



Africa Check

Sorting fact from fiction

Public engagement with politics, information and news – South Africa

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About this paper and the authors

Misinformation and disinformation in the media and politics have detrimental effects on people's finances and health, as well as democracy. This briefing is part of a research programme set up by Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact to find evidence for this and make it useful. In this briefing, the research team at the Africa Centre for Evidence looks at what we know about the extent of South Africa's public engagement with news, information and politics. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to Peter Belesiotis and Natalie Tchakarian for their work on this project. This research was supported by a grant from Luminare.

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Overview

- This briefing sets out background information on the demography, language use, and socio-economic make-up of South Africa, along with evidence of public engagement with politics, information and news, with a focus on misinformation.
- Religiously homogenous but ethnically diverse population, who speak a variety of languages.
- Television and radio are the most frequently used mediums for news consumption, followed by internet sources and social media.
- The growing use of social media has enabled a greater reach for mis/disinformation. A significant number of South Africans have admitted to sharing political news stories on social media despite believing that they were or could be false news.
- The tense and racially divisive political climate both enables and exacerbates the potential for harm from the spread of harmful mis/disinformation, particularly in times of election.
- The majority of South Africans are not satisfied with democracy and have little trust in parliament.



Demographics

Large, diverse and growing population, mostly younger than 54

Statistics South Africa estimates South Africa's mid-2019 population to be nearly 59 million, continuing a steady trend of moderate birth rates (19.9 births/1000 population in 2019) yielding roughly 1.4 % population growth annually.¹ Population estimates are accompanied by revised estimates for the period 2002 to 2019 and the most recent national census from 2011.¹ South Africa has the sixth-largest population of all African states and the 24th largest population globally,³ with the population roughly doubling between 1980 and 2018.⁴

South Africa's growth has slowed as the country's fertility has continued to decline since a peak in 1960;⁵ fewer births are projected in South Africa between 2015 and 2030 than between 2000 and 2015.⁶ Reasons cited by the US Central Intelligence Agency for the steadily decreasing fertility rate in South Africa include the increased usage of family planning methods, and women participating in education and the workforce to a greater degree.² However, global evidence on women's wage-labour participation in low- and middle-income countries remains heterogenous.⁷

Although South Africa's age makeup is youthful, it is less so than other African countries (including Nigeria). South Africa's aging population trend sets it apart from other sub-Saharan countries and is similar to population trends in the Middle East and South Asia.² As of 2018, 45% of South Africa's population was under 24 years of age, 42% was between 25 and 54 years of age, and 13% was above 55 years of age.² On aggregate, the current median age in South Africa was 27.4 years.² The UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs projects that between 2015 and 2030, the number of children and adolescents in South Africa will stay relatively stable.⁶

Diverse legacy of ethno-linguistic groups, most of whom identify as Christian

South Africa is home to a rich variety of languages and socio-cultural groups. Distinct ethnocultural groups are frequently identified by their mother tongue (for example, with the Xhosa group speaking isiXhosa).⁸ The most common languages spoken at home by South Africans (% of total population in adjacent parentheses) include: isiZulu (25%), isiXhosa (16%), Afrikaans (12%), Sepedi (10%), Setswana (9%), English (8%), Sesotho (8%), Xitsonga (4%), siSwati (3%), Tshivenda (3%), and isiNdebele (2%).² These constitute all eleven of South Africa's official languages.⁹

Many of South Africa's indigenous languages are spoken by people spread across the country, rather than being distinctly localised to certain provinces or regions. Approximately 2% of South Africa's population speaks a language other than one of the eleven official languages (examples include San, Nama, and Khoi)² with South Africa being host to roughly 25 distinct languages.⁹ Many South Africans speak more than one language.^{10,11} English is the dominant language of South Africa's commerce and government. As such, many South Africans are expected to learn English to attain jobs in urban centres such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban.¹¹



South Africa's racial groups as per the Statistics South Africa's 2019 mid-year population report are black African (80% of population), coloured (an official term referring to mixed race ethnicity, 9% of population), white (8% of the population), and Indian/Asian (3% of population).¹²

Unlike the fractured religious makeup of Nigeria, South Africa has a large majority Christian population.⁹ Nearly 86% of South Africans identify as Christian, followed by 5% of the population who adhere to one of multiple traditional African religions.² Muslims account for 2% of South Africa's population, and 5% of the population does not identify with a particular religion.²

South Africa has large established urban centres including Johannesburg (population of 9.2 million), Cape Town (population of 4.4 million), Pretoria (population of 1.2 million), and Port Elizabeth (population of 1.2 million).^{2,9} In general, the eastern regions of South Africa have a denser population than the west.² As of 2018, roughly 34% of South Africa's population resided in rural areas.¹³

High unemployment and small group within globe's richest 1% mean extreme inequality

South Africa is an emerging market with a large economic sector and an abundance of valuable natural resources.² However, as is the case in Nigeria, the prosperity of the South African economy on a macro level has not translated into economic wellbeing for most South Africans.²

Roughly 64% of South Africans have total wealth of less than US\$10,000, with another 33% in the region of \$10,000 to \$100,000, and only 3% earning \$100,000 to \$1 million, and 0.1% greater than \$1 million.

Nearly 56% of all South African adults – roughly 30.4 million people – were living below the state-defined poverty lines of R992 per person per month in 2015 prices.¹⁵ This was an increase compared to 2011 when a modestly lower 53% of the population was living below the state-defined poverty line, but was still an improvement compared to the 67% of the population living below the state-defined poverty line in 2006.¹⁵

Globally, Credit Suisse estimates that 61,000 South Africans have total wealth that places them within the global 99th percentile.¹⁴

With a 2013 Gini coefficient of 0.62,¹⁶ South Africa is the second-most unequal country in the world, only behind Lesotho.² In 2011, South Africa's wealthiest 10% of households accounted for 51% of the country's income while the poorest 10% of households accounted for just 1%.² Experts point to the history of apartheid in explaining some of South Africa's current inequality and poverty.¹⁷

In addition, South Africa suffers from high unemployment rates, particularly among youth. As many as 27.5% of South Africa's labour force of 22 million people were without a job in 2017.² Over 53% of youth were unemployed in 2018,² giving South Africa the second-highest youth unemployment rate globally¹⁸ and 17th-highest overall unemployment rate.¹⁹ Adding to uncertainty in the South African economy is a long term "brain drain" of skilled professionals.²⁰ In the period between 1989 and 2003, more than 520,000 people left South



Africa. Of the 520,000, roughly 25% had professional degrees, representing 7% of all professionals in South Africa at that time.²⁰

Low secondary school completion but universal primary education

Since the end of apartheid, South African children have nearly universal access to primary education. However, the percentage of students who go on to complete education is modest, particularly among secondary school cohorts.²¹ Among South Africans between 25 and 34 years of age in 2015, roughly 50% had not completed all of their secondary school education.²¹

Research by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has found that although South Africa has made improvements to its educational system in recent years, its primary and secondary school pupils still receive among the lowest scores on measures of reading and mathematics when compared with those of other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.²¹ Furthermore, South Africa has the lowest secondary school completion rate of all OECD countries.²¹ IMF researchers argue that South Africa's relatively low level of educational attainment and quality is a significant contributing factor to the economic issues the country faces.²¹

The reasons for this underperformance are complex. In comparison to Nigeria, where inadequate state funding is often blamed for poor access to and quality of education, there is broad agreement that a lack of funding is not responsible for South Africa's public education challenges. The relative amount of total gross domestic product that South Africa dedicates to public education is similar to other OECD countries.²¹ Researchers suspect that the factors which contribute to South Africa's under-performing public education system include its history under apartheid, a lack of teaching expertise,²¹ and widespread teacher absenteeism.²²

The Department of Basic Education has engaged in some efforts to ameliorate educational underperformance. In 2019, a programme was announced in which 72,000 teachers will be trained in computer coding so that coding may be offered as a subject on a pilot basis in 2020.²³

Despite the challenges of completion and attainment across the secondary school system, South Africa enjoys a large and successful public university system. Two South African universities rank among the top 400 universities worldwide,²⁴ with the University of Cape Town ranking 198th globally in the 2020 QS World University Rankings.²⁴ Of the 13 African universities in the 2020 QS World University Rankings, eight are located in South Africa.²⁴

However, there is a serious barrier of cost. Despite acclaim for the quality of education provided by South African tertiary institutions, high university fees put university access out of reach for many South Africans.²⁵ Additionally, two-thirds of students who begin a degree at a South African university do not complete their programme of study within the expected time frame,²⁶ and a significant portion do not complete their degree at all.²¹ The IMF has found that roughly 12% of South Africans begin undergraduate studies at a university, however only 4% of South Africans complete a bachelor's degree, primarily due to cost issues.²¹



Political context

Oppressive political past means tough challenges to reduce inequality

The political culture of South Africa over the past twenty years has been dominated by the legacy of apartheid – government policies mandating racial segregation and systematic discrimination against non-white people²⁷ – and efforts to reverse its effects.²⁸

Following South Africa's first democratic election in April 1994, the country's political leadership has been tapped from the African National Congress (ANC).²⁸ The ANC has pursued policies that attempt to ameliorate economic inequality between black and white South Africans through the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment programme.²⁹ Most claim the programme has proven unsuccessful at reducing inequality. The South African government has also made land reform – the process of returning to black South Africans agricultural land that was taken from black families under the 1913 Natives Land Act – a major long-term government priority.^{30,31} Land reform has been a controversial endeavour, particularly in light of the ANC's efforts to revise South Africa's constitution so that it is legal to seize land without compensating current owners.³² At present, this effort has not become law.³³ President Cyril Ramaphosa, having appointed an advisory panel on land reform, has recently received a report that recommends broad redistribution of resources and, in certain cases, expropriation of land without compensation to current owners.³¹

South Africa has three main political parties: the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). South Africa's post-apartheid politics has been dominated by the ANC, which has won every general election since 1994 by a comfortable margin.³⁴ The ANC and its entrenched political elite have become embroiled in frequent corruption scandals and have stolen billions of dollars from the South African state.³⁵

Political engagement and trust

The Afrobarometer R7 survey, administered to a representative cross-section sample of 1,200 citizens of voting age, provides an extensive look at South African civic engagement and political attitudes.

Overall, the level of political engagement was high. Surveyed on how frequently respondents discuss political matters with their friends or family, 39% of respondents indicated “occasionally”, 38% indicated “never”, and 23% indicated “frequently”.³⁶ No data was available for how frequently per week South Africans discuss political or governmental issues.

A similar picture of high engagement with politics was visible in election participation. Turnout in the 2019 general election was high: 66% of registered voters cast a ballot.³⁷ This represents a modest decrease from the 74% voter turnout in the 2014 general election.³⁷

Asked to rate the state of their democracy by the 2016 to 2018 survey, as many as 44% of respondents indicated that South Africa was a democracy “with major problems”.³⁶ An additional 9% indicated that they did not believe South Africa was, in practice, a democracy.³⁶ When asked how satisfied they were with South African democracy generally,



31% of respondents indicated they were “not at all satisfied” and 26% of respondents indicated they were “not very satisfied”.³⁶ Finally, just 15% of respondents to the same survey indicated they trusted South African parliament “a lot”, while over 64% of respondents indicated they trusted South African parliament “just a little” or “not at all”.³⁶ Trust in the South African president was only modestly higher: 22% trusted him “a lot”, nevertheless 58% of respondents trusted him either “just a little” or “not at all”.³⁶

South Africa’s widespread corruption has undermined public trust in social institutions, including elected officials⁵⁰ and the South African Police Service.⁵¹

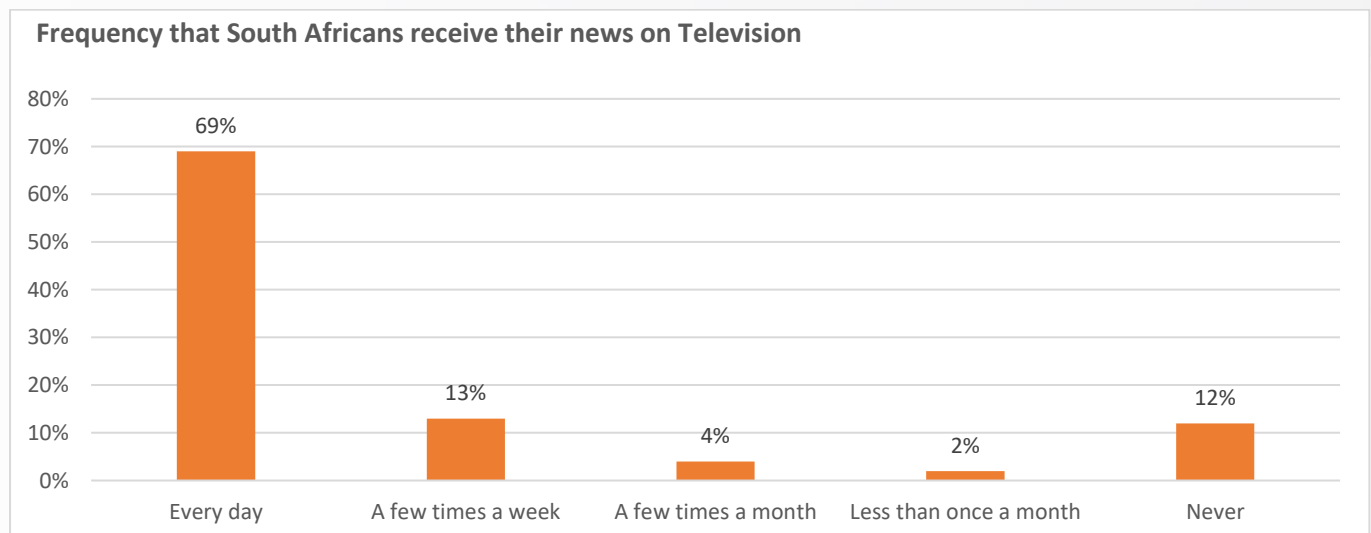
When polled from 2016 to 2018, 64% of South Africans stated they believed corruption had gotten worse in the preceding 12 months.⁵⁰ Furthermore, 70% of respondents said they believed the South African government was doing a poor job at tackling corruption, and 18% admitted to having paid a bribe to access a public service within the preceding 12 months.⁵⁰ Research has shown that corruption in the South African Police Service is also prominent and concerning to South Africans,⁵⁰ with 19% of South Africans indicating they have bribed a member of the South African Police Service in one survey.⁵¹

Media and the news

Media landscape and sources of news consumption

The Afrobarometer R7 survey in 2016 to 2018 also sampled South Africans on their news media consumption habits. No evidence examining how different social groups in South Africa utilise media was identified.

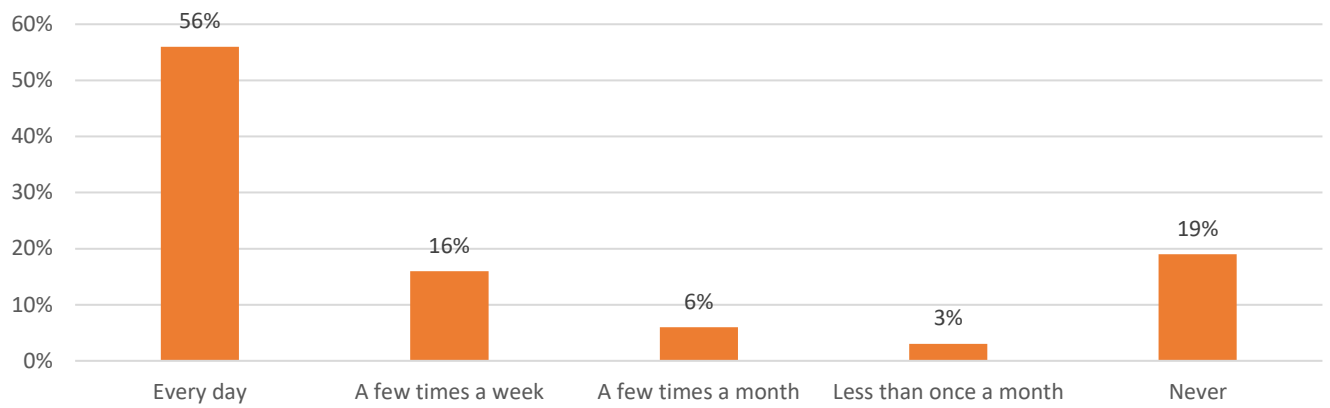
To highlight, television and radio were the most frequently utilised mediums for news consumption.



Source: Afrobarometer R7



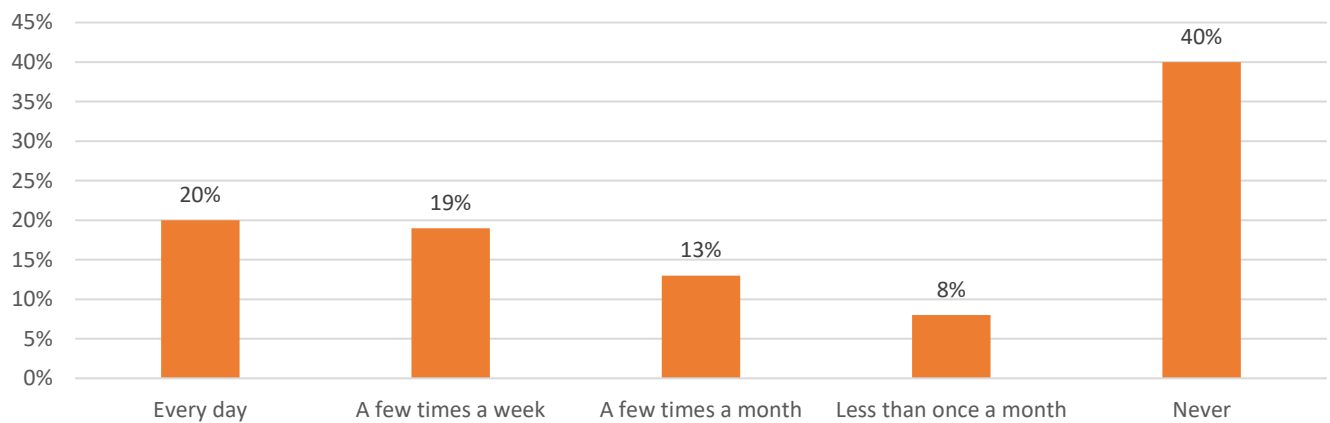
Frequency that South Africans receive news on Radio



Source: Afrobarometer R7

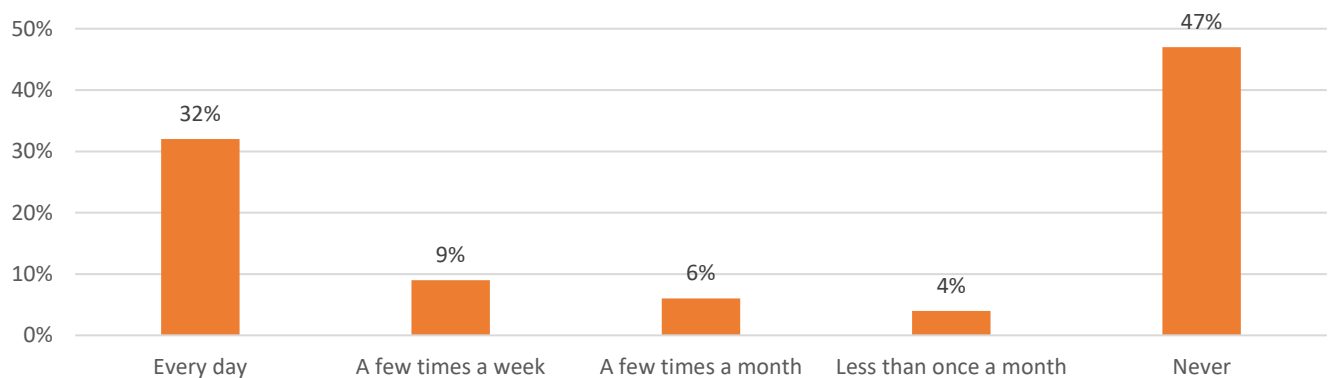
South Africans used newspapers, Internet sources and social mediums less frequently for news consumption.

Frequency that South Africans receive news through Newspapers



Source: Afrobarometer R7

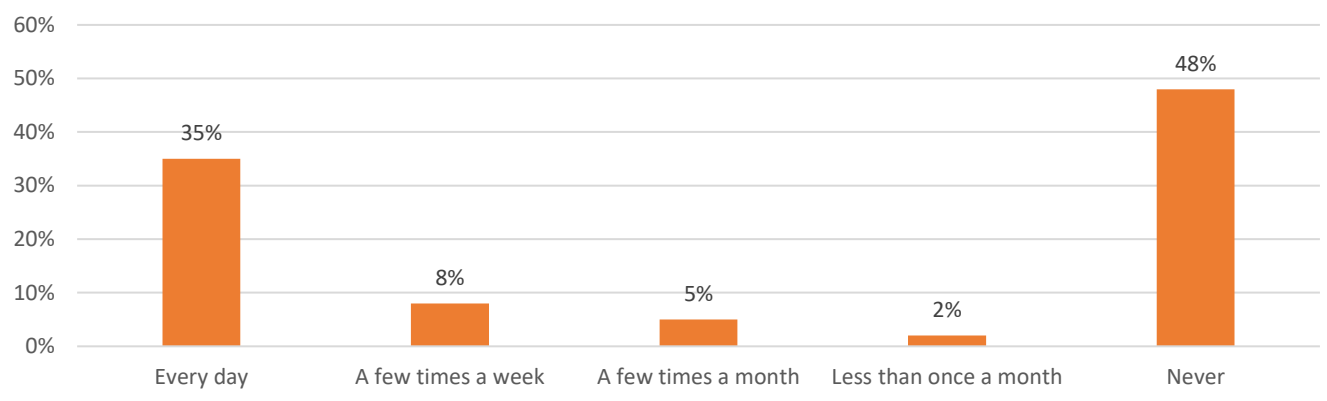
Frequency that South Africans receive news through Internet sources (excluding social media)



Source: Afrobarometer R7



Frequency that South Africans receive news through social media (such as Facebook and Twitter)



Source: Afrobarometer R7

Information on the role of peer-to-peer news transmission is limited, however reports have noted the group and private messaging platform WhatsApp has been used to spread mis/disinformation aimed at inciting violence.³⁸

Freedom of press

South Africans' perception of trends with respect to the media's ability to criticise the government is mixed, but generally points towards an improvement compared to a few years previously.

When asked whether the media's freedom to "investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticise government" has changed compared to a few years prior, 14% of respondents noted "much less freedom", 16% of respondents indicated "somewhat less freedom", 16% of respondents indicated the same amount of freedom, 15% of respondents indicated "somewhat more freedom", and 34% of respondents indicated "much more freedom".³⁶

Notably, a free press is not necessarily a priority for many South Africans: 38% of polled South Africans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control".³⁶ However, also notable is that more than 28% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society."³⁶

What is known about how mis- and disinformation is produced, consumed, and spread in South Africa?

After conducting a systematic search of available peer-reviewed research evidence, no scientific research evidence was found on the impact of the sociocultural/religious makeup, economic conditions, educational attainment, political history, access or reliability of the media and other official information on the production, consumption or harm of mis/disinformation in South Africa. Given what can be inferred from public news reports, this appears due to the lack of academic work in the field to date, rather than a lack of evidence.



Secondary research on South Africa's socio-cultural makeup argues that South Africa's history of racism plays a significant role in society, and many argue that racism is still a prevalent issue facing South Africa today.⁴² There are examples of attempts to capitalise on underlying racial tensions in South Africa to abet the spread of mis/disinformation.

For instance, statistical data on foreigner populations has been discredited for over-inflation and has played a detrimental role in both current and past outbreaks of xenophobic violence.⁴³

In another recent scandal, South Africa's Gupta family – allies of former president Jacob Zuma – retained boutique UK public relations firm Bell Pottinger to manage the perception that the Gupta's were engaged in "looting" or otherwise unscrupulous business dealings with the Zuma-led government.⁴⁴ Investigative reporting later revealed that Bell Pottinger staged a massive social media disinformation campaign that "exploited racial divisions on behalf of the Gupta family" by using terms like "white monopoly capital" to shift national discourse away from the Gupta family's business dealings.⁴⁵

Based on desktop reading of the status of South Africa's economy and education, one may assume that the lacklustre performance²¹ of South Africa's public education system has the potential to create a population without the requisite skills to critically evaluate some types of mis/disinformation, despite the high literacy rate of 94%.²

South Africa's sometimes tense and racially divisive political climate, based on its divisive history, is seen by some as enabling mis/disinformation to spread and bear harm, particularly during elections. The South African Electoral Commission noted that mis/disinformation had spread on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp ahead of the 2019 general election.⁴⁶

In response, the Commission launched Real411, an online platform where South Africans can submit complaints regarding mis/disinformation and view reports on the Commission's assessment of previously submitted complaints.⁴⁷ One South African political party – the Economic Freedom Fighters, or EFF – has been singled out as weaponising disinformation for political gain.⁴⁸ The director of Media Monitoring Africa, the organisation that manages Real411, has said "there is no doubt that the EFF in some instances participates in spreading disinformation".⁴⁸ The EFF's willingness to traffic in disinformation is acutely concerning given the controversial views of its leader, former ANC member Julius Malema.⁴⁹

The growth of social media and its influence in South African society can contribute significantly to the prevalence of mis/disinformation and its associated harms. Social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter are frequently utilised in South Africa to circulate mis/disinformation and have enabled its greater reach.⁵² In a 2016 survey by Pew Research Centre, 35% of South Africans stated they shared a political news story they later found out was false, and 26% of respondents stated they shared a political news story despite believing at that time that it was false.³⁹ As with other African states, the role of social media/peer-to-peer communication platforms in spreading mis/disinformation is especially prevalent in South Africa during elections.⁵³ However, unlike other African countries including Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda that have cut internet access during charged political periods, South Africa has maintained free access to the web during recent elections and has not publicly considered implementing restrictions.⁵⁴



One may assume that South Africans' evident lack of faith in their ability to obtain information from their local government indicates a broader lack of faith in access to reliable official information and a resulting information vacuum in which mis/disinformation may be more likely to proliferate.

Access to and trust in official information

In 2000, the South African government passed the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), which gives all South Africans the right to have access to records held by the state, government institutions and private bodies upon request.⁴⁰ Sending a request takes several steps, beginning with the completion of appropriate forms, the payment of access fees and the compliance with PAIA requirements, and even then, the request may be denied.

Grounds of refusal include the protection of privacy of a third party, information provided in confidence, commercial information of a third party or if any information poses a risk to national security. However, perhaps one of the most important provisions of PAIA is the public interest override, which states that access to information must be granted despite a ground of refusal under two conditions: if the disclosure of information was to reveal evidence of a contravention or if the public interest in the information clearly outweighs the harm in refusing access to the information.⁴¹ It is important to observe that the take up of this initiative has been modest.

Evidence of South Africans' perceptions of their level of access to official information and trust in that information is limited.³⁹ One survey found that when South Africans were asked how likely the possibility was that they could access their county's development plan and budget at the local government office, 42.1% of respondents indicated "not at all likely", 17.8% of respondents indicated "not very likely", 18.7% of respondents indicated "somewhat likely", and only 16% of respondents indicated "very likely".³⁶

The most recent Afrobarometer survey asked South Africans if information held by public authorities should be kept only for government officials to use. 28% strongly disagreed and 22% disagreed and thought that this information should be shared with the public.³⁶

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