

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

*Digital futures for a post-pandemic world*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)  
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

## Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

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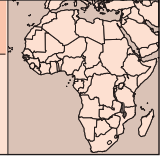
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## Introduction

The rapid advancement in information and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years has revolutionised the way we live and connect with each other. This digital revolution has brought unprecedented and transformational economic and social benefits.<sup>1</sup> However, the rewards of this digital transformation are also being overshadowed by the global spread of online misinformation and disinformation, also known as an “infodemic”.<sup>2</sup> Digital rights such as freedom of expression, access to information online and online safety are all under threat by the rapid dissemination of false and malicious online information within and across national borders.<sup>3</sup> Prior studies have shown that online misinformation and disinformation are complex problems that do not suit a one-size-fits-all solution. To this end, effective mitigation can only be achieved through long-term strategies involving multistakeholder collaboration and cooperation between governments, digital platforms, civil society and other actors.

In Africa, online misinformation and disinformation have grown recently, both in form and prevalence. However, the challenges of combating them are equally burgeoning, and measures to curb them remain inadequate and often inappropriate.<sup>4</sup> Attempts by some African governments

and digital platform companies to tackle them have been besieged by multiple challenges and policy shortcomings, with the lack of coordination and cooperation among key stakeholders being a major concern. These challenges were further exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Malawi, being part of the global community, is not spared from online misinformation and disinformation. Undocumented reports indicate that while internet and ICT access is increasing, online misinformation and disinformation are also on the rise at unprecedented levels,<sup>6</sup> particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic period. As has been argued, tackling online misinformation and disinformation requires a multistakeholder effort due to the complexity and multi-layered problems associated with them.<sup>7</sup> To this end, this report, which shares the findings of interviews with 13 respondents from across different sectors in Malawi, adopts a multistakeholder approach to generate evidence on efforts in combating online misinformation and disinformation in the country amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Study context

Malawi gained its independence from Great Britain in 1964. It borders Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. The country has an estimated population of 17.7 million people, of which 85% live in rural areas.<sup>8</sup> The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is USD 636.8.<sup>9</sup> Most women work in the agricultural sector, which is a backbone of Malawi’s economy. Of those in non-agricultural waged employment, 21% are women and 79% are men, and the numbers have remained the same over the years.

Despite Malawi having the lowest ICT penetration rate in the Southern African Development

1 Okeleke, K., & Robinson, J. (2021). *Exploring online misinformation and disinformation in Asia Pacific*. GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/asia-pacific/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/190721-Exploring-misinformation-in-Asia-Pacific-1.pdf>

2 Paine, J. (2021, 25 June). The future of Asia’s battle against online misinformation. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/the-future-of-asias-battle-against-online-misinformation>

3 Colomina, C., Sánchez Margalef, H., & Youngs, R. (2021). *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*. European Union. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653635\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

4 CIPESA. (2021, 26 October). Combating disinformation in Africa: Challenges and prospects. <https://cipesa.org/2021/10/combating-disinformation-in-africa-challenges-and-prospects/>

5 Ibid.

6 Kainja, J. (2020, 7 October). How lack of access to information and ICTs has fueled disinformation in Malawi. *CIPESA*. <https://cipesa.org/2020/10/how-lack-of-access-to-information-and-icts-has-fueled-disinformation-in-malawi>

7 Ngwira, K. (2021, 13 January). A view from Malawi: Combating fake news and the “infodemic”. *Thomson Reuters Foundation*. <https://www.trust.org/i/?id=9f827934-ce2c-4ad5-boed-d8abbce47881>

8 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

9 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

TABLE 1.

## List of respondents who were interviewed.

Code	Position	Sector
Resp 1	Lawyer	Government
Resp 2	Digital human rights defender	Civil society
Resp 3	Gender specialist	Civil society
Resp 4	ICT expert	ICT regulator
Resp 5	ICT expert	Private
Resp 6	Researcher	Academia
Resp 7	Media expert	Print media
Resp 8	Police officer	Law enforcement
Resp 9	Policy expert	Academia
Resp 10	Political and social commentator	Academia
Resp 11	Representative	Tech companies
Resp 12	Representative	Community-based organisation
Resp 13	Media professional	Online media

Community (SADC),<sup>10</sup> online misinformation and disinformation are on the rise. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) statistics show that 14% of the population uses the internet in Malawi while 52% of Malawians have mobile phones. Access to mobile broadband is estimated at 25.5% and fixed-line broadband is 0.06%.<sup>11</sup>

There are also gender disparities when it comes to ICT ownership in the country. About 34.2% of women own a mobile phone, and 3.9% own a desktop computer, while just 5.2% of them have access to the internet.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, 3% of the population has internet access in rural areas compared to 24.3% in the urban population. Computer access in rural areas remains at 2.1% while it is 19.2% in urban areas.

Airtel (Mw) and Telecom Networks Malawi (TNM) remain the two dominant mobile operators in the country, while Malawi Telecommunication Limited (MTL) is the only fixed-service provider. The Malawi Communication and Regulatory Authority regulates the telecommunication sector in the country

Poor access to ICT services such as the internet is largely attributed to poor ICT infrastructure and high tariff charges imposed on ICT services. These include 16.5% value added tax (VAT) on internet services, 17.5% VAT on ICT gadgets, and 10% excise duty on mobile text messages and mobile data transfers.<sup>13</sup>

Access to the internet is cost-prohibitive for the majority of Malawians. For instance, a monthly data bundle of 10 gigabytes (GB) costs USD 21 with both Airtel and TNM. This cost is equivalent to half the minimum monthly wage of the majority of Malawians. Reflecting this, the Inclusive Internet Index 2021, which measures internet affordability, availability, relevance of content and readiness, ranked Malawi 114th out of 120 countries.<sup>14</sup>

## Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the report, the researcher gathered data through literature and policy reviews, and conducted online in-depth interviews with key informants representing both state and non-state institutions. About 13 experts drawn from the ICT sectors, including journalists, media regulators, editors, digital platform experts, digital rights activists and civil society actors, participated in the study. Table 1 provides a list of respondents to the study, their positions and category of sectors they belonged to.

10 Malanga, D. F., & Simwaka, K. (2021). ICTs as potential enablers of the green economy in the Southern African Development Community. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2020: Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South*. Association for Progressive Communications. <https://giswatch.org/node/6230>

11 <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017>

12 Malanga, D. F. (2019). Framing the impact of artificial intelligence on the protection of women's rights in Malawi. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2019: Artificial intelligence: Human rights, social justice and development*. Association for Progressive Communications and ARTICLE 19. [https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/gisw2019\\_web\\_malawi.pdf](https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/gisw2019_web_malawi.pdf)

13 Kaiyatsa, M. (2020, 5 August). Digital rights remain under threat in Malawi despite historic win for democracy. *Global Voices*. <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2020/08/05/digital-rights-remain-under-threat-in-malawi-despite-historic-win-for-democracy>

14 <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/performance>

The data collected from the respondents was analysed thematically. Specific questions that respondents were asked included the following:

- What do you understand about online misinformation and disinformation?
- What is the prevalence of online misinformation and disinformation in the country?
- What factors do you think are fuelling the spread of online misinformation and disinformation?
- What are the impacts of online misinformation and disinformation?
- What do you think should be done to fight or tackle online misinformation and disinformation in the country?

## Findings

### *Defining online misinformation and disinformation*

Among those who participated in the study, there were significant disparities in the views on what constitutes online misinformation and disinformation. Some viewed online misinformation and disinformation as the same, since they both deal with spreading misleading and unverified information. Others viewed online misinformation as a “broader concept that deals with spreading fake news knowingly or unknowingly” (resp 5), while disinformation was “about spreading wrong information aimed at harming other people” (resp 7). From this it was clear that a lack of standardised or shared definitions of online misinformation and disinformation was a problem.

This lack of consensus on definitions has been reported previously by scholars. Nevertheless, some of the respondents’ understandings were close to generally accepted definitions such as online misinformation referring to the spread of erroneous online information without the intention of causing harm and online disinformation being a deliberate, coordinated and malicious attempt to spread false information.<sup>15</sup>

### *Prevalence of online misinformation and disinformation and factors fuelling its dissemination*

The study also solicited views from respondents on the nature and prevalence of online disinformation in Malawi.

There was a consensus among participants that during the COVID-19 pandemic, online misinformation and disinformation was a major concern and remains an existential threat, not only to public health, but

also to democracy in the country. It emerged that the nature or forms of online misinformation and disinformation focused on public health, socioeconomic issues and violence, had a gender dimension, and included cybercrime. For instance, claims that the COVID-19 pandemic was caused by 5G networks circulated online, and there was fake news about the treatment of COVID-19 using various concoctions and herbal medicine. Respondents also acknowledged that gendered online misinformation and disinformation such as false, misleading or harmful content that exploits gender inequalities<sup>16</sup> or invokes gender stereotypes and norms are common.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, respondents also noted that online misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine is rampant. “People are told that vaccine is meant to kill them, and it is associated with devil and the coming of 666” (resp 8). Consequently, this has led to low uptake of COVID-19 vaccines in the country.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, politically motivated online disinformation is also increasing. For instance, there has been fake news circulating on various digital platforms aimed at discrediting political opponents.<sup>19</sup> This has exacerbated political violence in the country.

The observed motivations, according to the study participants, ranged from financial, to a delight in causing mischief, and stoking political tensions. Respondents also indicated that online misinformation and disinformation are fuelled by the mainstream media spreading fake news, the politicians using the media to discredit opponents, and the rapid increase in the usage of social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

Furthermore, it also emerged that the COVID-19 outbreak has intensified the spread of disinformation in the country. It is therefore evident that online misinformation and disinformation can be considered prevalent in the country. They exist in the form of misleading, fake, fabricated, manipulated and “imposter” content and are associated with public health, religious, political, gender, social and economic issues.

16 EU DisinfoLab. (2021, 20 April). Gender-based disinformation: Advancing our understanding and response. <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/gender-based-disinformation-advancing-our-understanding-and-response>

17 Scott, V. (2021). *Understanding the gendered dimension of disinformation*. Countering Disinformation. <https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/gender/complete-document-gender-dimensions>

18 Tembo, L. (2022, 2 January). Tackling COVID-19 vaccine misinformation through faith leaders. *UNICEF Malawi*. <https://www.unicef.org/malawi/stories/tackling-covid-19-vaccine-misinformation-through-faith-leaders>

19 Kondowe, R. (2019, 10 May). Despite a low internet penetration, Malawi is worried about fake news in its election run-up. *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/africa/1616511/malawi-election-has-a-fake-news-problem-on-whatsapp-facebook>

15 Colomina, C., Sánchez Margalef, H., & Youngs, R. (2021). Op. cit.

## Impact of online misinformation and disinformation

Respondents were asked to provide their perceptions on the consequences of online misinformation and disinformation. The study found that online misinformation and disinformation have negative effects on people and society at large. Interviewees noted that they have impacted negatively on human rights and democratic processes,<sup>20</sup> and resulted in digital violence and the repression of marginalised groups such as women and minorities.<sup>21</sup> The impacts can be divided into several categories:

- **Impact on human rights:** Studies have shown that online misinformation and disinformation infringe on human rights. Respondents stated that it affected the right of freedom of thought and the right to hold opinions without interference. The right to privacy and freedom of expression both online and offline were hampered. In addition, online misinformation and disinformation also negatively affected the economic, social and cultural rights of citizens in the country.
- **Impact on democratic processes:** The arrival of COVID-19 coincided with the rerun of the presidential elections in 2020, after the 2019 presidential elections were annulled by Malawi's Constitutional Court for serious irregularities. In this regard, political misinformation and disinformation exacerbated the mistrust of democratic processes and institutions such as the courts and parliamentary processes, as well as of political figures. Some journalists and political figures have been frequent targets for online attacks. Due to the spread of online political disinformation, citizens may pull out from participating in public affairs, believing that behind-the-scenes political interference would make their participation ineffective.
- **Cyber violence and the repression of vulnerable groups:** Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”<sup>22</sup> Online disinformation is often associated with the rise of cyber violence against women, girls, children and other vulnerable groups.<sup>23</sup> Cyber violence includes a range of controlling

and coercive behaviours such as cyber stalking or harassment on social media. In this study, participants acknowledged that online misinformation and disinformation result in an increase in gender-based cyber violence against women and girls.<sup>24</sup> This in turn has the potential to affect the victims socially, economically, emotionally and physically.<sup>25</sup>

- **Impact of the COVID-19 infodemic on citizens:** Respondents were also of the view that the COVID-19 infodemic, which increased the spread of fake news such as hoaxes and conspiracy theories about the pandemic and vaccines, has also led to a mistrust in public institutions, putting the lives of people at risk. Online disinformation spread during the pandemic has included disinformation legitimised by being falsely attributed to well-known public or political figures.<sup>26</sup> It also became clear that some of the regulations targeting misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic have involved new limits on press freedom and resulted in censorship tools that are likely to be used beyond the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>27</sup>

## Approaches to fighting online misinformation and disinformation

In taking measures to address the entire spectrum of online misinformation and disinformation, it is important to look at the different actors involved, together with their actions taken.<sup>28</sup> In this study, participants were asked about the approaches that the government, digital platforms, civil society, and academia have taken to address the spread of online misinformation and disinformation in the country. It was noted that the respondents had different opinions:

- **Government:** On the part of the government, it was noted that existing laws can help to fight online misinformation and disinformation. These include the Penal Code (1930),<sup>29</sup> Communications Act (1998), Electronic Transaction and Cyber Security Act (2016), Access to Information Act (2016) and Data Protection Bill (2021).<sup>30</sup>

20 Colomina, C., Sánchez Margalef, H., & Youngs, R. (2021). Op. cit.

21 Okeleke, K., & Robinson, J. (2021). Op. cit.

22 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

23 Malanga, D. F. (2021a). *Tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls in Malawi amidst the COVID-19 pandemic*. African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition. [https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/Donald\\_Flywell-1.pdf](https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/Donald_Flywell-1.pdf)

24 Malanga, D. F. (2021b). *Survey of cyber violence against women in Malawi*. Proceedings of the 1st Virtual Conference on Implications of Information and Digital Technologies for Development. <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2108/2108.09806.pdf>

25 Malanga, D.F (2021a). Op. cit.

26 Pierri, F., et al. (2021). *Online misinformation is linked to early COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy and refusal*. arXiv. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.10635>

27 Colomina, C., Sánchez Margalef, H., & Youngs, R. (2021). Op. cit.

28 Ibid.

29 <https://malawilii.org/akn/mw/act/1929/22/eng%402014-12-31>

30 Malanga, D. F. (2020). *Londa: Malawi Digital Rights and Inclusion 2020 Report*. Paradigm Initiative. <https://paradigmhq.org/report/londa-malawi-digital-rights-inclusion-2020-report>

While there was a consensus among research participants on the need for the government to regulate harmful online content, others criticised the move as a precursor to suppressing civic space and freedom of expression. Participants questioned the effectiveness of these existing laws and ways in which the government has applied them to silence critics. Apart from legal measures, some participants identified raising the digital literacy of the general public as an essential means to combating misinformation and disinformation in Malawi.

- **Digital platforms:** Studies have shown that digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, among others, have introduced a number of measures in recent years to tackle online misinformation and disinformation. Salient examples include content removal, platform bans and feature limits (such as limiting the number of words that can be typed or shared via Twitter), and fact-checking and digital literacy initiatives. However, in this study, the majority of participants identified few measures that digital platforms have used to combat online misinformation and disinformation in the country. The participants suggested removing online content and banning perpetrators from digital platforms as measures.
- **Civil society:** Civil society is critical in countering online misinformation and disinformation. This may involve a variety of programmes such as fact checking, advocacy focused on government or on online platforms, public awareness campaigns, identifying online disinformation narratives, and building trusted networks for sharing accurate information.<sup>31</sup> In this study, it was found that most research participants acknowledge that civil society organisations have not done enough to combat online misinformation and disinformation. However, it was noted that collaborations between and among digital platforms, government regulators and international organisations can help to build stronger resilience and cooperation in tackling online misinformation and disinformation challenges.
- **Academia:** In the context of academia, it was found that while acknowledging the burgeoning of online disinformation and misinformation in the country, higher education institutions have done very little research on the topic. It was

noted that digital literacy programmes in higher education have focused on students, and there was no wider policy initiative to expand digital literacy programmes to the general public, including for different age groups, as one of the ways of combating online misinformation and disinformation in the country.

### Obstacles to combating online misinformation and disinformation

Despite the various approaches that the government, civil society and digital platforms are using to combat online misinformation and disinformation in the country, there are still a number of ongoing obstacles that undermine effective responses. The study found that the massive flow of information and content across national boundaries makes it difficult to fight online misinformation and disinformation, especially where there is disagreement on what constitutes misinformation or disinformation. It was also noted that the government has used existing laws to silence critics. This has a negative effect on freedom of speech, media freedom and political pluralism. Some civil society participants also accused the government of using existing laws to target their political opponents, religious groups, journalists and human rights defenders. Besides this, it was revealed that the government has little control over social media, where most misinformation and disinformation are shared and consumed.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, it was found that despite digital platforms making significant efforts to combat online misinformation and disinformation in the country, they face a number of challenges. The detection of online misinformation and disinformation on different platforms is difficult. The digital platform representative stated that online content encrypted by digital platforms make it difficult to detect misinformation and alert users about its spread.

Despite their efforts, digital platforms were criticised by some research participants for a lack of transparency. Digital platforms provide inadequate reporting on the scale of disinformation and misinformation and were not being transparent enough about what they are doing to manage them.

While the lack of consensus on definitions of online misinformation and disinformation among stakeholders makes it difficult to define proper strategies for addressing them, respondents agreed that a lack of engagement and collaboration between all stakeholders on the problem made it even more difficult to address the issue properly. These included policy makers, civil society, tech companies,

<sup>31</sup> Studdart, A. (2021). *Building capacity for civil society to mitigate and counter disinformation*. Countering Disinformation. <https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/csos/complete-document-civil-society>

<sup>32</sup> Ngwira, K. (2021, 13 January). Op. cit.

academia, grassroots community-based organisations and media groups.

## Conclusion

The study has revealed that online misinformation and disinformation are burgeoning in the country. While the two phenomena are not new, a number of factors have fuelled them: the unprecedented growth of social media usage; the involvement of mainstream media in spreading false information; the influence of politics on the media; and the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. The study has also found that online disinformation and misinformation have impacted on human rights and democratic processes and increased gender-based cyber violence and the repression of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, it found that despite various initiatives to address the challenge (including legislation and interventions by digital platforms), the lack of coordinated and collaborative efforts among stakeholders remains a problem. While substantial progress has been made to combat online misinformation and disinformation in the country, ongoing challenges remain clear. To address these ongoing obstacles, multistakeholder and multidimensional approaches are required.

## Action steps

Based on the findings of the study, the following multi-dimensional action steps are proposed:

- Improve media and information literacy: Empowering the users of platform services is a key element to increase the resilience of society to various forms of online misinformation and disinformation.<sup>33</sup> There is therefore a need to promote media and information literacy to counter online misinformation and disinformation. This will help users to navigate the digital media environment more effectively and identify online misinformation and disinformation when they occur. Actions for supporting media and information literacy programmes for people of all ages should be developed.

- Develop online tools for empowering both information users and providers: There is a need to develop tools for empowering users and information providers such as journalists to tackle online misinformation and disinformation and enhance positive engagement with fast and emerging digital technologies in the country.<sup>34</sup> Some examples of existing tools include Checkology, ClaimBuster, Fake Bananas, Botometer, Disinformation Index and NewsCheck Trust Index.<sup>35</sup>
- Strengthen transparency and accountability: There is a need to improve the transparency of online information sources, as well as the sources of funding that allow content to be developed. Fact-checking practices and initiatives need to be strengthened.<sup>36</sup> The lack of transparency among content developers may contribute to conspiracy theories, particularly if they are not willing to reveal their sources of funding and the way they operate. This in turn may lead to breeding online misinformation and disinformation.
- Promote research and development: There is a need to continue researching the impact of online misinformation and disinformation in Malawi, including reviews of the steps taken by different actors, in order to constantly encourage the necessary adjustments to responses.
- Protect the diversity and sustainability of the digital media ecosystem: This can be in the form of supporting actions that encourage press freedom and pluralism; the funding of projects that support quality digital journalism; and investing in research and innovative actions to improve technologies for online media services in the country.

33 European Commission High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation*. European Commission. <https://coinform.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/EU-High-Level-Group-on-Disinformation-A-multi-dimensionalapproachtodisinformation.pdf>

34 Ibid.

35 For more examples of tools see: Stellino, M. (2019, 24 January). 8 resources to detect fake news. *News Co/Lab*. <https://newscollab.org/2019/01/24/8-resources-to-detect-fake-news> and <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation/search.html>

36 Lubisi, N. (2021, 20 October). A multi-stakeholder partnership to combat disinformation. *Media Monitoring Africa*. <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/media-release-a-multi-stakeholder-partnership-to-combat-disinformatio>



## **DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD**

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

**GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH**  
2021-2022 Report  
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