MEDIA RELEASE

University of Pretoria partners with CSIR to caution against online disinformation during elections

Researchers from the University of Pretoria (UP) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) recently hosted a virtual media briefing to share research on the potential effects of disinformation and fake news during elections.

The media briefing was held online, and featured discussions on strategies and interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of disinformation. The briefing aimed to empower members of the media, institutions and the public with ways in which to navigate disinformation and differentiate fact from fiction.

Professor Vukosi Marivate of UP's [Data Science for Social Impact](#) research group (DSFSI) offered insight into leveraging data science as a powerful tool to combat this online scourge.

"Spreading disinformation affects the thoughts and feelings of online users," he said. "The major current challenge that we face is access to data. All this data is held within social media platforms, and with changes to platforms like X, formerly known as Twitter, [reducing access to data makes research on disinformation extremely hard for researchers](#). Without access to this data, we are unable to analyse the information that is out there."

Prof Marivate emphasised that social media influencers and people who use knowledge inappropriately have found ways to influence public perceptions by framing specific topics to drive their agendas. He warned the public about this, adding that this was seen in South Africa's 2021 municipal elections.

Other challenges, he noted, include the need for policies and regulations that will allow researchers to access social media data. He also mentioned that there are difficulties with automated content moderation, and with local languages and code switching. This means that the systems that are in place for content moderation usually apply to English language content; in South Africa, which has 12 official languages, the systems are not able to detect whether the content is disinformation or harmful. He added that if the Independent Electoral Commission violates election rules online, it will be hard to monitor, because of limited direct access or sample data from platforms.

Part of Prof Marivate's research focuses on utilising data-driven approaches to support the public, institutions and the media to counter fake news and malicious disinformation, which pose significant threats to social cohesion and trust. He also highlighted how the DSFSI employs cutting-edge natural language processing as a solution.

"With the upcoming 2024 national elections, we have a forum that helps to contextualise information, fact-check it, inform the public and escalate disinformation through different tools like Real411 [a reporting platform]," he said.

Dr Zubeida Dawood, the CSIR's research group leader in cybersecurity, provided an expert analysis of the nature of fake news, detection techniques and the potential impact of disinformation, particularly during elections.

"To empower our voters, we need to teach them to be vigilant and to discern fact from fake news," she said. "We need to be aware of common tactics, like doctored audio messages. This will enhance the public's ability to identify and reject disinformation."

She highlighted that collaborative efforts between the government, tech companies, higher education institutions and the public are essential for creating a resilient defence against disinformation.

"UP and the CSIR's Information and Cybersecurity Centre are collaborating on a project to detect fake news during elections," Dr Dawood said. "It involves using artificial intelligence and machine learning with advanced algorithms to analyse patterns and identify fake news, and will focus on continuous learning to adapt to evolving disinformation tactics."

Dr Dawood offered tips on what to look out for when determining whether information is reliable or fake:

- Check the source and URL.
- Look up the author.
- Verify the information on other sites.
- Check the date of the information.
- Check the text for grammatical and spelling errors.
- Use online tools like snopes.com to verify the article.
- Ask a tech-savvy friend to verify the content.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 116-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa.

UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2023 QS World University Rankings by Subject ranked UP first in South Africa in Accounting and Finance, Law, Economics and Econometrics, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Mathematics, and Veterinary Science.

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