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Disinformation goes South

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Political technologies threaten developing countries **DISINFORMATION GOES SOUTH**

Political technologies executed from within the digital domain are increasingly deployed in the Global South. Here, social media monopolies and an upsurge in the number of new digital media users allow information operations to reach millions and affect important political developments. The consequences can be fatal, as seen in Myanmar.

Political actors have always tried to outsmart or even outmanipulate their rivals. This is the nature of the political game. But we have entered a new playing field through the immense proliferation of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to the Global South. Crossing digital and cognitive domains, information operations are launched to achieve certain political effects and they are prepared and

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be prepared for a rapid transfer of the political technology of contemporary information operations to political actors in the Global South
- Anticipate information operations, including the use of disinformation, that exploit the combination of social media monopolies and an upsurge in the number of new digital media users
- Invest in digital media literacy and social media accountability mechanisms in states that have recently been affected by media disruption

Disinformation travels faster than regular information and it is very likely that people will also share or request access to disinformation more often than to regular information



“According to the UN, Facebook was a central platform for facilitating the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, not least through the spread of disinformation by the Burmese military”

executed with increasingly sophisticated aesthetics and credibility. The operations, even when addressing a very local political context, may be launched from anywhere in the world, and the services of political technologists are in high demand today.

Global diffusion of ICT

In the Global South, information operations can exploit the combined effects of growing ICT and social media monopolies. The International Telecommunication Union reported an internet penetration breakthrough in 2018 as it assessed that more than half of the world’s population is now using the internet. The fastest increase in internet use is seen in Africa: Whereas only 2.1 per cent of Africans had access to the internet in 2005, in 2018 the figure was 24.4 per cent. Since the start of the decade, the number of mobile users on the continent has quadrupled to almost 800 million people, the majority of whom have smart phones with access to the internet. With hundreds of millions of users, Facebook account

for upwards 80 percent of social media use in Africa. Table 1 provides a glimpse into the dominance of Facebook. It may even be speculated that some of the figures on penetration may obscure real and higher levels of access. “Community watching”, when more people gather around a single screen, may offer more people access to for instance news and therefore also potentially expose them to information operations. Studies, for instance by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, show that disinformation travels faster than regular information and it is very likely that people will also share or request access to disinformation more often than to regular information. It is simply considered of higher value than regular information.

At the same time, and with alarming speed, the consequences of overreliance on social media for information and news, are becoming clear. According to the UN, Facebook was a central platform for facilitating the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, not

	Mobile subscriptions (per 100 people)	Individuals using the internet (% of population)	No. 1 mobile social media platform (market share in %)
Afghanistan	67	11	Facebook (89)
India	87	34	Facebook (92)
Myanmar	90	31	Facebook (94)
Eritrea	14	1	Facebook (100)
Nigeria	76	28	Facebook (82)
Gabon	132	50	Facebook (96)
Colombia	127	62	Facebook (79)
Venezuela	78	64	Twitter (49)

Sources: The World Bank and Statcounter.

least through the spread of disinformation by the Burmese military, whose specialists were reported to have been trained in Russia. In 2018, an undercover video by British Channel 4 saw Cambridge Analytica executives brag about influencing Kenya's presidential elections in 2017 and 2013. And in the Spring of 2019, in Nigeria, where tens of millions of voters turned out to elect their new president, violence erupted at many voting sites as disinformation on social media escalated local tensions.

Disturbing democracy

Elections worldwide are increasingly characterized by two system-upsetting trends. The first trend is the ability to reach large numbers of voters quickly and often at low costs. This may range from large-scale and well-polished campaigns run on private or state-controlled networks to much simpler and crowd-fueled campaigns rolled out on social media platforms; and from wall-to-wall campaigning to micro-targeting, where small groups of voters, or even individual voters, are targeted by tailor-made messages.

The second trend, when appearing in its most extreme form, is the generation and spread of disinformation, definable as "intentionally wrong information" or simply "lies". Disinformation of course has also always been part of the political game, but modern ICT allow many more users to spread false information to much larger audiences. And it seems that this fact alone has brought many more disinformers out into the open. Less dramatic, we also observe a still more sophisticated use of biased information – for instance news which are not strictly lies but which are also not true. Biased reporting is attractive as it is harder for critics, be it political opponents or media watchdogs, to nail down than outright disinformation.

The two trends combine in a myriad of ways. The spectrum ranges, at the one end, from disinformation campaigns run by a state on its own state-controlled networks and targeting a global audience to the single political activist or "citizen reporter" posting regular information on social media. The former end of the spectrum is where resourceful actors, often supported by political technologists representing domestic or foreign companies, operate in a manipulative manner in order to achieve certain effects.



Nigeria's general election of February 2019 was one of the elections where disinformation campaigns played an important part. The Israeli "political consulting group" Archimedes who had reached millions of people with political manipulation was banned by Facebook afterwards. Foto: Shutterstock

To illustrate, in all the African elections of 2019, disinformation campaigns have been a central topic, from Senegal to South Africa. In May of 2019, Facebook announced they had banned Israeli “political consulting group” Archimedes who had reached millions of people with political manipulation in Nigeria and other African countries during elections, masking as local news organizations. Almost a million US dollars had been spent on discrediting opposition figures. By the time Facebook decided to intervene, numerous elections had already been targeted and possibly affected.

Operation and effect

The information operation – whether executed by a state or by a single political activist – is designed to have a more or less well-defined effect on a target audience. That is the link between the digital domain and the cognitive domain. While the information operation is executed within and through the support of the digital domain, its purpose is to influence the political preferences of a target audience. This process takes place in the cognitive domain. Needless to say, the hoped-for effects mirror the human imagination. Information operations may be conducted with the hope of strengthening or weakening adherence to certain norms or the socio-political cohesion of one or more states. They may be designed to deflate or inflate political, religious, ethnic etc. tensions. Or they may be engineered to legitimize

or delegitimize political, religious, cultural etc. actors. Of particular concern is the possible use of information operations to initiate and legitimize intra- or interstate conflict, to violate the rights of minority groups or to bolster non-democratic and/or illiberal rule.

The digital media landscapes in the Global South vary enormously. In Ethiopia, Chinese state-owned ZTE helped the former authoritarian government build a closed digital infrastructure allowing for control and regulation. In other countries (see Table 1), Facebook or Facebook-owned social media such as WhatsApp, dominate internet use, with many telecom operators often including free access to them as part of data bundles. The company seems to be working more closely with civil society and digital media rights groups than earlier, recruiting native language speakers, but questions still remain as to whether it has learned from past experiences in Myanmar and elsewhere. Only a limited group of developing countries have data protection and privacy laws, and many still struggle with cocktails of varying levels of media literacy, unstable regimes, and ethnic tensions. What binds them together, in all their differences, is their susceptibility to exploitation, from within or from without, as information operations increasingly move South.

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Coverphoto: People checking their smart phones in a Yangon Cafe: Facebook was integral in spreading disinformation that facilitated the Rohingya-genocide in Myanmar. Photo: Sai Aung Main/Ritzau Scanpix

