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Politics On Steroids? Algorithms, Bots And Automated Propaganda In Africa

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Digital media platforms are credited for having transformed political engagement especially with regards to transmuting it into 'participatory' and 'democratic' processes. Besides its glorified potential, the advent of these gizmos has also opened the floodgates for the use of algorithms, bots and automated back-end applications, which are mostly used for digital listening, posting political content, engaging in discursive conversations with human beings and sentiment analysis. This presentation looks at the emerging role of bots, algorithms and automated propaganda in African electoral processes. Using recent elections as case studies, the presentation provides compelling evidence on how the quest to harvest big data (mostly the electorate's demographic information, including their physical addresses, mobile phone numbers and email addresses), to manufacture the "necessary illusions" (automated propaganda and misinformation) and to control the master narrative has complicated the political process. This has not only made the already uneven playing field more unequal, but it has also ushered in new actants into the political field. These actants have been blamed for normalising and institutionalising misinformation, polluting the public sphere, producing uniformed and misinformed citizens as well as influencing the (in)visibility of political content and advertisements on digital media platforms. In the case of social media algorithms, they play an instrumental role in terms of filtering (gatekeeping), ranking (hierarchisation), selecting and recommending political content. This presentation argues that algorithms, bots and automated propaganda are increasingly playing an important role in terms of political communication in fragile and established democracies.

Primary author: Dr MARE, Admire (Namibia University of Science and Technology)

Presenter: Dr MARE, Admire (Namibia University of Science and Technology)

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