

TRACKING TRENDS FROM REAL411:
**IMPACT OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION IN THE 2024 NATIONAL AND
PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**Interim report presented to the
Electoral Commission of South Africa
by Media Monitoring Africa
www.mediamonitoringafrica.org**

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For more information:

William Bird | Director
Media Monitoring Africa
T: +27 (0)82 887 1370
E: williamb@mma.org.za

Thandi Smith | Head: Projects
Media Monitoring Africa
T: +27 (0)73 470 7306
E: thandis@mma.org.za

This report was prepared with the assistance of Avani Singh.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERIM REPORT

Real411, launched as a world-first with the Electoral Commission of South Africa (“IEC”) in 2019, is an online public reporting complaints portal that empowers members of the public to report incidences or concerns of mis- and disinformation as well as other forms of online harms identified during the election period. Administered and overseen by Media Monitoring Africa, it is based on a framework of cooperation with the IEC and social media platforms to respond to and mitigate the potential impacts that these online harms can have on the freeness, fairness and credibility of the elections. The mechanism created by Real411 is premised on our constitutional rights and values with a firm commitment to openness, transparency and accountability.

This interim report presents the initial findings and trends that were tracked through Real411 during the current election period in the 2024 General Elections in South Africa. These elections saw a marked spike in the numbers and prevalence of reports of mis- and disinformation relating to the elections, which can be grouped broadly into four categories: (i) false information regarding electoral processes; (ii) false information regarding parties and candidates; (iii) false information regarding election results; and (iv) information intended to undermine the credibility of the IEC or the commissioners.

The Real411 reporting platform can be accessed at www.real411.org.za or via MMA’s website at www.mediamonitoringafrica.org.

INTRODUCTION // SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

As the results come in for the 2024 General Elections in South Africa, its clear that millions of South Africans came out to cast their votes. This democratic milestone, celebrated against the backdrop of 30 years of freedom and constitutional democracy, reaffirmed the power of the people’s voice, the central role of elections in the country’s transformative ideals and the importance of having an effective and trusted electoral management body. We have come to take for granted that the IEC will deliver free, fair and credible elections. However, as we celebrate this achievement, we must also recognise that there are constantly new and evolving challenges – this being made all the more complex by the digital era.

The rise of online harms

In an interconnected world, where information flows freely across social media platforms and digital channels, the battle for hearts and minds extends beyond physical polling stations. In many ways, online spaces have contributed in positive ways to the electoral landscape by enabling voters to access up-to-date information, engage on critical issues and educate themselves on policies and processes. However, they have also become battlegrounds where mis- and disinformation, information, hate speech, harassment and incitement can be readily to mass audiences that can threaten the very fabric of our democracy. The relative anonymity afforded by the internet, combined with its borderless nature, reach and the easy monetisation of mis- and disinformation has seen harmful and dangerous narratives spreading like wildfire, without contestation, undermining trust in institutions, our democracy, and deepening polarisation among citizens.

In January this year, Saadia Zahidi, the managing director of the World Economic Forum, highlighted mis- and disinformation as the biggest short-term risk facing the world:

“An unstable global order characterized by polarizing narratives and insecurity, the worsening impacts of extreme weather and economic uncertainty are causing accelerating risks – including misinformation and disinformation – to propagate”.

As a young democracy, while we have key democratic institutions in place, we also have several fracture lines running through our nation most especially deepening inequality and poverty. Our work around mis- and disinformation has shown us that it tends to thrive during periods of escalated tension, uncertainty and gaps in communication. As we headed toward the 2024 elections, not only were South Africans confronted with a fracturing political party scenario where new parties were being formed, we also had a new law that would see the introduction of an additional ballot, and to make matters more challenging we saw an unprecedented number of legal challenges involving the IEC. From questions of powers of the IEC to allegations of unfair treatment, at the launch of the National Results Operating Centre the IEC revealed that it had no less than 17 matters before the Electoral Court and/or Constitutional Court. It was in short a perfect environment for bad actors to step in and seek to undermine the credibility of the elections and the IEC.

MEETING THE DARK FORCES WITH THE POWER OF AN INDEPENDENT ONLINE HARMS PUBLIC COMPLAINTS PORTAL: THE ROLE OF REAL411

A world-first collaboration with the IEC to address mis- and disinformation during elections

In 2019, the IEC and MMA made history with a world-first public complaints platform to combat and mitigate the threat of mis- and disinformation. Five years later, now in its third elections exercise, Real411 has grown as the predominant platform for reporting online mis and disinformation during the election period. Real411 stands as a beacon of hope and accountability in the fight against online harms. As a locally built platform that seeks to record, archive and track online harms, Real411 brings transparency to areas that powerful bad actors would prefer to keep in the shadows.

While many of the social media platforms are making increased efforts towards combatting online harms (though the degree to which is highly contested), one of the challenges of the explosion of mis- and disinformation is that it is seen as so pervasive, at a scale we are unable to comprehend and often difficult to track without there being a systematic and consistent approach to get a handle on it. But if we are to meaningfully address it and other online harms, we need to see and identify it, analyse who and what drives it, and crucially help the public understand what it looks like and how to mitigate its impact.

How the Real411 works: Commitment to transparency and accountability

By way of overview, there are five critical elements to the Real411 platform that bear highlighting:

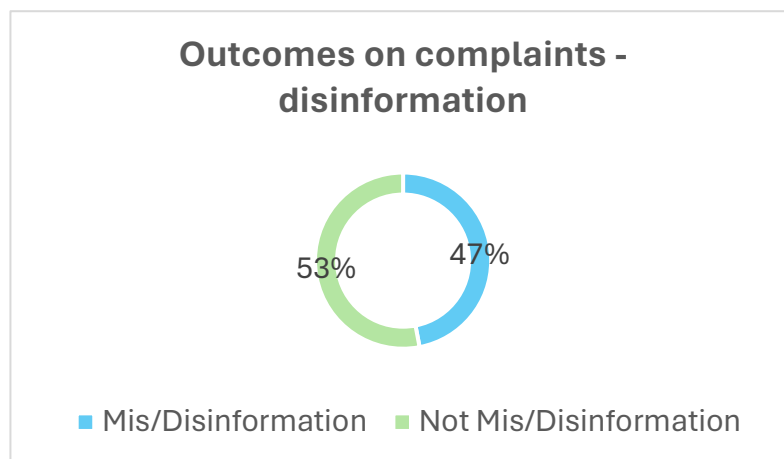
- As a collaboration among MMA, the IEC and various social media platforms, cemented through a framework of cooperation that was signed by all parties in July 2023 for purposes of the current elections, South Africa's constitutional values and norms are placed at the centre of the framework created. In doing so, the mechanism has been carefully considered and designed to manage competing rights and interests arising taking into account *inter alia* the rights to freedom of expression and political rights, and has built in various safeguards to ensure that it is an open, transparent and accountable process.
- It is open to all members of the public to access if concerns of mis- or disinformation, as well as other online harms, have been spotted. The complaints are then carefully considered by a team of at least three reviewers with varying expertise on relevant legal, technical and media-based matters, which is then finalised by a senior member of the secretariat team. Each reviewer provides their evidence-based reasoning for the view that is formed. While it is non-binding in nature, any person who is aggrieved by the conclusion reached by the review team has access to an appeals mechanism that is chaired by a retired judge of the Constitutional Court.
- The crux of the Real411 platform is to raise public awareness and support media and information literacy among the public. In doing so, it is therefore possible to curb the spread of harmful information and mitigate the impacts that this can have. Real411 is and simple to access, at no cost to the public, with there being a consistent feedback loop in the process. Users are guided throughout the process, with the elements of the different online harms being explained to users in plain language to assist them in understanding the law and how it is applied in a constitutionally-compliant way.
- In addition to the collaboration with the IEC and the social media platforms, other partners include the Press Council of South Africa and the South African Human Rights Commission in instances where the nature of the complaint falls within their particular mandate of specialisation. This not only supports the important mandate of these respective institutions, but also serves to emphasise the crucial role of multi-stakeholder cooperation in addressing the scourge of online harms and the complexities that this presents. It is also a resource to the media to assist in their reporting, both in terms of informing the public of mis- and disinformation being spread and to support their efforts in ensuring that they do not themselves regurgitate false information.
- The public nature Real411 also makes it an invaluable resource for research and analytical purposes to inform processes going forward. For instance, the repository created makes it possible to identify the types of content, instigators and drivers of harmful or misleading falsehoods in order to understand them better and create early warning systems for future elections both in South Africa and the region. It is independently run by MMA that is rigid and uncompromising in ensuring that there is no undue influence in the findings or trends reported in the process. This is further bolstered by the additional built-in safeguards to ensure the integrity and credibility of the process.

In what follows, we set out the key trends and reflections based on the Real411 complaints and reports that were received during the election period.

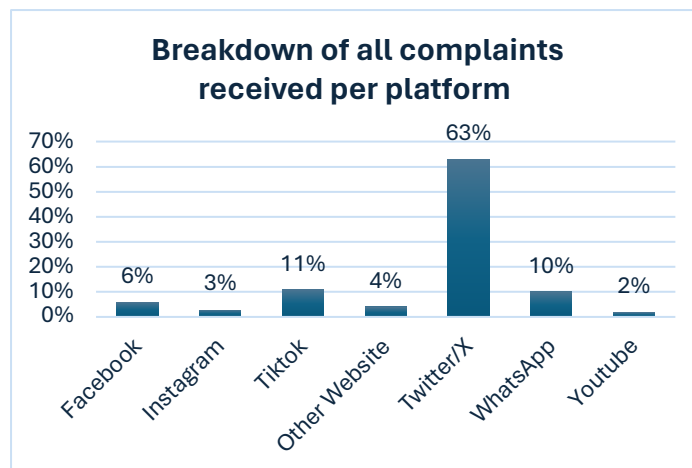
TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

Over the election period, Real411 received approximately 200 complaints reported in by members of the public. Each instance was recorded, analysed and a considered outcome provided, all of which is readily accessible to all members of the public. Of the complaints reported to Real411 as mis- or disinformation we saw an increase of those identified as mis- or disinformation from around 41% in 2021 during Covid-19 monitoring to the figures below. The increase may be as a result of the increase in disinformation and/or an increase in awareness of spotting mis- and disinformation.

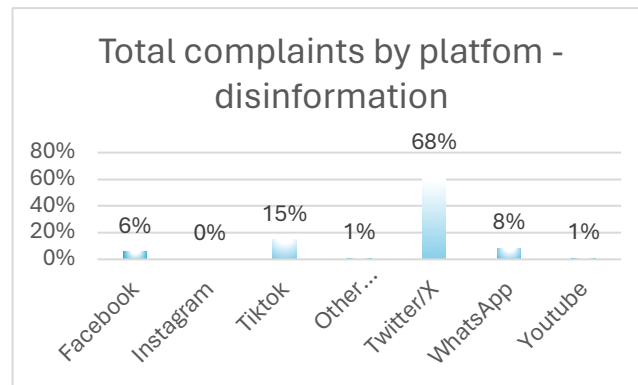
When looking at the **outcomes on complaints regarding disinformation**, the split looks as follows:



When looking at **which platforms are the most commonly reported across all complaints**, we find:



When we look at where the *most instances of content found to be disinformation* are found we see:



Unsurprisingly, the majority of content found to be disinformation was shared on X (formerly Twitter). X was not part of the framework of cooperation despite being invited to participate, which is all the more concerning in the light of X not having policies or standards for mis- and disinformation on its platform and there not being a single trust and safety representative on the continent. Globally, X has come to be seen as a ready latrine for bad actors to share content with little to no impunity.

The second and third platforms identified with Tiktok and WhatsApp respectively. Tiktok is a relatively new entrant to the landscape, and has anecdotally expressed the view that it does not consider itself to be a platform for political activity – something that has proven not to be the case in the current elections. WhatsApp as an encrypted channel presents a particular challenge in that only individual members of a group can see what is shared making it difficult to counter with accurate information. In respect of both, a further channel related to the difficulties in analysing video-based content, suggesting that there may be notably more online harms than anticipated or reported.

In broad terms, the trends show that the types of false or misleading content spread during the election period could broadly be broken into four categories:

- ***False information regarding electoral processes:*** This was a common trend seen throughout the election period that ramped up significantly in the week leading up to the elections. With the 2024 General Elections bringing into play a raft of new measures, including contestation by independent candidates, section 24A voting procedures and the introduction of a third ballot, content of this nature readily contributed to uncertainty and confusion about the electoral processes. Certain types of content were similar to previous years, such as claims of not being able to vote with false nails or needing to have your own pens, and while concerning were still relatively innocuous. However, more egregious types of content were also identified, such as pertaining to the storage and transport of ballots and ballot boxes and changes in voting stations. False information here risks voters potentially feeling confused or uncertain of the process to be followed, sentiments of apathy and exclusion, and may undermine their trust in the process.

- ***False information regarding parties and candidates:*** This typically played out in two ways: on the one hand, parties or candidates making false or misleading claims regarding their own performance; and, on the other, making false or misleading claims to discredit other parties or candidates. While the nature of politics often sees somewhat exaggerated claims being made, the factor taken into account by Real411 was instances where this rose to the level of there being a credible risk of harm to the election process as a result of this. In the more egregious instances, the risks created including inflaming tensions along racial or ethnic lines. This also risked skewing the public narrative in a way that made it difficult to distinguish truth from falsities, creating challenges for the public to properly inform themselves about the political choices they were making.
- ***False information regarding election results:*** This was a particularly concerning matter seen both while voting was ongoing and in the immediate aftermath of the polls closing while counting was underway. Of grave concern was that instances of this were created through official social media channels of political parties or representatives. Where this was done in KwaZulu-Natal for example, a province considered as a high risk of post-election conflict, there was a real risk of the impact this could have on the flaring of tensions. This also created serious threat to the integrity of the electoral process and the trust in the IEC, not least of all due to the dire implications of blatantly unfounded outcomes being claimed in such a highly contested election.
- ***Information intended to undermine the credibility of the IEC and its commissioners:*** This information was seen as rife during the elections, targeted at both the IEC as an institution and the commissioners at a personal level. This, coupled with the general mix of the content referred to above, appeared directly intended to undermine the credibility of the elections from the process to the potential outcomes. This included direct attacks by political parties and candidates without providing credible basis for the claims being made. While critiques of any electoral management body is an important element of electoral discourse, the nature of the ad hominem attacks and the lack of foundation provided for the claims being made, created a serious threat to the way in which the IEC and the elections were to be perceived by the public.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

There is a wide range of learnings drawn from Real411. At this stage, there are three reflections that are noted here: (i) there is much work still to be done to create and strengthen media and information literacy among the public to enable and empower an informed and critical electorate; (ii) multi-stakeholder approaches remain critical to address online harms, bringing together different areas of expertise; and (iii) there is an urgent need for effective recourse measures for perpetrators of online harms, as well as other role-players such as political parties, candidates and online platforms that may perpetuate or fuel the impacts of these harms.

(#3325)

Phakamani Ngwane Dlamini · Follow
13 May · 🌐

[THESE ARE FACTS, NOT ALLEGATIONS]:

The **Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC)** can, and does rig elections through their staff members;

1. Counting Officers (NEW).
2. Data Capturers at Local Offices.
3. Auditors, both at local and national operating centres.

You need the workable communications plan, and human resources (skilled) to stop them...rather than that, nobody can.....they can, and does rig elections.

👍 3

3 comments 41 Shares

#3337.

← Baas Kruger - 🇷🇵 VOTE RIGGING UN... 🇷🇵

Baas Kruger
38 mins · 🌐
🇷🇵 VOTE RIGGING UNCOVERED

Khumbulani Nene · Follow
11m · 🌐

Situation at Dambuza PMB, the voting has been stopped due to IEC Regional Managers car seen with the counselor late yesterday night and now in the morning they came with ballots box unsealed.
#Amasela 🇷🇵🇷🇵🇷🇵

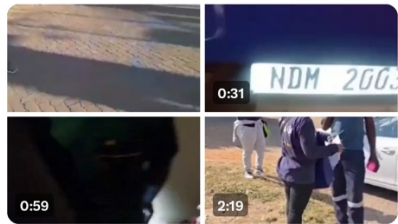


👍👍👍 103

(#3351)

Collen Sibusiso Gwebu
@CollenGwebu

The ANC and SADTU have already started rigging the elections.
@IECSouthAfrica these elections are not free and fair and the peace and civil war are both in your hands.



16:07 · 28 May 24 · 3 129 Views

66 Reposts 2 Quotes 85 Likes

2 Bookmarks

#3344

Msunu ka Johann Rupert ✓
@ZizinjaAbelungu

IEC acts as a Political party and not as an independant institution. We shall be vigilant during Elections because we are aware that the ANC has been stealing our votes helped by the IEC



20:39 · 19 Jan 24 · 3 599 Views

40 Reposts 1 Quote 87 Likes 4 Bookmarks

#3341.



WE ARE FIGHTING FO...
@KennyMbamboma1

Follow

[BREAKING NEWS]

IEC IS TOTALLY DISGRACED AND WE ARE NO LONGER EXPECTING FREE AND FAIR ELECTION.

ZUMA HAS EXPOSED EVERYTHING IN THESE COUNTRY. ANC AND IEC ARE NAKED BEFORE OUR EYES.



6:39 · 28 May 24 · 2 944 Views

109 Reposts 1 Quote 154 Likes

#3370



Mkhonto @MainlandAfrica

This is the same woman accused by Congolese politicians for enabling rigging of elections in DRC in favour of Felix Tshisekedi. The same Tshisekedi who is clandestinely rewarding ANC principals with mining gigs in the DRC. The same Tshisekedi who has influenced the deployment of SANDF in DRC, not for peacekeeping but to protect commercial interests of ANC principals.

To conceal the thuggery, they are keeping Congolese preoccupied with anti Kagame propaganda.

The tone of the IEC and attitude towards MK Party tell a tale of an Electoral Commission that is not independent.



BusinessLIVE
<https://www.businesslive.co.za> · 20...

[Ramaphosa appoints Janet Love as](#)

Post your reply

#3282



Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZuma1 · 47m

@IECSouthAfrica And Janet Love Please Take This As A Warning...You Issued Jabulani Khumalo Accreditation Without Our Knowledge Nor Consent On Wednesday And I Now, At This Hour Hear That Jabulani Khumalo Has Been Issued Accreditation AGAIN Without Our Knowledge Or Consent!!!

34 35 56 1,9K

#3138

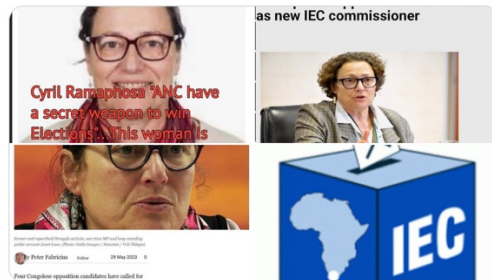


@BREAKING NEWS:ALLEGEDLY @DKNMOHAMMED · Apr 13

BREAKING NEWS:ALLEGEDLY

"STANDING AGAINST THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE IS CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY"

COMMENT, LIKE AND REPOST IF YOU BELIEVE THE SO-CALLED "IEC COMMISSIONER" JANET LOVE, SHOULD BE "ARRESTED" AND CHARGED FOR "TREASON" AND "CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY"!!



26 358 566 9.7K

#3372

#3373

15:33 5G

LIVE Following For You

29 May 2024
Overseas Elections
results

Vote MK

International results

Top Ten Parties: What people want?

- MK: (75625 votes)
- IFP: (1089 votes)
- EFF: (121 votes)
- ANC: (100 votes)
- DA: (49 votes)
- ACTIONSA: (16 votes)
- FF+: (9 votes)
- ACDP: (1 votes)
- NFP: (1 votes)
- Al Jama-ah: (1 votes)

2,623

214

528

khazza Photo izwe lethu

Part 232 | #mkparty

Playlist · AZANIA

Democratic Alliance

BREAKING NEWS

The DA wins Ward 6 Rand West, Gauteng

Voters continue to unite behind the DA as we prepare to rescue South Africa in 2024.

VOTE DA Visit RescueSA.org.za for solutions

3966

382

137

137

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