Media Foundation for West Africa

The State of Mis/Disinformation, Polarisation and State Threat to Ghana

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The State of Mis/Disinformation, Polarisation and State Threat to Ghana

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Media for Peace and Social Cohesion

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Foreword

The information ecosystem is increasingly being polluted with mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, and state threat. The trend is pervasive and has grave implications for democratic governance, social cohesion, and national stability. Nowhere is this more evident than in the context of elections, where the integrity of information is a cornerstone of free and fair democratic processes.

This report provides a comprehensive examination of the status of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, and state threat to Ghana, particularly in the lead-up to the December 2024 elections. It brings to light the mechanisms, actors, and platforms that drive these narratives, as well as the impact on public trust in the media, political parties, and democratic institutions. By employing qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study captures nuanced perspectives from key stakeholders, including political party actors, journalists, civil society representatives, state institutions, and young people – the demographic most vulnerable to information disorder.

The findings of this research are timely. They reveal how political actors, media practitioners, social media influencers, and foreign entities have leveraged on digital platforms to propagate falsehoods, distort public discourse, and inflame tensions. The study highlights the instrumentalisation of social media as a vehicle for mis/disinformation and hate speech, erosion of trust in traditional media, and the broader implications of these trends on democratic consolidation in Ghana. It also underscores the role of foreign information manipulation and

interference (FIMI) in shaping political narratives in West Africa. This adds a new layer of complexity to the challenge of safeguarding information integrity and democratic governance.

Beyond diagnosing the problem, the report offers concrete recommendations for mitigating the harmful effects of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat. These include strengthening media information literacy, fact-checking mechanisms, depoliticising media platforms, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration to promote accurate and responsible information dissemination. The study makes a compelling case for collective action involving the media, political actors, civil society, technology firms, regulatory institutions and regional bodies to combat the rising tide of information disorder.

As Ghana continues to chart its democratic path, ensuring information integrity is paramount. This research serves as wake-up call and a roadmap for action. It is my hope that the insights and recommendations provided herein will guide policy discussions, inform strategic interventions, and contribute to a cohesive, resilient society, and democratic governance.

I commend the research team and reviewers for their diligence in producing this seminal work. I encourage stakeholders to engage the findings of the study, with the urgency and seriousness they deserve.

Sulemana Braimah
Executive Director
Media Foundation for West Africa

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full form
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
EC	Electoral Commission
CNN	Cable News Network
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
FIMI	Foreign Interference Manipulation and Information
MDI	Misinformation/Disinformation
MIL	Media Information Literacy
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
NCCE	National Commission for Civic Education
NMC	National Media Commission
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NDC	National Democratic Congress
US	United States
UN	United Nations

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Executive Summary

Information disorder and other public discourse misconducts pervert the will of citizens and undermine public trust in democratic processes and institutions. In Ghana, the surge in information disorder presents a formidable threat to democratic sustenance, including elections. This exploratory study sought to ascertain the state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives, and state threat to Ghana. This study further analysed the nature of the threat, and identified the key actors, platforms, and mechanisms for driving these threats. It also analysed the role of social media in the dissemination of these narratives. Again, the study assessed the impact of these narratives on public perception, information integrity, election integrity and democratic consolidation in Ghana. The study provided recommendations for mitigating these threats, and promoting fact-based public discourse.

A qualitative research approach was adopted with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as primary sources of data collection. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed to select the research participants. These included representatives from political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), and state institutions; and journalists, youthful voters, and academics selected from Tamale, Kumasi and Accra. The geographical selection of the study sites ensured a fair representation from the north, middle and coastal belts of Ghana. Geographically, the study focused on the selected regions due to the following reasons: The three regions are apparently considered as the epicentres of political contest and polarising narratives. Ashanti region has been the stronghold of the NPP. Greater Accra is the host of the national capital, where a lot of the national debate and discourses on governance take place on the big media outlets, which have significant influence across the country. The Northern region is ostensibly home to many of the inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts in Ghana, and thus quite fragile in terms of potential for violence and polarisation.

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that mis/disinformation,

hate speech, and polarising narratives are alarmingly prevalent in Ghana at all levels of public discourse – community, regional and national.

The phenomenon has become a constitutive part of political communication strategies of political parties, media, online content creators and malign foreign actors. The study reported some egregious incidence of hate speech. While political actors were the main spreaders and targets of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narratives; mainstream media practitioners, sensational social media content creators, and malign foreign actors are also culpable. These bad actors use social media and politically aligned mainstream media to mislead citizens, obfuscate public debate, and degrade public confidence in democratic processes and institutions.

The study recommended a holistic strategy to addressing the "wicked problem" of information disorder, hate speech, polarisation and state threat. Because the current measures such as fact-checking, pre-debunking and Media Information Literacy (MIL) are inadequate, the study recommended that platform owners and mainstream media owners are held accountable for public discourse misconducts on their platforms. Again, state actors and key collaborators should heighten MIL at all levels in order to counter information disorder and state threat. Also, media practitioners and media organisations—who are at the forefront of the information ecosystem—should continue to prioritise fact-based reporting and fact-checking to promote information hygiene, and preserve the integrity of Ghana's media system. Additionally, the study recommended regulation of social media by striking a balance between curbing mis/disinformation and freedom of expression online. Finally, the study reiterates the need to scale-up the existing interventions by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and other collaborators which seek to promote fact-based discourse and information hygiene in Ghana.

Figure 1: Map of Ghana showing study regions

1.0 Introduction

The state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat have become a global concern due to their potential to foment conflicts and violence. This is particularly due to the high rate and the speed at which information spreads through social media networks to entrench false beliefs in society[1]. The public has become more exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of these menace than ever. The phenomena poison public opinion and heighten division, especially when they are put out by political parties and public figures to achieve parochial interests.

Mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, propaganda and state threat are also common features of elections[2]. Stengel[3] emphasises the use of disinformation by political players for specific interests.

Election-related mis/disinformation undermines election integrity, freedom of expression and democracy. At the global arena, mis/disinformation have become a weapon in diplomatic and international relations; and in particular, as an instrument of political, economic and scientific warfare. For instance, several mis/disinformation campaigns including conspiracy theories have flooded the Russia and Ukraine war[4] and Israel-Hamas war.

Despite the alarm around the subject, there is significant public misunderstanding and confusion around the meaning of the concepts, as well as the gaps between popular perceptions and empirical findings on their prevalence. The terms: misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives and state threat share a common turf.

1 Cailin, O. & Owen, J., W. (2019). The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8jp0hk
2 Jowett, G., S. & O'Donnell, V. (2020). Propaganda & Persuasion (7th Edition). SAGE Publications Inc.
3 Stengel, R. (2019). Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation & what We Can Do about it. Atlantic Monthly Press.
4 Uluşan, O. & Özejder, I. (2024). Faking the war: fake posts on Turkish social media during the Russia-Ukraine war. Humanities & Social Sciences Communications, 11, 891.

Misinformation is false information, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true. Disinformation is false or untruthful information designed and shared intentionally to cause harm. Disinformation may morph into misinformation when false information created to deceive and harm (disinformation) is shared by people who do not realise that the information is false. Disinformation and misinformation are types of information disorder—an umbrella term for all cases of false information or harmful information[5].

There is no globally accepted definition for hate speech. However, the United Nations (UN) Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech offers a working definition. It defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group, on the basis of who they are. In other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor"[6].

Hate speech can also be referred to as any form of communication, written, verbal or non-verbal that insults a race, ethnic and political group(s) by suggesting that they are inferior or despised or any action that court hatred, contempt and discrimination against them[7]. For example, the dominant ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulbe (Fulani), Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria use derogatory terms such as "traitors, kidnappers, illiterates, terrorists, saboteurs" against each other, while in Ghana, "the Akan ethnic group may feel superior and use derogatory terms against minority ethnic groups from the other parts of the country." While hateful conducts are precursors of violence and crimes, they are equally inimical to social cohesion and peaceful co-existence.

The popular understanding of polarisation is bimodal distribution of views on an issue or issues along two opposite ends of ideological spectrum[8]. While it is likely to have two opposing views on every topical issue, there is an emergent trend in public discourse where people take deep entrenched positions. This is particularly evident

5 Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking. Council of Europe.
https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666
6 United Nations (UN) Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech offers a working definition.
7 Ezeibe, C. (2021). Hate Speech and Election Violence in Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56(4), 919-935. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620951208
8. McLay, R., & Ramos, H. (2021). Do polarization narratives apply to politics on the periphery? The case of Atlantic Canada. Frontiers in Sociology, 6, 655880.

during elections and the trend is becoming the bane of democracies and election integrity.

State threat manifests through threats to the security burden of the state including critical infrastructure, national interests, human security, information security and interference in the democratic values of a country. Such threats are largely pursued by malign actors of foreign governments through several means such as espionage, cyber-attacks, information pollution, and negative influence on democratic processes of the country.

These developments create doubt and reduce trust in institutions including news media outlets and political parties[9]. Literature reveal that the more one is exposed to mis/disinformation, polarising narratives and state threat, the likelihood of losing trust and credibility in the institution of governance and mass media. For example, "in South Africa, those who perceive they are more exposed to fake news also report lower levels of trust in the media"[10]. The combined effects of mis/disinformation, hate speech, and state threat produce polarised narratives which disproportionately poison the media ecosystem, and democratic governance.

9. Fawzi, N., Steindl, N., Obermaier, M., Prochazka, F., Arlt, D., Blöbaum, B., Ziegele, M. (2021). Concepts, causes and consequences of trust in news media – a literature review and framework. Annals of the International Communication Association, 45(2), 154–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1960181

10. Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An Exploratory Study of "Fake News" and Media Trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. African Journalism Studies, 40(1), p.14. 107–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1627230

2.0 The African/Ghanaian context of mis/disinformation, polarisation and state threat

Mis/disinformation and polarising narratives have become a common phenomenon in the public sphere, especially in relation to political and economic governance. Studies on Africa including Ghana have shown that social media has led to a growing threat to democratic consolidation, peaceful conduct of elections and transfer of power[11]. According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies,[12] mis/disinformation campaigns on the Africa continent have quadrupled since 2022. It concludes that, "there is a direct link between instability and proliferation of mis/disinformation as a fundamental challenge to stable and prosperous African societies". Mis/disinformation is a threat to democratic values and freedom of expression.

Globally, there is an increasing concern about the use of social media and mis/disinformation during elections[13]. Political parties and actors compete not only on ideologies, but on propaganda to win populist votes[14].

11. Akinyetun, T.S., Odeyemi, D. D. & Alausa, J.A. (2021). Social media and electoral violence in Nigeria: Sustainable Development Goal 16, a panacea? KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(2), 169-194

12. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. (2024). Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. Available; https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in- africa/. (Access; August 29th 2024)

13. Gwala, N. (2019). Information communication technologies and electoral Violence in Africa. Kenya case study. Retrieved from; https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/1e8ea0c3-44fa-41d1-8e4a 89fc4d089e98/content. See also Judge, E. F., & Korhani, A. M. (2020). Disinformation, digital information equality, and electoral integrity. Election Law Journal, 19(2), 240-262; Eisenstat, Y., Hendrix, J. & Kreiss, D. (2024). Preventing Tech-Fueled Political Violence: What online platforms can do to ensure they do not contribute to election-related violence. Available; https://citap.pubpub.org/pub/preventing-tech-fueled-political-violence/release/4 (Accessed; August 26, 2024).

14. Ayoung, D., A, Baada, F., N. & Bugre, C. (2022). 'Curbing fake news: A qualitative study of the readiness of Academic Librarians in Ghana'. International Information & Library Review, DOI: 10.1080/10572317.2022.2046438. See also Kwode, P. A. K. (2022). Fake news and political propaganda in the public sphere: Aanalysis of the Ghanaian media. Covenant Journal of Communication, 9(2), 2354 – 3515; Demilie, W., B. & Salau, A., O. (2022). Detection of fake news and hate speech for Ethiopian languages: A systematic review of the approaches. Journal of Big Data. 9(66), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40537-022-00619-x

This is exacerbated by the presence of social media, and in some instances, politically affiliated mainstream media. Judge and Korhani[15], for example, observe that mis/disinformation leads to conflicts and disrupts elections, thereby leading to questions around the integrity of the electoral process.

Ghana is not immune to mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives and state threat. Evidence shows that elections provide a prime opportunity for mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarisation. Politicians take advantage of elections to spew propaganda messages.[16] The United Nations, Ghana[17], observed an increase in hate speech and abusive campaign rhetoric in the media during the 2024 elections.

Likewise, Thompson, Agbaglo and Yakub[18] revealed the use of abusive language against some presidential candidates and the Electoral Commission (EC) during the 2016 elections in Ghana. The authors further revealed that some media outlets; particularly, online portals seem unconcerned about publishing hate speech on their mediums. The 2024 elections in Ghana presented unique dynamics, and were expected to be crucial. As 2024 elections drew closer, the NPP and the NDC begun internal party elections. Bye-elections were held by the Electoral Commission. These elections were keenly contested with reported cases of hostilities. While the NPP sought to retain power with the sitting Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, the NDC sought to regain power with former President John Mahama. The Northern region was expected to witness intense political activity and mobilisation, because for the first time in Ghana's history, the Presidential candidates of the two main parties, the NDC and the NPP were both from the North. Additionally, political party commentators scrambled to control political discourse by attacking

15. Judge, E. F., & Korhani, A. M. (2020). Disinformation, digital information equality, and electoral integrity. Election Law Journal, 19(2), 240-262.
16. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. (2024). Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. Available; https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in- africa/. (Access; August 29th 2024). See also Kwode, P. A. K. (2022). Fake news and political propaganda in the public sphere: Ananalysis of the Ghanaian media. Covenant Journal of Communication, 9(2), 2354 - 3515.
17. United Nations Ghana (2024). Countering hate speech and misinformation. UNESCO kickstarts regional trainings for journalist ahead of 2024 elections. (Access; August 24, 2024).
18. Thompson, R. G. A., Agbaglo, E., & Yakub, M. (2024). "…you were reared": Response Comments on Verbal Attacks in Political Discourse on GhanaWeb. Emerging Media, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/27523543241267960

information hygiene. They ostensibly deployed propaganda and polarising narratives to sway public opinion and decisions of the electorate. Additionally, social media platforms were saturated with information disorder. And posturing by some hostile states on information integrity and election integrity was likely.

Several actors were therefore apprehensive as the phenomena of mis/disinformation, polarisation and state threat could place security burden on the country's peace architecture. Given the heightened political tensions and increasing prevalence of the menace, it was essential to understand the state of these threats and their potential impact on information and election integrity, peace and democratic consolidation in Ghana.

3.0 The rationale for the study

Ghana has made significant strides in maintaining a relative stable democracy since 1992, characterised by peaceful transfer of power across nine successful elections. This achievement is particularly noteworthy given the politically hostile environment of neighbouring countries; earning Ghana an international admiration. A key factor in this success has been the active role of several actors including political parties, civil society, media, state institutions, private sector and development partners in contributing to ensuring credible elections, peace and development

However, this progress has not been without challenges. Sporadic incidents of election-related violence continue to pose threats to the country's democratic stability. Also, the civic and governance space is inundated with rising prevalence of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and threat by malign state actors. The United Nations, Ghana[19], highlights the severity of these issues, emphasising the potential threats to peace, stability and community resilience.

Addressing the spread of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives and state threat was crucial to information integrity, election integrity, peace and democratic consolidation in Ghana. Various initiatives were launched to mitigate the challenge. Notable efforts includeed, MFWA's skills-enhancement for journalists and political parties to fact-check and counter mis/disinformation, polarising and extremist narratives and state threat ahead of the 2024 elections.[20]

19. United Nations Ghana (2024). Countering hate speech and misinformation- UNESCO kickstarts regional trainings for journalist ahead of 2024 elections. (Access; August 24, 2024).
20. Media Foundation for West Africa (2024). MFWA builds capacity of journalists on fact-checking ahead of Ghana 2024 elections. (Retrieved from https://mfwa.org/issues-in-focus/mfwa-builds-capacity-of-journalists-on-fact-checking-ahead-of-ghana-2024 elections/ (August 24, 2024).

However, few studies have provided evidence-based solutions to addressing the phenomena. Besides, there is dearth of empirical study on the dynamics and trend of mis/disinformation, polarisation and state threat to Ghana, as well as multiplicity of actors involved with various modus operandi.

This study aims to fill this research gap with a primary objective to establish the current state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat to Ghana. The study also proposed recommendations to dealing with the menace.

The specific research objectives were to:

1. Describe the state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives and state threat in Ghana.
2. Identify the key actors, platforms, and mechanisms driving these narratives.
3. Analyse the role of social media and other digital platforms in the dissemination of these narratives.
4. Assess the impact of the narratives on political parties, media, public perception, information hygiene and democratic consolidation in Ghana
5. Provide recommendations for mitigating these impacts, and promoting fact-based discourse in Ghana.

4.0 Methodology

This qualitative exploratory study used in-depth personal interviews and focus group discussions to collect primary data. Participants included representatives from political parties, civil society organisations, media, state institutions, youth and interest groups as well as expert opinions. The respondents were identified through purposive sampling and snowballing techniques. A total of 57 respondents were selected through this sampling strategy. The approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the issues from the participants' point of view.[21]

In consistent with qualitative methodology,[22] the study's goal was not to draw a representative sample for generalisation, but rather, a manageable sample for detailed exploration of the phenomena under investigation. A summary of the study sample is presented in Table 1, while the detailed description is shown in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Summary description of study sample

Category of research participants	Sample size
Civil society organisations	2
State actors	3
Journalists	15
Academics	2
Youth	20
Political party representatives	15
Total	57

Source: Field Data (2024)

21. Neuman, W., L. (2014). Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. (7th Ed.). Pearson and Education Limited.
22. Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches. (5th Ed.) Sage.

Political parties are one of the primary actors of content generation on governance and source of information to the public. Journalists disseminate information to the public and therefore, play a major role in influencing public policy and opinion. The CSOs keep an eye on the civic space, and public policies and so, possess pertinent knowledge on information integrity. The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and the National Media Commission (NMC), as state actors, are mandated by Article 231-230 and 166-173 of the Constitution of Ghana, 1992, respectively, to uphold democratic values through civic education and high journalistic standards. The National Peace Council (NPC) is also mandated by Act 818, 2011 to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts and to build sustainable peace. Academics in many ways, have expert opinions on national issues. And the youth make up the largest bracket of content generation and consumption of information. They are also vulnerable and often exposed to offensive public discourse and information disorder, particularly on social media.

4.1. Data collection

The study relied on primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were obtained through expert interviews and focus group discussions. An interview guide was developed to reflect the thematic focus of the study. The interview guide contained 15 questions, and the guide for the focus group discussions had six questions.

The interview guide focused on the following structured themes: a) the demographic features of the interviewees, b) the state of information disorder and offensive public discourse, c) the key actors involved in spreading information disorder and engaging in offensive discourse, d) the role of social media in information disorder, e) content analysis of information disorder, particularly in relation to elections, and f) recommendations for addressing the menace. These themes were used for data analysis, presentation, interpretation and discussion of the results of the study.

Interviews were used to collect data from academics, political parties, CSOs, academic and state actors while the focus group discussions were used to collect data from the youth (age 18 to 35 years), and journalists. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted online and in-person depending on the preference of respondents. In-person interviewees

were conducted in Tamale, Kumasi and Accra from 10 September 2024 to 29 October 2024. The interviews lasted for 25-35 minutes. The focus groups discussions were conducted in Tamale and Accra and lasted for between 65 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with prior consent of the respondents.

The secondary data were obtained from the reports of the GhanaFact, Fact-Check Ghana and Dubawa Ghana. These reports helped to fact-check election claims related to mis/disinformation during the 2024 elections. The secondary data covered the period 4th to 11th December, 2024. This period marked the heights of the elections, covering events before, during and after the elections. Mis/disinformation seemed timely and strategic during this period. The data analysis focused on election-related claims or assertions that have been fact-checked with a final verdict as either "false" or "misleading" claims made during the elections.

4.2. Data analysis

A thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is "a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis".[23] According to Braun and Clarke,[24] "it is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data." The research adopted a thematic analysis approach because it is flexible and can be modified. This enabled analysis of the data from different perspectives relative to the subject matter under study. Thus, providing "a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data".[25] The analysis began with transcribing the interviews, coding, and categorising the codes into themes. Themes were deductively selected based on how they helped answer the research questions of the study.[26]

Before the data analysis, the data were processed by transcribing verbatim, the audio recordings into text. The verbatim transcription was done manually by listening to the audios and transcribing

23. Fawzi, N., Steindl, N., Obermaier, M., Prochazka, F., Arlt, D., Blöbaum, B., … Ziegele, M. (2021). Concepts, causes and consequences of trust in news media – a literature review and framework. Annals of the International Communication Association, 45(2), 154–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1960181
24. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
25. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
26. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

them. This allowed the voices of the interviewees to be representative in the data and the results of the study without distortion. The transcripts were then sorted according to the thematic areas of the research to address the specific research objectives. The data collected were analysed using thematic process to identify patterns and trends in the spread of mis-disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives and state threat. Through this, emerging themes were developed and analysed.[27]

A total of 14 sub-themes emerged from the analysis. The sub-themes include: the negative impact of mis/disinformation, hate speech, and polarising narratives on the political environment; the influence on political actors; political competition; escalation and institutionalisation; the role of politicians and media; and social media amplification. These sub-themes were converted into nine major themes for analysis. These are: a) state of mis/disinformation and hate speech in Ghana; b) election heightens mis/disinformation and hate speech; c) politicians as the driving force of mis/disinformation; d) malign foreign actors use mis/disinformation to meddle in Africa politics; e) public trust in media, democracy and politicians erodes; f) social media fuels disinformation and hate speech; (g) media and journalists accused of mis/disinformation; (h) hate speech as mis/disinformation-divisive animal; and (i) recommendations.

27. Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 24*(1), 1-6. DOI: 10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Additionally, the analysis focused on understanding the motives and intents behind these narratives, the role of digital platforms, and the impact on public opinion and political stability. The analysis comes in the form of infographics and manuscript to make it user-friendly. Table 2 illustrates the themes.

Table 2: Themes for analysis

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Major Theme 1: State of mis/disinformation and hate speech in Ghana	• Negative impact on the political environment, and media • Influence on political actors and media
Major Theme 2: Election heightens mis/disinformation and hate speech	• Duo-poly and excessive political competition • Escalation and institutionalisation
Major Theme 3: Politically-driven forces of mis/disinformation	• Role of politicians and journalists
Major Theme 4: Foreign and malign actors use mis/disinformation to meddle in Africa politics	• Politicians and influential figures/politically exposed persons· • Community, online content creators, social groups and journalists
Major Theme 5: Public trust in media, political parties and democracy erodes	• Erosion of trust in political authorities, institutions and the media • Increased political tensions and disinformation
Major Theme 6: Social media fuels mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narratives	• Social media amplification

Major Theme 7: Media and journalists accused of mis/disinformation	• Weak media regulation, fact-checking and pre-debunking
Major Theme 8: Hate speech as mis/disinformation-divisive animal	• Absence of legal framework • The role of political parties and the media
Major Theme 9: Actionable recommendations	• Balancing free speech, social media and regulation • The role of regulatory bodies • The role of political parties, media, religious and community leaders, CSOs, government and regional bodies • Media information literacy • Fact-checking

Source: Authors Construct (2024)

Additionally, a qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the secondary data. The goal of the content analysis was to ascertain the prevalence and the focus of election-related mis/disinformation claims.

The content analysis was based on data from the fact-check reports generated by the Ghana Fact-Checking Coalition—a collaboration among three fact-checking organisations (GhanaFact, Fact-Check Ghana and Dubawa Ghana) to fact-check election claims which contributed to monitoring information integrity of the 2024 elections. The units of analysis were the fact-check reports on elections related to mis/disinformation, generated by the Ghana Fact-checking Coalition from 4th to 11th December 2024. Although the broad concept of mis/disinformation was deduced from the project headline, the descriptors of it from the coalition's reports constituted the codes, which were inductively developed for the content analysis. The reports were perused to identify words and texts of claims related to mis/disinformation during the elections. These codes were presented in tables, descriptively showing content categories and corresponding frequencies, and rates in numbers and percentages respectively presented in Table 3 (page 30).

5.0 Results and analysis

The findings showed multifaceted issues surrounding mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat to Ghana. The findings also focused on platforms, the nature and actors involved. The analysis also highlighted how disinformation and hate speech have been weaponised in the political and media environment. The analysis also offered insights into potential strategies for mitigating their impact. The findings were synthesised with available literature in relation to mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat.

5.1 The state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, and polarisation to Ghana

The study discovered that mis/disinformation could be segmented into four kinds: political disinformation, scientific disinformation, economic disinformation and religious disinformation. Political disinformation is at an ascendancy, particularly during elections. It is a world-wide menace and Ghana is not an exception. Economic disinformation is becoming common in Ghana because of attempts to go cashless. As a result, scammers have taken advantage and use people's images and other fraudulent means to scam innocent ones in several ways. Religious disinformation fuels existing tensions and hate speech. Because loyalty and devotion to certain religion could make one susceptible to certain beliefs and messages.

The study found out that, the state of mis/disinformation is becoming a common phenomenon. Its continued dissemination in the public sphere has the tendency of creating hatred and dislike for groups and individuals who are victims of those narratives. Hate speech and mis/disinformation are predominant in the political landscape. In the past, mis/disinformation was not a troubling issue, but in recent times, it has increased in great magnitude due to excessive partisanship and polarised media. Mis/disinformation and hate speech have become the order of the day because, they feed into the duo-poly and excessive partisan politics that tend to divide, rather than, unite. The modus operandi of the creators of this content is to target opponents and followers, in order to pollute and skew their minds towards a certain direction. This makes it a useful tool, particularly in the hands of political parties and the media. *"Thus, when people are*

manipulated, their perceptions are also manipulated, particularly those who possess low digital and media literacy. Information pollution therefore sow confusion to influence public opinion". (Interview H, Oct. 08, Accra).

Another respondent indicated: *"This phenomenon cuts across several spheres. This has not been a new thing. Collectively, across political divides, we have a daunting task to deal with, because the phenomenon could lead to hate, and hate could plunge the country into violence and conflict" (Interview A, Sept. 14, Tamale).*

This assertion is confirmed by Matanji et al. [28], who indicated that falsehood in African politics and media is prevalent. The ecosystem is polluted with mis/disinformation and non-truth. They attributed the situation to the control of the media by government and ownership by some political actors.

5.2 Elections as peak of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarisation

The study revealed that the spread of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narratives are heightened during elections. This is confirmed in this excerpt: *"I think it's been very intense. The quests for political power have raised tensions, especially during this election year. There are a lot of people sponsoring and targeting people just to dent them, so that they can reduce their pedigree in the eyes of the voters" (Interview C, Sept. 07, Accra).* Mis/disinformation and hate speech often carry political undertones. They are weapons often used by politicians, media and other malign actors both local and foreign. The threat is assuming alarming proportions despite efforts aimed at reducing it. *"I do think that the election season has exacerbated mis/disinformation. It is fully incorporated into electioneering and used frequently by political parties. No week passes by without somebody refuting information that was untrue or stamping on it and saying this is fake news. It looks like the political actors have appropriated mis/disinformation and hate speech as part of a strategy for their campaign, or for political communication in the 2024 elections" (FG1, Oct. 15, Tamale). Some respondents are of the view that mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarisation could affect the electoral integrity and Ghana's democracy.*

28. Matanji, F. Tully, M. Mudavadi, K., C. Diop, L.& Madrid-Morales, D. (2024). Media Literacy and Fact-Checking as proactive and reactive responses to misinformation in Kenya and Senegal. African Journalism Studies. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2024.2401782

"If mis/disinformation and polarising views are allowed to fester around the electoral process, particularly the independence of the Electoral Commission, you will know that the moment the election results are announced, people will begin to say, why should we trust this outcome when we have seen a lot of mis/disinformation moving around the electoral process. Such perception can deepen public mistrust in the Electoral Commission. And losers of the elections will not accept the results and may choose violence to fight their cause" (Interview C, Sept. 07, Accra).

Mis/disinformation is even more worrying when it is targeted at elections. Interviewees expressed dissatisfaction about how politics is destroying the cultural heritage of Ghana. It is now common to witness young people openly castigating, scolding and ridiculing the elderly, old enough to be their parents, just in the name of politics. This growing culture is breeding ground for mis/disinformation and hate speech.

Literature indicates a direct relationship between mis/disinformation and election-related violence. Judge and Korhani[29] opined that mis/disinformation lead to conflicts because it disrupts fair elections, leading to questions around the integrity of the electoral process. In some cases, social media has threatened the stability of countries during elections and transfer of political power.[30] Addressing mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarisation is crucial to responding to election-related violence,[31] and building citizens trust in state institutions, including political parties, the Electoral Commission and the media.

5.3. Actors, platforms, and mechanisms driving polarising narratives in Ghana

5.3.1 Politicians as driving force of disinformation

Political actors and politicians have become creators and disseminators of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narrative, because they profit from them. As creators of mis/disinformation, they plan tactfully to destroy their political rivals or counter mis/disinformation that has been generated from or by their opponents. This is made easier with the presence of social media which spread mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising views faster and cheaply. The involvement of political parties in the manufacturing of mis/disinformation was reiterated by this respondent: *"The phenomenon is rampant because of the emergence of social media. As I stand here, as soon as I give out any false information, those in Accra will be sharing it, even those outside Ghana in the next couple of minute. It means it has become too easy for us to spread mis/disinformation globally" (Interview B, Sept. 14, Tamale).*

29. Judge, E. F., & Korhani, A. M. (2020). Disinformation, digital information equality, and electoral integrity. Election Law Journal, 19(2), 240-262.
30. Akinyetun, T.S., Odeyemi, D. D. & Alausa, J.A. (2021). Social media and electoral violence in Nigeria: Sustainable Development Goal 16, a panacea? KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(2), 169-194
31. Akinyetun, T.S., Odeyemi, D. D. & Alausa, J.A. (2021). Social media and electoral violence in Nigeria: Sustainable Development Goal 16, a panacea? KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(2), 169-194

Another respondent indicates that, "political parties are culprits because they would want to win power at all cost" (Interview C, Sept. 07, Kumasi). Thus, the combined effects of social media and politically affiliated mainstream media makes it easier for mis/disinformation to thrive.[32]

A respondent noted: "On the top of my list is smear campaigns we see which are targeted at politicians, but also targeted at public figures, and those who play significant roles in the public spaces or part of those who hide behind content creators. This unfortunately pollutes the public sphere and poison the minds of their audience." (Interview D, Sept. 07, Kumasi).

5.3.2 Media and journalists as conduits of disinformation

The research findings also indicated that, the media which is supposed to serve as the fourth estate of the realm and hold duty-bearers accountable and responsible is neck-deep in mis/disinformation and polarisation. "Some media houses are seen to be sponsors or official partners of some political parties. And if you are an official partner, it means you start to gain when that political party wins an election. And because of this interest, some media houses and journalists are equally propagating the spread of mis/disinformation" (Interview E, Sept. 07, Accra).

Concerns were also raised about the ownership structure of mass media which have countervailing effects on the independence of the media. A respondent indicated that, "We are aware that in this country, we have stations that are affiliated to or for the NDC and the NPP. So, in doing the bidding of their political parties, they contribute to the spread of mis/disinformation and polarising narratives" (Interview D, Sept. 07, Kumasi). Other respondents expressed regret about the practice of journalism in Ghana. Some journalists are complicit by not cross-checking information before publication, thus contributing to the menace. This posturing affect fact-based reporting and journalism on national issues.

During the focus group discussions, the journalists partly admitted the blame of disseminating mis/disinformation and polarising views. Some say, *"Because we are in hurry to ensure that the news*

32. Demilie, W., B. & Salau, A., O. (2022). Detection of fake news and hate speech for Ethiopian languages: A systematic review of the approaches. *Journal of Big Data*. 9(66), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40537-022-00619-x

is trending so that people will say; this news, first, came from this media house; the issue of credibility, doesn't come in anymore. This culture contributes to information overload and the spread of mis/disinformation" (FG2, Oct. 27, Accra).

The quest for competition and the rush to break the news in order to stay competitive, results in sloppy journalism which create trouble for mainstream media. To mitigate the situation, Matanji et al.[33], suggest the need to equip journalists with skills and fact-checking news stories to mitigate dissemination of mis/disinformation. Also, section 208 of the Criminal and Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29), (Amendment) (Act 1101), and Section 76 of the Electronic Communication Act, 2008 (Act 775) criminalise dissemination of false information. Though some advocates of press freedom have condemned these legal provisions as infringements on free expression, they still remain laws and have been used to punish some citizens and journalists in Ghana.

5.3.3 Shifting blames on bloggers, influencers and politicians

In a focus group discussion, journalists shifted the blame of mis/disinformation on bloggers, influencers and politicians who they believe are behind most of the disinformation produced to achieve political agenda. *"The advent of the new media has opened the media space for virtually everyone to participate in producing and disseminating information across the space. Many of these bloggers and influencers do not have professional training in journalism, yet they are participating in disseminating news with sensational headlines. And most of these stories are fake just to draw traffic to their blogs in order to make money" (FG1, Oct. 15, Tamale).*

They further indicated that, the two major political parties; the NPP and the NDC, engage cyber battalions who churn out mis/disinformation and polarising narratives for propaganda purposes. It appears these parties are usually competing over who can spread more fake content and hate speech in the public sphere. This is made quite easier by the partisan political media ownership and platforms for spreading mis/disinformation. Again, public figures; celebrities such as actors, actress, and musicians; and social media influencers are equally guilty of spreading mis/disinformation or are target of mis/disinformation. Some of

33. Matanji, F. Tully, M. Mudavadi, K., C. Diop, L.& Madrid-Morales, D. (2024). Media Literacy and Fact-Checking as proactive and reactive responses to misinformation in Kenya and Senegal. African Journalism Studies. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2024.2401782

Some of these actors push pure propaganda and false narratives to advance their parochial agenda.

5.3.4 Mis/disinformation as entry points for foreign actors to meddle in African politics

Mis/disinformation, polarisation and state threat have garnered notoriety for security concerns in Ghana and other countries in West Africa with many analysts calling for drastic measures to curtail the security threat.[34] At the global arena, mis/disinformation and polarisation have become weapons in diplomatic and international relations, and in particular, as an instrument of warfare. This includes economic, security and scientific warfare. The warfare between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Hamas, and US and China and the role of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories are visible. This has implications for peace, community resilience and democratic consolidation in the Global South, including Ghana. The phenomenon is a tool which heighten fear, hate speech, polarisation and conspiracies to disadvantage opponents.[35]

The study established that mis/disinformation and polarisation are used by malign actors including some foreign interest groups, and in some instances, nation-states to influence policies and decisions, and warfare in the Global South, especially in Africa. The study revealed that the political uprisings that occurred in recent years in the Sahel and part of the Francophone West African region were infiltrated by foreign political powers. Such foreign influence is commonly described as FIMI.

The findings confirmed FIMI as an entry point through which foreign agencies interfere and penetrate into Africa nations. This quotation illustrates this understanding: *"So you might think that on a surface, the uprising in the Sahel region is politically motivated, or is about a social issue, or an economic issue? Underneath, is a foreign entity manipulation, or an authoritarian movement that is moving an agenda that you are unaware of. They use people on the ground and existing issues within countries to aggravate issues to their advantage. A lot of the unrest that*

34. Myjoyonline.com. (2024). Bawumia cautions security agencies to guard against misinformation, disinformation. Available; https://www.myjoyonline.com/bawumia-cautions-security-agencies-to-guard-against-misinformation-disinformation/ (Accessed; 25th August, 2024).
35. Uluşan, O. & Özejder, I. (2024). Faking the war: fake posts on Turkish social media during the Russia-Ukraine war. Humanities & Social Sciences Communications, 11, 891.

have gone on in Francophone West Africa have been fuelled by foreign entities who are using information manipulation and interference" (Interview H, Oct, 08, Accra).

Literature indicates that some powerful nations are often alleged to be actors and targets of mis/disinformation campaigns. For instance, while Russia and China have been accused of using covert and overt tactics including mis/disinformation to influence public opinion and assert their power in Africa and other parts of the world, France have become a victim of mis/disinformation and anti-Western sentiments.

A CNN investigation uncovered alleged Russian bot farms set up in Ghana and Nigeria to target audience in the United States ahead of the 2020 presidential elections".[36] Also, Russia is alleged to have meddled in international politics through information disorder where they contaminate and pollute the public sphere of foreign countries with deceptive and disinformation campaigns to their advantage.[37]

This suggests that mis/disinformation are not only applied by local political actors and media, but also, used as a conduit for international political interference into nation-states by international superpowers.

5.4 The role of generative platforms

The study found out that new technologies have democratised information dissemination to the extent that everybody has some form of power to push information to the public. And the algorithms decides who gets popularity or who's post goes further. There is now generative AI (Artificial Intelligence). And the extended reality is that, when all the social media platforms and tools converge, they centralise social web; the immersive media, where information disseminated shape people's thoughts, both false and factual information. *"It is difficult to track generative AI and the spread of information disorder. The trend is not getting any better, especially in Africa where there is little or no form of regulation or moderation for these new platforms" (FG2, Oct. 27, Accra).*

36. Lyammouri, R. & Eddazi, Y. (2020). Russian interference in Africa: Disinformation and mercenaries. Policy Center For the New South, 20-60

37. Madrid-Morales, D. Wasserman, H. & Ahmed, S. (2024). The Geopolitics of Disinformation: Worldviews, Media Consumption and the Adoption of Global Strategic Disinformation Narratives, International Journal of Public Opinion Research. 36 (3), https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edad042

The phenomenon is not peculiar to Africa. In Philippines (Asia), during the 2022 elections; it was discovered that politicians including governors, congressmen and mayors hired consultants to spread disinformation in their favour. This was carried out through identity theft on Facebook and other social media platforms. The report was corroborated by the BBC as follows: "We got the top politician's cell phone number and image to photoshop, then sent out a text message pretending to be him, saying he was looking for a mistress. Eventually, my client won".[38]

5.5 Mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarisation as divisive animal

Some respondents expressed great concern that the presence of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narratives are divisive and could plunge the country into disorder if efforts are not made to curb them. As political parties disseminate hate speech and mis/disinformation, opponents are targeted more frequently. This creates breeding grounds to nurse violence thoughts with the tendency of attacking opponents. Mis/disinformation is also sometimes spew at religion and ethnicity. When people are hurt due to hateful comments or hate speech, they sometimes, incite Christians against Muslims and vice versa, which create polarisation and undermine social cohesion. "We are Christians, we are Muslims, if we try to incite the two religious groups, it does not create social harmony and community resilience". (Interview B, Sept. 14, Tamale). It is the considered view of the respondents that such actions create psychological problems for families and breeds ethnic and religious animosity. They are also dangerous for inter-faith harmony and the country's democracy.

Religious mis/disinformation is not peculiar to Ghana. In Ethiopia, politicians and religious leaders take advantage of their dominant presence in the media to foment hate speech campaigns against the Tigray people by labelling them as enemies of Ethiopia, while declaring support for the Ethiopian National Defence Forces.[39]

38. BBC (2022). Philippine Election: 'Politicians hire me to spread fake stories'. Available; https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-61339293 (Accessed; 18/10/2024).
39. Nigussie, H. Kiflu, G. & Desta, B. (2024). Echoes of violence: Analysing hate speech in the Ethiopian broadcast media. Journal of Communication Inquiry. 1(21)

Likewise, in Nigeria, hate speech was responsible for ethnic conflicts leading to civil war in 1967-1970. The dominant ethnic groups of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo used derogatory terms such as traitors, kidnappers, illiterates, terrorists, saboteurs and cowards to describe each other.[40] Similarly, "hate speech credited to the Nigerian elites is aimed at raising sentiments among members of a particular ethnic or religious groups and political parties during elections. The ultimate goal is to win political support and sympathy along divisive lines".[41] The relative peace-loving nature of Ghanaians should spur them on to live above reproach by exhibiting maturity in their utterances on campaign grounds before, during and after the elections to ensure the sustenance and stability of democracy.

5.6 The role of social media and other digital platforms in disseminating mis/disinformation, polarising narratives and state threat

Social media promotes rapid dissemination of mis/disinformation, hate speech and polarising narratives. Respondents described "social media as the most dangerous technology in the 21 century used in propagating all manner of negative content." Technology and social media platforms have the tendency of igniting warfare. The study established that social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), and TikTok are commonly used to propagate mis/disinformation, polarisation and inciteful narratives. The modus operandi of content creators on these digital platforms; with the aid of AI, text, images and videos, are able to target population with the speed of light. This is corroborated by Tulin et al.[42], emphasising that social media boost mis/disinformation through algorithm amplification of false content for economic gains. It leaves the audience vulnerable to mis/disinformation. In order to combat the menace, the European Union for example, has enacted the Digital Services Act to regulate major digital platforms.

40. Ezeibe, C. (2021). Hate Speech and Election Violence in Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56(4), 919-935. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620951208
41. Ezeibe, C. (2021). Hate Speech and Election Violence in Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56(4), 919-935. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620951208
42. Tulin, M. Hameleers, M. Talvitie, C. & de Vreese, C. (2024). How can journalists strengthen their fight against misinformation in a changing media landscape? Journal of European Television History & Culture. 13(25).

6.0 The impact of mis/disinformation and polarisation on citizens trust in political parties and the media

6.1. Erosion of public trust in the media, political parties and democracy

The study found out that public trust in the political parties and the media has declined. Both the journalists and politicians seem alike and are spewing narratives that do not address the core challenges affecting the ordinary citizen. The study established that many people, instead of watching television or listening to radio during political discussions, rather resort to mobile phones or the internet to gratify their media needs. Some respondents indicate that mis/disinformation and hate speech have affected public trust in democracy and institutions. A respondent said, *"The phenomenon contributes to weaken the political system and political culture. It weakens our forward march towards democratic consolidation, especially if such narratives are championed by major stakeholders such as politicians and journalists. "People feel as if it's a political game. It affects trust, integrity, belief and hope people have in democracy and in* political institutions (Interview I, Oct. 14, Accra). It is a cause for worry since it has the tendency to breed negative behaviours.

Another respondent reiterated the need to revisit national conversation around regulation of social media, as well as the proposed law in 2016 that sought to standardise media platforms; stressing that, *"In 2016, we passed a law called Content Standards in Electronic Communications (LI 2224). The essence of this law was to ensure that anybody who owns a network regardless of whether it's a broadcasting network or a social media network or a communication platform, took steps to ensure that their systems were not subject to manipulation" (Interview K, Oct. 29, Accra).* The law was targeting platforms and media owners to be responsible to ensure that their contents were also responsible. However, the law was overturned by the Supreme Court because people thought it was against freedom of expression.

As a result of mistrust for mainstream media and the need to control social media during electioneering, some governments have resorted to censorship, shutting down internet and online surveillance as state-centric approaches in dealing with content moderation.[43] In South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, it was discovered that trust in mainstream media and social media has reduced due to concerns of fake news and disinformation in the public sphere. This is causing various governments in the continent to take counterproductive measures at curtailing the rising dissemination of harmful content in the media.[44]

43. Garbe, L., Selvik, L. M., & Lemaire, P. (2023). How African countries respond to fake news and hate speech. Information, Communication & Society, 26(1), 86–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994623
44. Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An Exploratory Study of "Fake News" and Media Trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. African Journalism Studies, 40(1), 107–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1627230

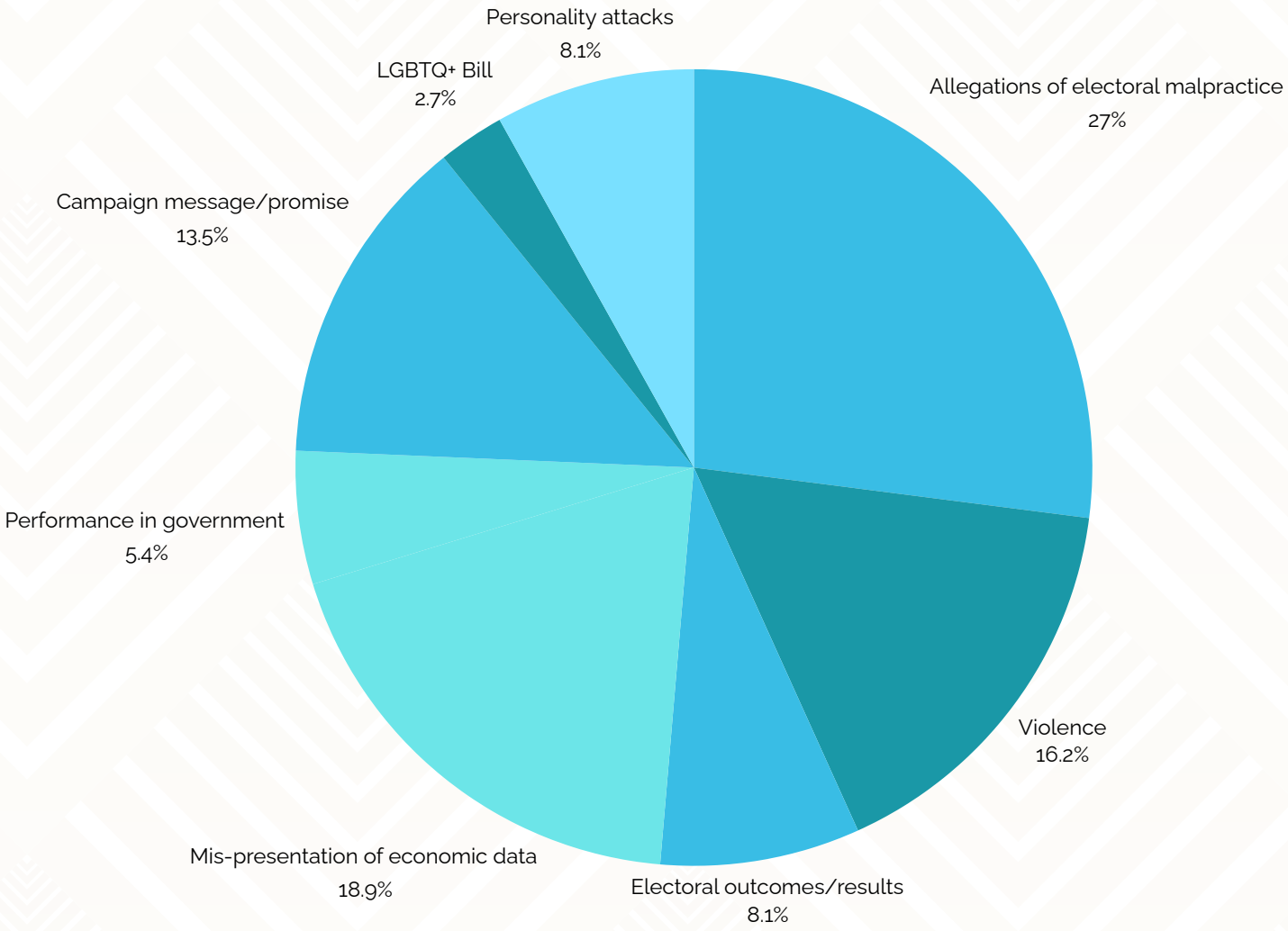
7.0 Content analysis on mis/disinformation in the 2024 elections

Eight content categories were identified in the report, which described election-related mis/disinformation. These content categories were analysed in frequency and percentages as presented in Table 3. Eight codes of content categories were identified which described and represented mis/disinformation (false and misleading claims of information) by political figures in the forms of alleged electoral malpractices, violence, and outcomes/results. The categorisation also included propaganda on government performance, mis-presentation of national economic data, false campaign messages/promises, mis/disinformation on LGBTQ+ Bill, and personality attacks on political figures.

Table 3: Distribution of content categories of mis/disinformation

Coded category of mis/disinformation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Allegations of electoral malpractice	10	27.0
Violence	6	16.2
Electoral outcomes/results	3	8.1
Mis-presentation of economic data	7	18.9
Performance of government	2	5.4
Campaign message/promise	5	13.5
LGBTQ+ Bill	1	2.7
Personality attacks	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

Source: Based on Fact-Checking reports (2024)


Personality attacks
8.1%
LGBTQ+ Bill
2.7%
Allegations of electoral malpractice
27%
Campaign message/promise
13.5%
Performance in government
5.4%
Violence
16.2%
Mis-presentation of economic data
18.9%
Electoral outcomes/results
8.1%

Disinformation on electoral malpractices is often used to misinform supporters of political party to lose trust in the integrity of electoral processes and results. The allegations can spread fast to cause confusion and disruption of the electoral processes; and perhaps, rejection of electoral results by political actors during elections if not checked. This was observed from the content analysis as clearly shown in Table 3 that, most (27%) of the disinformation that surfaced during the election was "allegations of electoral malpractices". The allegation exemplified election rigging syndicate. For example, on 4th December 2024, a claim emerged about an "NPP Rigging Syndicate." On the same day, another assertion surfaced that "the NDC flagbearer was planning to rig the elections." Both claims turned out to be false. Disinformation of allegations of electoral malpractices, using election rigging strategy, is a direct and an easy way of calling on the losing parties and their supporters to reject the final verdicts of elections. Such posturing could mar the integrity of the elections process and final results.

Misrepresentation of economic data is also used as a form of propaganda to disinform electorate and the public to discredit performance and competence of government, political parties and some personalities. Disinformation of economic data dominated during the elections. This could mislead voters as shown on Table 3. For instance, on 5th December, it was falsely reported that the Debt-to-GDP Ratio under Mahama-led government, NDC was 56%. Similarly, on 8th December, a claim emerged that the NPP was leaving power with Cedi-Dollar Exchange Rate of 13.8%. These claims were also dismissed as False. Improvement in economic performance is usually part of campaign promises of political parties. Sometimes information can be concocted and misrepresented to disinform the public as part of campaign messages of political parties during elections. In addition, the use of political violence claims against opposition parties and electorate during elections can mislead political parties and their sympathisers to discredit the integrity of elections. As displayed in Table 3, there was significant disinformation about electoral violence (16.2%), which was fact-checked and proven as false and misleading. Situations like this, if not factchecked early enough, could spark violent reactions from the grieving parties and their supporters to destroy the integrity of the elections.

The results of the content analysis further revealed a high rate of campaign promises of 13.5% as disinformation. The claims were factchecked as false and misleading. High rates of occurrences of misinformation during the elections, and other content categories identified in the fact-checked reports on disinformation, were incidents which represented the performance of government (5.4%), the anti-LGBTQ+ bill (2.7%), and personality attacks (8.1%).

Although these may seem insignificant, they could have an influence on reducing the integrity of the electoral process and results.

Overall, the content analysis suggest that mis/disinformation was a tool and strategy used by political parties and supporters to influence the integrity of the electoral process, and results of the December 2024 elections in Ghana.

8.0 Conclusion

This study explored the state of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarised narratives and state threat to Ghana. The study also sought to describe the nature and identify key actors, platforms, and mechanisms driving these narratives. Again, the study analysed the role of social media and other digital platforms in the dissemination of these narratives. It also assessed the impact of these narratives on public perception and trust in the political parties and the media, and potential for election-related violence and implication for democratic consolidation. Finally, the study offered recommendations for mitigating the menace and promoting fact-based discourse across divergent groups.

The findings indicate that mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarising narratives, and state threat are rife in Ghana. It is mostly peddled by political actors, media and influencers with the aim of influencing public discourse for propaganda purposes. The study also discovered that mis/disinformation can be categorised into four kinds; political disinformation, religious disinformation, economic disinformation, and scientific disinformation. Economic disinformation is becoming common in Ghana because of attempts to go cashless. Religious disinformation fuels existing tensions. Political disinformation is the currency in Ghana, particularly during elections. This assertion remained the case during the 7th December, 2024 elections. In all of these, those most targeted are persons with low media and digital literacy, and younger generations.

The study also discovered that mainstream media with political affiliation are guilty of disseminating mis/disinformation and hate speech with impunity. Most of these media houses appear not to be aware of or have little or no knowledge of ethical codes guiding their conducts, while owners of these media enjoy the unprofessional conduct.

Social media is seen as the basic instrument of mis/disinformation and hate speech. Respondents described social media as the most dangerous technology in the 21st century used in propagating all manner of negative content. This has the tendency of igniting information pollution and

information warfare. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X(Twitter), and TikTok were identified in leading dissemination of this poisoned content. With the aid of AI and bots, the new media quadruples the spread of these narratives near and wide. As these developments grow, public sentiments and trust in the mainstream media, political parties, political authorities and state institutions continue to erode. Citizens do not believe every information disseminated, especially by the mass media and political parties as the truth, unless a second opinion confirms it. The trust deficit undermine information integrity, election integrity and democratic consolidation.

It was revealing that not only local actors have interest in manufacturing mis/disinfromation to advance their parochial interests. But foreign entities and malign agencies equally take advantage of the cyber space to disrupt stable nations through information warfare and information disorder. Literature reveals that Russia and China have been taken advantage of new technologies to influence foreign politics, and in some instances, engaged in mis/disinformation to influence the media ecosystems and policies abroad, particularly in the Global South. It came to light that the political uprisings that occurred in the Sahel and within the Francophone West African regions were infiltrated by foreign influence, known commonly as, FIMI. The infiltrations of FIMI is also carved around elections and electoral politics. This is a global threat to democracy, information hygiene, election integrity, peace, social cohesion and building community resilience that must be fought fiercely, else we risk backsliding democratically and peacefully.

9.0 Recommendations: mitigating disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, and state threat

The study makes the following recommendations to mitigate mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat to Ghana:

a. Depoliticisation of media platforms: All key actors should institute protocols, standards and sanction regime to depoliticise political discourse on the airwaves. The owners of media organisations should ensure that those they recruit to media stations are professional and without political bias.

b. Media Information Literacy: Media, media organisations, political parties, CSOs and community-based organisations, NCCE and NMC, are encouraged to carry out continuous media literacy to equip the population with knowledge and technological skils to identify fake contents as strategies of mitigating them.

c. Community outreach and sensitisation on harmful effects of mis/disinformation: All key actors including political parties, peace institutions, regulators, media organisation, CSOs and religious bodies should intensify their role in carrying out educational and socialisation programmes, particularly targeting the youth who are most vulnerable, and sensitise them about the harmful effects of mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and state threat.

d. Institute fact-checking desk in newsrooms for fact-based reporting: The media is encouraged to set up fact-checking desks to support fact-based reporting. Media organisations and fact-checking organisations should equip media with fact-checking training and skills.

e. Networking, joint programming and mis/disinformation advocacy: There is the need for similar organisations to form networks against mis/disinformation, polarisations, hate speech and state threat at vertical and horizontal level, both in-country and at the regional level.

f. Strengthen gatekeeping policies and protocols to flag inflammatory content: Technological firms, and social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, WhatsApp and other platforms should take measures to flag mis/disinformation, hate speech, and polarising narratives before it gets to the public. Algorithms should be integrated into these platforms to flag unacceptable content by fact-checking them.

g. Government should be decisive to regulate the tech firms: Government should take decisive action against tech firms and media houses if they allow their platforms to be used capriciously to spread mis/disinformation and polarising narratives. Tech firms should be regulated just as it is currently happening in the Global North. Likewise media content should be regulated and sanctioned regimes introduced and implemented.

h. Social media regulation: Both state and non-state actors should revisit the national conversation on the regulation of social media; but in doing so, they should strike a balance between free expression and censorship, and promoting a congenial civic space for governance and freedom of speech.

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Appendix 1

List of respondents and their organisations/political parties

	Respondents	Organisations/Parties	Region
1	Communication Officer	National Democratic Congress	North East
2	Vice Chairman	New Patriotic Party	Upper East
3	Women Organiser	National Democratic Congress	North East
4	Organiser	Convention People's Party	Northern
5	Director of Communication	New Patriotic Party	Northern
6	Secretary	Convention People's Party	Northern
7	Communication Officer	National Democratic Congress	Savannah
8	Women's Wing	National Democratic Congress	Northern
9	Communication Director	New Patriotic Party	North East
10	Communication Director	New Patriotic Party	Upper East
11	Communication Team Member	New Patriotic Party	Ashanti

12	Second Vice Chair	Convention People's Party	Ashanti
13	Director, Conflict Resolution	National Democratic Congress	Central
14	Communication Officer	National Democratic Congress	Western
15	Deputy Communication Officer	New Patriotic Party	Eastern
16	Director of Communication	New Patriotic Party	Greater-Accra
17	Communication Team Member	New Patriotic Party	Western North
18	Regional Vice-Chairman	New Patriotic Party	Ahafo
19	Regional Women's Organiser	People's National Convention	Greater Accra
20	Head of Programmes	Penplusbytes	Greater Accra
21	Correspondent	Business & Financial Times	Northern
22	Editor	Ghana Broadcasting Corporation	Northern
23	Reporter	Daily Graphic	Northern
24	Editor	Zaa Radio	Northern
25	Reporter	Diamond FM	Northern

26	Chief Reporter	Ghana News Agency	Northern
27	Associate Professor/Academic	University of Media, Arts and Communication	Greater-Accra
28	Executive Secretary, National Media Commission	National Media Commission	Greater-Accra
29	Lecturer, Political Communication	University of Media, Arts and Communication	Greater-Accra
30	Director of Programmes	National Commission for Civic Education	Greater-Accra
31	Programme Team Lead, Fact-Check Ghana	MFWA, Fact-Check Ghana	Greater-Accra
32	Reporter	Ghana News Guide	Greater-Accra
33	Reporter	National Enquirer	Greater-Accra
34	Journalist	Fact-Check Ghana	Greater-Accra
34	Investigative Journalist	The Fourth Estate	Greater-Accra
35	News Editor	Daily Statesman newspaper	Greater-Accra
36	Youth groups	Mostly unemployed	Northern & Greater-Accra
37	Executive secretary	National Peace Council	Northern

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