Political disinformation during Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonised elections

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Abstract

Political disinformation is heightened during election periods world over and Zimbabwe is no exception. Leveraging on technological advancements to create hyper reality social media content, the period leading to the 2023 elections experienced complex and sophisticated forms of content that made it difficult for the audiences to tell whether it was real or fake. Audiences re-shared and re-posted such content with an assumption that it was real — and one such is an MP4 campaign message purported to be emanating from the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) political party. Such content has the potential to threaten a healthy democracy in any society. Against this background, this study sought to explore the nature of political disinformation used by political parties, candidates, interest groups, civil society and individuals for campaigning and de-campaigning purposes. Factored in is an analysis of how online audiences, particularly on the X platform, were deciphering meaning, and exploring the possible implications of such 'problematic information' in society. Rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, the study achieved its objectives by employing a non-participatory observation (netnography) approach to collect and archive data on the micro-blogging site, X. The data that were analysed using thematic and semiotic analysis revealed that the period under study experienced a high proliferation of political disinformation in its varied and diversified forms such as, among others, doctored images, edited audios and videos, and memes. Due to technological advancements, a contemporary form of political disinformation emerged such as deepfakes; content which blurred the lines between real and simulated media texts. The study submitted that deepfake content resulted in the polarised nature of online audiences. Furthermore, the study established that a polarised audience has the potential to impede democratic dialogue and threatens a healthy democracy.

Keywords: *Misinformation, political disinformation, deepfakes, Zimbabwe's 2023 election*.

Introduction

On December 31, 2022, just a few hours before Zimbabwe entered into full election mode in preparation for August 23, 2023 election day, a graphic audio clip purported to be emanating from Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC)'s communications department made rounds on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and X. The audio was embedded on a graphically designed flyer on a yellow background, white text used on black backgrounds, and showing the main opposition leader's headshot image, Nelson Chamisa. This audio caused outrage on social media platforms, especially on X where some journalists reposted it, rebuking the party for disrespecting Ndebele culture due to the 'butchering' of the language in the audio. It was only after the then CCC spokesperson, Fadzayi Mahere tweeted that it was fake news that citizens came to the realisation that they had been duped. The fact that journalists and civic media personnel believed such content to the point of engaging with it invoked the need to investigate political disinformation in the August 2023 election period.

Political disinformation has long existed in Zimbabwe especially during election periods however, professionally trained journalists and civic media personnel were quick to spotlight such. The study examines political disinformation during Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonised elections — a period which experienced heightened cyber-battles between Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) presidential candidate Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa and opposition candidate Nelson Chamisa's backers. Social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) became the battleground for #Varakashi (Mnangagwa's backers) and #Nerorists (Chamisa's backers) to campaign and de-campaign each other through the use of media products such as images, videos, pictures and audio depicting one party or the other. Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses became the order of the day emanating from X accounts of political parties, candidates, interest groups, government personnel, civil society and ordinary citizens. This study will point to the nature of political disinformation evidenced by the fact that most of the content posted on this (X) social media platform was dismissed as either fake or disinformation by ordinary citizens including prominent political figures and journalists such as Fadzayi Mahere and Hopewell Chin'ono respectively. Chibuwe (2020) has encouraged debate on content produced by citizens either in support/defence of, or against, a candidate during election periods. It is for this reason that this study also examines how online audiences responded to content from #Varakashi and #Nerorists and investigates possible

implications of such content on democracy. The X platform provides a case study to explore how online audiences interact with the content as well as the possible implications of such. Ncube (2019) argues that social media platforms are used as a political arena especially during election periods in semi-authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe. It is therefore, for this reason that this study adds to the growing literature on social media as a political arena locally and globally. The study sought to investigate political disinformation during the 2023 Zimbabwe election period in its varied and diversified nature, to analyse how online audiences were deciphering the political disinformation, and to explore the possible implications of the political disinformation in Zimbabwe.

Political disinformation: Genesis, issues and debates

Political disinformation is when "deceptive information is intentionally spread to influence public opinion or hide the truth" (Williams, 2023:1). Thus, for this study, political disinformation is when politically false or misleading information is deliberately spread to influence public opinion. Therefore, political disinformation is a tactic of citizen manipulation and causes confusion (Maweu, 2020). Disinformation is perpetrated through methods such as feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information (Maweu, 2020). The aim being to give the recipient useless, harmful knowledge so that the recipient can then make erroneous decision making when casting their vote (Lukasik-Turecka and Maluzinas, 2023). The extensiveness of disinformation during election periods negatively impacts democratic processes and thwarts public interest agendas over the pursuit of egocentric political popularity (Okongo'o and Dube, 2023). Political violence is fuelled, creating disparagement in political participation and skepticism in the election process (Ndhlovu, 2022).

 Disinformation emerges and thrives in 'post-truth reality' (Tandoc, 2014; Freelon and Wells, 2020; Marwick and Lewis, 2017) whereby the political field is awash with simulated reality. The social media environment has enabled the proliferation of false news since it can encourage its spread by design (Zannettou et al., 2018) and any user can create a social media account, a website or a discussion board. Malicious actors can create multiple accounts on social media to share disinformation due to the lack of strong verification processes on the sign up to those platforms. Technological advancements therefore, have made the distribution of manipulated news and information much easier, exacerbating the spread of disinformation. Social media

forms part of the digital media where individuals interpret and give meanings to the world around them, therefore making it even more difficult for audiences to distinguish between what is fake and what is real. Over the last two decades, Williams (2023) states that "disinformation and misinformation have become so common in digital media that it can be difficult for readers to distinguish the truth" (p.1). In a study which explored the origins, strategies, and impact of Russian disinformation campaigns, Williams (2023) argues that in the 2016 United States of America elections, the Russian government found Donald Trump to be a favourable candidate and orchestrated a state-sponsored disinformation campaign denigrating his primary competitor, Hillary Clinton. Similarly, in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Vladimir Putin authorised "influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process and exacerbating socio-political divisions in the nation" (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2021). According to Williams (2023), Russian agents used more fake social media accounts and attempted to hack into email servers and state voting systems; however, the U.S. government and social media platforms locked down and actively monitored servers (Facebook, 2021; CISA, 2022).

In African countries like Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe, politicians have also appropriated disinformation in their political rhetoric, a development Moyo, Mare and Mabweazara (2020:1) refer to as the rise of the disinformation society — where "misleading and false information and narratives are deliberately weaponised for political, cultural and economic gain". Similarly, in countries in the Global North, the unprecedented crisis of disinformation has taken advantage of heightened periods of political contestations such as electoral seasons and military coups. Scholars argue that political communication has been de-professionalised and de-institutionalised as a result of the digital public sphere, all in pursuit of winning over voters, creating fear and anxiety among citizens. According to a GeoPoll and Portland (nd) study, in April 2017, fake news shot into the limelight in Kenya's front page of the *Daily Nation* and was circulated in Busia County. The study established that the fake news cover claimed that the Orange Democratic Movement presidential aspirant Dr Otumo had defected to Jubilee, the major political party in Kenya, which was the ruling party from 2016 to September 2022— and this was created to discredit the candidate on the day of the nomination for primaries. In addition, the country witnessed the "proliferation of low quality websites set up to add credibility to false news stories and the widespread hiring of bloggers to propagate fake news

stories" (ibid:13). As a result of fake news, Kenyan people's ability to make informed voting decisions was limited. In that light, this study incorporated audiences' engagement on disinformation content on social media through user comments, something which Moyo et al. (2020) and the GeoPoll and Portland's (nd) study overlooked.

Political disinformation in the Zimbabwean election cycles

In the Zimbabwean context post-2018, a new phenomenon of 'information warfare' (Wilson, 2022) has been taking shape in the political discourse. A rise in the dissemination of what has been collectively coined as information disorders, has caused both unintended and intended effects (Okong'o and Dube, 2023). Social media, especially WhatsApp, has predominantly been used in spreading doctored images and amplified crowds by both the ruling party and the biggest opposition parties (ibid, 2023:2). Arguably, Okong'o and Dube (2023) contend that the state broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), has in the past also been understating the opposition CCC supporters in rallies in addition to decontextualising the opposition leader's speech. Disinformation therefore, cannot merely be viewed as a tool for political vilification of rival parties and candidates but as a calculated preposterous fight against democratic processes. In their study, Ncube and Mare (2022) problematise the notion of 'truth' in a "politically polarised and trust-deficit Zimbabwean society where audiences are balkanised and pigeonholed into predefined filter bubbles" (p.58).

The digital public sphere's interactive nature which allows audiences to be producers of their own content (Chibuwe, 2020) has further enabled the exacerbation of political disinformation within the news ecosystem. During Zimbabwe's 2023 election period, various forms of political disinformation dominated social media as political adversaries focused on sabotaging one another. Online users re-shared such content, commented and liked such kind of content, expressing genuine sentiments on content that would later be duped as 'fake' by individuals and organisations depicted. Extensive studies on the use of social media platforms for political engagements during elections exist, with scholars arguing that ZANU PF's backers — commonly known as *Varakashi* — are increasingly occupying online spaces that were traditionally associated with opposition voices (Tshuma, Tshuma and Ndlovu, 2022). In their study, Tshuma et al. (2022) conclude that the ruling party's Twitter propagandists defended and promoted the interests of the Mnangagwa regime through justifying the November 2017 coup in campaigning for the July 2018 election. Similarly, Chibuwe's (2020:1) study on social

media and the July 2018 Zimbabwe national elections concludes that "fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during digital propaganda battles" between Chamisa's followers nicknamed "Nerorists" and Mnangagwa's followers nicknamed "Varakashi". Chibuwe (2020) further argues that the production and dissemination of fake news undermines democracy as the openness of social media provides room for cyber ghosts who convert a digital public sphere into a digital insults arena through barraging insults at those with an opposing view by either side. In the context of this present study, the ZANU-PF party employed the "Varakashi" on social media to be in ideological cyber-battles with the "Nerrorists". In an attempt to create chaos, erode faith in democratic establishments and promote divisive content, political disinformation content ensued on the micro-blogging site, X. Scholars who studied this period all concur that citizens took it upon themselves to "produce advertisements and/or memes in support of their preferred candidate(s)"..."and this saw the birth of a true digital-based citizen political commissar, the citizen political consultant, and the citizen spin doctor all rolled into one" (Chibuwe, 2020:21).

In light of the discussed studies, one can argue that X publics' discourses about politics merit scholarly attention as they "represent a growing discerning citizenry utilising social media to disrupt or reinforce existing conditions" (Ndlovu, 2023:13). It is, thus, an agonistic space of contestation and resistance (Ndlovu, 2023). The August 2023 Zimbabwean elections invoked various articulations of many discourses whereby different forms of contestations and resistances came into play as a way to enhance political fortunes for particular election actors. Arguably, the use of social media during elections contributes to voting patterns although this cannot be quantified. This research on political disinformation during the 2023 Zimbabwe elections adds to the growing literature on social media as a political arena, especially in authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe. In questioning the nature of political disinformation in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, a concern with unpacking the various forms of political disinformation used during this period and its possible implications on society, particularly democracy, is necessitated.

Theoretical Premise

Bourdieu's field theory influenced this work in understanding how different political actors behave in online platforms which arguably offer spaces for one to fully express their views. Munoriyarwa and Chiumbu (2020) argue that the field theory views society as being composed

of different but interconnected fields, with each field having its specific logic. Bourdieu (1993:163) defines a field as "an independent social universe that abides by its own rules, regulations and laws as it works with other fields". Politics can, therefore, be understood as a field — a separate field with its practices and rationalities. According to Benson and Neveu (2005), power relations between and within spheres of fields structure human behaviour therefore, to understand how humans behave, it is important to understand in what kind of power relations they take part. In this light, it can be argued that the voice and agendas of different political players and civil society have extensively dominated social media as they contest for political communicative spaces resulting in ideological cyber-battles. It is therefore, for this reason that the field theory befitted this study as it helps to understand how and why different actors (political parties, candidates, interest groups, individuals and civil society organisations) interacted within the broader field of cultural production, in this case micro-blogging site X, and in the process disseminating different kinds of political disinformation during the 2023 Zimbabwe elections.

This study also draws upon the notion of post-truth. According to Oxford Dictionaries, 'post-truth' relates to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Simply put, individuals most probably trust any content they want to as long as they feel it is right. Dean (2018:2) states that at the heart of the post-truth, there lies an interplay between subjectivity and objectivity and "the precise boundaries of that interplay are frequently blurred". The notion denotes a turnover from the total subjectivity of postmodernism or a total objectivity sought by modernism (ibid, 2018). The debates about post-truth became widespread in Western countries in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, former President of the United States of America. Andersen (2017) concurs with this view and observes that the United States is divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart. Carlssan et al. (2023:502) adds that "in our new normal, experts are dismissed, alternative facts are (sometimes flagrantly) offered, and public figures can offer opinions on pretty much anything". Zimbabwe's 2023 election period witnessed this as the micro-blogging site X made anyone with a smartphone and Internet a public figure. Arguably, the political discourse experienced the heightened use of political disinformation content whereby a lack of interest in evidence, and an erosion of trust in the fundamental norms around people's accountability for the things they say, became the order of the day. This therefore, called for the identification of individuals who perpetuated

these, as Dean (2018) posits "identity outranks arguments" in the post-truth era. Over the past few years, the uptake of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has seen the proliferation of simulated content which audiences cannot easily tell whether it is real or fake. Simulated content was of no exception during Zimbabwe's 2023 election period and this saw individual journalists and civil society members reposting and forwarding hyperreality content thinking it was real. One particular case to exemplify this argument was the wide re-sharing and circulation of supposedly/allegedly CCC audio-visual which 'butchered' the Ndebele language on December 31, 2022.

Methodological considerations

This study is informed by a qualitative approach and interpretivist paradigm. Political disinformation circulated on the micro-blogging site, X, and the accompanying user comments thereon made up the population of this study. Since this is central to the study as it forms the basis for understanding the varied and diversified nature of political disinformation, non-probabilistic techniques were employed to ensure the inclusion of texts (videos, audios, images, screenshots among others) with not just the richest data — that is those that best exemplify the themes identified within the data — but also those that contain what the researcher deemed to be the clearest representations of these themes. The same techniques were applied to user comments to ensure the inclusion of comments with the richest data for analysis, and those that were generally representative (thematically) of the population. X was chosen as a unit of analysis considering the platform's profound use by political parties, candidates, interest groups, government personnel, civil society and ordinary citizens during the period under study. From the unit of analysis, the researchers employed purposive sampling to select X user accounts that posted political disinformation content in its varied and diversified forms and user comments thereon from the period December 2022, a month when the first deepfake audio-visual purported to be emanating from the CCC party made 'noise' across social media platforms, to October 2023, a month which was officially gazetted for a presidential runoff vote, if required. Since virtual ethnography (non-participant observation netnography) formed a part of this study to analyse online interactions, it also utilised archival research data coupled with screenshots taken and stored in the researchers' phones and laptops. Tweets which specifically referred to the 2023 election discourse were selected. The researchers' archival research data included even tweets in indigenous languages, considering that X is an informal platform.

Out of a total of forty political disinformation tweets that the researchers came across, fifteen of those were purposively sampled for analysis. The researchers observed that most of the political disinformation in the digital public sphere was against the main opposition, CCC, hence prompting the researchers to sample that data for analysis. The sampled tweets included texts, videos, audios, images, WhatsApp screenshot images and memes. Purposive sampling was also employed to select user comments on those selected fifteen tweets based on their richness to answer the study's objectives. Additional to the purposive sampling and after reviewing a wider gamut of comments on disinformation content itself, the researchers used Maximum Variation Sampling, also referred to as "heterogeneous sampling" to select user comments thereon. According to Etikan et al. (2015:3), MVS involves "selecting candidates across a broad spectrum relating to the topic of study" and this is done to ensure diversity within a non-random sample and the wider gamut of data. Selected data gave rich content that was meticulously scrutinised using thematic analysis in conjunction with Saurcer's semiotic analysis. Some of the purposively archived tweets which ensued discussions during the election period included, among a host of others, @mlevu with 9 180 followers as at January 30, 2024, @Realbeefactor with 21, 200 followers as at January 30, 2024, @GeorgeCharamba2 with 23, 200 followers as at January 30, 2024, @zvogboluckson with 39, 500 followers as at January 30, 2024 and @matigary with 13, 800 followers as at January 30, 2024. The selected data for analysis were quantified based on engagement (likes, comments, shares, bookmarks, reactions), reach (number of unique users who saw the post, regardless of whether they interacted with it), impressions (the number of times the post was displayed, even if scrolled past quickly), content type (text, image or video), topic modelling (this identifies the main themes and topics discussed in the post), and network analysis (to explore the relationships between users who interacted with the post, looking at things like mentions, replies, and shares). An outstanding advantage of purposive sampling (Tongco, 2007:154) argues, is that it can be "more realistic than randomisation in terms of time, effort and cost needed in finding informants".

Data analysis

The presentation and subsequent discussion of findings are divided into three subsections categorised along the study's themes: CCC turns against Tendai Biti, Job Sikhala and 'disrespects' the Ndebele ethnic group, Chamisa is a 'Symbol of failure' promising to 'Reverse

the Land Reform Program', and Chamisa and his party boycott elections on voting day with Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) ordering for 'fresh elections'.

Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party turns against Tendai Biti, Job Sikhala and disrespects the Ndebele people

The study established that the political field constituted ideological struggles and competition for legitimate appropriation of what was at stake (Bourdieu, 2005), and in this case, political parties, candidates, interest groups and civil society, among others, were canvassing for people's votes during the 2023 Zimbabwe election. The anti-CCC cyber political disinformation largely deployed screenshotted 'fake' WhatsApp messages, posters/flyers, audio visuals and distortion of pertinent information. This cements Okongo'o and Dube (2023) findings that social media, especially WhatsApp, has predominantly been used in spreading doctored images and amplified crowds by both the ruling party and the biggest opposition parties within the Zimbabwean political landscape. ZANU-PF loyalists and backers took advantage of the situation that impeded the CCC party which included the incarceration of Job Sikhala, fissures on account of the absence of structures and the nomination of candidates to speculate that the party was on the brink of another split, just a few months before the 2023 harmonised elections. Thus, ZANU-PF agents within the political field used their capital, in this case, their political positions, affiliations and referential powers to turn a speculative idea into a "powerful idea" (Bourdieu, 2005:39) with the intention to mobilise the populace and persuade them to adopt their proposed principles.

The idea that the CCC party is on the brink of another split is given relative prominence by Varakashi X users' handles such as, among others: @MviringiHosia, @GeorgeCharamba2, @zanupf_patriots and @matigary. In a screenshotted WhatsApp message captioned, '*Verily verily brethren and sistren, I say unto you, there is plenty of noise in the cockpit. The cockpit is experiencing plenty of noise. Will it be Biti or Markham?*' juxtapositioned with Hopewell Chin'ono screenshotted tweet saying, '*Opposition folks should not be fooled by ZANU PF that if the opposition drops Tendai Biti from parliament, they will be part of a GNU!*', @matigary suggests that the main opposition faces intra-party conflicts. Additionally, a few months after the August 2023 election, a poster with the CCC emblem claiming the expulsion of Biti from the party circulated on the X platform. This prompted the party to issue a statement highlighting that the news on the poster is fake, stating that:

> This is fake! In an era of disinformation, please disregard any updates that don't emanate from our official handle @CCCZimbabwe. (Gift Ostallos Siziba, 28.11.2023)

Another 'fake' WhatsApp screenshot circulated on X showing a conversation between the then CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere and a party supporter based in the United Kingdom. According to the images, the main opposition had thrown its imprisoned vice chairperson, Job Sikhala, into the 'political dustbin'. The screenshot partly indicated Mahere arguing that Sikhala was no longer part of the party project as the latter was said to be working with Freddy Musarirevhu, undermining the efforts of the party as well as those of Nelson Chamisa to get him out of prison. Musarirevhu is a member of CCC who defied party orders and filed nomination papers in defiance of the party, thus creating double candidates The 'leaked WhatsApp conversation', whose intent was to signal an imminent split in the opposition, read Mahere's response to the concerned party member as:

> Thank you for your concern but of late, that is no longer the position in the movement. Hon Sikhala has been working with Freddy Masarirevhu, the so-called personal lawyer and family friend, to undermine our efforts and those of President Chamisa. The President once warned him publicly about his violent tendencies but as you know, his ambitions to lead the opposition with Tendai got the better of him. All we can offer is solidarity and I have been consistent in doing so. However, our intelligence informed us he is now working on his own project from prison. That is why he is falsely accusing us of wanting to poison him. As the Spokesperson of the movement, I feel I have done my part and will continue to do so for the sake of the public but truth be told, he has chosen separate ways. (@GeorgeCharamba2, 05.01.2023)

Similarly, Mahere dismissed these as fake. These 'leaked WhatsApp conversations' came on the backdrop of speculations that the opposition party vice president Tendai Biti and vice chairperson Job Sikhala were working in cahoots plotting the downfall of Nelson Chamisa. The CCC party, since its inception, had been operating without party structures, thereby leading to claims that Chamisa treated the party as his personal project. Speculative ideas gained more traction when Allan Markham won the party's farcical candidate selection process for Harare

East constituency. This is consistent with the views of Okong'o and Dube (2023) that in the Zimbabwean context post-2018, a new phenomenon of '*information warfare*' has been taking shape in the political discourse.

Arguably, politicians are quick to evoke the fake news card when a report is not in their favour. Political disinformation during the August 2023 election period tapped into the latent tribal conflicts in the country, with the aim of causing conflict between the party and the Ndebele ethnic group — which arguably, is the opposition's stronghold group particularly in Bulawayo. A 2 minutes and 3 seconds MP4 CCC campaign audio went viral on the Internet ensuing outrage over the party's 'butchering' of the Ndebele language. The audio visual with Chamisa's face and CCC emblem was a campaign flyer with a voice over of a woman attempting to read and explain the points written on the flyer in Ndebele. However, the Ndebele words were badly pronounced and the grammar was extremely poor. The audio visual made rounds on social media, particularly X – sparking discontent over the party's failure to engage a native Ndebele speaker for the campaign message.

Similarly, the findings tally with the findings of a study by Carlsson et al. (2023) which established that we do not live in an era of post-truth, but in a time when notions of knowledge and truth appear to be fatally threatened in new ways. According to the scholar, subjective truth now appears to override objective truth. Due to technological advancements in contemporary society, individuals have an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality. This study submits that the political disinformation during the period under study sowed divisions among online audiences as X users had deciphered such content in different ways. Some believed the information to be real while some dismissed it at face value. Fake WhatsApp screenshots and an edited audio-visual constituted hyperreality content, which is the co-mingling of physical reality with virtual reality and human intelligence with artificial intelligence. This resonates with Harsin's (2018) findings that in a post-truth era, false news has become all too common on social media as audiences blindly and quickly accept simulations as facts. On the other hand, what constitutes fake news is subjective, hence this study concludes that online users who believed fake news as real were already in partisan politics.

Chamisa is a 'Symbol of failure' through means of promising to 'Reverse the Land Reform Program'

In addition to fake WhatsApp chats, doctored audio visuals and images, the period under study witnessed the deployment of memes to ridicule Nelson Chamisa and his leadership skills. Such memes were complemented by manipulated images and videos doctored out of context with the intention to create false narratives. Social media memes are generally caricatures of the everyday which thrive on exaggeration (Willems, 2008 as cited in Ncube, 2019). In most cases, memes are humorous in nature in which Bakhtin (1984) argues that laughter is a tool that critics of hegemonic cultures use to overcome their fear and attack their object of scrutiny. Arguably, the ruling regime has been gripped with fear about the popularity of the opposition party and its leader, Chamisa. The Varakashi then deployed laughter through memes to bridle, trick and toy with power (Mbembe, 2001). The memes corroborated 'unproven' ZANU-PF claims that Chamisa was in opposition to lure Western funding. In this case, Chamisa is caricatured as an immature adult, fit to be a toddler playing with Zimbabwe as a toy, therefore, unfit to lead. The meme depicted the opposition president as a baby putting on diapers, barefoot and holding the Zimbabwean map on his left hand. On the right hand side of the meme is a payoff line, '*Zimbabwe is not a TOY. Don't hand it over to a TODDLE*R' (Figure 1), and below that are words and hashtags written on a yellow backgrounded arrow pointed shape, '*Vote Wisely, #EDHasMyVote and #MaturityMatters*'. The words toy and toddler attract the reader's attention as they are capitalised and in orange and red big font respectively.

Following Chamisa's rally in Gweru, Midlands Province, on the 16th of July 2023, political disinformation ensued on the micro-blogging site X claiming that the party leader had promised to reverse the controversial land reform program once he is voted into power. A user handle @Jonesmusara on X tweeted a 09 second MP4 video clip of Chamisa addressing his supporters. The MP4 video clip had captions edited on it written, '*Chamisa promises to reverse Land Reform, repossess farms from resettled blacks (inserted a surprised emoji) 16/07/23. Gweru*'. The CCC president, who was addressing party supporters during the rally in the Shona language, is heard saying:

> Nyaya ye-land is an important point. Wese akabviswa pa-land anofanirwa kudzorerwa. Totangira ipapo (Jones Musara, 18.07.2023) (Figure 2)

This is translated as, "The land issue is a very critical one; everyone who was removed from their land must be reinstated. We will start from there". The X user captioned this video clip with, '*13 reasons why Chamisa and CCC lost Zim 23 August 2023 Elections to President ED Mnangagwa and ZANU PF: 1. The winners President ED Mnangagwa and ZANU PF are the only ones electable thanks to unparalleled #EDWORKS and ZANU PF works for Zimbabwe since the 1960s*'. The tweet suggested that Chamisa was unpatriotic as he sought to return whites to recolonise the country hence lacking democracy and will of the people.

However, evidence showed that the two pieces of information were not factual. The video clip was edited and shared out of context, qualifying it as political disinformation for this study. Background and fact-checking revealed that during his Gweru rally, Chamisa was referring to villagers in Chilonga, Chiredzi and Masvingo districts who had faced displacement from their ancestral land following government plans to make way for a Lucerne farm, a commercial irrigation venture. The ZANU PF government has over the years become known for evicting its citizens from their ancestral lands for political and financial gains. This edited video clip can be viewed as an attempt to divert people's attention from the crucial matter that Chamisa was promising the electorate. Thus, they (ZANU-PF) resorted to political disinformation, to cover up their shortcomings, instil confusion and scepticism towards their main political rivalry.

In contrast, audience engagement on this content cemented the view that social media's contribution to democracy is paradoxical given its anonymity and open nature. Chibuwe (2020) concludes that social media provides an opportunity for participants to share their views but has also provided rooms for emergence of cyber ghosts. The latter has undermined social media's emancipatory potential resulting in irrational debates, mudslinging, insults, and outright lies — and in this case the two accounts on X platform. An X user (@philchibako) commented:

> Uri dako hauna zivo! Teerera kana mashoko achitaurwa! Yes wese akabiswa pa land yake pachiiswa mukuru we @ZANUPF_Official ngaadzokere. It's our land, not @zanupf_patriots land! (philchibako, 19.07.2023)

Translated as: '*You are an unknowledgeable arse! Pay close attention when one is speaking! Yes, everyone who lost land to a ZANU-PF member has to vacate it. It is our land and not only for the ZANU-PF members*'.

Capitalising on ZANU-PF's official narrative that Chamisa and his party, the CCC, are puppets of the West, the Presidential Spokesperson, George Charamba used his X handle account @GeorgeCharamba2 to denigrate Chamisa's dignity. The handle tweeted a photo shopped image of Chamisa endorsing the United State of America's LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) pride month. The image was in juxtaposition to a US Embassy Zimbabwe screenshotted tweet whose contents were, coupled with a colourful flag:

> We celebrate the beginning of #PrideMonth and recognize those who advocate for equal rights for all #LGBTQI+ people in Zimbabwe. The work to end violence, criminalization, and stigma against LGBTQI+ persons remain central to the U.S.' commitment to human rights around the world. (USEmbZim, 03.06.2023)

This was the annual celebration that Chamisa was said to be in support of. The photoshopped image, Figure 3 on Appendix page, was captioned:

> So @nelsonchamisa is commemorating this evil month with an evil agenda towards extermination of the black race through homosexuality, & Zim (flag) sees nor hears no evil! Our constitution outlaws homosexuality. No ambiguities. Time the #PatrioticAct punishes promoters of homosexuality. (GeorgeCharamba, 03.06.2023)

From the findings presented above, the study argues that the production and distribution of political disinformation in support of preferred candidates demonstrates that political advertising is no longer just limited to professional political consultants. However, anyone with a smartphone and access to software and online spaces has the potential to deploy their creative skills in favour of their preferred candidate or against a political candidate they do not like. Thus political communication is no longer just a preserve of political parties and political consultants as Bourdieu's field theory argues, the political field consists of many players who in most cases do not agree with the rules of the game. Chibuwe (2020) argues that political advertising has been, "just like journalism, de-professionalised and de-institutionalised" (p.18).

The foregoing findings also demonstrate that political disinformation during the period under study was preoccupied with personalities instead of issues in the campaign engagements that ensued on the micro-blogging site X. The preoccupation with Nerrorist and Varakashi's

presidential candidates, in this case, Chamisa and Mnangagwa – arguably did not help online users make informed political decisions, highlighting the implications of political disinformation. Just like Chibuwe's (2020) study on social media and Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, this study submits that the tendency to focus on candidates' personalities and name calling during the August 2023 election robbed citizens in both online and offline spaces the opportunity to be better informed about the candidates and their offerings. The digital public sphere, X, was appropriated in the politics of de-legitimising one another and most probably sowing divisions between election candidates and the populace. This is consistent with Maweu (2020) who argues that disinformation can be simply viewed as a way of attempting to induce a sense of confusion and/or manipulate people through sharing false information knowingly to cause harm. The phenomenon of political disinformation is typically driven by intentions to arouse passions, attract viewership or deceive, and perpetrators often use subtle methods, such as feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information" (Maweu, 2020)).

CCC boycotts elections on voting day and ZEC orders 'fresh elections'

The discourse of voter suppression and vote rigging under an autocratic ZANU-PF government also dominated discussions on the micro-blogging site, X. The general consensus amongst Nerrorists was that the ruling party has never won election fairly but it rigs elections through wielding undue influence on the ZEC, the judiciary and the public media. It is for this reason that the opposition party CCC and civil organisations such as Team Pachedu sought to independently count votes; however, such agents were intercepted and arrested. This was on the backdrop of litigations that were taking place in the country around the delimitation report, voter's roll, nomination process, nomination fees, and dates of elections, accreditation of observers, printing of ballot papers and statutory instruments gazetted for the election. This obviously indicated that the election result would be contested too. Additionally, for the first time in a year, the country was headed into polls with a publicly divided ZEC (Kika, 2023) following seven commissioners who wrote to the President and Parliament distancing themselves from the delimitation report. Such developments provided a fertile ground for political disinformation to thrive.

On August 23, 2023, the actual voting day, people woke up to streets littered with fliers thrown

all over major cities. The fliers written, '*DO NOT VOTE!!! ELECTION IS STOLEN. STAY AT HOME!*' had the CCC emblem and Chamisa's face on them (Figure 4). Citizens uploaded pictures of these fliers on social media leading to the discovery that these fake materials were distributed mainly in traditionally opposition stronghold cities — and in this case, Harare and Bulawayo. The CCC denied issuing these fliers, ensuing speculations that they were likely from Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ) — a quasi-security military organisation — and/or ZANU-PF. FAZ, according to the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute's (2023) report, played a critical role in the weaponisation of law to clampdown on the opposition and democracy defenders. One X user who posted the flier online captioned it:

> #Zimbabwe (flag): opposition supporters already report having found hundreds of fake pamphlets which were being spread by regime supporters, calling on voters to stay home as the vote will be rigged anyway. (@ThomasVLinge, 23.08.2023)

The above comment is in line with the key tenets of the post-truth theory in which Dean (2018) argues that at the heart of the post-truth paradigm there lies an interplay between subjectivity and objectivity and the precise boundaries of that interplay is frequently blurred. The fact that the letter consisted of the ZEC letter and the election officer's signature made it difficult for online users to tell whether it was real or fake. Therefore, hyperreality content prevails as a result of public members who do not trust claims of the authorities resulting in media texts that audiences believe as long as they feel it is right. Thus, subjective truths are given more weight than objective facts. Just like Andersen's (2017) study on political disinformation in the U.S. elections, this study established that during the period under study Zimbabweans on the X platform were divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart further perpetuating mistrust and polarisation. This in turn cements Okongo'o and Dube's (023) argument that the extensiveness of disinformation during election periods negatively impacts democratic processes and thwarts public interest agendas over the pursuit of egocentric political popularity. As provided by the distribution of fliers that were being intentionally crafted to induce low voter turnout on the election day.

Conclusion

The study showed that the nature of political disinformation during the 2023 Zimbabwe election period was mostly towards the main opposition party, CCC and its leader Nelson

Chamisa. This study submits that doctored images, videos, audios and memes dominated the micro-blogging site, X in a quest to de-legitimise the popularity and leadership capabilities of Chamisa and his party. Political disinformation towards the ruling party, ZANU-PF only emanated when Nerrorists sought to challenge or offer counter narratives to the problematic information awash on the X platform. It is therefore for this reason that this research concluded that during the period under study the nature of political disinformation was against the main opposition. Arguably, political actors at the forefront of disinformation deployed the use of social media to spread problematic information disregarding the acknowledged professionalism and institutionalism of political communication. That is, technological advancements, especially in artificial intelligence, made it possible for political adversaries, in this case the Varakashi, to create and manufacture content that appeared real. This study further established that the election period saw the emergence of contemporary forms of political disinformation such as deepfakes whereby doctored and manipulated audio-visuals, images, faked screenshotted WhatsApp conversations, memes and videos were awash on social media.

Interestingly, the study established that most of the X users were quick to label the problematic information as fake while only a few somehow believed the content. Thus the nature of the political disinformation resulted in a polarized online audience as some believed it while others rubbished the content upon coming across it online. Audiences claimed that they were now 'woke' compared to the ancient times when there was no social media to offer divergent views on a particular issue. Also, they (audiences) made it clear that they were now aware of purveyors of political disinformation within the political field hence showing lack of trust in politicians and official political communicators. This study submitted that the political disinformation received more engagement from X users who were already partisan. Partisanship played an active role in the deliberate perpetuating of false information. While opposition supporters offered counter-narratives, these degenerated into insults, name-calling, and mudslinging and as a result, impeding democratic dialogue in the digital public sphere.

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Appendices

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4