2024 Political Disinformation in Africa Survey
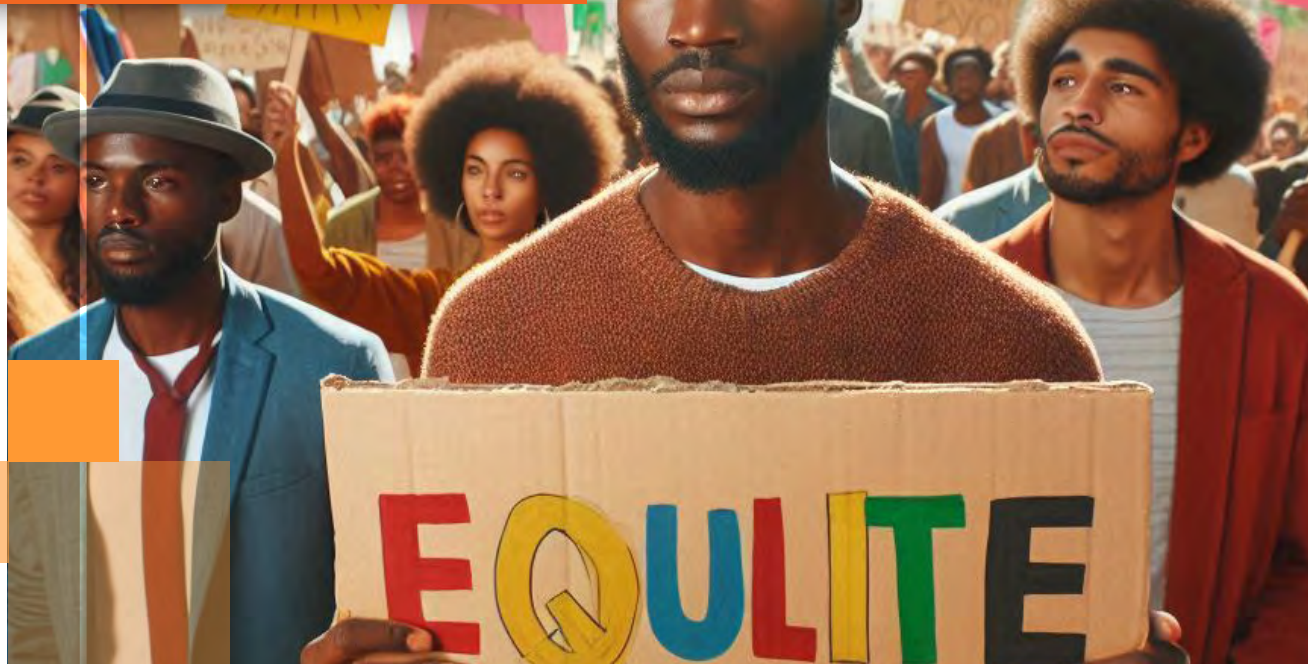
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THE DANGERS OF POLITICAL DISINFORMATION

In 2024, elections are being held in countries representing half the world's population. Africa alone will see 19 national elections, including in Algeria, Botswana, Chad, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa.

With numerous political campaigns underway, concerns about misinformation and disinformation are growing. While often confused, these terms differ: misinformation is the accidental spread of false information, while disinformation is the intentional distribution of false information, typically to cause unrest or achieve specific goals.

Political actors frequently use a mix of human trolls, partially automated accounts, and fully automated bots on social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and X to spread false information about candidates before elections. Advancing technology has made these campaigns more sophisticated, aiming to overwhelm genuine debate and destabilise societies. Recent examples include Nigeria's 2023 election, where inorganic hashtags and disinformation fuelled by social media influencers were aimed at discrediting rival candidates and exploiting voter sentiments. Another instance is South Africa's 2024 election, where a concerted disinformation effort attempted to discredit the election process after the elections.

Misinformation and disinformation are becoming more prevalent due to two main factors: social media's ability to rapidly spread false information, and the increasing accessibility of AI tools that can create sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

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The threat of fake news is well known. In this year's World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Risks Report, misinformation and disinformation ranked as the top concern for the first time, surpassing other risks, such as extreme weather events caused by climate change. Globally, leaders are concerned that the nexus between false information and social unrest will continue to take centre stage over the next two years, especially in countries with upcoming elections like the USA.
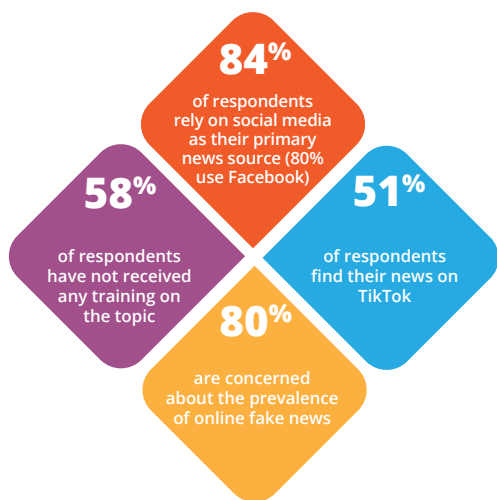
Recent findings from the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies paint a concerning picture of the disinformation landscape on the continent. Since 2022, there has been a nearly fourfold increase in disinformation campaigns, leading to destabilising and antidemocratic outcomes. Even more alarming is the revelation that nearly 60% of these campaigns are sponsored by foreign states.

Russia has promulgated disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, including South Africa. Their tactics include disseminating narratives designed to polarise communities, sow distrust, and bolster support for the African National Congress. Russia also leveraged influential South African figures to propagate pro-Russian narratives both within the country and internationally.

KnowBe4 conducted a survey in June 2024 on political disinformation and misinformation across five African countries: Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, and South Africa.

84% of respondents rely on social media as their primary news source (80% use Facebook)

58% of respondents have not received any training on the topic

51% of respondents find their news on TikTok

80% are concerned about the prevalence of online fake news

Notably, three of these countries have national elections in 2024: South Africa held theirs this past May, while Botswana and Mauritius are scheduled for October and November, respectively. The survey, which included 500 respondents, asked about their voting history in national elections and their primary sources of news.

The survey respondents represented a diverse age range, with the 25-34 age group comprising the largest segment (45%), followed by the 35-44 age group (25%) and the 18-24 age group (21%). The gender distribution was nearly even, with 52% female and 48% male participants.

Regarding employment status, 38% of respondents said they have jobs, while almost 16% are self-employed and 4% were looking for work. Students represented 4% of the sample.

In terms of education, 43% of respondents have a university or postgraduate degree, compared to 15% who have only finished high school and 11% who have a technical diploma.

A few highlights from the survey include:

- Almost 84% of respondents primarily rely on social media for news.

- Facebook is the most popular platform for news, used by 80% of respondents, while TikTok is used by over 50%.

- Ironically, while 80% of respondents acknowledge that most fake news they encounter is on social media, it remains their preferred news source.

- 82% of respondents feel confident in their ability to distinguish between real and fake news, despite a low level of formal education (57% did not have a university degree).

- There is a need for more education and awareness around misinformation and disinformation, with 58% of respondents saying they have received no training on the topic.

Several themes emerged as a result of the survey, particularly the high level of concern among 80% of respondents about the negative impact of fake news and the potential this has to cause social division. There was also a strong sentiment for implementing tighter controls, both on social media platforms and through stricter legislation.

KEY FINDINGS

The survey, encompassing 500 participants across the selected African nations, delved into several key aspects of the information landscape.

It focused on several key questions around misinformation and disinformation, seeking to understand where respondents sourced their news stories, how aware of fake news they were and what measures they felt could be used to combat it.

The following are the key insights:

- All respondents (100%) have participated in a national election.

- 60% are very familiar with the terms misinformation and disinformation, 36% are somewhat familiar, and 4% are not familiar at all. Men showed higher confidence in understanding these concepts (66% very familiar) compared to women (55% very familiar).

What social media platforms do you use to consume news?

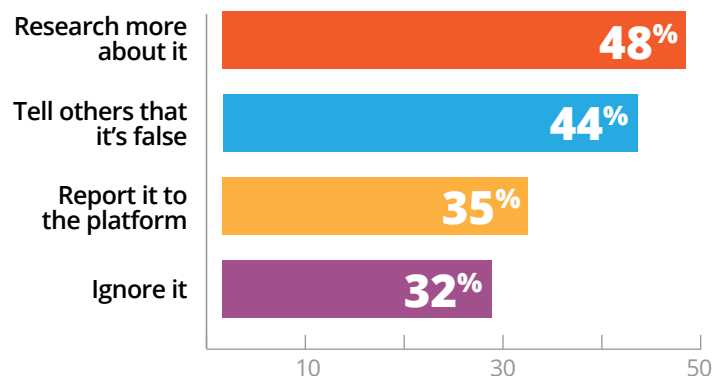| Platform	%
Facebook	80%
TikTok	51%
Instagram	48%
X	47%
LinkedIn	31%
Other	9%
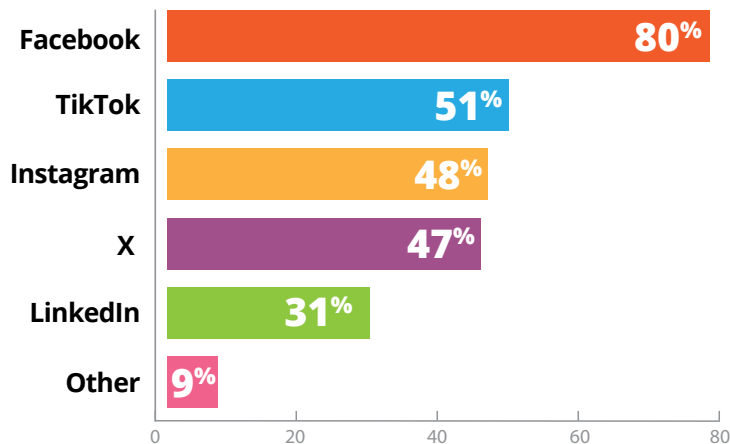
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- Respondents get their news from a variety of sources, including television channels (77%), print newspapers and magazines (43%), online newspapers and magazines (38%), news websites (68%), social media platforms (84%), podcasts (28%) and emailed newsletters (23%). Radio was also listed as a reliable news source among many respondents.

- Among social media platforms, Facebook was the most popular news source for 80% of respondents, while 51% used TikTok, 48% liked Instagram, 47% used X and 31% used LinkedIn. YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram and Google News were also listed as popular news sources.

- The popularity of social media sites varied from country to country. Whereas in Nigeria, the top three platforms were Facebook (79%), X (73%) and Instagram (63%), in Botswana, the top three social media sites were Facebook (92%), TikTok (59%) and Instagram (48%).

- Some findings were paradoxical. While 80% respondents say the fake news they encounter online originates from social media, they still use platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and X to consume their news.

- 63% believe misinformation and disinformation are serious or very serious issues in their country, with 85% expressing concern.

From an awareness perspective, significant work remains to be done. While over 60% of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to distinguish between real and fake news, a majority (58%) admitted to having no formal training on the subject. Responses to encountering fake news vary, with some taking proactive measures such as further research (48%), informing others of the false information (44%), or reporting it to the platform (35%). However, a concerning 32% of respondents simply ignore fake news, highlighting a need for more engaged responses.

These findings underscore the necessity for increased awareness about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation, as well as more robust measures to curb the

What action do you take if you believe information to be false?

Action	%
Research more about it	48%
Tell others that it's false	44%
Report it to the platform	35%
Ignore it	32%

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spread of fake news. Encouragingly, there exists a baseline awareness of fake news among users, with many having encountered and sometimes unknowingly shared such content. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents support implementing stricter controls on online platforms, expanding fact-checking services, and promoting media literacy education. These positive attitudes suggest a readiness for more comprehensive approaches to combating the spread of false information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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A key objective of the survey was to identify news sources for African respondents and assess their exposure to online fake news. As expected, social media channels are the primary news source for most respondents (84%), followed by TV news channels (77%) and news websites (68%). Notably, despite awareness of fake news risks on social media, users continue to rely on these platforms, with a concerning 51% using TikTok for news consumption. How much balanced reporting can be communicated in a 60-second TikTok video remains questionable.

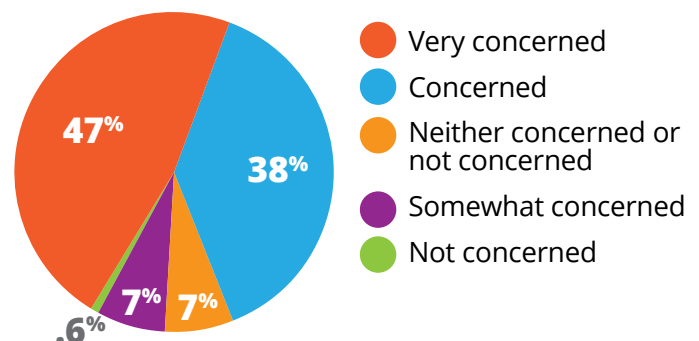## Rising levels of fake news are concerning

Given that 85% of respondents are concerned about misinformation and disinformation, it's understandable that 75% of respondents verify news stories before sharing them. Similarly, many have fallen prey to fake news, with 35% admitting to having shared false information in the past. While most respondents take action when encountering suspected fake news, such as informing others (44%) or reporting to the platform (35%), a significant 32% simply ignore it.

This lack of a proactive response calls for more education and awareness about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation. Over half of the respondents (58%) acknowledged never receiving training on fake news identification, indicating a clear opportunity for risk mitigation through education. Some policymakers advocate for AI-generated news to carry watermarks, a practice already mandated in China, though critics argue this measure alone is insufficient to counter the effects of false information.

Others, such as the WEF, are concerned that regulatory efforts may not keep pace with technological advancements, potentially allowing disinformation to manipulate individuals, damage economies, and fracture societies. Many respondents in Kenya mentioned civil war and tribal conflicts as one of the biggest threats of online disinformation campaigns. There is a growing fear that either governments will act too slowly, allowing disinformation to spread, or too harshly, restricting the right to freedom of speech.

How concerned are you about the prevalence of fake news and political disinformation?

- Very concerned
- Concerned
- Neither concerned or not concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Not concerned

47%
38%
7%
7%
.6%

More training needed to counter disinformation

With this in mind, there is a clear need for more awareness and training about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation. Having the requisite skills to decode whether information is true or false will help online users in Africa to be more discerning. For rigorous journalism to thrive, it needs to be supported. This calls for more users to pay for online subscriptions to credible news websites, rather than consume their news for free on social media. Holding social media platforms accountable is also imperative. Many international researchers are campaigning for stricter controls to be in place on sites like X, Facebook and Instagram to prevent false information from spreading and negatively influencing people. Similarly, governments need to act to put regulations in place, so that disinformation doesn't derail the political process during crucial periods like elections.

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Additional Resources

Free Phishing Security Test
Find out what percentage of your employees are Phish-prone with your free Phishing Security Test

Free Automated Security Awareness Program
Create a customized Security Awareness Program for your organization

Free Phish Alert Button
Your employees now have a safe way to report phishing attacks with one click

Free Email Exposure Check
Find out which of your users emails are exposed before the bad guys do

Free Domain Spoof Test
Find out if hackers can spoof an email address of your own domain

About KnowBe4

KnowBe4, the provider of the world's largest security awareness training and simulated phishing platform, is used by more than 65,000 organisations around the globe. Founded by IT and data security specialist Stu Sjouwerman, KnowBe4 helps organizations address the human element of security by raising awareness about ransomware, CEO fraud and other social engineering tactics through a new-school approach to awareness training on security.

The late Kevin Mitnick, who was an internationally recognized cybersecurity specialist and KnowBe4's Chief Hacking Officer, helped design the KnowBe4 training based on his well-documented social engineering tactics. Tens of thousands of organizations rely on KnowBe4 to mobilize their end users as their last line of defense and trust the KnowBe4 platform to strengthen their security culture and reduce human risk.

For more information, please visit www.KnowBe4.com

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