

Information Disorders and Civil Unrest

An Analysis of the July 2021 Unrest in South Africa

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Abstract

Various scholars in the global north have explored information disorders and have been able to present findings on them and their implications on various sectors; unfortunately, this has not always been the case for the global South. This desktop study explores information disorders in South Africa during the July 2021 unrest in Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal between the 7-19 July. This paper demonstrates that information disorders on social media have been used as a catalyst for unrest; they are used to mobilize both those online and offline. This work shows how politicians and influential individuals used these disorders to facilitate and instigate civil unrest during July 2021. This work argues that people in political office and influential individuals should be aware of the responsibility of being influential and the consequences of their social media posts. The work further argues that despite various ways to counter these information disorders, the digital divide and literacy rate in South Africa make this challenging.

Introduction

In the past few years, there has been an increase of scholarly work looking at fake news on social media and its implications on various sectors, including politics, entertainment, healthcare, education and others. It has also been evident that it is not always easy to distinguish fake and real news, this being due to various reasons, including the quality of the news, the source and literacy, amongst other factors. This all has created a conducive environment for Fake news to thrive. Scholars with a keen interest in this field decided that the term fake news did not do justice to the implications of the news and hence came up with the concept of information disorder. This concept examines disinformation, misinformation and malinformation as information disorders that intentionally or unintentionally deceive or spark a certain reaction. While these have been studied quite extensively, the studies have taken place in the global north, and there is very little information of these in the global South, hence the need for this specific work.

This work then explores information disorders triggered by social media during civil unrest in South Africa. South Africa was chosen for this study for various reasons; firstly, despite only 62.8 of the population having internet access, it is amongst the top three countries with the highest levels of internet penetration in Africa (Oluwole, 2022). Secondly, South Africa suffers from a digital divide that is due to the level of inequality in the country, which is said to be the highest in the world (Stoddard, 2012). Finally, the July 2021 unrest in South Africa is said to have resulted from social media mobilization, characterised by various information disorders.

Considering the above, this study will demonstrate how there are various stumbling blocks towards South Africa in fighting information disorders.

Information disorders

The term information disorder has become popular over the years. This word gained popularity as policymakers and researchers have tried to understand and account for how the information ecosystem has been polluted (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is important to note that most of the early information on information disorders is from Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), as they are the ones who pioneered the concept and wrote about it. In their framing of information disorders, they argue that the crisis is more complex than just being fake news, hence the need to give it adequate attention (Wardle, 2020). Information disorders are often in the form of propaganda, lies, conspiracies, rumours, hoaxes, hyper-partisan content, falsehoods or manipulated media, which is then grouped into the three categories of mis/dis/mal information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In a handbook on information disorders published for UNESCO, Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) argue that the key to understanding information disorders is thinking of who is creating this type of content and the motive behind it. And how does the audience perceive it? Furthermore, Bontcheva and Posetti (2020) problematize this topology by arguing that it is highly dependent on the ability to identify the sender's intention, which is not always possible as motives are diverse, contradictory and often unclear. Despite this concern, this work will use the above topology to frame different mis/dis/mal information types in this study.

Wasserman (2022) criticizes the discourse around information disorder, arguing that despite it being a problem that faced by the entire world, the studies on this phenomenon continue to be based and centred on the global north. Seeing the consequences and the dire information disorder is, attention should be given to attempts to understand how it operates in the global South. This is particularly because concerns about false and misleading information on social media and messaging platforms keep growing (Newman, 2021). In South Africa, it is estimated that the average time individuals spend on the internet a year equates to 154 days, of which 36 days are spent on social media (Jimenez, 2022). With social media being a catalyst for the spread of information disorders, together with it being country in the global South, that has citizens spending so much time on the internet, it is no doubt then that there should attention paid to the global South. Information disorders in the global South should be given attention as there is a need to sustain ethical independent, and trustworthy news to fight state propaganda and authoritarian states who hinder the free flow of information (Wasserman, 2022).

Misinformation is a term that has become quite popular when it comes to elections, political instability and, in some cases, healthcare. By definition, misinformation involves sharing false information without any intention to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The rise and use of social media is considered a catalyst in the creation and spread of misinformation (Hemsley, 2019; Petrova et al., 2020). The widespread misinformation has been shown to significantly impact society, elections, financial markets, environmental protection and violent uprisings, amongst other issues, hence making it a point of concern (Kim et al., 2019 and; Laser et al., 2018).

What is probably most dangerous about misinformation is that it doesn't necessarily equate to bad intentions; it could result from trusting information sources and using the information from these sources to inform others, not knowing it is not true. The danger with misinformation

is that when it comes to information and social media, people's first instinct is not to assume that the information is fake or need to verify it. People act on an invisible social contract that assumes that whatever one would share is accurate and hence never feel the need to verify this. In any case, it has been noted that some misinformation is even hard to detect or pass as fake news. Research has also shown that while media users in Africa might suspect or know that a piece of information is false, they feel that they are obliged to share it due to socio-cultural reasons like community orientation. Hence showing that one of the best ways to deal with this misinformation is eradicating it completely (Madrid Morales et al., 2021).

While misinformation means sharing information without intent to cause any harm, disinformation refers to the opposite of this, the intentional sharing of information that is not accurate to mislead, confuse or deceive (Fetzer, 2003). Fallis(2009) adds onto this, arguing that for it to be considered disinformation, the work's intention must be to deceive. Despite its existence for many years, it became of public and scholarly concern in 2016 after Brexit and Trump's presidential victory (Kreiss, 2021). Disinformation is closely associated with technology and social media. It is considered a tool that pollutes healthy information ecosystems (Kuo & Marwick,2021). Schools of thought argue that the rise of the internet in the 20th century and social media in the 21st century definitely multiplied the risk of disinformation (Posetti & Matthews,2018). It is important to note that despite its close association with technology, disinformation can be dated back to the First world war around 1917. Disinformation is said to have caused the reports of Nazi atrocities to be doubted when they first emerged (Neander & Marlin,2010).

The damage caused by disinformation varies in degrees, while in some cases, it could just pass as a small "lie" that doesn't have much impact. In other cases, like COVID-19 it could potentially cause great damage. The Trump administration's labelling of COVID-19 as a Chinese Virus, or Kung Flu, is a good example of what a harmful tool disinformation is. Here it proved itself to be a harmful tool that caused xenophobia, perpetuated racism in public health discourse, and strategically excluded Asians by portraying them as unfit, unwelcome and undesirable (Shah, 2001; Noel, 2020). Phillips & Milner(2021) and Polletta & Callahan(2017) note that it is important to be aware of the repetition of particular narratives and stereotypes in disinformation as they always show pre-existing racism, misogynistic, xenophobic and transphobic tropes.

The last information disorder is known as malinformation. It refers to information that is correct but is used in a context that is meant to cause harm or chaos (Wardle & Derakhshan,2018). This can be seen as repurposing the truth for deceptive purposes (Baines & Elliot,2020). McLane (2021) warns that this information disorder is a political tool more than anything. A common example of which this takes place is what is known as Phishing. This refers to the misuse of an individual's personal and confidential information, this often done to tarnish a reputation (Baskaran,2019). An example of this in South Africa is the hacking and leaking of President Cyril Ramaphosa's private email account in 2017 (Savides,2017).

Digital divide, illiteracy and South Africa's inequality

While it seems as though we currently live in a digital world where everyone has access to the internet, the reality is that only 60% of the world is online, and this is mostly in the developed world (Data Reportal,2023). This becomes as a cause of concern as the education, work, public services and other sectors have become reliant on access to the digital world. Hence the lack of it impedes on these people's access to everyday activities; the lack of connectivity

is a growing impediment on human development (Opp,2021 and Milner, 2006). The digital divide, as a phenomenon then, concerns the division of people who have access to and use the digital world and those who do not (Van Dijk, 2020). Taylor (2022) argues that the digital divide is not limited to the technical aspects only but speaks to the financial means to be able to utilize available technology, alongside the access, or lack thereof, to the internet. As this gap between those who can afford to be digitally connected and those who cannot grows, a new spectrum of inequality, known as digital inequality, begins to unveil itself (Hargittai,2003). Those who can afford to be digitally connected can advance themselves, while those who can't remain largely disadvantaged.

While the digital divide differs based on the region and other geopolitical factors. South Africa is largely affected by the digital divide due to the country's inequality level. About 46% of the population in the country is connected to the internet (Statista,2023), which means that 54% of the people in South Africa do not have access to the internet; South Africa is still ranked above other countries in terms of digital access. In South Africa, it is argued that poverty is the main barrier towards people's ability to be online (Mothobi & Gillwald,2018). In a world where even the media outlets have gone online, and the internet has become one of the main sources of information, this means that these people are excluded from information and also that they are likely to be victims of information disorders. This works on two folds. Firstly, they are excluded because they do not have internet access to information. Secondly, they cannot access the internet to verify news that they might hear. Hence putting them at the highest danger.

A study by Madrid-Morales (2021) found that during COVID-19, South Africans are said to have trusted their families more than the government regarding vaccine information. A result of this was a hesitancy to vaccinate, which led to the country not being able to meet their vaccination targets. Steenberg (2023) argues in his work that with the spread of misinformation, people became more anxious, hateful and hesitant about getting vaccinated. This shows how complex and challenging information disorders are in relation to digital literacy. That in a country where 54% do not have access to information tools, information disorders were able to affect people's thoughts on the vaccine. Hence we see that the digital divide is really a double-edged sword in this case; it can either allow misinformation to spread or prevent people from being able to fact-check.

Researchers and policymakers have been quick to say that media literacy could be a solution to information disorders in the country. However, this is problematic on various levels. Firstly, as discussed above, inequality and poverty in this country has meant that a larger part of the population cannot access the internet. Hence, where are they expected to practice and use the media literacy when they did not have access to these platforms? Furthermore, a study on the introduction of media literacy in South African schools found that there were stumbling blocks toward introducing this subject; these included inequality, poor training of educators in schools and bureaucratic processes regarding the change of curriculum (The Conversation, 2023).

The literacy rate in South Africa acts as a stumbling block towards fighting the digital divide as well as information disorders. A report from the 2030 reading panel found that most children in South Africa leave grade one without knowing the alphabet and that 82% of grade 4 children in South Africa cannot read for meaning (2030 Reading Panel,2023). Furthermore, adult literacy statistics have demonstrated that one-third of the adults in the country cannot read or write and that literacy amongst black South Africans is lower than 55% (Greater Good South Africa,2022). This raises alarming questions; it asks how a population of people

struggling to read and write could be expected to be trained in media literacy or distinguish from fake and inaccurate news. This is even more terrible as despite the disheartening statistics. It has been reported that there is no national reading plan or proper budget on this, and there is also no accurate reporting and progress on implementing vital interventions for this crisis (2030 Reading Plan). This is problematic as the fighting this literacy problem in South Africa is dependent on government intervention and initiative; also, fighting this could assist in the fight against information disorders in various ways. It means then that the longer it takes for South Africa to fight illiteracy, the longer the battle against information disorders. Hence, the need to understand that the information disorders and digital divide are not isolated issues, they are characterized by other socioeconomic issues that include education and inequality. Hence, the fight against them includes fighting all components.

The Durban Unrest 2021

The period between 7 July and 17 July 2021 has become a period marked in the history of South Africa; during this period, the country experienced unrest within the Kwazulu Natal Region and some parts of Gauteng (Elumalai et al.,2022). These protests initially started as “Free Jacob Zuma” after the former president handed himself to the Escort correctional services to serve his 15-month sentence (Vhumbunu,2023). The looting, destruction and burning of property is said to have cost the country R50 billion in damages, 354 lives and 150 000 jobs (Karrim,2022). Despite the protest initially having begun due to the arrest of former President Zuma, other causing factors have been identified. Vhumbunu (2023) argues that the looting during the protest demonstrated that the protest was also a cry due to the country’s poverty, unemployment and inequality. Social media mobilization led to this week of looting, property destruction, economic activity disruption, and unrest in Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal (Patel & Everrat,2021).

Unfortunately, these protests also sparked racial and community violence in Phoenix, Durban, leading to what would be known as the Phoenix massacre. It is alleged that 36 people died in Phoenix. This death was said to result from racial profiling and racial targeting from the Indian community towards Black people who were from local surrounding communities (Africa News,2021). Emarus and Hlangu (2021) do highlight in their work that vigilante groups took a criminal approach to protect their communities from looters and, as a result, committed brutal acts of violence. It is argued that an executive of the National Funeral Practitioners Association of South Africa was quoted saying 500 bodies were piled at the Phoenix state morgue; the KZN health department quickly dismissed these claims arguing that not all these bodies were linked to the unrest taking place in KZN (Singh,2021). Without evidence, a connection was made by uninformed members of the public and social media that the hundreds of bodies were a result of the “Phoenix Massacre” (Africa News, 2021). A social media storm under the hashtag #PhoenixMassacre trended after this unrest; some analysts have even argued that old and decontextualized videos were used to inflame the situation on the ground (Bateman, 2021).

Even with the initial protest, it is argued that the unrest was fuelled via Whatsapp. Many prominent South African figures cheered on the unrest from their Twitter and Instagram, with some spreading fake news knowingly and unknowingly (Lapping,2021). Sey et al. (2022) analyse this in their engagements of information disorders in the Global South. They argue that information disorders in the global South have escalated as a result of people’s reliance to social media for news and that the spread of false information is driven by fear, prejudice and a poor understanding of issues Sey et al. (2022) . This is exactly what is seen with the July

unrest and Durban Massacre. It also does demonstrate that part of the cause for information disorders in South Africa is the relationship that the citizens have with social media and influential individuals.

In an attempt to comprehend information disorders, in a country like ours, the questions that should be asked are on the sources of information and the citizens' relationship with them. From information gathered, former President Jacob Zuma's daughter Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla is said to have acted as a source on Twitter, which steered political violence. There are tweets which include her saying, "we see you" or "*Oksalayo*, we are not going back" which are said to have stirred up and instigated violence (Nair,2021). Twitter even reported that a picture she shared on 9 July 2021, at the peak of the violence, was out of context as the image was from 2020 (African Insider,2021). This is reckless on her side, considering that as the daughter of the former president-who, the violence was about people who were likely to believe the posts without a need to fact-check. Her positionality placed her as a reliable source. However, she used this to spread disinformation. Duduzile was very aware that Zuma loyalists would react to the videos and that the people who were protesting did not have time to fact-check but would react.

The Institute for Security Studies argues that people need to be aware of the responsibility and consequences of their behaviour online, that despite the presence of freedom of expression, there are consequences in the real world (Institute for Security Studies,2023). This shows the complex relationship between information consumers and their sources; it dates back to Wasserman's (2022) argument that people were likely to believe someone they "trust", over official government news. This making it harder to fight these information disorders during times of civil unrest that is politically motivated. Scholars like Ascott (2020) prescribe media literacy as a way to mitigate the spread of fake news and its implications. However, as stated above in this work, media literacy as a solution is a challenge for a country struggling with literacy and a digital divide. Hence it becomes influential that individuals need to understand the role the information they share plays with regard to information disorders. However, this work has shown that for political reasons and influential individuals, the spread of disinformation allows them to get what they want, in this case, to successfully instigate civil unrest. Research at the Berkman Klein Center substantiates this finding in their argument that political leaders use disinformation as part of their calculated strategy (Ly,2023).

According to an article in My Broadband (2021), a WhatsApp group called "ETHEKWINI SHUTDOWN" is part of the platforms that were used to mobilize individuals and wards for the protest. One notes from this that the instant messaging platform was chosen for this task, as it was a quick way to mobilize the protest and, secondly, a discreet way of communication. Unless someone in the group had leaked the communication, there is no way that law enforcement could have been prepared for what was to happen. This shows how complex the fight against this would have been. Furthermore, one notes that the use of words like "revolution", "cadre", "leadership", and "*amabran*ch" suggests the political nature of this unrest.

This alludes to the idea that the protests were due to tensions and factionalism within the governing African National Congress (ANC) and stereotypical Zulu nationalism (Patel and Everatt (2021). The use of social media in political issues is very strategic as it easily mobilizes loyalists. This was strategic because there were individuals from various branches in these groups who could report back to others not in the group and mobilize them. Hence showing how strategic and quick information disorders can stir civil unrest. The messages on the group are dated 8 July 2021, at around 1:05 pm (My Broadband News,2021). This is exactly on the first day that an unrest that would cost this country R50 billion would

emerge (Makonye, 2022). Therefore once again, showing how social media works perpetuates information disorders in South Africa and that civil unrest has resulted from this.

Conclusion

This paper engaged information disorders in the global South using the popular July 2021 unrest in South Africa to carry this discussion. This work showed that information disorders threaten the whole world; however, they remain understudied in the context of the global South. Which is a problem considering how much time people in the global South, particularly South Africa, spend on social media, and also how much they rely on social media for information. Moreso, this work demonstrated that information disorders do not exist online only; they can affect those offline who do not consume social media or internet content at all. Unfortunately, information disorders in South Africa are not isolated. However, the inequality in South Africa continues to reveal itself through the digital divide and poor illiteracy rate, which make fighting information disorders a challenge. Having said all of this, this work demonstrated that the conditions in South Africa allow politicians and influential individuals to strategically use information disorders for their own political benefit, which in this study was inciting violence and leading to enormous damages in the country.

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