



RESEARCH REPORT

Social media and  
mis/disinformation  
in electoral context  
in the DRC

May 2024



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# KEY FINDINGS



520 WhatsApp messages analysed in 155 groups

**88.5%**  
of false and harmful messages identified were mis/disinformation



Urban centres are hotspots for the diffusion of mis/disinformation and hate speech



The diffusion of mis/disinformation and hate speech increased slightly ahead of elections



Some users are encouraged by politicians or political entrepreneurs to share false information

Identify politics strongly shape the type of mis/disinformation shared on WhatsApp groups



While users understand the value of fact-checking information before sharing, they do not systematically do so

Users deliberately share unverified information to fact-check it



Users are proactive in correcting mis/disinformation but are less willing to confront authors of hate speech

Users are less inclined to verify information when it is shared by people or sources they trust



**T**his research was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of experts:

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# Introduction

## Research Objectives

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Internews is implementing the Media Sector Development Activity (MSDA), which has been reinforced by five complementary projects, including one funded by USAID's Complex Crisis Fund. The expected results of this project include a study of the disinformation ecosystem, which have been carried out in collaboration with Laboratoire de Recherche en Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication (LARSICOM) based in Kinshasa, during the election period (December 2023).

The 2023 electoral campaign was marked by the spread of misinformation, fake news, and manipulated images used to disorient voters and influence the public debate. While candidates themselves refrained from publicly using mis/disinformation, their entourage as well as politically engaged groups and individuals contributed to the spread of false or harmful information ahead of the elections<sup>1</sup>. In particular, individuals who are less informed or poorly equipped to critically evaluate the information they receive, and share are also susceptible to contribute to this phenomenon.



<sup>1</sup> <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/video/rd-congo-les-menaces-des-fausses-informations-sur-la-democratie-2683918>



## **In 2023, 54% of Congolese people surveyed by Target, a renowned market research service provider based in Kinshasa, declared using internet primarily to connect to WhatsApp, making the platform a central tool to share information...**

Growing distrust and manipulation of mainstream medias in Congolese society coincides with the rise of social media among public opinion. In 2023, 54% of Congolese people surveyed by Target, a renowned market research service provider based in Kinshasa, declared using internet primarily to connect to WhatsApp, making the platform a central tool to share information<sup>2</sup>. This has facilitated the rapid spread of information away from traditional media (press and radio), but it has also paved the way for the dissemination of fake news. Social media platforms are used to intentionally spread disinformation, exploit social divisions, and reach a wide audience. This spread is amplified by the use by the traditional media of information circulating on social media and the persistence of the journalistic culture of the scoop<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, this study on the disinformation ecosystem during the electoral period aims to understand the demand for mis/disinformation and hate speech. In particular, it seeks to explore the dynamics of consuming and sharing false information online, specifically on WhatsApp groups.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the nature of mis/disinformation and hate speech in WhatsApp groups?
2. How are messages of mis/disinformation and hate speech identified, perceived, and relayed by members of WhatsApp groups?
3. What contextual factors make people vulnerable to spreading false or harmful information?

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<sup>2</sup> Target (2023) 'Media habits of Congolese', print publication September 2023

<sup>3</sup> Patient Ligodi. Pollution de l'information : Fake News et journalisme dans le monde et en République Démocratique du Congo. Bruxelles, Wavre, Kinshasa, Editions Mabiki, 2024, p. 106

## Geographical areas

The study aimed to focus on the geographical areas which were of key interest during the elections, either due to their significance in the political campaign or due to the complex societal and conflict issues at play. Three areas were selected :

1. Kinshasa: the capital city, where the national political debate is likely to fuel and extend local conflicts.
2. Haut Katanga: because of the opposition between immigrants from the Kasaiian and Katangese communities, and the historical political divisions between presidential candidates in these regions (incumbent President Tshisekedi being from Kasai, and opposition candidate Moise Katumbi from Katanga).
3. North Kivu: a province torn by the conflict with Rwanda-back M23 and other local conflicts involving foreign actors.

## Methodology

### \* Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used by Internews:

**Disinformation:** Intentionally disseminating false information by presenting it as true. This can include spreading rumors, conspiracy theories or false data.

**Misinformation:** Refers to the unintentional or unintended dissemination of false information, with no intention to mislead or harm. Unlike misinformation, it often occurs through inadvertence, lack of understanding or factual errors.

**Online hate speech:** This contributes to the spread of harmful, misleading, or prejudicial information that can negatively influence people's opinions, attitudes, and behavior. This type of speech creates a toxic environment by propagating ideas that are discriminatory, defamatory or incite violence, thereby harming society in general. The spread of online hate can distort reality, polarize opinions, encourage misinformation and fragment communities by fueling prejudice and conflict.



Due to methodological limitations (see below) it was not possible to ascertain whether the messages identified on WhatsApp groups were intentionally sharing false information and what their possible motives for doing so were. Most of the respondents in the focus group discussions mentioned that they never or very rarely shared false or unverified information online, suggesting that most of the content collected falls under the category of "misinformation". However, respondents may have displayed a social desirability bias, where respondents give responses based on what they believe to be socially acceptable to the group. As a result of these difficulties, the remainder of the study uses the term "mis/disinformation".

## \* Methods

This study is based on two different methodological approaches to analyze the production and consumption of mis/disinformation and hate speech.

The first approach, which looks at the production of mis/disinformation and hate speech, is reflexive, based on the experience of journalists and the realities they face on a daily basis. Through a description of the political, social and security context, it presents journalists' experience on the supply of disinformation in the DRC.

The second approach is more empirical and analytical and is based on a field study to examine cases of mis/disinformation and hate speech circulating through the WhatsApp messaging app and the perceptions they generate among consumers.

Capturing these different aspects (supply and consumption/demand) requires a holistic process of mixed approaches, combining a detailed knowledge of the context, stakeholders and practices (Section 1), with more analytical procedures based on a rigorous examination of data methodically collected in the field (Sections 2 to 4).

## Monitoring of WhatsApp Groups

A total of 155 groups (42 in Haut-Katanga, 72 in Kinshasa and 41 in North Kivu) were selected for this study from the existing Internews database. The members of these groups are journalists, members of civil society organizations, and community leaders with a total of 29,593 members (18,466 leaders of community-based organizations, 7,458 leaders of grassroots civil society organizations, 3,347 leaders and members of religious organizations and 322 journalists). This has implications on the findings as they are not representative of Congolese society as a whole. Indeed, WhatsApp Group members in the selected groups have, due to their status and occupations, on average a higher level of literacy and are exposed to and actively engaged in media-related activities.

Collectors recruited by Internews were trained to monitor WhatsApp groups to which they were existing members of, and to which they were added if relevant. Each collector monitored an average of 5-10 groups which were influential in their community (e.g. civil society or political groups), with the purpose of identifying key topics of discussion circulating. Within those groups, collectors recorded cases of mis/disinformation and hate speech according to a categorization tool designed by Internews.

The data was collected a total of 520 messages over a continuous period of 2 weeks (4-10 December and 11-17 December 2023). The 16 collectors were trained in the identification of content (misinformation and hate speech) using the Open Data Kit application and google Forms to collect all the information containing false information and hate speech shared in the WhatsApp groups in which they were members. The information was then verified by the data analyst by cross-referencing repeated words using Microsoft Power BI software. A second process of fact-checking and categorization was carried out by LARSICOM, making sure all information was assigned to the appropriate category and discarding when appropriate.

The selected content was analyzed comparatively in two weekly reports.

In addition, a qualitative analysis of the messages was carried out to identify the key themes and other relevant observations such as messages which were most frequently shared across groups.

The analysis of WhatsApp messages focused only on text-based content and did not include the multimedia contents of the messages (audio, video, images).

While the sample may not be considered representative of Congolese society as a whole, it does provide relevant insight into the nature of mis/disinformation and the content that circulates within online communities.

### **Survey of mis/disinformation**

A short questionnaire was administered to all users of messages of misinformation/disinformation and hate speech identified during the monitoring of WhatsApp groups (n=622). It included the following questions :

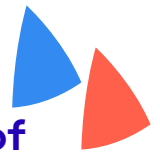
1. Where did you find the information that you shared?
2. What made it interesting for you ?
3. Why did you share it ?

These quantitative results were complemented by a qualitative analysis of the dissemination of misinformation/disinformation content and hate speech within the same groups. They were consolidated in a survey report (with graphs presented in relevant sections below).

### **Focus groups**

Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted in all three regions (2 in North Kivu, 1 in Kinshasa and 1 in Haut Katanga) to supplement and triangulate the information collected during the monitoring of WhatsApp groups. Participants were recruited purposely within the groups monitored, either among the users who shared mis/disinformation and hate speech (approx. 60%) or among the broader members of those groups. All participants in the focus group discussions signed informed consent forms.

The design of this study was intentional in working at different levels within the same data set. In other words, the participants of the focus groups and the survey were all recruited from the users who shared mis/disinformation and hate speech messages in the WhatsApp Group. This allowed us to have a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics at play within those groups and a more solid basis for analysis and cross-referencing.



**This study was constrained by a number of limitations pertaining to the political and security context in the regions. Members of the WhatsApp groups were reluctant to identify themselves and discuss sensitive topics pertaining to the elections, especially in Haut Katanga and North Kivu where ethnic tensions and militarization constrains people’s willingness to openly discuss with strangers...**

#### **\* Limitations**

This study was constrained by a number of limitations pertaining to the political and security context in the regions. Members of the WhatsApp groups were reluctant to identify themselves and discuss sensitive topics pertaining to the elections, especially in Haut Katanga and North Kivu where ethnic tensions and militarization constrains people’s willingness to openly discuss with strangers. As a result, the original scope was reduced to explore only the demand for and sharing of mis/disinformation, leaving aside issues related to the production of false and harmful information and to the intentions of content creators.

Some limitations were noted at the level of the quantitative study of WhatsApp groups. Due to difficulties in ascertaining the intent of users in sharing false information, as well as the extent to which they were aware of the incorrect nature of the information shared, the quantitative analysis relied on two categories ‘mis/disinformation’ and ‘hate speech’ to catalogue messages. However, this broad categorization obscured the multiple types of information covered by misinformation, such as :

- ✘ **Fabricated or manipulated content** : Completely false content or genuine information or imagery that has been distorted (e.g. clickbait or sensationalist headline)

For instance, some messages claimed that “Katumbi camp proposes negotiations with M23” (North Kivu WhatsApp group - 7 December 2023) or that “The leader of the M23 has just announced their support for Moïse Katumbi” (North Kivu WhatsApp group - 5 December 2023). However, fact checking websites show that there is no evidence to date that Moïse Katumbi supports the M23<sup>4</sup>.

- ✘ **Misleading content** : Deceptive or ambiguous information (e.g. comment presented as fact).

For instance, one message reported that ‘Having smelt upcoming civil war, the European Union observers have left the DRC’ (Kinshasa WhatsApp Group, 6 December 2023). The fact is only partially true, as the EU did cancel its mission, but the reason is due to technical constraints<sup>5</sup>. The statement about civil war is likely a comment from the author of the message.

- ✘ **Humor and satire** : Humorous but false stories passed off as true. There is no intention to harm or mislead but readers may be fooled.

For instance, one message used satire to present a scenario where Rwandan president Paul Kagame is candidate in the elections, using the registration number of the devil (666). "Paul Kagame Mwira, No. 666, candidate for the national deputation in the city of Goma" (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 07 December 2023).

- ✘ **Errors** : A mistake made by established new agencies in their reporting.

The design of the quantitative analysis did not allow to explore those distinctions. Further analysis of that data set would be needed to highlight the proportion of each of the above types of messages, and to understand better the nuances of the spread of misinformation online.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://balobakichck.cd/aucune-preuve-natteste-a-ce-jour-que-moise-katumbi-soutient-les-m23/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://balobakichck.cd/lue-na-pas-annule-sa-mission-dobservation-electorale-en-rdc-apres-avoir-constate-la-non-volonte-dorganiser-des-elections-credibles/>



# The DRC, a fertile ground for *'information pollution'*

**T**his section provides an analysis of the landscape of mis/disinformation in the DRC, focusing on the actors who produce false, misleading or harmful content as well as the political and security context in which these practices take place.

## Background

On 20 December 2023, millions of Congolese went to the polls. For the first time, the DRC held four simultaneous elections: presidential and legislative, national, provincial and municipal. This fourth post-Dialogue Inter Congolese electoral cycle was marked by a very large number of candidates: 26 for the presidential election, almost 25,000 for the national legislative election, and many more for the provincial and municipal elections. The outcome of these votes saw Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi re-elected President for a second 5-year term, while the coalition that had backed his candidacy seemed to have significantly beaten the Opposition in all other elections (legislative, provincial and municipal).

Despite serious irregularities noted by several observers and the Opposition's challenge of the results, the installation of new elected officials is going ahead, pending the processing of appeals lodged with the relevant judicial bodies.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues to evolve in a complex and fast-moving political context, marked by a combination of persistent challenges and more recent developments.

First, political stability remains a major challenge in the DRC. Despite previous elections, instability persists due to various factors such as fragile institutions, ethnic tensions, armed conflicts in certain regions, and disputes over natural resources. These factors contribute to unstable governance and hamper the country's economic development.



In North Kivu province, where hostilities between the FARDC and the M23 resumed in October 2023, people are continuing to flee the fighting, which is refocusing on the town of Goma. The provincial capital, still under siege like the rest of the province, is experiencing high tensions and rumors of an imminent takeover of the city by the March 23 movement.

Accused by Kinshasa of being behind the rise of the M23, Rwanda denies any support for the rebel movement and in turn accuses the DRC government of harboring perpetrators of the genocide.

From an internal political standpoint, the early months of 2024 have been used to maneuvering for the formation of the new parliamentary majority from which the next government will be formed. The opposition, weakened by its low score in the last general election, is struggling to formulate an effective alternative strategy, leaving the management of the war, and of public life, in the sole hands of the coalition led by President Tshisekedi.

This domination of public life by the presidential majority has led to a decline in pluralism of opinion in the media. Media outlets and journalists who feel threatened or under surveillance seem to be shying away from their mission as watchdogs and declining to investigate stories that might put them at odds with those in power. The undermining of the press, coupled with restrictions on the symbolic public space, is likely to encourage the circulation of news (false or true) of all kinds, in the face of a demand for information exacerbated by the war in the East and the country's ongoing socio-economic crisis.

## The factors of information pollution

According to an ongoing assessment of the digital public space, disinformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is fostered by various factors : (i) a combination of the socio-economic and political elements already mentioned in the contextual analysis above, and (ii) purely technological factors. The most influential factors include :

- **Weak media institutions** : media outlets and other media institutions in the DRC operate in a precarious and under-resourced environment, due to a difficult economic situation and severely restricted access to resources. This state of play exposes them to multiple influences, particularly from certain political or economic interests, and challenges their independence. The difficulties in making a regulatory framework operational, even though it was strengthened with the promulgation of two ordinances - the Digital Code and the Press Freedom Act - in March 2023, only serve to underpin an environment where disinformation thrives freely.
- **Limited access to education** : the poor quality of education and academic training for the majority of the population mean that millions of Congolese are more vulnerable to disinformation. Lower levels of educational attainment are not conducive to the development of a critical mind, and make individuals more likely to believe and spread unchecked information.
- **Polarization and political tensions** : Political polarization can create a climate where truth is often sacrificed in favor of partisan views. Information can then be shaped to serve political interests. Ethnic tensions are sometimes involved and are exploited to deliberately spread misleading information with the aim of creating fear, mistrust and division between different communities. The final objective is to create public opinion in favor of the cause being espoused.
- **Increased use of social media** : The growing popularity and use of social media among the population has facilitated the rapid spread of information, but it has also paved the way for the dissemination of fake news. Social media platforms are used to intentionally spread misinformation, exploit social divisions, and reach a wide audience. This trend is amplified by traditional media outlets picking up and disseminating certain information that is circulating on social media platforms and journalists' ever-present search for a scoop.



- ↳ **External influence :** Foreign stakeholders can also play a role in promoting misinformation to influence the political and social climate in the DRC. This may take the form of online disinformation campaigns or more subtle interventions by stakeholders with different interests in the DRC.

In this context, combating misinformation and information pollution requires a global approach, involving the improvement of media institutions, the promotion of education, the regulation of social media, and raising public awareness. This phenomenon can also be combated by implementing fact-checking mechanisms and promoting transparency.

## Perpetrators of disinformation

We can identify three main groups who are behind information pollution in the Democratic Republic of Congo : private political entrepreneurs, digital militias and private digital companies.

### Political actors

This first group includes individuals motivated by vested interests who aim to mobilize public opinion or establish networks of influence to achieve their political objectives. In 2020, for example, Facebook deleted around sixty accounts associated with a politician in the ruling coalition, Honoré Mvula. The social networking site accused the politician of spreading disinformation and political propaganda under the guise of news content. A total of 66 user accounts, 63 Facebook pages, five groups, and 25 Instagram accounts were deleted.

### Digital militias

The military term militia is used to designate permanent or temporary troops formed to supplement, reinforce or replace the standing army. They may also be illegal paramilitary organizations carrying out commando actions on behalf of a political movement or other commanding structure (company director, trade union, etc.). These two aspects come together in the constitution and modus operandi of structured groups that are present online and who seek to exert influence on society or on specific events. Just as armed militias can exert influence over territories, control geographical areas or conduct military operations, these digital militias are active in influencing opinion, steering public debate online, and

manipulating perceptions through the dissemination of apparently legitimate content. Four digital militias with clear political aims, each affiliated to specific political movements, came to the fore during the election period. These include :

- ↘ **"The Talibans"** : A digital militia claiming to be part of the UDPS party and ardently defending Félix Tshisekedi. They systematically target people and organizations they perceive as a threat to their leader, using various forms of information pollution.
- ↘ **"Kashobwe"** : named after a locality in Kasenga territory, on the left bank of the Lwapula on the border with Zambia, less than 20 km from Lake Mweru. Kashobwe is linked to Moïse Katumbi. The Kashobwe militia unites Moïse Katumbi's enthusiastic supporters, including influencers posing as journalists or with long experience in journalism, now actively working to influence information.
- ↘ **"Pyongyang"** : affiliated with politician Vital Kamerhe and his UNC party. Pyongyang often teams up with the Taliban to attack Kashobwe or the "Mpangistanis".
- ↘ **The "Mpangistanais"** : close to Martin Fayulu. They take their name from "Mpangi", meaning "brother" in Kikongo. The term gained currency when Martin Fayulu and Adolphe Muzito, all opposition members from the former Bandundu region, were allies.

In each of these militias, there are five types of members :


1. **Covert influencers** : They exert influence without advertising themselves as such, acting in a subtle way or without seeking to emphasize their status as an influencer.
2. **Self-proclaimed militants (including communicators)** : they openly display their political, social or ideological commitment and opinions, and assert them publicly. Self-proclaimed militants play an active role in informational influence actions to defend certain causes, and readily display their beliefs, political affiliations or commitments in public debates.
3. **Phantom journalists** : pretend to be a journalist but publish content designed to influence or manipulate public opinion. These individuals do not necessarily follow the ethical principles of journalism, and may be involved in spreading disinformation, propaganda or other forms of information manipulation. They often publish true information to mislead the public about their real activities.
4. **Committed journalists** : refer to themselves as journalists. They work for media outlets that participate in information influence operations, either because they work for outlets whose political affiliation is known, or because they work "independently" based on their audience reach on social media.

5. **Religious operators** : They are similar to political entrepreneurs, defending political causes and actors by taking advantage of their status as "trustees of the word of God."

### Private digital companies

The most significant example of this third category of players (after political entrepreneurs and digital militias) is the Archimedes Group. The Israeli company had been banned by Facebook in May 2019 for conducting electoral informational influence activities through fake accounts and content. Facebook explained that this company had created fake accounts and disseminated false information with the aim of manipulating the elections, particularly in the DRC.

Sans Frontières Associates Ltd. (SFA) signed a contract with the Presidency of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This strategic communications consultancy drafts press releases, manages press relations and provides media training for Félix Tshisekedi's teams. At the end of November, Jeune Afrique revealed that Jonathan Lehrle, a former UK Conservative Party Chief of Staff, had worked for the British lobbying firm Bell Pottinger until the end of 2016. The firm was accused of orchestrating a secret campaign in January 2016 to stir up racial tensions in South Africa on behalf of billionaire clients, including the Gupta brothers. It should be noted that Félix Tshisekedi's electoral campaign was also marked by a focus on what he referred to as "foreign candidates."



**The most significant example of this third category of players (after political entrepreneurs and digital militias) is the Archimedes Group. The Israeli company had been banned by Facebook in May 2019 for conducting electoral informational influence activities through fake accounts and content. Facebook explained that this company had created fake accounts and disseminated false information with the aim of manipulating the elections, particularly in the DRC...**

The SFA website presents Jonathan Lehrle as an expert with solid expertise in controlling political messages and proven media management skills. It also mentions that he managed a number of sensitive projects between 2008 and 2016. These projects cover a wide spectrum, from Belarus and the collaboration with President Lukashenko in 2008/2009, to more conventional political initiatives in Zambia, South Africa, Gabon, Guinea, Zambia (notably in the mining sector), Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of Congo (PCT), Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Ukraine and the Middle East.

Meta's January 2022 report identified and removed a network of three Facebook accounts originating from St Petersburg, Russia, primarily targeting the DRC as well as other African countries. This network used fake accounts to create fictitious personalities, such as media editors or European-based Arabic-speaking executives in PR agencies, with profile photos probably generated by artificial intelligence. Although their attempts to exert influence were largely unsuccessful, they did try to contact African journalists to publish articles on their behalf, notably aimed at criticizing French influence in Africa. This activity has been linked to individuals associated with the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA).

## Practices of information pollution

Widely acknowledged as a pioneer of 20th-century public relations and strategic communication, Edward Bernays<sup>6</sup> (1928) explored various techniques for manipulating public opinion in his seminal book "Propaganda". He invented the notion of informational influence and showed how it can be used to shape public perceptions and opinions. His ideas and work have greatly contributed to the understanding of how journalistic information can be used as a powerful tool for persuasion and manipulation on a large scale.

A survey of the Congolese media ecosystem shows how conquering public opinion paves the way towards large-scale manipulation operations involving informational influence, both in the electoral context and in military operations in the province of North Kivu.

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<sup>6</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda : Comment manipuler l'opinion en démocratie*. Paris, éditions Zones, p. 144



## Polluting electoral informational influence (2iep)

Electoral informational influence refers to the strategic and deliberate use of information, often through traditional media outlets and online platforms, to influence voters' opinions, attitudes and behavior during election periods. This influence can be exerted by various stakeholders including political parties, candidates, interest groups or even foreign entities, and may or may not directly involve journalists. 'Foxification' is a mechanism often used by the media to disseminate deliberately erroneous information, in order to create a climate of opinion favorable to a particular ideology or political figure. This process can be seen as symptomatic of the post-truth era, where the veracity of facts becomes secondary to their effectiveness in supporting a cause or opinion. Foxification raises fundamental questions about the role of the media as a fourth power in the system of checks and balances in society. Many recent studies have shown how the media can be instrumentalized to serve particular interests, to the detriment of the general interest and democracy. Such dynamics are of even more concern in societies undergoing transition or conflict situations, where the media are called upon to play a key role in building peace and social cohesion. It raises questions about the ethics of journalism and the media's ability to contribute to free and fair elections and challenges the role of citizens and civil society in maintaining responsible and transparent media.

## Military informational influence (2iem)

In the present age, characterized by the pre-eminence of information as a vector of power, hybrid warfare is emerging as a complex domain where conflicts are no longer limited to traditional battlefields, but extend into the information space. Hybrid warfare is conceptualized as a multidimensional conflict combining conventional and unconventional weapons, including information manipulation and disinformation, to achieve strategic objectives. As stated by Vladimir Volkoff, a French novelist writing about intelligence and manipulation during the Cold War, information warfare is defined as the offensive and defensive use of information to exploit, corrupt and destroy enemy information systems, while protecting one's own. Disinformation is identified as a key strategy in hybrid warfare. It is used to manipulate public opinion and destabilize the adversary. Volkoff highlighted that disinformation is mainly used in a political context, with information processed by underhand means. Operation Mockingbird is an example of the historic application of disinformation by the CIA to influence media narratives. In the DRC, this reality most often translates into the manipulation of social media networks to influence trends and give greater space to certain discourses, sometimes creating information bubbles favorable to a particular view or specific interests. Some actors use cyber-attacks to disrupt critical infrastructures, spread fake or damaging information, or even manipulate online media, such as hacking into social media accounts or news websites.

The creation of fake online identities and media infiltration are increasingly used. They involve the infiltration of agents or propaganda officers within the mainstream media to alter or steer media coverage of events, thus favoring a certain point of view. In the DRC, the strategy adopted by the M23 rebellion is a complex one, using both information pollution and hybrid warfare to influence opinion and create uncertainty :

- 1. Creating a fake news agency :** By establishing fictitious news agencies such as Rutshuru Presse, the M23 seeks to manipulate journalists by disseminating fake news reports. This practice aims to disorientate and propagate fake information in order to shape a narrative favorable to their interests.
- 2. Creating fake media :** Fictitious media outlets such as Voice of Kivu or Goma 24, created on online social media networks, are used to spread M23 propaganda. These fake media entities are used to disseminate biased and partisan content, aimed at influencing perceptions and giving legitimacy to the rebel group's actions.

3. **Creating fake activists or civil society organizations** : The M23 recruits individuals posing as activists or civil society organizations on social networks. These fake actors feed information pollution by spreading one-sided content aimed solely at supporting the interests of the M23.
4. **Using ghosts** : The use of fictitious people or anonymous profiles enables the M23 to mask the origin of disinformation and spread manipulated discourse without revealing its true source.
5. **Using fake journalists and "phantom journalists"** : The rebel group recruits individuals posing as journalists affiliated to fictitious media or transforms former news professionals into influencers. These actors contribute to the dissemination of propaganda by using their supposed credibility to reinforce the spread of biased content.

Through a combination of these different methods, the M23 sometimes manages to create a dynamic on social networks where a multiplicity of fictitious or biased sources share similar information. This strategy is designed to influence trends and alter public perceptions in favor of the rebel group's objectives.

The strategy of informational influence deployed by the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to counter the M23 is based on several tactics that also borrow from the principles of information pollution and hybrid warfare :

6. **Committed journalists (patriotic journalists)** : These media "professionals" are closely aligned with government positions. They use their platform to disseminate pro-government narratives, often presenting one-sided perspectives in support of the incumbent's cause. They highlight the regime's successes and achievements with a view to underpinning the credibility of government actions and discrediting political opponents.
7. **Digital militias affiliated to the presidential camp** : The government deploys various digital militias that are active on online platforms and share pro-government content. These groups use strategies of message dissemination, disinformation and even defamation to defend government positions and attack opponents, helping to shape favorable public opinion.
8. **Neo-medias** : These new online media outlets, set up between 2022 and 2023, are funded or supported by stakeholders with close ties to the government. They use their platforms to spread information that is often biased in the government's favor. These media outlets rely on local resources to give an impression of legitimacy and proximity to the population, reinforcing the credibility of their pro-government content.

- 9. Civil society close to the government :** The government relies on members of civil society who are in close contact with the ruling authorities. These civil society stakeholders frequently appear in the mainstream media to express opinions and viewpoints that converge with those of pro-government spokespeople. They use similar terms and language to underpin the coherence of the government's message.

These strategies of informational influence aim to create a narrative convergence, where several stakeholders (journalists, media, members of civil society) all give similar coherent messages that are supportive to the government. Through a combination of these tactics, the government seeks to consolidate its position, undermine its critics and influence public opinion to its benefits.

The media confrontation between the Congolese government and the M23 takes place against a backdrop of the use of informational leverage to influence minds in disputed territories and manipulate public opinion.

The M23's tactics to exert control over information in areas under their influence are evidenced by the restrictions the rebel group has imposed on Top Congo FM's radio partners, the constraints imposed on media managers in Rutshuru territory, and the obligation for these media to devote one hour of airtime every day to the M23. These tactics, which go beyond military actions, are aimed at consolidating power and influencing opinion in the regions concerned.

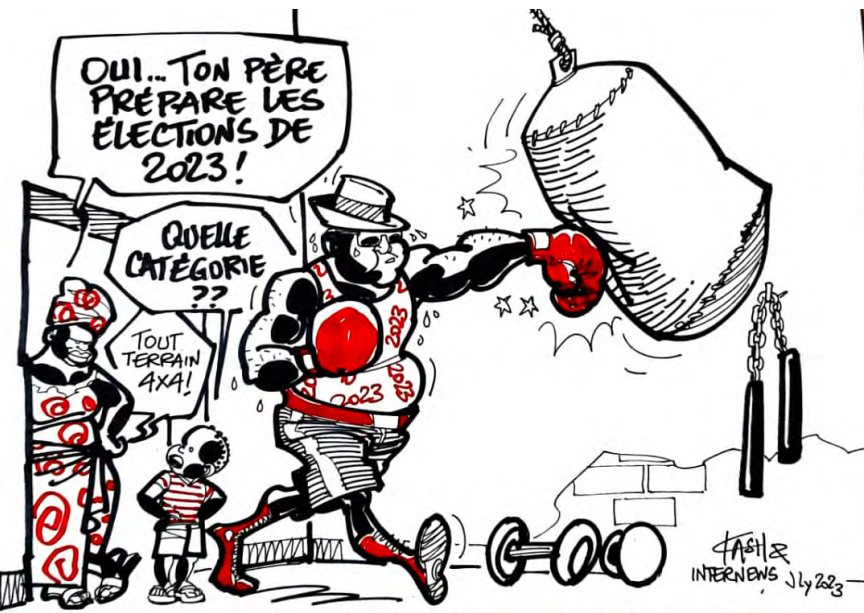
Statements by the DRC's High Council for Broadcasting and Communication (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication - CSAC) on the ban on broadcasting Rwandan television stations in the Bluesat, Startimes and DSTV packages highlighted accusations of manipulation of information and propaganda. The CSAC accused these media outlets of spreading messages aimed at destabilizing the DRC, denigrating its institutions and promoting the interests of the M23, and therefore contributing to the pollution of information and the manipulation of public opinion.



The Congolese government has taken a number of diplomatic and media initiatives in an attempt to counter the influence of Rwanda and the M23. These include the expulsion of the Rwandan ambassador and the suspension of other agreements with Rwanda. These actions aim to contain the spread of messages or information deemed harmful to the stability of the DRC, while seeking to positively influence public opinion in favor of the government.

The media war between the Congolese government and the M23 is also a battle for control of information and public opinion, where the media are used as instruments of power to influence contested areas and consolidate the position of each side in the conflict.

# Typology of WhatsApp messages



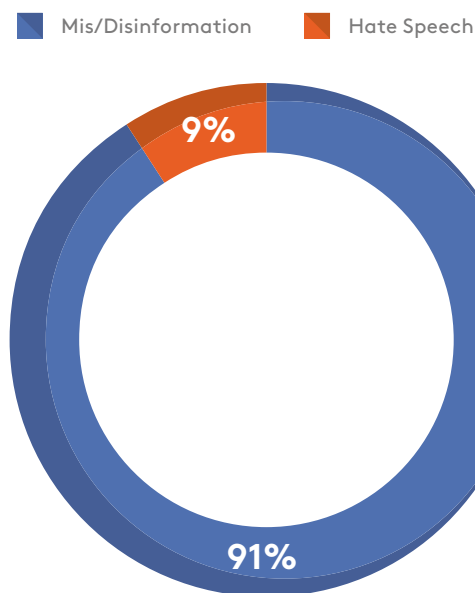
**T**his section provides an analysis of the nature and characteristics of mis/disinformation messages as well as hate speech disseminated in the WhatsApp groups monitored for this study.

Over the study period, 520 messages of mis/disinformation and hate speech were registered, with 170 on week one and 350 on week 2. This marks a stark increase in the spread of false or harmful information in the weeks prior to the elections.

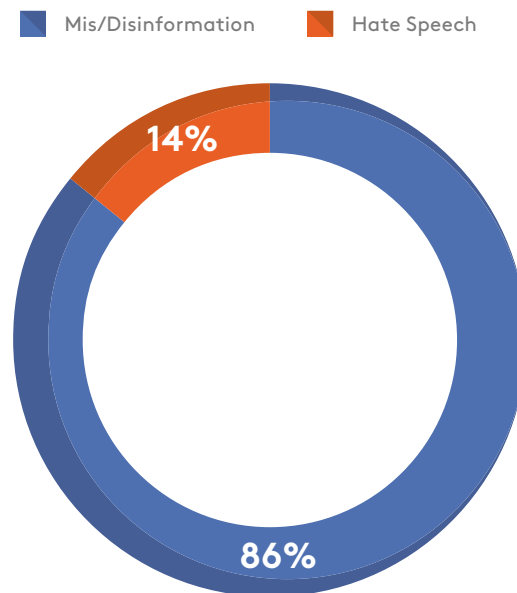
Overall, the quantitative analysis suggests that a median average of 3.5 messages circulated in each of the groups over the two-weeks period. It was not possible to ascertain whether some groups had a higher concentration of mis/disinformation and hate speech than others.

Overall, and across the monitoring period, the vast majority of messages documented were mis/disinformation, with a smaller proportion of hate speech.

Type of identified message by category (week 1)



Type of identified message by category (week 2)



### Urban centers are hotspots for the diffusion of both mis/disinformation and hate speech

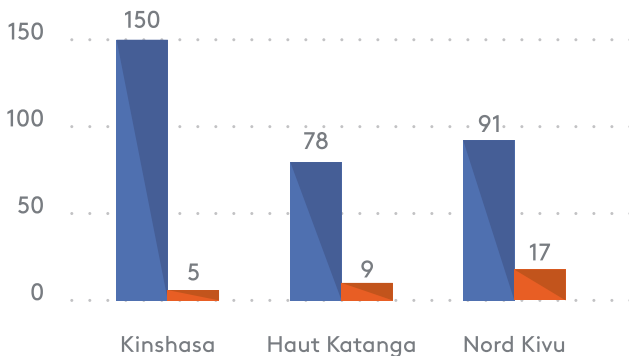
The capital city of Kinshasa was the main geographical hotspot for the circulation of mis/disinformation with numbers of messages increasing as the date for elections grew closer (66 messages on week 1 and 150 messages on week 2). In North Kivu and Haut Katanga, the provincial capitals of Goma and Lubumbashi were the areas where mis/disinformation and hate speech were most prevalent. In Goma, a combined amount of 140 messages of mis/disinformation were documented during the two weeks, with only minimal numbers inventoried for provincial towns such as Butembo (9), Rutshuru (5), Lubero (3), Beni (3) and Walikale (1). Similarly, in Lubumbashi, a total amount of 52 messages were registered over the two weeks, with only 35 in Likasi and 1 in Sakania. The breakdown of messages is similar for hate speech.

This prevalence of mis/disinformation and hate speech in urban areas may be explained by the fact that people in towns and cities are likely to be more exposed to political campaigning as well as their diffusion on social media.

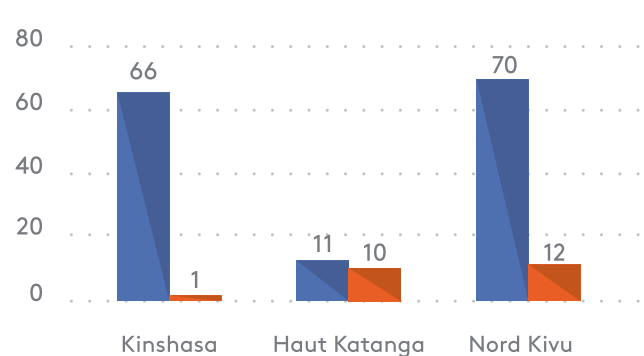
## Hate speech was more prevalent in Haut Katanga and North Kivu provinces

Occurrences of hate speech messages took place mainly in North Kivu (29) and Haut Katanga (19) provinces. In North Kivu, while the analysis showed a slight increase in the absolute numbers recorded between week one (12) and week two (17), it indicated that the proportion of hate speech messages compared to the number of mis/disinformation messages remained stable (around 15%). In Haut Katanga, however, the proportion of hate speech messages significantly decreased from 52% in week one to 10% in week two.

Type of message per province (week 1)



Type of message per province (week 2)



■ Mis/Disinformation ■ Hate Speech

■ Mis/Disinformation ■ Hate Speech

The online spread of hate speech in these two provinces may be explained by the security and political contexts as well as strong discourses rooted in identity politics. In the wake of the elections, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concerns about “*the rise in ethnic-based hate speech and incitement to violence in the DR Congo*”, especially in the Kivus, Katanga and Kasai regions<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-sounds-alarm-at-rising-hate-speech-in-drc/7429794.html>

In North Kivu, the conflict with M23 has given rise to strong anti-Rwandan sentiment<sup>8</sup>, as well as calls for violence against Congolese people of the Tutsi ethnic group. According to one research participant : *“Several WhatsApp groups carry hate messages. Recently, a message was circulated by a police officer urging the population to pick up machetes to protect themselves. This message was picked up by a human rights activist. He in turn added below the same message that all Tutsis should be killed because Tutsis are dangerous people.”* (FG Goma1).

Other examples of messages include :

*“Over the past ten days or so, the current electoral campaign has also witnessed the rise in power and widespread use of extremist rhetoric, with calls for violence and murder, while hundreds of thousands of machetes have been conspicuously distributed to the Taliban of the UDPS and to supporters of Katumbi.”* (North Kivu WhatsApp group, 10 December 2023).

*“The wazalendo are Hutus who have just changed their Hutu names to munyamulenge. On that note, any Congolese who says that the Rwandan Tutsis are banyamulenges will be caught and beaten up for that.”* (North Kivu WhatsApp group, 8 December 2023).

In Haut Katanga historic tensions between native Katangans and immigrants from Kasai were stirred in the pre-elections period<sup>9</sup>, as incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi comes from Kasai and Moise Katumbi, one of his main rivals, comes from Katanga.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220615-anti-rwanda-tensions-boil-over-in-eastern-dr-congo-city-of-goma>

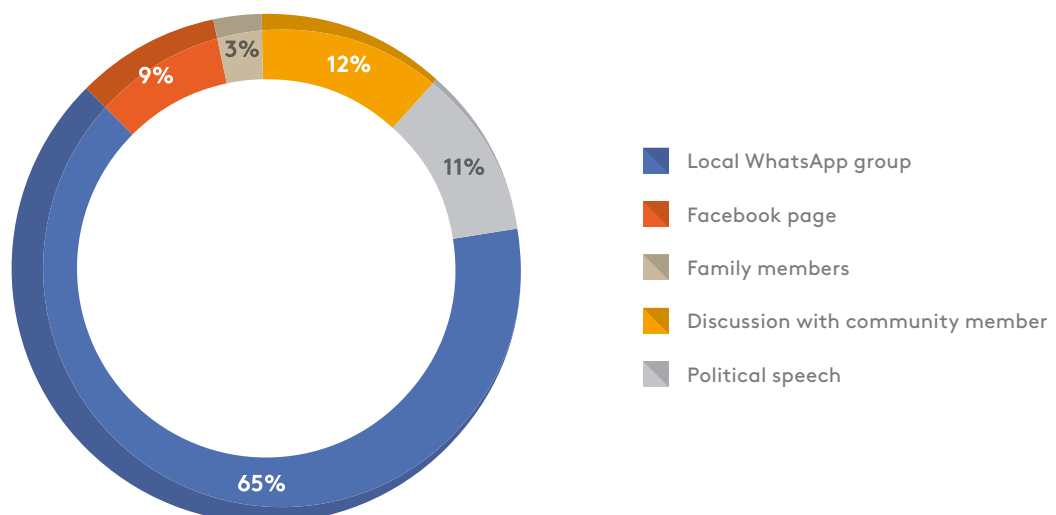
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/democratic-republic-congo/katanga-tensions-drcs-mineral-heartland>

*“Félix Tshisekedi was not well received in Kolwezi because the population understood that the outgoing president was there to take away their mining concessions and give jobs to his Kasaian brothers to the detriment of the indigenous people. Hence the need not to vote for him. (...) If his Kasaian brothers dare to say a word, we will chase him into the greater Katanga area, following in the footsteps of our brothers from Malemba Nkulu” (Haut Katanga WhatsApp group, 07 December 2023).*

*“I left several groups [because of mis/disinformation and hate speech], but here I'm going to talk about the group called ‘Debout Katangais’. In this group, according to its vision, only a Katangese could be a member. The administrators had planned that the aim of this group would be to share all information relating to all of our province. But, unfortunately, while we were members of that group, we saw that there were a lot of hate messages circulating on it, insulting other tribes such as the Kasaians. There were several infiltrators who weren't Katangese, which led to exchanges of insults. Seeing no place for myself in these kinds of discussions, I was forced to leave the group without asking the administrator's advice. When the administrator added me again, I called him privately to tell him that I didn't want to be in the group anymore, even though I'm a Katangan” (FG Lubumbashi).*

## Some users are encouraged by politicians or political entrepreneurs to share false information

Where did you received this information (disinformation case) you just shared from ?



In Haut Katanga, WhatsApp group users reported being encouraged – sometimes under pressure – to share political messages on the groups.

*“We young people are sometimes used. I’ll take one example from the campaign period. I may be aware that the message isn’t a good one. But because I’m supporting a leader who gave me mega [online data] and a bit of money, and who asked me to share this message in several WhatsApp groups, I’m doing it. It’s not my opinion because I’m being pushed by a leader.”* (FG Lubumbashi).

*“Sometimes we publish things following threats. They tell you, for example, that if you don’t publish, they’ll come and attack you at home, they’ll burn something in your house. In that case, you are obliged to publish these messages.”* (FG Lubumbashi).

*“I know a friend who works with a provincial authority [name deleted]. This authority, who is in the majority camp, told my friend that ‘if you want us to continue working with you, I’ll ask you to publish this message against the opposition’. My friend knew it was wrong to publish this message. But seeing that if he refused to do so he would lose his job, and that finding another is difficult, he published and took screenshots, because his boss had forced him to do so.”* (FG Lubumbashi).

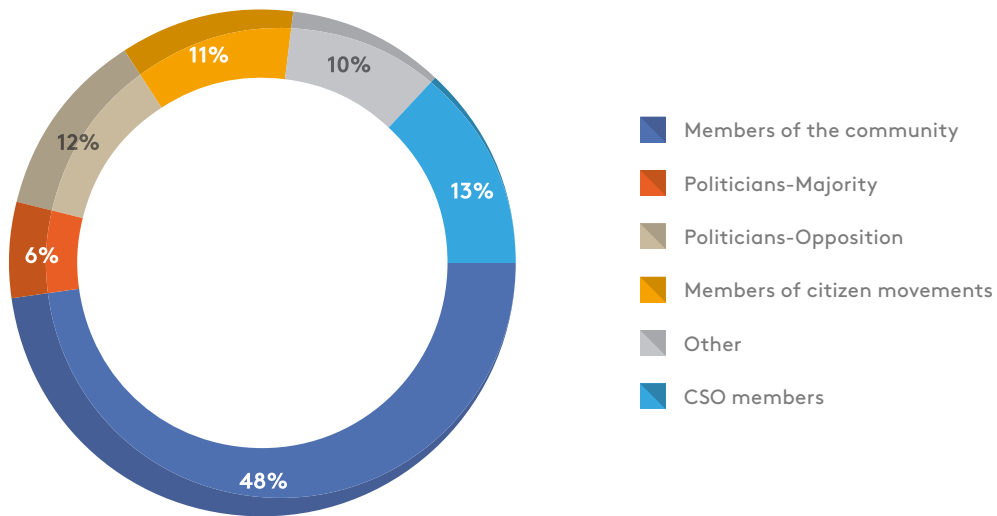
While information collected for this study may be anecdotal, and is insufficient to establish a trend, it sheds light on a phenomenon which may require further research. The use of monetary and non-monetary incentives as well as threats to encourage the dissemination of political content is related to the active online participation of both majority and opposition politicians. Indeed, as suggested elsewhere<sup>10</sup>, political entrepreneurs may be motivated by vested interests and seeking to mobilize public opinion, shape policy or establish networks of influence to achieve their political goals.

Data collected for this study shows that the mobilization of political actors (including politicized citizens’ movements) increased in the weeks prior to the elections, reaching a third (29%) of mis/disinformation shared in the monitored WhatsApp groups.

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<sup>10</sup> Ligodi, Patient. Pollution de l’information : Fake News et journalisme dans le monde et en République Démocratique du Congo. Bruxelles, Wavre, Kinshasa, éditions Mabiki, 2024

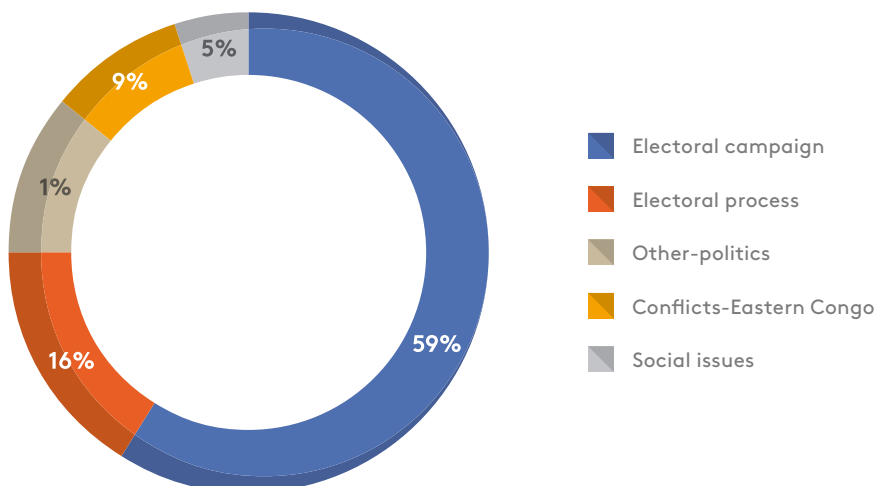
## Typology of actors sharing mis/disinformation messages



## The spread of mis/disinformation around the electoral campaign increased slightly in the weeks prior to the elections

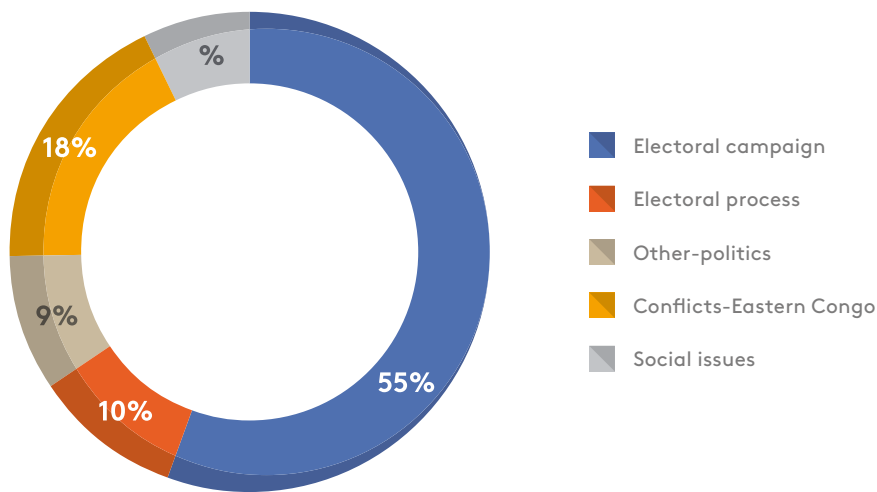
Data collected in the monitored WhatsApp groups suggests that the combined number of mis/disinformation messages shared by users about the electoral campaign, the electoral process, and national politics slightly increased in the run up to the elections. By comparison, mis-disinformation related to the conflict in North Kivu, as well as general society issues, slightly decreased in the same period.

## Key thematic categories of mis-disinformation messages (week 1)





**Key thematic categories of mis-disinformation messages (week 2)**



Within the overall category of the electoral campaign, the most frequent types of mis/disinformation shared in the groups are pointing to alleged problems with the organization of the elections. Data collected in the groups shows the same or similar messages circulating in multiple groups at the same time.

*“In South Africa, the printer made it clear to Denis KADIMA that the ballot papers could not be ready in 2 weeks. As a result, CENI is technically unable to organize the elections within the constitutional deadline.” (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 5 December 2023).*

*“President Felix [Tshisekedi] gives 20GB free internet data to supporters. Martin Fayulu gives 20GB of free data and 5000 FC for the rally and campaign for the presidential elections” (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 5 December 2023).*

*“Goma : At 3.30pm, the town hall deploys its agents to the streets of the town center to tear down all the campaign posters of candidate Denis Mukwege. When approached, the Town Hall replied that it was on the instructions of the President, given that Félix wanted to come and campaign in Goma... message received as such. What country are we in after all ?” (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 7 December 2023).*

Other messages include false information about other candidates, for the purpose of defamation. Interestingly, accusations of being an advocate of LGBTQIA+ communities were repeatedly used to position targeted candidates in opposition to Congolese socio-cultural norms. While homosexuality is not a criminal offence in the Congolese Penal Code, Article 172 specifies that any act or offence "against nature" may be punished, leaving a loophole for judicial action against LGBTQIA+ communities. More generally, Congolese society remains strongly conservative with regards to SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics).

*"Denis Mukwege candidate of the homosexuals"* (Kinshasa WhatsApp Group, 11 December 2023).

*"President Fatshi [Felix Tshisekedi] has legalized homosexuality and transsexuality in the DRC since 11 September 2023, cfr Opinion bulletin number 004-06/12/2023"* (Goma WhatsApp Group, 8 December 2023).

*"Kasaïans, do not vote for Mukwege. He is a Western-formatted candidate. Once you vote for him, he will integrate gender into decision-making bodies and legalize gay marriage in the DR Congo"* (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 9 December 2023).

*"Denis Mukwege is not allowed to campaign in Goma because he promotes homosexuality and this will not be accepted in Goma"* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 8 December 2023).



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Focus sur les fake news, Intox et légendes urbaines en RD Congo

#BOMOKO  
HABARI YA UMGUJA

Articles

Lutte contre la désinformation et les discours de haine en RDC : bulletin Sango ya bomoko n°36

Voici la 36<sup>è</sup> édition du bulletin Sango ya bomoko. Ce bulletin a traité, au total, cinq (5) feedbacks en plus d'une analyse, répartis en trois...

Lire plus

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## Identity politics strongly shape the type of mis/disinformation disseminated on WhatsApp groups

In all monitored provinces, the most frequently shared message - categorized sometimes as mis/disinformation and sometimes as hate speech - is related to opposition candidate Moïse Katumbi's origin.

*"In his election campaign rally on the night of 05 December 2023 in Lubumbashi, presidential candidate Antoine Félix TSHISEKEDI asked the people of Katanga not to vote for a foreigner, Moïse KATUMBI". (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 06 December).*

*"None of [Moïse] Katumbi's 9 children were born to a Congolese mother. Moïse Katumbi has no Congolese blood in his house. He himself was born of an Israeli-Italian father and a Zambian mother, and his wife is a naturalized Belgian Burundian Tutsi. He has a total of 9 children: 4 with his Tutsi wife Carine, 2 with a Zambian, 1 with a Tanzanian, 1 with a Jewish-Central African and 1 with an Italian". (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 5 December 2023).*

*"Olive Lembe Kabila opposes Moïse Katumbi because, according to her, to become head of the country you have to be Congolese by father and mother and have a Congolese wife." (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 7 December 2023).*

*"All patriots want Katumbi to stop his campaign and be arrested so that he can explain himself properly. It is not possible for a foreigner living in the country to have the power to run for the presidency. Another thing: let's take a good look at the President of the CENI and the President of the country's Supreme Court. They are not patriots, because it was they who allowed Katumbi's CV to be accepted as a Congolese citizen." (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 8 December 2023).*

These messages are linked to broader political debates in Congolese society around the notion of "Congolité". The concept, referring to someone being uniquely "Congolese" due to both their parents' national identity, has become an increasingly evoked political concept in Congolese society and has been presented by some political groups as a criterion for political legitimacy. While the Congolese constitution stipulates that the president of the republic must "possess the Congolese nationality of origin"<sup>11</sup>, recent attempts have been made to restrict this definition.

In 2021 lawmakers proposed a Bill on 'Congolité' to restrict certain government posts to citizens born to a Congolese father and mother, including the President of the Republic. The bill was rejected but "the ideas behind it threaten national cohesion by reinforcing tensions in a country affected by instability since the 1990s. It seeks to create second-class citizens, excluding many de facto from the political process and Congolese society. In a country of over 200 ethnic groups, it is not hard to see these ideas weaponized ahead of the 2023 presidential election" (Adegbidi 2021)<sup>12</sup>.

Identity politics was also a common theme in Haut-Katanga mis/disinformation and hate speech, and the examples below suggest that long-standing ethnic tensions in Katanga were instrumentalized during the elections to influence outcomes.

*"Jacques KYABULA<sup>13</sup> and Sama LUKONDE<sup>14</sup> are financing young Miswa (Kasaians) to mobilize many people and insult their Katangese blood brother."* (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 9 December 2023).

*"Kasaiens vote for Kasaiens. If we lose power, the BaSwahili will chase us back from their provinces".* (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 9 December 2023).

*"Katangais vote for Katangais to safeguard and better guarantee our resources and restore respect for the Kasaians."* (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 9 December 2023).

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<sup>11</sup> In article 10, Congolese origin is defined as: '... any person belonging to the ethnic groups whose persons and territory constituted what became the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) at independence...'

<sup>12</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/12/29/the-next-drc-elections-could-weaponise-congolite-identity/>

<sup>13</sup> Governor of the Haut Katanga province before the general elections

<sup>14</sup> DRC Prime Minister, before the general elections, belongs to a Katanga ethnic group

*“90% of the candidates who have applied in the province of Haut Katanga are Kasaians at national, provincial and municipal level, with the mission of neutralizing Katangese power. Dear Katangese, open your eyes wide. To vote for a Kasaiian is to vote for his suffering”.* (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 9 December 2023).

## **In North Kivu, fear and insecurity created by conflict in the East is used to shape the electoral debate and spread mis/disinformation about presidential candidates**

Data presented above showed that the conflict in the Eastern provinces of DRC constituted a significant part (31% on week 1 and 9% on week 2) of the mis/disinformation messages shared on the WhatsApp groups. Many of the messages provided false information about the evolution of the military operations (such as fake news about the capture of Goma by M23 rebels or deaths of key military leaders), with no direct links to the electoral campaign. However, an equally large number of messages claimed that some candidates (especially opposition candidate Moise Katumbi) either had links to M23 and/or Rwanda, or were linked to balkanization agendas.

*“M23 leader announces support for Moise Katumbi”* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 5 December 2023).

*“Imagine, Moise Katumbi President ; we will have a civil house full of Rwandans”* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 6 December 2023).

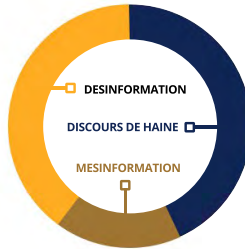
*“Felix Tshisekedi in Bukavu : Among the 26 candidates there are some who are made by Rwanda”* (Goma WhatsApp Group, 09 December 2023).



**Data presented above showed that the conflict in the Eastern provinces of DRC constituted a significant part (31% on week 1 and 9% on week 2) of the mis/disinformation messages shared on the WhatsApp groups...**



## ANALYSE DES CATÉGORIES DES COMMENTAIRES COLLECTÉS DANS LA COMMUNAUTÉ



## ZONE DE COLLECTE



- Kinshasa
- Tshopo
- Kasai-Oriental
- Nord-Kivu
- Lualaba
- Kasai-Central
- Equateur
- Haut-Katanga
- Sud-Kivu
- Ituri
- Tanganyika
- Mai-ndombe

## A PROPOS DU BULLETIN

Produit par Kinshasa News Lab, Next Corps, Actualité.cd, Balobaki, Congo Check, Lokuta Mabe, 7sur7.cd et ZoomEco, ce bulletin répond aux rumeurs qui circulent au sein de la communauté et qui peuvent être porteurs des discours de haine, des discours tribalistes et des fausses informations.

La collecte se fait sur terrain, sur les réseaux sociaux et autres plates formes numériques dans les 12 provinces de la RDC comme présentées ci-contre par les organisations précitées.

The incumbent president's difficulties in stabilizing the region despite 2 years of military state of emergency and multiple reshuffling of foreign forces in North Kivu and Ituri<sup>15</sup> was central to mis/disinformation messaging. Indeed, fears and anxieties around the advances of M23 and the group's support from Rwanda<sup>16</sup> were reflected extensively in the collected messages. Ahead of the elections, candidates used strong nationalist rhetoric, with Tshisekedi using the most extreme language, comparing Rwanda's President Paul Kagame to Adolf Hitler : "*Félix Tshisekedi in Bukavu: "I would like to say this to the Rwandan president, Paul Kagame. Since he wanted to behave like Adolf Hitler by having expansionist aims, I promise him that he will end up like Adolf Hitler."* (WhatsApp Group, 09 December 2023)<sup>17</sup>.

"*Dear Congolese, do not vote for candidate Mukwege. He is a candidate groomed by the West for balkanization. Be careful, once you vote for this man, he will entirely leave the management to the Westerners.*" (Haut Katanga WhatsApp Group, 11 December 2023).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20231204-east-africa-force-starts-withdrawal-from-drcongo>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/dr-congo-atrocities-rwanda-backed-m23-rebels>  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/03/17/congo-rwanda-genocide-anniversary-war-world-forgot/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-67669187>



**As the above examples demonstrate, the spread of mis/disinformation about the crisis in the East is rooted in the broader historical and national debates around the balkanization of the DRC, which political elites usually unearth during crisis periods. Frustrations about the persistence of insecurity, a stagnating decentralization process and continued state fragmentation are merged with conspiracy theories and rumors about Rwanda’s plan to establish a “Hima-Tutsi empire” in eastern DRC with Western support...**

*“The plan for the occupation of the Congo and Central Africa by the Tutsis is under way. It is a war between the Bantus and the Tutsis. These elections are a plan to finalize their process of creating the Hima empire, supported by the Western cabal. The objective is the same: balkanization.”* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 17 December 2023).

*“This group is full of \*Rwandan Tutsis\* and they are all behind Katumbi. A good Congolese is supposed to understand easily. National sovereignty or balkanization. The choice is clear, let's save the country with \*FATSHI BÉTON\* and not sell our national sovereignty to a foreigner.”* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 7 December 2023).

As the above examples demonstrate, the spread of mis/disinformation about the crisis in the East is rooted in the broader historical and national debates around the balkanization of the DRC, which political elites usually unearth during crisis periods. Frustrations about the persistence of insecurity, a stagnating decentralization process and continued state fragmentation are merged with conspiracy theories and rumors about Rwanda’s plan to establish a “Hima-Tutsi empire” in eastern DRC with Western support<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> [https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16\\_GIC\\_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf](https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16_GIC_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf)



# Sharing practices and motivations

**T**his section provides an analysis of users' motivations to share mis/disinformation and hate speech on WhatsApp groups, as well as insight into the strategies which they use to identify mis/disinformation, verify information, and correct other online users.

## **Information shared is equally obtained from official and informal sources**

A large proportion of the messages disseminated by users on WhatsApp groups are shared from other WhatsApp groups (65.5%) as well as social media including Facebook (8.5%), X, TikTok and YouTube. Users reported sharing links and screenshots of content they found interesting.

Information shared on WhatsApp groups also originates first or second hand from the community level (12.5%). Users share information from family, friends, church and contacts in neighborhoods, particularly to warn or inform about ongoing and recent events such as political rallies and security incidents.

To a lower extent, information is also shared from official sources including online media outlets (e.g. actualités.cd, 7/7.cd, Radio Okapi), websites of institutions, official press releases (e.g. from CENI or ministries), and political speeches and events (11.1%).





## Users are somewhat selective in joining and leaving groups which share false or harmful information

Users sometimes inform themselves about the objectives and content of the groups they join or are added to, but not systematically. They do so by checking the group description, monitoring discussions to see if they reflect their opinions and interests, or by asking the administrator directly. In the context of elections, as well as in general, they report being added to a large number of groups without being asked or without knowing anything about the groups and their other users. In these cases, they are particularly proactive in verifying the nature of the groups.

*“It’s not uncommon to find yourself a member of a WhatsApp group without wanting to be, which can limit your ability to analyze the ins and outs of such participation. I don’t think we have the time to analyze the parameters and potential dangers, so we don’t know what to do before joining a WhatsApp group” (FG Goma 1).*

*“Yes, I asked the administrators about this because there are also spy groups that track down members whose opinions differ from theirs, which is why it was important for me to understand the parameters of credibility.” (FG<sup>19</sup> Lubumbashi).*

*“I check the credibility or reliability of information in a group where I feel I don’t know anyone, because sometimes someone I don’t know sends me a link asking me to join a WhatsApp group. In that case I’ll have to ask what the purpose of the group is. But if it’s someone close to me or a friend who invites me to join a group, I already trust them beforehand and it’s easy for me to join without knowing whether or not they’re credible.” (FG Lubumbashi).*

<sup>19</sup> Focus group

Users reported leaving or muting groups which they feel do not provide them with interesting or accurate information. Some mentioned that they left groups which disseminated large numbers of graphic images of injured and dead people (likely from the conflict in the East), which promoted the agendas of candidates they did not like, or more generally when the discussions and content shared in the group no longer aligned with its stated objectives.

*"I don't leave groups simply because I don't like when people leave groups when I create them. That's just me. Even when I see in the group that Fake news are being published I stay there because rumors can also lead to real information". (Kinshasa)*

*"During the campaign, I was a member of at least 76 groups. And after the elections I decided to leave because the content was no longer interesting". (FG Goma 1)*

*"A group that doesn't have any important information for me, I don't leave it but I put it on mute. I no longer consult that group". (FG Goma 1).*

## **While users understand the value of fact-checking information before sharing it, they do not systematically do so**

The majority of users consulted in focus group discussions claimed that they always check the validity of the information they share in the WhatsApp groups. However, they were recruited to the study because they had shared mis/disinformation and/or hate speech. This means

that their statements may have been shaped by a desirability bias and may not reflect their actual practices and capabilities. A previous study by Internews showed that only 14.79% of people surveyed had a good understanding of what constitutes reliable information, and only 16.93% were able to identify cases of misinformation, thus pointing to very low fact-checking skills even amongst people who are members of radio clubs and would likely have a higher media literacy rate<sup>20</sup>.



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<sup>20</sup> Survey of 33 radios conducted in 2023 with 2386 members of radio clubs

Nevertheless, respondents for this study did show strong awareness of the risks posed by widespread mis/disinformation and the importance of fact-checking messages and links before sharing them. The strategies they used to do so include verifying whether the information was published on multiple mainstream media (online news site<sup>21</sup>, radio, TV), checking official and institutional websites for press releases, and contacting people who may have first-hand information to verify the facts (e.g. witnesses of events).

*"If we were told that from 8pm onwards, we shouldn't go to the Kalebuka neighborhood, because there at the bridge, there is a group of unidentified people who are looting people and making a mess. If I know people living in that area, I'll raise the problem with them to get the real story. If the news is confirmed, I publish it in a group."* (FG Lubumbashi).

*"A group of friends insistingly called me to tell me that it was candidate Katumbi who had become President of the Republic. They insisted that I publish this information as a matter of urgency, as I am the group's administrator. I asked them to wait until I checked the reliable news sites. After checking, I found that it was false information and that I was right not to publish it."* (FG Lubumbashi)

*"False information is a danger to the community. So, I check by comparing sources or by calling resource people. The example given above concerns the ban on motorbikes by the mayor of the town of Goma. I checked the information with the town hall's communication unit"* (FG Goma 1).

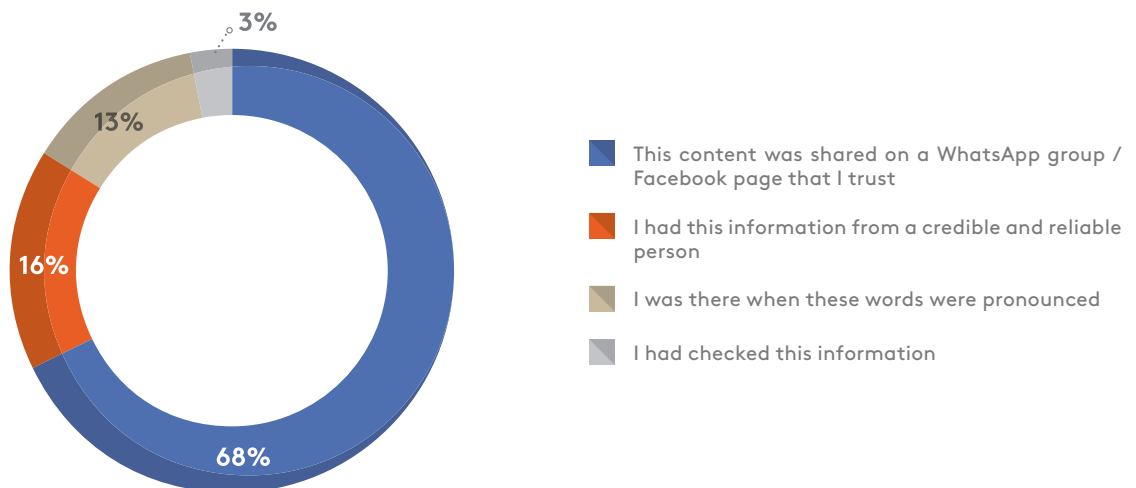
As the above quote suggests, users do not always verify the information they share. This is apparent also in the survey (graph below) where only a minority of respondents said they verified the information (in green).

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<sup>21</sup> Such as Actualités.cd, Radio Okapi, RFI, TV5, CongoCheck, Google reverse image



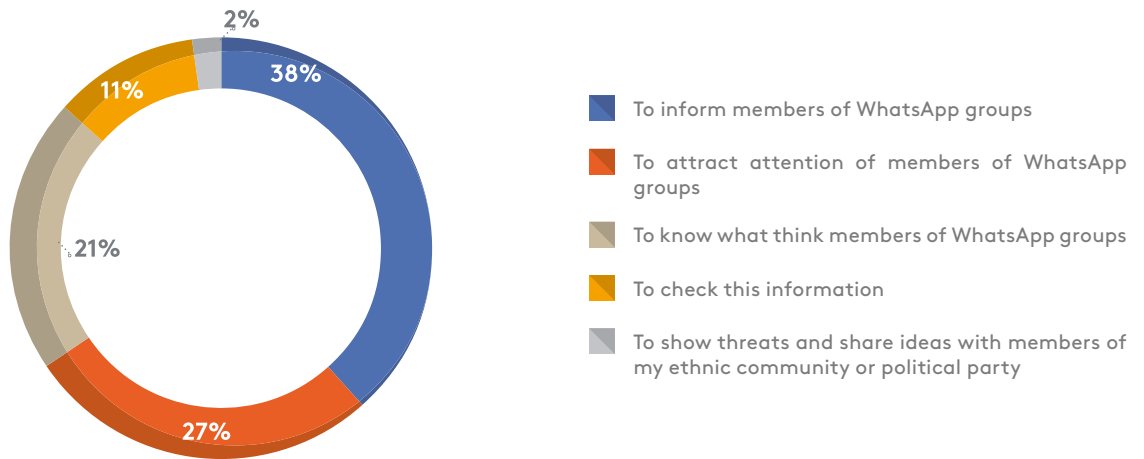
What made you think this information (disinformation/hate speech) was interesting?



**In a context of mistrust of official sources of information, users deliberately share unverified information to fact-check it**

As the below chart suggests, only a third (38%) of users are motivated to share information in order to inform others about events. On the contrary, around 11% of users share mis/disinformation specifically in order to verify it and 21% share it to know what others think.

## Why did you share this information (disinformation or hate speech)?



*“Sometimes we publish information that we believe to be false in order to get a true version, because by publishing information that we suspect to be false, there may be someone who has the true version of the information who can also inform us” (FG Lubumbashi).*

*“In case of doubt regarding the veracity of information, I share it but I write under it ‘to be verified’.” (FG Goma 2)*

*“Yes, sometimes I do publish false information in order to fact-check. But if I have enough proof that it is false, my conviction is not to share it” (FG Lubumbashi)*

The recourse to online communities to seek information may be explained by the weakness of Congolese media institutions and the high distrust in official information channels. Indeed, press organs and other media institutions in the DRC operate in a precarious situation due to a difficult economic situation and very limited access to resources. This state of affairs exposes them to multiple influences, in particular from certain political or economic interests, calling into question their independence and thus compromising the veracity of the information disseminated. The difficulties in implementing a regulatory framework, despite the fact that it has been strengthened by the promulgation of two ordinances - the Digital Code and the Freedom of the Press Act in March 2023 - reinforces an environment in which disinformation thrives unhindered. In the absence of a solid legal framework (and its implementation) to deter malicious actors and ensure accountability, trust in the official sources remains low. In addition, fact-checking structures, while growing, remain limited.

Users, therefore, turn to online communities such as WhatsApp groups in order to verify information. This informal pooling of knowledge allows group members to quickly receive reactions and feedback from others on the information shared. This phenomenon is closely linked to the reliance on rumors spread in person (radio trottoir) or online as a key source of information<sup>22</sup>.

## **Users who share false or harmful information are also motivated by getting reactions rather than informing**

One of the reasons for the lack of systematic fact-checking described above may be because one primary motivation of users when sharing messages is to trigger reactions. Indeed, the survey chart above showed that 27% who shared mis/disinformation on the WhatsApp groups sought to see other people's reaction and/or to grab people's attention.

*"Sometimes we come across information that interests us, but we lack the will to find out the truth. The aim is simply to share and see the reactions of other users without thinking about reassuring ourselves of the veracity" (FG Goma 2).*

*"We've all shared dubious or even false information on purpose, just because it was meant to be funny or entertaining. We relay this information to make fun of or damage someone's image". (FG Kinshasa)*

*"It was information of general interest. I published it without checking the facts, because I wanted to be the first to share it". (FG Goma 1).*

As explained in the introduction, one key challenge to identify mis/disinformation is to identify both the veracity of the facts presented and the intentions of the sharer. However, in online groups where the objectives of the community are not always clear, making the distinction between information that is shared for the purpose of informing others (e.g. security updates) and information that is shared with the purpose of influencing them (e.g. political campaigning) is not easy. As a result, information that may be shared for political or entertainment purposes may be misunderstood and shared by others as facts.

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<sup>22</sup> See Internews research on rumors during Ebola and Covid-19 health crisis

Some humorous messages are clearly false and makes no intent to pass as facts. For instance, one message used satire to present a scenario where Rwandan president Paul Kagame is candidate in the elections, using the registration number of the devil (666). *"Paul Kagame Mwira, No. 666, candidate for the national deputation in the city of Goma"* (North Kivu WhatsApp Group, 7 December 2023). However, distinction not always easy

However, in many instances, opinions about the electoral campaigns were categorized by data collectors as 'mis/disinformation', suggesting that personal views or beliefs are shared as factual information within the groups. Examples include :

*"In a serious electoral cycle and in a country governed by the rule of law, Mr \*TSHILOMBO\* should be declared invalid"* (Kinshasa WhatsApp Group, 6 December 2023).

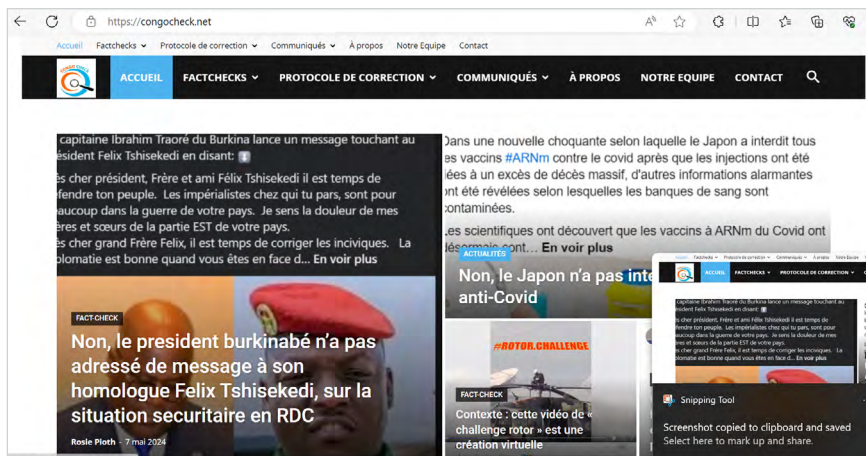
*"Hello, each candidate must present his or her vision of society and it is on the basis of this vision of society that the people will decide. Stop distracting us with your famous childish games. If you can't come up with a blueprint for society, shut up and wait for your failure. Intellectual debate is based on ideas".* (Kinshasa WhatsApp Group, 7 December 2023).

*"Congolité: a pejorative term linked to the intoxication distilled by the official French media, which is very good at self-suggestion, all in order to preserve the gains of France's famous pre-square among those less fortunate than them, without whom their economy would be stagnating. In the end, you have to call a spade a spade"* (Kinshasa WhatsApp Group, 8 December 2023).

*"If by mistake it is announced that the elections will be postponed even by one day, we will all go to the CENI to spend the night there to demand the elections."* (Haut-Katanga WhatsApp Group, 12 December 2023).

## **Users are proactive in correcting mis/disinformation**

While some users said that they do not intervene when they see mis/disinformation on WhatsApp groups, many reported taking measures to correct false or misleading information. At the most basic level, they do so by replying to the authors of messages and asking for sources or clarifications. In other cases, they proactively seek the correct information and share it in the group, as a constructive way to correct the situation.



*“On the eve of the elections on 20 December 2023, there were many messages in our WhatsApp groups saying that there would be no elections on that date. (...) To refute this false information, we took photos of people going to the polling centers and published them to say that the elections were taking place, and that people should go and vote” . (FG Lubumbashi).*

*“Not long ago, after the elections of 20 December 2023, CENI published the list of candidates who were invalidated following certain electoral regularities. Among these candidates, there was a false message according to which there was also Fifi MASUKA, Governor of Lualaba. In reality, her name was not on the list. To correct this misinformation, we took the authentic list of invalidated candidates and published it on the various WhatsApp channels”. (FG Lubumbashi).*

*“When I see false information circulating, I don't hesitate to question and challenge the authors in order to enlighten other group members. For example, I came across a piece of misinformation about the mayor's ban on motorbikes after 5pm in the town of Goma. I took the time to check the information and correct the error with the members of the group, because the ban was for 6pm and not 5pm”. (FG Goma 1).*

Some users expressed a preference for contacting authors of mis/disinformation in private rather than exposing them in public. This may be linked to socio-cultural preferences towards non-confrontational attitudes.

*“One day I had to correct some false information that had been sent to the group. The person relaying it had everyone believing that the message was true. I didn't correct him publicly, I wrote to him privately, asking him to withdraw the message and giving him proof.” (FG Goma 1).*



*"I don't like questioning people in the group because it's a bit degrading. They might feel aggrieved and react in the wrong way. I like to go in private and do it in private. So I told him that the information you gave him wasn't real information and then I sent him the right information, the real photo of Patrick Muyaya". (FG Kinshasa).*

## **Users are less willing to confront authors of hate speech**

Participants in the focus groups reported being frequently exposed to hate speech or discriminatory messages, either targeting them directly or targeting other communities. Messages include ethnic stereotypes (e.g. "X are lazy and naïve"), gender discrimination (e.g. "women should not occupy these positions" ; "women are weak"), insults against persons with disabilities (e.g. "this person is a half-man" ; "this person is an inferior"). In the contexts of tensions in Haut Katanga and eastern DRC, messages also included insults against Kasaians, Rwandans, and foreigners more generally, as well as videos of violence.

*"Every day, if not every minute, hate speech spreads in WhatsApp groups with the aim of creating tension and division. For example, a message has been doing the rounds of WhatsApp, asking the people of Goma to stop eating meat from Rwanda because it is poisoned. These are very dangerous messages, capable of creating unnecessary conflicts with the neighboring country". (FG Goma 1).*

In those cases, some users intervene and call out harmful messaging. However, most users generally do not react or leave groups, mostly for fear of incurring a violent reaction.

*"In a political group, some people said the Wazalendo were like the M23 rebels, and that they should be sent home too. When I read that, I shut up immediately". (FG Goma 2).*

*"To avoid getting involved in debates, I prefer to keep quiet instead of entering into this debate. (...) I prefer to keep quiet so as not to be treated in one way or another". (FG Kinshasa).*

*"I am wary of people who relay or publish hate messages. I prefer not to get involved in discussions that could put me in danger. That's why I never comment on hate messages" (FG Goma 2)*

*"When a message of hate or discrimination appears in a group where I am administrator, I remove it. And when it's in a group where I'm not an administrator, I keep quiet." (FG Lubumbashi).*



# Trust and preferences

**T**his section provides an analysis of the format, language and types of content that WhatsApp group users trust more, shedding light on information preferences.

## **Users are less inclined to verify information when it is shared by people or sources they trust**

Trust is a central factor in users' decision to verify the information received. In cases when they are added to groups by people they know and trust, they are often less inclined to check the nature of the group. Likewise, trust in the author or sender of the messages is a key determinant of the level of efforts made to verify information before sharing it on other platforms.

*"During the 2023 election campaign, I saw a message announcing that Martin Fayulu was offering 10 GB of internet data to the Congolese population. Because of the source of the information and the context of the campaign, I believed it to be true. However, I then took the time to check the information and discovered that it was false". (FG Goma 1).*

*"Personally, I rely on the credibility of the person sharing the information as a criterion of the reliability of the information itself. (...) if the author inspires confidence in me, then I share the information easily". (FG Goma 1).*

*"I didn't ask around to join the group either, because we already know each other from friends who had joined" (FG Kinshasa).*

## **While the source of the information matters more than its format, users tend to trust videos more than text or image-based information, which they find are easier to manipulate**

Overall, all participants in the discussion groups demonstrated a keen awareness of the challenges posed by the fabrication of false information. They were clear that all types of media – text, audio, photo and video - can be manipulated easily or created entirely using digital software and artificial intelligence. There was no consensus among participants regarding the type of format they were more likely to trust. Instead, as mentioned above, they stated that the source of the information (e.g. an official communication or a known person) was more likely to determine whether they would trust the content.

*“I don't trust any of these formats. With technology, it's easy to be fooled. I trust the person who published it or the group in which the information can be found”.* (FG Goma 1).

*“I trust all formats as long as the source of the information is official, certified and reliable. I judge information according to its source, not its format”* (FG Goma 2).

Among users who expressed a preference, those in Kinshasa were more likely to trust videos, which they said are by nature a better reflection of reality and harder to manipulate than text or images. On the other hand, users in Goma and Lubumbashi were more likely to prefer text-based formats.

*“I much prefer video because it doesn't give you a lot of work to do in terms of processing or verifying information. When you watch a video, you have all the elements you need to verify the information compared with other formats. In the video, you see someone talking, you see where they are, you see the gestures...”* (FG Kinshasa).

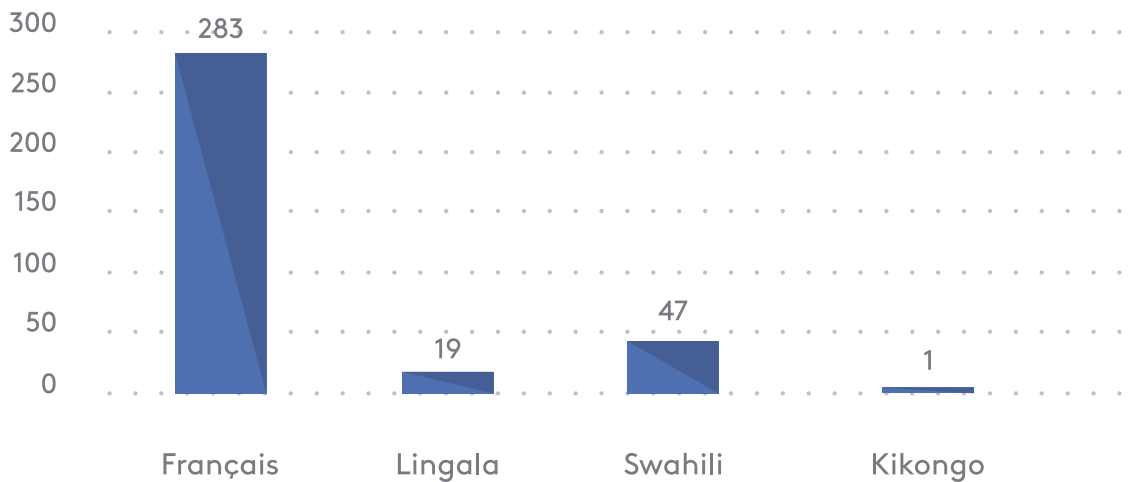
*“On this subject, the text format. I can take textual information from any website and try to reassure myself as to its authenticity, otherwise it will be information to be rejected.”* (FG Goma 2).

*“I have more confidence in the text format because I think that with video or images, I wouldn't know whether it was reliable or not. Right now there are editing applications, and with these images it's hard to detect the source of the information. With text, it's easy to see who signed it.”* (FG Lubumbashi).

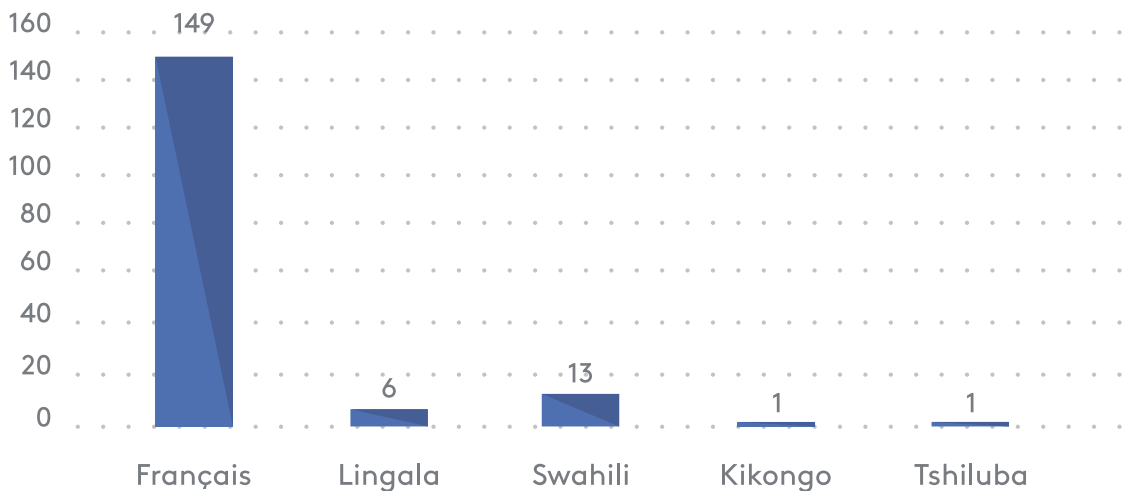
## Most mis/disinformation shared by users is in French, as it is widely understood and used across the medias

French is preferred to other national languages as a medium for spreading mis/disinformation and hate speech, used in 88% of messages on week 1 and 81 % on week 2. A closer look at the national languages shows that Swahili is the most used, followed by Lingala (in Kinshasa mostly), Kikongo (appears only twice in a group in Kinshasa), and Tshiluba (found once in a group in Haut Katanga).

### Languages used in mis/disinformation and hate speech messages (week 1)



### Languages used in mis/disinformation and hate speech messages (week 2)





In the week closer to the elections, data suggests a slight increase in the use of national languages for spreading mis/disinformation and hate speech, with Swahili going from 8% to 13% of messages, and Lingala from 3.5% to 5% of messages.

While other studies have shown that communities tend to prefer information shared in their local languages<sup>23</sup>, users in the focus groups expressed a preference for French, Swahili and Lingala, which are the most widely used in the DRC. They prefer French, in particular, because it is the language used by official sources as well as mainstream medias platforms, which makes the information more easily verifiable. In addition, in the electoral context, preferences for French may be linked to the desire of civil society and politically-oriented groups to reach nation-wide audiences.

*"I have more confidence in information broadcast in French because it is the country's official language. The one that all the authorities use to convey a message. On the other hand, rumors can easily circulate in Swahili because this language is only understood by part of the population". (FG Goma 2).*

*"I trust information in the languages I know, such as French and Lingala". (FG Kinshasa).*

*"In my opinion, you have to adapt the message to the language that puts everyone at ease. (...) It's true that we have a lot of national languages, but I really prefer to deal with or have information in the languages I know, as my predecessor said, French and Swahili, because I can't afford information in languages I don't know or don't understand well." (FG Lubumbashi).*

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<sup>23</sup> See for instance Posada, A. Lopez Inigo, R. and Majid, B. (2023) Inequity driven mistrust: Its impact to infodemic management and health response and what to do about it. *Internews*. ; Translators Without Borders (2019) 'Assessment: effective Ebola communication requires respect and transparency' [https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CR\\_DRC\\_BeniAssessment\\_EN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CR_DRC_BeniAssessment_EN_FINAL.pdf)

**T**he simultaneous conduct of multiple elections (presidential, and national, provincial and municipal legislatures) in December 2023 has underscored the spread and detrimental impact of mis/disinformation and hate speech in online communities. Weak media institutions, polarization of the political landscape, heightened use of social media and limited media literacy among the population constitute key factors which shape the spread of false and harmful information online, with serious consequences on ethnic relations and the conduct of peaceful and transparent elections. In this context, a strong understanding of the information ecosystems is required to shape solutions and support bottom-up work with online producers and consumers of mis/disinformation and hate speech.

This paper aimed to address some of the gaps in knowledge about the nature of mis/disinformation and hate speech in WhatsApp groups, as well as the mechanisms through which those messages are identified, perceived, and relayed by users. Through quantitative and qualitative study of activities in 155 WhatsApp groups ahead of the elections, the research identified the following main dynamics :

- ↘ As elections approached, the sharing of mis/disinformation increased in the selected WhatsApp groups, especially in urban areas. This trend coincided with an increase in hate speech in Haut Katanga and North Kivu, where electoral campaigns fueled existing tensions and insecurities around identity politics in particular.
- ↘ While users are keenly aware of the wide spread of false and manipulated media content, and the importance of verifying information, they do not systematically do so. In addition, the line between political opinion, humorous posts and mis/disinformation is thin and users may find it hard to identify the information which needs checking. Nevertheless, some users reported deliberately sharing false or harmful information in online communities. Their behavior was driven, in part, by the desire to provoke reactions or entertain. They also used WhatsApp groups as a tool to verify information, thus purposely sharing unverified or misleading news in order for others to confirm or refute it.

- ↳ Users are often highly proactive in bringing attention to mis/disinformation circulating in the groups, and frequently share links or witness sources to correct false or inaccurate news. However, they are less comfortable with confronting authors of hate speech, preferring to remain silent or exit the groups.

While this research sheds light on WhatsApp group members' practices relating to information sharing, it also acknowledges its limitations. The study was conducted in a non-statistically representative sample and was not able to clearly ascertain the precise extent to which users deliberately shared false information. Further research would be required to explore the motivations driving the creation and sharing of false and harmful information online, as well as the extent to which users rely on it to shape their electoral preferences and behaviors.



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