

African reflections on social media and elections

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The fragility of many democracies in Africa comes to a head at times of elections. Recent polls year in [Gabon](#) and [Sierra Leone](#) have been a prelude for power grabs.

But it could get worse for the role of elections as legitimate and enduring peaceful conflict-resolution mechanisms. This is in a scenario of social media and AI-powered “disinformation-for-hire” becoming more ubiquitous, meaning that the 20 African elections scheduled for 2024 could be in for a rough ride.

Some help is coming, however, thanks to the [Association of African Electoral Authorities](#). The body itself was a recent victim of its website being hacked, highlighting one of the digital threats that Election Management Bodies (EMBs) nowadays need to anticipate.

More broadly, electoral-related hate speech and disinformation on social media are high among other threats to African elections. A further problem is where online threats are given fuel by the platform companies’ algorithms and automated micro-targeted ad models.

The AAEA has been driving an initiative to provide its circa 40 members with Guidelines for dealing with the anticipated digital challenges.

I’ve been a member of the technical working group drafting the Guidelines, including joining a consultative workshop to comment on the Guidelines, hosted in the African Union building in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in September. That event was [supported by the South African government](#).

The Addis event heard from South Africa’s Independent Election Commission which led the process for the AAEA, that [40 responses were received on a draft of the Guidelines from 47 EMBs](#) that had been approached for comment.

The meeting itself heard oral inputs from reps of more than a dozen individual EMBs, many of whom also provided written feedback. It also received a joint statement from the 16-member Electoral Commissions Forum of the SADC.

Leading African editors, NGOs active in election support, UNESCO and UNDP, and African Union Commission officials took part, as did staff from Google, Meta and TikTok. No surprise that that X (formerly Twitter) failed to respond to the invitation to join the occasion, although its service will be on offer across the continent’s elections.

Relatedly, the Addis meeting discussed the challenge for each EMB in trying to contact and negotiate with powerful and distant social media companies. Some speakers called for continent-wide endorsement of the AAEA Guidelines and mechanisms for communication that could remedy this situation.

Tanzanian MP [Neema Lugangira](#), Chair of the [African Parliamentary Network on Internet Governance](#) called specifically for the Guidelines to highlight that EMBs should press the platforms to do more against attacks on women in politics. She also said that EMBs should ensure the companies had sufficient capacity to moderate malignant electoral content in local languages.

Another guidance issue at the workshop was the importance of companies demonstrating to EMBs that they had conducted human rights impact assessments and taken appropriate risk mitigation measures ahead of the election.

For their part, the big tech representatives urged the Guidelines to be more normative than regulatory in tone, and said that it would also be technically complex if they had to respond to EMB calls to change algorithms considered to be giving prominence to election-harmful content.

As regards electoral contenders, EMB representatives encouraged the Guidelines to cover codes of conduct that should discourage politicians and their supporters from expression that could harm elections, and several EMB representatives urged that such codes should include sanctions. The media attendees urged that EMBs speak out when journalists were denigrated.

The Guidelines initiative takes it as a given that a free, fair and credible election is a human right, and – in addition - one that depends on there being respect for other rights - such as expression and association, both online and offline.

The significance of this point is that violations of these other rights during an election cannot be separated from the fundamental right to political participation.

EMBs are advised in the Guidelines that for any restriction of electoral-related rights to be justifiable, this would need to meet the “3-part” test in international standards – namely, be imposed a legitimate purpose such as public safety, be demonstrably necessary and proportional for this purpose, and be authorised by law.

Limits on electoral rights that do not meet all three criteria put in jeopardy the integrity of the poll.

A common refrain in the Addis workshop was that the Guidelines do not substitute for law or regulation concerning social media and elections. Further, it was stressed the Guidelines will also need to be adapted and operationalised for the different national contexts.

A recognised challenge is the lack of capacity and budgets in many EMBs, with the risk that the Guidelines become just another wishlist. In this context, the value of EMB multi-stakeholder partnerships – like the [South African Real411](#) with civil society and big tech– was presented as one way to redress EMB constraints. There are now plans to “socialize” the Guidelines in countries facing elections.

After the Addis meeting, there were further tweaks of the Guidelines before their [finalization and adoption by the AAEA assembly](#) in Benin in early November. Among other points, the final version gives much attention to addressing online attacks on women. There are also important points on:

- Internet disruptions and shutdowns in elections – EMBs and big tech companies are encouraged to speak out against these all-too common threats to electoral integrity;
- The need for all stakeholders to address falsehoods that aimed at attacking electoral officials and trying to discredit EMBs’ management of the poll;
- The need for proactive communication by EMBs to avoid information vacuums on social media which facilitate disinformation;
- The importance of EMBs in building the public’s media and information literacy about dynamics on social media which can harm or affirm electoral integrity;
- Encouragement for social media to share data with researchers, civil society, fact-checkers and EMBs in order to detect and monitor threatening online narratives;

- The importance of credible news media in a context where the provenance and verifiability of much other content is dubious.

If taken up, the Guidelines can help EMBs to assert their mandate and their authority vis-à-vis both political – and social media owners. If so, the integrity of elections and related information environment can be protected. In turn, that can help sow the seeds for peace and political accountability through and beyond polls.

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Prof Guy Berger's work on digital issues and elections includes:

Inputs into UNESCO's [Elections in digital times: a guide for electoral practitioners](#) (2023)

Inputs into UNESCO's [Media and elections in digital times](#). (2019) Summary [here](#).

Participant and co-organiser. "[Improving the communications and information ecosystem to protect the integrity of elections](#)", Colloquium organised by UNESCO and Global Network Initiative, Paris. 8 February (2018).

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