Namibia FactCheck

• BY FREDERICO LINKS & MARTHA NANGOLO

FEBRUARY 2020

Tracking Disinformation

Social media and Namibia's 2019 elections

Hanns Seidel Foundation

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1. Key observations and recommendations

The spread of political mis-/disinformation via social media has become an undeniable Namibian reality, with potentially far-reaching consequences for healthy political discourse and engagement in the present and into the future, both online and off-line.

The effects of information pollution on the political and electoral landscapes have been laid bare by what appeared to be something of a flood of political mis-/disinformation in the periods immediately before, around and after Namibia's national and presidential elections of 27 November 2019.

The aim of this study / project was to identify false political or elections-related information and to track / monitor whether such information 'jumped' between and amongst social media platforms.

1.1 Key observations

- While many Namibians are active on a variety of social media platforms, most appear to be primarily active on Facebook and messaging platform WhatsApp, while much fewer are on Twitter and even less on Instagram;
- There appears to be a considerable number of highly active groups on WhatsApp and Facebook dedicated to Namibian political discussions;
- Many social media users are members of a variety of discussion groups on both WhatsApp and Facebook;
- Political discussion groups appear saturated with political mis-/disinformation, especially on WhatsApp;
- From our observations it is clear that most political mis-/disinformation either emanates from groups or profiles on Facebook or WhatsApp, and there is a great deal of cross-posting of such content amongst groups on these two platforms;
- Mutual misinforming is prevalent across and in Facebook and WhatsApp groups. But especially in and among WhatsApp groups;
- Members of WhatsApp groups appear especially involved in or susceptible to sharing / forwarding mis-/disinformation, with those consistently demonstrating low levels of exposure to or engagement with traditional channels of receiving news and current affairs appearing the most susceptible;
- Many recipients, whether individually or in groups, when confronted with false content appeared unable to distinguish between credible information and sources and information or sources which were not credible;
- Notably, in the few instances where the researchers strategically intervened to debunk specific false information, both on Facebook and WhatsApp, those who shared such content would double-down on the veracity of the information or others in the group would question whether the facts were actually the facts;
- Most users who share mis-/disinformation content do not bother to attempt to verify the information they share and simply seem to 'forward' such content to as many groups as they can;
- Suspect or false information is forwarded / shared by many individuals in WhatsApp groups with the disclaimer 'Forwarded as received';
- It seems that the fact that some individuals suspect that the information they are sharing might be false does not dissuade them from forwarding / sharing such information;
- Aside from clearly satirical political content produced by some notable and popular pages / profiles on Facebook, the vast majority of mis-/disinformation content is serious in tone;
- While it is largely possible to determine where false information emanates from or who is primarily sharing / forwarding mis-/disinformation content on Facebook, on WhatsApp it is almost impossible to determine the original source of false content;

- On Facebook there are a number of possible fake profiles primarily engaged in sharing / forwarding mis-/disinformation into popular political discussion groups and commenting on posts of a political nature;
- Most political mis-/disinformation encountered and monitored gave the impression of being randomly orchestrated by supporters of opposing political movements;
- That said, based on the examples of mis-/disinformation monitored and collected, while most mis-/disinformation content seemed to be randomly supporter generated, there were suspicious signs that some mis-/disinformation emanated from deliberate and targeted homegrown campaigns, but this study did not collect enough evidence to substantiate such suspicions;
- According to our observations, there appeared to be no evidence of foreign mis-/disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the integrity of or influencing Namibian political and electoral processes or to sway the election one way or another;
- Most of the political mis-/disinformation collected and assessed in the course of this study was posted, shared or forwarded in the three to four weeks prior to the 27 November 2019 elections, and the week immediately after the elections;
- A lot of the mis-/disinformation content had tribalist undertones, while some were explicitly tribalist in tone, and some threatened violence and others were borderline incitement to hate and violence;
- A lot of the mis-/disinformation content took the form of manipulated or altered images, or graphics or mimicked social media breaking news posts of traditional media organisations;
- Furthermore, traditional media mistakes and bad reporting practices appeared to contribute to suspicions of the credibility of media sources and reports, as well as the overall spread of mis-/disinformation. This was especially so in the case of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC);
- Lastly, politicians and government officials, including the presidency and the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN), through their statements and the issuing of misleading information, considerably contributed to further drenching a landscape already flooded with mis-/disinformation and low on trust in available information concerning political and electoral processes.

1.2 Recommendations

- That the code of conduct for politicians, political parties and their supporters be updated to include a clear, comprehensive and enforceable section dealing with the production and dissemination of mis-/disinformation during election campaigns and electoral processes;
- That media and information literacy become a component stream in primary and secondary education curricula, as well as part of relevant tertiary level training initiatives;
- That electoral and government authorities sharply improve their information sharing and communication functions, and adopt more transparent and proactive practices in engaging with the public and the media;
- That access to information be formalised by the enactment and installation of an enforceable legal and regulatory framework;
- That, if social media regulation is taken forward seriously, the eventual outcome be a self-regulatory, nationally subscribed to initiative that is born out of a multistakeholder, multi-disciplinary process, informed by best practice;
- That media organisations and media training institutions take appropriate steps to provide adequate training to young reporters around best journalistic practices;
- That media organisations, especially state-owned media, steer clear of providing partisan or biased reporting and coverage of political campaigns and electoral processes;
- That Namibian civil society play a far more active and engaged role in encouraging more civil and good faith political discussions and debates, and in the monitoring of electoral processes and holding the state authorities accountable for their communication and information sharing shortcomings.

2. What is disinformation?

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon and has been around for as long as people have been telling stories, whether orally or in written form.

However, while the phenomenon is not new, the academic interest and study of it has exploded since 2016 as the world has become uncomfortably acquainted with its more familiar guise, namely 'fake news'.

In their seminal paper[1] on the topic, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), for the Council of Europe (CoE), argue that disinformation is one of the three information disorders, along with misinformation and mal-information, that individually and collectively contribute to information pollution.

One definition of disinformation that they put forward is that it is information "designed specifically to sow mistrust and confusion and to sharpen existing socio-cultural divisions using nationalistic, ethnic, racial and religious tensions". Another, more succinct one, they provide is that disinformation "is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm".

In 2018, the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation[2], of the European Commission, has defined disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit", excluding parody or satirical content and hate speech from inclusion.

The Atlantic Council defines disinformation as "false or misleading information spread with the intention to deceive. It's distinct from misinformation, which is the unintentional spread of false information."[3]

In light of these roughly similar definitions, for our purposes we came up with the following working definition in two parts: The intentional dissemination of information that is false, inaccurate or misleading; and that is designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm, political confusion or social panic.

In other words, on the one hand we consider disinformation to be the intentional dissemination of information that is false, inaccurate or misleading. On the other hand, disinformation is also the intentional dissemination of information that is designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm, political confusion or social panic.

With this definition we hoped to catch out not only the usually suspect social media posts, but also the misleading statements and claims of politicians and government officials, as well as bad reporting and journalistic practice by online and traditional media, as it is clear these actors play significant roles in the realm of information pollution.

Furthermore, when considering the definitional aspect of disinformation, it is also necessary to bear in mind the enablement and facilitation of its virality by social media technology, which Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue allows "information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these 'polluted' messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers".

It was against this definitional landscape that examples of political and electoral disinformation were identified and monitored for the purposes of this study.

1 https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77
2 https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation
3 https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/issue/disinformation/

The dangers of disinformation

"In today's context of disinformation and misinformation, the ultimate jeopardy is not unjustifiable regulation of journalism, but that publics may come to disbelieve all content – including journalism. In this scenario, people are then likely to take as credible whatever content is endorsed by their social networks, and which corresponds with their hearts – but leaves out engagement with their heads. We can already see the negative impacts of this on public beliefs about health, science, intercultural understanding and the status of authentic expertise.

This impact on the public is also especially concerning for elections, and to the very idea of democracy as a human right. What disinformation seeks, particularly during a poll, is not necessarily to convince the public to believe that its content is true, but to impact on agenda setting (on what people think is important) and to muddy the informational waters in order to weaken rationality factors in people's voting choices. Likewise, the issues of migration, climate change and others can be highly impacted by uncertainty resulting from disinformation and misinformation."

Taken from: *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation*[4] . UNESCO. 2018

3. What is fuelling disinformation?

The European Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation states that "problems of disinformation are connected with wider political, social, civic and media issues"[5] in Europe.

This is similarly the case in Namibia, as this study has viewed the seemingly increased occurrence and spread of disinformation as being stoked by and preying on existing fissures and confrontations on the Namibian socio-political landscape.

These fissures and confrontations can be clustered under the following broad themes:

- Political factionalism
- Political polarisation
- Political disillusionment
- Political exclusion
- Socio-economic exclusion

The emergence and rise of the independent candidate movement, spearheaded by Panduleni Itula[6] in the run-up to the 27 November 2019 National Assembly and presidential elections, and the emboldened political rhetoric of youth-led movements, such as Affirmative Repositioning, are arguably primarily symptoms of political factionalism, polarisation and disillusionment in the ruling and politically dominant Swapo Party [7].

At the same time Namibia's economic decline, perceptions of widespread and deep-rooted corruption, public sector mismanagement and poor state governance and service delivery have fed into long simmering and divisive racial and ethnic resentments that have animated narratives of political and socio-economic exclusion.

[4] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation
[6] It should be noted though that while Panduleni Itula campaigned as an independent candidate, he pronounced on numerous platforms and occasions that he was and would remain a member of the ruling Swapo Party. In a sense then, his independent candidacy was also disinformation.
[7] For a detailed historical discussion, see: https://ippr.org.na/publication/fake-news-namibian-elections/

Foreign actors and African disinformation

In October 2019 the New York Times reported that Russia was active in disinformation campaigns in various African countries.

The *Times* report stated: "Russia has been testing new disinformation tactics in an enormous Facebook campaign in parts of Africa, as part of an evolution of its manipulation techniques ahead of the 2020 American presidential election."[8]

The report was based on information collected by the Stanford Internet Observatory, which found: "Russia's global strategy for reasserting itself as a geopolitical superpower has led to an increased presence in Africa, where it has broadened efforts to shape the continent's politics and pursue new economic opportunities to allay the effects of sanctions. While the presence of Russian military instructors and paramilitary groups in Libya and the Central African Republic is well documented, there is emerging evidence that Russian-linked companies are now active in the information space as well."[9]

However, it's not only the Russians that are active in political disinformation in Africa. The notorious and now defunct British political consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica has been exposed as having played a role in attempting to influence elections in both Kenya and Nigeria over the last decade.

A recent report on Cambridge Analytica's activities stated: "Cambridge Analytica was hired by a wealthy Nigerian to support the 2015 reelection campaign of then-president Goodluck Jonathan. During the campaign, the firm worked with the Israeli intelligence firm Black Cube to acquire hacked medical and financial information about Jonathan's opponent Muhammadu Buhari. In Kenya, the firm worked on both Uhuru Kenyatta's 2013 presidential campaign and his 2017 reelection campaign. To date, it is unclear exactly what it did during either campaign."[10]

And increasingly it is also becoming clear that China is emerging as a source of disinformation in Africa and other parts of the world, for as Reporters Without Borders reports: "The regime has managed to convince tens of thousands of journalists in emerging countries to go on all-expense-paid trips to Beijing to "train their critical mind" in exchange for favorable press coverage. As for the Chinese diaspora media, many of which used to be critical of the regime, almost all have been bought out and disseminated into the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)."[11]

With such foreign influence campaigns already having become a feature of the African electoral landscape, and with Namibia having strong historical ties with both Russia and China, it seems only a matter of time before such sophisticated disinformation actors are roped in to muddy Namibian electoral and political waters further.

8 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/technology/russia-facebook-disinformation-africa.html
9 https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/prigozhin-africa
10 http://democracyinafrica.org/cambridge-analytica-africa-know/
11 https://rsf.org/en/reports/rsf-report-chinas-pursuit-new-world-media-order

4. Snapshots of political disinformation in the run-up to the November 2019 elections

What follows is a visual presentation of some of the numerous examples of political and electoral disinformation that were widely spread / shared / forwarded especially on and between Facebook and WhatsApp groups in the pre-elections period of September, October and November 2019 and the post election period of December 2019 to early February 2020, when the challenge to the presidential election outcome was resolved in the Supreme Court.

The examples relate to and are clustered around specific high-point events / episodes / incidents on the electoral and political landscape leading up to and following the elections of 27 November 2019.

The examples are clustered under the following headings:

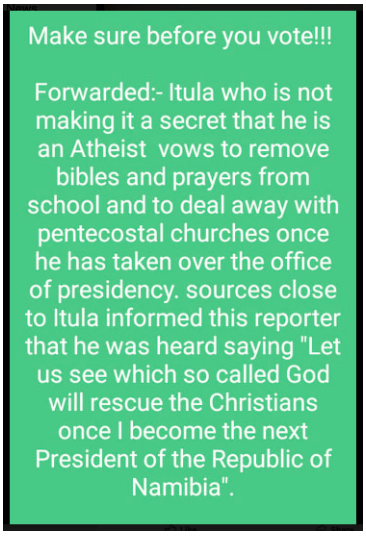
- The Swapo Party Electoral College
- Launch of Panduleni Itula's 'independent' presidential candidacy
- Missing electronic voting machines (EVMs)
- Itula's EVM challenge
- Special vote
- Fishrot
- National flag issue
- Threats of violence and military intervention
- ECN's mismanagement of results announcement
- Election rigging hoaxes
- Tribalism and Racism
- Media mistakes
- Misleading statements by politicians

4.1 The Swapo Electoral College

Factional fighting within the ruling party once again dominated narratives around the party's electoral college in early September 2019. Swapo Party secretary general Sophia Shaningwa over recent years appears to have become a popular target figure amongst political disinformation creators and she was once again cast as a divisive figure at the heart of internal ruling party machinations, as the following example suggests.

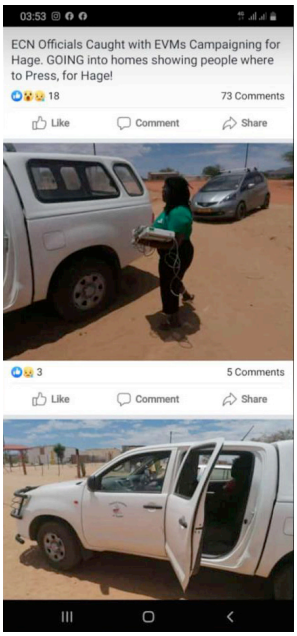
4.2 Launch of Panduleni Itula's 'independent' presidential candidacy

On 8 October 2019, Panduleni Itula registered as an 'independent presidential candidate' for the 27 November 2019 presidential election, even though he had been unofficially campaigning since about February 2019. Itula's registration to stand in the presidential election and his confirmation as a candidate in late October 2019 has fuelled quite a lot of mis-/disinformation. Following are some examples of the varied sorts of false information targeting Itula and his supporters and that were widely shared / forwarded on social media.



4.3 Missing electronic voting machines (EVMs)

In one of the biggest political stories of 2019, on 18 October 2019 *The Namibian* reported[12] that a number of electronic voting machines (EVMs) had gone missing in mid-2017 and had not been recovered. The EVMs went missing while in the care of the ruling Swapo Party. The story gave rise to much false information and conspiracies on social media. While some of the false information was clearly satirical, most was serious in tone and appeared to considerably fuel the expression and sharing of negative sentiment towards the use of EVMs in the November 2019 elections. Not helping was the way various government authorities, including the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN), were issuing mixed messages[13] about the circumstances surrounding the missing EVMs and mishandled information and communication on the issue[14] up to and beyond the 27 November 2019 elections.



12 https://www.namibian.com.na/194402/archive-read/Voting-machines-go-missing
13 https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/anatomy-of-a-misinformation-episode/
14 https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/anatomy-of-a-misinformation-episode-part-2/

4.4 Itula's EVM challenge

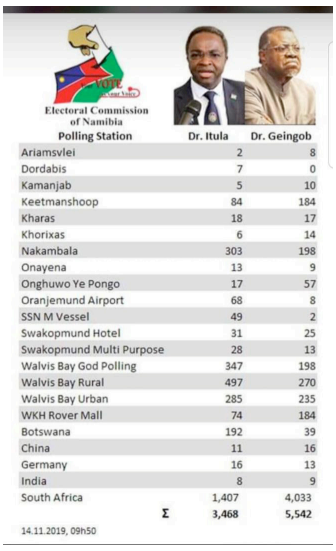
In mid-November 2019, barely two weeks before the elections of 27 November, Panduleni Itula launched a legal challenge to the use of EVMs in Namibian elections. The case was heard on 19 November and the judgement was delivered on 26 November, just a day before election day. Itula's challenge was unsuccessful. However, the legal bid fed into a climate of rampant suspicion surrounding the EVMs and the intervening period between 19 November and 27 November 2019 saw conspiracies and hoaxes swirling around on social media, and on the day that the judgement was initially set to be passed, 25 November 2019, disinformation content such as the following did the rounds in social media groups.

ECN and SWAPO was kicked out today from court. Dr IItula won the case. I have no words but this the wind of change. Viva Dr IItula via

Come 27,11,19

4.5 Special vote

On Wednesday, 13 November 2019, a special election was conducted by the ECN for sailors, soldiers, prison wardens and police officers, as well as at foreign missions to allow Namibians overseas to vote. As soon as voting was done in parts of the world, tallies were coming in mostly via WhatsApp, as people took and shared photos of results pasted up at polling stations locally and internationally. As these results started to flood social media, confusion and conspiracy quickly followed. And unofficial results tallies and pronouncements of a winner followed, even as the ECN failed to respond to quell the confusion that was spreading as people sought to verify results amongst themselves and with contacts overseas and at locations around the country. The following day, 14 November 2019, the ECN issued a statement which effectively labelled the results people had been sharing around as false because they had not been verified, further deepening conspiracies, rumours and suspicions around the results.


Electoral Commission of Namibia

Polling Station	Dr. Itula	Dr. Geingob
Ariamsvlei	2	8
Dordabis	7	0
Kamanjab	5	10
Keetmanshoop	84	184
Kharas	18	17
Khorixas	6	14
Nakambala	303	198
Onayena	13	9
Onghuwo Ye Pongo	17	57
Oranjemund Airport	68	8
SSN M Vessel	49	2
Swakopmund Hotel	31	25
Swakopmund Multi Purpose	28	13
Walvis Bay God Polling	347	198
Walvis Bay Rural	497	270
Walvis Bay Urban	285	235
WKH Rover Mall	74	184
Botswana	192	39
China	11	16
Germany	16	13
India	8	9
South Africa	1,407	4,033
Σ	3,468	5,542

14.11.2019, 09h50

4.6 Fishrot

Arguably the biggest story of 2019, on Monday, 12 November 2019, the Fishrot Files corruption scandal broke internationally and locally. In the aftermath of the high-level political corruption scandal, as public anger and disillusionment poured out via social media, hoaxes and conspiracies became the order of the day. The furore around the Fishrot scandal has yet to die down, as the case trundles through the courts and more information comes out as to the wide-scale and political dimensions of the alleged corruption. The figures at the heart of the scandal – former justice minister Sakeus Shanghala and former fisheries minster Bernhard Esau, and their co-accused – were the subjects of numerous conspiracies and hoaxes in the days and weeks following the breaking open of the corruption scandal. The following examples are but some of the many such false content that circulated on social media through November and December 2019 and into 2020.

4.7 National flag issue

On the eve of the 27 November 2019 elections, information minister Statnley Simataa issued a statement calling on political parties and figures to not use the national flag in their political campaigns, and he suggested, by quoting from the National Symbols of the Republic of Namibia Act (17 of 2018), that people waving or wearing the national flag at political party campaign rallies was illegal[15]. On 9 December 2019, as the political climate was still fraught with tension following the elections and the announcement of results on Sunday, 30 November 2019, he repeated the same claim. And the issue resurfaced in official correspondence that became public and was widely shared via social media. According to legal experts, minster Simataa and government's quoting of law was inaccurate and highly misleading.

Around the same time

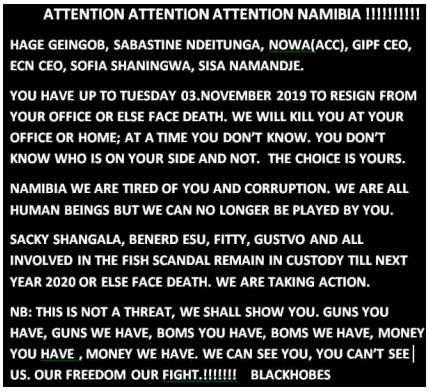
[15] https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/report/exaggerated-grn-response-to-national-flag-costumes-overblown/

4.8 Threats of violence and military intervention

Also on the eve of the 27 November 2019 elections, the military issued a surprise public statement in which it informed the public of its heightened alertness following alleged threats to destabilise the country and cause violence that were apparently spread via social media. The military statement wasn't specific about who the threats were coming from or what exactly was being threatened. The military's vague statements before and after the elections appeared to cause some public alarm, anger and confusion, and in a political climate already at a heightened state of sensitivity, attracted much criticism and scorn online.

The military's entrance onto the electoral landscape, under the guise of maintaining safety and security, was seen by many as an attempt at public intimidation and an interference in political processes

It appears that the military was using the following or similar statements, which were posted and shared on Facebook groups and also being forwarded in WhatsApp groups, as the pretext to march onto the electoral landscape.



The following are photos of the two military statements issued before and after the elections of 27 November 2019.

NAMIBIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Tel: (061) 204 9111
Fax: (061) 204 2124
E-mail Address: ndefence@mod.gov.na

Chief of the Defence Force
Private Bag 13307
WINDHOEK

Enquiries:
Ref: Your ref:

02 December 2019

MEDIA RELEASE

MEDIA BRIEF ON THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY AFTER ELECTIONS

The Namibian Defence Force is happy to announce with appreciation that the citizens of the Land of the Brave ensured that peace and stability prevailed before and during the polling process up to the announcement of the results. On the 26th November 2019, at our press conference, we informed the nation that the security of the country was elevated to the highest level. The elevation became imperative following incitements of violence and chaos, and threats of assassinations and civil war by certain individuals or groups using the social media.

After the announcement of election results, the threats that were made before elections continued to be shared on social media. The NDF is particularly disturbed by declarations by some individuals that, since their candidates did not win, they would resort to unconstitutional means such as: assassination of the President, storming and burning of the State House, launching civil war, blocking of roads, and sabotaging of government installations and national key points.

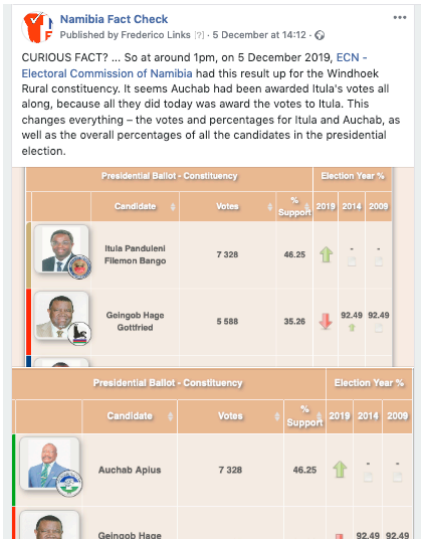
All Official correspondence must be addressed to the Chief of the Defence Force

4.9 ECN's mismanagement of results announcements

At the heart of much of the disinformation that swirled around the 27 November 2019 elections was the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN). One of the areas where the ECN's conduct especially contributed to fuelling conspiracies and confusion was around the announcement of elections results in the days following 27 November 2019.

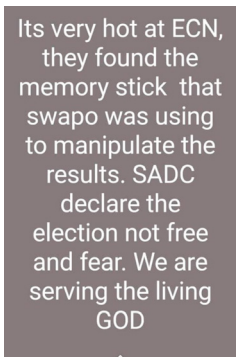
On 30 November 2019 the final results of the National Assembly and presidential elections were officially announced by the ECN. However, in the week afterwards results were still being checked and changed, as the following example[16] indicates. This was by no means the only questionable handling of the elections results[17] and the management of the ECN's online results portal[18].

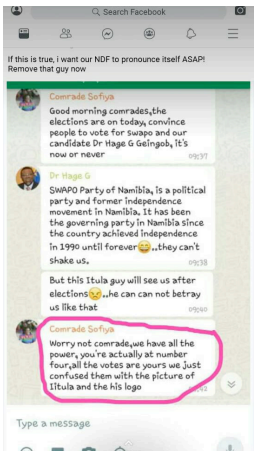
With its conduct – disseminating inaccurate and misleading figures and results – the ECN was contributing to the spread of disinformation.



4.10 Election rigging hoaxes

While the ECN was mishandling the communication of elections results in the days following 27 November 2019, election rigging conspiracies and hoaxes started doing the rounds on especially Facebook and WhatsApp, with the following being examples of the sort of disinformation forwarded amongst Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and also on some Twitter accounts.





16 https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/explainer-tale-of-a-mistaken-tally/
17 https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/strange-numbers-part-1-the-last-7-constituencies/
18 https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/strange-numbers-part-2-the-other-number/

4.11 Tribalism and Racism

Tribalism was a significant sub-theme in and around public discourse concerning the 2019 elections, as tribalistic statements and stances on social media caused inflamed and divisive discussions and confrontations. At the same time, the racialised nature of socio-political issues also came to the fore, and topics such as corruption, which attracted wide public condemnation after the revelations of the Fishrot Files corruption scandal in mid-November 2019, became heated spaces of contesting racial and ethnic narratives.

A lot of the statements and stances clearly crossed into ethnic and racial hatred and incitement, as these examples illustrate.

4.12 Media mistakes and bias

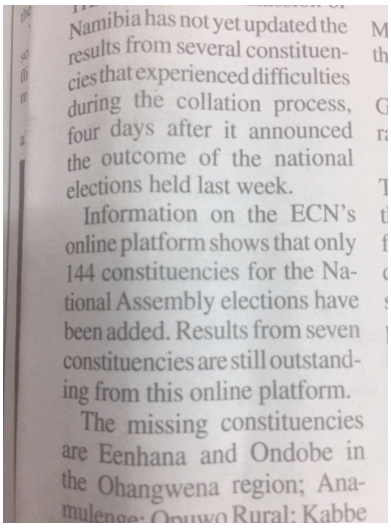
Poor journalistic practices and media bias play a significant role in information pollution and during the electoral period before and after the 27 November 2019 elections, media mistakes and biases contributed to considerable questioning and criticism of the media's role and intentions.

The following examples are illustrative of the sorts of poor coverage of electoral and political issues that regularly featured on the elections related information landscape.

In this example, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) misrepresented the leader of the official opposition, McHenry Venaani, with a misleading and inaccurate report of a statement he made in parliament.

The following example is a retraction statement by talk radio station Eagle FM after it had rushed to share unverified and inaccurate results of the 13 November 2019 special election.

In this example, an election results update report by *The Namibian* newspaper on 4 December 2019 erroneously stated that Namibia had 144 constituencies, while the country has 121 constituencies.


Namibia has not yet updated the results from several constituencies that experienced difficulties during the collation process, four days after it announced the outcome of the national elections held last week.

Information on the ECN's online platform shows that only 144 constituencies for the National Assembly elections have been added. Results from seven constituencies are still outstanding from this online platform.

The missing constituencies are Eenhana and Ondobe in the Ohangwena region; Ana-

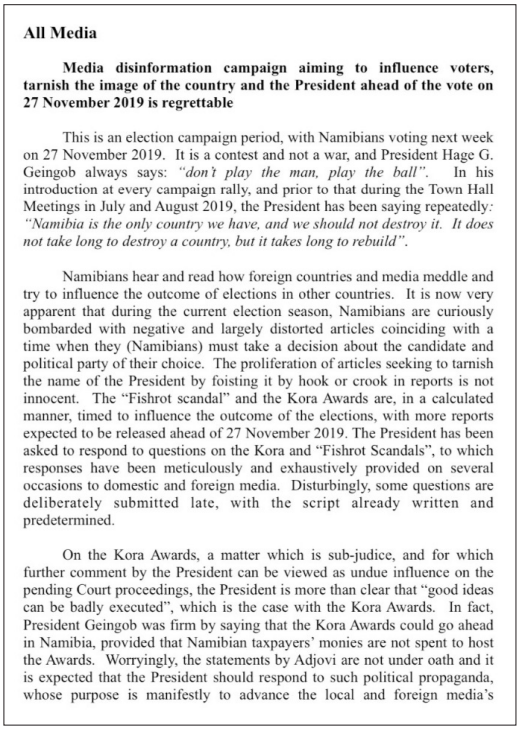
In the following example, *Insight Namibia* tweeted what appeared to be speculative information and conspiracy, which was subsequently labelled as false and fabricated information by the Namibian Presidency. This 'story' concerned the outcome of the failed legal challenge of the presidential election result on 5 February 2020.

To emphasise, by publishing wrong, inaccurate and misleading information, media organisations and journalists engage in disinformation, as many rely on the media to be arbiters of truth in times of political confusion and chaos, so special care should be taken in reporting in such sensitive periods as elections.

4.13 Misleading statements by politicians

In the period preceding and following the elections of 27 November 2019, the Namibian Presidency at various occasions publicly accused the media, especially The Namibian newspaper, of biased reporting aimed at casting president Hage Geingob in a bad light and engaging in disinformation. The presidency also labelled reporting on such issues as corruption as disinformation.

However, these presidential statements were disinformation, for they were themselves inaccurate and misleading, and clearly aimed at discrediting the media.



All Media

Media disinformation campaign aiming to influence voters, tarnish the image of the country and the President ahead of the vote on 27 November 2019 is regrettable

This is an election campaign period, with Namibians voting next week on 27 November 2019. It is a contest and not a war, and President Hage G. Geingob always says: *"don't play the man, play the ball"*. In his introduction at every campaign rally, and prior to that during the Town Hall Meetings in July and August 2019, the President has been saying repeatedly: *"Namibia is the only country we have, and we should not destroy it. It does not take long to destroy a country, but it takes long to rebuild"*.

Namibians hear and read how foreign countries and media meddle and try to influence the outcome of elections in other countries. It is now very apparent that during the current election season, Namibians are curiously bombarded with negative and largely distorted articles coinciding with a time when they (Namibians) must take a decision about the candidate and political party of their choice. The proliferation of articles seeking to tarnish the name of the President by foisting it by hook or crook in reports is not innocent. The "Fishrot scandal" and the Kora Awards are, in a calculated manner, timed to influence the outcome of the elections, with more reports expected to be released ahead of 27 November 2019. The President has been asked to respond to questions on the Kora and "Fishrot Scandals", to which responses have been meticulously and exhaustively provided on several occasions to domestic and foreign media. Disturbingly, some questions are deliberately submitted late, with the script already written and predetermined.

On the Kora Awards, a matter which is sub-judice, and for which further comment by the President can be viewed as undue influence on the pending Court proceedings, the President is more than clear that "good ideas can be badly executed", which is the case with the Kora Awards. In fact, President Geingob was firm by saying that the Kora Awards could go ahead in Namibia, provided that Namibian taxpayers' monies are not spent to host the Awards. Worryingly, the statements by Adjovi are not under oath and it is expected that the President should respond to such political propaganda, whose purpose is manifestly to advance the local and foreign media's

Geingob claims media sabotage

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by Hileni Nembwaya

Hage Geingob interacts with the media. Photo: File

The following was a report from the Afrikaans-language daily newspaper *Republikein*, in the days following the 27 November 2019 elections, in which opposition political leader Bernadus Swartbooi, of the Landless Peoples Movement (LPM), made various claims about election rigging by the Electoral Commission of Namibia (NBC). However, neither Swartbooi nor the LPM lodged a case with the police of election fraud or an electoral challenge of the parliamentary election results, and simply put these serious allegations out in public without substantiating them or subjecting them to legal scrutiny. This example of a politician being left unchallenged in spreading disinformation further inflamed and agitated a climate already rife with conspiracies of election rigging and electoral fraud.

Republikein

25 mins

Die leier van die Landless People's Movement (LPM), Bernadus Swartbooi, beweer hy het geloofwaardige bewysstukke dat 'n groep van vyf kuberkrakers van Indië ingevlieg is om met die 2019-verkiesingresultate te peuter.

"Dit is nou duidelik dat stemme gemanipuleer word en dat daar kuberkrakers binne die ECN-gebou gestasioneer is. Dit is deur talle bronne bevestig," het Swartbooi tydens 'n perskonferensie vroeër vandag gesê.

Video Catherine Sasman

39 23 Comments • 51 Shares • 1.5K Views

Like Comment Share

It should be emphasised that these are just a handful of the examples of disinformation content collected over the period from September 2019 to the first few days of February 2020.

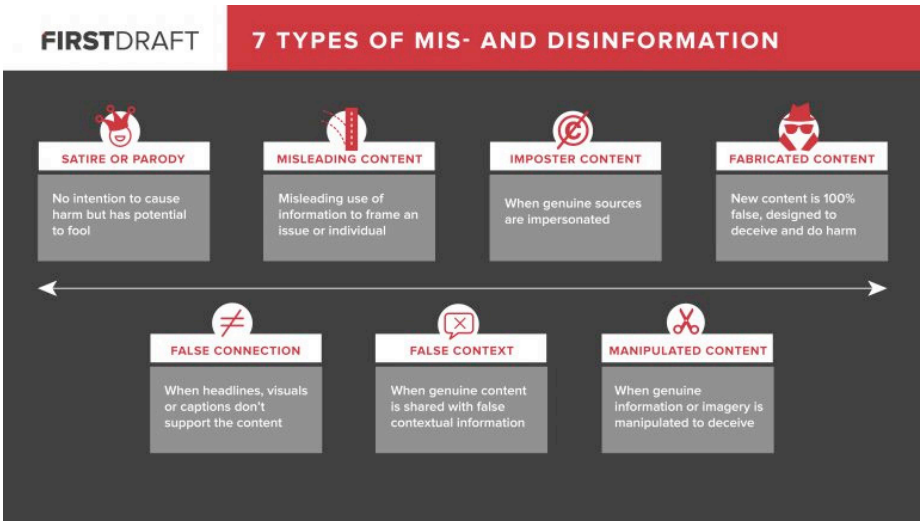
5. Methodology

For this study, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) set up a social media tracking centre (SMTC) under its Namibia Fact Check project.

While the SMTC was the core component of this study, it formed part of a two track research initiative, which looked as follows:

- The purpose of the SMTC was to identify and monitor the spread of politics and election-related disinformation on social media over a three-month period (September to November 2019), up to and immediately after the 27 November 2019 presidential and National Assembly elections;
- The identifying, collecting and archiving of general false and disinformation content – not just that related to elections, but also including such content – encountered on social media and in the traditional media by Namibia Fact Check researchers over an approximately five-month period (September 2019 to January 2020).

In order to identify disinformation, the researchers applied the working definition and First Draft's seven (7) types of mis-/disinformation[19] to potential disinformation content.



The SMTC consisted of researchers going through the following four steps to identify, monitor and collect examples of politics and election-related disinformation:

- **Identify and join target groups or like / follow target profiles:** Each member of the research team was assigned a pre-identified group or profile on Facebook to like, follow and/or join, as well as having to seek out and join discussion groups on WhatsApp;
- **Regularly check up/in on target groups and/or target profiles:** Researchers had to do a daily review of the content posted/shared to target groups or by target profiles;
- **Collect links and screenshots:** In the event of encountering disinformation content, researchers had to collect links and screenshots of such content;
- **Maintain a detailed spreadsheet for reporting:** Researchers were provided with a customised Google spreadsheet in which all the data had to be collected and to which the lead researchers had access.

Using these steps the research team was able to collect a large array of disinformation content from various social media and traditional media.

[19] https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/

6. Acknowledgements

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We also wish to acknowledge the interest, commitment and support of the IPPR executive director, Graham Hopwood, who motivated the importance of funding this project and who played an advisory role at key points in this project.

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Without the dedication of these research assistants – all of them students at either the University of Namibia or the Namibia University of Science and Technology – this project would not have been possible.

Lastly, we wish to acknowledge all those, wherever they are in the world, who have gone before us in studying the interesting field of mis-/disinformation and social media, and on whose knowledge and insights we have relied to a great extent to conduct this study and produce this report.

Thank you.

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About IPPR

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) is a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research into social, political and economic issues that affect development in Namibia. The IPPR was established in the belief that free and critical debate informed by quality research promotes development.

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