



AFRICA'S TRIPLE THREAT: LANGUAGE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND TRUST

Date: November 19, 2025

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KEY EVENTS

On November 19, 2025, Zain Verjee presented, *Africa's Triple Threat: Language, Sovereignty, and Trust*, at the CASIS Vancouver West Coast Security Conference, followed by a question-and-answer period with audience members and CASIS Vancouver executives. The presentation examined the security implications of AI-enabled information environments across Africa, focusing on structural vulnerabilities linked to linguistic exclusion, limited data sovereignty, and fragile trust ecosystems.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Ms. Verjee framed AI as a force multiplier of existing structural inequalities. In environments marked by infrastructural gaps, linguistic marginalization, and external data dependency, AI amplifies asymmetries rather than neutralising them. Africa's information ecosystems—dominated by mobile-first platforms and encrypted communication—are particularly susceptible to perception warfare. AI governance, language inclusion, and data sovereignty were positioned not as development questions alone, but as national and regional security imperatives.

BACKGROUND

Ms. Verjee outlined an "AI paradox" in Africa: rapid adoption without proportional ownership or control. Approximately 78% of urban African youth reportedly use AI tools weekly, outpacing many Western markets, yet Africa represents only a small fraction of global AI research output and market share. The continent's AI workforce, estimated at roughly 5,000 professionals, serves a population exceeding 1.4 billion, illustrating a significant capability-consumption imbalance.

Ms. Verjee stated that infrastructure deficits compound these vulnerabilities, pointing to the fact that nearly half of Africa's data centres are concentrated in South Africa, leaving other regions reliant on external processing capacity. Only a small proportion of African data is processed locally; most raw data is exported, refined abroad, and monetised externally. Ms. Verjee characterized this dynamic as a digital continuation of extractive economic systems.

Ms. Verjee noted that linguistic exclusion constitutes a core security vulnerability. Over 2,000 African languages are effectively absent from major AI training datasets, and only a marginal percentage of global online content exists in African languages. Models trained predominantly on Western corpora frequently produce skewed or hallucinated outputs when prompted in African languages. She illustrated this through a hypothetical electoral query in rural Mali, where a chatbot response in Bambara could inadvertently disseminate inaccurate or fabricated voting information, triggering localised instability.

Ms. Verjee stated that advances in synthetic media—such as, voice cloning, AI-generated audio, and deepfake video—lower barriers for manipulation. In oral information ecosystems where radio, WhatsApp, and TikTok function as primary channels, synthetic content can rapidly erode trust. Electoral periods are particularly vulnerable to this content, as misinformation spreads within encrypted, trust-based networks that are difficult to monitor in real time.

Ms. Verjee presented data sovereignty as an issue of critical importance, as dependence on Western infrastructure exposes African states to privacy risks, foreign surveillance, and economic dependency. She stated that retaining and processing data domestically strengthens institutional capacity, protects national interests, and supports local job creation.

Ms. Verjee noted the importance of Africa's demographic and economic profile. With a median age under 19 and approximately 95% of youth operating within informal economic structures, information ecosystems are decentralised and peer driven. She stated that AI systems optimised for engagement rather than accuracy can interact with low digital literacy to intensify polarisation and the spread of misinformation.

Ms. Verjee highlighted African-led innovation as a viable pathway forward, with small, context-specific language models demonstrating how localised datasets can produce culturally grounded outputs. Rather than replicating Western LLMs,

she advocated building small language models trained on structured local data. Ethical design principles and collective data ownership frameworks were presented as essential to ensuring community control. African AI front-runners, including Egypt, Mauritius, and South Africa, were cited as examples of emerging regional leadership.

Question and Answer

There have been credible allegations of misinformation and disinformation campaigns linked to regional actors in West Africa aimed at influencing elections, such as in Côte d'Ivoire. How representative are these cases of broader AI-enabled information threats in Africa, and are such campaigns likely to increase?

Ms. Verjee noted that such campaigns are part of a global pattern rather than uniquely African. However, regional linguistic diversity, mobile-first ecosystems, and cross-border political dynamics complicate detection and response. She assessed that such threats are escalating and underscored the importance of institutional trust-building and critical-thinking education during election cycles.

What practical steps can African countries take to reclaim data ownership and build sustainable, autonomous AI systems?

Ms. Verjee advocated beginning with small, defined use cases. States should identify specific linguistic or sectoral needs, structure locally grounded datasets, including oral histories, and train small language models in local environments. Partnerships may provide technical components, but data control should remain domestic.

Given the high rate of AI adoption among African youth, what are the principal risks and opportunities, and where does a sustainable balance lie?

Ms. Verjee emphasised both opportunity and risk. Africa's demographic dividend creates strong entrepreneurial demand for AI tools. However, reliance on external models risks cultural distortion, economic dependency, and long-term strategic vulnerability. Sustainable balance requires investment in domestic talent, public-private partnerships, and policies protecting data privacy and national interests.

What initiatives currently exist in Africa to counter AI-enabled misinformation, and how can they be strengthened?

Ms. Verjee suggested that verification models may need to move beyond traditional newsroom practices toward intelligence-inspired methodologies, including metadata analysis, chain-of-custody tracking, and embedded authentication systems.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Africa exhibits high AI adoption but limited control over data, infrastructure, and algorithmic development, creating structural dependency.
- Linguistic exclusion from global AI systems constitutes a significant and underappreciated security vulnerability.
- AI-enabled disinformation spreads rapidly in mobile-first, encrypted, and trust-based ecosystems, particularly during elections.
- Data sovereignty should be treated as a core national security issue with economic and political implications.
- African-led, small language models and intelligence-informed verification frameworks offer more resilient alternatives to imported, generalized systems.

FURTHER READINGS

Verjee, Z. (2024, October 16). Election Interference and Information Integrity: A Rundown Toolkit. *The Rundown Studio: AI & Comms Insights for Emerging Markets*. https://rundownstudio.substack.com/p/election-interference-and-information?utm_source=publication-search

Verjee, Z. (2025, November 18). Intelligence Tradecraft for the Misinformation Age: The Candyce Kelshall Method. *The Rundown Studio: AI & Comms Insights for Emerging Markets*. https://rundownstudio.substack.com/p/intelligence-tradecraft-for-the-misinformation?utm_source=publication-search



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