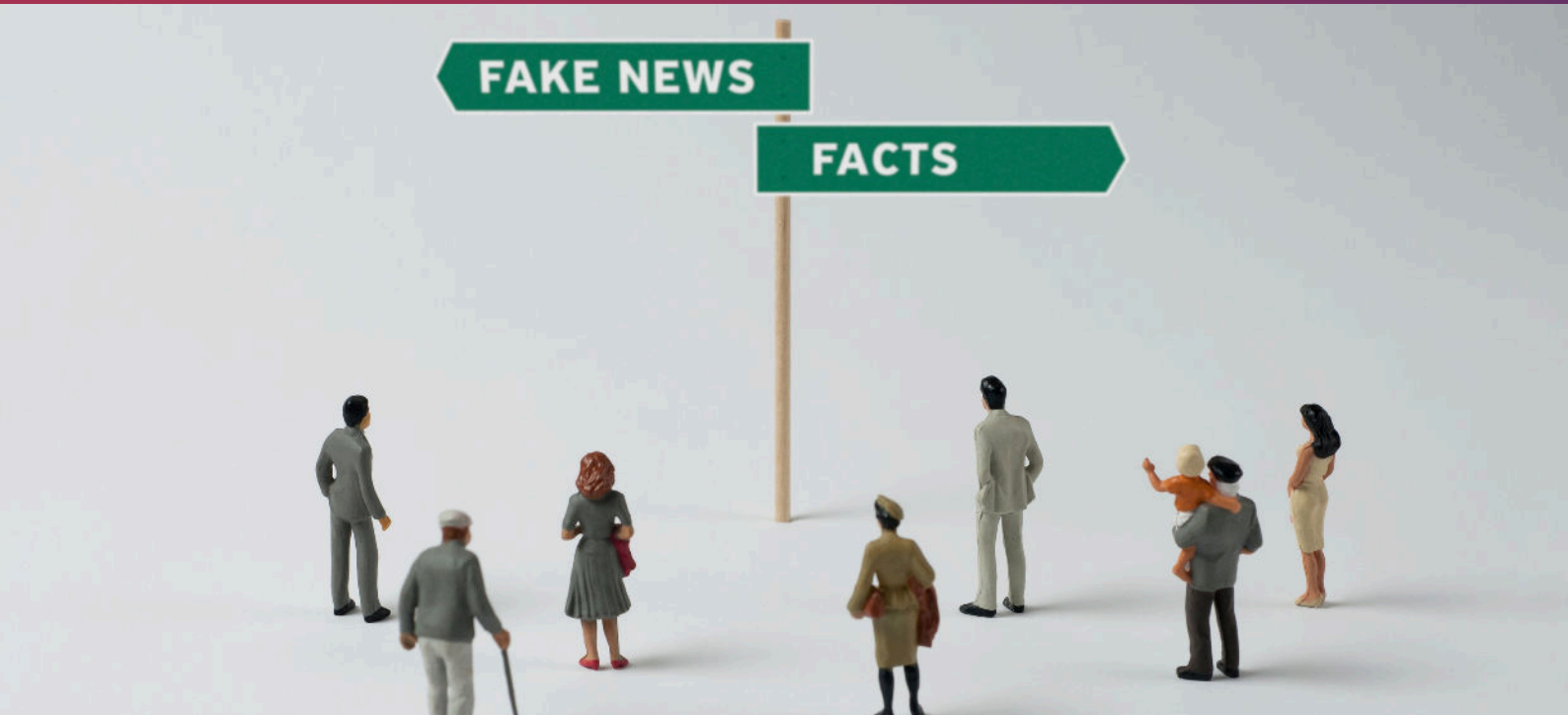


UNDERSTANDING THE ECONOMICS OF DISINFORMATION ON GHANA'S DEMOCRACY



JULY, 2024

Introduction to Disinformation

Discussions centered around disinformation and misinformation have been topical in recent times particularly as a result of the surge in digital platforms allowing people to share and receive information at an unprecedented rate. Borrowing the words of Julie and Alice in their publication on the history of "fake news and disinformation", misinformation, disinformation and propaganda have been part of human communication since the Roman era. For this article, much emphasis will be on the economics of disinformation and its impact on Ghana's democracy.

Disinformation can simply be explained as the deliberate spread of false information with the tendency of deceiving people and causing havoc in society. According to the African Center for Strategic Studies, disinformation in Africa has led to a surge in the manipulation of African information systems in the last three years, causing destabilization and antidemocratic issues.

Democracy in Ghana

Ghana is famous for being a catalyst for democracy in Africa, especially since the beginning of its 4th republic. Like many other African countries, Ghana experienced periods of military rule after gaining independence from British colonial rule. Ghana's democratic system enhanced in 1992 after a referendum pushed for a new constitution to allow multi-party system. That also marked the beginning of its fourth republic, during which the first general elections were held and won by former president Jerry Rawlings. The media system in Ghana underwent significant transformation with the repeal of the newspaper licensing law in 1991. Following its repeal, the enactment of the 4th Republican Constitution in 1992 further liberalized the media landscape by allowing the establishment of private media outlets. Prior to this liberalization, the media landscape in Ghana was predominantly controlled by the government. However, since the liberalization period and into the digital age, Ghana's media landscape has become characterized by state and private ownership.

Actors of Disinformation in Ghana

Like many countries, disinformation has become a serious threat to Ghana's democracy. Most often, discussions concerning the spread of disinformation have been attributed largely to the media and politicians in the country. A publication by Fact-Check-Ghana, also confirmed that government agencies, politicians and influencers are the main actors in social media manipulation and the spread of disinformation in Ghana.

Concerns have also been raised over how the media have increasingly prioritized speed over accuracy in their reportage in this digital age often for clickbait. For instance, last week, the media reinforced the public opinion that they prioritize speed over accuracy. They flooded the media space with news of a supposed Ghanaian chef claiming to have broken the Guinness World Record for the longest cooking marathon. However, just a few hours later, the Guinness World Records (GWR) team debunked this information after some individuals decided to verify it directly with them. Surprisingly, some media houses also took steps to confirm directly from GWR, but this was after they had already contributed to spreading false news.

Similarly, politicians have also become purveyors of disinformation in Ghana. For instance, in March 2023, Media Foundation for West Africa hosted a forum in Accra where key stakeholders identified political party propaganda, the media's pursuit of speed over accuracy and challenges in government regulation as major drivers of disinformation in Ghana.

Furthermore, new research findings indicate that foreign actors have also become part of the disinformation ecosystem in Ghana. A study by the African Center for Strategic Studies revealed that, about 39 African countries have been targeted as conduits for the spread disinformation campaigns, with almost 60% of these campaigns being sponsored by foreign countries such as Russia, China, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Impact of Disinformation on Ghana's Democracy

Disinformation can negatively impact Ghana's democracy through its two main democratic activities in Ghana. In this digital age, citizens' preferences for information access have shifted due to the proliferation of media outlets on digital platforms. People no longer rely mainly on traditional media for information, leading to an abundance of both accurate and inaccurate information online. Unfortunately, some individuals are unaware of how to verify the information they encounter and are often influenced by disinformation.

For instance, those who rely on manifestoes and other information about political parties and candidates to make informed decisions are susceptible to having their decisions influenced by disinformation online, potentially leading to the election of unsuitable leaders and undermining the effectiveness of democracy in Ghana. Additionally, disinformation can distort public opinion on government performance. Whether the opinion is positive or negative, the manipulation of information can be exploited by those spreading disinformation to their advantage.

Focusing on Ghana, research conducted by **Penplusbytes** in 2023 on "Strengthening Democratic Resilience in Africa " revealed that one major problem faced by the media and citizens is economic challenges. Actors of disinformation with resources are exploit the economic situation by luring the media and other citizens with money to spread disinformation in the country, especially during this election period. The media in Ghana, both traditional and new media outlets, need financial support to carry out their journalistic duties. Consequently, politicians can sponsor them to manipulate information or news stories that spread disinformation about their opponent. Similarly, the foreign countries reported to sponsor almost 60% of disinformation campaigns in Ghana, can also take advantage of the economic difficulties faced by citizens, media and even some opposition leaders to spread disinformation by offering them financial support.

Conclusion

Disinformation is a major threat to the democracy of Ghana. Government should implement strategic measures to address the main causes of disinformation and factors that can influence individuals to spread it.



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ABOUT

Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in the following key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, new media and innovations, climate and well-being, and enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and resources.



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