



Summation of Conference Proceedings

Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age

Strategies for Combatting Disinformation

2-5 March 2020

Cape Town, South Africa



Key Issues



The challenges posed by social media for democracy and elections include the following:



(a) disinformation can distort and harm democratic processes, electoral processes;



(b) social media increases polarisation which can provide a breeding ground for democratic backsliding;



(c) social media contributes to the decline in the quality of information for citizens to make informed choices;



(d) weakened media environment undermines checks on government, facilitating unaccountable and corrupt practices;



(e) social media can also become a tool to reinforce authoritarianism, populism, negative ethnicity and narrow nationalism;

Responses by EMBs and electoral stakeholders



Social media has already created spaces and given voice to marginalised communities, the EMB reach has been enhanced and triggered regional cooperation



Social media has enabled communities to be seen and heard on their own terms - increasing participation, boosting communication, engaging all members of the community and improving transparency and trust throughout the entire electoral cycle



Increased accountability, transparency and regular media interface by the EMBs to the electorate in real time



Development of Code of Conducts, multi-party special committees, stakeholder engagement

Responses by EMBs and electoral stakeholders

- Regulatory measures through other statutory bodies
- Internal and external threats - Some EMBs and political parties have developed communication or media policies to mitigate crisis that could compromise institutional integrity
- Legal and extra-legal over-reach by the state - The continent has witnessed shutdowns of social media especially in the immediate post-electoral phase, which relates to announcement of result under the guise of national security.
- Engineering of election observation methodologies

Key Lessons

- Social media is a tool at the disposal of organisations and individuals;
- The need to embed social media expertise in election observation architecture;
- The over-reach by the state in shutdowns does not work due to alternatives through Virtual Private Network ;
- Without collaborative efforts and partnerships, we cannot deal with social media as a preserve of EMBs alone, therefore a multi-sectoral and faceted approach at national, regional and continental levels.

Key Lessons (cont.)

- The absence of provision for legal and normative frameworks for social media in election expedates for building capacities for social media in EMBs;
- Digital literacy is not enough. The pressure point is on those who pay for disinformation;
- Protect the value of personal data in possession by the EMBs points to a vulnerability that creates risk for malicious narratives.

Conclusion

The conference was able to achieve the following:

It created 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

- It stimulated 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
- It identified a variety of potential measures by EMBs, technology partners, academia, non-governmental organisations and think-tanks to mitigate these risks, including:
Transparency solutions; Legislative solutions; Enforcement solutions;
Communication/education solutions and Technological solutions

Key Recommendations: Regulation

- Data protection – there is need for a balance of data protection and privacy in terms of determining parameters for regulation of social media (human rights approach)
- Co-regulation – as we pursue statutory measures, we must enhance the self-regulation by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and put in place Codes of Conduct
- Electoral Cycle approach should be adopted to regulate any election related usage of social media

Key Recommendations: Monitoring

- EMBs must be transparent, accountable and impartial in election management to minimise exposure to disinformation through social media
- Election observation missions need to incorporate social media monitoring in their election assessment methodology
- Monitoring of social media in elections should be a collaborative process which entails partnerships between EMBs and all electoral stakeholders
- Strategic partnerships and scope for social media usage during elections should be forged with digital platforms such as Face Book, Twitter to monitor and combat negative activities during elections

Key Recommendations: Normative Framework

- There is need to enhance existing continental and regional normative frameworks that govern the conduct of elections by specifically incorporating use of social media in elections
- There is need to develop continental guidelines and principles governing social media in elections.

Key Recommendations: Digital Literacy

- Digital literacy must target the entirety of social media influencers, peddlers and users
- To foster policy conversation of social media in elections should be mainstreamed in continental and regional EMB forums

Proposed Overarching Principles

1. Human rights approach should underpin any regulatory and normative framework on social media in elections
2. Principles of impartiality, accountability and transparency should guide the creation and composition of any statutory institution mandated with monitoring social media in elections
3. To guard against over regulations of social media in elections, measures must not erode the self-determination and identity of communities especially marginalised groups
4. There must be an established a multi-level partnership at national, regional and continental levels for coherence and maximisation of benefits of social media and mitigation measures

Way forward

1. Development of a Policy Brief arising from the Cape Town Conference
2. Establishment of a Continental Working Group to develop the principles and guidelines governing the use of social media in elections in Africa to be adopted by the African Union and Regional Economic bodies