

**ROTARY PEACE CENTER**

**DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND PEACE STUDIES COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES MAKEREREUNIVERSITY**

**TITLE: TACKLING INFORMATION DISORDER IN ZIMBABWE-REIMAGINING MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN THE POST TRUTH ERA.**

**LOCTION: BULAWAYO AND HARARE, ZIMBABWE**

**START DATE: JULY 2021**

**END DATE: NOVEMBER 2021**

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**A SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE (SCI) REPORT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF MAKERERE UNIVERSITY**

**DECEMBER 2021**

**DECLARATION**

**I, Thomas Sithole, do hereby declare that “Tackling Information disorder in Zimbabwe-Reimagining media and democracy in the post truth era.” is entirely my original unaided work, except where acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted before to any other University or institution of higher learning for the award of any academic qualification.**

**Signed……………………………… Date…………………………….**

**Thomas Sithole , ROTARY PEACE FELLOW**

**APPROVAL**

**This Social Change Initiative (SCI) report has been approved for submission to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences by the University Mentor and Supervisor after having thoroughly read through its contents.**

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**CONTENTS PAGE**

**ABSTRACT 3**

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction and Background 5**

**Problem Statement 9**

**Goals and Objectives 12**

**Challenges and mitigation strategies 13**

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Literature Review 15**

**Theoretical Underpinnings 19**

**Change theory and how it was applied 23**

**Methods and Design 25**

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Interventions and Activities 27**

**Key Findings 34**

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**General Conclusion 36**

**Recommendations / implications for Policy 37**

**Sustainability plan 40**

**ABSTRACT**

Information disorder is having an absolutely corrosive impact on the institutions and norms that enable democratic governance and is posing an existential threat to democracy. The impact it has on prospects for democratic development is an urgent matter for those involved in strengthening democratic institutions. Ideally, in a healthy democracy, citizens and policymakers can draw from a common set of facts to deliberate and make decisions. In an era where information disorder is so prevalent, democratic progress and order is threatened by faulty information—conspiracies, lies, half-truths, distortions, and propaganda.

Most worryingly, information disorder is a significant force that can undermine democracy and good governance, free and fair elections, access to information, rule of law, protection of human rights, independent media, and civil society action. Critical to every aspect of good governance, information integrity enables political parties, CSOs and citizens to debate and share ideas, concerns, and solutions. It opens opportunities for citizens to influence public policy dialogue.

Around the world, information disorder is spreading and becoming a more complex phenomenon based on emerging techniques of deception. It undermines human rights and many elements of good quality democracy; but counter-information disorder measures can also have a prejudicial impact on human rights and democracy. COVID-19 compounds both these dynamics and has unleashed more intense waves of information disoder allied to human rights and democracy setbacks. Effective responses to information disoder are needed at multiple levels, including formal laws and regulations, corporate measures and civil society action. Many governments around the world have begun crafting policies and legislation that are meant to curb this scourge. In doing so, they can draw upon best practice from around the world that tackle information disorder through a human rights lens

It has become clear that to tackle the problem, interventions, both big and small, are needed. One temptation is to try to fix the problem through regulation, and many countries are choosing this route, but freedom of expression advocates warn that this could hurt the openness and participation that new technologies have enabled. Particularly if authoritarian-minded leaders come to office, they will find a powerful and ready legal weapon at hand to determine what is “fake” and what is not regarding any critical coverage of their performance.

New media provides a major platform to engage society, promote debate, civic values, and democratic participation in an environment that strengthens human rights, cultural diversity, science, knowledge and rational decision-making. This social change initiative employs citizen and public engagement interventions like summits, symposia and workshops to explore information disorder in its various forms. It also leverages on available literature to further interrogate this scourge. Using Zimbabwe as an example, key findings have been used to inform recommendations with regards tackling this ravaging scourge.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction and background.**

The UN’s Culture for Peace Initiative depends greatly on participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge. The original UNESCO document stated that freedom of opinion, expression and information is needed to replace the secrecy and manipulation of information which characterise the culture of war. The free flow of information is essential to a well-informed society.

Accurate and well-distributed information underpins the free market, improves human capital, provides transparency of government decisions, and improves judicial and government decisions. The free flow of information is an attempt to account for the degree of access to information as well as the independence of that information from vested political and economic interests. In this respect, freedom of the press is also helpful in countering corruption, as greater transparency can provide a means for increasing the oversight of resource distribution by the media. Therefore, the media can be a powerful partner for the construction of a culture of peace. Its technological advances and pervasive growth have made it possible for every person to take part in the making of history, enabling a truly global movement for a culture of peace. On the one hand, it is essential for the consciousness-raising and networking that can make the transition possible from the culture of war to a culture of peace, especially in the hands of the young generation.

On another side, however, the media is sometimes misused to create and disseminate enemy images, violence and even genocide against other ethnic and national groups, and to portray and glorify violence in many forms. The control of information by the state and its commercial allies has become the chief weapon of the culture of war. Also, secrecy is on the increase, justified in terms of national security and economic competitiveness, whereas in fact more transparency is needed in governance and economic decision-making.

Some governments around the world are using the negative impact of the sharing of these often inflammatory and harmful messages to craft draconian laws with heavy penalties. They claim they are fighting against the rise of information disorder. What is actually spurring them is their fear of criticism, which is translating into legislation that shuts down critical voices, especially those of CSOs, media practitioners and journalists wanting to hold power to account.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental value of open democratic societies. The information received by citizens must be varied and verifiable to enable them to form an opinion on the issues that affect them in their lives. However, the deliberate, large-scale and systematic spread of information disorder seriously endangers democracy and poses a huge challenge to unity, peace and security at community, national, regional and global level. This intervention is an attempt to comprehensively examine information disorder and its related challenges. While the historical impact of rumours and fabricated content have been well documented, contemporary social technology or new media means that we are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these ‘polluted’ messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers, communities etc. The direct and indirect impacts of information disorder are difficult to quantify. Since the results of the ‘Brexit’ vote in the UK, Donald Trump’s victory in the US and Kenya’s recent decision to nullify its national election result, there has been much discussion of how information disorder is influencing democracies. More concerning, however, are the long-term implications of information disorder campaigns designed specifically to sow mistrust, disunity and confusion and to sharpen existing sociocultural divisions using nationalistic, ethnic, racial and religious tensions.

The term “information disorder” was coined by Wardle (2017) to describe the broad societal challenges associated with misinformation and disinformation on the digital landscape and in real-life circumstances. Mis-, dis- and mal-information contribute to the pollution of our evolving information ecosystem. Disinformation is the false or misleading information that is deliberately spread with an intent to cause harm or damage. Misinformation is the unintentional spread of false or misleading information shared by mistake or under a presumption of truth, whereas malinformation describes the malicious use of factual infor­mation to cause harm or damage.

Information disorder is neither new nor unique to the modern day. It has been a favoured tactic of those seeking to influence the outcome of world events; foment division; justify violence against racial, ethnic, or other groups; or push back against facts and evidence that are driving change. Today, augmented by technology, those same tactics have evolved: with even greater reach and velocity. Contemporary manifestations of information disoder have raised concern about the quality and credibility of news and information circulated via mainstream and new media platforms across the globe (Chadwick and Vaccari 2019, 14; Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo 2019; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). In Africa, for instance, what information disorder has ravaged electoral, social and cultural processes with devastating consequences. Although “fake news” is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it has been recalibrated and amplified by the mass permeation of new media platforms and smartphones into ordinary people’s everyday lives. Evidently, the spill-over effect of the amplification of “fake news”, especially through digital media technologies, has negatively affected the reputation of mainstream media organisations and digital-born start-ups. This has contributed towards information disorder where misleading and false information and narratives are deliberately weaponised for political, cultural and economic gain. The transformation of the public sphere has led to a situation where journalists are no longer the only curators of verified and credible information. In other words, the actual existing communication ecologies in Africa and beyond have been invaded by what some scholars have termed “citizen” journalists (Moyo 2009). Although the usage of the concept “citizen journalism” has become fashionable in mainstream literature over the past decade, there is a realisation that on a continent where dual political identities coexist (citizen versus subject) as theorised by Mamdani (1996), its usage is no longer associated with transformative and democratic potential. The argument here is that political identities, such as citizen and subject which were constituted through indirect rule during colonialism and apartheid, continue to rear their ugly head in “post-colonial” Africa. As a result, not everyone is privileged enough to enjoy the rights of a “citizen” because others still occupy political identities of “subjects”, with limited rights to speak truth to power, especially in authoritarian, heteronormative and patriarchal societies. Buoyed by former United States President Donald Trump’s arbitrary deployment of the term “fake news”, politicians in some African countries have appropriated it in their political rhetoric as a way of rationalising and legitimising their disproportionate clamping down on media and internet freedom in general (Mare 2020a). This problematic concept has also been used to justify the passage of draconian cyber-security and data protection laws and the implementation of unnecessary and disproportionate state-ordered internet shutdowns (Ayalew 2019; Mare 2020a). Even more daringly, some politicians have also deployed this floating signifier as a stigmatising label used to critique anything that they do not agree with which is circulating in the public sphere. As intimated earlier, this unprecedented information disorder has tended to take advantage of heightened periods of political contestation, such as electoral seasons, service delivery protests, natural disasters and military coups. During these periods, news and information appealing to fear, emotion and pre-existing ideological orientations often have a ready audience. Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe have witnessed an upsurge in the production and distribution of “fake news” via new media, mainstream media and popular forms of communication during specific moments in history. Most research thus far has focused on the complicit role played by new media platforms in the production and dissemination of “fake news” in different social contexts. As Tsfati et al. (2020, 157) observe, “thus far, only limited attention has been directed to the role of mainstream media in the dissemination of disinformation, misinformation and fake news”. Be that as it may, anecdotal evidence posits that traditional/mainstream media platforms are not entirely innocent of these invasive weeds. In highly polarised contexts, traditional media platforms have been implicated in the process of systematically amplifying “fake news” on behalf of their political and economic handlers. The weaponisation of “fake news” by ruling and opposition parties in some African countries has contributed to the normalisation of media polarisation. In such authoritarian media systems, the press becomes the battleground for the circulation of “fake news”, propaganda, half-truths, fabricated stories and concocted lies aimed at manufacturing the necessary illusions and winning the hearts and minds of the electorate during elections (Mare 2020b). Thus, the public press has assumed the role of the chief purveyor of government and ruling party propaganda in some African countries.

Similar to “fake news”, propaganda has existed since time immemorial; however, the advent of digital media technologies has seen it being digitised (Howard and Bradshaw 2018). Although scholars use the term “cyber-propaganda” (Howard and Bradshaw 2018, 23), it is noteworthy to highlight that this corrosive phenomenon is part and parcel of what Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) call “information disorders”. Instead of using the popularised term “fake news”, Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) argue that continuing with that tradition is not only self-defeating but also contributes towards the over simplification of a very complex problem. As part of this crisis of information disorder, scholars in Asia and Europe have looked at the role of “cyber-troops” (also referred to as troll armies, cyber-brigades, keyboard warriors, etc.) in the production and distribution of fake news and propaganda. Cyber-troops are government, military or political-party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over new media (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, 4). These “fake news” producers and distributors take advantage of their unfettered access to mainstream and new media platforms to manipulate public opinion. Through the strategic deployment of cyber troops and bots, research (Howard and Bradshaw 2018; Mare 2020b) has shown that governments, political and civic actors across the world are occupying social and mainstream media platforms to generate content, direct opinion and engage with foreign and domestic audiences. In some contexts, cyber-troops have targeted opinion leaders, including prominent bloggers, [investigative] journalists, opposition politicians, human rights defenders and activists in their coordinated smear and character assassination campaigns. In this special issue, Chibuwe reflects on the strategic recruitment of “Nerorists” and “Varakashi” by the ruling and opposition parties during the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe.

**Problem statement**

Information disorder has become an increasing concern in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. With the state of the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly evolving in all facets, the vaccination debate has become increasingly polarized and subjected to a form of politics based around identity markers such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and ideology. At the forefront of this is the COVID-19 anti-vaccination movement that has gained mainstream attention, leading to conflict with pro-vaccinationists. This has paved the way for exploitation by subversive elements such as, foreign state-backed information disoder campaigns, alternative news outlets, and right-wing influencers who spread false and misleading information, or disinformation, on COVID-19 in order to promote polarization of the vaccine debate through identity politics. Information disorder leads to the erosion of social cohesion as well as the potential for real-world conflict and violence. This intervention will generate further understanding of the modern-day spread of information disorder, the strategies and tactics utilized by state and non-state actors, the effects of its exposure, and the social-psychological processes involved in its spread and resonance. Furthermore, in countering this phenomenon, this intervention recommends a collaborative framework involving emphasis on critical media literacy skills, citizen participation, and development of counter-offensive capabilities.

Violent conflict is on the rise, and increasingly, new media is playing an important role: political actors have used new media to target critics with disinformation , misinformation and malinformation while COVID-19 infordermic spread online has spurred hate speech against stigmatized groups. Current off-line and online approaches and tools to address these challenges seem insufficient to the task. Moreover, there are real dangers inherent in some current responses, such as exposure of human rights defenders to attack and restrictions on speech by governmental authorities. Peacebuilders are increasingly addressing new media harms alongside other conflict drivers, but it remains a relatively new area of peacebuilding. However, there are lessons to be drawn from recent experience. Given that sources of conflict, whether actors or drivers, may originate in the off-line space, both off-line and online approaches and tools are necessary to address new media’s role in conflict. This initiative explores the ‘weaponization’ of new media and peacebuilding responses to it. While it explores some examples and highlights some innovations, it does not catalogue new media’s various impacts on conflict or serves as a reference guide to digital tools. Rather, it attempts to explore an emerging consensus with regards information disorder and its challenges, and very practically, what approaches are effective or promising. New media, which was once heralded as a force for freedom and democracy, has come under increasing scrutiny for its role in amplifying information disorder, inciting violence, and lowering levels of trust in media and democratic institutions.

The digital age has given and amplified peoples’ voices and enhanced access to information. At the same time, it is an era of information disorder characterised by misinformation and disinformation particularly during major political events like elections and mass protests. The trend has intensified with increased use of digital technologies as a result of the gradual collapse of the traditional media and the popularisation of new media platforms. In Zimbabwe, the polarised media environment is fertile ground for the proliferation of false news that is spread through Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The misgivings about the mainstream media exacerbate the situation. The state controlled media is said to uncritically report on the government and ruling party activities while the private media is inclined towards the opposition and also self-censor for fear of harassment or arrests. The information void created by such an environment forces people to rely on new media for news which is mostly taken as truth. Citizen journalism also contributes to spread of false news as there is no editorial responsibility for fact-checking and quality control that is found in traditional mainstream media. While misinformation and disinformation are prevalent on new media, mainstream media is also not spared as some journalists now rely on new media without exercising due diligence. In Zimbabwe, during the election period in 2018 false news spread regarding the role of the army, polling stations, vote buying and other election related matters. Also, during the anti-government protests in January 2019, protestors were subjected to police brutality and the government shut the internet. During that period misinformation and disinformation escalated to the extent that it became difficult to ascertain the impact of the police brutality and identification of the victims.

Since the establishment of the modern nation-state of Zimbabwe, the state has exercised various restrictions on media through licensing laws and censorship, but with the rise of new media as a transmitter of news, digital platforms have far outstripped the traditional formats; the newspaper, radio and television are no longer the sole sources of information. At least six million people are estimated to have access to the internet in Zimbabwe. Facebook and WhatsApp dominate the market share followed by Twitter and YouTube. With their phenomenal growth, new media platforms in Zimbabwe, have become an outlet for some citizens to vent frustration at the state and to mobilise for civil action against an economic or political issue. However, new media also has its dark side. Due to the restrictive laws governing the media and the use of the internet, Zimbabwe is ranked as partly free by the Freedom House On The Net report. In 2018 and out of 100 countries, Zimbabwe was placed 53rd. With more users making use of the instant nature of new media and the cover of anonymity it gives, it has also become a tool to target public figures. As a country, Zimbabwe is sharply divided along political lines, split between supporters of the ruling Zanu-PF party and supporters of opposition parties, key among them the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This polarisation traces its roots back to Zimbabwe’s founding leader, Robert Mugabe, who had a desire to create a one-party state. As leader of the nationalist liberation movement Mugabe pushed the idea of singularity. “We have had the philosophy of a one-party state for a very long time. It’s an African philosophy,” he said. Throughout the decades of his rule, voices of opposition were crushed and, despite the rise of multi-party democracy in the late 1990s, the one-party ideology remained strong. The peak of Zimbabwe’s political crisis came in the 2000s with the formation of the MDC which, made up of trade unionists, activists and lawyers, challenged the Mugabe regime but was violently crushed by state security units and also the ruling party’s youth league. The state-sponsored violence of the 2000s and prior ethnic massacres of the 1980s, which resulted in the military’s killing of at least 20,000 civilians in south-western Zimbabwe, created resentment and division between those who were ‘with’ the liberators, Zanu-PF, and the ‘sell-outs’ who supported any opposition party. The deep-seated trauma of past political violence and economic collapse of the 2000s has deeply divided people. The continued allegations of vote-rigging and disputes over election outcomes has deepened divisions. And despite President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s promise of a ‘new dispensation’ after the de facto coup against Robert Mugabe in November 2017, Mnangagwa’s increasingly authoritarian and militarised approach to governance in a tough economic and pandemic environment has also entrenched people’s political standings and this is played out in online debates over issues or in character assassinations of public figures. Human rights defenders, activists, opposition political parties and dissenting voices have been the main victims of online vitriol and slander. Although the state has also moved to draft strict laws regulating usage, they seem to be more focused on safeguarding the state rather than protecting individuals from the braying, digital mobs.

This intervention on information disorder and its impact on civic engagement and democracy is timely because the country (and continent) is part of a global village and uniquely interwoven in the global political economy agenda and more so during the covid 19 crisis. This initiative will thus not only pioneer a debate on information disorder but will also endeavor to trigger learning institutions such as universities to remodel their media (and journalism) curricula and launch researches around this challenge with potentially positive policy recommendations and effects.

Further to this, the intervention will not only offer stakeholders the opportunity to reflect, share and learn about information disorder in relation to democracy, unity, peace and security but will also throw policy makers at the center of the new media law-making debate especially at a time Zimbabwe authorities are working on the Cyber Security, data private security and freedom of information Bills. In addition to this, the intervention will ignite debate on the country’s (new) media landscape beyond Access to Information and Personal Privacy Act (AIPPA) and Public Order and Security Act(POSA) which pieces of legislation have been described as draconian and fascist by some political commentators. It shall be noted that these laws are increasingly being used to infringe on citizen’s rights and shrink their civic space during the current pandemic/covid 19 crisis.

**Goals and Objectives.**

Tackling information disorder in the post news era in Zimbabwe became a very ambitious social initiative whose main goal was to make a strategic intervention towards a free, inclusive, democratic and open society where citizens enjoy their rights and actively participate in matters of public concern. Democratisation of the media as a fourth estate remains a critical undertaking by state and non-state actors alike. In this intervention, the writer working in collaboration with KAS, the USA Embassy and Zimbabwe Centre for Media and InformationLiteracy (ZCMIL), convened government, media, civil society, academia and business to have constructive engagement on the country’s media policy reform agenda with a view of taking stoke of the second administration’s performance in the media policy sphere. The symposium scrutinised government’s commitment or lack of it and also served as a platform to advocate for and propose progressive and innovative media policies by proffering best practice orientated recommendations.

**Goal**

* To take stoke of the Zimbabwe media policy reform agenda with a special focus on the performance of the new dispensation.

**Objectives.**

This intervention looked at the following objectives.

* To take stoke of the Zimbabwe media policy reform agenda with a special focus on the performance of the new dispensation.
* To hold power to account with regards media policy reform or lack of it.
* To interrogate and propose relevant media regulatory mechanisms for Zimbabwe.
* To have a conversation on and propose innovative sustainability models for the community media sector with a special focus on newly licensed community radio stations.
* To proffer progressive policies and laws to tackle information disorder informed by best practice.

**Challenges and mitigation strategies.**

The main challenge for this initiative is that it was conducted at the time when Covid 19 was still wreaking havoc in the country, region and globally. This meant that for the summit, only a virtual event could be held. This actually became a mitigation measure. Secondly, given the country’s negative attitude towards media freedoms and media reform, there was a risk of government completely shunning the event and branding it an initiative of regime change agents or work of the enemies of the state. There was robust engagement with most state institutions so that there was clear understanding of what the initiative’s goals and objectives were. This helped clear the air and allay the state’s fears. The last challenge was that of resources mostly the financial aspect. Partnering with the USA Embassy, Konrad Adenure Stifftung and the writer’s organization helped in terms of raising the much-needed financies.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Literature review.**

In this section, the writer will explore literature and content in light of the subject at hand that is information disorder. As has already been highlighted this phrase is used broadly to refer to different but related concepts such as disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Terms such as fake or false news will also be looked at.

Scholars from the field of digital media and communications generally concur that disinformation can be defined as any false or misleading information that is spread with the intent of deceiving and sowing confusion and disorder (Broniatowski et al., 2020; CSIS, 2016; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Its close counterpart, misinformation, while similar, is defined as information that is false or misleading, but is not spread with the intention of causing harm. Distinct from these in terms of authenticity, is malinformation, which can be seen as any truthful information that has been leaked for the purposes of causing reputational damage. The hacking of Hillary Clinton’s emails by Russian cyber agents would be an example of this (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While the origin of disinformation goes back centuries, its contemporary form has become more noticeable in the wake of the 2016 presidential election (Dornan, 2020). Originally coined by the KGB during the Soviet era, disinformation was considered by the former Soviet Union as a harmful form of propaganda that was based upon false narratives and contexts, geopolitics, and nationalistic sentiment. As a necessary tool in their operational planning, one that was based on the ‘Active Measures’ policy and Gerisomov Doctrine, the intent was to sow division and discord in enemy nation-states by obfuscating the origin of the disinformation and attributing its spread to third parties (CSIS, 2016; Lin & Kerr, 2018). Since 2008, the Kremlin has utilized disinformation campaigns in countries such as Georgia, France, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and the Baltic states. There is no doubt, however, that their biggest success in recent years has come from interfering in the U.S presidential election in which Donald Trump prevailed (CSIS, 2016; Lin & Kerr, 2018). This has been the result of both learning from past campaigns that have targeted foreign elections, and the rhetorical tactics that the Trump campaign used to bolster the success of their candidate in the months leading up to the election, and even afterwards (CSIS, 2016). These conditions had a profound impact on the electorate’s ability to discern truth from falsehood and have led to a cascading effect on political discourse over new media leaving little room for middle grounds.

The 2016 U.S. election campaign was referred to as the most polarized campaign to date in the past 25 years (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). As a result of Trump’s rhetoric, the campaign was notably marked by xenophobic sentiments, white nationalism, anti-globalism, and support for an ‘America First’ isolationist policy that was defined by tougher negotiations with NATO allies, further trade barriers, and immigration restrictions (Beauchamp, 2016; Nelson, 2016). This led to frequent clashes between Democrats and Republicans, which occurred across new media platforms and at offline protests that occurred at Trump’s political rallies, covered by the mainstream media. The biggest effect on polarization, and the one most conducive to the spread of disinformation online, was seen in Trump’s frequent attacks on mainstream media outlets such as CNN, in which he referred to them as ‘fake news’ (Bernard et al, 2021). Mainstream media (or legacy) outlets have traditionally been viewed as the gatekeepers from which information is passed top-down, due to the code of ethics that many professional journalists are bound by, one that requires them to fact-check and corroborate sources to maintain credibility (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; CSIS, 2016; Kharroub, 2019). However, even mainstream media can contribute to disinformation spread as Obama’s first term as president showed. During this period, efforts were made to debunk false narratives spun by the birther movement regarding Obama’s birth status. This inadvertently led to a media amplifying effect, however, as false narratives were amplified to resonate with supporters (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Global Engagement Centre [GEC], 2020). Through the influence of figures such as Donald Trump, both the legacy media and the new media continued to amplify the false narrative created by the birther movement to nullify Obama’s candidacy, despite evidence debunking it. The created media amplification, thus, “fed back through mainstream and new media communication channels as a disruptive and disorienting reverberation, reaching mainstream audiences” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018,124). As this example implies, this type of continued amplification of already debunked narratives can lead to growing distrust by mainstream media consumers, leading them to turn to alternative news sources; hence, satisfying these source’s aims of undermining the mainstream media’s credibility (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Therefore, a major element of alternative media is seen in its purpose to create ideologically driven counter-narratives to the mainstream media. By utilizing a cost-effective economic model for content production, alternative media producers can use low-cost online tools to produce alternative conspiratorial narratives that challenge mainstream media news about politics or breaking events (CSIS, 2016; Starbird, 2017). The popularity of such conspiracy theories has led to Alternative Media Personalities (AMPs) taking advantage of early coverage of the pandemic to supply conspiratorial misinformation to their online far-right audiences (Kelvin, 2021). Far-right AMPs that take advantage of internet technologies can amplify risk perceptions, as they avoid journalistic balance in their coverage, and instead, opt to conspiratorially reframe risk communications that solidify their audience’s worldview towards radical discourses such as anti-vaccination and climate change (Kelvin, 2021).

In terms of its ecosystem, Marwick and Lewis (2017) find that the alternative media, within the context of anti-vaccination discourse, is comprised of a far-right network of hyper partisan news outlets, dedicated to the peddling of conspiracy theories, rumours, misinformation, and mainstream media attacks, and motivated by nationalism, their embeddedness in internet culture, the desire to win the culture war against the Left, and an antipathy towards leftist ideals such as multiculturalism, feminism, racial tolerance, and political correctness. Based on the elements described, the alternative media can be conceptualized as: an online far-right media ecosystem that relies on low cost tools of production to produce online disinformation and misinformation on partisan issues such as antivaccination in order to promote polarization between the Left and the Right, and distrust of mainstream news authority through the Disinformation-Amplification Reverberation cycle which results in mainstream news reporting on false narratives that inadvertently amplify, and then reverberate back to audiences. Three examples that fall within the encapsulated definition are Breitbart, Infowars, and The Gateway Pundit. All three drew considerable support from the far-right during the presidential election of 2016. Like the 2008 U.S. election, the media environment during both the 2016 election and Trump Presidency became prone to similar manipulations due to Trump’s influencer status. Trump’s attempts at de-legitimizing the mainstream news industry and conversely raising the prospect of ‘alternative facts’ brought the empirical reality of facts into question, inducing within his followers the idea of ‘post-truth’—that there were multiple truths, rather than one objective way of looking at it (Guadagno & Guttieri, 2019; Temmerman et al., 2018). When combined with “post-democratic processes” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, 127), it is not hard to conceptualize why disinformation and misinformation spread by online personalities and outlets with dubious credentials and expertise, have become popular with right-wing online users who adhere to the post-truth view.

Disinformation allows one to bypass the objectivity of information, while framing the contextual nature of it within a narrative or set of narratives that have no evidence to support it but are appealing to one’s identity. By connecting with issues presented in an ideological, racial, or nationalistic framework, the recipient (i.e., the reader that agrees with Trump’s politically charged rhetoric) is more likely to connect with Trump’s position from an identitarian perspective rather than a rationalist one. Trump’s success in mobilizing the far right and creating an opposition to mainstream press is further indicative of his persuasive ability to weaponize disinformation, labelling all inconvenient coverage by the legacy media as ‘fake news’ (Guadagno & Guttieri, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Such frequent attacks have resulted in a widespread decline in confidence by his supporters in the mainstream media and public officials, leading to a push for politically divisive discourse that promotes in-group consolidation, while undermining the out-group (Li & Su, 2020; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). This phenomenon has been seen in both left-wing and right-wing individuals as research on fake news utterances over Twitter have shown. Li and Su (2020) found, from analyzing disconnected retweeted networks between 2016–2018, that there was an uptrend in identity-based language in fake news discussions over Twitter, which promoted in-group collectivity and consolidation by selectively amplifying messages while derogating the out-group by attributing blame.

Furthermore, another major effect of Trump’s rhetoric has been the heightened focus of news consumers on fake news stories from alternative news outlets over new media. As Twitter research study by Buzzfeed has shown, three months prior to the election, “20 top-performing fake news stories generated 8.7 million shares, reactions, and comments, while 20 top-performing stories from reputable news outlets generated a total of only 7.3 million” (Silverman, 2016, as cited by Tucker et al., 2018, p. 37–38). Despite only an 18% difference, research by Bastick (2021) on covert modification of implicit attitudes has found that even miniscule exposure to positive disinformation can have an unconscious effect on consumers. In the controlled experiment, it was found that the largest effect, an increase of 5.15% came from the group that viewed the positive fake news article (Bastick, 2021, 6). Although a seemingly minor increase, this may contribute to greater swing voting. As Bastick (2021) states, real world disinformation campaigns are likely to have a larger effect as users are exposed to additional disinformation that is reinforced by multiple sources and influenced by peer endorsement; thus, if every eligible voter had been exposed in the past to a real world campaign that had an unconscious effect of at least 5.15% this would have been sufficient enough to “flip the margin of the popular vote in the last two presidential elections” (p. 7). As a result, it is apparent that the proliferation of disinformation combined with decreasing confidence has ominous implications for future elections. This lack of confidence appears to be significantly prevalent within those on the authoritarian right, even though research indicates that new media discourse is fuelled by voters at both ends of the spectrum. For the far-right, liberal democratic values are seen as the antithesis of movement values of ethnic nationalism and the restoration of “mythical cultural traditions” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, 125).

In addition to this, research shows that there is a divergence in beliefs between the center-right, conservatives, and the more recently formed, ‘alternative. The alternative right in particular appears to tilt more towards “strategic partisan disinformation” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, 125) due to their affinity for information sites that mimic journalistic authenticity by reporting on documented events, but ultimately emphasize disinformation aimed at destabilizing opponents and institutions (Bevensee & Ross, 2019). Hence, for the purposes of this intervention, the alternative right can be conceptualized, under an essentialist approach, as a new media driven far-right diaspora, characterized not only because of its shared cultural history and strict adherence to traditions and normative behaviors, but also its penchant for engaging with disinformation disseminated by the right-wing media ecosystem over online channels, through which it mobilizes (Feron & Lefort, 2018; Ragazzi, 2012).

**Theoretical underpinnings**

A growing literature of research related to information disorder has shown that the wide variety of sources that spread disinformation, misinformation and malinformation are prone to manipulation and are driven by underlying psychology, at the individual and group-level, and its interaction with new media (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). According to Pennycook and Rand (2021), belief can be conceptualized in two ways: the first being in terms of the user’s overall accuracy in determining what is true or not, and second being the overall belief that a user has towards news in general (p. 388-389). Conceptualizing this is important as ‘truth discernment’ is an integral aspect of critically analyzing media; therefore, the failure (or indifference) towards discerning between truthful and false content can be attributed to three fundamental theories that are influential in driving information disorder. These are: social identity theory, cultural cognition theory, and affect theory.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) has become an important social psychological theory within the new media domain, seen as an arena where social groups compete for political influence. Longstanding research regarding this theory has shown that positive self-image is linked to a person’s identification with their social group, and the actions their group undertakes will reflect meaningfully on their self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This has significant implications for political identity because, as Pereira et al. (2018) state in their ‘political identity hypothesis’, it would mean that individuals will hold their political identities above ideological values, and as such, are likely to have their beliefs in news stories distorted, so long as they are exposed to positive news regarding the upholding of values (irrespective of ideology) by politicians associated with their in-group, compared to negative news that is value-undermining towards them (p. 12). The political identity is more likely to override the other aspects, especially during periods of strong polarization and saliency (Pereira et al., 2018, 55–56). This suggests that polarization arising during critical periods, such as exposure to misinformation and disinformation during an election or pandemic, can contribute to people holding on to social identities through their partisan affiliations; thus, being more susceptible to cognitive biases and processes. The belief in the material based on one’s political identity allows them to fulfill basic psychological needs such as moral, status, and belonging goals (Pereira et al., 2018, 58). The above likely explains the prevalence of echo chambers and new media algorithms that filter information based on user’s preferences, both of which provides the user with information to support their mindset, leaving little room for contravening views or info that could create doubt. These chambers also act as a means in which ideological asymmetries are reinforced as conservatives have value-laden discussions that assert values such as “dogmatism, rigidity, intolerance for ambiguity, and needs for cognitive closure, structure and order, as compared to liberals” (Pereira et al., 2018,60). As a result of this asymmetry, conservatives are more likely to engage, through shares, likes, and comments, with disinformation over new media, than liberals are; however, greater belief superiority is likely at the extreme ends of both sides (Pereira et al., 2018, 60–61). This finding was reiterated by Lutzke et al. (2019) in research on priming critical thinking (something that has been shown to prevent engagement with disinformation), who concluded that individuals driven by motivated reasoning and/or a strong conservative identity can resist interventions designed to prime critical thinking to improve resiliency towards climate change disinformation.

It is instructive to note that while both groups exhibit belief superiority, conservatives are more drawn towards disinformation than liberals are. In terms of the movement of the bulk of the misinformation/disinformation, research on the new media context suggests that the ‘attention economy’ aspect of new media may be responsible for the lack of reflective thinking that prevents users from assessing the accuracy of the article. Hence, the bulk of the sharing is likely being driven by non-truth discerning (or inattention to distinguishing between truth or falsehood) intentions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). However, research has also shown that apolitical material that emotionally arouses or causes affective polarization (explained under ‘affect theory’) can also lead to the spread of unvalidated material (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Pereira et al., 2018); thus, there is no indication that the bulk of material being shared by individuals is for identity-related reasons. To understand more about how cognitive processes and biases impact user assessment of disinformation and misinformation, it is important to turn to the theory below.

The next theory, Cultural Cognition Theory (CCT), is an important theory that describes the concept of ‘identity-protective’ cognition—a well-researched concept in information disorder studies. Research has shown that individuals participate in online engagement through selective exposure of new media curated content, dictated by algorithms (Tucker et al., 2018,18). As a result, discussions of empirical issues are fraught with assessments of information that rely on motivated reasoning and operate from an identity protective standpoint where the goal of protecting one’s identity or standing in an affinity group that shares fundamental values generates “motivated cognition related to policy relevant facts” (Kahan, 2013a, 408). This means that propositions that fall in line with the group’s dominated thinking will force individuals to defer to the group’s perspective due to the unconscious motivation to resist empirical assertions that run contrary to the group’s belief, even if the contrary belief is well supported by evidence (Guess & Lyons 2020; Kahan, 2013a; Kahan, 2017).

In addition, Kahan (2017) further notes that motivated reasoning can also be applied to scientific consensus in the sense that people are more likely to believe a scientist’s or expert’s point of view if it affirms the group’s position they hold, such as whether humans are the cause of global warming (p. 54). Biased sampling towards experts that affirm the anti-vaccination groups views is likely the reason for the spread of health-related misinformation which has led to outbreaks in vaccine-preventable viruses in recent years, suggesting that verifying the accuracy of scientific claims and accepting contravening evidence that is well supported by the scientific community are not priorities for the anti-vaccination movement (Young, 2021; Hotez, 2020). In fact, information that opposes the movement’s point of view is far more likely to cement the group’s views, giving them a false sense of legitimization as the act of contesting their views is seen as validation of them (Dornan, 2020; Kahan, 2017). However, as Dornan (2020) notes, much of this animosity towards health regulations and science likely stems from uncertainty due to the rapidly evolving nature of COVID-19 research which results in conflicting ideas and models; therefore, contributing to the identity protective cognition seen in justifying anti-science and vaccine discourse.

The above justification can be observed in the context of COVID-19, Beall et al. (2021) found that cultural cognitive framing of scientific articles on COVID-19 evokes cultural meaning, activating cultural values, which primes ideologically diverse individuals (particularly conservatives) towards differing levels of perceived validity of COVID-19 articles that are non-ideologically framed. Those with communitarian values, such as those liberals hold, are likely to view the use of technology as risk aversive, while conservatives who are more individualistic are likely to view it as a sign of ingenuity, which leads to the differences in perceived validity. Framing appears to have a small impact on discussions of COVID-19 zoonotic origins; however, Beall et al. (2021) note that this is likely due to the increasing debate on preventative measures that became the prime focus soon after the pandemic was declared. CCT is significant in understanding how anti-vaccinationists may perceive COVID-19 literature that is unequivocal to their worldview.

The final theory, ‘Affect Theory’, is an under-utilized theory in the field of information disorder studies, but nevertheless, one that is just as significant in applying to this theoretical framework. Researchers have recently begun to realize the effect of emotion on user susceptibility towards fake news, indicating a shift in focus from research that has largely concentrated on the use of reasoning (analytic thinking) and deliberation in the development of accurate beliefs up until now (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Martel et al., 2020). This has led to more research on the phenomena of affective polarization, which is distinct from ideological polarization.

Affective polarization, defined as the extent to which supporters of different political parties dislike the other party and its supporters, can occur when political actors deliberately disseminate disinformation or misinformation that leaves readers in disarray, leading to political apathy, lowered levels of trust in institutions, and greater support for radical political parties as the user becomes driven by sentiment and fantasies of what a good life entails (i.e., being a part of a community of like-minded and supportive individuals) (Tucker et al., 2018; European Foundation for South Asian Studies [EFSAS], 2021). In this sense, the fantasy of a good life clashes with the need for credibility, and disinformation campaigns are more likely to succeed because they “effectively exploit our cruel attachments to a good life” (Young, 2021, 3). In some countries such as Nepal and India, this aspect has been exemplified in discrimination meant to foment hatred and violence towards Christians and other religious minorities, stigmatizing them as subversive groups that are intent on fragmenting Hindu society through conversion and spreading of COVID-19 (United Nations Geneva, 2021). This indicates that when conspiracy narratives intersect with violent extremist discourse, a dangerous mechanism can be established; one that is built upon creating fear through ideas such as superiority versus inferiority, imminent threat, and an existential crisis facing the in-group (EFSAS, 2021).

**Change Theory and how it was applied.**

The theory and practice of summits, workshops and symposia is increasingly concerned with placing the citizen at the centre of policymakers’ considerations, not just as target, but also as agent. The aim is to develop policies and design services that respond to citizens’ needs and are relevant to their circumstances. Concepts such ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’ have emerged to describe this systematic pursuit of sustained collaboration between government agencies, non-government organisations, communities and individual citizens. Over the past decade, this view has been reframed to regard the public as ‘citizens’, whose agency matters and whose right to participate directly or indirectly in decisions that affect them should be actively facilitated. Such an approach honours the fundamental principle of a democratic state—that power is to be exercised through, and resides in its citizens.

In many democracies, citizen participation in policymaking and service design has been debated or attempted, but too infrequently realised. There have been some notable achievements, in both advanced and developing countries, and there is abundant public policy literature advocating thoroughgoing collaboration. But genuine engagement in the ‘co-production’ of policy and services requires major shifts in the culture and operations of government agencies. It demands of public servants’ new skills as enablers, negotiators and collaborators. It demands of citizens an orientation to the public good, a willingness to actively engage, and the capabilities needed to participate and deliberate well. These are tall orders, especially if citizens are disengaged and certain groups within the population are marginalised. Most especially, effective engagement by a citizen-centric public service requires political support for the genuine devolution of power and decision-making to frontline public servants and professionals—and to the citizens and stakeholders with whom they engage. Ministers and agency heads have a major leadership responsibility here.

There is no doubt that the momentum for increased engagement with citizens is being assisted by innovations in information and communication technologies. The emergence of new media as an interactive communications platform, offering new social media tools like blogs and wikis, has further heightened expectations. New media is the democratisation of innovation and decision-making, and will make us all co-designers of civil society in the 21st century’.  Just how far we have come, or are likely to progress, along this path is a topic of considerable debate among both theorists and e-government practitioners. New media provides public servants with unprecedented opportunities to open up government decision making and implementation to contributions from the citizens. This has provided relevant stakeholders including the citizens and government the opportunity to engage in robust policy conversations. The use of New media tools and technologies has provided improved options for engagement between government and citizens. It has ushered in a culture of online innovation within government—to ensure that government is receptive to the possibilities created by new collaborative technologies and uses them to advance its ambition to continually improve the way it operates. But most importantly, it has provided the citizen, state and market the much needed space to engage and deliberate on matters that are of public interest.

There is a broad consensus, however, that online engagement opportunities for citizens, to be truly effective, require embedding in a broader context of government openness and transparency that includes robust legislative regimes for freedom of information, public ownership and re-use of information gathered and generated by government, and society-wide access to and participation in the public policy making arena. In the broader concept of online citizen engagement, there is a strong argument that government should go to the people rather than making people come to it. One may argue that one good reason for government departments and agencies to participate in public forums hosted by civil society is that discursive practices within government sites inevitably remain bound by a significant imbalance in power relationships which can limit participation levels and the effectiveness of government-hosted and managed online consultation plartforms.

The barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological. Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens. Participation by citizens in the governance of their society is the bedrock of democracy. To the extent that the work of building and sustaining democracy is never completed—the price of freedom is eternal vigilance—we should expect that the institutions through which our democracy is expressed should be themselves constantly renewed, recalibrated and re-imagined.

**Methods and Design:**

**Summit(Virtual)**

Since the covid 19 pandemic was still ravaging nations, this event was delivered through a virtual summit. Summits provide an opportunity to start the discussion of important topics that need debating and to examine the most critical and compelling issues of our time – in this case, the effect of information disorder on our democracies, our economies, and our public health – with a vision to craft meaningful solutions and policies. The main purpose of this event was to understand the impact of information disorder and to revisit public policy frameworks that will best govern this impact, and craft an agenda going forward about how to achieve the promise of new media and avoid its peril.

The Summit brought together thought leaders, media industry experts and stakeholders from academia, government, CSOs and business. The speakers and participants were drawn from around the country and some within the African continent. Its program encompassed a key note speech, panel and plenary sessions, break away conversations and discussions as well as capacity building workshops. More details on this is provided under the activities and interventions section.

**Symposium**

Unlike the summit that was convened virtually, this event was conducted physically in Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital city at the Meikles hotel. Like the summit, it convened participants and delegates from the academia, government, CSOs and business. However, the symposium only had participants from within Zimbabwe. Whereas the summit focused on information disorder and its impact on the democratisation agenda and how it impacted on trust of the media, citizens’ freedom of expression and access to information, the symposium’s focus was on interrogating government’s media policy reform agenda and taking stoke of the performance of the second republic in so far as media freedom and development is concerned. This was born out of a realisation that the state was in the process of crafting hash and repressive policies and pieces of legislation as a way of curbing information disorder. Most of these laws and pieces of legislation had a potential of eroding citizens’ liberties and freedoms such as freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of assembly etc. Like the summit, the symposium had a key note speech, panel sessions and plenary. This was a high level event that attracted the participation of government Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Commissioners from chapter 12 institutions such as the Zimbabwe Media Commission, Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission among others. The Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services was the guest of honour and gave the key note address.

The symposium also became a vibrant space for policy debate, exchange of best practice and networking. It lived to its theme and facilitated conversations that took stoke our media policy reform agenda as country, particularly with a view of reforming undemocratic policies so that they protect and provide for freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information and exchange of ideas in an open and peaceful society.

**Workshops**

These were organized on the first two days of the summit and were capacity building opportunities for media professionals as well as selected members from CSOs. Each workshop had not more than 20 participants and focused especially on equipping participants with techniques and skills in a given area with the largest portion of the workshops being emphasized on “hand-on-practice” thereby giving participants an opportunity to marry theory with practice. The workshops were also designed to reinforce, imprint and bring forward an immediate functioning dimension to the participant’s eye and hands by implementing and practicing the actual concepts or techniques that were taught through lectures and demonstration process. The workshops conducted are highlighted in the interventions and activities section.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Interventions and activities**

This social initiative was implemented through a 5day summit and a 3-day media law reform symposium. The summit’s focus was on information disorder and democracy under the theme: **Reimagining media and democracy in the information disorder era.** The symposium ‘s focus was on media policy reform with a particular emphasis on repressive pieces of legislation that curtail free flow of information, infringe on citizen’s rights on access to information as well as their freedom of expression all in the name of curbing information disorder. The two events had some trainings as well that targeted and gave capacity building to media practitioners on tackling information disorder as well as reporting on the media policy reform agenda. Both the summit and the symposium are detailed below.

* 1. **New Media Summit on information disorder and democracy.**

**Context and background**

Challenges of **information disorder** are deeply intertwined with the development of digital and new media. This can be harmful to the citizenry and society at large as it shakes the very core of democracy through eroding public trust. When citizens are bombarded with information disorder, they cannot make informed decisions and this is a threat to democracy, civic engagement and freedom of expression. Citizens and policy makers thus needed to have frank conversations and dialogue regarding the scope of the challenge as well as come up with solutions. This intervention thus brought a new focus to the challenge of information disorder as well as provided a strategic space for government and relevant stakeholders like media and civil society to have a dialogue on the **cyber security bill** that is on the cards whose provisions, among other things, will tackle the challenge of this digital scourge with a view of proffering progressive provisions relating to information disorder that are informed by best practice and also respect the rights of citizens. The summit also interrogated and scrutinized some mooted pieces of legislation like **Maintenance of Peace and Order Bill** to replace **Public Order and Security Act**  and **Protection of Personal Information Bill (Data protection Bill); Freedom to Access Information Bill** and the **Zimbabwe Media Commission Bill** to replace **Access to Information and Personal Privacy Act** as well as the **Broadcasting Services Act Amendment Bill.** Continued existence and use of AIPPA and POSA in their current form erode citizen’s rights that are enshrined in the constitution.  
  
The summit and the theme came at a time when Zimbabwe, the sub region and continent were ceased with the task of crafting **Cyber security laws**. It is envisaged that some of these laws would deal, among other things, with this digital challenge, as the proliferation of fake news and propaganda has become a cause for concern for both citizens and states. Balancing the national cyber security concerns and citizen rights online thus calls for a collaborative, multi stakeholder and inclusive approaches towards policy and law making. Countering this scourge is not therefore to be left to governments alone. An inclusive consultative approach that harvests views from all stakeholders is thus key and this initiative provided such a strategic space as it brought onboard various interested stakeholders.  
  
In addition to **digital media legislation** in the context of **cyber security**, **citizen privacy and data protection**, **information disorder**, the intervention also featured panel discussions on **Tech, democracy and digital inclusion**, **Cyber bullying and gender inclusion online**, **media and information literacy and civic engagement**, and reimagining the **public and local media** in the digital age. The Summit also featured specialized trainings on emerging topics such as **Data Journalism** in the Digital Era, **Mobile Journalism** (**Mojo)** in the Digital Era, **Fact-Checking for Newsrooms & Bloggers** in the Digital Era and **Deepening audience engagement & building trust for local news.**

**Workshops and trainings.**

As already alluded to above, this initiative had 3 days dedicated to workshops. They are highlighted below.

**Workshop 1. Combating information disorder and fake news: Digital tools for fact-checking**

This training session sought, among other things, to unpack the term information disorder as a concept with its constituent aspects like Misinformation and Information disorder as well as Fake News. The training further explained the various ways to report misinformation and information disorder on various platforms including Google, YouTube and Twitter. Participants were taken through an interactive session on how to spot a BOT (Internet Robot) or simply automated online activity that plays a significant role in peddling fake news, information disorder and misinformation. Participants were also given numerous examples of how to identify such bot-like activity from various online platforms with Activity (frequent posts of over 50 posts a day), Anonymity (Faceless characters) as well as Amplification (Very frequent retweets, likes, shares compared to original content). Practically, participants were taken through the various free online digital tools and websites for identifying digitally manipulated images and videos. Such tools included OSINT Framework, Tineye, Reverse Image Search and other tools such as Bellingcat tools, Google tools and NASA mapping tools. The Session was however marred by erratic Internet connectivity.

**Workshop 2. Social Media Dos and Don’ts for Civic-Engagement**

The training interrogated the diverse nature of the internet at the disposal of many citizens and the ample opportunities that such a position has opened up for citizens’ involvement on things that affect them in everyday society. It also looked at tools like the smart phones that permit ordinary citizens to instantly tweet, post or share WhatsApp messages to challenge the status-quo – be it political, economic, social or otherwise. Whilst the facilitator highlighted many unique opportunities for civic engagement that social media has opened up, he also addressed the numerous flipsides. For instance, activists can pursue or be persuaded by others on causes which sometimes could be in the service of a certain interest group. Online civic-activism can also cause polarisation within and/or among campaign agents, often with negative consequences. The session posed the following critical questions that were further explored in detail during the session:

• How can online activism be done and improved?

• What should campaigners desist from?

• What tactics work best?

• Do you need a strategy?

**Workshop 3**

**Data Journalism and Visualisation**

The facilitator took participants through the various aspects of Data Journalism and Visualisation

establishing its strong connection to combatting information disorder. The various benefits of Data

Journalism were interrogated and its justification in modern day journalism. Other aspects covered

included the following:

• Finding stories in data - how do you do it?

• How do you find the data - sources, and techniques

• Cleaning data - how to make the data make sense

• Scraping data - using the web as a data source

• Visualising the data: what works and what doesn't

• Introduction to free data tools

• Freedom of information requests

• Mapping

**Workshop 4 Best Practices for Ethical Content Generation and Reporting**

The session sought to provide guidelines to ensure that African media, in all its forms, encourages and respects the free exchange of information that is fair, accurate and professionally thorough. The facilitator shared the approaches and principles to create professional content generation in an era of the changing media landscape and journalistic practices. The discussions were placed in the wider context of a society where the media is the bedrock for an independent justice system, a healthy political environment and enables vibrant citizen participation in the building of society. The course was a fast-paced introduction to ethical content generation and reporting. The exchange session also focused on:

• The challenges for media professionals and citizen journalists in the Zimbabwe of today.

Examples of fake news and the polarization of media in difficult circumstances were

considered. How mobile penetration and social networks impact on the media, the

government and the civilians in the country. Examples to illustrate the challenges and

reality.

• Comparisons between traditional and citizen journalism: defining the latter.

• The responsibility of citizen journalists for accuracy, context, follow-up, approach to

sources (their validity and their motives and how to protect them), honouring the role of a

watchdog over private companies, government and public affairs.

• The need to avoid stereotypes, sharing stories which reflect the Zimbabweans’ diversity

and magnitude. Find the voices of the voiceless, those that are rarely heard.

• Ethical duties such as attribution, not plagiarizing, clearly labelling commentary.

Participants were given numerous concrete examples from across Africa and other parts of the

world to illustrate the following:

• Principles and challenges and realities the majority of the citizen journalists face.

• Separating rumour from fact when emergency news breaks, with examples.

• The essence of verification and the use of new technology such as TweetDeck, to verify

stories.

• Interaction and communication with audiences and how journalists can benefit from both

in their work.

• The ways social media and citizen journalism operate and have evolved. The case of

Burkina Faso. Exercise comparing this case with ones in Zimbabwe.

• How to open up citizen journalism and feed it into traditional journalism. Work on

engaging content matter. Amplifying and gathering citizen input.

• What is next? Tapping into African and global networks.

* 1. **Media law policy reform symposium**

The Zimbabwe Media Policy Reform Symposium proved to be a strategic intervention convening and facilitating dialogue and conversations on public policy making framework anchored on consultation and with a view to establish a free, inclusive, democratic and open society where citizens enjoy their rights and actively participate in matters of public concern. Democratization of the media as a fourth estate remains a critical undertaking by state and non-state actors alike. This intervention convened government, media, civil society, academia and business to have constructive engagement on the country’s media policy reform agenda with a view of taking stoke of the second administration’s performance in the media policy sphere. The symposium therefore scrutinized the government’s commitment or lack of it in media policy reform and also served as a platform to advocate for and propose progressive and innovative media policies by proffering best practice orientated recommendations.

Media policy reform in any country, Zimbabwe included, should liberate rather than limit the public sphere at the expense of narrow interest of the ruling elite. Investigating media policy reform and media democracy is a continuing concern within the discipline of media. The concepts of media democratisation, media activism and media reform grapples with the issues of struggling for free access and exchange of information as well as free and open communication through various means. Ideally media policy and regulatory reform in Zimbabwe should contribute to the liberation of a democratic public sphere by providing citizens with information about their world; fostering debate about various issues and enhancing citizen participation in issues that involve how they are governed so as to encourage informed decision making on available courses of action.

The media operating environment is contextualised against developments on the media law reform process, in terms of progress or lack thereof, as well as the enjoyment of the right to media freedom, freedom of expression, and ultimately citizens’ right to access to information. Regrettably, the situation is still far from the ideal in terms of respect for media freedom which is a critical component in fostering unhindered citizens’ participation in democratic processes for accountable and transparency governance. According to the Reporters Without Borders 2020 World Press Freedom Day Index, Zimbabwe was positioned at 126 out of 180 countries ranked globally. This ranking should be a sobering and reflective moment for the Zimbabwe government considering that other Southern Africa Development Community countries such as Namibia, South Africa and Botswana were ranked at 23, 31 and 39, respectively.

While the Freedom of Information Act has since been signed into law, the government gazetted the Cybersecurity and Data Protection Bill, which is strong on surveillance of citizens and weak on balancing cybersecurity with the enjoyment of fundamental rights such as free expression online, privacy and protection of personal data. The government was also to announce its intentions to come up with a Patriot Bill, which if enacted, has the potential of curtailing the exercise of rights such as media freedom and freedom of expression, right to privacy, access to information, freedom of conscience, political rights, freedom to demonstrate and petition, and freedom of assembly and association.

The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), together with the Public Order and Security Act, enacted in 2002, were among some of the most repressive laws used to suppress media freedom and free speech in Zimbabwe Scores and scores of journalists were arrested under AIPPA while newspapers such as The Daily News and The Tribune were closed under this law which at that time was used as the weapon of choice against dissenting voices and media workers. However, with the coming into being of the 2013 Constitution with its highly acclaimed Bill of Rights and explicit provisions on citizens’ right to access to information, it became increasingly clear that AIPPA was anathema to the enjoyment of the very same right it purported to protect. This point was driven home under Section 62 of the 2013 Constitution (on access to information), that new legislation should be enacted to give effect to the enjoyment of that right, thus paving way for the repealing of AIPPA. It is in that regard that the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act in July 2020, as part of the unbundling of AIPPA, was welcomed as one of the progressive steps taken by the government of Zimbabwe towards the alignment of the country’s laws with the Constitution.

**Key Findings**

The global spread of information disorder has the potential to erode foundational elements of modern civilisation across much of the developed and developing world. Social cohesion, public health and safety, political stability and democracy are all under threat by the rapid and sometimes malicious dissemination of false information within and across national borders. Information disorder is an extremely complex and multi-layered problem that defies simple, one-size fits all solutions. Effective mitigation can only be achieved through multi-pronged strategies involving collaboration and cooperation between governments, digital platforms, academia, CSOs and community-based organisations. Attempts to date by governments and global technology companies to tackle misinformation, disinformation and malinformation have been constrained by a multitude of challenges and policy shortcomings, not least being a lack of co-ordination and co-operation between key players. Traditional media outlets can also contribute to the information disorder crisis through amplification of the existence of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation campaigns and should be included in strategies to mitigate it.

Popular terms such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, false news and hoaxes are used loosely and interchangeably, leading to widespread confusion about their meanings, and adding to the already formidable challenge of trying to tackle the issue. The extent of information disorder is extremely difficult to gauge and to accurately measure, in part due to contested definitions about what is being measured. Governments, global technology companies and other interested parties need to work together towards achieving a broadly agreed set of definitions of key terms surrounding information disorder to enable coordinated and more effectively targeted strategies to be developed at local, national and global levels.

New laws in some parts of the world ostensibly introduced to fight information disorder are also being misused by governments to crack down on political dissent and suppress freedom of expression and the media, further undermining already compromised democratic structures and institutions. Advanced liberal democracies face a difficult challenge trying to balance the sometimes competing aims of pluralism, free expression and individual liberty against the need to protect citizens from online harms and to uphold the integrity of the electoral system. Democracies should be alert to the potential for any new anti-information disorder laws and regulations to be misused by governments to undermine freedom of speech and the media. This came to the fore during the panel discussions at the summit. The policies and pieces of legislation that are mooted by the Zimbabwean government like the Computer crimes and cybersecurity bill, freedom of information and personal privacy bill are too draconian, repressive and infringe on the citizens’ rights such as freedom of expression and access and exchange of information.

Despite the uniquely difficult challenges faced in combating information disorder, extensive work has been undertaken at grassroots and higher levels to mitigate this scourge, with some success. However, the need for new approaches and initiatives is also apparent. The global spread of information disorder surrounding COVID-19 has exposed the broader potential of “information disorder’’ on the internet to jeopardise public health and safety – particularly, but not exclusively, in less developed countries. In Zimbabwe, as well as in other parts of Africa, the government used firm handed tactics that eroded citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of assembly under the guise of curbing both the pandemic and infordemic. Covid 19 then became mana from heaven to most dictators as they used it to shrink the civic space under the guise of SOPs.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**General Conclusion**

Governments must approach the concept of information disorder in a fully comprehensive manner in order to counter it effectively. This means accepting and adopting the ways in which this challenge has become more complex and multi-faceted over recent years. It also means tackling the many tactics of manipulation that accompany and amplify its pernicious effects. It entails targeting the multiple instigators and agents that drive information disorder strategies and unpacking the different motivations behind this phenomenon, whether they be political, financial or reputational. Governments need to push back more systematically against both information disorder and a broader range of deceptive influence strategies. The relationship between information disorder and human rights is double-edged. Information disorder infringes a range of core rights. These include: the freedom of thought; the right to privacy; the right to participation; as well as economic, social and cultural rights. It also violates citizens’ right to freedom of expression and access to information. Furthermore, it diminishes broader indicators of democratic quality by: weakening trust in democracy; interfering with elections; as well as feeding digital violence and repression. However, counter-information disorder initiatives also carry risks for human rights and democracy. In many countries around the world, measures against information disorder have constricted human rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these trends and problems. It has triggered information disorder campaigns driven by political and profit-driven motivations. In the last year, a huge amount of information disorder has spread through social media and the internet, thereby sharpening debate on the governance of social media. Meanwhile, non-democratic regimes have made use of the pandemic to crack down on political opposition by restricting freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Different responses have been initiated to tackle information disorder. Legislative and executive bodies have tried to regulate the spread of information disorder. Responses have gone from elaborating codes of practice and best practice guides to enabling verification networks that debunk information disorder. Corporations have also launched some initiatives to contain information disorder in their cyber-spaces, although it has proved very difficult to pursue all information disorder on the internet. Civil society has also been mobilised in the fight against information disorder and the protection of human rights online. The basic challenge remains to find a way of building strategies against information disorder more fully into overarching approach towards human rights locally, regionally and globally. There is need to ensure that information disorder does not weaken global human rights, in practice it has deepened commercial and security partnerships with many regimes guilty of using information disorder to abuse human rights and undermine democratic checks and balances.

The guiding principle must be to combat information disorder without infringing freedom of expression. This means being attentive to counter-information disorder tactics that undermine human rights and rather finding other ways to build up the incentives and capacities to lessen information disorder’s reach around the world. Content regulation can lead to censorship, internet shutdowns and the prosecution of dissenting voices all ostensibly in the name of fighting information disorder. A human rights perspective needs to be built into debates on media regulations.

**Recommendations / implications for Policy**

The new media laws that are currently being drafted by most governments seek to regulate what is said online, but they are not designed to stop the hateful, harmful or false narratives that spread at the click of a button. This calls for a concerted and sustained effort in fighting this scourge. Below are some of the recommendations with regards tackling this vice.

1. **Create a National Policy Supporting Online Peacebuilding Instead of a state-centred, regulatory approach**

A more inclusive alternative could be the creation of a national policy towards online peacebuilding. The role of independent, non-partisan influential actors such as churches could provide leadership toward a greater presence of online peacebuilding programmes. The peacebuilding initiatives by state, church and civil society actors have largely been focussed on providing platforms for face-to-face dialogue. Workshops, town hall gatherings, conferences and long-running community programmes have been the standard method to encourage social cohesion. However, focusing on the physically present excludes digital actors where tensions between individuals scattered all over the world still prevail. Coming to the Zimbabwean context, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission(NPRC) was created by the constitution in 2013, but it came to life only in 2018. The NPRC has a mandate to ensure healing of past traumas and seek justice for the aggrieved. While the NPRC deals with important issues, its mandate needs to develop an approach to peacebuilding through new digital media.

1. **Support Peace Mapping in Zimbabwe.**

Ushahidi is a peace mapping platform useful for preventing electoral violence. Ushahidi used crowd-sourcing to map violence and direct peace teams to help defuse violence during Kenya’s 2007 elections, which resulted in at least 1,400 deaths. Ushahidi then evolved into a peace mapping initiative. The application maps peacebuilding initiatives among communities and if there are signs of instability within a community, it is easier to identify them. These digital tools could be brought to Zimbabwe. Current mapping projects such as the Zimbabwe Peace Project are focussed only on rights violations and incidences of violence. The monthly mapping report is useful in identifying sites of violence, but it does not show where violence was instigated on the basis of a new media post, nor does it indicate where peace initiatives, both online and offline are taking place in communities.

1. **Develop an Online Peacebuilding Lab**

Faced with declining socio-economic conditions and ongoing concerns such as climate change that could deepen tensions within a polarised nation, building online spaces for collaboration between people across their divides is key to national cohesion and empowering people in new ways, rather than restricting, so they can participate in solving the problems and crises of the future. In 2018 a peacebuilding social lab, supported by Humanity United was developed as a trial run in the lead-up to the July elections. It was a novel idea aimed at local digital innovators and change-makers developing more inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. According to Humanity United, the lab provided a safe space for people to talk about their experiences and discuss home-grown solutions to online peacebuilding. Initiatives such as these should be long term, to encourage people to think before they post online. The lab represents a space to build trust among Zimbabweans to arrive at a shared understanding about the hotly contested and deeply polarized nature of their country’s conflict. The idea is to create new communities, values, ideas, and activities that take aim at the root causes of conflict and amplify domestically driven solutions to support peace. Efforts like this could be expanded to ensure that Zimbabweans see an alternative for how to talk with people with whom they disagree, and to promote the idea that every person is a key stakeholder in preventing the spread of online hate before it degenerates to social violence.

1. **Engage Youth in Developing Constructive Digital Media**.

New media programming developed specifically for youth is particularly important in Zimbabwe. More than two-thirds of the country’s 14.65 million population is under the age of 35 and this means the youth are a key pillar in building democracy and peace in the future. As the world becomes more technologically advanced it is important to engage the youth. Training and workshops can help youth learn basic new media literacy, so they can help to dispel information disorder and to defuse polarising content. Youth can be involved in developing positive new media content. More advanced training and workshops could help youth learn critical skills in using new media platforms to build social cohesion, to promote positive messages supporting peace, and to foster skills in using new media for improving democratic dialogue. Youth can be involved in developing new media skits to share on platforms like YouTube or Facebook that could show the alternatives to and the consequences of online hate.

1. **Journalistic due diligence**

While legislative provisions that apply to the notions of information disorder were described above, it must also be emphasised that there exists a large range of regulatory measures that apply to journalism and the media which assist in the effective tackling of information disorder. Media professionals and journalists can tackle information disorder mainly through other concepts, such as existing rules on objectivity, accuracy, and fairness which apply to the media. Importantly, scholars have emphasised the “unintentional amplification of information disorder” by the media, and “getting the mainstream media to amplify rumour and information disorder is the ultimate goal of those who seek to manipulate. As such, regulatory rules applicable to the media can be a powerful bulwark against information disorder.

1. **Promotion of Media and Information Literacy**

The promotion of media literacy in schools and in communities stands as one of the most effective ways of tackling information disorder. It is important to consider media and information literacy and, more broadly, the development of critical thinking, for the whole population, at all stages of life. The education of teenagers and students is particularly important because they tend to be the most vulnerable to information manipulation for a variety of reasons: lack of experience, the need to assert independence, socio-cultural environment and they have not necessarily benefited from media and information literacy training in their early years. Offering media and information literacy to citizens will ensure that any person faced with a piece of information can assess its validity, arguments, evidence and its source reliability and motivations. it is crucial to educate the general public from a very early age but also at different stages of life, about image, audio-visual media, critical thinking and rational argumentation. The assessment of information is a skill that can be learned. Media and information literacy must include a technological dimension so that young people can understand the operation of social network algorithms (personalization, filter bubbles). Promotion of media and information literacy can be an essential step in building civic resilience and inoculating the public against information disorder. MIL can act as the first line of defence against information disorder as it empowers individuals to be critical users and producers of media and information content. It makes individuals more discerning on the content they are consuming

**Sustainability plan**

The sustainability plan of this initiative is anchored on a multi stakeholder approach to finding community, societal and national challenges. Information disorder is a challenge that concerns and affect all of us hence the need to bring as many stakeholders as is possible around the table. Academic institutions like universities (National University of Science and Technology, the University of Zimbabwe and Midlands State University) have pledged support and commitment to collaborating with the organisation that I lead ie Zimbabwe Centre for Media and Information Literacy in tackling the information disorder scourge through media and journalism curriculum review so that they equip journalism and media students with the requisite skills to tackle this challenge head on. In addition to this, they have also pledged their full support in collaborating and partnering with ZCMIL in offering short courses to CSOs, youth and the general public on combatting information disorder. This initiative was partly supported by the Konrad Adenure Stifftung(KAS) and the USA Embassy. The two have committed to supporting the conference on New Media again next year that will scrutinise the impact of information disorder on democracy, governance and civic engagement during covid 19 era.

In addition to the summit/conference, capacity building of relevant stakeholders like media professionals/practitioners, Civil Society Organisations, Academia and youth on countering information disorder will go a long way towards building a critical mass that will be strategically positioned to continue the work of dealing with information disorder beyond the summit and capacity building sessions. This is a critical initiative towards anti information disorder movement building whose sustainability model is anchored on multi stakeholder participation, partnership, collaboration and co creation.

Last but not list, the sustainability plan for this intervention leverages civic engagement and active citizenship. The convening of multi stakeholders with a view of collective solution provision builds the much needed citizen voice and agency towards finding solutions and tackling the scourge of information disorder.