

Akhbaar Huban: Combating Disinformation in Somali Media

Background

The Somali media landscape is lively with breaking news and opinion; however, it is inundated with sites that peddle in disinformation. While some are designed to gain an audience in order to monetize them for ads, many are the work of political actors seeking to influence audiences. Democracies have the highest capacity and tendency to conduct domestic disinformation campaigns because of the need to win elections and influence populations.¹ Somalia is no different; political parties and substate groups are engaged in political disinformation, resulting in the creation of a murky media environment that is hardly conducive to the goal of establishing a free and democratic state. Somalia's nascent democratic institutions are therefore under threat from the spread of disinformation. This free-for-all environment has generated government attention, which introduced several iterations of a draconian media law in 2007, 2016, and 2020.² While the stated aim of these laws is to improve the accuracy of news and combat fake news, it in fact creates a very hostile environment for reporting of news by individual journalists. Government steps and regulation to address disinformation risk censoring genuine sources of information that could be considered unfavorable for the governing party.

It is therefore necessary that the solution does not cause censorship but provides the public with the tools to identify deceptive news. Without an educated public, the internet devolves into an uninformed mob that is easily susceptible to disinformation.³ Training the public in a manner easily understandable by the everyday consumer of internet content is therefore necessary to combat internet disinformation. The general Somali-speaking public is consequently prone to deceptive messaging by various actors, including those seeking to undermine the democratic state being built in the country. There are news sites maintained by non-state actors fighting the government, such as Al-Shabab, that masquerade as genuine news sites, therefore succeeding in surreptitiously influencing unsuspecting audiences.

Marqaati has therefore developed a solution to the problem without threatening media freedom in the form of a browser extension that could be used on both desktop and mobile browsers to enable users to see the rating of any news site being accessed. Users can see the methodology and the detailed score sheet of the website by clicking the browser extension. The news sites are rated based on credibility and flagged accordingly. Additionally, fact-checks are made of the most viral Somalia-related news stories. As of 9 December 2020, forty websites have been rated.

¹ Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N. Howard. "The Global Organization Of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 1.5, 2018, pg 28

² The current law is a slight edition of the very problematic 2007 draft media law, available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4753e5c86.pdf>

³ Schiffrin, Anya. "Disinformation And Democracy: The Internet Transformed Protest But Did Not Improve Democracy." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2017, pg. 123.

The rating system makes users understand the source of their news and potentially encourage news sites to improve their credibility by meeting the criteria required to achieve higher ratings. Likewise, fact-checking of news and political statements is expected to discourage blatantly false news and statements while at the same time educating the public not to take information at face value without further scrutiny.

Methodology

The news sites selected for rating are those that garner the most web traffic, share, and references. We spent from May to October making the current list, with many others currently in the process. While we are launching with 40 rated websites, we will continue to add rated sites into the system. The credibility and the transparency of the websites are rated by adapting NewsGuard's methodology. Credibility indicators weigh 75/100 of the points, while transparency indicators weigh a combined a quarter of the score.

Credibility (75 points):

- Does not repeatedly publish false content (22 points),
- Gathers and presents information responsibly (18 Points),
- Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5 Points)
- Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5 Points),
- Avoids deceptive headlines (10 Points).

Transparency (25 points):

- Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5 Points),
- Clearly labels advertising (7.5 Points),
- Reveals who's in charge, including possible conflicts of interest (5 Points),
- The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5 Points).

News articles going back a year have been reviewed to assign the appropriate scores for each of the news sites. Following the rating, the websites are assigned a label – green, yellow, or red, depending on where they lie based on their score. Websites receiving 50 and fewer points are assigned a Red label as unreliable sources of news; those that receive 51-69 are assigned Yellow as mostly reliable; and 70+ are assigned Green as very reliable. Unfortunately, there is only one news site that is currently classified as very reliable. The websites are then contacted for comment and given time three weeks to respond. Their response will be made available on a special page created for that purpose. If the website becomes more transparent by providing more information in its response, its score will be reviewed and its score updated accordingly.

Rated news sites

The following news sites have been rated by using the aforementioned methodology. Users are made aware of the scores assigned to each when they visit them. The detailed table showing how each point was awarded in every category and sub-category is annexed to this document.

Website	Total Points
www.hiiraan.com	71.5
www.allbanaadir.org	69.5
www.jowhar.com	68.5
www.caasimada.net	66.5
www.goobjooge.net	64.5
www.warqaad.info	63
www.garooweonline.com	63
www.horseedmedia.net	61
www.puntlandpost.net	60
www.calankamedia.com	59
www.goobjoog.com	59
www.puntlandtimes.ca	59
www.dayniile.com	56
www.markacadeey.com	56
www.puntlandi.com	54
www.Burcoonline.com	54
www.qarannews.com	54
www.radiokulmiye.net	54
www.mareeg.com	54
www.daljir.com	54
www.radiodalsan.com	53
www.oodweynenews.com	53
www.somalitalk.com	53
www.radioshabelle.com	52
www.radiorisaala.com	52
www.warkii.com	52
www.badweyntimes.net	51
www.muqdisho.online	51
www.shaaciye.org	50
www.gabiley.net	50
www.somalilandtoday.com	50
www.allgalgaduud.com	50
www.caynabanews.com	50
www.dhacdo.net	50
www.allgedo.com	50

www.geeska.net	50
www.jubbaland24.com	49
www.somalimemo.net	44
www.galdogobtmes.com	43
www.waagacusub.com	23