COUNTERING #ELECTIONS2024 MIS- & DISINFORMATION

Political abuse of social media and the 2024 elections

Social media has become important for political communication and messaging, especially during electoral periods. However, often political actors (politicians and parties) use social media to engage in negative campaigning, by employing smears and spreading fake news or to intimidate and incite. This bulletin looks at how Namibian political actors, including politically connected or associated interests or entities, used social media in the run-up to, during and after the 27 November 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections.

How did political campaigns use social media?

Most Namibian political parties, politicians and associated political actors still appear quite unfamiliar with how social media can be used to aid them in their messaging and communication around elections. This is evident from their use, or lack thereof, of social media platforms to communicate and engage with supporters and voters.

Most Namibian political parties and politicians, even quite prominent ones, don't have very high profile social media pages or profiles, with the exception of a few. And even those who do have huge followings and high engagement on social media do not necessarily use these to spotlight their policy proposals and commitments to voters, but rather to attack their opponents or to react to attacks from opponents. Politically partisan or associated social media pages and profiles were also posting and spreading political and election-related propaganda and mis- and disinformation via various platforms.

The political parties, those with functioning social media pages or profiles, mainly also **used these to post and spread photos and short videoclips of campaign rallies and graphics of party slogans**.

There was very little actual engagement with the political and socio-economic agendas and programmes, as captured in election manifestos, evident in how political parties, politicians, and those associated with such parties and candidates used their social media accounts.

While a lot of election-related discussion, debate, propagandising and mis- and disinforming was happening via open online platforms, such as Facebook or X (Twitter), indications are that **it was especially or primarily in WhatsApp spaces and groups where election-related political discussion and information sharing**, including the posting of mis- and disinformation content, was taking place.

Namibian political parties, including the ruling Swapo Party, do not have large presences or followings on social media. This screenshot image taken before the November 2024 elections shows that at the time the Swapo Party, the largest and most popular political party, had less than 4,000 followers on X (Twitter). Some other political parties did not even have official social media pages or accounts, or even websites.

What sort of abuse of social media did we see from political actors?

As stated, it was only some politicians who overtly used their online and social media profiles and pages to directly attack opposing parties or political opponents. It was rather partisan actors or profiles that appeared to favour or support specific political causes or agendas, as clearly illustrated by the obvious slanting or bias of the information they posted or shared, that were disseminating divisive social media content.
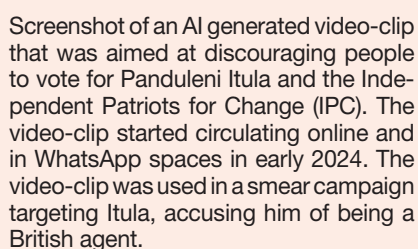
Information manipulation tactics and methods were used by a variety of clearly partisan actors online to push or promote election or politics related mis- and disinformation. The most visible information manipulation campaigns clearly stemmed from among and were supported by ruling Swapo Party allied actors and, on the other side, Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) allied actors or interests.

The most visible or prominent tactics used in these election-related information manipulation campaigns were:

- Narrative laundering;
- Smear campaigns; and
- Political propaganda.

This project focused on monitoring the use or deployment of the first two tactics by the various actors concerned.

The primary methods or ways in which these tactics were deployed were:

- Use of **fake or manipulated images or voice messages** and / or **misleading videos or graphics** across social media and messaging platforms;
- **Narrative laundering via traditional and social media** pages or channels;
- **Mimicking news media**;
- The **use of foreign influencers** and / or disseminating of **mis- and disinformation via foreign channels**;
- The **use of artificial intelligence (AI)** tools to generate social media content;
- **Trolling or swarming** on social media.

Aside from these, it should be noted that **media mistakes and bad reporting also significantly contributed to polluting the electoral information landscape** in the run-up to and beyond the 27 November 2024 elections.

Screenshot of an AI generated video-clip that was aimed at discouraging people to vote for Panduleni Itula and the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC). The video-clip started circulating online and in WhatsApp spaces in early 2024. The video-clip was used in a smear campaign targeting Itula, accusing him of being a British agent.

What is information manipulation?

Information manipulation has numerous similar definitions.

In short, information manipulation can be said to be **the coordinated and sustained production, distribution and / or promotion of messaging or information that is false, misleading, propagandised or harmful in order to influence sentiment or perception of an individual, organisation or entity.** Information manipulation campaigns use traditional and / or social media platforms to spread such false, misleading, propagandised or harmful messaging or information.

It is worth emphasising the last point, that information manipulation involves **the deliberate weaponisation of media** in order to engage in an influence campaign.
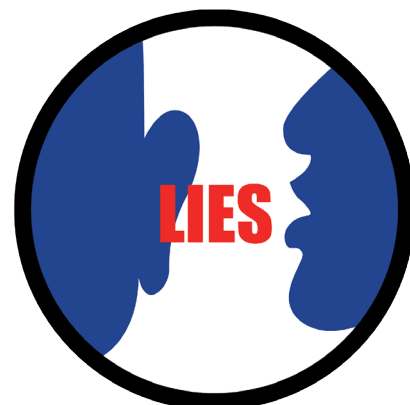
What is narrative laundering?

Narrative laundering is a **disinformation technique** used to make false or misleading information appear credible and widely accepted. It works by strategically spreading a narrative through multiple sources until it gains legitimacy. Here's how it typically unfolds:

1. Placement – The false or misleading information is first introduced, often through obscure or unreliable sources.
2. Layering – The narrative is then amplified by multiple accounts, websites, or influencers, making it seem more widespread.
3. Integration – Eventually, the narrative is picked up by more credible sources or mainstream platforms, giving it an appearance of legitimacy.

This technique is commonly used in **political propaganda, conspiracy theories, and misinformation campaigns** to manipulate public perception. It exploits psychological biases, such as the tendency to believe repeated information, even if it's false.

Narrative laundering works by **weaving layers of lies around truths**. The aim of those engaging in narrative laundering is **to sow confusion and to undermine trust in targeted political candidates or parties.**

'Deep Intelligence' gained prominence in the months ahead of the November 2024 elections and primarily targeted the Swapo Party with a narrative of corruption and its candidate for the presidential election, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, with narratives of being a foreign puppet and a traitor to her party. Various accounts, such as the one above, regularly spread the 'Deep Intelligence' disinformation.

Which actors did we see abuse social media?

It was clear that **actors associated** with or supporting various political parties or causes were behind much of the election-related mis- and disinformation that was circulating across social media and messaging platforms before, during and after the 27 November 2024 elections. These actors fell into the following categories:

- Partisan social media accounts;
- Partisan social media influencers;
- Politically-affiliated actors in social media and closed messaging groups;
- Politicians and politically affiliated individuals;
- Foreign partisan social media accounts and influencers;
- Foreign actors (ab)using traditional media (online).

An X (Twitter) account going by the handle @ali_naka regularly posted content in support of the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) ahead of and after the November 2024 elections. Ali Naka was the most prominent of foreign social media influencer accounts that posted politically partisan content.

Which platforms / media were favoured by disinformation actors?

Election-related mis- and disinformation were **primarily spread and visible via social media platforms**, but also circulated in closed messaging groups, such as WhatsApp groups. TikTok also became a platform that was used to spread lies and propaganda. Some of the election-related mis- and disinformation made it into traditional media reporting or was spread via more traditional (if partisan) media platforms, whether online or offline.

According to what *Namibia Fact Check* observed, **much of the mis- and disinformation was spreading in WhatsApp spaces, such as politics discussion groups or political party supporter groups.** While it's impossible to categorically state that WhatsApp was the main channel for mis- and disinformation, indications are that that was indeed the case, as **WhatsApp is the most widely used and prevalent social media or messaging platform** in use in Namibia.

The most popular platforms / media for spreading election-related mis- and disinformation were:

- WhatsApp;
- Facebook;
- X (Twitter);
- TikTok.

Some of the information in this document was gathered and compiled using Microsoft's AI app Copilot.

For more on this and other topics investigated, access the full report at www.ippr.org.na and www.namibiafactcheck.org.na