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Defending the truth

Photo: dpa / ZUMAPRESS.com / Faisal Bashir

Opinion — 5

"Without lasting peace, the long-suffering people of South Sudan will not be able to move forward with the social and economic reconstruction of their country."

Parach Mach, p. 5

Photo: dpa / Hans Lucas / Pool Union Européenne / Agence Hans Lucas

The Market Systems Development (MSD) approach helps to promote marginalised market participants, p. 14.

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22 — Focus — Defending the truth

Photo: Khalid Albaih

Cover: „Fake news trap" by Sudanese artist Khalid Albaih (see p. 4).

People of all ages and from all societies must be empowered to understand the information they are dealing with. Autocratic regimes around the world owe their rise in part to the deliberate use of all kinds of misinformation. They have an interest in ensuring that truths are distorted or remain unrecognised. The fight for truth depends on civil-society activism, media education in childhood, thorough media work and strong democratic institutions.

Challenging one's own view

The cover image for this issue, "Fake news trap", was created by Khalid Albaih. He is a Sudanese political cartoonist, civil rights activist and freelance journalist. Attentive readers will already be familiar with him: In our April issue focusing on political satire, we published some of his cartoons and *an interview with him*. He told us that his cartoons function as a kind of diary – they capture his immediate response to events. "At the same time, my cartoons also serve as a mirror for those who share my perspective or experience," he said. "It's about asking questions – challenging our own views in a simple way." Khalid Albaih's family left Sudan for political reasons; he currently lives in Norway.

The good news

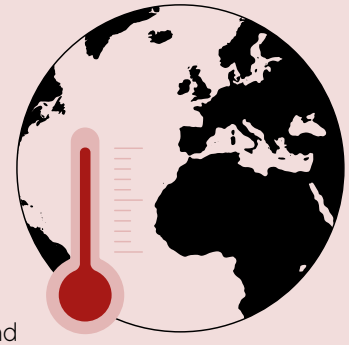
The **ozone hole,** which appears every spring in the southern hemisphere above Antarctica and partly over Australia **has been gradually decreasing for about ten years.** This development is apparently linked to the Montreal Protocol, which came into force in 1989 and banned chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which destroy the ozone layer. Ozone occurs naturally in the Earth's stratosphere and acts as a kind of sunscreen, protecting the planet from the sun's harmful UV rays. The ozone hole **could even disappear completely by 2035.**

Click here for the study that proved all this.

$36 *trillion*

is how much **rich countries owe to African nations for climate damage,** according to calculations by the advocacy group ActionAid, taking into account historical emissions, their **harmful effects on the climate and the extent to which rich countries have benefited economically.** The *report* also compares this figure with another: the $646 billion in debt that the countries on the continent owe to rich nations and global institutions.

What has also caught our interest



Two of Europe's leading development **policy thinkers attempt to make sense of the Donald Trump administration's vision for development cooperation** in the Global Policy Journal. Stephan Klingebiel, research programme director at IDOS, and Andy Sumner, EADI president, *believe they have identified five guiding principles.*

Stephan Klingebiel wrote about the topic for D+C *back in February.*

Here are **two stories** from The Guardian that gave us hope because they **show that people are not simply giving up in the face of climate crisis.** We find *the Solar Mamas from Zanzibar* and the people who are working every day to build a green *"climate protection wall" around Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou* truly inspiring.

SOUTH SUDAN

Renewed conflict is jeopardising South Sudan's peace process

What began as a skirmish between an armed group and South Sudan's military might bring civil war back to the country. Political leaders must now seek dialogue.

BY PARACH MACH

Photo: dpa / Associated Press

Satellite image from Planet Labs taken on 25 March in the Nasir district of Upper Nile State, South Sudan. It shows where airstrikes by government forces have destroyed civilian infrastructure.

In early March, members of the White Army overran a military base of the South Sudanese army in the town of Nasir, in Upper Nile State. According to the government, they killed more than 400 people. The White Army is a tribal militia of the Nuer, the second largest ethnic group in South Sudan.

The attack marked an escalation of the simmering conflict between President Salva Kiir's Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement In Opposition (SPLM-IO), led by Riek Machar. The White Army is associated with the latter, a Nuer. Kiir belongs to the largest ethnic group in the country, the Dinka, and the two communities have been in conflict since the country was founded. After a bloody civil war that ended with a peace agreement in 2018, the rival parties formed a coalition government, with Kiir as president and Machar as his deputy. However, the peace process has been repeatedly overshadowed by political turmoil.

In South Sudan's capital, Juba, tensions have been growing since the attack. At the end of March, President Kiir had several leading SPLM-IO politicians arrested, including Machar. The SPLM-IO subsequently declared the peace agreement a failure. The deputy president and his family have been under house arrest ever since.

Since then, armed clashes have occurred in various places between SPLM-IO forces and the South Sudanese army, for example in the Central Equatoria region, where Juba is located. In the Upper Nile State, the White Army and government troops are currently maintaining their combat positions. The government is receiving military support from neighbouring Uganda.

CIVILIANS ARE SUFFERING

The renewed escalation of the conflict is exacerbating the suffering of the civilian population. Several civilians have been killed or injured in air strikes, for example. According to the United Nations, at least seven civilians were killed in an air strike on a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Jonglei State in early May.

The fighting has displaced more than 130,000 people and is hampering the reconstruction that the country still urgently needs after the years-long civil war. Many of those displaced by the civil war had returned to their homes after the peace agreement was signed and are now facing violence again. Some are fleeing to neighbouring Sudan, where armed conflict is also raging, and one of the world's largest hunger crises has unfolded. According to the UN, South Sudan is home to more than 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers, most of whom come from Sudan.

"Without lasting peace, the long-suffering people of South Sudan will not be able to move forward with the social and economic reconstruction of their country."

The economic situation in South Sudan is disastrous. According to the UN World Food Programme, 7.7 million people are suffering from hunger. The export of crude oil via Sudan's pipeline infrastructure, which is very important for the state coffers, came to a standstill for several months due to the conflict in the neighbouring country. Civil servants had to wait a year for their salaries. The country's administration remains weak, as does its infrastructure.

Climate change is also taking a heavy toll on the country and, along with the political crisis, is contributing to the destruction of livelihoods. Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns have led to floods and droughts, which have been devastating for a population that is highly dependent on agriculture and pastoralism.

Even before the recent fighting, securing peace in South Sudan was an extremely difficult task. After all, the country is home to more than 60 ethnic groups with different languages and cultural practices. The priority now is to revive the peace agreement and prevent South Sudan from sliding back into civil war. Political leaders therefore urgently need to seek dialogue. Without lasting peace, the long-suffering people of South Sudan will not be able to move forward with the social and economic reconstruction of their country.

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KASHMIR CONFLICT

Authoritarian forces on the rise

The conflict between the nuclear powers Pakistan and India has flared up again. Authoritarian regimes on both sides of the border are stirring up hatred. The civilian population is suffering as a result.

BY MUHAMMAD NAWFAL SALEEMI

When the British Empire withdrew from South Asia in 1947, two successor states emerged – India and Pakistan. Both sought to incorporate princely states, which did not clearly belong to any state, into their respective territories. Kashmir was the most prized of these regions. Both India and Pakistan occupied parts of it and have repeatedly gone to war over it.

On 22 April, a brutal militant attack on civilians in Pahalgam in the Indian-held part of Kashmir almost brought the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe. The war drums started to beat as India blamed Pakistan for the attack and promised vengeance. Pakistan denied involvement and threatened retaliation for any attempts to violate its sovereignty. The showdown started with Indian missile attacks on several locations across the disputed Kashmir region as well as mainland Pakistan. Retaliation followed soon afterwards. The escalation potentially endangered all of South Asia, home to more than a fifth of the world's population.

The jingoism of both regimes was amplified by social-media-driven war hysteria. It seemed as if there was a collective descent into the madness of mutually assured destruction. As the skirmishes escalated, both militaries deployed their latest imported weaponry. Chinese war planes and Turkish drones operated by Pakistan faced off against Indian-operated French Rafale fighter jets and Israeli drones. World powers had no choice but to intervene. On 10 May, President Donald Trump announced that the United States had brokered a ceasefire.

Since the ceasefire came into effect, the war hysteria has been replaced by victory celebrations on both sides of the border. However, the only winners of this conflict are the two countries' governing regimes and the arms manufac-

Photo: dpa / ZUMAPRESS.com / Faisal Bashir

Indian paramilitary soldiers cordon off an area in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir after an unknown aircraft crushed near the city of Srinagar on 8 May.

turers whose latest technology has now been field tested. For the Hindu majority government in India, the conflict presented an opportunity to project an image of strength and appease its far-right voter base, who are steeped in anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan hatred. It also allows the government to perpetually externalise its challenges in Kashmir by suggesting that everything would be fine if only Pakistan would stop fomenting unrest.

> "The losers of this conflict are the casualties and their families – and the vast majority of South Asians, who will be forced to pay for greater defence spending."

For the Pakistani military establishment, this conflict did not come a moment too soon. Since former Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted through a vote of no-confidence in 2022, the military establishment had been facing an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. This brief exchange allowed it to refurbish its embattled image and position itself as the only institution that can safeguard the country's sovereignty. The old playbook of anti-Hindu and anti-Indian hatred just had to be dusted off and all the criticism simply dried up.

AUTHORITARIANISM IS GROWING STRONGER

The losers of this conflict are the casualties and their families – and the vast majority of South Asians, who will be forced to pay for greater defence spending. They will also have less freedom to dissent, criticise or mobilise against their increasingly authoritarian states, which will now feel even more emboldened.

The worst affected will be the Kashmiris. In Pakistan-held Kashmir, there will be less space for those who do not fully subscribe to the integrationist policies of the Pakistani state. In Indian-held Kashmir, the violence against Muslims whom the Indian government accuses of cooperating with Pakistan is going to further intensify. Homes belonging to families of alleged separatist militants have been demolished in retribution. Thousands have been detained for their suspected links to separatists in what is already one of the most militarised regions in the world. The international community must now pay close attention and work to prevent another cycle of escalation. The world cannot afford it – least of all the Kashmiris.

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COMMUNICATION

Lost in acronyms

Given the current state of global politics, it is particularly problematic when acronyms and jargon prevent people from understanding what important institutions actually do. In response to drastic budget cuts to development policy and research, their work must be made clearer so that as many people as possible grasp its relevance.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Last month, I attended CGIAR Science Week in Nairobi. CGIAR stands for "Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research". The event took place at the UN complex, which reflects how relevant this organisation's work is to the global community – even though it remains largely unknown outside professional circles. Over 9000 people conduct research on behalf of CGIAR in 89 countries. Their efforts are directed at nothing less than world nutrition and sustainable food security for all.

The significance of CGIAR's work is not immediately apparent because important actors are only talked about in acronyms. That is true for the 15 large "Future Harvest Centres", which are distributed all over the world and conduct research on essential topics like rice, livestock management and water, as well as for national research organisations or university agricultural institutes. When these groups of actors join forces, reach agreements and set future agendas, they produce even more abbreviations.

At the Science Week, for example, the GNC was launched, which was developed by GFAiR on the basis of the CGIAR HLAP report and commissioned by various RF, such as APAARI, FARA, FORAGRO, EFARD, CACAARI and AARINENA, to facilitate cooperation between NARS all over the world. Got it?

That means the following: On behalf of regional or continental forums (RF; FARA, for example, is the "Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa"; CACAARI is the "Central Asia and the Caucasus Association of Agricultural Research Institutions"), the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAiR) set up a consortium (GNC, the "Global NARS Consortium") to help national research systems (NARS) collaborate and present themselves globally.

Another example: Later, participants discussed how CGIAR can better support CAADP's new ten-year strategy. Many people took part in the panel, including representatives from ICRAF-CIFOR, IITA, CIAT and ILRI. These are institutions that specialise, for instance, in tropical rainforests and nature preserves (ICRAF-CIFOR), agriculture in tropical regions (IITA), biodiversity (CIAT) and livestock systems (ILRI). The conversation about CAADP and CGIAR is very important, because CAADP stands for "Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme". The programme should help African countries end hunger and reduce poverty by 2063 by stimulating the economy through more productive agriculture.

On the one hand, it's clear that all these institutions, consortia and strategies need suitable names, and we journalists certainly do not want to waste valuable space by writing

At the plenary session of CGIAR Science Week.

out long monikers every time.

On the other hand, the excessive use of acronyms can obscure what is actually at stake. Press releases and publications by larger media companies use them repeatedly – worst case scenario, without any explanation. Readers are often left in the dark about what the actors behind the acronyms actually do or aim to do.

Cascades of acronyms are neither new nor unique to agricultural research. I'm writing from Kenya, where it is almost impossible to navigate state and educational institutions without a list of abbreviations. Even the smallest institution needs names that can be made into acronyms – whatever cannot be shortened does not exist. That is true for other countries on the continent as well – and, of course, for German bureaucracy.

DEVELOPMENT BUZZWORDING

In development policy, acronym overuse is old news. The EU maintains its own database of abbreviations, and asking AI for a typical description of development work produces the following: "As part of the SDG agenda, the UNDP, together with GIZ, USAID and local CSOs, is coordinating a PPP project to promote WASH initiatives in LDCs, which will be implemented under the SWAp approach using ODA funds from DAC donors. M&E is being carried out according to RBM guidelines and regularly assessed through JSRs and KPIs."

Even worse, sometimes the words between the abbreviations fail to shed much light, like when classic development buzzwording refers to "strategic partnerships for impact", "facilitation", "capacity building" or "empowerment dynamics".

Acronym fatigue is particularly appropriate now. In light of sharp declines in research and development funding, it is more important than ever that as many people as possible understand what both development policy and research actually achieve.

The example of CGIAR shows: Even important work that aims to ensure that the basic needs of all people are met is often – best case scenario – only understood by the people who conduct it. But that is not enough, now that new donors from the private sector, for example, must be brought on board in order to close huge financing gaps. At the same time, initiatives like the GNC and the CAADP are incredibly important currently because they strengthen national systems and make them less dependent on the benevolence and erratic decisions of richer countries. We in the media have to make an effort to provide the necessary background knowledge – and it would be very helpful if the research and development communities could formulate their messages more clearly. The fact that they do not, probably has to do with money struggles behind the scenes. Nevertheless, a lack of transparency about budget decisions exacerbates public mistrust of international organisations and global agendas in the medium term.

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Photo: dpa / NurPhoto / Adekunle Ajayi

Events like the annual Lagos Women Run help raise awareness of diseases such as cancer.

HEALTH

Communicating about non-communicable diseases

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and cancer are responsible for about 30 % of all annual deaths in Nigeria. This calls for urgent action – and above all strategic sensitisation at the community level.

BY CHINEDU MOGHALU

NCDs are on the rise in Nigeria. These diseases are exacerbated by lifestyle factors such as poor diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and alcohol consumption.

Hypertension, the most common cardiovascular disease, affects over 29 % of adults in Nigeria, according to The Lancet's 2021 Global Burden of Hypertension report, and is a major risk factor for heart attacks, strokes and other cardiovascular complications. The International Diabetes Federation estimates that around 5 million Nigerians live with diabetes. The majority of these cases are undiagnosed, putting people at risk of kidney failure, blindness or amputation. Chronic respiratory diseases, including chronic obstructive

“What truly matters is what happens after information on policies and programmes has been issued.”

pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma, are particularly prevalent in urban areas with high levels of air pollution.

Breast, cervical and prostate cancer are the most common types of cancer in Nigeria. Late diagnosis and limited access to treatment mean that many cases are only detected at an advanced stage, resulting in a high mortality rate – a trend detailed in Nigeria’s National Cancer Control Plan (2018-2022).

Besides causing premature deaths, NCDs impose a heavy economic burden on individuals, families and the nation as a whole. The high cost of treatment and the loss of productivity undermine Nigeria’s development efforts.

THE WRONG PRIORITIES

NCDs, however, are not always a high priority on the national health agenda. This omission – or simply the lack of prioritisation – must change. Addressing the issue requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond healthcare. While prevention, early detection and disease management are essential, the crucial role of strategic communication is often overlooked.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of communication in successfully combating NCDs. Strategic communication treats communication as more than a tool to publicise health policies and programmes. Instead, health policymakers should integrate communication into programmes’ design and implementation. What truly matters is what happens after information on policies and programmes has been issued.

It is crucial to distinguish between top-down campaigns and community-led initiatives. Conventional campaigns, often initiated by central authorities and managed by governments, policymakers and development partners, can be effective, but frequently fall short of fostering meaningful community engagement. As a result, those who most need health programmes are inadvertently left behind. For instance, campaigns that rely solely on billboards, radio ads or social media may reach large audiences, but often fail to drive lasting behaviour change at the grassroots level, particularly among underserved populations with limited access to healthcare or digital infrastructure.

THE COMMUNITY LEVEL IS CRUCIAL

Community-led campaigns – particularly those involving faith-based organisations (FBOs) and traditional leaders – have proven to be far more effective in driving change. These groups wield significant influence in their communities and are trusted sources of information and guidance. When such actors actively participate in health campaigns, their messages are more likely to be received and acted upon.

Several positive examples are documented in WHO and NCD Alliance reports on effective community-based NCD interventions. In Ghana, a campaign aimed at reducing salt intake – implemented in collaboration with local communities, FBOs and traditional leaders – led to a 2.5 mmHg drop in systolic blood pressure nationwide. Similarly, Senegal’s tobacco control efforts, which engaged religious leaders, contributed to a 15% reduction in youth smoking rates. In Côte d’Ivoire, initiatives that deployed community health workers improved NCD management, resulting in a 30% increase in early diagnoses of diabetes and hypertension in rural areas.

In Nigeria, a key outcome of the 64th National Council on Health in 2023 was the establishment of a “Health Promotion Day” to encourage preventive healthcare and raise awareness about healthy lifestyles.

Furthermore, non-communicable diseases are no longer just diseases of the elderly – they are increasingly affecting younger people as well. More than 33 million Nigerians are active on social media, the majority of whom are young. Therefore, social media plays a complementary role in strategic communication – it is an effective tool in this demographic to raise awareness and drive change. Young Nige-

rians are not only at risk from unhealthy lifestyles, but also in a unique position to lead the fight against non-communicable diseases. By becoming agents of change, they can use their online influence and community networks to promote healthier lifestyles, advocate for stronger policies and support their peers in making informed health decisions.

A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH

Tackling the NCD crisis requires cross-sector collaboration between stakeholders from health, education, agriculture, finance and beyond. The Nigeria Health Sector Renewal Investment Initiative (NHSRII) applies the Sector-Wide Approach to pool expertise and resources. Organisations like the WHO, Population Services International and the National Primary Health Care Development Agency play a key role. No single entity can combat NCDs alone – a comprehensive approach, involving government as well as the civil and private sector, is essential to mobilise resources and political support.

Beyond partnerships, the NHSRII reflects Nigeria's domestic commitment to repositioning the health sector under the Renewed Hope Agenda of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. It establishes national priorities – such as primary healthcare revitalisation, health security and digitalisation – that can accelerate NCD prevention and management.

However, this momentum must now move beyond frameworks into frontline implementation – particularly at the subnational level. States must activate their State Health Investment Plans in ways that foreground NCDs, with measurable budget allocations, community-mobilisation components and outcome tracking.

As we look ahead, the path forward is clear: We must strengthen efforts to communicate the dangers of NCDs, advocate for stronger policies and enhance cross-sector collaboration. By doing so, we can equip every Nigerian with the knowledge, tools and support needed to lead a healthier life.

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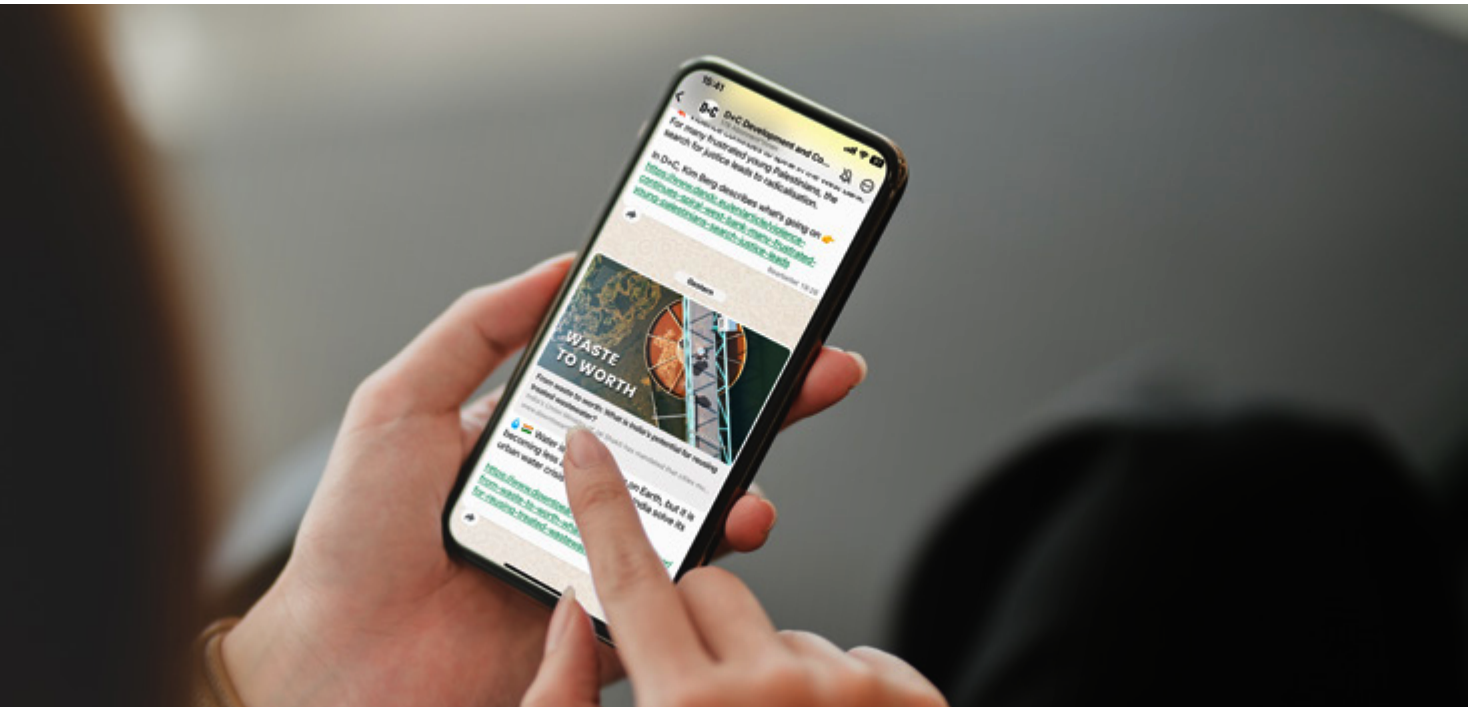

POVERTY REDUCTION

Strengthening access to markets for vulnerable groups

Worldwide, many people who produce or process food have little access to local markets. As a result, they miss out on opportunities to earn a higher income. The Market Systems Development (MSD) approach addresses this problem by providing support to marginalised market participants.

BY ARNDT R. BRODKORB

Photo: dpa / Hans Lucas / Pool Union Europeenne / Agence Hans Lucas

Transporting goods in Cotonou, Benin.

Amara Agossou (name changed) lives in modest circumstances in a village in Benin and makes her own mango preserves. She would like to sell her preserves beyond her village, too, but she faces several challenges: First, she cannot make very much because of her limited production methods. Second, she lacks a mode of transportation to deliver her goods promptly and safely, such as a two-wheeler with a carrier. Third, while she is familiar with a few nearby markets, she is not sure where it would be most lucrative to sell her product. She also doesn't know which shops in the next-largest town might carry her preserves, and under what conditions. All of these factors limit her ability to gain a foothold in the market and expand her business.

Many people who produce or process goods on a large or small scale experience the same problems as Amara Agossou. The Market Systems Development (MSD) approach can help, in particular, to better integrate these actors into local markets. MSD projects have existed for some time; occasionally they are also abbreviated as M4P, which stands for "Making markets work for the poor". Their overriding goal is to achieve broad-based economic growth, especially for people with very low incomes (pro-poor growth).

> "MSD projects can be game changers and transform structurally weak markets to benefit marginalised groups."

MSD projects first analyse the market with regard to development deficits and trends. Only then do project coordinators prioritise measures that have the best potential to improve market access for marginalised actors. In principle, as many participants as possible should profit from the project and adopt good practices. Successful projects promote sustainable change. In other words, they change market systems in such a way that they function better than before even without continuous or repeated interventions.

MSD projects are designed as long-term initiatives and typically progress through several distinct phases. During the inception phase, for instance, the implementing organisation recruits the future project team and establishes operational structures and processes. It is often necessary at this stage to conduct baseline or diagnostic studies. The purpose is to identify market constraints and to collect and analyse information about the relevant stakeholders.

The subsequent implementation phase focuses on the plans of action that the project team has developed. A central goal is to improve marginalised actors' access to the market. At this stage, for example, measures are implemented to optimise collaboration between producers and transport-service providers, or to train target groups in processing products in line with standardised quality requirements. It can be beneficial at this point to integrate individuals or companies whose success positions them as inspirational figures for others.

EXPERIENCES FROM TOGO AND BENIN

From 2014 to 2017, the author was responsible for a regional programme in Togo and Benin that promoted projects based on the MSD approach. For example, the programme supported projects by partner organisations on the value chains of paddy rice and parboiled rice, manioc, tomatoes, chicken and traditionally manufactured palm oil. The most important target groups included producers and processors from low-income families. A civil-society organisation based in Lomé served as the regional coordination body.

An example from southern Benin shows how the MSD approach can help overcome barriers in markets and create win-win solutions. An MSD project there supported about 2600 chicken farmers. In order to strengthen veterinary care, 50 people were trained as veterinary assistants and equipped with starter kits. The farmers paid them for their work, and thus they were able to supplement their income. At the same time, this newly created group of market actors overcame a development barrier in the system: the critical shortage of veterinary care in the project zone.

In the various projects that were conducted in Togo and Benin, comprehensive baseline studies were necessary in some cases to gather reliable data on the markets. It also became apparent that the actual size of the target group can change over the course of a project, since it could sometimes be difficult to identify all the relevant actors from the outset.

Further insights from the MSD projects include:

1. Further education for employees of implementing organisations pays off: They need to be able to moderate, network and coach in order to help market actors organise meetings independently, for example.

2. Gathering knowledge and experience is important: It allows to measure the progress and efficacy of a project and to correct problematic developments. Later project phases can benefit from it, too. The need for training in this area should therefore be taken into account.

3. False expectations should be avoided: Project managers and target groups have to understand from the outset that MSD projects do not work with large grants. However, smaller, targeted incentives for specific market actors can help overcome bottlenecks and, in some cases, significantly improve the overall situation.

4. Social norms can stand in the way of establishing the envisaged market: These include traditional gender roles that prevent women from becoming financially independent through entrepreneurship. Steering the project around such obstacles can be a lengthy and complicated process.

5. Cooperation with state authorities has advantages and disadvantages. While they can provide a lot of leverage at a certain point, they tend to work too slowly for the purposes of most projects.

In sum, MSD projects can be true game changers, transforming underperforming markets in favour of marginalised groups. However, the technical and financial efforts required to accompany such processes should not be underestimated. Further information on this topic is provided, among others, by the UK-based Springfield Centre, a leading institution in the development and documentation of MSD projects.

LINKS

Springfield Centre: *springfieldcentre.com*

Bekkers, H. and Zulfiqar, M., 2020: The story of MSD: achieving sustainable development at scale. *beamexchange.org/resources/1353/*

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RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

Global oligarchy, shrouded in secrecy

If you wonder why democracy looks fragile in the USA and other high-income countries, "Offshore – Stealth wealth and the new colonialism" by Brooke Harrington is a book you should read. Published shortly before the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024, it explains well what is driving the autocratic action of the new Trump-Musk regime in the USA.

BY HANS DEMBOWSKI

This comparatively brief essay of about 200 pages elaborates how tax havens have enabled a small global elite of super rich people to shroud their business activities in secrecy. Harrington, a professor of sociology at Dartmouth College, spells out clearly that they avoid much more than only national revenue services. Indeed, offshore financial centres basically allow prosperous persons to escape the laws and legal systems of other nation states. The resulting illicit financial flows do not only harm developing countries, but long-established, prosperous democracies too.

Prosperous people rely on trust funds and letter-box firms in offshore financial centres for their business activities. Such shell companies are beyond the reach of prosecutors and judges from other sovereign states. In a strict literal sense, Harrington elaborates, these centres are not necessarily "foreign" jurisdictions in a legal sense. Due to rather loose financial regulations combined with strict secrecy laws, US states like Delaware or South Dakota or the EU member Luxembourg serve as offshore tax havens too.

The offshore system does not only deprive other governments of essential revenues, it also stifles healthy market competition. The reason is that it allows beneficiaries to grasp harmful and legally dubious business opportunities internationally with only minimal risk. Their shell companies can, for example, invest in mining activities that are destructive in multiple ways, for example because they deplete the environment, breach traditional ownership rights and disregard labour standards. If such a project succeeds, the owners syphon off the profits. If it fails or merely runs into serious trouble, they let the shell company go bankrupt and avoid any personal liability.

NO REGARD FOR THE COMMON GOOD

As Harrington argues, this system has given rise to a small set of oligarchs who feel entitled to do whatever they want without regard for the common good. They do not care about environmental protection, labour laws or equal opportunities. According to their libertarian ideology, people must be able to buy whatever they can pay for, and governments breach their freedom should they pass any regula-

Photo: dpa / Newscom / Dreamstime

The Bahamas are widely considered a tax haven.

tions that limit rich people's reach. In the scholar's assessment, they want total liberty for themselves and authoritarian rule for everyone else.

In the eyes of the oligarchs, any questions concerning where they made their money amount to infringements of their personal liberty. This thinking blurs the line between crime and legitimate business activities. Harrington insists that it is no coincidence that tax havens also serve organised crime, including the traffickers of drugs and arms. They all need the secrecy which offshore centres sell. The business model of financial "paradises" is basically to help monied clients break laws of their own countries.

It is no coincidence, the scholar points out, that right-wing forces like Germany's AfD and Britain's Brexit campaign typically receive funding from anonymous offshore donors. Right-wing extremists often promise to liberate their nation from global pressures, but they actually limit governments' ability to regulate and redistribute. They distract attention from the most wealthy people bypassing all sorts of laws and regulation, which is a core reason for worsening inequality. Instead, the extremists agitate against minorities and aggressively deepen divisions between communities.

MOSTLY ANONYMOUS GLOBAL ARISTOCRACY

Harrington likens the global plutocratic elite to the aristocracy of the feudal era. She shares the view that they are above the rules that apply to everyone else. The sociology professor, nonetheless, sees a major difference. The nobility of the past was visible to the public and, to a limited extent, therefore felt obliged to the common good. Today's plutocrats, by contrast, mostly stay hidden. They see no need to appear legitimate, but assume everyone else owes them gratitude for creating jobs.

> "In the eyes of the oligarchs, any questions concerning where they made their money amount to infringements of their personal liberty."

In truth, their behaviour is parasitic, Harrington argues. They avoid taxes, so they do not contribute to the hard and soft infrastructure that their businesses depend on. Due to their tax avoidance, middle and lower classes bear those costs. Even in the tax havens themselves, the scholar points out, only a small minority of people actually benefit from the huge financial sector. Typically, these countries are haunted by corruption and crime, and they offer very little scope for upward mobility.

Harrington's easily readable book elaborates many interesting aspects. They include how Russian oligarchs have become trailblazers, what crucial role the professions of private asset managers are playing and why most of today's tax havens emerged during the decolonisation of the British empire.

SUSTAINABILITY VERSUS FREEDOM FOR THE FEW

Her most alarming message, however, is perhaps that offshore finance has made avoidance of not only tax laws, but rules and regulation in general something of a status symbol. Libertarian ideology suggests that any interference in supposedly free markets is incompatible with freedom as such. This narrative has become deeply entrenched in public discourse. Related rhetoric systematically discredits the role of the state. The full truth is that market efficiency depends on the rule of law, public transparency and regulatory oversight. Market dynamics as such provide none of this.

Sustainability requires capable states – and such states depend on adequate revenues. Illicit financial flows, by contrast, destabilise both nation states and the international community. As Harrington points out, the offshore system provides the basis for an elite insurgence against equality before the law.

Libertarianism ultimately leads to kleptocratic systems in which the highest bidders buy government services, entrenching their privileges and crowding out any other interests. That is precisely the kind of political system that Donald Trump and his ally Elon Musk are currently trying to build in the USA by dismantling government institutions, undermining the rule of law and attacking the freedom of speech.

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YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Rallying young Mexicans against corruption

Fighting corruption requires more than laws. In Mexico, youth-led initiatives are promoting ethical behaviour and civic responsibility.

BY PAMELA CRUZ

Corruption continues to be one of the greatest obstacles to global development. The most recent Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published by the civil-society organisation Transparency International highlights the need for more effective measures to address it.

Mexico, with 26 points, ranks 140th out of 180 countries, falling into the "highly corrupt" category alongside countries like Iraq and Nigeria. According to the National Survey on Governmental Quality and Impact (ENCIG) 2013-2023 , six out of 10 people who interacted with public-security authorities for traffic incidents, infractions or administrative offences fell victim to corruption.

With such an alarmingly high prevalence of corruption, one would expect victims to act. This is not the case, however, as many people opt not to report acts of corruption. The most common reasons include the belief that reporting is useless (29.5 %) or that corruption is a common practice anyway (12.6 %).

Therefore, to fight corruption adequately, it is not enough to rely solely on legal frameworks and institutional structures. Active participation of individuals is needed, too. We must invest in initiatives that encourage a change in behaviour and drive-up civil action against the vice.

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE WITH POSITIVE ACTIONS

Mejor México, a non-profit organisation established in 2016, seeks to do exactly this. The organisation is offering programmes to university students in Mexico where they can learn about what corruption is, why it is so dangerous, and how they can help fight it.

The programmes promote positive actions that encourage honesty and behavioural change. As Jorge Mireles, executive director of Mejor México states, the key is for each person to recognise the opportunities to be corrupt and have

"the tools to say no to corruption, break the vicious cycle and gradually transform it into a virtuous act."

To achieve this change, Mireles highlights three fundamental pillars: "The first is that leaders must be committed to saying no to corruption and reflect on their actions. Second, there must be a legal and institutional framework that regulates ethical behaviour. And third, which is the most important for us, there must be citizen awareness and participation."

ConversAcciones, one of the flagship programmes of Mejor México, focuses precisely on fostering this awareness and participation among young people aged 18 to 29. The programme aims to involve university students in designing and implementing strategies that promote behavioural change in the fight against corruption.

COMMUNITY EVENTS AND DIGITAL LARGE-SCALE CAMPAIGNS

The programme unfolds in two stages: The first, "Conversa", consists of information, co-creation and reflection spaces where young people design proposals to change behaviours and attitudes. The second, "Acciones," focuses on implementing these strategies in their communities and measuring their impact. At the end of the programme, participants present their strategies at a virtual event where the audience evaluates the results for creativity, impact and value. Since its launch in 2022, ConversAcciones has engaged more than 6500 young people from over 80 public and private university campuses across 54 cities in 25 states of the country.

Mejor México, with the support of several companies and foundations, has managed to reach many people through large-scale digital campaigns such as #NoDoyMordidas ("I don't give bribes"), forums, webinars, ethics and corruption contests, as well as events in movie theatres.

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DISINFORMATION

Defending the truth

Illustration: Khalid Albaih, https://www.flickr.com/photos/khalidalbaih/41531276984/

“Alternative Facts” by Sudanese cartoonist Khalid Albaih. For more information about the artist, see page 4.

OUR VIEW

The world needs to relearn what is true

Autocratic propaganda exploits mistrust and a lack of media literacy. Even young people need to be taught how to identify lies and deal with false information.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

I volunteer on a project for disadvantaged children and youth near Nairobi. In April, D+C author Alba Nakuwa and I led two workshops for around 70 young people on the topic of media literacy and disinformation. The reactions and thoughts of these 14 to 20-year-olds overlapped with much of what media researchers and psychologists from other parts of the world have reported.

When fake news dealt with subjects that were close to home, the young people could almost always identify them. For example, we talked about a post that falsely claimed that the flooding in Nairobi last year only affected a small portion of the city. A boy identified the report as false because he was personally impacted by the flooding, even though he lived in a different neighbourhood.

The young people were overly mistrustful of information about the Kenyan government. Even true reports from media that we had previously identified as reliable sources were labelled false. That lines up with what Kenyan legal expert Irene Mwendwa describes in an interview: Particularly in countries of the Global South, people have a deep mistrust of institutions. Mwendwa sees the root of this tendency in these societies' history of exploitation.

There was great uncertainty among the young people when it came to global phenomena and connections. Sometimes their social media feeds spit out wild assertions like: "There is another continent beyond Antarctica". In other cases, it became clear that the virtual clutches of Russia's propaganda army reach from the west of the continent to the east: Burkina Faso's young head of state, Ibrahim Traoré, who has led the country since a coup d'état three years ago, is often presented to the young people as an anti-western hero. Memes and reels celebrate him for his hatred of France and the entire west, as well as for actions and statements that can rarely be corroborated.

Many of the young people realised that they should be sceptical; just as many thought the posts were true. That is not surprising: The workshop participants come from economically disadvantaged families and attend woefully underfunded public schools with no resources for media literacy.

Circumstances are different in Finland, as education expert and former school director Kari Kivinen reported to D+C. Children there learn as early as kindergarten that disinformation means lies, misinformation means mistakes, and false information means gossip.

People of every age need to be taught how to understand the kind of information they are dealing with. Autocratic regimes all over the world can attribute their rise in part to the deliberate application of all kinds of false information. They have an interest in distorting the truth or keeping it from being recognised. Thanks to artificial intelligence, they are more successful than ever.

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Photo: Africa Check

Our image is taken from one of Africa Check's guides: "Africa Check's guide to zombie claims: how to spot false information that just won't die."

FACT CHECKING

Combating fake news

In Africa, as in most parts of the world, political rhetoric, dubious health claims and geopolitical interests fuel the spread of misinformation. Africa Check, the pioneer for information integrity on the continent, regularly exposes lies, combats misinformation and works to (re)build media literacy in order to hold those in power accountable with facts.

BY ALPHONCE SHIUNDU

In February, Africa Check, a non-profit organisation founded in 2012 to verify facts and promote accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa, brought together in Nairobi some of the researchers and fact-checkers who have been monitoring the 2024 elections in nine African countries, including South Africa, Rwanda, Senegal, Namibia, Ghana, Tunisia and Algeria. Representatives from Africa Check in Kenya and Nigeria also spoke about their respective election information ecosystems in 2022 and 2023.

Overall, political smears against competitors, falsehoods undermining the credibility of electoral authorities, and those designed to undermine public trust in independent media emerged as some of the main ingredients of the recipe for disinformation. The use of paid influencers, secretly hired to spread falsehoods, was also common in all countries.

Fake opinion polls on controversial issues or the popularity of candidates, fake or manipulated election posters, well-designed manifestos with inflammatory rhetoric, well-edited videos that were cut together to show polarising verbal exchanges, and fake screenshots of internal WhatsApp conversations were used with varying degrees of effectiveness and harmfulness in all countries.

Africa Check and its partners took action with their proven set of tools to ensure information integrity: fact-checking, debunking, media literacy and digital hygiene courses. The platform offers programmes that teach people how to verify information from publicly available sources and alert them how to recognise false information, particularly in cases where disinformation aims to exploit cognitive shortcuts. The programmes also provide guidance on how to use safe online practices to protect oneself and others from harmful content and explain how algorithms work to amplify outrage, and how they can be recalibrated to display useful content.

BATTERY ACID AS A CURE FOR CATARACTS

David Ajikobi is the country editor for Africa Check in Nigeria. He explains that, in addition to political disinformation, disinformation in the health sector is a major problem. "This leads to dangerous behaviour, and the damage is sometimes life-threatening," Ajikobi explains, referring to the spread of untested treatments, such as an absurd false claim on Nigerian social media that battery acid is a cure for cataracts. "This is a major problem, especially on a continent where there are hardly any functioning healthcare systems and healthcare costs have to be paid out of pocket," he adds.

In other words, people don't go to the hospital because they've heard about cheap, untested remedies that promise miracles. Someone who is struggling to feed themselves is likely to try something they can afford with the little money they have before committing to spending more money on hospital bills. That's the economics of survival.

Misleading health advice can have deadly consequences, not only for oneself, especially in times of epidemics or pandemics such as Covid-19 or Ebola. Quite a few people also trust their religious leaders when they tell them that vaccines are part of a global sterilisation programme. They refuse vaccines for themselves and their children against preventable diseases such as polio, tetanus, measles and tuberculosis.

The trail of disinformation in Africa is as follows: It spreads via social media – WhatsApp, X, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube or Telegram – then reaches community radio stations and is repeated as fact in mosques and churches, in marketplaces and on official platforms. On other days, it starts in the marketplace and ends up in the family WhatsApp group. This is how it circulates unchecked, poisoning minds and endangering lives.

"The trail of disinformation in Africa is as follows: It spreads via social media, then reaches community radio stations and is repeated as fact in mosques and churches, in marketplaces and on official platforms."

BATTLES FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

In West Africa, there is another aspect of disinformation that is gaining ground. Researchers attribute it to the geopolitics of the region, where major global players are trying to win the hearts and minds of the population. "False narratives and disinformation are being used to promote the influence of foreign actors – Russia, China, but also the US and the EU," says Ajikobi.

Valdez Onanina is editor-in-chief for francophone Africa at Africa Check. He is based in Dakar, Senegal, and has done extensive work in French-speaking countries that have experienced coups in the last decade. "Misinformation and disinformation especially from China or Russia remain a threat as they contribute to the increasing polarisation of public debates and political disputes in our countries," Onanina says.

According to Onanina, there are two reasons for this: "A very fragile media ecosystem is struggling with a difficult economic situation, which has a direct impact on the quality, ethics and impact of journalism," he says. "Secondly, trust in the media is declining worldwide, due to various factors, including the rise of populism in several countries, where public figures often fuel this mistrust through wrong statements."

MISINFORMATION FROM THE HIGHEST LEVEL

As far as the last point is concerned, we in Kenya know exactly what he means. Here is an example of how fake news is spread from the highest level of government.

Kenyan President William Ruto travelled to Germany in September 2024 to sign a bilateral labour migration agreement. "This agreement will unlock 250,000 job opportunities for young people from Kenya," he said in an interview with Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's state-run international broadcaster. The British public broadcaster BBC picked up this figure and wrote in a post on X: "Germany has agreed to welcome 250,000 skilled and semi-skilled Kenyan workers."

Shortly after the BBC post went live, Germany's Interior Ministry quoted it and posted on X: "This information is clearly false. The agreement between Germany and Kenya does not include any numbers or quotas of skilled workers who will have the opportunity to work in Germany. All applicants must fulfil the strict requirements of the German Skilled Immigration Act."

For Kenyans, the figure came from the president. And a friendly government had just declared it to be wrong. Many who saw the DW interview, read the BBC report or heard the president's comments in Kenya saw this as criticism of Ruto by the Germans.

Ruto's claim that the agreement included figures and his failure to disclose the details fuelled the hopes of millions of young Kenyans, most of whom are unemployed. Suddenly, there was great excitement on the internet, with people already picturing themselves sitting on planes to Germany.

When the German government clarified that the agreement did not contain any numbers and emphasised that it was about skilled workers, this shook the already crumbling confidence in the president.

Nevertheless, some decided to twist the issue and argue that the head of state's statement was true, but that the German government had to contradict him because immigration was a hot election issue in the upcoming German elections. Ruto had promised people jobs, and he now had to show at all costs that he would keep that promise.

This is how disinformation thrives. Facts are twisted to fit a narrative, and even when misrepresentations are exposed, it is difficult to correct them because those who are spreading falsehoods dig in their heels and insist on their version of events, as they have an end goal in mind.

But there is hope. Thanks to borderless and collaborative information forensics in a connected world where thousands of digitally savvy young people have access to the internet, the truth often comes to light. When this happens, however, the trust and goodwill of the public, on which the work of all civil servants and authorities is based, are undermined. Civil disobedience becomes a patriotic duty, and governance becomes difficult.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

Mercenaries of digital disinformation

Purposefully spreading false information is their business model: Dubious companies and consultants like "Team Jorge" are trying to influence elections around the world. They rely on armies of fake social media accounts, cyber espionage and AI.

BY SONJA PETERANDERL

Those who sought out a man with the code name "Jorge" typically had a lot of money, few scruples and large ambitions. In the summer of 2022, a man posing as a representative of an African politician wanted to order election manipulation from the consultant "Jorge". "Jorge" quoted a price of around € 6 million for the job. The consultant justified the high cost of his services by pointing to his successful track record: He bragged that his "Team Jorge" had already used digital disinformation to influence 33 presidential campaigns, 27 of which were successful.

In this case, however, the supposed new customer was a journalist. A team from the international research collective "Forbidden Stories" went undercover to expose some of the

Illustration: Forbidden Stories & Mélody Da Fonseca

Tal Hanan (light-coloured shirt), Mashi Meidan (centre) and Shuki Friedman are three protagonists of the "Team Jorge" galaxy, according to "Forbidden Stories".

mechanisms of the digital disinformation war that is endangering democracy worldwide. Dubious service providers like "Team Jorge" are trying to influence debates and even elections. They create artificial trends on social-media networks, circulate rumours and destroy people's reputations with the help of, for example, armies of fake social-media accounts, AI and, occasionally, cyber espionage.

"For years, manipulation on social media has been a shadow industry that has received little attention," says journalist Max Hoppenstedt, who works for the German news magazine Der Spiegel and reported on "Team Jorge" as part of the international "Forbidden Stories" team. He explains that the number of companies conducting these operations worldwide remains unclear – it is often difficult to trace the source of disinformation campaigns.

"Dubious service providers like "Team Jorge" are trying to influence debates and even elections. They create artificial trends on social-media networks, circulate rumours and destroy people's reputations."

THE TOOLS OF DISINFORMATION

The investigation of "Team Jorge" nevertheless sheds light on their tools and strategies: "We could see that Team Jorge has a wide variety of weapons in its arsenal, ranging from hacking attacks on high-ranking politicians to the systemic spread of chaos and lies on social media to manufactured scandals," Hoppenstedt says. "The unique thing about Team Jorge was that its troops offered their services to pretty much anyone – from despots to disreputable businessmen – like they were mercenaries in an information war."

According to "Forbidden Stories", the man who calls himself "Jorge" is an Israeli businessman named Tal Hanan, who used to work for Israeli special forces. For at least 10 years, he has apparently led a team made up of former intelligence officials and security and digital experts who carry out the digital dirty work of his influential clients.

AN ARMY OF BOTS

In 2022, his squad commanded an armada of around 30,000 fake profiles on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Amazon. The team developed software called Advanced Impact Media Solutions (AIMS) to quickly create and direct virtual avatars. This network of virtual fake people can flood digital platforms with posts or comments and manipulate social-media trends. Based on a few keywords, the software also automatically generates positive, negative or neutral content in any language.

"Team Jorge's methods are old, but effective and therefore profitable," says Alberto Escorcia, a Mexican digital expert who has analysed digital disinformation in Latin America for years and also took part in the "Forbidden Stories" research. "They don't use any sophisticated techniques. Instead, they basically generate a huge amount of spam, which is then promoted by networks of influencers who were hired for that purpose." Through various networks, they "create a collective narrative, which becomes larger and more powerful than trends in other networks through sheer brute force," says Escorcia.

According to him, the software used by "Team Jorge" is a kind of copycat of "TweetDeck", a social-media dashboard that allows multiple accounts on X to be monitored at the same time. "Team Jorge" also apparently places fake-news items in journalistic reports and tries to convince celebrities, influencers and their fans to pass on the rumours the bots have spread, thereby concealing their source – like money laundering. According to Escorcia, "Team Jorge" is one of the oldest and best-known groups working in Latin America; it is especially active in South America. He explains that in countries like Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, these disinformation warriors have already interfered in elections.

CYBER ESPIONAGE FOR CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA

"Team Jorge" also sometimes exploited security gaps to obtain sensitive information and contacts and hack into accounts. During his conversations with journalists from the "Forbidden Stories" team, "Jorge" demonstrated his skills by gaining live access to the e-mail and messenger accounts of several high-ranking Africans. He hacked Telegram accounts and then posed as the account holders to send messages to their family members.

"Jorge's" team also seems to have provided cyber espionage services to the notorious British company Cambridge Analytica, which is now defunct. In 2018, the consulting firm became well known worldwide because of a data scandal: It used the data of up to 87 million Facebook users to influ-

ence elections around the world through personalised digital campaigns. According to "Forbidden Stories", hackers from "Team Jorge" marched into the offices of Cambridge Analytica with USB sticks that were allegedly full of confidential information gleaned from e-mail accounts, including data from a Nigerian presidential candidate. Even some Cambridge Analytica employees were shocked, as one ex-employee later told The Guardian.

RUMOURS IN MESSENGERS

The providers frequently spread their disinformation campaigns across multiple channels simultaneously. "The agencies usually sell a package made up of political spam and dirty social-networking tactics, along with rumour-mongering and election advertising via WhatsApp numbers and zip-code campaigns via Facebook ads," Escorcia observes.

Content on social media is not placed in a journalistic context. The formats are short, and abbreviated, sensationalised and emotional messages often spread particularly well. All of these factors make the platforms ideal targets for propaganda and disinformation. "Young people, especially, have had enough of traditional politics; it bores them," observes Ivón Rivera, a communications expert who teaches and researches at the Central American University in San Salvador (UCA). "They want to consume information as entertainment, in little information bytes."

Rumours also go viral in messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram. In chats or closed groups, information spreads quickly, without opposition. According to Escorcia, people are often more likely to trust peers like friends, acquaintances or family rather than traditional media.

AI AS A MULTIPLIER OF DISINFORMATION

Alberto Escorcia is concerned about the fact that AI software is now increasingly being used to create and spread posts and entire campaigns automatically and on a large scale. During the presidential and parliamentary campaigns in Mexico in 2024, for example, he observed that the programming interface of the AI company OpenAI was being misused to create thousands of tweets and Facebook ads.

Social networks like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, now X, have introduced tools and processes in recent years to uncover fake accounts, bot networks and disinformation, including community reporting, fact-checking and AI software designed to automatically detect suspicious posts or profiles. "The research on Team Jorge showed that the defences of social-media companies like Facebook against masses of automated and lying bot accounts function significantly worse than the companies would have us believe," says Spiegel editor Hoppenstedt. "We were able to demonstrate that the companies failed to notice numerous fake accounts for a long time."

The tech companies have also fired many community managers and trimmed security and ethics teams over the past several years. Moreover, the CEOs of large tech companies are now publicly lining up behind the anti-democratic, right-wing extremist US president Donald Trump – and taking an even more relaxed approach to disinformation from the far right of the political spectrum. Recently, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg even stopped working with international journalistic fact-checking initiatives, which Facebook had long established and supported – good news for mercenaries of disinformation.

"Team Jorge" is also apparently involved once again in the dirty business of election manipulation: "We have seen signs that, even after the publication of our findings, Team Jorge might have resumed its activities after taking a little break," says Hoppenstedt.

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Photo: dpa / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Evgenia Novozhenina

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping support one another.

PROPAGANDA

When autocrats cooperate

Autocracies work together worldwide to stay in power. They flood the public sphere with targeted disinformation in order to destroy democratic discourse and impose their own narrative on the world, as Anne Applebaum argues in her book "Autocracy, Inc.".

BY DAGMAR WOLF

As different as the autocratic rulers of countries like Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela or Zimbabwe may be in terms of orientation and ideology, they stick together to shore up their power, enrich themselves and expand their influence. They cooperate to evade sanctions and support one another with capital, technology, weapons and other resources. Using propaganda bots and troll factories, they influence debates in the digital realm.

What unites them is their contempt for the liberal world and the fight against every form of democracy. That is the conclusion that Polish-US American journalist and historian Anne Applebaum reaches in her book "Autocracy, Inc.". The rejection of democratic values is rooted in the nature of democracy itself, Applebaum writes: Accountability, transparency, justice, human rights, free media and citizen participation are principles that challenge autocrats' power. For that reason, they would like to nip democratic movements in the bud whenever possible.

Therefore, they defame the opposition, discredit the charismatic leaders of democratic movements and intimidate their supporters. According to Applebaum, autocrats typically shy away from targeted killings – for fear of creating martyrs.

DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Personal attacks against political opponents make an impact. In Venezuela, Zimbabwe and many other countries, they are carried out to make it impossible for inconvenient people to live a productive life. These people are subjected to smear campaigns on social media, harassment by financial authorities, stalking and physical violence. Their family members are often threatened too.

Sophisticated online hate campaigns are giving rise to new forms of mass bullying. Many people participate in such campaigns anonymously. For example, Applebaum describes how the Venezuelan government introduced a system to pay users small sums of money to spread government propaganda on social media. According to Applebaum, similar state-run campaigns are carried out in other autocratic countries as well. They attack opponents using countless real and fake accounts – like an army of trolls that emerge from every nook and cranny, as Venezuelan opposition politician Leopoldo López told Applebaum.

The victims of such troll campaigns suffer so-called civic death: They become increasingly isolated and therefore untouchable – even to their own families. If someone is repeatedly vilified, at some point even those closest to them will ask if there might be something to the accusations – as false as they may be. Autocrats' message to the people is clear: Stay away from politics. Fighting isn't worth it.

DISCREDITING DEMOCRACIES

In addition to surveillance and control, autocrats also create narratives to discredit democracy itself. They oppose the "chaos and violence" that supposedly reign in democracies with the "order and security" in their own countries. They warn the population of the "spiritual contamination of the West" and fuel resentment and nationalist pride. Russia, Applebaum observes, likes to position itself as the leader of an alliance of strong, traditional-minded states opposed to weak democracies.

> "Applebaum's book reveals the influence autocrats now wield in a wide variety of political, economic, military and information spheres. It shows how much damage they can cause when they work together pragmatically to achieve their goal."

A massive amount of false information is spread to promote the autocratic narrative. Whether in Putin's Russia, Maduro's Venezuela, Museveni's Uganda or Trump's America – politicians lie continually and unabashedly, Applebaum documents. If their lies are revealed, they don't even try to present counterarguments. Their strategy is to flood public discourse with so much disinformation and distraction that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. Former Trump adviser Steve Bannon coined the phrase "flood the zone with shit" to describe this approach.

MEDIA PROPAGANDA

Autocratic leaders invest heavily in foreign media and troll farms to steer the debate in their favour. For example, the Russian broadcaster RT spreads its propaganda on social media and fake websites and operates multiple offices on the African continent. In Nairobi, it employs journalists from the region to broadcast its programming in national and world languages.

Chinese news agencies like Xinhua, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio and the internet portal China Daily are also generously financed by the state and maintain multiple social media channels, as Applebaum describes. Professionally produced and state subsidised, their content is cheaper than Western offerings and presents China and its allies to their advantage. Hundreds of news providers around the world use this content.

The African offices of Xinhua and RT, along with the Venezuelan satellite broadcaster Telesur and the Iranian network PressTV, spread the autocrats' worldview through stories and memes. These stories are then picked up and amplified by (real and fake) networks, translated into numerous regional languages and tailored to local markets. The Spanish version of Iran's PressTV – which is openly antisemitic and presents Covid-19 as the product of a Zionist conspiracy – may be banned in Spain, but it is available everywhere in Latin America. Al-Alam, the Arabic-language version of PressTV, also spreads conspiracy theories, Applebaum writes.

She sums up: We are experiencing a wave of targeted information laundering. Fact checks and quick reactions are not enough; by the time the correction comes, the lie has already made its way into the world.

INFLUENCE ON WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

Autocrats' information politics aim to deepen existing divisions worldwide and fuel discontent. They want to whip up anger towards democratic states. Conspiracy theories and fake reports are scattered across innumerable platforms; algorithms help spread them. As a result, these messages become part of the global news.

Autocrats also contact selected politicians and entrepreneurs in democracies to find support. They promote extremist voices to exacerbate conflicts and – whenever possible – escalate them into violence, Applebaum warns. The aim is to encourage citizens to increasingly question politics and the state and sow doubt about democracy itself. Autocrats precisely monitor each other's victories and defeats and choose actions that will inflict the most damage.

They are also making large-scale efforts to influence elections in democratic countries. Back in 2016, the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, later the leader of Russia's Wagner group, circulated a massive amount of falsified information to manipulate the American election. Since then, these methods have spread more and more widely (see Sonja Peterander in this issue).

> "Autocratic leaders invest heavily in foreign media and troll farms to steer the debate in their favour."

UNITING AGAINST AUTOCRATS

Applebaum's book reveals the influence autocrats now wield in a wide variety of political, economic, military and information spheres. It shows how much damage they can cause when they work together pragmatically to achieve their goal: the destruction of democracy and its values – at home and worldwide.

For Applebaum, the fight for freedom is a fight against autocratic behaviour – across borders in an international alliance. Her book ends with an appeal to democrats to unite.

BOOK

Applebaum, A., 2024: Autocracy, Inc. The dictators who want to run the world. Random House LLC US.

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Photo: dpa / Hans Lucas / Martin Bertrand

Disinformation and fake news are rampant online, and digital media literacy is more important than ever.

TECHNOLOGY AND ETHICS

“Data literacy is about building informed, active citizens”

Irene Mwendwa is the executive director of the civil-society organisation Pollicy, an Africa-centred feminist collective working at the intersection of data, design and technology. In this interview, she outlines her vision of ethical tech and talks about her experiences in the fight against disinformation and for the empowerment of Africans, especially women, so that they can defend themselves against unjust policies.

IRENE MWENDWA INTERVIEWED BY MILENA KAPLAN

What challenges related to disinformation and artificial intelligence (AI) are currently being faced in Kenya and the Global South?

In Kenya and much of the Global South, disinformation spreads quickly – especially on platforms like Facebook or TikTok, where algorithms reward the most sensational content. With low digital literacy and limited fact-checking in local languages like Kiswahili or Sheng, false narratives often go unchecked, sometimes even fuelling ethnic tensions or influencing elections. On the AI front, we're dealing with tools built on biased datasets that don't reflect African realities, leading to things like facial recognition technology that struggles with darker skin tones. Add to that weak AI regulations and extractive data practices (like gig workers in Nairobi being underpaid to train global AI systems), and it's clear that we're not just facing a tech problem, but a justice problem.

Why is data literacy so crucial for limiting the impact of disinformation?

Data literacy gives people the power to pause, question and verify, rather than just click "share". It helps communities understand how data can be twisted or misused – whether it's spotting a deepfake or calling out skewed statistics. More importantly, it builds confidence to challenge platforms or policies that aren't working in people's favour. We've seen this in action through Pollicy's initiatives such as our Digital Safe Tea card game, which makes these concepts accessible and engaging, especially for youth and community groups.

> "Then there's the language gap – so many resources are in English or French, leaving out huge swathes of the population."

Why is it often difficult to promote data literacy on a broad scale – especially in the Global South?

It's hard because the odds are stacked against them. Many schools don't have proper internet access or up-to-date curricula, and in rural areas, girls in particular may not have much exposure to digital tools. Then there's the language gap – so many resources are in English or French, leaving out huge swathes of the population. There's also a deeper distrust of institutions, rooted in a history of exploitation.

> "When people understand how data shapes their lives – from how they're scored for loans to what content they see online – they can speak up, organise and demand better."

Are there any success stories where data literacy has made a real difference?

Absolutely. One standout is Pollicy's Afrofeminist Internet Scorecard, which gave African women from seven different countries and LGBTQ+ communities a way to rate how digital platforms treat them, leading to real policy conversations in countries like Uganda and Kenya. Another exciting initiative is the Voice Data Literacy Training Program, which focuses on capacity-building through a hands-on course designed to help young people gain essential data skills. This free course teaches learners how to collect and analyse data, manage it effectively and visualise it using tools like Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets. It's particularly impactful in enabling youth to prepare professional policy briefs and communicate research findings clearly to decision-makers. To support the learning process, participants get access to real-world datasets.

How does all of this relate to civic participation and inclusive engagement?

At its core, data literacy is about building informed, active citizens. When people understand how data shapes their lives – from how they're scored for loans to what content they see online – they can speak up, organise and demand better. This kind of engagement is essential for inclusive governance. Projects like Pollicy's Dear Tech Diary show the power of bringing everyday voices into conversations about technology and accountability.

What role can development organisations – such as UNDP (UN Development Programme) – play in promoting inclusive digital ecosystems and ensuring that no one is left behind in the age of AI?

Organisations like UNDP can make a real difference by funding grassroots innovation and trusting local experts. Pollicy's work is a perfect example of what happens when communities take the lead, participating in the co-creation of resources like the Africa Data Governance Knowledge

Hub that are tailored to real needs. Beyond funding, development organisations should ensure that women, youth and rural communities are not only included in policymaking, but at the centre of it. They also have the power to push for global standards that put people first, not just profits or technical efficiency.

How should AI systems be trained to reflect diverse realities, and what role do data quality and representation play?

It starts with who gets to shape the data. Instead of scraping content without consent, why not involve communities in creating and vetting datasets? That's something Pollicy has emphasised in our work with gig workers and digital workers, through our Fair Digital Kazi Manifesto. Quality is more important than quantity: An AI system trained on 1000 diverse, well-documented examples is better than 10,000 random ones. Localisation is also key: AI that understands Kiswahili slang or regional nuances will always outperform generic global models. And let's not forget oversight. Civil society needs a seat at the table to ensure fairness and transparency.

at the centre of rulemaking, creating accountability for past data exploitation and developing ways to measure impact through an intersectional lens, not just tech performance. Pollicy's approach to rethinking power structures and centring care offers a practical way to make these principles a reality.

LINKS

pollicy.org
bmz-digital.global/en/hsc/

> "It starts with who gets to shape the data. Instead of scraping content without consent, why not involve communities in creating and vetting datasets?"

The upcoming Hamburg Declaration on Responsible AI for the SDGs launched by the UNDP and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is bringing together policymakers, civil-society representatives, researchers and industry leaders to ensure AI is deployed in a fair, inclusive and sustainable manner. The Declaration will be adopted at the Hamburg Sustainability Conference in June 2025 to which you have been invited as a speaker. What is your perspective on the Declaration in relation to ethical and sustainable AI?

The values behind the Hamburg Declaration – human dignity, inclusivity, sustainability – fit well with Pollicy's feminist vision for ethical tech. But these kinds of declarations only matter if they actually lead to change on the ground. This means putting the voices of the Global South

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Irene Mwendwa's colleague Maureen Kasuku has contributed to this interview.

Photo: dpa / newscom / Maya Vidon-White

Filipino journalist and Nobel Prize winner Maria Ressa is a champion of freedom of expression.

CIVIL-SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Fighting the weaponisation of anti-fake news laws

In South and Southeast Asia, several governments use laws that are supposed to fight fake news to suppress critical voices. However, civil-society actors have successfully countered such attempts to undermine free speech. Both camps are pursuing different strategies to achieve their goals, as research by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) indicates.

BY SANGEETA MAHAPATRA, JANJIRA SOMBATPOONSIRI AND ANDREAS UFEN

Disinformation is no longer solely a matter of information control and the manipulation of public perception. Nowadays, even the supposed fight against it is increasingly becoming a tool of repression by powerful government actors. Between 2011 and 2022, 78 governments worldwide introduced misinformation, disinformation and mal-information laws, according to Statista. While these laws were ostensibly designed to counter fake news – we use it here as a broad term for disinformation and other false or misleading information – they have, in many cases, emerged as instruments that illiberal governments use to suppress civil-society critics and political opponents.

Our study on the weaponisation of such legal measures, which we term "Anti-Fake News Lawfare" (AFNL), highlights this alarming trend in South and Southeast Asia. This world region is home to more than 1.6 billion internet users. We drew on archival material, news analysis as well as key informant interviews and documented at least 239 instances of AFNL deployed between 2018 and 2024 in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Targets included journalists, academics and activists who operate and express opinions in digital spaces.

PATTERNS OF ANTI-FAKE NEWS LAWFARE

Our research revealed several key patterns in the use of AFNL across the region:

1. Fake-news laws are often vaguely worded. This allows government actors wide discretion to redefine disinformation to include criticism against and opposition to the government. Dissent is, therefore, criminalised as "disinformation", which supposedly threatens government stability, public order and national security.

2. Consequently, AFNL is often implemented in conjunction with criminal and security laws, particularly by security forces.

3. Dissidents face multiple serious charges, forcing them to spend their limited time, energy and resources on long-drawn legal battles.

4. The majority of cases involve posts on Facebook, followed by YouTube and X (formerly Twitter). Social-media platforms, which many consider central for political expression and democratic participation, have ironically become sites of repression.

5. The enforcement of AFNL is highly partisan. Government supporters accused of disseminating disinformation online are often shielded, while critics face harsh penalties.

6. Governments' weaponisation of fake-news laws surged during the Covid-19 pandemic, as authorities increasingly invoked them to intimidate those questioning their preparedness and policies. Governments invoked emergency powers during the pandemic to use AFNL to monitor the expression of opinions.

7. AFNL has increased governments' influence over tech platforms. In major markets such as India and Indonesia, governments have pressured companies to share user data and remove content under regulations such as India's IT Rules, 2021 and Indonesia's Ministerial Regulation 5. They have managed to significantly tilt the digital playing field in their favour.

> "In the Philippines, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and journalist Maria Ressa leveraged her "reputational capital" to rally domestic and international support, transforming legal intimidation into a campaign against AFNL."

STRATEGIES AGAINST ANTI-FAKE NEWS LAWFARE

Despite these worrying trends, our research shows that resistance among civil-society actors is growing. Various strategies have proven effective against AFNL; they include legal action, advocacy, resource mobilisation, capacity-building and public outreach, as well as cross-border engagement with policymakers and allies. These strategies share a core understanding: Countering AFNL requires tackling the legal, social and economic "costs" that deter civil-society actors from holding governments to account.

Short-term responses to AFNL include extending pro-bono legal support to targeted activists, journalists and organisations. Networks of human-rights lawyers have played crucial roles in their respective countries and are increas-

ingly seeking to expand collaboration across the region. They include Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute, Lawyers for Liberty of Malaysia, the Free Legal Assistance Group of the Philippines and the Centre for Social Justice of India.

Moreover, lawyers and rights advocates in Asia collaborate to leverage the prosecutorial and judicial procedures specific to their country. In places with a certain degree of judicial independence, such as India and the Philippines, defence lawyers aim to secure case dismissals at the prosecutorial stage to avoid costly and prolonged trials. This strategy has proven beneficial for under-resourced journalists and activists in particular.

Complementing legal efforts, various groups have raised funds to support individuals targeted by Anti-Fake News Lawfare. Organised fundraising improves the groups' ability to manage funds for bail, legal fees and other trial-related expenses, helping to alleviate the financial burden of prolonged legal battles.

DRAWING PUBLIC ATTENTION

Beyond the courtroom, activists and journalists have deployed innovative tactics to draw public attention and create political backlash against AFNL. For instance, in the Philippines, journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa leveraged her "reputational capital" to rally domestic and international support, transforming legal intimidation into a campaign against AFNL.

Strategic litigation and constitutional challenges have also proven effective. In India, for example, the Supreme Court halted the formation of a fact-checking unit by the government in March 2024 after petitions by the Editors Guild of India and comedian Kunal Kamra argued it infringed on free speech and press freedom. The Court warned that government fact-checking units may have a chilling effect on dissent.

In Indonesia, an article of the Criminal Code and two articles of Law No. 1/1946 on Criminal Law Regulation – all related to false information – were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2024. In Malaysia, the notorious 2018 Anti-Fake News Act was repealed after opposition parties won the general elections in the same year. In early 2025, Malaysia's lower house passed a bill to establish the Malaysian Media Council – an independent body consisting of 21 representatives from media companies, media associations and other stakeholders. The Council is seen as a major step toward reforming the legal framework for freedom of expression and the media. Similarly, persistent civil-society campaigns in the Philippines pushed the lower and upper house representatives to introduce bills decriminalising cyber libel in 2022, followed by a Supreme Court ordinance in 2023 supporting decriminalisation.

ALTERNATIVES TO RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

Countering AFNL requires civic alternatives to restrictive legislation. Fact-checking organisations like Cofact in Thailand, AltNews in India, BD Fact-Check in Bangladesh or JomCheck in Malaysia contribute to this end by combating disinformation and advancing information literacy. These efforts are being bolstered by researchers and civil-society activists who analyse biased law enforcement and content manipulation. Thanks to their work, more comprehensive strategies to protect information integrity are emerging.

Ultimately, in South and Southeast Asia, civil-society actors are positioned between illiberal governments and powerful tech companies. While they are benefiting from heightened public awareness of digital repression tactics, they urgently require more domestic and international support to safeguard information pluralism and strengthen democratic institutions.

LINK

German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA): Anti-Fake News Lawfare (AFNL) *fakenewslawfare.com*

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HATE SPEECH

The ecosystem of hate

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power in India for more than 10 years now. The goal of this right-wing party is to establish a Hindu-majority state. This has led to a significant increase in hate speech, followed by hate crimes against minorities, with a focus on India's largest minority group, Muslims.

BY SUPARNA BANERJEE

Photto: dpa / Sipa USA / Hindustan Times

Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath (left) during an election campaign tour in Ayodhya in support of BJP candidate Lallu Singh (right).

The "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech" defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor."

However, the Indian legal system struggles to strike a balance between hate speech and freedom of expression. For example, the 267th report of the Law Commission of India states: "Hate speech is an expression which is likely to cause distress or offend other individuals on the basis of their association with a particular group or incite hostility towards them. There is no general legal definition of hate speech, perhaps for the apprehension that setting a standard for determining unwarranted speech may lead to suppression of this liberty." As a result, India's legal institutions do not sufficiently prevent the spread of hate speech and make criminal prosecution difficult.

In consequence, hate speech is spreading at the highest levels in India. Here are some examples of campaign speeches by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and other senior BJP leaders:

- During a speech in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, in May last year, Modi made false claims about the political opposition and suggested that it intended to damage the newly opened Ram temple, which had been controversially built on the site of a demolished historic mosque in Ayodhya. He stated that if the opposition alliance came to power, it would "send Lord Ram back to the tent and bulldoze the temple."

- Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister (CM) of Uttar Pradesh, used the slogan "Batenge toh kitenge" (roughly translated as "If we divide, we will be cut up/destroyed") several times in 2024. He invoked this slogan particularly in the context of calls for Hindu unity, which BJP representatives believe is being undermined by Muslim minorities, for example. It was also used in connection with attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh and warnings of internal divisions in India. The opposition accused Adityanath of contributing himself to division and inciting hatred against minorities.

- Home Minister (HM) Amit Shah said at an election rally in Jharkhand: "Infiltrators are grabbing land by marrying our daughters. We will bring legislation to prevent the transfer of land to infiltrators if they marry tribal women." The term "infiltrator" refers to Muslims.

According to the 2024 report by the Washington-based India Hate Lab (IHL), the men in the examples were the three individuals who delivered the most hate speech: the CM of Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath (86 incidents), PM Modi (67 incidents) and HM Shah (58 incidents).

According to the IHL, the 2024 parliamentary elections saw a rise in hate speech at campaign events to 74%, with 1165 cases recorded. 98.5% of the recorded cases of hate speech were directed against Muslims.

Since 2014, the BJP has won three consecutive elections, and Modi is currently serving his third term as PM. Before becoming the PM, he was the CM of Gujarat, where he was accused of tolerating or even orchestrating the 2002 riots between religious communities, although he was later acquitted of all charges. The BJP's core ideology is based on Hindutva, the political instrumentalisation of Hinduism to promote Hindu supremacy. The BJP adopted this ideology from its parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a voluntary paramilitary organisation of the Hindu right.

> "The primary goal of hate speech is to marginalise and harm the target group and to create a climate of fear and division."

The establishment of a predominantly Hindu nation requires the marginalisation of its minorities. This marginalisation can take various forms, including structural discrimination, violence and hatred. Hate speech is an effective means of demonising minorities. It originates with those in power and gradually becomes entrenched in various systems and strata of society. The primary goal of hate speech is to marginalise and harm the target group and to create a climate of fear and division.

SPEECH BECOMES CRIME

Hate speech contributes significantly to the rise in hate crimes, which are criminal offences motivated by prejudice against a victim's perceived membership of a particular social group. When influential individuals or organisations spread hate speech, they legitimise prejudice and create an environment in which violence against certain groups is

normalised. This can lead to an increase in discriminatory acts, physical assaults, vandalism and even large-scale violence, as has been observed in various cases across India.

> "Public statements and speeches by political leaders, including PM Modi, were sometimes seen as indirect endorsement or non-condemnation of hate speech."

Speech that dehumanises or demonises a community can lead to civil unrest, exacerbate tensions and result in the loss of life and property. An ecosystem emerges that protects the perpetrators and punishes those who stand up to them. For example, in 2018, Jayant Sinha, a minister at the time, honoured eight men with a garland of flowers after they were released on bail following their conviction for the lynching of a Muslim man. Furthermore, a 65-year-old activist named Parwez Parvaz, who had filed a lawsuit against CM Adityanath for alleged hate speech that led to riots, was convicted of gang rape. Several media outlets have expressed doubts about the lawfulness of the ruling.

In response to the rising tide of hate speech and hate crimes, several organisations and initiatives have emerged to combat these issues and promote social harmony. Notable efforts include:

- "Hindutva Watch", an initiative that focuses on documenting and exposing hate speech and violence that takes place under the guise of Hindutva. Its goal is to hold perpetrators accountable and raise awareness of the consequences of such rhetoric.
- The aforementioned IHL, a research and advocacy group that analyses trends in hate speech and its link to hate crimes. The lab provides data-driven insights that inform policy-making and public discourse.
- "Halt the Hate", a campaign by Amnesty International that aims to track and report incidents of hate crimes in India. The project's goals are to support victims, advocate for justice and call on authorities to take strong action against hate speech and violence.

Public statements and speeches by political leaders, including PM Modi, were sometimes seen as indirect endorsement or non-condemnation of hate speech, encouraging individuals and groups to express such views more openly. Raqib Hameed Naik, founder of Hindutva Watch and affiliated with IHL, says: "The phenomenon of sectarian hatred is not a recent development in the country. However, it manifested in a more nuanced form. The necessity for a figure to incite societal discord and exacerbate preexisting cleavages has been identified. This has culminated in the marginalisation and subsequent relegation of Indian Muslims to second-class citizens in their own country."

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MEDIA LITERACY

“Don’t listen to just one filter bubble”

Finland has been ranked a world leader in media literacy for years. Children as young as kindergarten age are being taught to handle the disinformation they will encounter online. We talked to Kari Kivinen, the European Union Intellectual Property Office’s (EUIPO) education outreach expert. A former headmaster in Helsinki, he has contributed to shaping Finland’s media literacy education.

KARI KIVINEN IN AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Phhoto: Adobe

Young people are getting their information from platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp.

Experts worldwide have been calling for better media literacy to counter the spread of fake news. But while little has been done in many countries, Finland has actually taken action: In 2014, media literacy became part of the national curriculum for pupils of all ages. How were you able to take such decisive action?
It has to do with the Finnish education system, which is unique in many ways. We swim against the current global tide in education, which involves focusing on core subjects, competition and control. We place greater emphasis on general competencies than on testable knowledge. These competencies are outlined in the national core curriculum, which is regularly updated.

Finnish students' performance has consistently scored higher than the OECD average and the socio-economic gap is narrower. Can you tell me more about the Finnish education system?
Every child in Finland has the right to free, quality education, regardless of where they live. We have a unified comprehensive school system to ensure that every child receives the same education and opportunities, the idea being for there to be no barriers: pupils receive free meals, books and transport. Teaching is a very popular profession, so universities are really free to pick the best candidates to train for this career. There is also a great deal of trust in schools, with heads and teachers themselves monitoring the quality of education rather than bringing in external inspectors to do so. I've been a head teacher in Finland myself and we take this side of the job very seriously.

What happened in 2014?
The new National Core Curriculum was introduced and multiliteracy became one of what we call "transversal education areas". This means that every teacher, whether they teach PE, English or maths, is required to promote multiliteracy in all age groups.

Multiliteracy is defined as the ability to obtain, process and verify information. Why is this such a high priority?
In Finland, media and information literacy is considered a basic civic competence for democracy. It is promoted not only by schools, but also by libraries, NGOs and lifelong-learning institutions. And we foster this skill from an early age, as even most pre-school children have already been exposed to digital media: They have seen films and advertisements, listened to music, and some have played computer games. We want to show them how to use digital media devices in a balanced and civilised way.

"Only a little over half of 15-year-olds in the EU are being taught how to detect whether information is fact or opinion. Yet this distinction is an important prerequisite for identifying fake news: Facts can be verified, opinions cannot."

Photo: dpa / Jens Kalaene

Digital media is something that most children today are exposed to from a very early age.

Children in pre-school can't even read or write. How can they reflect on media use?
The core question when it comes to identifying disinformation is simple: Is a piece of information true or not? Young children can start learning to distinguish between fact and fiction. For example, they can read fairy tales in class and discuss whether the story is likely to be true. In some fairy tales, cunning people or animals cheat others. This teaches another lesson: Some information you receive may not be true, but it is being used to harm you.

That's very interesting – it may have nothing to do with the digital world, but it is very much about disinformation.
Yes, and this is something that even younger children understand very well. To explain the concept of disinformation to children, we reframe it: We call misinformation a mistake, disinformation a lie, and malinformation gossip. Children are usually very familiar with mistakes, lies and gossip in their daily lives. They learn that not all information is correct, and that it matters whether information is being spread with the intention of harming someone.

> "It is not only important to warn people about disinformation – it is almost equally important to teach them which sources are reliable."

You've worked with the fact-checking organisation FaktaBaari to develop teaching materials for schools. What do these materials recommend?
Our aim during the FaktabaariEDU project was to apply the NGO's professional verification methodology to a school environment. We reduced their long list of fact-checking steps to three main questions that help determine whether information is trustworthy:

1. Who is behind the claim? Is it a trustworthy source?
2. What evidence is there to support the claim?
3. What do other sources say about it?

We recommend that if you're not sure whether a claim is true, you should try to find information from other sources that substantiate it. If you can't find anything from reliable sources, then the claim is probably false. Don't share it.

What would you consider a "reliable" source?
That's a very important question. In fact, it is not only important to warn people about disinformation – it is almost equally important to teach them which sources are reliable. For example, most scientific sources and quality media can be trusted, because journalists and scientists adhere to ethical standards. Today, even Wikipedia has become a fairly reliable source of information, especially in its major language versions. But we recommend not to use it as the only source, but to check somewhere else as well.

Studies suggest that Wikipedia is even comparable nowadays to other online encyclopaedias in terms of accuracy.
It's true that misinformation on Wikipedia tends to be corrected quite quickly. That's why Elon Musk is so keen to crack down on it.

In everyday life, even I don't check every piece of information I receive, as it's just not feasible. What would you recommend to make sure I remain critical?
If a claim, image or video you come across online triggers a strong emotional response, be wary: Stop, think and then check! While a lot of online disinformation is fairly harmless, the images or claims that affect us emotionally are the most dangerous. Shock elements are used strategically because our actions tend to be guided by instinct rather than reason when we are scared or angry.

Finland has ranked number one in the European Media Literacy Index for several years in a row. Have you achieved your goal or is there still more to do?
Digital literacy is an ambitious goal. Even though we rank highly, research by the Finnish CRITICAL project shows that 40 % of 12-year-olds in Finland cannot clearly distinguish between commercial and factual information. Most young people can't interpret misleading graphs, and almost a third of high school students have trouble judging the reliability of texts. So, even though Finland performs quite well on average, there are significant digital gaps. Especially the heterogeneity of students poses challenges. For example, it is more difficult to reach young people who are not fluent in Finnish and who receive adapted schooling. There's also a large Russian minority population living

in Finland, who tend to follow media from Russia. However, it is absolutely crucial for every young person to have critical digital literacy skills – even more so in today's age of artificial intelligence. We are also very concerned about the rise of TikTok and hope that we can teach our children how to deal with it.

How do you hope to achieve this?
Young people are getting their information from different sources than their teachers, using for example TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. We need to close this gap. Since we cannot force students to seek information from other sources, all we can do is train teachers and parents to try to understand young people.

You're now working for the EU at EUIPO and are involved in updating the Digital Competence Framework for citizens. Should other European countries follow the Finnish example?
What we have done can't easily be replicated in other countries, but the EU targets can serve as a guideline. The EU has set an ambitious target, specifying that at least 80 % of the adult population should be digitally literate by 2030. Being digitally literate is defined as citizens being aware that online information contains misinformation and disinformation, that they are able to recognise sponsored content, know how to analyse search results and are willing to fact-check information. EU countries should try to find ways to gradually build these skills in their respective education systems. There's a huge need for this to happen: According to the OECD, only a little over half of 15-year-olds in the EU are being taught how to detect whether information is fact or opinion. Yet this distinction is an important prerequisite for identifying fake news: Facts can be verified, opinions cannot.

Finland has a solid and well-funded education system, but many countries do not. What can they do to prepare their citizens for the disinformation they will encounter?
Children who read a lot are better able to identify fake news than their peers. Therefore, I would recommend that children are first taught to read and write properly. If you can't read fluently and rely on visual information from TikTok, you won't be able to verify information. Secondly, teachers should start evaluating online information with their pupils from an early age, rather than waiting until upper secondary school. That said, I do acknowledge that teaching media literacy can be very challenging in some countries.

For example?
I've trained teachers from the United States. In many cases, students' parents are either Democrats or Republicans, and if a teacher warns about misinformation from one side or the other, the parents often take it as an insult. It's very delicate. Media literacy teaching has been often outsourced to librarians.

What about countries where information is censored, or where the government itself is interested in spreading disinformation?
Information is global these days. Consider this: Finland shares a 1,340 km border with Russia that is closed; nothing physical crosses it, but online content does all the time. Fake news and reliable, balanced information both cross borders. In countries with limited access to independent information it is even more important for people to actively seek out reliable sources. The internet offers the opportunity to check information from multiple sources. Indeed, this may be the key to verification around the world: Don't just listen to one filter bubble; always try to see the bigger picture.

LINKS:

FaktaBaari:
faktabaari.fi/in-english/

European Commission DigComp 2.2: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens – With new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes.
publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415

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kivinen.wordpress.com

DIGITAL REFORMS

Building unity rather than division

Despite being the target of foreign disinformation campaigns, Taiwan has managed to halt social polarisation. One of the driving forces behind this process was Audrey Tang, Taiwan's first minister of digital affairs and a former hacker.

Photo: Kaii Chiang/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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AUDREY TANG INTERVIEWED BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Audrey Tang's journey began in 2014 when protests erupted over a planned trade deal with China. At the time, she was a computer programmer and a member of the Sunflower Movement opposition group. The group occupied Taiwan's parliament and succeeded in halting the trade agreement. The movement fostered civic participation in Taiwan and strengthened the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which opposes closer ties with China. Following the DPP's election victory in 2016, Audrey Tang was invited to become a minister without portfolio, and from 2022 to 2024 she served as the country's first minister of digital affairs. During her time in office, she made transparency and the open-source approach important principles of government, raising trust in democratic institutions and helping to combat disinformation.

In the lead-up to Taiwan's 2024 presidential elections, the country faced some fairly sophisticated disinformation campaigns, with significant foreign interference observed, particularly from China. The impact was contained, however, preventing it from undermining democracy and public trust in the integrity of the elections. How was this possible?

Our information resilience ecosystem countered these attacks effectively with three pillars:

- *Fast:* Civic and official channels published accurate clarifications within the "golden hour", before rumours become entrenched.
- *Fair:* All major platforms adopted strong measures against counterfeit accounts, including mandatory "know your customer" measures on advertisements.
- *Fun:* Humour-over-rumour memes outcompeted rage-baiting; and grassroots clarifications achieved a higher level of public engagement than the falsehoods they answered.

> "Humour allowed people to respond constructively despite their ideological differences, building unity rather than division during a crisis."

Because citizens were able to see the process, trust has remained high: the Freedom House Index, which measures access to political rights and civil liberties, rates Taiwan 94/100. And the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2024 report notes declining long-term polarisation on national identity issues, despite election spikes, with 91 % considering our democratic system at least "fairly good".

Since you mentioned the "golden hour": How did the authorities communicate during the election period?
There are channels in place for flagging information manipulation directly to the relevant ministry. The ministry is then required to draft a counter-narrative as soon as possible, ideally within 60 minutes. We have trained our civil servants and politicians to respond quickly, and the government has indeed become very responsive, especially during election times.

Why is a quick response important?
If you respond within an hour, your response will have a pre-bunking effect, reaching most people more quickly than the manipulated information. By contrast, a delayed response only has a debunking effect, which has little impact on public opinion. Pre-bunking is always more effective than debunking.

Debunking means correcting misinformation after it has been spread, while pre-bunking aims to reach people before they encounter disinformation. But can the pre-bunking effect be achieved even after the misinformation has been published?
Yes, provided you have an effective monitoring system and can respond within 60 minutes. Anticipating such attacks is even better. I *deep-faked myself* in 2022 to show what's coming and the need to "always verify before forwarding."

Another tool being used in Taiwan to combat disinformation is the Cofacts fact-checking platform – a chatbot where people can post information they have come across and ask the fact-checking community whether it is true or false. How exactly does this work?
It's like a Wikipedia for fact-checking. Whenever someone would like information to be fact-checked, they can report it on LINE, which is an end-to-end encrypted messaging service similar to WhatsApp. This report is added to a transparent, collaboratively maintained database that everyone can access. It is not run by the government.

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Polling officers count votes in New Taipei City, Taiwan, 2024

A 2023 study by Cornell University showed that Cofacts often responds more quickly to queries and that the answers are generally just as accurate as those from professional fact-checkers. Who are the people behind Cofacts?
Cofacts serves as a hub, based on crowdsourcing but backed by civil-society groups and fact-checking profes-

sionals such as the Taiwan FactCheck Center. Through crowdsourcing, it quickly becomes clear which topics are likely to go viral and are worth fact-checking. Professional fact-checking teams will focus on these. However, the platform is open to everyone, and volunteers play a significant role in the fact-checking process. The Cofacts team has also trained a language model that can step in even before the first professional team is deployed. The chatbot provides an instant, rapid response based on previous cases – for example, it can determine whether an online incident resembles a memetic virus that has occurred previously and is merely a mutation.

How do you ensure people actually participate?
Contributing to Cofact is part of the media-competency training provided in schools and in our lifelong learning programmes. For instance, students may be asked to fact-check live during a presidential debate. This experience is important because going through the process of assessing which sources are trustworthy can "inoculate" a mind – meaning it can make people more resilient to disinformation and conspiracy theories – whereas simply seeing the facts does not. Furthermore, once students realise that they can contribute to society, they are more likely to participate in collaborative fact-checking outside of school.

In 2019, Taiwan implemented a general curriculum reform. How did fact-checking make it onto the school curriculum?
The goal of media education shifted from media literacy to media competency. Literacy is about how you handle information as an individual, whereas competency means being able to contribute to the common understanding. Prior to 2019, the overarching educational objective was for pupils to comprehend and reproduce standard responses. Nowadays, standard answers are something that AI can handle better than students and teachers can. Instead, we want to encourage interaction and creativity. Students learn how to spark their own curiosity, how to collaborate with people from different backgrounds and how to view collaboration as a win-win situation rather than as a zero-sum game. These are values that only humans can provide, even when AI handles all the tasks involving standard answers. They are based on mutual understanding and care.

In the latest OECD PISA rankings, Taiwanese students were among the top five performers in all three categories: maths, reading and science. Would you say that the educational reforms have been successful?
The PISA rankings show that we have not sacrificed STEM performance (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in favour of emphasising civic literacy. This is the best possible outcome. At the same time, we have made progress in other areas: Taiwanese students ranked first for civic knowledge in the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). They also scored highly in terms of civic engagement and their ability to contribute to environmental sustainability, social issues and human rights, as well as their level of trust in government agencies.

> "Don't allow bots to run rampant on social media. Bots should not have freedom of speech."

The 2014 uprising was a decisive moment for you personally. At that time, public trust in the president was very low, but it has increased significantly since then. What happened in the meantime?
2014 was a watershed moment. Social-media use reached a record high and people could freely express their opinions online. However, "engagement through enragement" algorithms eventually caused social division. Our approach was to make the government's decision-making process transparent, providing people with real-time open data. We also introduced online citizen assemblies where people could deliberate on important issues. In addition, the civic collaborative platform g0v has engaged in open consultation through online tools and in-person meetings since 2014. We recovered from the trust crisis not by asking people to trust the government, but by encouraging public services to trust the people.

Social-media platforms are huge hubs for disinformation. What measures could stop misinformation from spreading?
Firstly, ensure that your online ecosystem incorporates a fact-checking component. Secondly, don't allow bots to run rampant on social media – freedom of expression does not entail the right to create an unlimited number of bots. Bots should not have freedom of speech. Therefore, ensure that platforms use secure "know your customer" technology (KYC) or digital signatures to verify users' authenticity. Thirdly, social-media companies should be held liable for any damage caused if they do not comply with the rules.

Photo: dpa / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Chiang Ying-ying

Volunteers of the Fake News Cleaner group guide students through the LINE app to identify fake news during a class in Kaohsiung City, 2023.

For example, if a social-media platform in Taiwan perpetuates scams and does not take them down even after they have been flagged, the parent company is liable for any damages suffered by users. This ensures that the company shares the burden of harm. Facebook, YouTube and TikTok have already implemented robust KYC procedures. We have also drafted a law requiring digital authentication for social-media users. Social media do not inevitably polarise people; it is a consequence of the platform's design.

How did citizens react to the idea of a digital authentication law?

This rule was crowdsourced by an online citizen assembly held in March 2024. Citizens who were selected through stratified random sampling discussed the issue of information integrity. The outcome was that people were clearly against government-led content moderation, but they voted in favour of digital authentication.

What would you recommend that other countries do to improve their information ecosystem?

Firstly, they should regard broadband internet access as a human right. In Taiwan, the Universal Service Fund provides broadband bidirectional connection, even in rural areas and at the top of Yushan, which is almost 4,000 metres high. Otherwise, you exclude a large number of people from participating in civic life online. Starting 2019, we adopted an education system that prioritises the contributions of pupils, teachers and other learners to the common good. It is important to foster a sense of agency and empower individuals to contribute to society. It doesn't matter if they get things wrong sometimes. As long as enough people participate, the ecosystem of knowledge usually converges on common ground after a while.

And what about technologies?

The more open source technologies and software are, the more likely people are to adapt them to their actual needs. Governments can invest in public code, which is open-source technology coupled with a code of conduct and deployment. Another option is for governments to bring technology enthusiasts who are working on free and open-source content together with community organisers and educators. Both communities share the same ethos, and when they empower each other, something beautiful emerges – a civic technology community. The most suc-

cessful open-source infrastructure relies on communities with a strong offline connection – literally people meeting every week. These face-to-face interactions build the civic muscles, the trust between people. My main suggestion is not to bypass your existing community-level face-to-face associations and civic groups, but rather to tap into them. This enables informal ties between civil-society groups to grow into stronger bonds over time.

Taiwan has gained recognition for the way it has handled disinformation about the Coronavirus, with one strategy being to debunk health misinformation using memes. How can humour help to tackle disinformation?

> "Social media does not inevitably polarise people; it is a consequence of the platform's design."

Humour played a crucial role in our successful fight against Covid-19 by creating "uncommon ground" and fostering societal resilience rather than polarisation. During the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, we faced conflicting information about mask effectiveness. Some people claimed "only N95, the highest-grade mask, is useful because of our SARS experience," while others spread the message that "wearing a mask actually harms you." This created a polarising debate when the science was still uncertain. Our response was a public service announcement featuring a cute Shiba Inu dog putting her paw to her mouth with the message: "wear a mask to remind each other to keep your unwashed, dirty hand from your face." This humour-based approach worked because it reframed the issue. Instead of engaging with the polarising mask debate, the meme redirected attention to hand hygiene, which is a very non-polarising topic that everyone could agree on.

Also, it created shared experience: People who laughed at the Shiba Inu message formed a common emotional connection that transcended their ideological differences about masks. This is not to trivialise the issue. Of course, a virus is very serious, but we want to make it serious in a way that enables it to elicit societal resilience.

The effectiveness was measurable. We monitored tap water usage and saw it increased after the campaign. The humour allowed people to respond constructively despite their initial positional or ideological differences, building unity rather than division during a crisis. This exemplifies Taiwan's broader "humour over rumour" strategy, using wit and shared laughter to build bridges across divides while still addressing serious public health challenges.

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