



LAUNCH OF DIGITAL DISINFORMATION INITIATIVE

**OPENING REMARKS BY
CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER
MR SY MAMABOLO**

ELECTION HOUSE

1 APRIL 2019

WELCOME

- Thank you Programme Director Kate Bapela
- Vice Chairperson Janet Love
- Colleagues from the Electoral Commission
- Director of Media Monitoring Africa William Bird and members of MMA
- Members of the media
- Ladies and gentlemen

LAUNCH OF DIGITAL DISINFORMATION INITIATIVE

The Electoral Commission in conjunction with Media Monitoring Africa along with other partners are pleased to announce the launch today of an innovative project

which we hope will help combat the scourge of disinformation intended to unfairly influence elections.

There are three key aspects to this initiative:

1. The first part of this project is to enhance the education of all stakeholders around disinformation on digital platforms. This includes highlighting the risks and dangers of intentionally false and misrepresented information for free and fair elections and in raising the consciousness of the public in relation to this problem. It also includes providing tools and assistance to voters, the media, political parties, candidates and others in helping to identify false information and knowing what steps to take to query and lodge complaints regarding potential instances of disinformation.
2. The second key part of this project is to provide an online platform which will allow members of the public, members of the media, political parties, candidates and other interest groups to quickly and easily report to the Electoral Commission potential disinformation which may be in breach of the Electoral Code of Conduct – and then to allow the Electoral Commission to rapidly and efficiently deal with such complaints.
3. The third aspect of today's initiative is a pilot political advertisement repository where political parties can post copies of their official campaign material to help with the identification of false messaging.

DISINFORMATION AND THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Ladies and gentlemen

The dangers of false and disinformation have long been recognised within South Africa's electoral system and legislative framework. Both the sections on prohibited conduct in the Electoral Act as well as the Electoral Code of Conduct prohibit false information.

The Code of Conduct specifically prohibits:

- The use of any language that may provoke violence or intimidation.

- Any discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, class or religion.
- The publication of any false or defamatory allegations in respect of any other party or candidate.

The Electoral Act also prohibits any person from publishing any false information with the intention of:

- Disrupting or preventing an election.
- Creating hostility or fear in order to influence the conduct or conduct of an election.
- Influencing the conduct or outcome of an election

As noted by the Vice Chairperson, in seeking to give real meaning to these provisions, the Electoral Commission has been engaging with a range of stakeholders to see how we can simplify and accelerate the process of identifying and dealing with alleged breaches of the Code regarding false information specifically on digital platforms.

SUPPORT FROM POLITICAL PARTIES

I am pleased to report that in engaging with political parties within the National Party Liaison Committee around the issues of digital disinformation and this initiative we have received overwhelming support for this project from all parties.

No party wishes to see its key campaign messages distorted and abused.

In this regard, they have welcomed the idea of a political advertisement repository where any member of the public can check for themselves the veracity of campaign material and quickly determine whether a poster or pamphlet has been photoshopped or otherwise altered to undermine the party.

Equally, they have welcomed the establishment of an online platform where they and other interested stakeholders can alert the Electoral Commission quickly and easily to instances of abuse via social media.

Importantly, the online platform will allow complaints to include links to digital platforms which will help retain their “footprint” to more easily allow an investigation into the source of any disinformation.

HOW IT WILL WORK

So how will it work?

William Bird from Media Monitoring Africa will shortly give you a demonstration of the online reporting platform but let me give you a brief glimpse of how things will work behind the scenes.

Once a complaint is submitted online it will be referred to a panel of experts under the umbrella of the Electoral Commission’s Directorate for Electoral Offences.

This panel – with expertise in media law, social media and disinformation – will assess and investigate the complaint and make a recommendation to the Commission for consideration.

The Commission will then make a determination on any possible further action. Such action could include:

- Requesting social media platforms to remove the offensive or inaccurate material
- Requesting political parties or candidates to clarify the information
- Issuing media statements to alert the public and correct the disinformation
- Referring the matter for criminal or civil legal action if necessary

The site will contain a database of all complaints received and their progress so that other social media users can see if an issue has already been dealt with and what the outcome was.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen

Social media is the new frontier for communication, education and deception. We are not arrogant enough to believe we have found a solution to the problem of disinformation on social media.

But we believe that this pilot project will help us – and perhaps others around the world – to begin to fight back against those who seek to undermine our hard won democracy behind the anonymity and license of social media.

We hope you will join us in this quest.

I thank you