Disinformation and digital disparities in fledgling democracies. A case study of post-Mugabe Zimbabwe.

Tenford Chitanana, University of Technology Sydney

Background

While disinformation is as global as social media, the main vehicle through which it is orchestrated, there is little study of its scale and impact in sub-Saharan Africa. An opportunity therefor exist to explore disinformation in countries and communities that are traditionally considered technology-poor and with weak/failing political systems. Such contexts call for an examination of the contextual nuances such as the relationship between disinformation and the political environment, demographics, and technology access . This study examines the nature, the prevalence, and the impact of disinformation in Zimbabwe's transitional period that began with the November 2017 coup, then followed by July 2018 elections and the January 2019 riots.

Zimbabwe is undergoing a tumultuous political and economic period in which media play a central role in shaping public discourse and influencing political behaviours. The period under study is marked by the ending of Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule, his death and the new government's efforts at transitioning into a second republic 40 years after the country's independence in 1980. Even though this period coincides with significant growth in communication technology penetration, entrenched socio-economic and political factors affect optimal appropriation of the technologies. As such, the study puts into consideration a contextually-nuanced view of the mediating environment and how it influences both the use of digital technologies and their potential impact with regards to disinformation. In a context like Zimbabwe, where the Media is heavily regulated and dominated by state-linked broadcasters and therefor not trusted, social media play a central role in the communicative ecosystem. This role is significant when one considers that social media can be said to be contributing to an emerging society wherein discourse-driven change shifts fundamental beliefs and customs and creates a new systems of thought (Le Bon, 2002).

Central to this inquiry is a consideration of whether disinformation exists in Zimbabwe. If it does exist, what is its nature and prevalence? How do the socio-economic, political, and technological factors affect disinformation and/or exacerbate its impact? What is the efficacy of disinformation in Zimbabwe? To answer these questions, the study used digital ethnography to explore how Zimbabweans use Facebook and interact with each other and with information. Online observation enabled the identification and selection of key pages which were then used in qualitative content analysis. The data from online observation and content analysis was triangulated with in-depth interviews with social media users. Though the study primarily focused on Facebook as a central component of the communicative ecosystem in Zimbabwe, interaction with social media users revealed a significant role played by other platforms, for instance WhatsApp, in the information lives of Zimbabweans. The paper analysed misinformation circulated on Facebook and examples shared by different research interlocutors to understand the nature of disinformation; below are some of the preliminary findings and reflections.

Historical roots of disinformation in Zimbabwe

As can be said of other contexts (see Fallis, 2015), disinformation is not a new phenomena in Zimbabwe. Its recent manifestations can be traced back to the liberation war in the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, the political contention between the nationalists forces and the colonial government of Ian Smith created a bedrock for misinformation and propaganda campaigns that aimed to control the narrative of what the war was about. Colonial settlers described the war as 'the bush war' to defend British and European civilisation under threat from terrorism. Nationalists—labeled terrorists by the colonial government and a number of conservative Western media—framed themselves as freedom fighters. Their cause was to liberate the country and establish a democratic system in which all people were equal. This contestation of ideas was as important as the war itself, and it played out in the various media platforms that were in existence at the time. Then, radio had the widest reach, hence the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation did the bidding for the colonial regime. Liberation fighters used their own pirate radio station, Radio Mozambique, to broadcast their propaganda from Mozambique. International media was equally instrumental in the propaganda war. The Smith government hosted foreign journalists who would be taken onto choreographed media excursions that avoided atrocities done by Rhodesian forces on Africans while showing dead white settlers. The Rhodesian government also used other means like dropping fliers from helicopters to intimidate villagers through false information.

On their part, liberation fighters used citizen 'education' platforms, commonly known as *pungwes* or *morari*, to interact with and educate communities about the war. The *pungwes* deliberately included misinformation about the freedom fighters' capacity, capabilities and exploits. Most young people who were recruited into the war were drawn in by these kinds of mobilisation campaigns. The post-liberation government has used disinformation to undermine political opposition and to silence critics. Other approaches involve revising historical accounts to suit narratives of the day, a practice referred to as production of patriotic history (see Ranger, 2004).

Technological context and its enabling role

According to the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), Zimbabwe has experienced growth in internet and mobile penetration over the past 15 years. As of December 2017, the country had over 100% mobile penetration (POTRAZ, 2017). This is significant in that mobile-enabled internet connectivity constitute over 90% of all internet connectivity in Zimbabwe. As mobile phone connectivity increases, more Zimbabweans are able to go online; and social media is one of the main utilities of internet data (POTRAZ, 2017). Key platforms where most data is consumed are Facebook and WhatsApp, according to POTRAZ. Of these two platforms, WhatsApp is the most popular, with over 5.2 million users in a country of 13.8 million people (*CIA Factbook, Zimbabwe, 2018*), compared to 1 million Facebook users.

Though showing a positive trajectory, Zimbabwean internet uptake and usage reflects an urban-rural divide (Freedom House, 2016). From an infrastructure point of view, over 50% of Zimbabwe's telecommunications base stations are second-generation (2G) cellular technology stations (POTRAZ, 2017). These 2G stations are largely concentrated in rural areas, thus affecting the quality of internet access in remote areas of the country. Relatedly, platforms such as Facebook have single digit penetration rates (Zimbabwe Internet Usage and

Marketing Report, 2017), and are largely limited to big cities like Harare and Bulawayo (see Chitanana, 2019 for more on digital divide in Zimbabwe).

Beyond this basic rural-urban divide in accessibility and usage of mobile internet, the country has stratified internet data. Telecom companies offer 'data bouquets'—connectivity packages that enable one to buy internet access for a particular platform and over a desired period of time. With this, users can buy data solely for Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or SMS with options to buy daily, weekly or monthly bundles. Social media bundles tend to be cheaper than regular data bundles that enable one to connect across applications on their phone. Hence, users choose to buy social media bundles; WhatsApp bundles being the most popular, followed by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The stratification of data has a determinant role in how people are connected and how they receive information and, to an extent, it transfers offline socio-economic disparities into the online environment. Those who are economically well-off can get a broad range of data packages while those with low income have limited options. Those who can afford bundles are, by virtue of affordances, located at the helm of the communicative ecosystem. They extract news information from different sources and distribute it as audio-visual clips, screenshots, and text for the consumption of those who are not on the 'elite' platforms. This has a bearing on information quality and, in many cases, has been a vehicle through which disinformation is executed.

The nature of disinformation

Social media use as an alternative to mainstream media, especially among activists, peaked in 2016 when activists and ordinary users organised online protests that challenged the government. At the time, the State responded by arresting digital activists, threatening to impose regulations that would incriminate certain social media uses, as well as establishing a government ministry dedicated to cyber crime (October 2017). Prior to 2016 the State had had to deal with Baba Jukwa, a whistleblower who used Facebook to share state secrets involving hit-squads, murders of critical voices and plots to rig elections. Back then the State had neither particular response mechanism nor expertise on how to track or counter the whistleblower. This unpreparedness shifted with the post-Mugabe government. The new government was quick to adopt social media platforms and created Twitter and Facebook accounts for top government officials, including the President.

In lead up to the 2018 elections, there was a surge in new Facebook pages associated with the government. Though appearing to be independent, these pages had a shared tone of voice and often posted related material within the same time window, indicating a level of coordination. A majority of these early pages appeared to spread positive information on the new government's efforts (e.g., Engage Zimbabwe). They portrayed of the post-Mugabe government as a new dispensation regardless of the fact that it constituted of mostly individuals who had served under previous governments. These pages paved way to a new wave of pages that were more political in tone and combative in approach (e.g., Operation Restore Legacy; ED has my vote; ED supporters' page). They attacked the main opposition party at every opportunity while extolling the virtue of their candidate, president Emmerson Mnangagwa.

Before this, social media had had been a space dominated by pro-democratic forces. A new group of pro-State activists commonly known as *varakashi* (those who thrash) have since populated Twitter and Facebook to bolster the State's efforts to counter progressive voices. While *varakashi*'s initial role was to counter the tech-savvy opposition supporters, they have grown to become producers of pro-government and anti-opposition content. This includes overstatements on government achievements or opposition errors and outright distortions of truth. For example, in September 2019, president Mnangagwa gave a speech to an almost empty United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) auditorium. *Varakashi* were quick to photoshop the body of the President over Donald Trump's during the latter's UNGA speech, thereby showing Mnangagwa as having spoken to a bigger audience.

Photoshopping images and generating fake screenshots carrying messages smearing political opposition figures has been one of the *varakashi* tactics. Other tactics include perspective shifting in audio-visual material. They employ this tactic when they seek to either show that their party has huge following and/or to show that the opposition has little followers. Another popular instance when they employed perspective shifting was during a commission of inquiry on the August 2018 killings of civilians by the military. A high ranking military officer attempted to dismiss a video of a soldier shooting into the crowd by claiming that he was shooting at a 45-degree angle into the sky. A frame extracted from the video was circulated by *varakashi*, as a mashup photo with illustrations that supported the 45-degree theory. Even more profound than perspective shifting, with regards to audio-visual information, is historical revisionism. With this, the pro-state actors try to associate key figures within their camp with significant historical events. For instance, during the President's visit to Russia in January 2019, pro-state activists circulated a photo purported to be that of president Emmerson Mnangagwa with someone believed to be Vladimir Putin. The photo was said to have been taken in 1973/74 in Tanzania, during Zimbabwe's liberation war. However, simple verification disputes this narrative; Putin was then a 21 year-old University student and Emmerson Mnangagwa was serving a 10-year sentence in a Rhodesian prison.

A key characteristic of the *varakashi* era of disinformation is the scale and reach of ghost accounts, fake accounts and sensationalist blogs. Ghost accounts constitute social media accounts that, on the surface, appear to be owned by real people with offline lives. They have friends, some history of employment and/or education, but the accounts tend to have been created after November 2017. Their content is largely, if not exclusively political in nature; either attacking opposition or defending the State. Based on content and/or language used in these pages, sometimes it is apparent that the pages are somewhat centralised or under the management of teams of individuals. Another vehicle for disinformation, fake accounts, involve social media pages made in the name of public figures or online influencers to share misinformation that can potentially damage the public persona of the said figures. For example, a Twitter account, falsely attributed to one of the leaders of the opposition party circulated a call for violent protests. This was done against a backdrop of a treason charge against the same individual and escalation of government rhetoric blaming the opposition for socio-political unrest. Combined, these examples illustrate a deliberateness in the orchestration of misinformation in order to achieve specific political goals.

Disinformation is further reinforced by a sensationalist blog culture that thrives on antagonistic politics (pro-state vs anti-state) in ways that are devoid of nuance. Such blogs are at the centre of news distribution during major political events. To their advantage, the blogs have mastered speed of production and circulation of information and they live within social

networks. Hence they have more followers to cascade (mis)information through downstream and popular platforms such as WhatsApp.

The WhatsApp factor

In the hierarchy of news information and knowledge production, Twitter is on top of the pyramid, with Facebook playing an intermediary role to broader population and WhatsApp being a broadcasting platform. Because of the socio-economic disparities and the stratification of mobile data, Twitter tends to attract a specific demographic group of 'smart mobs'. Twimbos, Zimbabweans on Twitter, tend to have attained higher education levels, have white collar jobs, have access to WiFi (from home/ work), or have all these characteristics. They constitute a class of information producers and an elite public sphere where those who are 'smart' interact with socio-political leaders. Their ideas permeate other platforms, Facebook and WhatsApp, as screenshots and text or audio-visual extracts. Ordinary information consumers on downstream platforms, on the other hand, tend to consume such information as is. They do not participate in the information production process and neither do they have the means to verify the information they receive, resulting in unwitting consumption and distribution of misinformation. This is particularly important in that WhatsApp is a popular platform, especially for people in rural and peri-urban areas.

Implications and ongoing reflections

From a global perspective, the nature of disinformation in Zimbabwe is still nascent, but when examined in its own terms, it has significant implications on politics and society at large. To begin with, disinformation campaigns and their immediate outcomes affect Zimbabweans differently. Geographic, demographic and economic factors create digital disparities in which those at the periphery tend to consume what is produced at the centre. Speculative and unverified information originating from Twitter reaches those on the margins, mostly through word of mouth or secondary platforms (e.g., WhatsApp) as fact. A scan of fake stories on Facebook show that people with lower education levels are the ones who are quick to engage with and believe fake stories as truth.

Through an examination of the level, nature, and quality of digitally-enabled economic, political, and social inclusion (and exclusion) in Zimbabwe, the study notes that, digital disparities offer architects of disinformation campaigns power to shape public agenda and to influence public opinion. This is so when one considers that public opinion is shaped by collective consensus on a given subject. Within the Zimbabwean context, those on the margins receive opinion as news and they have little to contribute in the public discourse. Voices that tend to dominate social media platforms also tend to have better access to ICTs and have some level of ICT literacy. As a result, opinions of the loudest and those with access tend to define online and offline agenda.

Another implication of disinformation is that it has become a self-perpetuating process in which there is no distinct arbitrator of truth. The term 'fake news' has become a default scapegoat for politicians caught in bad acts and a shield against accountability. Through asserting that whatever facts stated against them are 'fake', they inadvertently make people doubt information in general. These 'seeds of disbelief' have altered public discourse and the

entire public sphere. In essence, groups such as *varakashi* have succeeded in thrashing facts, and further entrenching antagonistic politics in which moderate voices are seldom heard, if ever they dare to participate in the public sphere. Within the polarised political environment, political conversation has become an end on its own, with no specified goal. The current state of public and political discourse can characterised as drawing from a poisoned public sphere where facts are unimportant in comparison to one's opinion or political beliefs. The resultant polarisation has enabled those in power to amass more power with little checks and balances.

In all this, there is still limited awareness of the prevalence and or nature of disinformation in Zimbabwe. This goes for the educated and engaged social media users. Those with awareness tend to only note isolated cases of misinformation without making connections to the overall orchestration or deliberateness of such campaigns. There are no databases or collection of misinformation to understand its nature. Finally, while disinformation is still rudimentary in Zimbabwe, there are indications that it can become more sophisticated, especially as the country draws closer to the next election cycle.

References

Chitanana, T. (2019). From Global to Local, Metropolitan to the village. A Case for definitional and context-oriented approach to examining the 'digital divide'. In: Mutsvairo, B. & Ragnedda, M. (eds). Mapping Key Perspectives on Digital Divide in Africa. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Fallis, D. (2015). What is Disinformation? Library Trends, Vol. 63, (3). pp. 401–426.

Freedom on the Net, Zimbabwe. (2016). Retrieved 17 September 2017 from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2016_Zimbabwe.pdf

Le Bon, G. (2002). The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind. Dover Publications.

CIA Factbook, Zimbabwe. (2018). The World Factbook. Retrieved from www.cia.gov

Ranger, T.O. (2004). Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe. Journal of Southern African Studies, 30 (2), 215-234.

POTRAZ. (2017). Postal and Telecommunications Sector Performance Report Fourth Quarter 2017. Retrieved 9 October 2017 from http://www.potraz.gov.zw/images/documents/3rd_Quarter_2017.pdf