Shadow Wars

Exposing & debunking influence ops + disinfo in Kenya & Africa.

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I am CfA’s pan-African manager for investigations, and lead the forensic iLAB at the African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR). Prior to CfA, I was a cybercrime investigator and forensic auditor at KPMG. My iLAB team consists of data scientists and OSINT technologists in 8 African countries. I am also a fellow at the African School of Internet Governance (AfriSIG).

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**Code for Africa** (CfA) is the lead in four separate consortia that track coordinated influence operations by extremists and malign nation states across 21 African countries.

Our partners in the consortia include the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (**DFRLab**), and the **DT Institute**. CfA also leads a **UN (UNDP & OHCHR)** supported consortium to apply these approaches to hate speech & online incitement in Kenya’s 2022 elections, in partnership with **Shujaaz Inc** and **AIFluence**.

We conduct **investigative forensic research** into coordinated networks that seed disinformation, hate speech and propaganda. The consortia also support **fact-checking** at watchdog media to debunk harmful mis/disinformation.
CfA is helping to build a robust pan-African coalition of researchers focused on influence ops.

ADDO mobilises both non-profit & for-profit orgs to better coordinate efforts, pool resources, share expertise, harmonise methodologies, and explore synergies for local coalitions.

Partners include commercial due diligence / risk advisory companies & demographic polling / survey institutes, with specialist academic researchers, human rights CSOs & watchdog media.

Call for Applications: Research into influence operations that subvert African democracies
ADDO is calling for applications for research on foreign government influence in 21 countries in Africa
CfA is also growing a pan-African ‘self-help’ network for fact-checking desks in 384 newsrooms in 28 countries. The consortium commits to ongoing incremental skills plus seed resources for proof-of-concept projects with Meta support for Sahel media.
Multi-faceted approach

Disinformation is profitable, therefore CfA is part of consortiums that fight disinformation from all fronts, including investigating disinformation related to elections, climate extremism and foreign interference/influence in the African continent.

How hate speech trolls targeted Kenya’s 2022 elections

Paid influencers and other ‘keyboard warriors’ used a clear playbook to amplify toxic content to polarize voters.

This report outlines the investigative insights and recommendations from the Mapema Coalition that worked with the United Nations (UN) and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) to detect online hate speech and coordinated disinformation and digital incitement targeting the elections. Find out more about the Mapema Coalition at the bottom of the report.

COP, LOOK, LISTEN

ISSUE 4 | Saturday 12 November

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: Africa’s Gas Lobby Comes to Sharm

OUR VERDICT:

Decarbonisation Day (11 November) is shaping up to become a major platform for oil and gas lobbyists in Sharm, who continue to argue for the "just role of fossil fuels in the energy transition." The counter-narratives should be loud and clear: we need accelerated deployment of renewable and greener, cleaner energy, not further oil and gas. Let’s hold the industry and its actors accountable.

For more details on climate divestment, influence operations and vested interests in the region, please refer to COP27 partner | Intelligence Unit | COP27 Action Hub, as well as coalition partners who expose the system's failures and expose the role of prominent individuals and actors.

Summary:

Pro-Russian campaigners are successfully using sophisticated video propaganda to shape public narratives and undermine democratic watchdogs across Africa, using increasingly slick production standards and coordinated amplification.

The video campaigns are deliberately designed as entertainment that glorifies the Wagner Group's mercenaries. They are targeted at audiences who traditionally avoid mainstream news using formats that range from full-length feature films and short animated 'viral social' productions, to deliberately provocative humorous 'crisis response' counter-messaging.
Overview

Understanding information disorder problem
Understanding the problem

'Fake news' is a complex problem created a diverse set of 'bad' actors that ranges from viral sharing of both 'innocent' mistaken info & deliberately created misleading info, to toxic hate speech designed to incite. The only way to fight it is to have diverse toolsets.
Disinformation

Intention is a key component, but the following are also focus areas. It's also not only a political enterprise, but can also be used for economic gain. Further, state actors are using this tools for their own goals. The ABC model is used for investigations.
Disinfo is profitable

Disinformation is a fast growing industry, with profiteers deliberately finding/amplifying discord so they can monetize it.

They use ever cheaper & easier-to-use tools to do this, on an industrial scale.

This underground shadow economy of ‘political public relations’ includes digital strategists & paid social influencers or rented pundits.

They compete to win public mindshare (often through re-usable ‘audiences’).

https://investigate.africa/reports/
Influence operations tend to fall into two broad categories: domestic and foreign, and also can be driven by state actors or non-state actors.
Domestic: Kenya Case

Dynamics shaping influence strategies in Kenya
Kenyan Election: Platforms Trend

A total of 812 cases of hate speech and incitement were identified. These were the cases validated by NCIC during the monitoring period.

There was a marked decrease in hate speech and incitement content/cases identified after the announcement of election results.

Facebook and Twitter still account a higher proportion of toxic content. However, we believe this is significantly lower compared to the actual number of similar content on platforms.
Tactics & Techniques

How was the influence peddled on social networks?
Keyboard warriors

There is a growing shadow economy of professional ‘keyboard warriors’, who run campaigns using their own existing networks of sock-puppets.

The networks are leveraged for multiple clients, which makes it harder for AI tools to identify + track.

This underground ‘public relations’ industry includes digital strategists and (increasingly) otherwise legitimate real-life social influencers or paid pundits who compete to win public mindshare for their political clients.
Trend manipulation

Twitter and Meta both describe Kenya as a leading global ‘idea factory’ for new ways to manipulate its algorithms that manage trending topics.

Subverting algorithms allow local bad actors to get their disinformation, hate speech & propaganda content into more people’s feeds.

Trend manipulation see actors mention the top candidates in the upcoming elections, or specific trending issues/hashtags as a way to piggyback on authentic public interest.

This creates an amplification feedback loop.

TRENDING HASHTAGS IN KENYA (POLITICS)
Collected hashtags mentioning Raila Odinga, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto.

Source: iLAB's Hashtag Monitor, 2022
Armies of **automated bots** are being used to turbocharge coordinated campaigns.

The bots are used to **drown out** reasonable voices, or try to boost/amplify narratives that undermine and disrupt the public conversation in Kenya.

The bots are also successfully making **genuine but divisive political conversations** trend on social media.

This leads to **accelerated polarisation**, by boosting the voices of **extremist or fringe commentators** at the expense of centralists.
Sock puppet influencers

Consistent use of suspicious accounts to amplify political messaging, with no real persona

The content undermine the integrity of public conversations, particularly using disinfo, memes or sarcasm, and consistently churn out high volumes of posts every day.

Some amplify suspicious hashtags, while others drive narratives targeted at entities e.g. judiciary (#AkissForMwilu)
Imitating media

There is a marked increase in malign actors in Kenya on social media impersonating media.

They present themselves as legitimate sources of news, and package conspiracy theories or overt propaganda/disinfo as news articles.

This includes increasing numbers of pages/groups that impersonate legitimate media outlets such as Citizen TV.

Many of these pages are profit-seeking clickbait initiatives, that deliberately amplify inflammatory or polarising content.
False poll tallies

We observed a spike in the number of social content announcing the results of the poll tally, before the official announcement by the Independent Electoral & Boundaries Commission (IEBC).

Proactive efforts by Twitter & TikTok to flag and label such type of announcements helped to deter the spread of content that could polarise the public and create anxiety within the country. Such content could not be debunked by our fact checking & investigative teams.
Weaponising satire

Bad actors are increasingly using visual communication techniques to transmit their message, often disguised as satire. Visual messages appeal to younger audiences, but animated images & GIFs are better at evading Twitter & Facebook’s AI-based threat detection algorithms.

Amusing/satirical visual messages are also re-shared more often with friends & family, as memes, on dark social networks on WhatsApp or Telegram or Signal.
Paint a **📸** Picture

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Emotive Incitement

Graphic photoshopped images, often involving violence, are another distinctive trend in Kenya.

The messages are designed to polarise or incite citizens by exploiting existing tribal/ethnic, religious or political faultlines.

The images are created using fairly complex editing software, and require a degree of design competence.

The campaigns particularly target semi-literal and/or rural/remote communities.
Invisible mobilisation

Dark social groups may be invisible, but they can quickly reach a significant scale. Conversations in some of the groups we monitor hit upwards of ~15,000 messages during peak debates, but tend to average ~1,000 messages per group every two weeks.

Much of the communication is grassroots planning or logistics, for local rallies or other events/concerns. But, organisers regularly use inflammatory content to incite or mobilise followers.
Key narratives

What was being peddled on these social networks?
Blinded to toxic posts

These closed groups are used to openly converse around political issues, but some members use banned hate speech words to attack each other.

This originates from both camps since members of these groups tend to be a mixture of supporters from both sides of the political divide.

We continue to monitor these chats since it is expected the groups can be used for incitement during and after the poll date.
Discrediting institutions

The campaigns have since moved into platforms such as Tiktok, indicating a concerted effort to target the youth.

The identified content attempts to insinuate that the electoral body has allegiance to one political party.

IEBC Chairperson Wafula Chebukati has been included in the majority of the manipulated (photoshopped) pictures and videos in an attempt to propagate a narrative that he is allied to the UDA party.
Gender Slurs & Misogyny

After the announcement of election results, women candidates who lost, have been subjected to gender slurs and misogynistic language.

Such content tend to imply that women candidates are not deserving of leadership positions and that they primarily use their femininity to solicit for votes during campaigns.

We are yet to see coordinated attacks however, we continue to monitor for such content and building a watchlist database for such terms.
Hate Speech and disinfo

Hate speech is disinformation when the perpetrators are propagating hate speech with an intent to cause harm and also they are aware that they are sharing misleading information.

In most cases, the hate speech disinformation is propagated through inauthentic means such coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

Not all cases of hate speech are disinformation or misinformation.

How hate speech trolls targeted Kenya's 2022 elections

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Foreign interference

The intersection with dynamics shaping influence strategies in Kenya and the rest of Africa
Global turf war

Non-African nation states & warmongers or crime cabals are seeding + amplifying disinfo that is fuelling armed conflict from the CAR + Mali, to Ethiopia + Mozambique.

They are ‘franchising’ the frontline work to African proxies/contractors, and are using coordinated networks & professionally produced multimedia content to weaponise their messages.

They are increasingly using ‘infotainment’ formats to bypass media watchdogs, & to target youth or to catch unsuspecting audiences.
Regional Infrastructure

Regional networks of co-opted or sockpuppet accounts continue to grow, controlled by administrators in multiple countries.

While Mali is currently the epicentre for control of these networks, the node in France is also noteworthy.

The fastest growing nodes are Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, suggesting these countries are the focus for current/future operations.

The networks consistently promote pro-Wagner and anti-French narratives.
Content aggregation or syndication is a major amplifier of state-affiliated media content.

Aggregation is particularly popular in West Africa, with ‘clickbait’ sites like Maliweb.org & bamada.net re-publishing Sputnik or other state-media content often without attribution.

Syndication allows more direct targeting, with wire services such as ANA (African News Agency) injecting content into 1,000s of otherwise credible & unsuspecting media.

Sputnik News Agency and Radio and Ethiopian News Agency signed a memorandum of understanding in Addis Ababa on Thursday. This is the first document in Sputnik’s history concerning cooperation with the Ethiopian media.

The parties agreed to increase cooperation both in the field of content exchange and with respect to joint projects. The document was signed by Vasily Pushkov, Director of International Cooperation at Sputnik, and Johannes Wondirad, Director of Public Relations and Strategic Partnerships at ENA.
Co-opting Media

Foreign state-owned media are ramping up content-sharing partnerships with African media, injecting reportage that supports their policy positions into mainstream mass media across the continent.

Foreign nations are also increasing media training, via RT/Sputnik/CGTN, etc, alongside equity investment into African media.

There is also growing evidence of outsourcing or ‘franchising’ of social media campaigns to local content producers.

China’s State-Controlled Media Holding Company Opens New HQ in Kenya

Glad to see the launch of Africa headquarters of #China Media Group. First hand reporting of a true #Africa to Chinese audience and vice versa!

China’s top diplomat for Sub-Saharan Africa, Ambassador Wu Peng, announced over the weekend the opening of the China Media Group’s (CMG) new headquarters in Nairobi.
The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has recruited a total of 44 pan-African network of academics, political activists and media pundits who publish pro-Chinese ‘think piece’ articles in a wide range of local media without disclosing their links to Chinese state affiliated agencies.

Many of the opinion articles appear to be coordinated, published in multiple countries by multiple authors using identical phrases or wording.
Spiritual spears

Religion is a major tool for disinfo campaigns, with the growing role of Russia’s Orthodox Church & the country’s ‘defender of the faith’ role especially notable.

Ethiopia’s Orthodox Church & ROC have, for example, jointly called for Russian military intervention in the country, with the ROC also overtaking pushing both Putin and Russian state interests.

The narrative includes claims Russia has “done a lot to protect Christians in Syria”, and targets bodies such as AFROCOM.
Streaming influence

Blockbuster entertainment such as the “Le Touriste” movie has been so successful that a sequel, “Granit”, was produced in December 2021.

The French version of the “Le Touriste” movie was amplified using ~310 coordinated Facebook accounts over a period of 24 hours, and has now gone viral organically.

The films catch audiences in a relaxed ‘suspension of belief’ state-of-mind, when they are susceptible to plot-driven narratives about good vs evil.
Cartoon heroes

State-affiliated influence strategists are ramping up use of sophisticated animated videos to target younger ‘non-political’ audiences on social media.

The videos are also shared as static ‘comics’. They glorify mercenaries as heroes, fighting for justice for ordinary Africans.

The videos are team-driven big budget productions with input from African creatives. We’re tracing the studios to map the supply-chain & to ‘fingerprint’ what else these sub-contractors are doing.
Shadow boxing

The murky financing and secret leadership structures that extremist groups use to protect themselves are useful for IO strategists who feed conspiracist claims.

In Africa, both European and Russian influence ops have used public fear/rejection of jihadist extremists to frame their forces as the ‘good guys’ or to suggest that their opponents are secretly funding insurrectionists.

Russia’s Wagner Group is using the strategy heavily everywhere from CAR to Mali.
Pro-Russian campaigners are successfully using sophisticated video propaganda to shape public narratives and undermine democratic watchdogs across Africa, using increasingly slick production standards and coordinated amplification.

The video campaigns are deliberately designed as entertainment that glorifies the Wagner Group’s mercenaries. They are targeted at audiences who traditionally avoid mainstream news.
Gift Horses: Aid diplomacy

The war in Ukraine has disrupted agricultural exports and fuel supplies across the Black Sea region, triggering widespread global cost increases and food/resource scarcity across Africa. Russia is increasingly seeking to blame the West’s sanctions for the growing impacts.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has gone further, blaming the shortages and market disruptions on the West’s response to the pandemic and on the West’s ‘green agenda’, which he suggests prejudices developing nations.

Summary:

The war in Ukraine has disrupted agricultural exports and fuel supplies across the Black Sea region, triggering widespread global cost increases and food/resource scarcity across Africa. Russia is increasingly seeking to blame the West’s sanctions for the growing impacts.

286K tons of Russian fertilizer necessary for farming made by Uralchem and Uralkali have been stuck in the ports of Estonia, Latvia, Belgium + the Netherlands.

Meanwhile, Russia already found a way to ship + donate 25K tons, each, to Burkina Faso (NPK) and Sudan (carbamide).
Food/fuel diplomacy

Increasing aid diplomacy, through food or fuel aid donations in CAR echo Russian influence strategies the DFRLabs first observed in Sudan.

Significantly, the donations are often accompanied by communiqués from the Wagner Group attributing the donation to ‘Evgenii Prigozhin’.

The overt use of ‘From Russia with Love’ branding rather than Wagner branding cements the tie between security operations and humanitarian aid.
Mobilising IRL activists

Russia is tapping into a growing grassroots social movements that campaign around pan-Africanist agendas.

An continental network of 72 campaigning CSOs was launched last week in Burkina Faso, with overt pledges of support for Russia amongst anti-French/anti-NATO rhetoric.

Elsewhere, mainstream political parties, such as the ANC Youth League in South Africa, are overtly supporting Russia and its war against Ukraine.
There is a significant growth in a network of pro-Russian nano influencers, who frequently record viral live videos, sharing their opinions about key events happening in the region.

These videos often receive significant engagement on Facebook - some with more than ~500,000 views, and the majority of the supporters congratulating or promoting a Russian/Wagner military collaboration with the countries within the region in the comment section.
Citizen cheerleaders

The mobilisation isn’t just online: increasingly social media is being used to trigger real-world rallies + protests.

The Ukraine war’s impact on food/fuel prices + ineffective peacekeeping missions provide topical flashpoints for a growing pan-Africanist movement fueled by conspiracist disinfo.

The events often adopt global iconography, such as Russia’s ‘Z’ symbol, as to build compelling visuals that feed back into online campaigns on both open + dark social platforms.
Feeding the flames

Pro-Russian networks are increasingly targeting United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in CAR and DRC, & WHO health campaigns.

The campaigns combine foreign + domestic actors and use coordinated narratives calling for violent action.

The online campaigns are mirrored by street protests.

In DRC there is evidence of coordinated incitement ahead of violent attacks on UN bases resulting in deaths of both peacekeepers & protestors.
Counter messaging efforts

Efforts to counter the spread of hate speech and inciteful content
Platform convenings

Social media companies were invited by the consortium and partners to discuss different issues related to the elections including:

A comprehensive overview of the national early warning and response during elections.

Overview of election plans to counter online hate speech/incitement in Kenya

Feedback on action plans by social media companies to curb the spread of mis/disinfo + hate speech.

Collaborative approaches to solve the challenges + moderate content on platforms.

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Re: Consultation on online hate speech in the Kenyan electoral context

Dear all,

This is a reminder of tomorrow’s meeting at 3pm Nairobi time. Similar to previous meetings, the discussion will focus on trends, incidents and responses with a focus on the way forward and issues which remain of concern in the post-election phase.

Agenda
1. Brief opening remarks by UN Kenya
2. Presentation by MAPEMA consortium/Code4Africa on trends and concerns
3. Interventions by social media platforms and other actors on incidents and actions taken
4. Discussion on the directions of further action and engagement

We look forward to your participation in the discussion.

Best,

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With these experts and potentially others, we would appreciate your virtual attendance of our inaugural meeting on Tuesday, 14 June 2022, between 14h00-16h00.

Proposed agenda:
1. Overview of the national early warning and response during elections and UN & partners roles in Kenya.
2. Overview of election plans to counter online hate speech/incitement in Kenya:
   1. Google
   2. Meta
   3. Tiktok
   4. Twitter
3. How do we collaborate moving forward? How often do we meet and who needs to be with us?

We trust you will be able to attend and help us combat hate speech and online incitement. We look forward to your response, and partnership.

warm regards,
Viral Storytelling

Disinfo often succeeds because it is mesmerising.

It is visually striking, tells a compelling story and plants doubts or suspicions.

We’ve therefore partnered with East Africa’s biggest & most trusted youth brand, Shujaaz, to leverage its two-time Emmy-winning visual storytelling through comics, animated video & viral social platforms.

Shujaaz youth ambassadors & its community of 7.5m ‘heroes’ will facilitate real-world dialogues.
AIfluence focused its efforts in development of messaging focused on:

1. Sensitize the public on the reality of all elections – there is always a winning and losing candidate.
2. Encouraging social media users to remain peaceful while waiting for the supreme court’s final verdict and avoiding the spreading of hate speech.
3. Standing up against tribalism by communicating that Kenya is home to a diverse collection of tribes, cultures, and religions.
We’ve been overwhelmed with the response to our workshops, training 576 journalists through 161 webinars so far, while also mentoring them and providing story grants to use the skills in producing investigative pieces on disinformation + hate speech + influence operations cases.
We use our convening power and ecosystem networks to focus attention on disinfo + hate speech, by co-hosting conferences such as the African Investigative Journalism Conference (AIJC) and facilitate sessions or workshops at others’ events.

https://aijc.africa/
Successful training is built on ongoing repeated lessons, over extended periods, so that new techniques/tools become part of journalists’ core ‘DNA’.

The consortium therefore works with major journalism schools/universities across Africa, to help develop curricula focused on disinfo, hatespeech or fact-checking.

We have partnerships with 37 universities. We’d be happy to explore synergies.
Some Solutions
How CfA partners are tackling disinfo/toxic networks
Drive up the costs

1. **Debunk + pre-bunk** conspiracies by exposing the hidden puppet-masters
2. **Dismantle** the sock-puppet infrastructure that gives access to audiences
3. **Deplatform** the ‘linchpin’ bad actors
4. **Demonetise** the underlying disinfo economy & blacklist the profiteers
5. **Dissuade** the digital creatives who produce the content
Build indigenous ecosystems

1. **Fund** institutions not projects
2. **Develop** infrastructure rather than storytelling
3. **Shift focus** from parachute-in training to peer-mentorship
4. **Nurture** indigenous technical expertise + technologies/tools
5. **Support** transnational collaboration
6. **Invest** into diversified ‘information economies’
Questions?

Fire away!
Connect:

This presentation: https://bit.ly/ACSSKenyaCase

CfA: @Code4Africa

iLAB: @AfricanCIR

PesaCheck: @PesaCheck