, including interventions to improve audiences’ media and information literacy, understood as having the ability to understand the main functions of the media, how these functions are performed, as well as how to evaluate and use media and information in an ethical manner (Wilson et al. 2011, 8).

In the context of political disinformation, a more suitable term might be that of “misinformation literacy” which Cunliffe-Jones et al. (2021, 6-7) understand as a collection of four skills and competencies: understanding the context and the producers of disinformation; being able to identify the different types of misleading content; being familiar with the processes through which disinformation circulates; and, being aware of the reasons people consume and share false information, and the consequences of doing so. The benefits associated with improving these skills have been empirically substantiated (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu 2021), even though some limitations exist, including the fact that the benefits of media literacy take time to build. Furthermore, educational approaches might need to go beyond the practical application of how to engage with the media, to strengthen other important societal values, the erosion of which is seen as an underlying factor in the emergence of partisan and polarised media (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017).

### Regulatory Approaches

In **Table 1**, regulatory approaches are included across all six typologies. While “there is very little appetite in the US for any type of regulatory intervention,” Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, 70) write, in Europe, “the regulatory wheels have been turning slowly, and we are starting to see legislation directed at information disorder.” These efforts have focused on regulations that lead to a) corrections of false information, b) the removal and blocking of falsehoods and, c) criminal sanctions against those spreading false information (Helm and Nasu 2021). For example, the German Network Enforcement Law (2017) commonly referred to as “hate speech law,” tackles issues such as defamation or hate speech. The law requires digital platforms with at least two million subscribers to remove false content within 24 hours (Dittrich 2019). In France, during election periods, a political party or a political candidate

can head to court to plead that a digital media platform takes down a false narrative within 48 hours of its publication (Alaphilippe et al. 2019).

The use of laws to regulate disinformation is a sensitive issue given that it is not possible to create regulations without limiting freedom of speech (Helm and Nasu 2021). Journalists across the world and especially in autocratic societies or states are concerned that if the government is tasked with regulating speech, journalistic freedom and freedom of speech would be abused (Vese 2022). The concerns spread through surveillance on journalistic sources and activists, hence, rendering them vulnerable to abuse (Mantas 2020). In election contexts, for example, governments may use laws to silence the opposition (Aravindan 2019).

### *Technological Approaches*

Social media platforms present a fertile ground for deliberation, but can also be purveyors of disinformation (Allcott et al. 2019). For example, during the 2016 U.S. elections, Donald J. Trump used Twitter to disseminate unsubstantiated information regarding the elections and electoral system (Hazell and Ortutay 2020). Digital media platforms have also been accused of facilitating the spread of false information online for profit (Allyn 2021). Considering these and other cases, digital platforms have been called to self-regulate to curb the spread of disinformation. In response to such calls, Facebook has partnered with fact-checking organizations to embed links containing quality information below false narratives on its platform (Jennings and Stroud 2021). Research shows that fact-checking initiatives like this can have a positive impact on media audiences (Carnahan and Bergan 2022). Digital media platforms have also suspended accounts purveying false narratives, reduced visibility of false claims, and updated their platforms with election specific policies (Caled and Silva 2022).

While these steps have been welcome by organisations fighting disinformation, because these platforms are business entities with the core goal of generating profit through advertisements, for example, questions remain around their impartiality and the methods they use (Ong and Lanuza 2023). Perhaps because of the perception that political disinformation is particularly rampant online, technological approaches have been particularly predominant, and social media platforms have been keen on appearing as being at the forefront of efforts to counter disinformation. This is evident in responses to recent elections (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening 2020), including those in Kenya, the country on which we are focusing for the remainder of this chapter.

### **Disinformation and Journalistic Practice in Kenya**

Kenya's media landscape, much like that in other countries, grapples with challenges presented by growing levels of political disinformation, which have been partly fueled by rapid changes in news production routines. First, due to increased pressure to publish content fast (particularly online), less time is spent fact-checking stories (Wilding et al. 2017). This is sometimes exploited by political operatives in efforts to influence editorial agendas. Other activities of influence prevalent in Kenya include the provision of “brown envelopes” (Skjerdal 2010), which help journalists earn additional money, in a context of low paying jobs for most media professionals. Second, an increasing number of newsrooms are incorporating audience metrics in evaluating their performance, a practice that has been

linked to a growth in clickbait and sensationalized reporting (Moyo et al. 2020). In doing so, while news organizations increase audience attention, they oftentimes also contribute to amplifying inaccurate political narratives (Wilding et al. 2017). Finally, some have suggested (Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets 2022) that insufficient training on critical thinking, digital literacy, and source verification renders journalists more susceptible to manipulation through false narratives.

Furthermore, perceptions among the general public that disinformation is ubiquitous are higher in Kenya than elsewhere (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). This, in turn, has been linked to eroding media trust levels in the country (Mudavadi and Shanahan 2022). This credibility deficit can be exacerbated when news outlets are accused of disseminating false information. Such accusations can further deepen ethnic divisions, impeding constructive discourse within the Kenyan society. Amidst a crisis of trust, there is a possibility that media houses find themselves struggling with reduced advertising revenue in the future caused by decreased audience interest, which could in turn make newsrooms more ill-equipped to tackle disinformation in a seemingly vicious circle.

While changes in journalistic practice and audience perceptions, as we outline above, have made debates around politically motivated disinformation more prevalent in Kenya in recent years (ADDO 2022), this in fact has been a persistent issue for some time. The 2007 presidential elections saw the spread of false rumours and propaganda via mobile phones, which fuelled ethnic tensions (Goldstein and Rotich 2010). During the 2013 and 2017 general election, false rumours and hate speech spread through social media platforms and text messages (Maweu 2019). To address the issue, Safaricom, the largest telecommunications provider in the country, allocated 50 percent of its resources to monitor “fake news” and correct false narratives online during the 2017 elections (Safaricom 2017). However, as Kulundu et al. (2022) note, misinformation persists in Kenya, even after the most recent 2022 general election, which saw a myriad of counter-disinformation strategies tested. We review some of them in the final section of this chapter.

### **Countering Political Disinformation in Kenya**

Civil society organizations (like PesaCheck, a fact-checking group, or the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), a trade organisation) in Kenya have led efforts in addressing the spread of disinformation, particularly when it comes to *journalistic approaches*. MCK, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched “iVerify” – a digital platform used by newsrooms to verify information before publication during the 2022 general elections (Okata 2022). Similarly, Code4Africa established an “iLab” to provide support to newsroom-based networks in verifying online messages, which includes forensic investigative research and data analysis (Sonnichsen 2020). Fact-checking efforts were expanded to reach more people living in the outskirts by using community radio stations that communicated in local languages. Furthermore, podcasts such as “What’s Crap on WhatsApp” were used to expose and discredit political disinformation (Ababakirov et al. 2022).

While social media platforms are most commonly associated to *technological approaches* to counter disinformation, in Kenya few such efforts have been seen. TikTok, for instance, was accused of failing to identify hate speech during the 2022 elections (Madung

2022), while Facebook was singled out for investing just a fraction of its content moderation budget to languages other than English (Nicholas and Bhatia 2023). Meta, Facebook's parent company, focused instead on both journalistic and education approaches, such as working with local experts and organizations to train women on safety tools and resources; partnering with "iEARN Kenya" to create digital safety guides for teachers and parents; or working with well-established fact-checking organizations (e.g., AFP, PesaCheck, and Africa Check) to add warning labels on false posts to provide users with additional information (Ndegwa 2022). While media and information literacy does not form part of Kenya's national school curriculum (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021; Mutsvairo and Bebawi 2019), a number of *educational approaches* have been tested, including some funded by foreign donors like the United States (Roudik et al. 2019). The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), for instance, has trained young voters on how to debunk false narratives online through satirical comedy in partnership with Pilot Media Initiatives and Buni Media (NED 2022).

Finally, the Kenyan government has also taken steps to curb the spread of disinformation, including passing legislation to regulate the media and online content (*regulatory approaches*). In 2018, the government passed the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, which criminalized the publication of false information online (Funker and Falmini 2018). However, as Ababakirov and colleagues (2022, 140-141) suggest, state-led efforts to reduce the spread of disinformation in Kenya and in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa have resulted in "the introduction of laws that have done more to repress freedom than to lessen mis- and disinformation."

Despite the diversity of efforts around the 2022 general elections, concerns about political disinformation and hate speech remained. A multitude of factors can help explain this, including the growing use of a variety of social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok...) in a context of limited media literacy training; the constantly evolving toolkit used by disinformation producers to create content that is difficult to differentiate from authentic news; the fast-changing news production process, in which journalists are more likely to fall victims to disinformation; and the enduring polarisation of political debates, which encourages politicians and their supporters to spread false information for their own benefit. The case of Kenya is a good illustration that

disinformation exists in every information ecosystem in the world. No actor can address this alone. For this reason, a whole-of-society [multi-prong] approach is needed that encourages actors from governments, civil society, and industry to work together to counter disinformation and strengthen societal response (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening 2020 10).

In Kenya, combating the rising threat of political disinformation demands tailored interventions that take into account a range of very specific contextual characteristics. Factors like linguistic and cultural diversity create fertile ground for the spread of false information, complicating containment efforts. To address this, strategies must bridge ethnic and group differences, even more challenging for financially struggling media outlets. Additionally, the proliferation of digital media, especially on encrypted mobile apps (i.e., WhatsApp), hampers efforts due to limited transparency. Distrust in institutions further complicates the battle

against disinformation, necessitating initiatives to rebuild public trust. A holistic approach recognizes Kenya's complex factors, ensuring contextually relevant and truly effective interventions.

### Further Reading

The study of digital political disinformation has long centred on countries in Europe and North America. Books like *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018) by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and articles such as “Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research” (*The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25 (3): 493–516) by Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser and Peter van Aelst offer good overviews of the impact of digital political disinformation on liberal democracies. For a more geographically diverse range of perspectives, the volumes *Politics of Disinformation* (Wiley, 2021), co-edited by Guillermo López-García, Dolors Palau-Sampio, Bella Palomo, Eva Campos-Domínguez and Pere Masip, and *Disinformation in the Global South* (Wiley, 2021), co-edited by Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, can be good starting points. The latter includes a chapter (“Responses to Misinformation: Examining the Kenyan Context”) focused on Kenya. To add a valuable longitudinal perspective to recent changes in Kenyan politics, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (Zed Books, 2018), by Nanjala Nyabola, provides a detailed overview.

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