SAFEGUARDING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: STRATEGIES FOR COMBATTING DIGITAL DISINFORMATION

AN AFRICAN CONFERENCE

Cape Town, South Africa

2 – 5 March 2020
1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has exploded around the world to become a leading source of information, news and dialogue for the public.

The growth in the spread and popularity of social media has brought with it great benefits to electoral democracy including the rapid, convenient and cost-effective distribution of information to the electorate by political parties, candidates and election management bodies (EMBs) among other stakeholders.

But these very qualities which give social media its profound power and impact also carry with it grave risks to the integrity of the electoral process.

Examples abound of the growing influence and potential impact on elections of misinformation, disinformation and “fake news” peddled using a variety of social media platforms and digital technologies across democracies in Europe, the United States and Asia.

Elections in Africa are no exception; as social media continues its unrelenting expansion across the continent, so the risk of undue and unfair influence on the electorate rises.

Electoral integrity is at the heart of free and fair elections and the continued growth and perseverance of democracy on our continent.

As the defenders electoral democracy, election management bodies (EMBs) must continually seek ways of enhancing and protecting the integrity of the election process – including understanding how to reap the rewards and mitigate the risks posed by advances in digital technology.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), proposes to convene a conference of experts in electoral management, digital technology, social media, freedom of expression and related fields to explore how EMBs and other stakeholders should and have responded to the benefits and risks of social media within the African context.
2. **The rise of social media in Africa**

Social media as a platform has been growing rapidly throughout the world. There are currently globally almost 4.4 billion internet users which reflects a global penetration of over 57 percent. ¹ There are approximately 3.5 billion active social media users – or nearly half of the world’s total population.²

While growth has slowed over the years, adoption of digital technology continues to expand at around 10 percent per year. ³

While internet usage in Africa still lags much of the rest of the world, increasing accessibility coupled with the decreasing cost of data is seeing rapid catch-up on the continent. African nations dominate the list of countries with the fastest growing internet communities, although many of these countries start from relatively small bases and five African countries saw their internet populations double over the past 12 months, while nine countries experienced annual growth of 50 percent or more.⁴

In January 2019, over 50 percent of the population of southern and northern Africa had access to the internet while western Africa (42%) and eastern Africa (32%) were also growing rapidly.⁵

Worldwide social media user numbers have grown to almost 3.5 billion at the start of 2019, with 288 million new users in the past 12 months pushing the global penetration figure to 45 percent. However, social media use is still far from evenly distributed across the globe, and penetration rates in parts of Africa are still in the single digits.

However, comparisons to total population are less representative when it comes to social media, because most platforms prohibit use by children. As a result, this year’s reports also include analysis of what we’re terming ‘eligible penetration’ – i.e. social media use amongst adults aged 13 and above.

Considering that almost 40 percent of the total population in some parts of Africa is below the age of 13, this has a meaningful impact on the overall social media picture.

¹ Global Digital Yearbook for 2019  
² Ibid  
³ Ibid  
⁴ Ibid  
⁵ Ibid
Still, of the top 19 fastest-growing countries in terms of social media penetration, African countries occupied 10 positions. 6

3. Social media and elections

From an electoral democracy point of view, digital media has been a game changer for all stakeholders, including electoral management bodies, political parties, candidates and voters themselves.

It has allowed people to have access to information and to share information as never before and in so doing, it has boosted electoral democracy by helping to create a more informed, active and involved electorate.

The very power of digital media is in its accessibility and lack of regulations and control – making is accessible and available to everyone. But therein lies its greatest risk too.

Social media platforms have become a major influence on elections: they are increasingly being used to shape political opinion and beliefs generally, and in electoral periods they influence voter choices. Reports from many countries have shown that disinformation attempts to manipulate elections, be it via discrediting campaigns, external influence or trying to suppress voter turnout. 7

A study released in July 2017 found that sophisticated software can be used to generate thousands of fake tweets and online posts to influence public perceptions and manipulate voters. These are known as “Twitter bots”.

The study found that almost 20 percent of Twitter bots that were engaged in spreading propaganda against Emmanuel Macron during the recent French presidential election had been used to spread misinformation in favour of Donald Trump last year during the US elections. 8

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6 Global Digital Yearbook for 2019
8 https://venturebeat.com/2017/07/10/study-bots-have-turned-twitter-into-a-powerful-political-disinformation-platform/)
4. Responding to the threats

In response to these threats, international organisations, civil society institutes, EMBs, media organisations and social media platforms have introduced a variety of measures to mitigate the risks.

These have ranged from education initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the threats and helping the public to identify “fake news” to legislative, enforcement and technological solutions.

Since 2016, at least 43 countries around the globe have proposed or implemented regulations specifically designed to tackle different aspects of influence campaigns, including both real and perceived threats of fake news, social media abuse, and election interference.  

In 2018 Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter signed on to the European Union’s “code of practice on disinformation”, a voluntary agreement that lays out steps to fight fake news on their platforms try to address the problem of fake news.

In 2014 International IDEA published a guide for EMBs on approaches to social media and how to mitigate some of the inherent risks which identifies a range of measures which have been adopted by EMBs around the world.

Increasingly, EMBs are also working together with social media platforms and other stakeholders to find joint solutions. During its recent national and provincial elections held in May 2019 South Africa introduced a joint initiative in partnership with civil society, media organisations and social media platforms to highlight the risks of disinformation and to provide a rapid online reporting disinformation complaint and investigation process.

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5. Sharing good practice

The Electoral Commission of South Africa, with support from the UNDP, is planning a conference to bring together experts in electoral democracy, social media, disinformation and other related fields from across the African continent to focus on the influence of social media on electoral integrity.

The interactive conference will be an opportunity for participants to learn about the benefits and threats of social media on electoral democracy, how African election management bodies and other international practitioners have sought to mitigate these threats and to engage around best practice in the use and prevent of abuse of social media in electoral democracy.

5.1 Conference objectives

The conference seeks to:

- Create awareness among EMBs, electoral practitioners and other stakeholders on the benefits and threats of social media to the electoral process and to electoral integrity in particular

- To stimulate debate and discussion on the role of EMBs, social media platforms, political parties/candidates and other stakeholders in seeking to prevent the abuse of social media

- To help to identify a variety of potential measures by EMBs, technology partners, academia, non-governmental organisations and think-tanks to mitigate these risks, including:
  - Transparency solutions: Enhanced transparency of the entire voting and counting process to provide additional sense of security and trust to all stakeholders
  - Legislative solutions: Potential amendments to legislation governing elections (including codes of conduct) and social media to address and prevent incidents
- **Enforcement solutions**: Heightening the investigative and prosecutorial process to act as a deterrent – including processes through which voters can report fake news

- **Communication/education solutions**: Combined/aligned communication and education activities by all stakeholders to highlight the problem and help educate voters.

- **Technological solutions**: Enhanced cybersecurity systems in place to prevent hacking, preferably with the buy-in of key stakeholders including political parties and media

### 5.2 Conference Themes

The following are the key themes and topics which will form part of the conference programme and discussion:

- The current and future social media landscape in Africa
- The benefits of social media for electoral democracy and how to leverage social media to enhance participation, promote awareness and knowledge and enhance transparency of the electoral process
- The potential negative impact of digital disinformation on electoral integrity
- Potential solutions by EMBs and other partners to mitigate the risks posed by social media and digital disinformation including case studies of the use/abuse of social media (or specific platforms) in recent African and other elections
- Initiatives and measures taken by social media platforms and other key stakeholders to reduce the spread of misinformation and to protect electoral integrity.

### 5.3 Participants

All stakeholders in electoral democracy are urged to attend including:

- Members of EMBs (especially social media and communication practitioners)
- Members of civil society groups involved in electoral democracy, media, freedom of expression
- Members of academia with an interest in this field
• Members of the media
• Members of political parties (particularly those involved in campaigning, communications and social media).

6. Conference dates and venue

The conference will be held from 2 – 5 March 2020 at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town, South Africa.

7. Conference programme

See attached draft programme. A final programme will be distributed in due course.

8. Further information

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