



Network of Issues and Opportunities in East Africa's Misinformation Landscape

A Critical Assessment of Stakeholders' Perspectives on Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities

Executive Summary

The proliferation of misinformation in East Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, poses significant challenges to public health, political stability, and social cohesion.

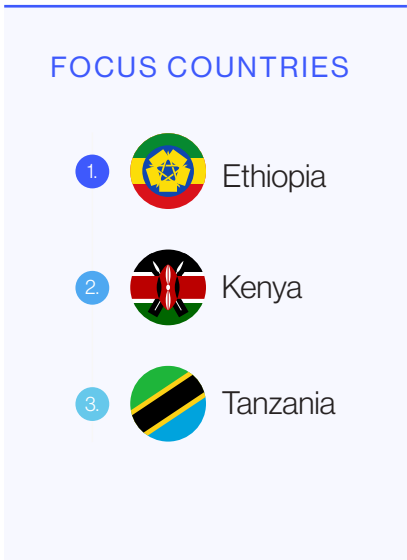
The proliferation of misinformation in East Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, poses significant challenges to public health, political stability, and social cohesion. The region's information ecosystem is contaminated by a mix of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, propaganda, fake news, and hate speech, disseminated through traditional media, social media, and government channels. The behaviours of instigators, agents, intermediaries, and interpreters in the misinformation ecosystem exacerbate the spread and impact of false information. Fact-checking efforts in East Africa involve collaborations and tools aimed at combating misinformation, with key players including local fact-checkers, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and media platforms like Meta. These efforts focus on enhancing verification processes, promoting digital literacy, and developing innovative technologies to detect and counter false information.

This backdrop provides the framework for further investigation of the region's misinformation problem through a qualitative approach and a philosophical research design that uses in-depth interviews and subject matter experts as research methods. The samples for the market assessment were the attendees of the roundtable discussions that took place in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania in August 2023 and January 2024, as well as the experts that were interviewed during the year.

Several key findings highlight the urgency of addressing misinformation in the region, which shows the importance of a multifaceted approach to create a more informed and resilient information ecosystem. The fight against

misinformation in the region relies on the creation and enforcement of strong policies and frameworks. This needs to be done collectively by state and non-state actors, with the adoption of a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach. These actors should consider the inclusion of critical stakeholders in the misinformation business in the processes leading to the development of policies and fact-checking control or containment frameworks. Providing digital civic education and critical thinking skills that aid in the application of cognitive and emotive domains is equally significant. This will enable citizens' ability and capability to be resilient against purveyors of misinformation and their sponsors. A socio-civic engagement reorientation programme needs to be initiated and pursued vigorously by state actors. This will help raise awareness about the reputational and societal implications of spreading false and misleading information.

Our analysis has also led to the discovery of 22 opportunities in eight areas of the misinformation market in the region for supply-side and demand-side stakeholders. These opportunities are within the people, processes, and technology components of the market. Governments, research institutions, academics, non-government organisations, civil society organisations, and technology developers are all expected to explore these opportunities. Meta should increase its contributions to empowering stakeholders at the meso, micro, and macro levels through evidence-based interventions in order for the recommendations to be implemented successfully and opportunities explored.



Introduction

East Africa is experiencing significant technology growth and digital transformation in political participation and civic engagement.

East Africa is experiencing significant technology growth and digital transformation in political participation and civic engagement. Digital technologies have enabled new forms of participation, such as social media and online petitions. One of the negative consequences of the adoption and use has been the spread of false and misleading information. This is known as misinformation, which is common during disasters, accidents, and crimes, political conflicts, election cycles, spreads through different routes, including traditional media, social media, and governmental settings, affecting many sectors. Misinformation propagation is driven by the behaviours of five categories of participants in the misinformation ecosystem: instigators, agents, messages, intermediates, and targets or interpreters¹.

For years, the relentless pursuit of participants to minimise the impact of their activities on personalities, businesses, and society has been a daunting challenge. The unpredictable nature of the strategies and tactics employed has led to a cat-and-mouse game between state and non-state actors, each trying to outmanoeuvre the other. Despite these efforts, the region continues to struggle against the tide of misinformation, with the rate of creation and dissemination showing no signs of slowing down. The questions remain: how best can stakeholders address this scourge? What are the alternative strategies

and tactics for fact-checking the claims of the participants? If there is a need to continue with some of the existing approaches to address the problem, how best can we refine them to deliver the expected outcomes?

In this report, to answer these questions, we explored East Africa's misinformation landscape using Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. In these countries, the war on misinformation has been consistently fought using online solutions more than offline ones. Fact-checking efforts have also remained fragmented and underfunded, while the digital divide limits access to various literacies needed to build resilient systems against the purveyors and platforms being used for spreading false information. These gaps are potential opportunities, such as expanding fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programmes and strengthening media independence and journalist safety, for stakeholders on the supply-side and demand-side of the misinformation market in the region. In line with this, we considered the countries and our data emerged from a series of roundtable discussions and interviews held in August 2023 and January 2024 in each of the countries, which helped us establish different narratives on the misinformation problem and existing opportunities for stakeholders, especially those in the control and containment segments of the information sector.

Misinformation propagation

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The Big Questions

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- What are the alternative strategies and tactics for fact-checking the claims of the participants?
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Our different analyses have revealed that the misinformation problem in East Africa is just as complex as in other parts of the world. We've also discovered that stakeholders may easily identify human and non-human actors who continue to play important roles in developing and maintaining the misleading information market. At the same time, we have learned that certain stakeholders may exert influence on false information perpetrators with negligible results due to the various challenges and issues associated

with the processes, people, and technologies they use to shape activities in the region's misinformation market. These views are further reflected in Figure 7, where we show the interconnection of many factors, such as digital literacy, security, policies, conveyors, and verification methodologies, which comprise human and non-human actors. This interdependence implies that a comprehensive approach is required to effectively combat misinformation.



Ethiopian Misinformation Landscape

Trends and Prevalence

The prevalence of misinformation in Ethiopia is a significant concern, particularly in the context of social media. The recent data indicates that over 7 million Ethiopians use social media, translating to 5.5% of the current over 129 million people. However, the number of social media users can vary depending on the methodology used to measure them, as there is no universal standard. Different platforms and sources employ different techniques to calculate user base, leading to fluctuations in the reported figures. Meanwhile, some of the users consciously or unconsciously share information without adequate verification of sources and messages. This has led to a rise in the spread of false information, hate speech, and disinformation, which can have severe consequences for social cohesion and political stability. This trend is evident in the analysis of public search interest, which shows that fake news and disinformation are major issues. Hate speech is also a concern. Fact-checked claims play a crucial role in combating misinformation. At the time of conducting our research, there were 100 claims fact-checked contents that had Ethiopia as a keyword on Africa Check. Additionally, between August and November 2021, Ethiopia Check received around 1,315 claims from followers on the three platforms asking verification of rumours, social media accounts, and news items. Examining the claims' form reveals that they primarily deal with politics, health, elections, security, the economy, and education. Creators and purveyors of false information are focusing their attention on the travel and aviation industries, according to new data from the Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative. The most common types of claims are text, videos, photos, and graphics.

The most prevalent area for the generation and dissemination of false information is still online. Bloggers, individuals, vested interest groups, politicians,

social influencers, and traditional media are important creators and distributors of polluted information. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) have played an important part in the propagation of misinformation in Ethiopia. The law and regulatory response to misinformation in Ethiopia have been mixed. While the government has taken steps to combat the problem, there have been questions about the effectiveness of these measures. For instance, the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) has set Proclamation 1185/12 to control hate speech and disinformation, but critics argue that the measures are insufficient.

Platform responses have also been significant. Meta, for instance, hosts on and off-platform campaigns focusing on misinformation literacy and supports the Fact Checker Incubation Programme. In addition to hosting the campaigns, Meta has also enabled the ability and capacity of Ethiopians to use digital space responsibly and responsively through My Digital World. It is an effort in which digital humanities specialists guided thousands of Ethiopians through the essentials of the digital domain, including wellness, engagement, empowerment, and opportunity. Since its inception in 2020, the project has helped citizens have a better understanding of the information ecosystem in terms of the development and transmission of misleading information. Code for Africa (CfA) offers intensive fact-checking fellowships to develop a network of citizen fact-checkers that can recognise and combat false information in Ethiopia. In addition to Ethiopia Check's efforts to tackle the scourge through real-time fact-checking activities, AFP Fact Check Africa and PesaCheck contribute significantly to the country's healthy information landscape. The two organisations are implementing a variety of soft and hard methods, as well as tools, to check official and non-official statements across various social media platforms and non-digital communication channels.

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Kenyan Misinformation Landscape

Trends and Prevalence

In January 2024, it was reported that over 13 million Kenyans used social media. This represents more than 23% of the current total population. Meanwhile, there is no standard number of users per medium for social media because different methodologies are used to determine the user base. Until this year, social media was a powerful tool in the hands of individuals and groups who manufactured and spread false information. They continue to develop and spread false information in a variety of situations, utilising the media as strategic tools. For example, there are 2,039 fact-checked contents that had Kenya as a keyword on Africa Check. Out of 632 claims selected by the Brain Builders Youth Development Initiatives, 284 claims were created and disseminated to target individuals, groups, and governments in Kenya. In terms of specificity of information pollution, we found 251 claims related to fake news associated with Kenya from a total of 466 claims of fake news recorded by the BBYDI. Public interest in misinformation is also a significant issue in Kenya. In contrast to Ethiopia and Tanzania, Kenya public stands out in their high search interest in hate speech. However, fake news and disinformation are less searched for. One of the most striking patterns is the consistent increase in search interest in Kenya over the years, with a notable spike in 2017 and 2018.

The rise in public attention could be linked to the previously mentioned increase in the number of claims for various forms of information disorders. Participants frequently target diverse areas of Kenyan society. According to latest BBYDI statistics, the types of claims span the country's socio-political and economic landscape, with a focus on destabilising security architecture, political, social, educational, and corporate institutions. The data also show a concentration on inciting a cold war between Kenya and other nations through deceptive foreign policy and

deportation narratives. These claim types have mostly been propagated using textual, vocal, and graphical representations of themes incorporated in the claims and targets (individuals, countries, and organizations).

In response to these challenges, the Kenyan government enacted legislation in 2019 criminalising social media abuse and the propagation of false information. However, stakeholders advocate for long-term solutions such as enforcing media literacy education in schools. Social media platform owners like Meta have also taken steps, hosting on and off-platform campaigns focusing on misinformation literacy and supporting the Fact Checker Incubation Programme. Since its inception in 2020, the My Digital World, another initiative from Meta, has been revolutionising the way Kenyans interact with the digital sphere. By engaging thousands of citizens with digital humanities experts, the project has equipped them with the fundamental skills to navigate the complexities of digital wellness, engagement, empowerment, and opportunities. This groundbreaking initiative has significantly contributed to a better understanding of the information ecosystem, enabling citizens to critically evaluate and combat the spread of false information.

Kenya is home to AFP Fact Check Africa and PesaCheck that verify suspicious photographs, videos, official statements, and other falsehoods found online, as well as budgetary and financial numbers presented by Kenyan politicians. Additionally, Africa Check and UNESCO have hosted advanced fact-checking and digital verification training for regulators, media professionals, peace builders, and civil society organisations in Kenya.

→ ***In order to support the digital literacy skills of users, Meta hosts on and off platform campaigns, focusing on misinformation literacy. The “How to Fight Misinformation” campaign aims to help people spot false news online and take action against it. As part of this campaign, we also partner with local radio stations to run commercials about how to spot misinformation and what people can do about it.***

Tanzanian Misinformation Landscape

Trends and Prevalence

The Tanzania public interest in seeking information about misinformation has been consistent over the years. This trend suggests that the public is becoming increasingly concerned about the spread of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech. Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation, has documented 188 fact-checked contents related to Tanzania. These claims draw attention to the importance of bloggers, people with vested interests, politicians, social influencers, and traditional media in creating and disseminating misinformation that shapes socio-political and economic systems. Over time, players in the misinformation market have prioritised creating and spreading false information about politics, governance, health, education, and other topics with the goal of destroying personalities and causing targets to suffer financial losses as a result of public ostracization of products and services. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) have played a crucial role in spreading misinformation in Tanzania. The deployment of these platforms has been from some of over 5 million users, which amounted to 8.3% of the total population reported in January 2024. Meanwhile, because the techniques for establishing the number of social media users are not uniform, there is no universal number of users per medium.

As noted previously, the public's growing concern about misinformation is evident in the consistent increase in search interest in Tanzania. This trend suggests that citizens are becoming more aware of the need to verify information and are seeking reliable sources to combat the spread of misinformation. The spike in search interest in 2017 and 2018 is particularly striking, suggesting an intense sense of urgency

among the public. The Tanzanian government has addressed the issue of misinformation through legal means, both directly and indirectly. The National Cohesion and Integration Act, the Information and Communications (Amendment) Act, and the Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act were all recently passed. Earlier legal solutions have partially addressed the issue. For example, the 2010 Electronic and Postal Communications Act and the 2015 Cybercrimes Act criminalise the transmission of false information with the intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass another person. The 2016 Media Services Act prohibits intentionally falsified information that threatens defense, public safety, order, economic interests, public morality, or public health, or injurious to others' reputation, rights, and freedom. The 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations make it illegal for providers of online services to publish content that threatens national security or public health and safety, except when it is clearly pre-stated as satire, parody, fiction, or not factual. The 2020 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations also prohibit publishing content that threatens public security and national safety.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has taken steps to address misinformation in Tanzania. The biggest social media platform owner has launched on- and off-platform campaigns focusing on misinformation literacy and support the Fact Checker Incubation Programme. These initiatives aim to empower users with the skills to identify and combat misinformation.

Country	Prevalent Areas	Impact	Actions
Ethiopia	Online	• Violence and conflict • Heightened tensions	• Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (2020) • Media Proclamation (2021) • Cyber Army Development Institute Establishment Council of Ministers Regulation (2017)
Kenya	Mainstream Media	• Personal interest • Social network resonance	• Kenyan government has responded with the Kenyan Penal Code, Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018) • Communications Authority of Kenya (2017) • Section 22 of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act • Section 23 of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act
Tanzania	Online	• Health misinformation • Climate • Political • Governance • Personality misrepresentation	• The National Cohesion and Integration Act • The Information and Communications (Amendment) Act • The Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act • The 2010 Electronic and Postal Communications Act • The 2015 Cybercrimes Act • The 2016 Media Services Act • The 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations • The 2020 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations



Ethiopia

Ethiopia has seen relatively stable public search interest in information disorder over the years, with a slight increase in 2018. While fake news and disinformation are significant concerns, misinformation does not appear to be a major issue. The public is more concerned about the spread of false information and hate speech, which can have severe consequences for social cohesion and political stability.



Kenya

The Kenyan public consistently shows the highest search interest in information disorder, particularly in 2018. The public is deeply concerned about hate speech, with 74.42% of searches related to this type of information disorder. Misinformation is also a significant issue, with 46.65% of searches. Addressing hate speech is crucial to mitigate social unrest and political polarisation in Kenya.



Tanzania

Tanzania has seen a steady increase in public search interest in information disorder, culminating in a peak in 2023. The public is more concerned about misinformation, with 53.35% of searches. Disinformation is also a significant issue, with 37.03% of searches. The rise of social media and economic and political instability may contribute to these concerns, which can undermine trust in institutions and contribute to social and economic instability.

Recommendations

01

Implement comprehensive media literacy programmes to educate the public on identifying and evaluating credible sources of information

02

Platforms should also downrank incorrect information and prevent algorithms from amplifying misinformation

03

Establish and support fact-checking organisations to verify information and provide accurate data.

04

Implement robust moderation policies and mechanisms to prevent the spread of harmful content.

Managerial Recommendations

Building a Resilient Society Against Misinformation Through Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills

The battle against misinformation hinges on the development and implementation of robust policies and frameworks. These measures can significantly enhance digital literacy and security, guiding the dissemination of information and supporting verification efforts. While fact-checking organisations and fact-checkers are necessary in the fight against misinformation, providing digital civic education and critical thinking skills that aid in the application of cognitive and emotive domains is equally

significant. Therefore, digital literacy and critical thinking skills for building a resilient society against purveyors of misinformation and their sponsors are important. These skills enable individuals to navigate the information landscape more effectively and protect themselves from misinformation. The significant influence of conveyors like media, politicians, and social influencers underscores the need for these groups to be held accountable and guided by robust policies and frameworks.

Empowering a Vigilant Society: Combating Misinformation Through Awareness and Critical Thinking

Raising awareness among the general public and fact-checkers is critical for combating misinformation effectively. Continuous efforts to promote awareness can lead to a more informed and vigilant society capable of identifying and challenging misinformation. Specifically, addressing misinformation in

Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania requires a multifaceted strategy that incorporates digital literacy, robust policies, effective verification methods, and active involvement from all conveyors of information. Empowering individuals with critical thinking and awareness is vital for creating a resilient information ecosystem.

Unlocking Opportunities in the Misinformation Market

We derived several opportunities for players in the misinformation market based on trends, problems, and solutions supplied by stakeholders. Table 2 shows the prospects for both the supply and demand sides of the market, with increased opportunities for digital platforms such as Meta, which has billions of users on Facebook and WhatsApp. We have identified further opportunities for governments, research institutions, and

academics, as well as areas where non-governmental organisations, civil society members, and technology developers must work. Meta should increase its contributions to empowering stakeholders at the meso, micro, and macro levels through evidence-based interventions in order for the recommendations to be implemented successfully and opportunities explored.

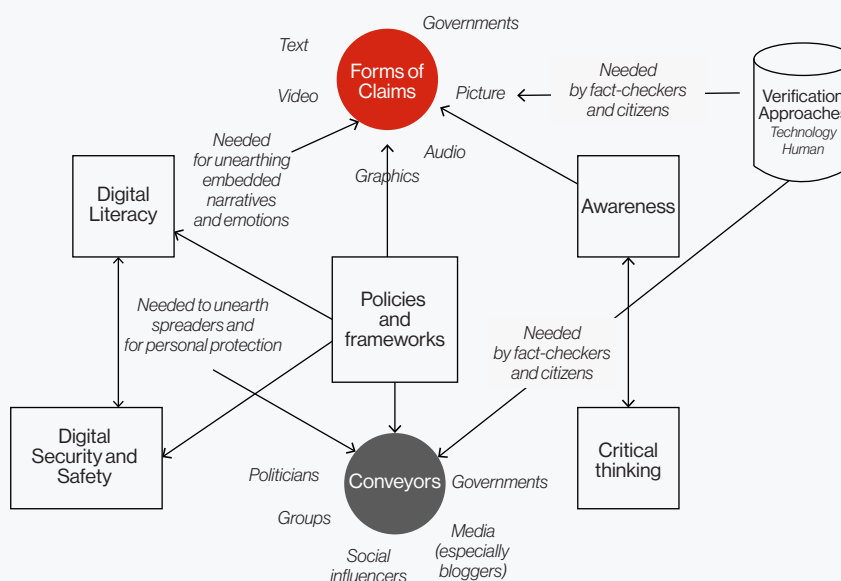


FIGURE 3: Network of actors, issues and opportunities in EKETAN's (Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania) Misinformation landscape

S/N	Supply-Side Opportunity	What should be done
1	Fact-checking initiatives	1. Deepening knowledge, skills and verification processes and technologies 2. Increase experienced fact-checkers and competent fact-checking organisations
2	Digital platforms (Meta and others)	1. Partnership with fact-checking organisations on processes, and technology improvement 2. Increase capacity of employed and freelance fact-checkers 3. Support development of fact-checking friendly tools 4. Improve content moderation and false information detection algorithms 5. Address algorithm bias in detecting and deleting conveyors' false messages
3	Mainstream media and NGOs	1. Develop personalised fact-checking teams and collaborate with existing fact-checking organisations as well as fact-checkers 2. Partner with fact-checking organisations and fact-checkers to enhance verification efforts, promote critical literacies (digital, information, media and thinking)
4	Research institutions and academia	1. Conduct innovative social and natural sciences studies that assess effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives 2. Conduct applied researches towards establishing increased willingness to seek credible sources 3. Partner with fact-checking organisations, fact-checkers in areas of research conceptualisation and dissemination of results and lessons learned
Demand-Side Opportunity		
1	Digital literacy and critical thinking	1. Empower citizens with essentials and applied knowledge and skills that address biases associated with failure to use cognitive and affective domains while consuming information 2. Promote the knowledge and skills using continuous awareness effort
2	Policy and framework development	1. Create policies from bottom-up approach not top-down approach 2. Formulate policies that support inclusion of all critical literacies and skills in school curricula at all levels 3. Train government officials and employees who manage information ecosystem on media and digital policy making as well as evaluation processes
3	Conveyors of misinformation	1. Inclusive and sustainable awareness campaign that promote responsible information dissemination 2. Strong political and institutional will to hold politicians and social influencers accountable 3. Promote the idea of moral sensibility, a culture of, "Can I accept it if my reputation and personality are being destroyed through false information?"
4	Awareness and collaboration	1. Continuous efforts towards building a vigilant society and a citizen 2. Genuine collaboration among fact-checkers, journalists, digital platforms, mainstream media, NGOs, and research institutions

