UNDERSTANDING THE LEVEL OF AWARENESS, IMPACT, AND MECHANISMS OF COMBATING MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND HATE SPEECH IN SOUTH SUDAN.

POLICY BRIEF

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Abstract: **This paper was produced for public consumption. The information provided can be used by the national, state, and local governments, the civil society, media houses and practitioners, media development organisations, social media influencers, the private sector, academic institutions, researchers, community leaders, youth, women, people with disabilities, religious actors and all the people inside South Sudan and beyond. The paper reveals the dynamics surrounding the status and level of awareness, impact, and mechanisms of combating misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in South Sudan. The paper offers recommendations to the government, media, CSOs, and the general population.**

Introduction

This Policy Brief reveals the level of awareness, impact, and mechanisms of combating misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in South Sudan. It was produced by Journalists for Human Rights and Digital Rights Frontlines, formerly Defy Hate Now under the project Tackling Mis/Disinformation to Promote Peacebuilding in South Sudan, supported by the Peace and Stabilization Operations. The Brief aimed to gauge the understanding of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in South Sudan, assess the impact of harmful information on communities, reveal some of the strategies and highlight success stories and the role of communities in strengthening information integrity. The point is, in a country where falsehoods deepen divisions and fuel conflict, there is an urgent need for all civic actors, including the government, the media, civil society organisations, and local communities to work together to counter the spread of harmful narratives and protect social cohesion.

Policy Brief Discussion

The Brief asserts that in South Sudan, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech pose a significant danger to communities by fueling ethnic tensions, inciting violence, hindering peacebuilding efforts, and exacerbating existing conflicts, mainly through the easy spread of harmful content on social media. All these can rapidly escalate tensions between different groups within the country, given its history of tribal divisions, and is especially concerning given South Sudan's ongoing struggle to recover from a devastating civil war (United Nations, 2024). Despite South Sudanese awareness of harmful falsehoods and hate speech, the majority could reference what constitutes misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech and the difference between misinformation and disinformation. They also pointed out the role of social media in increasing access and spreading false information, which leads to confusion over current events and policies. The paper also revealed that most South Sudanese are aware of the harmful falsehoods in which often contain political, economic, health, humanitarian, security, cultural, and religious narratives. A recent study on media trust ranked radio as the most trusted news source with 55.6%, social media at 4.4%, Television at 15.6%, websites at 14.4% and newspapers at 10%, respectively (DHN, 2023). Radio, Television (TV), newspapers, social media, and the internet are the most relied-on sources for news and information about South Sudan. According to the 211CHECK Media Monitoring Analysis report of July to August 2024, 139 incidents of complex interplay of hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation in the digital space in South Sudan were recorded, making the situation alarming. From the analysis, it is clear that hate speech and mis/disinformation have obstructed access to reliable and credible information, especially for those without access to accurate information and those in remote areas. It has also heightened tensions among rival communities.

The paper revealed that while the community understands harmful falsehoods, in recent days, they trusted primary sources of information more than secondary sources (JHR, 2024). The people of South Sudan have also learned that passing unverified information causes misunderstandings, which creates room for hate speech and harmful narratives (Defyhatenow,2023). One example of danger also relates to how hate speech led to the killing of 16 Sudanese nationals during a protest across South Sudan over alleged killings of South Sudanese people in Sudan's Al-Jazira state. Unrest in South Sudan sparked off after gruesome videos on

social media showed images of the gruesome killing of 29 South Sudanese civilians in Wad Medani in Sudan on January 15, 2025 (Radio Tamazuj, 2025). Another danger was also how Sudanese-owned businesses in neighbourhoods across Juba were vandalized and looted amid rising tensions (Anadolu, 2025). Lessons learned from successful counter-disinformation efforts suggested that promoting responsible journalism practices is vital to combating the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Media organizations should uphold journalistic ethics, fact-checking protocols, and professional standards to ensure they publish accurate and reliable information.

The Brief also showed that South Sudan's diverse ethnic landscape had the duality of either being a blessing or a curse. Ethnic diversity has often been exploited to fuel conflict and promote ethnic violence quickly. However, at the same time, it serves as the cornerstone of national unity and resilience. The current political context has created conditions that fuel hate and division. As noted, since South Sudan gained independence, the country has experienced ongoing political instability, largely driven by misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. The instability has led to tensions that are rooted in factional power struggles, resulting in violence or mistrust. Therefore, this Policy Brief finds that the recent allegations regarding a coup plot involving military officers have heightened fears of potential violence and unrest among civilians. In multiple interviews with South Sudanese people, misinformation and disinformation, including hate speech, foment severe consequences for the local communities. The harmful narratives and falsehoods create fear and panic in communities because the dodgy content is designed to attack a community's sense of safety and to reduce and erode trust between communities, individuals, and groups. Experience from civil society and community leaders also showed that false information had eroded trust in government, local authorities, and institutions, making it harder for them to maintain order and implement policies, laws, and regulations in most communities. One of the significant challenges was the refusal by community members to update their beliefs formed after consuming falsehoods and harmful narratives, especially in instances where the incorrect information aligned with their cultural or religious views. This resistance made it difficult to correct false information and promote accurate narratives. According to the Defyhatenow study report 2023, youth were most likely (74%) to spread disinformation and misinformation in South Sudan than the elderly (10%). Besides this group, politicians are the most likely group to spread disinformation and misinformation in South Sudan. Further, the report noted that the lack of adequate laws to regulate information sharing in South Sudan was a significant enabling factor for disinformation and misinformation. The data protection bill is still in development, meaning there is currently no law to effectively address data-related crimes (Defyhatenow, 2023).

This Policy Brief notes that the biggest challenge was verifying the data labelled as misinformation and disinformation. Some people tend to withhold information that could expose something as false. A recent example from the unrest in South Sudan, revealed that social media users were deliberately spreading hate speech and graphic content to incite violence without considering the legal consequences. In response, the government shut down Facebook and TikTok in the country. However, the ban has sparked widespread disapproval among South Sudanese netizens, who have criticized it as censorship and a violation of digital rights (The East African, 2025). To address this problem moving forward, collaborative efforts should be made between citizens, civil society, media institutions, fact-checking institutions, government institutions, and technology platforms to verify and debunk false information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As pointed out by this paper, the literature reviewed concerning South Sudan established that there are social media pages and groups that either fuel disinformation or misinformation. These pages or groups include “South Sudan Eye” Facebook Page, “Sixty-four tribes of South Sudan” Facebook Group, “Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) TV” Facebook Page, “64 Tribes” Facebook Page, “Ten States Press” Facebook Page, “Terekeka Press” Facebook Page, “Phow Radio FM” Facebook Profile. Others are “First Class Bales” Facebook Page, “South Sudan Twins Broadcasting News”, “South Sudan Twins Broadcasting News (SSTBN)”, and “Heart of South Sudan”. Other sources include blogs/websites, WhatsApp, and X. As shown in SafetyCom report 2023 and 2024. These social media platforms are personal blogs, private groups, legal, media/news companies, radio stations online, and public groups.

The finding is that misinformation and disinformation are significant challenges affecting both urban and rural communities of South Sudan. Drawing insights of legal scholars and researchers, several key strategies to address the issue of disinformation and misinformation comprehensively emerge. Notably, fostering

media literacy and critical thinking skills is essential in enabling individuals to discern reliable information from falsehoods. Reviewed literature from Kaplan (2019) articulates educational programs, awareness campaigns, and media literacy initiatives that should be promoted to enhance the public's ability to critically evaluate news sources and content. This brief thus argues that the rise and persistence of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in South Sudan stem largely from government's failure to ensure the timely dissemination of credible information. Because of that information gap, the public creates its own narratives to fill the gap, often fueling panic. As noted, South Sudan faces unique challenges due to its socio-political context, which is marked by ongoing conflicts, ethnic tensions, and limited access to reliable information. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that integrates community engagement, education, and technology. Some of the strategies and success stories include community awareness campaigns, the involvement of community leaders and peace committees, the implementation of the Peace Agreement, community engagement forums, dialogue meetings, and the promotion of responsible digital interactions that uphold the values of accountability and humanity.

The analysis shows that communities have actively engaged with one another to assess their understanding and perceptions of harmful falsehoods and narratives. Community members have participated in surveys, focus groups, and meetings, providing valuable feedback to identify misconceptions and areas that need to be addressed or clarified.

Conclusion

This Policy Brief focused on understanding the level of awareness, impact, and mechanisms for combating misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in South Sudan. It establishes that these issues are widespread driven by a complex interplay of historical, social, political, and economic factors. The discussion around falsehoods, harmful narratives, and hate speech is relevant, given the long history of ethnic conflict in South Sudan, exacerbated by colonial legacies and subsequent civil wars. The struggle for independence from Sudan was marked by significant violence and division along ethnic lines, which perpetuated cycles of hatred and conflict. To address these challenges, key strategies such as community awareness campaigns, engaging community leaders and peace committees, supporting community engagement forums and spaces, meetings, and dialogues, and advancing fact-checking and social media monitoring programs need to be implemented continuously. Additionally, the South Sudan government should increase its commitment to promoting freedom of expression and the independence of the media, as enshrined in the constitution.

Recommendations

To Government Institutions

1. The South Sudan government institutions should boost efforts to collaborate with citizens, civil society, technology platforms and institutions in media, fact-checking, and international or multilateral agencies to support verification and debunking of harmful content.
2. Government efforts are needed to create space and facilitate discussion on addressing ineffective laws regulating information sharing in South Sudan. One key law to be looked at is the Data Protection Bill, which is still being developed. While regulation is important, the Government should be careful about criminalizing speech through the law.
3. Urgent training of government officials to tackle misinformation/disinformation and hate speech before reaching out to communities and community-based organizations because they are prone to sharing information containing hate speech.
4. Government institutions should support stakeholders in initiating and organizing inclusive clubs and groups at higher learning institutions to champion peacebuilding and combat misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech.
5. The government should work with civil society, media, NGOs, and fact-checking actors to support and organize community meetings, as they are vital. The meeting aimed to increase South Sudanese

understanding of hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation and discuss how communities can reduce this.
6. Government institutions should promote freedom of expression and the independence of the media, as enshrined in the constitution, and ensure timely release and information access to the South Sudanese public.

To Civil Society, Media, NGOs, and Fact-Checking Actors

1. National and local organizations be supported to play a critical role in enhancing community awareness to reduce the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech
2. Implementing programs that teach digital literacy skills, helping individuals navigate and critically assess online information. These programs can target various demographics, including students, adults, and older individuals, to enhance their ability to discern credible sources.
3. Create and distribute resources such as fact-checking tools, guides on spotting harmful information, and contact information for reporting false information. Providing easy access to these resources empowers individuals to take proactive steps in preventing misinformation.
4. More training sessions be conducted for children and youth in South Sudan on the human rights, privacy, and responsibilities of minors and youth in adhering to acceptable standards.
5. Continuing to support the trained Community-Based Organization (CBOs) and those who participated in the two monthly fellowship programs to conduct training in their communities and regularly monitor mis/disinformation and hate speech
6. Conduct Training of Trainers (TOTs) and target youth on hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation so that the TOTs will be the ambassadors in the communities. Alongside this, community engagement activities should also organize events that educate community members about misinformation's impact and how to evaluate sources of information critically. Workshops can be conducted in schools, community centres, or through virtual platforms to reach a broad audience.

To South Sudanese Citizens

1. National organizations and community structures should be facilitated to continue conducting radio talk shows on local radio stations in native languages to help minimize the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech within the community at various levels.
2. Collaborating with influential figures and respected community leaders to spread accurate information and support educational campaigns. These individuals can leverage their platforms to reach a wider audience and reinforce the campaigns' messages.
3. Improving social media users and influencers is essential to be positive agents. Given the magnitude of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in communities, community members should develop an interest in participating in training that creates positive influences.

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