



## **ELECTORAL COMMISSION LAUNCHES ONLINE REPORTING PLATFORM FOR DIGITAL DISINFORMATION**

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Centurion – Following a global rise in disinformation especially via digital platforms and its potential impact on elections, the Electoral Commission has launched an innovative online reporting platform for citizens to report instances of alleged digital disinformation.

Developed in conjunction with Media Monitoring Africa, an NGO focused on promoting independent, accurate and impartial reporting on elections, the platform will provide for the online submission and tracking of complaints relating to disinformation encountered on social media platforms.

The platform is hosted on a website called “The Real 411” ([www.real411.org](http://www.real411.org)) and can be accessed from the Electoral Commission website ([www.elections.org.za](http://www.elections.org.za)).

“411” is internet slang for information. Urbandictionary.com describes 411 as “1. slang for 'the info'; 2. asking for the low-down on something; 3. information”.

Disinformation is defined as false, inaccurate or misleading information designed to intentionally cause harm. Within an election context this includes false information intended to unduly affect participation in and the outcome of elections.

The digital disinformation reporting platform forms part of the work of the Directorate of Electoral Offences which was first established ahead of the 2016 Municipal Elections to investigate alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct and prohibited conduct.

The Directorate operates when the Code of Conduct is in relation to an election (i.e. from the date of proclamation until the announcement of results). It consists of a panel of independent attorneys appointed to investigate each complaint and make recommendations for possible further action to the Commission.

The purpose of appointing an external legal firm also facilitates the independence and the integrity of the Electoral Commission in relation to the investigation of such complaints.

Noting the power and speed of social media, the online platform will help to enable the rapid submission and consideration of any complaints received of alleged disinformation.

Complaints will be considered by a panel of relevant experts including those with expertise in media law and social and digital media. They will make recommendations for possible further action for the consideration of the Commission.

Such action could include:

- Referring the matter for criminal or civil legal action
- Requesting social media platforms to remove the offensive material
- Issuing media statements to alert the public and correct the disinformation

The site will contain a database of all complaints received and their progress.

In addition to the online reporting platform, the initiative will also include a communication and education strategy to help educate voters about the dangers of disinformation and how to spot “fake news”.

Launching the platform today Vice Chairperson of the Electoral Commission, Ms Janet Love said:

“Digital media has the potential to be an asset in the promotion of democracy, transparency and informed decision-making that should underpin elections as it provides platforms for rapid and wide sharing of information. But it also comes with significant risks and we have seen disinformation posing a very real threat to free and fair elections elsewhere in the world.

“This platform is South Africa’s innovative step to help channel any complaints to people with the relevant capabilities so that the Electoral Commission can take the necessary action quickly.”

Media Monitoring Africa director William Bird said one of the core challenges surrounding disinformation is that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.

“Without the necessary skills and techniques to distinguish real information from disinformation, the likelihood of members of the public being misled is increasing. While some efforts to build critical digital literacy skills have been made, it is essential, in the lead up to elections, that concerted efforts to develop digital literacy skills are rolled out. Not only will such skills have lasting impact but the more people who are equipped to combat disinformation the harder it will be to spread.”

To help distinguish between official and fake adverts, political parties contesting the 8 May elections have been asked to upload all official advertising material used by the party to an online political advert repository.

This will allow anyone to check whether a poster or a digital banner is legitimate or has been digitally altered.

Commissioner Love said while false information was already covered by the current Code of Conduct, a supplementary Code of Conduct on Digital Disinformation had been drafted as part of the project.

“The additional draft Code helps clarify issues around the new realities and risks associated with digital platforms and social media. The draft Code will be voluntary for the 2019 elections but it is our intention to formalize this for future elections depending on the success of this platform and what we learn.”

The digital platform is intended for complaints related only to social media and is not intended to replace existing channels and processes for investigating alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct.

Such complaints can be submitted to the Electoral Court or the Directorate for Electoral Offences. The Secretary of the Court, Ms Samkelo Mgxekwa, can be contacted on email [SMgxekwa@sca.judiciary.org.za](mailto:SMgxekwa@sca.judiciary.org.za) or tel: (051) 412-7400 / 7494. The Directorate for Electoral Offences can be reached via email at [legalservices@elections.org.za](mailto:legalservices@elections.org.za)

## **ISSUED BY THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

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