

Countering Disinformation: **Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infoscape**

**National Dialogue in the context of
World Press Freedom Day 2023**

Proceedings of the workshop organised by

**The University of Mauritius &
The Australian High Commission in Mauritius**

Edited by

Christina Chan-Meetoo
Roukaya Kasenally
Gundeea Narrainen

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The National Dialogue on "Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infospace", which was organised in May 2023 would not have been possible without the support of the Australian High Commission in Mauritius. The workshop was organised in the context of World Press Freedom Day 2023 to highlight the growing concern pertaining to disinformation, misinformation and information disorder.

Our wholehearted thanks and gratitude go to H.E Chargé d'Affaires, Keara Shaw, and Senior Political and Public Diplomacy Officer, Yasmina Hosanoo, for their close involvement in the design, structure and outcome of the workshop. Our thanks also extend to the Deputy High Commissioner, H.E Katie Lalor for her presence at the event and expressing interest in a continued collaboration with the University of Mauritius.

As members of the University of Mauritius, we would be remiss if we did not also acknowledge the institution which has provided us with all the support needed in the organisation of the workshop, from swift approval by management to successful delivery of services needed.

Special thanks go to Pinky Boojhawon from the Registry of the Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities who acted as secretary to the organisers and also to the students who volunteered for the smooth running of the workshop.

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FOREWORD

Introduction

The global state of democracy is at its lowest and this has allowed for disinformation to creep in further. Although disinformation is not *per se* a new phenomenon, its amplification and its ability to erode democratic principles are worrying. Equally worrying is how social media has ‘facilitated’ the spread of disinformation.

Persily (2019)¹ refers to a number of factors that have made the internet and social media problematic - “velocity”, “anonymity”, “homophily” and “virality” - upon which disinformation thrives.

Disinformation, in its simplest definition, is “false information, spread deliberately with the intention to mislead and/or deceive” (Hernon, 1995)². Associated with disinformation are the following: misinformation, fake news, hoax and conspiracy theories. There have been numerous reports and policies that have been initiated by national governments, international agencies, academics, amongst others, to understand the depth of the problem and propose potential solutions. Although the corrosive nature of disinformation affects all spheres of society, there are certain areas and matters that are more prone to disinformation. Elections, propaganda campaigns, natural disasters, and epidemics are just some examples.

There have been a number of mitigating measures proposed, ranging from preventive mechanisms such as education and regulatory frameworks to remedial solutions such as fact-checking and debunking. All come with their own challenges. Education has been central to minimising disinformation through media literacy aimed at all ages with a specific focus on children and young adults. A number of media houses have set up fact-checking desks within their own newsrooms while specialised fact-checking institutions have been created across the world. The aim is to equip both content users, creators and professionals with fact-checking

¹ Persily, N., 2019. *The Internet's Challenge to Democracy: Framing the Problem and Assessing Reforms*. Geneva: Kofi Annan Foundation.

² Hernon, P., 1995. Disinformation and misinformation through the internet: Findings of an exploratory study. *Government information quarterly*, 12(2), pp.133-139.

skills. More recently, major tech players like Meta and others have opted for in-house anti disinformation practices through their community standards and oversight boards.

The Mauritian context

Mauritius offers an interesting case study to observe and understand whether a culture of disinformation is gaining in importance. The country has a very high uptake in social media users especially when it comes to Facebook. Latest statistics mention 745,500 Facebook users representing 58% of the Mauritian population³. Facebook (owned by Meta) by far overtakes any other social media platforms, be it Instagram (also owned by Meta) or Twitter (now known as X). This heavy reliance on Facebook as a means of communication and potential source of information can be problematic if the information ecosystem is not properly managed. Round 9 of the Afrobarometer survey for Mauritius highlights that more than seven out of ten (73%) respondents mentioned that they get news on a daily basis from social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others⁴. What also needs to be factored in is the propensity amongst political parties, leaders and candidates to use Facebook as a means of communication. This was visible in the 2014 as well as the 2019 Mauritian general elections (Kasenally and Awatar, 2017)⁵ and will no doubt be more prevalent for the next round of elections due in 2024.

In addition to a heavy uptake in social media use, Mauritius has faced two phenomena in recent years: increased digitalisation and dissatisfaction towards the quality of its democracy. In the case of digitalisation, there is an accelerated move towards connecting people, businesses and services, much in line with the principle of efficient and effective delivery and use of services. Digital platforms and services have no doubt expanded access to information and also democratised access to means of production and dissemination for one and all. But, there are a number of trappings if not well understood. For instance, digitalisation has seen the advent of new

³ <https://Dataportal.Com/Reports/Digital-2023-Mauritius>

⁴ <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/MAU.R9-Summary-of-Results-Afrobarometer-ENG-25nov22.pdf>

⁵ Kasenally, R. and Awatar, D., 2017. Social media, elections and political engagement: The 2014 general election in Mauritius. *Journal of African Elections*, 16(2), pp.47-70.

media services which are not always built on the values of veracity and credibility. These spaces have thus increasingly become a breeding ground for disinformation which circulate as freely as regular information.

As for the perception about the quality of its democracy, only half of the Mauritian respondents to the Afrobarometer Round 9 survey expressed satisfaction about the way our democracy works. This points to an inherent distrust towards key institutions - once again a potential breeding ground for disinformation.

Given the above, it is imperative that the necessary light be shed on the presence and ramifications of disinformation on the island. What sectors are particularly prone to disinformation? What are the existing mitigating factors to address disinformation? How are major current media players identifying, managing and countering the flow of disinformation? What are the red flags that require due attention as the 2024 general elections get closer?

The World Press Freedom Day (WPF) 2023 offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the theme of disinformation especially in light of this year's theme - "Shaping a Future of Rights" - as information forms an inherent and crucial part of people's right to reliable, verifiable and trustworthy content allowing them to play a more informed role. No doubt digital rights but equally digital obligations are important in the fight against disinformation.

OPENING REMARKS

by Her Excellency Ms Keara Shaw

Chargé d'Affaires

Australian High Commission in Mauritius

The Australian High Commission is really proud to support this discussion to raise awareness and stimulate discussion about disinformation in Mauritius. It is really important to have a healthy and broad mix of contributors from across the media landscape as well as academia, government and civil society.

I think we have got the people we need in the room to explore how the phenomenon of disinformation is playing out and impacting Mauritius. It is certainly not a new phenomenon. In fact, efforts to manipulate information are perhaps as old as civilization or at least as politics, but the speed, volume and sophistication of information transmission have radically transformed and amplified the potential use of dis/misinformation.

Disinformation is now recognized as something that can threaten democracy and before we focus on the Mauritian landscape, I want to share a few thoughts on how disinformation is impacting the international landscape. This has become a matter of increasing concern for Australia, as a country that upholds freedom of expression and sees the free flow of information as essential to democracy. When I joined the Australian government some ten years ago, it was not discussed in the way it is now done. Today we have got dedicated teams in the government. My Ministry is looking at how disinformation is playing out both internationally and locally in terms of how it is affecting the Australian community and the danger it poses for community cohesion.

Australia defines “disinformation as the intentional creation and dissemination of wholly or partly false or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead”. It can be done for a variety of reasons, for example to cause strategic political, economic, social, or personal harm or for commercial gain. There are of course many examples of

disinformation being used and taking place within the domestic context of a particular country, but it can also be part of a deliberate campaign by state actors or non-state actors who are representing the interest of their government.

Foreign disinformation campaigns can be integrated into a country's domestic political discussion so that its foreign roots are invisible. An example is attempts to sow discord or disagreement in a population on a particular topic. Disinformation campaigns can be used to divide or weaken political movements that are not seen as favourable to a foreign actor or disinformation may be used to boost groups that are linked to or promote a foreign power. Another example is when disinformation is used to cast doubt around a proposed course of action by a government that might be seen as contrary to the interest of a foreign power. For example, and I cannot speculate on the veracity of this, but there is a lot of media speculation that foreign actors may have supported pro-Brexit narratives in the United Kingdom.

Disinformation does not just impact domestic audiences, it can also be used to shape the way states view each other and can be deployed to undermine support for international initiatives or challenge the authority and moral standing of a particular country so that it loses relative influence. An example from Australia that I think illustrates this quite well, is the mischaracterization of our defence arrangements. Australia is acquiring submarines that are nuclear powered, but which do not have any nuclear weaponry whatsoever. In fact, Australia is a country that has long championed the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Unfortunately, there are now some actors who try to mischaracterize the submarines as breaking our long-standing commitment to nuclear non-proliferation.

Currently we are witnessing a global disinformation campaign and false narratives, concerning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of these narratives are intended to flip the story or muddy the waters by blaming the West or NATO expansion. This is even visible among mainstream journalists who pick up these narratives without fact-checking the story or even acknowledging whether there might be other sides to the discussion. Unfortunately, this dis/misinformation is designed to dampen the international condemnation that should flow from a clear violation of the

UN Charter. The information received shapes how we perceive the world and the decisions we make and how we respond to events. Thus misleading or manipulated information can undermine the ability of governments and citizens to decide their own destinies.

Disinformation can damage the ability of countries to act in their own interests or to present clear information to their populations and the international community. It can undermine the international rules that promote a peaceful world order where sovereignty is respected. Often our discussions about international relations and conflict focus on kinetic conflicts where you have armies and military activities. In the case of disinformation, a country can seriously harm another country without any physical contact.

In recent years, elections around the world have demonstrated that there is a great capacity for digital disinformation within and across borders. Malicious actors have effectively hijacked public discourse and influenced communities and public opinion on matters of importance. Even platforms that were designed to enable the free flow of information like social media platforms have been misappropriated to spread and amplify disinformation and, in the process, dividing communities. A very prominent example that featured a lot in the global headlines was the 2016 U.S. elections. There were reports by the U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller that found evidence of Russia interfering in the elections with a coordinated campaign of disinformation. One of the things that I personally found striking as I observe this playout was that disinformation was not just targeting political parties or actors but, in an article that I read in the *New York Times*, it was shown that Russia's disinformation machine was hitting at the women's movement in the U.S. There was a deliberate move to divide and weaken the movement just as it was mobilising protests against the then President. Part of this campaign involved impersonating the voices of Americans on social media to discredit, sometimes in highly personal ways, the leaders of the movement. A lot has happened since 2016 on the tech front, we have new technologies which are used to amplify campaigns much more dramatically than they could have, even some five to ten years ago. Bots can drown out legitimate online debates by planting huge volumes of fake conversations.

Technology has enabled the malicious micro-targeting in particular of vulnerable audiences and there are sophisticated deep fakes that can be used to convincingly spread disinformation. In recent months the world has started to grasp the potential risk from the high-powered AI technology that can instantly produce reams of credible sounding but sometimes also biased information. I have to confess I did actually consult ChatGPT on this speech but decided I would stick with my own content.

Democratic countries with open information environments are actually more vulnerable to this type of manipulation where multiple media sources can pop up to amplify messaging. Authoritarian countries that limit what media can say or that control journalists are actually a little bit more immune than democratic countries to this form of disinformation campaign. That is why it is even more important that democratic countries with open media environments have discussions like the one that we are having today, to try and build resilience to be able to identify and address deliberate disinformation campaigns.

Another thing that worries me is the proliferation of online platforms and news sources that you cannot really pin down to a specific geographical location or that eludes any form of editorial standard especially when it comes to controversial issues in international affairs. I frequently stumble upon analysis from commentators who, even though they have names and not necessarily are global journalists, often reprint articles from other news sources around the world that accentuate criticism of governments or have particular elements that seem to me to point to some deliberate campaign behind them. That is why I believe that mainstream media is actually incredibly important and I am really glad at the participation of mainstream media in today's event. Established media has this need to maintain their reputational advantage by applying rigorous editorial policies that separate them from anonymous online sources.

So, what do all these new developments mean for Mauritius? Well, I look forward to hearing from the different contributors present today about the risks in the Mauritian information environment but also how the rich media environment and the talented pool of journalists that exists in Mauritius can help mitigate some of those risks. Governments also play an important role, such as in ensuring that there is the right regulatory framework and

also, I believe that academics, civil society and journalists have really important roles in questioning and reporting on disinformation campaigns. So, thank you all for joining in today's discussion and I look forward to hearing what comes out of it.

WELCOME REMARKS

By Professor M.Santally

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academia)

University of Mauritius

Your Excellency Ms Shaw, Chargé D’Affaires of the Australian High Commission, Ms Lalor, Deputy Australian High Commissioner, Professor Carpooran, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Dr Kasenally, our keynote speakers, colleagues from the University, colleagues from the media, ladies and gentlemen, I extend a warm welcome to you all.

The University of Mauritius is pleased to co-host this workshop on ‘Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infoscape’ with the Australian High Commission in Mauritius. This workshop is organised in the midst of World Press Freedom Day that was celebrated on 3rd May 2023. The choice of the theme - disinformation - speaks to a key concern in society where both digital technologies and more recently Artificial Intelligence are taking centre stage. Today, we live in an age of information plenty and we must learn how to use it in a responsible manner. It is only then that we can promote a culture of prosperity, and peace. However, disinformation, misinformation, fake news and other forms of information manipulation are real and tangible threats that can lead to destructive consequences for humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to note the very diverse audience in attendance, we have Foreign Embassies’ representatives, media professionals, students, academics and other key stakeholders. No doubt, this will allow for a rich debate on such an important theme. The University of Mauritius is committed to promoting the development of a knowledge-based society in line with our core values. This workshop testifies to our engagement to promote high-level exchanges with different stakeholders. The senior management of the University of Mauritius looks forward to receiving the workshop report.

As I conclude, I wish to once again thank the Australian High Commission for initiating this collaboration, Dr Kasenally, Mrs Chan-Meetoo and Dr Narrainen for spearheading this workshop and the Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities for his support. Thank you and I wish you a fruitful workshop.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS 1

Mr Noko Makgato

Executive Director

Africa Check

Addressing Disinformation: Perspectives from Africa Elections and Political Disinformation

Political disinformation is a growing area of concern across the world and Africa is not different. One of the areas of intervention of Africa Check is the intersection between political disinformation and elections.

In Africa, each election offers valuable insights and acts as a learning experience on how to deal with political disinformation. 'Africa Facts' is a working model and network that Africa Check has nurtured since 2017 with the aim of promoting the growth of fact-checking throughout the continent. This is operationalised by supporting local fact-checkers to tackle disinformation and misinformation during elections.

Some Lessons Learnt

- ***An increase in the targeting of journalists, the Judiciary and the Election Management Bodies.*** This is a powerful tactic used during elections by people running disinformation campaigns. These institutions, that are key features in any democracy, are accused of bias, incompetence or even portrayed as corrupt and unreliable with the aim to undermine their credibility and those working for them. These tactics promote diversionary alternative narratives that sow discord and confusion. This is happening in practically all the countries that Africa Check has been working in.
- ***The manner in which ethnicity, culture and religion are often elevated and exploited during disinformation campaigns around elections.*** African countries are made up of multiple ethnic groups and the campaigns around disinformation that mobilise along ethnic lines and exploit these divisions make it easier for political

campaigns to involve ethnic, religious even cultural solidarity. This can have a polarising pull at public faith in a way that is intended to get a win out of the election campaign without necessarily attending to the public policy issues that are pertinent. Kenya experienced this with political dog whistling. So did Nigeria and no doubt this will become a feature in other countries.

- ***Digitally connected voters are those that are most vulnerable to false information.*** Despite the increase in Internet users in Africa, they, to a large extent, have issues in understanding information and the digital information ecosystem. African voters' digital experience is less enabling for them due to their limited digital literacy and navigating the online landscape remains challenging. A number of other challenges persist such as inaccessible and poor-quality public information and language barriers as most of the content is in English, French or Arabic. In fact, it is imperative to create or recreate the content in a language that can be understood by the majority of the population. Africa Check tries as much as possible to translate its different fact-checking reports into local languages.
- ***Paywalls by media houses remain an important challenge*** and this happens in a number of countries such as South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. These paywalls often make quality information inaccessible forcing users to rely on lower quality information that is accessible through social media.
- ***Government regulations remain a risky proposition.*** The EU Commission has developed an interesting digital related legislation and this can offer a relevant framework for fact-checkers. However, this would be difficult to implement in Africa. In a number of African countries, the bulk of threat concerning democracy comes from governments themselves. In the case of political disinformation, the commitment to regulating this depends on whether this serves their interests or not. In some countries like Uganda and Nigeria, governments have cracked down on social media platforms and authorities have basically mismanaged that whole process. Therefore, it is important that in combating false information and

hate speech, rights to information and freedom of expression should not be trampled.

- ***Platforms remain unaccountable in Africa*** and Africa Check works with a few social media platforms including Facebook. When it comes to elections, there is significant investment in tools, fundings and resources to tackle misinformation. Unfortunately, as soon as the elections are over, accountability disappears. It should be noted that fact-checking programmes exist in only a few social media platforms such as Facebook whilst WhatsApp has a limited programme. The main concern comes from platforms such as TikTok and YouTube that continue to be a challenge for fact-checkers. There is an urgent need to shed light and engage with platforms that operate behind the shadows using an algorithm that we still do not understand, except for the fact that it prioritises and amplifies certain things and downplays other things. No doubt this remains a key challenge and at Africa Check there is a need to understand how African governments and civil society hold these foreign multinationals accountable for political disinformation beyond the obvious data protection and digital laws.

Some Solutions

- ***Digital and information literacy that can help the population understand how to access information, to read the news, to discern credible information from less credible one.*** To that effect, Africa Check is working with schools to teach young people about how to understand information and distinguish mis- from disinformation, and good from bad information.
- ***Collaborations are key for fact-checkers.*** It is important that we keep working with mainstream media, particularly around elections, and in a joint effort to debunk and basically call out harmful political disinformation.
- ***As technology evolves, fact-checking organisations need to build partnerships with social media platforms*** so that tools can be made available to keep pace with the evolution of disinformation.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS 2

*Dr M Davis,
Research Fellow, Centre for Media Transition,
University of Technology, Sydney*

Disinformation / Misinformation: Best Practices from the Australian Context

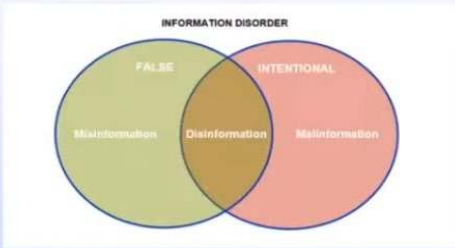
There is a need for a brief introduction to misinformation and disinformation at a conceptual level as this will help in developing policy as well as possible methods of regulation. Both in academia and policy circles, there has been an interest in addressing the problem of misinformation and disinformation. It is a very complex phenomenon with many interacting causes, many different agents and with different objectives that make for difficult policy and regulatory environments. To navigate such difficulties, accountability and transparency are key, particularly with respect to the operations of digital platforms, multinational companies who are subject to different jurisdictions around the world. Collaborating on common frameworks is also very important.

The Conceptual Framework: the information disorder

The following conceptual framework is one that is gaining importance in policy and regulation as well as in academic studies. There is a strong move to adopt this particular framework by Wardle and Derakshan in policy circles and this is most visible in the European context in particular with the EU code of practice on disinformation.

Concepts and causes

- Variety of concepts: fake or false news, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, influence operations, information warfare
- Regulation and policy increasingly adopting the Wardle & Derakshan (2017) framework (right)
- Useful, but also misleading – truth and intention are an inadequate basis for intervention.
- Complex problem that implicates the media and political environment as a whole



Based on C. Wardle & H. Derakshan, Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking, Council of Europe, 27 September 2017

Figure 1: Slide on "Concepts and causes"

TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER

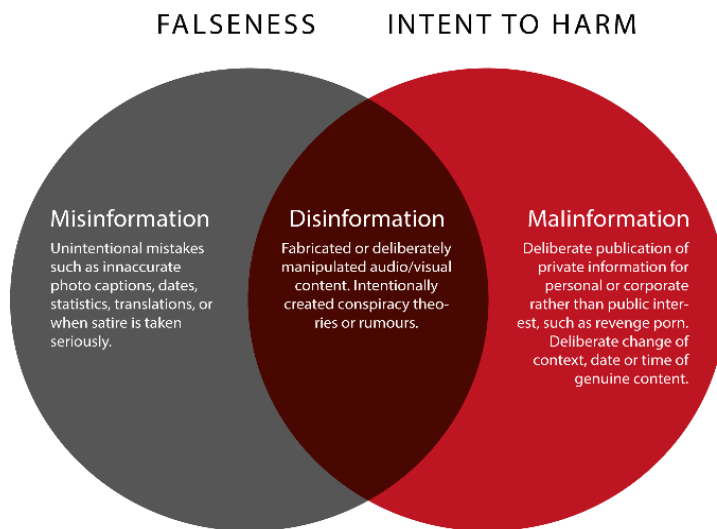


Figure 2: Types of Information Disorder.
Wardle & Derakshan (2017), *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*

The framework uses information disorder as an umbrella term to capture both misinformation and disinformation as well as what is referred to as malinformation. Misinformation is information that is false but where there is no intention to deceive whilst disinformation is information that is false and where there is an intention to deceive or to harm. Malinformation is information that is true or accurate but is used in a harmful way. For example, revealing the address of a person online, as in the phenomenon called doxing.

There are however a number of problems with the framework although it is quite simple and easy to understand. The problem inherently lies in the fact that it relies on the notions of truth and falsity on one hand and intention on the other. So, we have something that is conceptually clear but in practice quite difficult to implement.

In fact, it is quite difficult in real time to tell whether something is true or false and perhaps even more difficult to tell what people's intentions are. On numerous occasions, this can become apparent after a certain time, particularly intentions one can work out through patterns of information flows on social media. Truth and falsity on the other hand is something that is perhaps never really established with complete certainty. Often, one relies on court systems to establish whether things are true or false with a high standard of proof.

Another problem stems from the fact that it is such a complex problem as mentioned earlier with many different causes and different agents all interacting. Therefore, one needs to think about misinformation and disinformation in the context of the media and the political environment as a whole and not treat it as an isolated problem that can be addressed just by placing extra regulatory requirements on digital platforms.

The Australian Experience

The Australian experience with misinformation really started to rise just after the United States and Europe became concerned about disinformation campaigns particularly coming from Russia. It gained in ascendancy, at least in public consciousness, with the terrible bushfires of 2019/2020. Most of it really has been organic misinformation spread by Australian citizens interacting on social media.

Disinformation as such has fairly narrowly been confined to particular issues such as the Russian and Ukraine conflict. Due to the transnational flow of information, there has been a fair amount of cross-pollination in

narratives of disinformation and Australia is not immune to such flows. As expected, a peak was observed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a lot of misinformation and disinformation narratives coming from the United States. Research done in Australia shed light on the role and influence played by politicians and lifestyle influencers. The media is also a potent source of influence. In fact, misinformation and disinformation narratives really take off once they get picked up by influencers, who tend to have a lot of followers on social media, cable TV or YouTube. This often causes political polarisation and the rise of conspiracy narratives.

The Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 was marked by the lack of authoritative information, a lot of political uncertainty, and confusion within the public health system on how to deal with the pandemic. This led to the proliferation of misinformation, government lockdowns giving rise to political discontent within some circles. This brought about the influence of political narratives, conspiracy views and so on coming in from other countries and driving misinformation narratives. One also witnessed a rise in race driven misinformation and hate speech particularly towards Chinese people.

Harms arising from misinformation:

Acute harms:

- Impact on public health with a drop in vaccination rates;
- Financial damage to telecommunications infrastructure with a conspiracy linking the Covid-19 pandemic with 5G mobile towers;
- Concerns about electoral integrity in the Federal elections of 2022.

Chronic harms:

- Decreased trust in public and democratic institutions;
- Decreasing trust in authoritative information;
- Decrease in community cohesion.

Implications for journalism

There has been a long-term decline in trust in both the media and in government. In 2020, a longitudinal study carried out by the University of Canberra looked at the changes in trust of news, particularly mainstream

news and authoritative news. It found that, in this environment of uncertainty, although there was a lot of propagation of misinformation on social media, people took to mainstream news sources and other trusted news sources in order to find out what was really going on. No doubt, this is a good sign. Therefore, it is imperative, in order to build trust in the media, that the latter becomes more responsible, accountable and is responsive to the concerns of the public.

A responsible media

Linked to the concept of press freedom is a requisite concern for press responsibility and a recognition of the influence that the press has in promoting certain public narratives and agenda setting. In terms of the implications of misinformation for journalism, there is a real potential with the power of the press to amplify misinformation narratives that are coming from elsewhere.

Fact-checking is also important. The media need to develop practices that are transparent and accountable and that embody ethical journalistic principles. In Australia there have been demands for the various media sectors to revise their self-regulatory system and co-regulatory codes of practice in order to develop good strategies in press practice.

Regulation and collaboration

Regulation can be useful for the promotion of accountability and transparency of digital platforms when it comes to government policy. It is important that these interventions have democratic legitimacy to secure public trust. If the regulatory hand is too heavy, then we find that public trust is lost very quickly.

There is also the need to develop cooperative and collaborative frameworks. For example, frameworks to encourage information sharing between digital platforms and the media as well as collaborative policy development with all stakeholders, and the use of independent bodies to set and operate content moderation standards and trust indicators. We have seen some movement towards that with the Facebook Oversight Board but again true independence is not really there and independent media observatories are also important.

Regulatory trends

- Regulation can be politically fraught. There is the need to balance such interventions with civil liberties and that is not always easy. What is key is to ensure political legitimacy for the whole process.
- Most democratic countries favour the hands-off approach where self and co-regulatory frameworks are predominant.
- Clear move away from self-regulation towards co-regulation.
- Increase towards industry accountability and transparency through industry codes of conduct.
- Need for proportionate, risk-based models for platform interventions aimed at mitigating harms.

Australian regulatory approach

- In 2021 the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation came into effect. It was modelled on the EU Code.
- Self-regulatory model developed and enforced by industry but overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The Code includes misinformation but excludes professional news, political advertising and private messaging services.
- An AMCA report released in 2022 highlighted a number of issues with the Code: lacked transparency and accountability measures, too narrow in scope to effectively address all the harms arising from misinformation and had inadequate frameworks for collaboration and ensuring consistency in risk assessment.
- Following the ACMA report, the government announced a move towards co-regulation.
- ACMA has been granted enhanced powers to gather information and set record, keep rules, enforce the industry code through fines and set standards where industry codes are inadequate.
- ACMA's powers will be directed towards addressing systemic problems.

PANEL 1

The State of Information, Communication and Data in Mauritius: Key Trends in Disinformation

Moderators: Christina Chan-Meetoo and Gundeeta Narrainen, UoM

Panellists:

- Trilok Dabeesing, Director IT, Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA).
- Drudeisha Madhub, Data Protection Commissioner, Data Protection Office (DPO).
- Jean-Luc Mootoosamy, Executive Director, Media Expertise.

Introduction

An overview of the current state of social media adoption and use in Mauritius was provided so as to understand the potential scope for online disinformation on some of the key platforms. Figure 3 below provides a snapshot of social media use as at the beginning of 2023.

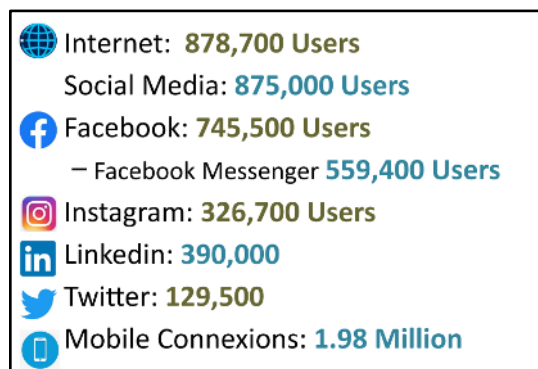


Figure 3: Social Media and Internet usage in Mauritius as at January 2023
Source: Datareportal (<https://Datareportal.Com/Reports/Digital-2023-Mauritius>)

A survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and YouGov indicates some of the topics that are most likely to be the target of disinformation (see Figure 4).

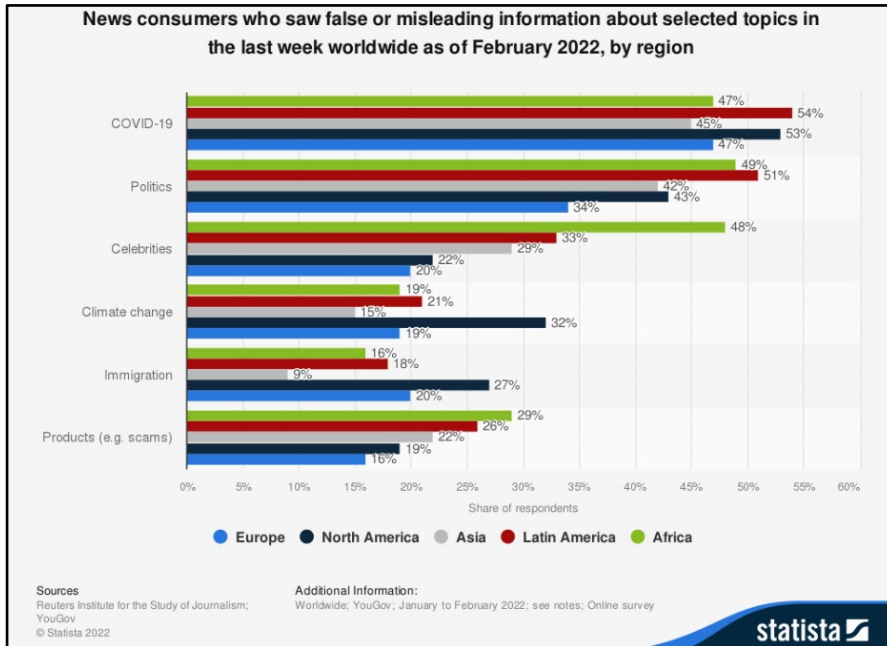


Figure 4: News consumers worldwide about selected topics (Jan-Feb 2022)
Sources: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism / YouGov / Statista

In the case of the African continent, topics that were most likely to be targeted were: politics (49%), celebrities (48%), Covid-19 (47%), products (29%), climate change (19%) and finally immigration (16%). There was no reason to believe that Mauritius would differ much from the rest of the African continent though specific research would need to be conducted to confirm that.

Overall in the Global North, climate change and immigration are ranked as topics more prone to disinformation as compared with other parts of the world. But, one could notice that politics and Covid-19 were consistently most prone to disinformation across all regions.

New Legislation

There have been a number of countries that have initiated or passed legislation to deal with disinformation. Below are some examples:

- European Union (EU): The *Digital Services Act* (DSA) 2022;

- United Kingdom (UK): The proposed *Online Safety Bill*;
- Australia: The *Online Safety Act 2021*;
- India: The *Information Technology (Amendment) Act 2022*.

In the case of the EU *Digital Services Act*, there is a timeline to apply its provisions until February 2024 (see Figure 5). This timeline includes the appointment of national Digital Service Coordinators by member States. These coordinators will be responsible for supervision and enforcement of the provisions of the DSA, specially for platforms which are designated as "Very Large Online Platforms" (VLOPs).



Figure 5: Timeline for the EU Digital Services Act

Source: <https://www.mccannfitzgerald.com/knowledge/disputes/progression-of-the-digital-services-act-the-dsa-and-key-dates>

In the United Kingdom, the proposed *Online Safety Bill* goes back to 2019 and is still being amended and discussed. There are a number of issues pertaining to its applications regarding the restraint of "lawful but harmful" speech as well as intrusive government powers that might overstep the duties of the regulatory body, that is, Ofcom.

In the case of Australia, the *Online Safety Act (2021)* was adopted to provide more power to authorities to regulate industry participants, with an eSafety Commissioner and also the introduction of industry standards known as Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE).

In India, its *Information Technology Act 2000* was amended in 2008, 2022 and 2023 respectively. In the latest version, it has become mandatory for platforms to set up a grievance redressal office in the country and to have

a Chief Compliance Officer and a nodal contact person to liaise with Indian law enforcement agencies.

Legislation in Mauritius

A number of legislations exist such as the *Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Act* (2021) and the *Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act* (2003). Other relevant legislations are the *Information and Communication Technologies Act* (2001), the *Independent Broadcasting Authority Act* (2002) and the *Data Protection Act* (2017). It is to be noted that these different legislations are in a constant process of being amended. Figure 6 provides details pertaining to the laws mentioned above.

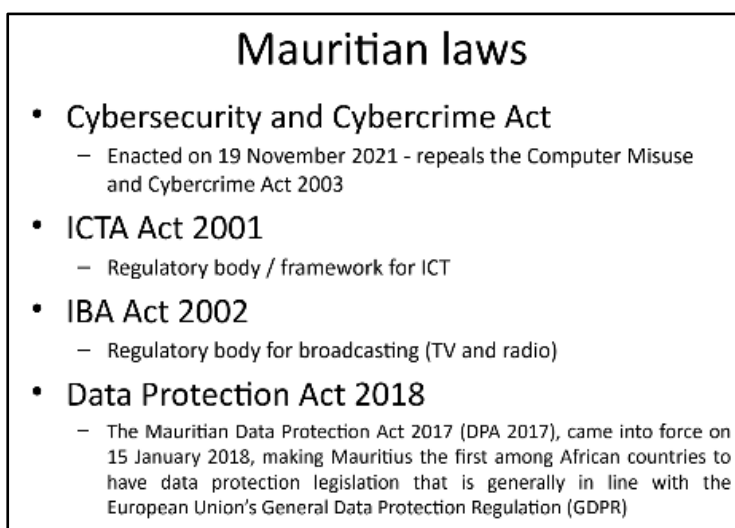


Figure 6: Mauritian Laws pertaining to Digital Data

The remit of the ICTA

Trilok Dabeesing from the ICTA from the onset mentioned that most of the complaints registered by the ICTA were related to abusive content. According to him, some of the complaints may contain a dimension of disinformation but they are not flagged as such. He spoke specifically about the role of the ICTA, which is to regulate ICT related operators both in terms of infrastructure and services. However, this not does apply to the

data that sits within these two entities. He emphasised on the fact that the ICTA is essentially a technical regulator which looks into infrastructure and services. There is a clause in the ICTA Act (Section 18, sub section (m)) which states that one of the functions of the Authority is “to regulate or curtail the harmful and illegal content on the Internet and other information and communication services”. For him, this was quite a challenge.

Power of investigation

One of the major problems faced by the ICTA is that it does not have power of investigation under the current Act. In fact, all the complaints received by ICTA are referred to the police. Elaborating on the nature of crimes and other offences committed on the Internet, Dabeesing stated that these are often transnational and most of the time beyond the jurisdiction of a country.

Dealing with complaints

The way the ICTA proceeds with a complaint is as follows: once the complaint is registered, the first step is to proceed with the take down notice. This step is done by the CERT-MU (the Mauritian national computer security incident response team) that contacts Facebook for instance to request that the platform takes down the content which is deemed as illegal in Mauritius. Dabeesing emphasised on the fact that the process is both tedious and frustrating due to the lack of proactivity when it comes to feedback from Facebook.

International benchmarks

The key question is how to tackle this issue? While no magic recipes exist and most countries struggle with a similar situation, albeit on different scales, one can have a look at international practice. In this regard, the European Union is often regarded as providing an interesting benchmark in this area. Its approach has been to move away from targeting content creators to focusing on online platforms as they are those that host the content. The EU's initial self-regulatory proposal includes a code of practice where all the big players like Google, Facebook (now Meta), Twitter (now

X), Instagram among others, sign and adhere to the code of practice. However, with the advent of Covid-19 and the 2020 U.S. elections, there has been a real explosion in fake news making self-regulation not always effective. The focus is now much more on co-regulation and the recent enactment of the EU Digital Services Act directs greater responsibility towards online service providers.

Using blockchain technology

Dabeising highlighted the advent of AI as both a source of disinformation and a possible means of tackling disinformation. He believes that part of the solution might lie in blockchain technology. However, he cautioned that this is far from being a silver bullet solution.

The Data Protection Commission: awareness building and outreach

From the onset, the Data Protection Commissioner made a plea for all relevant stakeholders including the general public to familiarise themselves with the Data Protection Office. Speaking about the volume of complaints, she mentioned that her office receives around 100 complaints pertaining to disinformation annually and it is imperative that there is better understanding and coordination between the different stakeholders, namely the State, the media and civil society. Mention was made of the '*Data Protection and the Media*' document that was launched in 2019 and unfortunately till date there has been no traction with the media on this document. She reiterated her plea to the media professionals to work more closely with the Data Protection Office.

Power to investigate, prosecute and enforce

The Data Protection Act (2018) is a key legislation that is in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The law includes 99 articles and each article has 10 sub-sections making it a voluminous piece of legislation. The DPA has been made in compliance with the EU GDPR and the international treaty on data protection.

The Data Protection Office has investigatory powers but the prosecution process only happens once the Data Commissioner recommends it and the police has the duty to follow up. The Commissioner noted that it can

be problematic to work with another institution and that a request to set up their prosecution unit has been made to the relevant authorities and is still pending. Concerning the issue of enforcement as per the Data Protection Act (2018), every organisation, be it public, private or otherwise, is required to appoint a data protection officer. Not doing so constitutes an offence liable to prosecution. The necessary coordination mechanism is being put in place so as to create a network of data protection officers aimed at building capacity.

International collaboration

The question of prosecuting for content which is typically hosted overseas was evoked. Even for the European Union, this has proven to be a tall order. More than 80% of cross-border complaints concern 8 tech giants: Meta, Google, Airbnb, Yahoo!, Twitter, Microsoft, Apple and Tinder⁶. Ireland, which hosts the European headquarters of many tech companies has been heavily criticised for slow enforcement of the GDPR and lack of stringent measures⁷. It is estimated that 83% cases are settled amicably by the Irish DPC, leading to much criticism from Brussels and even legal conflict over certain cases⁸.

For the Data Commissioner, international collaboration among authorities is key. She cited Section 36 in the Mauritian law which states that for every transfer happening outside the territory of Mauritius, there exists a number of safeguards that the person transferring the data has to satisfy. She also stated that she had personally collaborated with the Irish Commissioner in the case of Cambridge Analytica.

The Data Protection Commission also affirmed that, at the local level, all inquiries are kept confidential. All names are anonymized when data and/or information are published on the institution's website but the gist of decisions is provided, together with the reasoning that has been used in a particular case.

⁶ <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2023/05/75-per-cent-of-irish-data-watchdog-s-gdpr-decisions-since-2018-overruled-report-reveals/>

⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2021/09/13/ireland-accused-defying-brussels-privacy-crackdown-big-tech/>

⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/01/05/eu-clashes-ireland-big-tech-dublin-vows-sue-brussels-overreach/>

Madhub confirmed that the DPO collaborates with foreign offices for investigations. She cited the example of a data protection authority in Congo wishing to get information on a particular incident which had probably originated in Mauritius and with whom her office has collaborated.

The Media Environment

In the second part of this panel, an analysis of the ranking of Mauritius in the Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders) annual index was presented. It was noted that Mauritius' best ranking happened in 2007 when it ranked 25th out of 169 countries. The country's worst ranking was in 2014: 70th over a total of 180 countries. Its current (2023) ranking is 63rd out of 180 countries.

RSF Ranking Mauritius versus other Countries

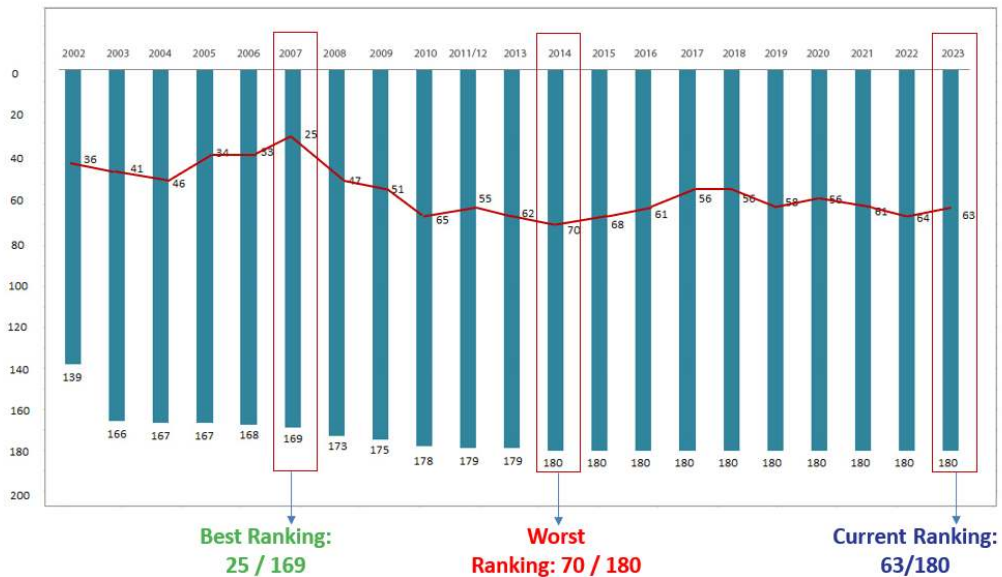


Figure 7: Reporters Sans Frontières ranking of Mauritius for press freedom from 2002 to 2023 (as compiled by the editors)

Responding to Mauritius' RSF rankings over time, Jean-Luc Mootosamy mentioned that such rankings / scores should not be used as stand-alone

data and that there is a need to understand the methodology used to develop such rankings. He did agree that overall media is free in Mauritius because the latter can more or less freely publish. However, certain aspects of media freedom may be at risk and he referred to differences in the work environment, specific working conditions faced by journalists and finally resource constraints faced by certain media houses.

Mootoosamy also stressed on the fact that some of the sources used by journalists may lead to disinformation. He gave the example of reporting about Parliament where a journalist can report a fake information given by a parliamentarian (who is protected by immunity) and is tangled in the trap of disinformation.

Mainstream Media versus Social Media

Mootoosamy laid emphasis on the fact that mainstream media precedes social media and should thus be given all the necessary support as they play a crucial role in any society. Citing the example of editorial meetings held in some of the media houses he has worked for, he equated them as a means of filtering out false information and allowing for in-depth discussion among established and younger journalists. Mootoosamy reflected on editorial responsibility which is a hallmark of established mainstream media. Unfortunately, such responsibility does not exist in social media which allows anyone and everyone to write what they want.

Media suffers from loss in trust and this is a feature that has accelerated over the years and needs to be addressed. Speaking specifically about public interest, he believed that social media does not have the same obligation towards upholding public interest as mainstream media does.

Mootoosamy noted that there is a perception that the lines are increasingly blurred between mainstream and social media. This can be addressed by ensuring robust editorial decisions and choices and the necessary investment in verification methods. For him, the slow seeping through of disinformation within news desks is something that should be taken seriously by all media.

Mootoosamy stated that mainstream media are not the same as social media or blog owners when it comes to private versus public interest. For

him, people have to question themselves as to why disinformation is gaining such ground. There is also a lack of proper media literacy amongst audiences.

Investing in Quality Journalism

Speaking about the pre and post media liberalisation in Mauritius, Mootoosamy emphasised on the expanded media space characterised by private commercial radio stations, online media platforms and an explosion in social media. This has allowed people to speak out and at times voice out whatever they want without proper editorial oversight. In fact, this happens despite the mandatory broadcast delay button which can be actioned for live broadcasts.

Quality is dependent on who is holding the microphone, who is running the show - some people are trained, others are not. Mootoosamy stressed that this is not just about training journalists; editors-in-chief also need to be trained. He was concerned by the fact that certain editors-in-chief may not be adhering to some of the fundamental principles of basic journalism.

The quality of sources must be verified and all information must be cross-checked and triangulated. This is vital and even though it is an old recipe, it is still very much valid and in fact desperately needed at the present time.

Mootoosamy made an appeal for collective and coordinated approach between journalists, media practitioners and media owners to work towards addressing the issue of disinformation.

Regulation

Regarding the issue of regulation, it was noted that there is a fine line between regulation by the authorities and censorship. Mootoosamy mentioned the additional confusion which increasingly occurs between information and communication. He stated that more and more people are coming in with “pre-written pieces”. He acknowledged that communication agencies have a legitimate role in the mediascape but he objected to the practice of pre-written interviews which are sometimes just placed in the press.

Journalism cannot be just about economic interests, nor about simply a race to be the first to publish, nor about having the highest ratings. For Mootoosamy, regulations are needed to protect the public as it is a matter of public interest. However, regulation can only be achieved through dialogue.

Mootoosamy stated that journalism cannot just be about economic interests, nor about coming out with the news first, nor about having the highest ratings. For him, regulations are needed for the protection of the public as it is a matter of public interest. But, regulation can only be achieved through dialogue. Else, it will not be sustainable in the long run.

Concerning regulation of social media, the Data Protection Commissioner referred to the Cybercrime Act of 2021 which is in line with international standards and the Budapest Convention. She concurred with Mootoosamy that some laws may need updating, such as the one governing elections in Mauritius. At the very least, some practices may be reviewed to ensure fairness, transparency and accountability.

For Madhub, there is widespread ignorance about the existence of Mauritian laws and a lack of understanding of the provisions within laws. Not only laypersons, but also legal practitioners may find it difficult to digest these laws as they require a certain level of mastery.

As for the ICTA, it faces a big issue in the sense that people come to the institution and ask them how to interpret laws. This is not as straightforward as one could wish. There are multiple court cases which require a foundational line of interpretation. Often, such cases lead to disinformation. For Dabeesing, disinformation is a human product, humans create disinformation. Technically, 'data' is neutral and it is human beings who misinterpret data and create misinformation.

The idea of self-regulation and even co-regulation was discussed with respect to tech platforms. It was noted with concern that all countries or regions are not always treated in an equal manner by tech companies. For example, African voices often go unheard in dialogues with big tech such as Meta or Google. So, neutrality should also apply to technology. However, the use of bots and Artificial Intelligence can pose threats in this respect.

Therefore, it is important to have a much clearer understanding about what is data, by deconstructing it and making it simple or digestible.

Responding to the issue of technology neutrality, the Data Commissioner said it is neutral and so is data but human beings give it meaning and often distort it. She concluded by emphasising on the need to step up outreach among the public.

PANEL 2

Current Practices and Possible Solutions for Mauritian Newsrooms

Moderators:

Christina Chan-Meetoo and Roukaya Kasenally, UoM

Panellists:

- Ashok Beeharry, Desk Coordinator in the News Department at the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)
- Bernard Delaitre, CEO and Director of Le Mauricien
- Iqbal Ahmed Khan, Journalist at La Sentinelle (L'express)
- Prem Sewpaul, Consultant at the Defi Media Group

Introduction

This panel brought together practitioners from mainstream media. Keynote addresses from the opening emphasised on the fact that disinformation is everywhere. Even though it was recognised that a lot of disinformation occurs online and originates from multiple sources including individuals who relay unverified information, the question is what can the mainstream media do to counter disinformation. Technically, the professional media have professional codes such as codes of ethics or codes of conduct and editorial briefings. But it is important that the media create awareness to shine light on the issue and to act as a filter against disinformation. Key areas of discussion included the history and nature of fake news in Mauritius, the difficulty of verifying facts in fast-moving news environments, the impact of social media on newsrooms, commercial bias, the need for financial support and enhanced professionalisation as well as calls for re-inventing the news industry altogether.

Questions were asked by the moderators about the nature of disinformation, the actors involved, the involvement of management in tackling the issue, whether any fact-checking desk exist or specific fact-checking exercises occur within newsrooms. There was also a focus on potential solutions to be adopted by local media houses to tackle and mitigate disinformation.

Fake news is not that new

When fake news could be identified as political propaganda

According to Iqbal Ahmed Khan, journalist at La Sentinelle, disinformation and information were called by another name previously: propaganda. He stated that the first democratic elections ever held in Mauritius were in 1976 after independence and that there was one newspaper called “*The Nation*” which published an article that appeared just a month before the elections were due. This article asserted that there was a fleet of Soviet warships carrying tanks that was making its way to Mauritius and that they would be surrounding the harbour of Port-Louis. *The Nation* had obtained information that, should the MMM lose the elections, the Soviets would just walk in and carry out a coup. In effect, the MMM lost the elections and no soviet tanks ever came into Port-Louis. On the other side, the MMM had its own share of fake news making. This party was alleging that a Cessna plane had landed in Madagascar and that it was full of weapons intended for the militia that was supposedly being run by another political party, the PMSD. The weapons were supposedly going to be used to kill the MMM’s leadership and all its supporters.

These two incidents show that fake news in the Mauritian context is not really new. But, these used to originate either from political leaders or from party-run newspapers such as *Advance* or *Le Militant* and so on. Everybody knew where this fake news was coming from, what agenda and what political purpose it was serving. As a result, these political newspapers generally did not have much credibility, many of them went out of business very quickly. They would lose in court cases brought against them or they simply did not develop a sufficient readership of their own. For some, the party that was supporting them lost elections and there was no advertising or money being funnelled in to keep them alive.

Fake news in contemporary Mauritius

Disinformation about elections

For Bernard Delaitre, CEO of Le Mauricien, traditional media is not where there is the most disinformation and if there is, it is most often by accident. Social networks are the ones hosting most disinformation. And social media is by definition everyone. Every individual who receives some news can forward it from his/her mobile phone without any clue if it is true. There are more than 700,000 Facebook accounts in Mauritius. Newspapers are nowhere near that mark. Social media is the medium for disinformation. We have no control over this, save our credibility to counter fake news.

In fact, with the internet, we cannot ascertain where fake news is coming from. We have no idea what agenda is being served, what political perspective is being furthered. Khan detailed an example of fake news with which he is very familiar: the allegation that 2019 elections were rigged thanks to Bangladeshi votes. Following the elections, numerous posts were published and shared on Facebook about Bangladeshis suddenly appearing in voting stations and to swing the elections in favour of the ruling party. The numbers being cited kept changing; first it was 8,000 and then it was 12,000 and so on and so forth. It turns out that less than 50 Bangladeshis were actually registered to vote in the Republic of Mauritius. Whoever came up with this had no idea how the Mauritian elections were actually organised. But that did not stop this from becoming a key political demand with a leader of an extra-parliamentary political party requesting publicly that Bangladeshis or Commonwealth citizens should not be allowed to vote.

The influence of professional communicators

As for Prem Sewpaul, Consultant at the Defi Media Group, he stated that he is not a typical journalist as he is also a communication professional. As such, he believes that the communication perspective is very important as there are news that are planted by professional people who are highly paid to influence journalists' perceptions. He stated that commercial influence is an issue and that the biggest challenge is real-time news. He does not believe that official information originating from authorities constitutes disinformation. Rather, disinformation comes from interested parties, those who carry agendas. He emphasised that it is also the public

who is a part of the process. "If somebody sees something a certain way, it does not mean that it's right. He's having the opportunity to voice out.", said Sewpaul.

There is a hierarchical level of fact-checking within newsrooms but the challenge is not fact-checking. He believes that bias is more problematic as information is quite skewed in Mauritius across media houses because "we try to be everything for everybody as we cannot have specialist journalists in Mauritius and it is not economically sustainable so all media have developed an innate sense of representing what they think they should be representing." Companies and institutions send press releases and press kits to news desks with well-written content that journalists are very tempted to just copy and paste.

Bernard Delaitre also recognised that there are attempts to manipulate information and that sometimes it can be very difficult to verify the facts. He said that mistakes are sometimes made and they fall into traps. He affirmed that they do take time to check and prefer to miss out rather than to weaken the credibility built by his newspaper over 133 years.

The difficulty of doing live fact-checking

Prem Sewpaul referred to the difficulty of verifying facts on the spur of the moment. "When we do live interventions, and we give people '*le droit à la parole*' [the right to speak], this is challenging because it is happening in real time." He cited the recurrent example of people who are in bereavement right after a relative dies in hospital. They go through a phase of anger where they blame every authority before they eventually come to acceptance. So, every single person who calls on Radio Plus would immediately say that the cause of death is medical negligence but this is difficult to establish right away.

Bernard Delaitre states that Le Mauricien may not feel concerned by disinformation within the news desk, but the advent of social networking sites creates issues around disinformation due to the speed of circulation of news on these platforms. It takes them 24 hours to produce a newspaper, to verify the facts, consult archives and other sources. Their biggest difficulty has been to control their website, as well as their Facebook and Instagram accounts, where they are the most active online.

"Instantaneity, especially when it comes to politics, can be problematic", says Delaitre.

Current practice

Reliance on established journalism culture

The CEO of Le Mauricien recalled that his media house is a family-owned business. He stated that there is a specific culture which has been nurtured and handed down generations, a strong journalism culture whereby editors-in-chief have full control over the production of the newspaper. They do meet the director regularly, especially when the news is "touchy" to expose the problem and discuss what can be done. These are the only times that management gets involved with the newspaper's content, according to Delaitre. "Our journalists have lots of freedom to work. They do not receive any formal instructions. I think that the quality of their training and the depth of experience that they have acquired over the years allow them to make the right decisions."

For news that does not belong to the political realm, Delaitre stated that they do exactly as they do for the printed version. Delaitre cited a number of house rules that their journalists are familiar with: verification, caution about naming victims of accidents before relatives are informed, etc. All new journalists receive a copy of their code of ethics and information about unethical practices which should be avoided. They meet regularly with their chief editors and have regular conversations with the management of Le Mauricien.

Ashok Beeharry, Desk Coordinator in the News Department at the MBC, started by saying that he does not like the term "mainstream media". He said: "You have the media or the non-media. So today we have individuals or groups calling themselves media which is not quite right because, as we know the media is run by professionals, which is not quite true for what we call non-mainstream media". He affirmed that the MBC is very much aware of the dangers and risks of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, and that the main consideration is the newsworthiness of the story for all MBC journalists. Angle, accuracy and interest are their key words. The sources of information have to be checked and cross-checked. "Fact-checking or ensuring accuracy in our stories and our reports is ingrained, embedded in our system," said Beeharry. He stated that the

MBC has a well-defined system where, at the very start, their journalists, even interns coming from the University of Mauritius, know what is the workflow, what is the best practice and they have different levels of control. The journalist himself or herself first has to ensure the accuracy of information so as to make sure that there is no misinformation or disinformation or malinformation. Second, they have editors of the day, who also have a close look at what journalists are reporting about, as part of their everyday routine. The third level of control is the rewriters, known in French as "*secrétaires de rédaction*" (SR) and the final level of control is "*au niveau de la direction de l'information*", that is at the level of the chief editor, and the director. Beeharry pointed out that, "even among the media we see media propagating disinformation against other media for example".

Ashok Beeharry believes that disinformation forms part of a complex web of motivation. The motivation could be economic or ideological and could be personal as well. So the media need to be very cautious about sources of information and be very wary of the risk of manipulation. Journalists need to check their information not from one source but two sources, even three sources for sensitive and delicate information. The media is at risk of being manipulated by politicians, by ideologists, by activist groups.

Ashok Beeharry also wished to point out that the MBC is not a state-run media. "If we were state-run media, most of our content would be dictated by the state or government or the politicians. We are a public service broadcaster (PSB) as defined in the MBC Act. Now how far the law is being applied is a different question..." He also stated that there is no Media or Press Council in Mauritius. As a representative of the MBC, he also happens to be the secretary of the Media Trust Board. But the Media Trust is not the voice of the media, unfortunately or fortunately. Its mandate statutorily is about the training of journalists and media professionals.

Potential solutions to tackle disinformation

No easy solution but policy is key

For Iqbal Ahmed Khan, there is no easy solution to the problem. To be fair, this is not just the media who are grappling with disinformation. Even the government has had a hard time dealing with this. Back in 2018, the State wanted to bring in a law specifically targeting fake news on social media. Khan referred to the Law Reform Commission report on social media which explains exactly what the conundrum is. Fake news is indeed a problem but does that mean that we need to have a Ministry of Truth run by the government? Who determines what is true and what is false? Khan said that it is also a danger to rely on the media in order to think about what is true and what is false. Any one source that becomes a paragon of truth becomes itself a problem. We will not get rid of disinformation because it is not a new thing. We have always lived with this. The volume has increased and the frequency has increased and perhaps the ways and means in which it comes about have increased but fundamentally this is not a new problem and this is the problem that we will continue to have.

For Ashok Beeharry also, the solution is policy. Not just by the government. There are limits to regulation. Rather, we need co-regulation. Unfortunately, in Mauritius there is no collaboration within the media. There is no coordination. In some countries like Estonia and other Scandinavian countries, there is a media alliance, a network where they cooperate to build resilience but also to combat disinformation and to share information about fake news. This is not present in Mauritius. We need training. The Media Trust does that for example but they do not have enough funds to provide appropriate training. Also, media and information literacy at all levels are crucial.

The need to re-invent the news media

Iqbal Ahmed Khan said: "What we can do is improve ourselves as the media and hope that a sufficient mass of critical readers come about to our point of view." For Khan, there is a reason why political newspapers never really worked in Mauritius but mainstream newspapers did. It is because mainstream newspapers are credible. Political newspapers were seen as biased and lacking credibility and so they did not survive. So, it is again back to basics. We have to understand what worked in the past. Even if a lot of people go for social media, there would be enough people looking for genuine information. Our issue is to improve ourselves. That is all we can do. That is the only realistic perspective.

Strengthen knowledge of legal frameworks and political history

According to Khan, first there has to be familiarity with the legal system in this country. Second, every newsroom should put their journalists through a crash course in Mauritian political history because very often fake news concern things that have happened before. Also, a lot of fake news is actually just ill-informed news. Newsrooms have to inoculate themselves because they have limited resources and limited people. WhatsApp groups of journalists are often flooded, including with internet memes. Newsrooms should organise themselves and change the way that they organise internally, how they interact with one another as well. According to Khan, a weakness of the written press is that there is no set system to counter fake news. It is up to the editors instead. "A journalist can feel free to work but then ultimately it's the editor who then decides."

For him, the media, especially the written media, cannot continue operating the way they did in the 1970's and 1980's whereby a large number of journalists do not do much but go around, covering press conferences and just reporting what was said there, that is doing "he said, she said" journalism. If the idea is that we need to be able to explain, analyse, fact-check and debunk on occasion, we need a much greater degree of professionalisation within the sector. Just like for any economic sector or activity, we need to invest in professionalisation or it will be a non-starter and hot air. The media itself has to relook at its business model because it is no longer enough just to give information. This is not just an information industry anymore. We have to be an explanation industry, a

contextualisation industry. This can only happen through internal re-invention.

Absence of fact-checking desks or specific fact-checking activities

None of the media houses who were present on the panel have a dedicated fact-checking desk or have ever experimented with fact-checking as a specific activity. Ashok Beeharry stated that the MBC does not have a separate, dedicated fact-checking desk, like the BBC for example, for two main reasons. The first is that they do not have the necessary resources. The second is about its relevance or usefulness in their system, because they believe that fact-checking is not a silver bullet. For Beeharry, fact-checking is reactive, like debunking. It is just one of the tools that can be used. He advocated for pre-bunking ("*en amont plutôt qu'en aval*" that is "before rather than after"). He affirmed that this is done by training their journalists and imparting to them the right knowledge. He reiterated the call to go back to basics, back to fundamentals and to best practices in order to build resilience against disinformation.

Revenue models are problematic and funding is insufficient

Bernard Delaitre also recognised that there is no specific fact-checking system at Le Mauricien. He affirmed that their older journalists are excellent fact-checkers and cannot be replaced by machines. The chief editors and senior journalists are the best fact-checkers. The biggest issue is on the financial front as the press is suffering greatly. The newspaper industry relies on two types of revenue: direct sale of the newspapers and advertising. With the internet, paid circulation has decreased drastically. Paradoxically, "*on n'a jamais autant de lecteurs mais jamais autant moins d'argent provenant de la vente et de la publicité*" ["we have never had as many readers yet as little revenue from paid circulation and advertising"]. Delaitre stated: "If we did a survey, we would see that Mauritian citizens think that information is free and should be free. They do not realise that there is an infrastructure and a team of people and professionals behind the news." Additionally, the industry is recruiting people who are less well prepared for the job and paid less so that many prefer to work elsewhere.

Prem Sewpaul also agreed that funding is a big issue as people mostly access the newspapers through WhatsApp. This contributes to financial constraints for the media whose sustainability is reduced, making them

even more prone to commercial bias. This needs to be managed at policy level.

Regarding the two sources of advertising, governmental or private sector, Deloitte laments that, on the one hand, government may either punish or congratulate the media, and on other hand, the private sector is not faring well. Firms prefer to invest in product development to mitigate prices and many are also afraid to place ads in newspapers that criticise the government. They try to stay away from controversies and use communication agencies a lot. These agencies are the ones which reap the most from giving out information to the media. The lack of financial resources is the key issue. Websites are free to access and, earlier, Noko Makgato from Africa Check, said that paywalls are barriers to access to information. But one had to pay for information in the past. This allowed news media people to earn a living. Today, if one puts up a paywall, the numbers crash down. "We need to find new models and this is not an easy task.", said Deloitte.

Using technological tools for verification

For Sewpaul, verification tools will be much more accessible thanks to Artificial Intelligence. He believes that if one uses Bing AI chat which is coupled with the search engine, one can check information within seconds. So, training and education need to keep pace with technological advancement. Upon a remark about the fact that these are just tools that can thus cut both ways, Sewpaul affirmed that people need to have knowledge of how tools such as ChatGPT, Google Bard and Bing AI work and be able to know how to counter check, especially as these tools provide their sources in their answers to queries.

Mistrust towards dedicated fact-checking organisations

Iqbal Ahmed Khan's own personal view is that we cannot rely upon external fact-checking organisations because that would raise all sorts of questions. For instance: what are the companies funding them? Who are their sponsors? Do they have any contracts with the government as well? He believes that there are potential conflicts and entanglements which should be avoided and is adamant that there should be a greater degree of professionalisation within the industry, which would mean "reinventing ourselves and reinventing our economic model".

Requesting financial assistance from the State

Bernard Delaitre made a clear distinction between the State and the government. Support for news media should be sought from the State rather than from the government. He recalled that, in France, all newspapers, even the biggest ones, are subsidised by the State through support for the distribution of the printed editions and for the purchase of equipment (up to 50% of costs). This had started when newspapers faced dire financial situations and the support still exists.

Ashok Beeharry agreed with the idea of the media benefiting from tax incentives from the State but he did not agree with direct subsidies or funding due to the tense relationship between the State and the media. He proposed the creation of a fund instead. He recalled that the State funds the Media Trust to the tune of Rs 2.5 million or Rs 3 million annually. This is insufficient due to the administrative costs of running the Media Trust which leave little for funding training projects. A fund to which organisations, including diplomatic missions, could contribute seemed more appealing to Beeharry.

Conclusion

Discussions seemed to provide a rather bleak outlook on the ability of Mauritian news media to tackle disinformation and fake news. The consensus was that all media organisations lack resources and that there are conversely so many sources of disinformation, including every single citizen as individuals who can potentially be sources of disinformation, misinformation or malinformation.

On the positive side, all the panellists seemed committed to combat disinformation and, although there may be some differences in their outlook regarding financial assistance, they all agreed that some form of support was required and that the current revenue models would not be sustainable.

Additionally, all panellists as well as all journalists who were present were enthusiastic about signing the official pledge to counter disinformation. Such commitment from diverse media houses is a first step towards more dialogue and shows encouraging potential for eventual collaborations against disinformation. As pointed out in the concluding note, the issue of

disinformation is simply not going away anytime soon. If anything, it will get bigger and bigger and it will overwhelm all of us. If that trend continues, we do not know what this will do to our democracy!

PLEDGE ON COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

The Pledge was signed by all media panellists who participated in the workshop:

- Bernard Delaitre, Director of Le Mauricien
- Ashok Beeharry, Desk Coordinator of the News Department at the MBC and member of the Media Trust
- Iqbal Ahmed Khan, Journalist at La Sentinelle / L'express
- Prem Sewpaul, Consultant at Le Défi Media Group
- Jean-Luc Mootoosamy, Director of Media Expertise

It was also signed by journalists and trainers who attended the event:

- Manda Boolell, Broadcast Consultant
- Abdoollah Earally, News Correspondent for RFI
- Sushita Neerbun, Lecturer, OUM

Other media practitioners and newsrooms who are interested in signing the pledge can contact us by email on chanssc@uom.ac.mu to receive a digital version where they can add their signatures.

They can also add their names to the comments section of the online post at the following address:

<https://bit.ly/pledge-countering-disinformation>

Pledge on Countering Disinformation (English version)

Following the workshop on ‘Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infospace’ organised by the University of Mauritius and the Australia High Commission (Mauritius) on Monday 22 May 2023, we the signatories are:

Aware that disinformation is a growing concern as it is spreading very fast and is, in the process, affecting our information/communication system.

Determined to take the necessary steps / measures as media professionals to ensure that journalism as a profession is conducted to ensure truth, accuracy and balance. In order, to achieve this, **we pledge to do our utmost best to undertake** the following:

1. **Verify and fact-check** all information before publishing or sharing it.
2. **Use** credible sources.
3. **Provide** context and background to help the audience understand complex issues.
4. **Correct and retract** any errors or misinformation within a reasonable time delay.
5. **Distinguish** between opinion and facts.
6. **Minimize** sensationalism and **prioritize** the truth (especially during heated, controversial or charged debates).

By taking these steps, we the signatories believe that disinformation can be tackled and that good, balanced and truthful journalism will prevail and serve the interest of the public at large.

Engagement contre la désinformation (version française)

En conclusion de l’atelier de travail “Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infospace” (Contre la désinformation pour un écosystème médiatique libre et transparent) organisé le lundi 22 mai 2023 par l’Université de Maurice et l’Ambassade Australienne à Maurice, nous, les signataires, déclarons que nous sommes:

Conscient(e)s que la circulation de la désinformation est en hausse constante et constitue, de ce fait, une menace pour nos systèmes d’information et de communication.

Déterminé(e)s à prendre les mesures nécessaires en tant que professionnel(le)s des médias pour s’assurer que le métier du journalisme est pratiqué selon les principes de vérité, de justesse et d’équilibre. À ces fins, **nous nous engageons à faire de notre mieux** pour:

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3. **Donner** les informations contextuelles nécessaires afin de permettre à notre audience de comprendre les problématiques complexes.
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5. **Faire la distinction** entre les opinions et les faits.
6. **Minimiser** le sensationnalisme et **prioriser** la véracité (surtout durant les débats houleux et controversés).

En adoptant ces mesures, nous les signataires croyons fermement que la désinformation peut être combattue et que le journalisme de qualité, équilibré et en accord avec la véracité va prévaloir afin de servir l’intérêt public.

Langazman kont dezinformasion

(version Kreol Morisien)

An konklizion latelie travay “Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infospace” (Kont Dezinformasion pou Garanti enn Ekosistem Mediatik Lib ek Transparan), ki finn organize Lindi 22 Me 2023 par Liniversite Moris ek Lanbasad Lostrali dan Moris, nou, bann signater, nou deklare ki nou:

Konsian ki dezinformasion pe ogmante ek sirkile rapidman ek ape donk afekte nou bann sistem linformasion ek kominikasion.

Determine pou pran bann mezir nesese antan ki profesional dan media pou asire ki journalism pratike kouma enn metie ki baze lor bann prinsip laverite ek lekilib. Dan sa lobzektif-la, nou angaz nou pou fer tou zefor nesese pou:

1. **Verifie ek kont-verifie** tou linformasion avan piblikasion ek distribision.
2. **Servi** bann sours kredib.
3. **Donn** linformasion kontextiel nesese pou ki lodians kapav konpran bann problematik kompleks.
4. **Koriz ek retir** bann erer ouswa bann linformasion ki fos dan enn dele rezonab.
5. **Fer distinksjon** ant opinion ek linformasion faktiel.
6. **Minimize** sansasionalism ek donn **priorite** laverite (sirtou pandan bann deba anime ki ena boukou kontrovers).

Kan nou pe adopte sa bann mezir-la, nou, bann signater, nou krwar ki kapav konbat dezinformasion e ki bon journalism ki ekilibre ek veridik pou prevalwar ek servi lintere piblik.

SIGNED PLEDGE

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Langazman kont dezinformasion (version Kreol Morisien)

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Determine pou pran bann mezir neser antan ki profesyonel dan media pou asire ki zournalism pratike kouma enn metie ki baze lor bann prinsip laverite ek leklib. Dan sa lobzektif-la, **nou angaz nou pou fer tou zefor neser** pou:

1. **Verifie ek kont-verifie** tou linformasion avan publikasion ek distribision.
2. **Servi** bann sours kredib.
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Kan nou pe adopte sa bann mezir-la, nou, bann signater, nou kwav ki kapav konbat dezinformasion e ki bon zournalism ki ekilibre ek veridik pou prevalwar ek servi linterie publik.

Nom ek signatir bann signater - Names and signatures of signatories - Noms et signatures des signataires:

Signed on 22 May 2023, Réduit, Mauritius - Signé le 22 mai 2023 à Réduit, Maurice - Signe le 22 Me 2023 dan Réduit, Moris.

Pledge on Countering Disinformation (English version)

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En adoptant ces mesures, nous les signataires croyons fermement que la désinformation peut être combattue et que le journalisme de qualité, équilibré et en accord avec la véracité va prévaloir afin de servir l'intérêt public.

Langazman kont dezinformasion (version Kreol Morisien)

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Names of signatories below signature - Names and signatures of signatories - Noms et signatures des signataires

Signed on 22 May 2023, Réduit, Mauritius - Signé le 22 mai 2023 à Réduit, Maurice - Signé le 22 Me 2023 dan Réduit, Moris.

PROGRAMME

9.00 – 9.30	Registration
9.30 – 9.35	Welcome by MC/Co-organiser, Assoc Prof R. Kasenally, University of Mauritius
9.35 – 9.40	Welcome Remarks - Prof M. Santally, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academia), University of Mauritius
9.40 – 9.50	Opening Speech - HE K. Shaw, Chargé D'Affaires, Australian High Commission
9.50 – 10.05	Disinformation / Misinformation: Best Practices from the Australian Context. Keynote by Dr M. Davis, Research Fellow, Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology, Sydney
10.05 – 10.20	Addressing Disinformation: Perspectives from Africa Keynote by Mr N. Makgato, Executive Director, Africa Check
10.20 – 10.40	Tea break
10.40 – 11.25	The State of Information, Communication and Data in Mauritius. Key Trends in Disinformation Moderators: Dr G. Narrainen and Mrs C. Chan Meetoo, University of Mauritius Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mr J. Louis, Ag Director, ICTA;• Mrs D. Madhub, Data Protection Commissioner;• Mr J-L. Mootoosamy, Executive Director, Media Expertise

11.25 – 12.40 Current Practices and Possible Solutions
for Mauritian Newsrooms
Moderator(s): Assoc Prof R. Kasenally and Mrs C. Chan-Meetoo,
University of Mauritius

Panelists:

- Mr A. Beeharry, Desk Coordinator, News Department, MBC;
- Mr B. Delaitre, Director, Le Mauricien;
- Mrs G. Geoffroy, Editor-in-Chief, Radio One;
- Mr I. Khan, Journalist, La Sentinelle;
- Mr P. Sewpaul, Consultant, Defi Media Group

12.40 – 13.10 Pledge on Countering Disinformation

13.10 – 13.15 Vote of Thanks

13.15 onwards Lunch – Finger Buffet (UoM Cafeteria)

GALLERY OF PICTURES









MEDIA COVERAGE

Link to Livestream:

The full live recording of the workshop may be seen online at:

<https://bit.ly/livestream-disinfo>

News report on the MBC primetime news bulletin (22 May 2023):

- <http://bit.ly/MBC-disinformation-20230522>
- <https://bit.ly/mbc-report-workshop>





News report by TopFM ((22 May 2023):

<https://bit.ly/TopFM-report-workshop>

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News

Dialogue national dans le cadre de la Journée mondiale de la liberté de la presse : « Il est important de comprendre ce qu'est la désinformation et de faire l'éducation de la masse », soutient l'Associate Professor Roukaya Kasenally

May 23, 2023 42

top Dialogue national dans le cadre de la Journée mondiale de la libert... Copy link

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TOPTV MAURITIUS

L'évènement était organisé par l'Université de Maurice en collaboration avec le haut-commissariat australien. Il était axé sur la désinformation, ses effets, la nécessité de contrer ce phénomène et les mesures à prendre afin d'assurer davantage de transparence. Des professionnels des médias étaient présents à ce dialogue national, tout comme des spécialistes de la communication et des représentants des organismes gouvernementaux.

MOTS CLÉS Dialogue national l'Associate Professor Liberte de la presse Roukaya Kasenally

News report by Wazaa FM (22 May 2023):

<https://bit.ly/wazaa-atelier>

05/09/2023, 14:05 Désinformation et Factchecking : D'assurer un info-paysage ouvert et transparent


WAZAA FM


WazaaFM Live NEWS VIDEO FANS EVENTS PARTNERSHIP GAMES

Acte de désespoir : une étudiante de 18 ans tente de commettre l'irréparable | Diplomatie : le président de Mitsui OSK Lines rencontre le Premier ministre | Lutte

Désinformation et Factchecking : D'assurer un info-paysage ouvert et transparent

Un atelier de travail a été organisé par le l'Université de Maurice et le Haut-Commissariat de l'Australie.



 Mukul Doolah

Updated on : 23 May 2023, 08:43

La désinformation est un problème universel, dont l'île Maurice n'est pas épargnée. C'est qu'a déclaré Roukaya Kasenally, Associate Professor in Media and Politics, lors d'un atelier sur la désinformation, hier le lundi 22 mai à l'Université de Maurice.

"La désinformation fait son chemin dans le paysage médiatique sur différents sujets, tels que la politique, l'économie et les questions sociales. Le public manque de compréhension sur la désinformation et l'éducation aux médias. C'est dans ce contexte que l'UOM a réuni les parties prenantes, des journalistes et des consultants en communication pour s'attaquer à ce phénomène", a souligné Roukaya Kasenally.

Christina Chan-Meetoo, Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication, a estimé pour sa part qu'il est essentiel de s'attaquer aux sources de la désinformation.

"Malheureusement, le modèle économique des entreprises de médias ne le permet pas. Si la vérification des faits (Factchecking) n'est pas la solution finale, elle fait partie d'un ensemble de solutions qui nous ramènent aux fondements de l'éthique et des méthodes traditionnelles du journalisme", a-t-elle affirmé.

Désinformation et Factchecking : D'assurer un info-paysage ouvert et transparent

NATIONAL DIALOGUE | World Press Freedom Day 2023

Face à la désinformation, la revalorisation du métier

L'Université de Maurice, en collaboration avec l'*Australian High Commission*, a organisé un *National Dialogue in the context of World Press Freedom Day 2023* sur la thématique *Countering disinformation: ensuring an open and transparent infoscape*. Le colloque a ainsi réuni les principaux acteurs locaux du secteur, dont la *Data Protection Commissioner* Drudeisha Madhub, Jean-Luc Mootoosamy, exécutif directeur de *Media Expertise*, et les différents représentants de la presse locale, dont Bernard Delaitre, directeur du groupe Mauricien Ltée, Ashok Beeharry, *Desk Coordinator* à la MBC, Iqbal Khan, journaliste de *La Sentinelle*, et Prem Sempaul, du Défi Media Group. Au terme de près de trois heures de discussions, les personnes présentes ont signé un "pledge on countering disinformation", afin d'assainir davantage le paysage médiatique local.

Trouver des solutions, voire les pistes à suivre pour contrer la désinformation et la diffusion de *Fake News* dans les médias, mainstream ou en ligne. Tel était l'objectif du colloque organisé lundi à l'université de Maurice. Une occasion par ailleurs de réunir sur une même plateforme les différents acteurs du secteur, dont des journalistes, ceux qui légifèrent et ceux qui consomment quotidiennement ce flux d'informations, que ce soit dans la presse écrite papier ou la presse Web.

L'Australie est confrontée au problème de désinformation depuis ces cinq dernières années. Aussi la chargée d'affaires de l'*Australian High Commission*, Keara Shaw, a affirmé l'engagement du gouvernement australien dans la promotion de bonnes pratiques au sein des médias. « *La désinformation a un impact négatif sur la démocratie. Il est important de régler le problème* », dit-elle.

Dans cette même optique, le

Dr M. Davis, *Research Fellow* du centre pour *Media Transition* à l'*University of Technology* de Sydney, est intervenu à distance sur le cas australien, citant à titre d'exemple la diffusion de fausses nouvelles dans les *Mainstream Medias* sur le conflit russo-ukrainien ou encore sur les incendies. Il a ainsi expliqué que ce genre de nouvelles non vérifiées et diffusées sur les réseaux sociaux peut être néfaste à la fois pour les médias elles-mêmes, mais surtout pour la population, qui finit par perdre confiance.

Méconnaissance de nos lois

N. Makgato, *Executive Director* d'*Africa Check*, a pour sa part présenté le cas africain, expliquant l'importance de *Fact Check* les informations qui circulent. Il a aussi évoqué le cas de la couverture médiatique des élections en Afrique. Les deux intervenants ont ainsi abondé dans le même sens, affirmant qu'il est impor-

tant d'éduquer davantage les populations sur ce phénomène de désinformation et sur la nécessité de vérifier les informations qui leur sont présentées.

Sur le plan local, Trilok Dabeesing, de *Information and Communication Technologies Authority of Mauritius* (ICTA), et Drudeisha Madhub, *Data Protection Commissioner*, ont abordé l'aspect légal de l'information et de sa diffusion à Maurice sur des plateformes étrangères. « *A ce jour, nous avons reçu une cinquantaine de plaintes, mais la plupart concernent essentiellement des Abuse Complaints, et pas nécessairement de la désinformation* », a-t-il dit. Il a par ailleurs expliqué que même si l'ICTA demeure un *Regulatory Body* pour le secteur des TIC, l'autorité n'a pas de pouvoir d'investigation pour pouvoir prendre les actions nécessaires contre les utilisateurs délictueux ou pour agir face aux plaintes reçues sur les réseaux sociaux, par exemple.

« Back to Basics »

Même son de coche du côté de la *Data Protection Commissioner*, qui elle aussi ne peut pas "prosecute" dans des cas d'abus. « *Je suis triste de voir à quel point les gens à Maurice ne connaissent pas les lois en vigueur* », explique-t-elle d'emblée. Elle a ainsi rappelé que le rapport *Data and Protection to the Media* existe depuis 2019, et qu'il y est clairement expliqué comment contrecarrer les effets de la désinformation dans le contexte local. Elle a ainsi mis l'accent sur l'urgence de faire collaborer davantage les gens du secteur pour régler ce problème, de même que sur l'importance de



conscientiser la population sur la question.

Si du côté des autorités, l'on a parlé du besoin de collaborer davantage entre gens du secteur, Jean-Luc Mootoosamy a pour sa part mis l'accent sur le besoin de soutenir davantage les *Mainstream Medias*, soit la presse traditionnelle. Face aux flux souvent incontrôlables et incontrôlés d'informations sur Internet, qu'elles soient fausses ou bonnes, il soutient qu'il est l'heure de remettre les pendules à l'heure et de *go back to basics*.

Avoir une presse de référence permettrait ainsi de résoudre en partie le problème de perte de confiance du lectorat local dans la presse, dans son ensemble. « *Sur les réseaux sociaux, il n'y a pas de ligne éditoriale, il n'y a pas de compte à rendre. Tel n'est pas le cas pour les groupes de presse* », dit-il. Il est également persuadé de la nécessité de revaloriser la profession et de le releasser, et ce, dans l'intérêt du public avant tout. « *Il faut par ailleurs une Proper Media Literacy* », propose-t-il.

Les nouveaux enjeux financiers de la presse

Dans le deuxième panel de discussions, c'était au tour des principaux acteurs du secteur d'intervenir. Iqbal Ahmed Khan, journaliste de *La Sentinelle*, a ainsi rappelé que le problème de la désinformation n'est pas récent, et qu'il a même toujours existé. « *Nous l'appelions auparavant de la propagande et elle était utilisée justement par des groupes de presse politiques* », fait-il comprendre.

Repondant à une question de l'*Associate Professor* Roukaya Kassenally sur les bonnes pratiques mises en vigueur au sein de *La Sentinelle* pour lutter contre la désinformation, il a expliqué qu'il est nécessaire d'avoir dans chaque salle de rédaction des journalistes ayant une « *legal literacy* et une *political history literacy* ». C'est aussi dans ce sens qu'a abondé le directeur du groupe Mauricien Ltée, Bernard Delaitre,

qui a avancé que l'atout des salles de rédaction demeure les journalistes eux-mêmes. « *Nos meilleurs Fact Checkers sont nos anciens journalistes et nos rédacteurs en chef, eux-mêmes, ont une meilleure connaissance du métier et du terrain* », a-t-il dit.

Rappelant la culture journalistique bien ancrée du groupe, Bernard Delaitre a ainsi expliqué que le problème de désinformation concerne essentiellement les réseaux sociaux, car la presse écrite, elle, reste bien structurée, et, surtout, bénéficie de plus de temps pour traiter une nouvelle. « *Un journal papier se fait en 24 heures. Tel n'est pas le cas pour l'information sur les réseaux sociaux. Cependant, nous préférons rater une information que de prendre le risque de nuire à la réputation du journal* », fait-il comprendre. Il a également parlé des nouveaux enjeux de la presse, notamment financiers. « *Nous n'avons jamais eu autant de lecteurs et, parallèlement, autant de problèmes financiers* », fait-il comprendre.

Prem Sempaul, du Défi Media Group, a de son côté mis l'accent sur le côté subjectif de la désinformation, expliquant que le problème auquel le groupe a à faire face, c'est le ressenti et les témoignages à chaud des auditeurs, par exemple, et qu'il est souvent impossible de vérifier une information en quelques secondes avant de la diffuser en direct.

Ashok Beeharry, de la *Mauritius Broadcasting Authority*, a quant à lui expliqué que les journalistes sont formés pour à la fois *Debank* et *Prebank* une fausse nouvelle, et ce, encore une fois dans l'intérêt du public.

Au terme des discussions, la majorité des représentants des groupes de presse ont conclu que pour la survie du secteur, et ce, dans les meilleures conditions possibles, il faut investir davantage. Si quelques-uns ont évoqué la possibilité d'un soutien financier de l'État, d'autres ont exprimé leurs inquiétudes par rapport à cette proposition, qui pourrait créer une relation de dépendance malsaine.





COLLOQUE SUR LA DESINFORMATION, LUNDI

CHRISTINA CHAN-MEETOO (SENIOR LECTURER EN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION À L'UoM) :

“Une démocratie n’est pas complète sans un journalisme de qualité”

L’Australian High Commission et l’université de Maurice (UoM) ont organisé, lundi, un colloque dans le cadre de la World Press Freedom Day 2023 avec pour thématique *Countering disinformation : ensuring an open and transparent infoscape*. Le forum a ainsi réuni sur une même plateforme les différents acteurs du secteur, dont les représentants des principales maisons de presse, soit du Mauricien, de La Sentinelle, du Défi Media Group et de la MBC, ainsi que des représentants des institutions régulatrices, notamment l’Information and Communication Technologies Authority of Mauritius (ICTA) et la Data Protection Commission.

Un forum de près de trois heures sur l’état de la presse locale et sur le phénomène de la désinformation et de la diffusion de fake news, qui prend de plus en plus d’ampleur sur les réseaux sociaux.

le dialogue”, dit-elle. “Nous aurions souhaité pouvoir inviter plus de personnes, mais il était impossible de mettre 10 personnes sur un panel. On aura certainement l’occasion d’organiser d’autres sessions de ce genre.”

Le modèle économique, le nœud de la guerre

“C’est l’Australian High Commission qui nous a approchés en premier dans le but d’organiser un atelier sur la désinformation” soutient Christina Chan Meetoo, Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication, Unit Coordinator, Communication Studies et Head of Mediacom Studio de l’université de Maurice.

Elle explique qu’il y a eu plusieurs réflexions autour des périodes électorales et “de la désinformation qui a tendance à circuler plus vite à ce moment-là.” “Nous avons ainsi voulu faire venir les grandes maisons de presse locale ainsi que les régulateurs pour ouvrir

Par ailleurs, au terme du colloque, un pledge on countering disinformation a été signé par les personnes présentes. “Le pledge a été symboliquement rédigé en anglais, français et kreol mawisien”, précise-t-elle. Et même si Christina Chan-Meetoo concède que les discussions entretenues ont brossé un avenir assez sombre du secteur, elle confie que “cela fait quand même chaud au cœur de voir la participation de chacun des acteurs.”

Signe que la volonté d’améliorer et de protéger la liberté de la presse est bel

et bien là. Christina Chan-Meetoo concède par ailleurs qu’il est clair “que le modèle économique est un peu le nœud de la guerre pour toute la presse privée.”

Pour y remédier, une des solutions proposées est de créer un fonds d’aide émanant de l’État. “Si certains étaient pour, d’autres étaient contre, par peur d’une mainmise de l’État. Ce qui est tout à fait normal dans un dialogue.

Mais si cela devait se faire, il faudrait bien définir les conditions de non-interférence de l’État, par exemple.” En ce qui s’agit du problème de la désinformation, elle estime qu’il serait temps de se donner les moyens techniques avec les régulations et les conditions qu’il faut, pour “mesurer l’étendue de la désinformation et pour identifier les bad actors qui agissent sur les réseaux sociaux. Le but est de développer les outils pour réduire l’impact de la désinformation, notamment avec la viralité des réseaux sociaux”, insiste-t-elle.

En outre, elle souligne que durant le forum, les différents acteurs ont parlé de l’importance du fact checking, du debunking et de media literacy. “Il y a une panoplie d’outils qu’il faut considérer sans pour autant



De gauche à droite, Roukaya Kasenally, Associate Professor à l’UoM, Christina Chan-Meetoo de l’UoM, Ashok Beahary Desk Coordinator de la MBC, Bernard Delaitre directeur de Le Mauricien Ltd, Prem Sewpaul, consultant au Défi Media Groupe et Iqbal Khan, journaliste à La Sentinelle

se braquer l’un sur l’autre.” Quant à l’engouement des jeunes pour le métier, elle confie qu’il y a toujours “pas mal de jeunes intéressés, surtout quand ils voient des journalistes mis en vedette sur les réseaux sociaux. Ce qui est bien, car ces derniers sont passionnés, mais cela peut aussi être un danger.” Elle confie qu’il y a aussi la curiosité du métier, “même s’il faut avouer que la curiosité n’est pas une qualité qui est encouragée dans nos systèmes scolaires ou autres.

« La curiosité n’est pas une qualité encouragée »

Il s’agit de toute une approche systémique, donc, on ne peut pas vraiment reprocher aux jeunes de ne pas être aussi curieux que les anciennes générations, par exemple.” Selon elle, il faudrait plus d’échanges entre les gens du métier et les étudiants. “Il manque des lieux de dialogue.

Pourquoi pas un café de la presse ou encore un conseil de la presse ? Il manque ce dialogue, et cela est dommage, car il nous faut un journalisme de qualité. Une démocratie n’est d’ailleurs pas complète sans un journalisme de qualité.” Christina Chan-Meetoo note, surtout, que la demande pour le cours en Mediacom à l’université est bien présente chaque année, “mais on restreint à cause du marché du travail, mais aussi pour ne pas avoir des salles de cours trop remplies. C’est meilleur pour la qualité des échanges.”

Concernant la presse locale ces dernières années, elle dit d’emblée que le “constat est contrasté.” “Il y a une évolution très visible dans les pratiques journalistiques de plusieurs niveaux, et ce qui est intéressant, c’est que parfois, nous avons des pratiques différentes d’une même personne dans une même rédaction. Tout cela dépend évidemment des pratiques internes ou des intérêts des rédacteurs en chef,

etc.” Christina Chan-Meetoo souhaite ainsi que tous les gens du secteur puissent se focaliser sur un modèle pour que “tout le monde puisse se hisser vers ce même modèle.”

Ce qui rejoint le point exposé par Jean-Luc Mootoosamy, Executive Director de Media Expertise, pour un “retour aux sources”, et la nécessité de révaloriser et de soutenir la presse locale mainstream, pour avoir une “presse de référence” face aux dérives, parfois individualistes, de tierces personnes sur les réseaux sociaux. “Evidemment, nous n’avons pas la prétention de dire que nous avons les solutions à tout. Pas du tout. Mais nous sommes là

Le besoin d’une presse de référence

pour proposer un forum, pour ouvrir le dialogue et pour réfléchir aux moyens pour relever

la qualité de notre journalisme.” À savoir que le colloque a réuni les principaux acteurs locaux du secteur, dont la Data Protection Commissioner Drudeisha Madhub, Jean-Luc Mootoosamy, Executive Director de Media Expertise, et les différents représentants de la presse locale, dont Bernard Delaitre, directeur du Mauricien Lite, Ashok Beahary, Desk Coordinator à la MBC, Iqbal Khan, journaliste de La Sentinelle, et Prem Sewpaul, consultant au Défi Media Group.

The workshop on "Countering Disinformation: Ensuring an Open and Transparent Infospace" was held at the University of Mauritius on 22 May 2023 in the context of World Press Freedom Day. The event was conceptualised as a national dialogue on how to combat disinformation within the local mediascape, while taking into consideration the multiple constraints faced by the media industry. Key mainstream media groups were invited to participate in the discussions with representatives of regulatory bodies as well as with local and foreign scholars and experts.

These proceedings capture the essence of the discussions. What emerged is that stakeholders feel great concern about the quality of information which circulate online, are aware of the limitations of the current regulatory frameworks and of the existing practices within newsrooms. They are all committed to find practical solutions for a healthier Mauritian infoscape despite the many difficulties of the task.

This National Dialogue was the first of its kind in that respect as all professional journalists readily signed a Pledge on Countering Disinformation which was itself available in three languages for more accessibility, namely, English, French and Mauritian Creole.

It is hoped that more of such dialogues can be held in the future with even broader participation as these are essential to the consolidation of democracy.