

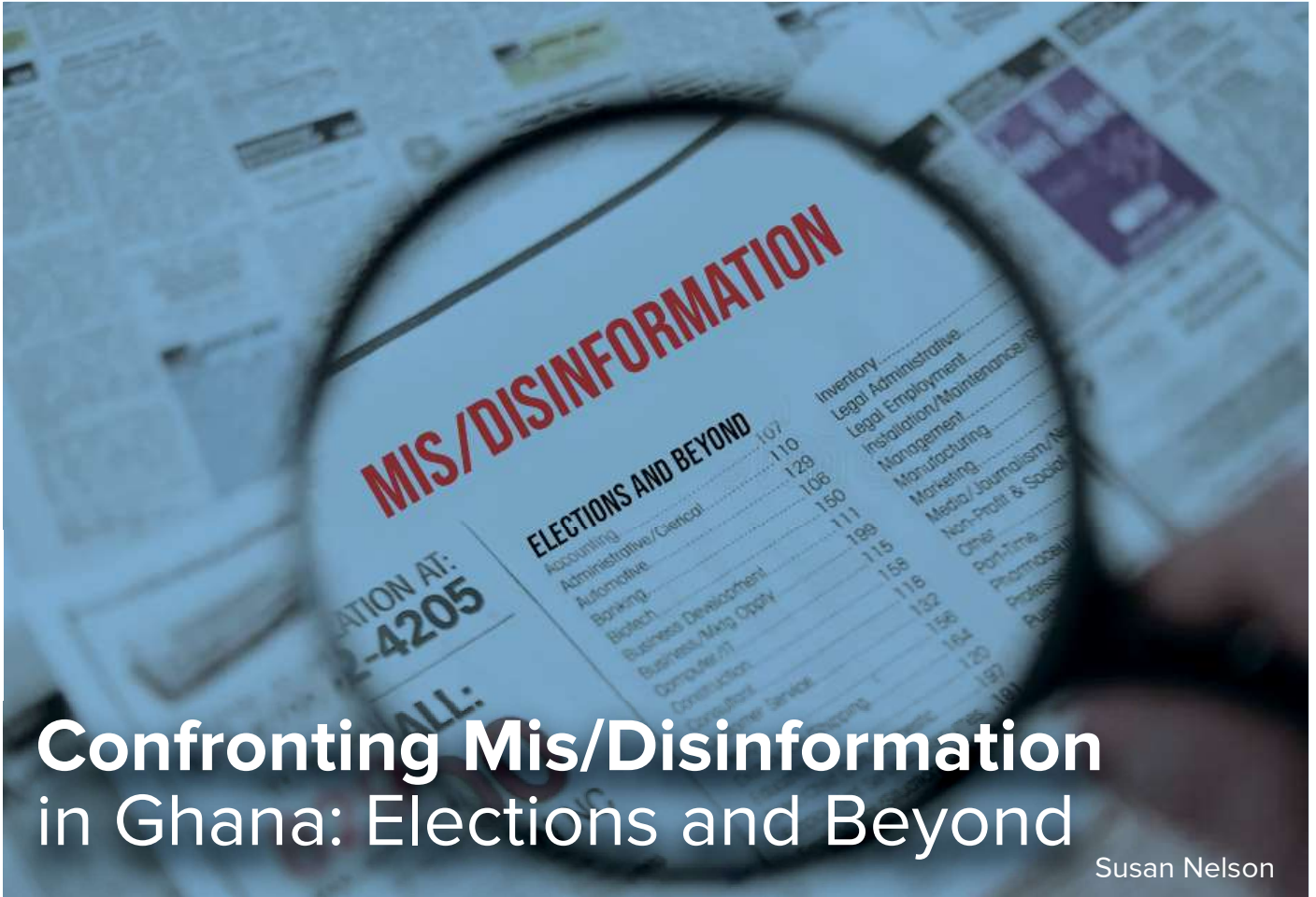


KA IPTC
...where peace begins



KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE

POLICY PAPER 6 | DECEMBER 2024



Confronting Mis/Disinformation in Ghana: Elections and Beyond

Susan Nelson

Abstract

The unprecedented availability of information empowers people to stay informed and engaged with global issues like never before. However, this constant stream of information can also lead to information overload. The speed at which news travels means that false narratives can equally spread as quickly as factual ones, making it crucial for users to develop critical thinking skills to distinguish between credible sources and misinformation. The threat of mis/disinformation is considered an increasing global risk over the next few years.¹ It therefore makes it imperative for users to navigate and critically engage with content in this complex information landscape. This policy brief seeks to explore the drivers of misinformation and disinformation and the systematic measures to counter misinformation and disinformation in Ghana. The policy brief argues that misinformation and disinformation pose a threat to human security in Ghana.

Key Words: Election, misinformation, disinformation, Ghana.

¹Linden, van der, S., McIntyre, L. and Lewandowsky, S. (2024, February 15). *Disinformation threatens global elections – here's how to fight back. The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/disinformation-threatens-global-elections-heres-how-to-fight-back-223392>

Introduction

The dissemination of misleading information is one of the biggest issues currently confronting the world. The concepts of disinformation and misinformation are as old as communication and precede social media, the internet, and other modern forms of communication. However, digital communications over the internet as a form of information dissemination have greatly amplified these phenomena. Misinformation is defined as misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent, which is created and shared without malicious intent.² Disinformation, on the contrary, has been defined by Ireton and Posetti (2018) as “deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them, while misinformation is misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent.”³ The upsurge of social media usage has transformed communication, in ways that make information more accessible. However, this ease of information sharing has also led to significant challenges. Misinformation can spread rapidly, often eliminating fact-checking efforts and creating confusion around critical issues like climate change, election integrity, and even basic scientific facts.⁴ Currently, mis/disinformation exacerbates existing grievances and polarisation, can act as a trigger for violence, leads individuals to make decisions based on false information, and creates or intensifies mistrust of institutions and international peacebuilding efforts.⁵ Indeed, disinformation is a complex issue that can manifest in various contexts, making it challenging to pin down a single definition.

Disinformation can be deployed as a powerful tool by both state and non-state actors to manipulate public opinion, create division, and undermine trust in institutions. Disinformation is particularly dangerous and effective in divided and war-torn countries, where the countervailing forces that might otherwise neutralise it are weak. During emergencies, such as natural disasters or armed conflicts, the spread of false information can hinder effective responses,

exacerbate fear, and escalate tensions among communities. The COVID-19 misinformation proved particularly deadly when in Ghana potentially harmful alternatives were spread and misinformation on the disease and the vaccine that could otherwise have prevented or treated COVID were rife.⁶ Misinformation gave way to vaccine hesitancy in parts of Ghana where false information about the vaccine’s potential to cause death, and infertility among others was spread. For instance, in Ghana, during the COVID-19 era, several influencers posted on their platforms what they had personally witnessed. One common belief was that it was hard to tell what information was false. This resulted in pausing before posting the campaign to ensure the validity of the information.⁷

Misinformation and disinformation have become prevalent issues in the digital age, with social media platforms serving as breeding grounds for the spread of false information. In Ghana, like many other countries, the dissemination of misleading content has had significant implications for public discourse, political stability, and social cohesion.⁸ One common type of misinformation in Ghana is sensationalist headlines that aim to grab the attention of readers and elicit strong emotional responses. These headlines often exaggerate or distort the facts to create a sense of urgency or outrage among readers. For example, a headline claiming that a popular politician has been involved in a scandal may attract more clicks and shares than a more balanced and nuanced headline that accurately reflects the situation.⁹ In conflict situations, disinformation can escalate tensions and incite violence, while in climate discussions, it can distort scientific facts and hinder effective policy responses.¹⁰ The efforts of journalists and civil society organisations to combat these effects, primarily through media literacy initiatives and fact-checking, cannot keep up with the scope and scale of ‘fake news and it destroys democratic processes. The scarcity of accurate information can lead users to untrustworthy sources, which oftentimes may prove difficult to distinguish between accurate information and mis- or disinformation. Even harder

²Dame Adjin-Tettey, T. (2022). Combating fake news, disinformation, and misinformation: Experimental evidence for media literacy education. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2037229>

³Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (Eds.). (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation: Handbook for journalism education and training*. UNESCO Publishing.

⁴Weir, K. (2024). *This election year, fighting misinformation is messier and more important than ever*. *Emerging Trends*, Vol. 55 No. 1 <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/01/trends-fighting-misinformation-disinformation-election-year>

⁵Ibid.

⁶Brackstone K, Atengble K, Head M, Boateng L. (2022) COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy trends in Ghana: a cross-sectional study exploring the roles of political allegiance, misinformation beliefs, and sociodemographic factors. *Pan African Medical Journal*. doi: 10.11604/pamj.2022.43.165.37314. PMID: 36825126; PMID: PMC9941608.

⁷UNICEF Ghana (2022). *Debunking COVID-19 myths with Ghana’s influencers*. <https://www.unicef.org/ghana/stories/debunking-covid-19-myths-ghanas-influencers>

⁸Sikanku, E.S.G. (2021). *Comprehensive Report on Information on Disorder in the 2020 Ghana Elections*. <https://idac.dubawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/COMPREHENSIVE-REPORT-ON-INFORMATION-DISORDER-IN-THE-2020-GHANA-ELECTIONS.pdf>

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

is the recognition how our own biases steer how we perceive and sometimes unintentionally spread misinformation. The concept of echo chambers where pre-existing beliefs, sentiments and propaganda are reechoed poses extreme danger in conflict situations.

Elections and Information Warfare

Generally, the contesting aspirants in the 2024 elections largely deployed digital communications in their campaigns. From announcing the arrival of the presidential candidate to members within communities where a campaign is scheduled to sharing campaign messages, new media have become primary tools utilised by the political parties. Social media tools have been widely deployed for sharing campaign messages online. For instance, some social media messages have targeted the health and private matters of the contesting candidates in earlier reports.¹¹ In August 2024, the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, declared war on fake news. The president further explained, “Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread unintentionally, while disinformation involves the deliberate dissemination of false information to deceive.” He also noted that “... false narratives can distort public perception, undermine trust in our institutions, and even incite violence.”¹² This intentional spread of falsehoods can have serious consequences in several spheres of life, including undermining public trust, influencing elections, or exacerbating social divisions.¹³ Each context—be it electoral processes, public health, armed conflict or climate change—has its own nuances and implications. Democratic elections are based on a competitive process, faith in electoral institutions, and informed participation.

Online disinformation has the potential to amplify voter confusion, reduce turnout, galvanise social cleavages, suppress the political participation of women and other marginalised populations, and degrade trust in democratic institutions. While disinformation campaigns are not new, modernised information technology has changed their potential

scope and scale. For instance, in the 2020 Ghana elections, disinformation was not only user-generated but also operated around media houses and political units that reshape or reframe events to suit ideological views.¹⁴ The 2024 elections, arguably can be said to be the toughest electoral test so far, with low trust in institutions and deep polarisation fueling fears of a disorderly election. For example, the NDC’s accusations of the Electoral Commission’s plans to rig the election created a lot of anxiety and tension. Such information, discourse, and dialogue within the public space and the news media are held up as important conditions for smooth elections and healthy competition. However, the absence of this could have grave consequences on the quality of the public discourse in terms of its ability to be a true levelling force for democratic participation.¹⁵

During the lead-up to the 2024 elections, Ghanaians have to deal daily with loads of online/ digital political advertisements from the two leading parties. Earlier in the year, information targeting the private health matters of contesting candidates flooded social media.¹⁶ This flood of information with Artificial Intelligence-generated photos seemed to give credence to the false assertions about the health status and private matters of contesting candidates. This rise of artificial intelligence-generated content and images makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish truthful from biased, misleading, or untrustworthy news. However, fact-check agencies have been able to contest these allegations and come out to debunk such allegations.

Gender Dynamics

Disinformation also impinges on gender equality.¹⁷ Typically, gendered disinformation in Ghana draws on the intersectionality of the age, religion, ethnicity or culture, and the marital status of women.¹⁸ Often, these narratives are with an intent to malign and sometimes coordinated. While disinformation erodes trust and distorts the truth, a more insidious form preys on gender and exploits existing biases, stereotypes, and falsehoods that hinder progress toward gender

¹¹Penplusbytes. (2024). *Curbing Misinformation and Disinformation ahead of Ghana’s 2024 General Elections: The Critical Role of MIL*. Accessed on 21 November 2024.).

<https://penplusbytes.org/curbing-misinformation-and-disinformation-ahead-of-ghanas-2024-general-elections-the-critical-role-of-mil/>

¹²ModernGhana. (2024). *National action plan to combat misinformation is before Cabinet – Akufo-Addo*. Accessed on 12 December 2024. Available from: <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1331512/national-action-plan-to-combat-misinformation-is.html>

¹³Broda, E and Strömbäck, J. (2024). Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news: lessons from an interdisciplinary, systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 2024, Vol. 48, No. 2, 139–166. Accessed on December 2024. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2024.2323736>.

¹⁴Sikanku, G. E. (2021). *Comprehensive Report on Information Disorder in the 2020 Ghana Elections*. Accessed on October 2024. Available from: <https://idac.dubawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/COMPREHENSIVE-REPORT-ON-INFORMATION-DISORDER-IN-THE-2020-GHANA-ELECTIONS.pdf>

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Interview with Fact Check expert of Media Foundation for West Africa, 24 July 2024, Accra

¹⁷Hassan, I. (2022). *Disinformation Is Undermining Democracy in West Africa*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. Accessed on 10 October 2024. Available from: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/disinformation-is-undermining-democracy-in-west-africa/>

¹⁸Asante, K. K. (2024b, March 29). *How misinformation will be gender-based in Ghana’s upcoming elections*. Poynter. Accessed on 15 June 2024. Available from: <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2024/how-misinformation-will-be-gender-based-in-ghanas-upcoming-elections/>

equality across the world.¹⁹ Gendered disinformation is a form of abuse that uses false or misleading gendered and sex-based narratives against women intending to discourage them from public participation. Allegations attributed to the Afenyo-Markin, labelling the opposition female vice-presidential candidate as too old, rehash previous campaigns deployed during the 2020 general elections. Even though several active male politicians are septuagenarians, there is not much reference to their ages which renders these attacks on Opoku_Agyeman highly unnecessary and baseless. In a similar disinformation slander, a member of parliament alleged at a campaign rally in 2016 that the first female commissioner of Ghana's electoral management body offered sex to obtain her position. When criticised and pushed to present evidence, he argued months later that the comments were made in jest.²⁰

Women politicians and candidates are also faced with online campaigns that attack them for their role in public life. It is common to see aspersions cast on individuals' integrity and capacity in efforts to prevent them from participating in politics. For example, in Ghana, the opposition vice presidential candidate has also been at the receiving end of unsavoury remarks about her dress sense. Gender and intersectional dimensions are also important, as there often exist wide gaps in terms of access to digital platforms, and certain types of media (traditional and social) can resonate differently within different groups in a society. Gendered disinformation creates a general picture of women as unfit to occupy public office. Such gendered disinformation limits the diversity of voices, experiences, and expertise in political spaces thereby undermining the quality of democracy and ultimately nation building.

Conclusion

Given the varying contexts, any approach to addressing disinformation requires collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and tech and media organisations to create frameworks that promote transparency and accountability across platforms. Information is critical to the conduct of elections, and electoral integrity thrives largely on the credibility of information. Importantly, the ever-evolving disinformation techniques present a constant challenge for media professionals and researchers alike. It is therefore essential to assume a proactive approach to understanding how disinformation spreads and evolves across various information ecosystems, including social media, news platforms, and even private messaging networks.

Recommendations

1. Grounded and interactive fact-checking can be deployed as a potent tool in curbing the spread of disinformation.
2. There is an urgent need to empower people to consume content critically. This should entail educating every citizen on the basics of fact-checking.
3. Educational programs that teach individuals how to recognise manipulation, verify sources, and navigate digital platforms responsibly are essential in building a more resilient society.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

About the Authors

Susan Nelson is Research Associate at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC), Ghana. She holds a Master of Arts in Development Communication and an executive MBA from the University of Ghana.

How to Cite a Publication

Nelson, S (2024). Confronting Mis/Disinformation in Ghana: Elections and Beyond *Policy Paper 6*, December, Accra: KA IPTC.

About

This policy paper was published with funding from the Government of Norway, through the Norwegian Embassy in Accra.

The opinions expressed in this policy paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, its Governing Board or partners. Authors contribute to KA IPTC publications in their individual capacity

About the Centre

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC) is an ECOWAS Centre of Excellence that provides globally recognised capacity for international actors on African peace and security through training, education and research to foster peace and stability in Africa.



KA IPTC
...where peace begins



Norwegian Embassy
Accra

KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE
PMB CT 210, CANTONMENTS, ACCRA-GHANA | T: 233(0)302718200 | F: 233 (0)302718201

🌐 www.kaiptc.org [kaiptcgh](https://www.youtube.com/kaiptcgh) [kaiptc](https://www.instagram.com/kaiptc) [kaiptc-official page](https://www.linkedin.com/company/kaiptc-official-page)