

MEDIA LITERACY CAMPAIGNS IN AFRICA: COMBATING DISINFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This study addresses the escalating and insidious threat disinformation poses to democratic processes, public health and social cohesion across the African continent. Driven by rapid digital penetration and unique socio-political vulnerabilities, misinformation propagates swiftly, necessitating robust and proactive counter-strategies. The study's objective is to articulate a compelling argument for media literacy campaigns as an indispensable, foundational defence mechanism against this pervasive challenge. Drawing on Media Effects Theories and Information Literacy frameworks and employing a comprehensive library method, this work critically synthesises existing scholarship to argue its case. Key arguments assert that media literacy empowers citizens to critically evaluate digital content, discern credible sources and recognise manipulative tactics, thereby building societal resilience from the grassroots. The study contends that generic

approaches are insufficient; effective campaigns must be contextually tailored, culturally sensitive and delivered through formal and informal educational channels across Africa's diverse regions. While acknowledging implementation challenges such as infrastructure deficits and political will, the study highlights the continent's youthful demographic and widespread mobile technology adoption as unique opportunities for impactful intervention. It concludes that media literacy campaigns, though not a singular panacea, represent a vital pillar for fostering an informed citizenry and robust public discourse in Africa's evolving digital future.

Keywords: Africa, Digital Age, Disinformation, Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Political Communication.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the advent of digital technologies has revolutionised the production, dissemination and consumption of information globally. However, this transformation has also enabled the widespread propagation of false, misleading and harmful content, commonly referred to as disinformation particularly through social media and digital platforms (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). Disinformation, unlike misinformation, is deliberately created with the intent to deceive, manipulate public opinion, or distort democratic processes and it has emerged as a major threat to political stability, social cohesion and public health, particularly in fragile democracies and developing contexts (UNESCO, 2021; Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020).

Across Africa, the challenge of disinformation has become increasingly pronounced due to several interrelated factors. These include rising internet penetration, poor regulatory frameworks, limited media

literacy among citizens and the increasing use of encrypted and opaque messaging platforms like WhatsApp, which facilitate the rapid and untraceable spread of false content (Adeleke & Oyelade, 2021; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). Africa's youthful population - over 70% of whom are under 30 and its reliance on mobile phones as a primary gateway to the internet, make the continent particularly susceptible to digital manipulation and the weaponisation of information (Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the real-world consequences of unchecked disinformation in Africa, as unverified treatments, vaccine conspiracy theories and political propaganda were disseminated widely, often with fatal implications (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020). Likewise, electoral disinformation has become increasingly weaponised by political actors seeking to sway public opinion, suppress voter turnout, or delegitimise electoral outcomes, as seen in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa (Funke, 2022; BBC Africa Eye, 2018).

In response to this growing crisis, media literacy has emerged as a powerful and necessary counter measure. Media literacy is broadly defined as the ability to critically analyse media content, recognise misinformation and produce credible information in return (Livingstone, 2019). Media literacy campaigns,

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when effectively designed and executed, enable citizens to navigate the digital landscape more responsibly, evaluate the veracity of online content, and participate more meaningfully in democratic processes (UNESCO, 2021; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

In the African context, however, media literacy initiatives remain underfunded, fragmented and often lack policy-level integration into national education systems. Moreover, such campaigns must contend with linguistic diversity, varying literacy levels and infrastructural limitations. Nonetheless, there is growing consensus that empowering citizens with critical media skills is essential to fostering resilience against disinformation and strengthening democratic governance on the continent (Egbunike, 2021; Cilliers, 2022).

This study therefore argues that media literacy campaigns should be central to Africa's strategy to combat disinformation in the digital age. It assesses the current landscape of media literacy efforts in Africa, identifies key challenges and opportunities and proposes actionable strategies for governments, civil society and international partners. It underscores the urgency of institutionalising media and information literacy as a long-term response to the disinformation crisis, particularly in light of upcoming electoral cycles and the ongoing influence of global information networks.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid digital transformation across Africa has created an unprecedented information ecosystem, one characterised by both opportunity and vulnerability. While the digital space has democratised access to information, it has simultaneously intensified the threat of disinformation – deliberate, false or misleading content designed to deceive audiences (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc et al, 2018). This phenomenon has significantly undermined public trust in institutions, distorted electoral processes, inflamed ethnic tensions and complicated public health communication, particularly during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Several studies have examined the spread and impact of disinformation on the African continent, noting its particular virulence on mobile-first platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook (Mare, 2020; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). Scholars have highlighted how the combination of low digital literacy, high mobile penetration, weak regulatory environments and political manipulation creates a fertile ground for disinformation to thrive (Adeleke & Oyelade, 2021; Funke, 2022).

However, much of the existing literature remains descriptive or diagnostic, focusing largely on the sources, types and impacts of disinformation, with limited empirical investigation into sustainable, long-term countermeasures such as media literacy interventions (Livingstone, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

Moreover, while media and information literacy (MIL) has gained global recognition as a key strategy in combating disinformation (UNESCO, 2021), studies assessing its implementation in Africa are fragmented, underfunded and often anecdotal. Many initiatives remain small-scale, donor-driven and fail to reach rural populations or marginalised groups who are often the most affected by false information (Egbunike, 2021; Mutsvairo & Kazombo-Mwale, 2022). There is also a paucity of research that evaluates the effectiveness of existing media literacy programmes in enhancing critical thinking, digital citizenship and civic participation within African societies.

In addition, the institutionalisation of media literacy through integration into school curricula, teacher training or national policies remains sparse, as most African governments have yet to adopt a strategic framework for MIL in combating disinformation (Cilliers, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). The absence of such frameworks further hampers efforts to scale up media literacy education in ways that are contextually relevant, linguistically inclusive and technologically adaptive.

Thus, the problem is not merely the existence of disinformation but the lack of a coordinated, evidence-based and sustainable media literacy strategy to equip African citizens, especially youth with the tools to critically engage with information in the digital era. This study seeks to address this limitation by examining the current state of media literacy campaigns across Africa, analysing their limitations and proposing actionable solutions for scaling their impact in the fight against disinformation.

Theoretical Framework

The fight against disinformation in Africa's digital ecosystem requires a robust theoretical underpinning to understand the cognitive, sociocultural and technological dynamics at play. This study adopts an integrative theoretical approach, drawing from Media Literacy Theory, Framing Theory and Cognitive Load Theory to provide a multidimensional lens for evaluating the role of media literacy campaigns in combating disinformation.

Media Literacy Theory

At the core of this study lies Media Literacy Theory,

which argues that individuals must acquire specific competencies to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in various forms (Livingstone, 2018). Media literacy serves as a preventive strategy against disinformation by empowering citizens with critical thinking and analytical skills, thus enabling them to discern credible information from falsehoods (Hobbs, 2017). According to Mihailidis & Viotty (2017), media literacy helps to cultivate “civic intentionality” in media consumption, particularly among youth in participatory digital environments.

This theory is especially relevant in African contexts, where digital access is increasing rapidly but often without corresponding improvements in critical media engagement (Mutsvairo & Kazombo-Mwale, 2022). The theory supports the argument that combating disinformation goes beyond technological solutions and must include educational interventions aimed at fostering media-savvy populations (UNESCO, 2021).

Framing Theory

Framing Theory, originally developed by Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Entman (1993), helps explain how media content shapes public perception through the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of a narrative. In the context of disinformation, framing is exploited by malicious actors to manipulate interpretations of facts, stir emotional reactions and reinforce ideological biases (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). The theory is instrumental in explaining why certain disinformation campaigns succeed in Africa by tapping into deeply rooted socio-political and ethnic frames (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020). Media literacy campaigns informed by framing theory can teach individuals to deconstruct how information is presented, helping them to resist manipulative framing techniques and develop resilience against ideological manipulation (Waisbord, 2018).

Cognitive Load Theory

Another valuable lens is Cognitive Load Theory, which explains the mental effort required to process information and make decisions (Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga, 2011). Disinformation often thrives in high-stress or information-overload environments, where individuals are more prone to rely on heuristics or familiar sources, even if inaccurate (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

This theory underscores the importance of media literacy training that simplifies complex evaluative tasks, thereby reducing cognitive strain. For instance, checklists or digital literacy modules that help users identify red

flags in online content can significantly aid information verification, especially in low-literacy environments prevalent in parts of Africa (Guess, Lerner & Lyons, 2020).

By combining these three theories, this study establishes a holistic framework for understanding the challenges and solutions in addressing digital disinformation in Africa. While Media Literacy Theory focuses on skills acquisition, Framing Theory highlights content interpretation and Cognitive Load Theory addresses psychological processing. Together, they support the design of media literacy campaigns that are cognitively accessible, culturally contextualised and politically aware.

Conceptual Review

The proliferation of disinformation in the digital age has become a major concern for democratic institutions, public health systems and social cohesion globally, and Africa is no exception (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018). The nature and spread of disinformation are intricately linked to developments in digital technologies, political communication and audience behaviour, which necessitate a nuanced understanding of key concepts such as disinformation, media literacy and digital citizenship.

Disinformation in the Digital Context

Disinformation refers to deliberately false or misleading information disseminated with the intention of deceiving audiences (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It differs from misinformation, which is false information shared without intent to harm (Fallis, 2015). In Africa, disinformation has increasingly been weaponised by political actors, extremist groups and foreign influencers to distort public opinion, discredit opponents and foment unrest (Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nielsen, 2020; Mare, 2020). The digital landscape, particularly social media platforms, accelerates the spread of such content due to their algorithmic amplification, virality features and the lack of robust content regulation (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Media Literacy as a Countermeasure

Media literacy encompasses the ability to critically access, analyse, evaluate and create media across different formats (Hobbs, 2017). It is not merely about functional literacy or digital skills, but about fostering critical awareness and civic engagement in the information ecosystem (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). In the African context, where digital penetration has increased significantly without a corresponding rise in media literacy (Mutsvairo & Kazombo-Mwale, 2022),

there is an urgent need for educational interventions that can empower users to navigate disinformation.

UNESCO (2021) underscores media literacy as a vital pillar of democratic participation and sustainable development, advocating for national policies and school curricula that incorporate media and information literacy (MIL). However, despite the global emphasis, few African countries have institutionalised media literacy as a core part of their education systems (Mabweazara, 2021).

The Role of Media Literacy Campaigns

Media literacy campaigns refer to organised efforts that are either governmental or civil society-led to promote critical media engagement and reduce susceptibility to disinformation. These campaigns may involve school-based instruction, public service announcements, social media challenges, or community workshops (Guess, Lerner & Lyons, 2020). In African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, nascent MIL programmes have shown potential in changing how citizens engage with online content, although coverage remains limited and urban-centric (Ibrahim, 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

According to Waisbord (2018), media literacy campaigns must be context-sensitive, acknowledging socio-political realities and local communication norms. In Africa, where oral culture still plays a prominent role and where traditional media coexists with digital platforms, MIL campaigns must also incorporate local languages and indigenous knowledge systems (Bosch, 2017).

Digital Literacy and Civic Agency

The concept of digital citizenship, which is the ability to use digital tools responsibly and ethically closely aligns with media literacy (Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri, 2021). African youth, who constitute the majority of internet users on the continent, often lack the tools to evaluate digital content critically, making them susceptible to manipulation and radicalisation (Tully & Ekdale, 2020). Building civic agency through media literacy campaigns is thus not only a response to disinformation but also an investment in democratic resilience.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that media literacy, when combined with digital safety training, significantly improves individuals' ability to discern fake news, especially when applied as interactive or game-based interventions (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Yet, in Africa, challenges such as low funding, inadequate training and policy inertia hinder the full rollout of such innovations.

Despite growing research and initiatives, existing conceptual models of media literacy often fail to account for the socio-economic and infrastructural disparities within and across African states (Ibelema, 2021). Many studies are Euro-American in origin and do not always translate well into African contexts. Therefore, there is a pressing need to decolonise media literacy frameworks and tailor them to African realities, particularly considering local epistemologies, power dynamics and levels of access to digital tools (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

Opinion Review

Disinformation in the digital age has emerged as one of the most formidable threats to information integrity, democratic values and public trust. In the African context, the urgency to combat this menace has elicited divergent scholarly and institutional opinions on the most effective responses. While some argue for stronger regulation of digital platforms, others advocate for media literacy as a long-term solution that addresses root causes by empowering citizens with critical thinking and verification skills (Livingstone et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

A prevailing opinion among scholars and communication practitioners is that media literacy, especially when locally adapted and context-sensitive is one of the most sustainable approaches to tackling disinformation in Africa (Mabweazara, 2021). Media literacy equips individuals to understand the structure, purpose and content of media messages, thereby reducing their susceptibility to manipulation (Hobbs, 2017). This view is particularly relevant in countries with young, digitally active populations like Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, where exposure to false content is high but digital discernment is often low (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020).

However, critics of this view contend that media literacy alone may not suffice in contexts with widespread poverty, low formal education and digital illiteracy. They argue that structural issues such as internet accessibility, weak regulatory enforcement and government manipulation of media must also be addressed (Tully & Ekdale, 2020; Mare, 2020). For instance, Mutsvairo & Ragnedda (2019) caution against transplanting Western-centric media literacy frameworks into African settings without tailoring them to local socio-political and cultural realities. They emphasise that without addressing the power asymmetries in the African media landscape, media literacy could merely serve as a band-aid.

Other scholars argue that platform responsibility and

algorithmic transparency should take precedence over user education. According to Bradshaw, Bailey & Howard (2021), social media platforms operating in African countries have been slow to act on coordinated disinformation campaigns, partly due to low commercial interest and lax regional content regulation. This has led some experts to call for binding codes of practice, similar to the EU's Digital Services Act, as a more forceful intervention (Gorwa, 2019).

That said, there is growing consensus that a multi-stakeholder approach is required; one that combines regulatory oversight, civil society engagement, platform accountability and robust media literacy campaigns. UNESCO (2021) has highlighted the importance of integrating Media and Information Literacy (MIL) into national curricula and teacher training programmes. Such integration, if implemented effectively, could create a new generation of discerning digital citizens.

Notably, African countries are increasingly taking ownership of this agenda. For example, the "iVerify" programme in Zambia and UNDP-supported initiatives in Ghana and Liberia demonstrate a growing continental appetite for home-grown solutions (UNDP, 2023). These initiatives rely on local fact-checkers and community media hubs to bridge the gap between urban-rural information divides - a strategy often cited as more effective than top-down interventions (Bosch, 2017).

Thus, while media literacy is not a panacea for disinformation in Africa, prevailing opinion suggests that it remains an indispensable pillar in the fight against false information. The real challenge lies in how to embed it in a way that is culturally relevant, politically neutral and accessible to all. A hybrid model that combines grassroots education, policy reforms and platform accountability offers the most promising path forward.

Empirical review

Matanji, Tully, Mudavadi, Diop & Madrid-Morales (2024) conducted a study titled Media Literacy and Fact-Checking as Proactive and Reactive Responses to Misinformation in Kenya and Senegal. Using 42 in-depth interviews with journalists, fact-checkers and policymakers, the study explored institutional responses to misinformation. It found that combining proactive (media literacy) and reactive (fact-checking) approaches is most effective. The authors recommended training for both content producers and audiences. While their work supports the integration of media literacy, it focuses primarily on media professionals, whereas this study advocates for broader public-oriented campaigns across all societal levels.

Dubawa (2024) assessed the Impact of Fact-

Checking Training on Nigerian Journalists to Mitigate Mis/Disinformation. Using surveys and interviews, it discovered that while 43.6% of journalists received training and some produced media literacy content, only 16% actively applied fact-checking techniques. The study concluded that training improves awareness but does not ensure sustained practice and recommended newsroom incentives. Unlike this study, which proposes a nationwide public media literacy framework, Dubawa's research is limited to journalists, making its scope narrower in terms of target audience and societal impact.

Nyhan, Porter, Reifler & Wood (2021) in their study of Global Effectiveness of Fact-Checking conducted large-scale experiments, including Nigeria, to assess whether factual corrections reduce misinformation. They found that while fact-checks temporarily correct false beliefs, the effects often wane over time. The authors recommended reinforcement mechanisms. Though this supports the usefulness of correction tools, this study extends the discussion by arguing that long-term resilience against disinformation requires structured and continuous media literacy campaigns rather than one-off corrections alone.

Adjin-Tettey (2022) explored Fact-Checking Practices among University Students in West Africa using interviews and focus groups. The study revealed that students seldom engage in systematic verification and often rely on instinct or trusted legacy media. It recommended integrating media literacy into educational curricula and fostering platform-based collaborations. While the findings affirm the need for institutional media literacy interventions, they are largely limited to tertiary students, in contrast to this study's broader push for comprehensive, multilevel public awareness campaigns spanning formal and informal sectors.

While these empirical studies provide invaluable insights into specific aspects of misinformation and initial countermeasures, they collectively highlight a critical gap that this study aims to address. The reviewed literature primarily focuses on professional groups (journalists, fact-checkers) or specific demographic segments (university students), or investigates reactive, short-term interventions (individual fact-checks). There remains a notable deficit in comprehensive empirical investigation into the design, implementation and long-term effectiveness of broad, nationwide and multi-level public media literacy frameworks specifically tailored to the unique socio-cultural and digital realities of African societies. This work is therefore motivated by the urgent need to articulate a strategic, holistic approach to media literacy that moves beyond limited scopes and reactive

measures, advocating for a sustained, comprehensive public education framework as a cornerstone for building long-term societal resilience against disinformation in the digital age.

Methodology

This study adopts the library research method, a qualitative approach involving the systematic collection, evaluation and synthesis of existing scholarly literature, reports and theoretical materials relevant to the subject of disinformation and media literacy in Africa. This method is particularly appropriate for conceptually rich subjects that require interpretation and theoretical framing rather than empirical measurement (George & Bennett, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016).

The research draws from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, books and institutional reports from credible sources such as UNESCO, the African Centre for Media & Information Literacy (AFRICMIL), Dubawa, Africa Check and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. These materials were accessed via online academic databases including JSTOR, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, Springer Link and Google Scholar, ensuring the inclusion of contemporary and regionally relevant scholarship published between 2010 and 2024.

Using content analysis and critical synthesis techniques, the study analysed several documents and studies that address key themes such as disinformation trends in Africa (Madrid-Morales, Wasserman & Mare, 2021), media literacy interventions (Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2020) and the role of civil society and journalism in combating misinformation (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). The selection criteria for sources focused on recency, geographical relevance, scholarly credibility and theoretical applicability.

While the library research method lacks primary empirical data, it is particularly useful for building normative arguments, proposing policy directions and engaging with theoretical perspectives (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2016). As such, this paper does not present statistical findings but rather draws connections between scholarly discourse and practical media interventions aimed at curbing disinformation.

Discussion

This section unpacks the core arguments underpinning the indispensable role of media literacy campaigns in combating disinformation across the African continent. Drawing upon a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary scholarship, it elucidates the multifaceted nature of the disinformation challenge in Africa,

positions media literacy as a critical intervention and examines the various dimensions through which such campaigns can foster resilient information environments.

The rapid pace of digital adoption across Africa has, paradoxically, created unique vulnerabilities to disinformation. Unlike regions with established digital infrastructures and longer histories of media consumption, many African nations have transitioned directly to mobile-first internet access, often bypassing traditional fixed-line broadband (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). This leapfrogging has resulted in a vast, diverse and often young demographic engaging with digital content primarily through social media platforms, which are inherently designed for rapid, often unverified, information sharing (Kreiss & McGregor, 2020). The prevalence of "zero-rated" data plans, which offer free access to specific social media apps, further incentivises their use as primary news sources, inadvertently amplifying the spread of misinformation within closed messaging groups (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). Furthermore, varying levels of traditional media literacy, coupled with historical legacies of state-controlled media and public distrust in institutional information sources, render populations particularly susceptible to alternative, often false, narratives circulating online (Ojo, 2020; Moyo & Nyamnjoh, 2018). This context creates a fertile ground for disinformation actors, implying an urgent need for interventions that equip citizens with the skills to navigate this complex information environment.

Disinformation in Africa is not a benign phenomenon; its impacts are profound and far-reaching, directly threatening democratic processes, public health and social stability. Politically, disinformation has been extensively documented during electoral cycles, influencing voter behaviour, suppressing turnout, or inciting violence (Adewumi, 2022; Gagliardone, Stremlau & Zhuravskaya, 2015). False narratives aimed at discrediting opposition candidates, fabricating electoral fraud, or exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions can severely undermine the integrity of democratic transitions and governance (Okoro & Okoro, 2019; Posetti & Matthews, 2018). Beyond politics, the spread of health-related misinformation, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to vaccine hesitancy, adoption of harmful unproven remedies and erosion of public trust in health authorities, with tangible public health consequences (WHO, 2020; Dlamini, 2021). Socially, disinformation frequently exploits existing societal cleavages - be they ethnic, religious, or regional, to deepen divisions, polarise communities and even incite violence, threatening national cohesion (Moyo & Nyamnjoh, 2018). The

pervasive nature and severe implications of these impacts underscore the urgent necessity for effective counter-strategies, with media literacy emerging as a fundamental, bottom-up solution.

The core argument of this study is that media literacy campaigns offer a direct and sustainable intervention against disinformation by empowering individual citizens. Media literacy, in this context, extends beyond mere digital fluency to encompass the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms (Livingstone, 2017; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). For African contexts, this specifically translates to equipping citizens with the critical thinking skills necessary to:

- a. Recognising common tropes like click bait, manipulated imagery, deep fakes, or emotionally charged language designed to bypass rational thought (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).
- b. Distinguishing between reputable news organisations, propaganda outlets and unreliable social media accounts, understanding journalistic standards and identifying vested interests (Vraga & Tully, 2019).
- c. Grasping how social media algorithms create filter bubbles and echo chambers, potentially reinforcing false beliefs (Pariser, 2011; Dubois & Blank, 2018).
- d. Encouraging self-reflection on one's own predispositions and willingness to engage with diverse perspectives (Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017). This proactive approach to media consumption builds individual and collective resilience, shifting the burden from solely content moderation (which is often reactive and insufficient) to fostering informed and critical citizen engagement (Livingstone, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).
- e. Effective media literacy campaigns in Africa cannot be one-size-fits-all; they must be contextually tailored, culturally sensitive and delivered through diverse channels (Moyo & Nyamnjoh, 2018).
- f. Incorporating media literacy into school curricula from primary to tertiary levels is a long-term, systemic approach to inoculate future generations (UNESCO, 2021). This involves developing locally relevant educational materials and training teachers as key facilitators.
- g. Given varying access to formal education, community workshops, public awareness campaigns (utilising radio, local languages and traditional storytelling formats) and initiatives by civil society organisations are vital. These approaches can reach diverse populations, including rural communities and older demographics (Okoro & Okoro, 2019; Adewumi, 2022).
- h. Since mobile phones are the primary access point to the internet for many Africans, campaigns must specifically address how disinformation spreads on mobile messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) and short-form video platforms, which often lack the public scrutiny of open web content (Posetti & Matthews, 2018).
- i. Disinformation often thrives on cultural references and local grievances. Media literacy campaigns must be developed in local languages, employing culturally relevant examples and engaging with traditional gatekeepers and community leaders to enhance trust and effectiveness (Moyo & Nyamnjoh, 2018).

Implementing widespread media literacy campaigns in Africa is not without its challenges. These include: infrastructure deficits (limited internet access in some rural areas, lack of reliable electricity); resource constraints (funding for extensive training and material development); political will and censorship concerns (governments sometimes fearing an empowered, critical citizenry); and the sheer scale of diverse populations and languages (Livingstone, 2017; Gagliardone et al., 2015).

However, Africa also presents unique opportunities. The continent's youthful demographic (often early adopters of new technologies) is a prime target for effective media literacy interventions, potentially creating a generational shift in information consumption habits (Oluwole, 2021). The widespread mobile phone penetration offers an unprecedented reach for digital literacy tools and campaigns. Furthermore, existing civil society networks and community-based organisations often possess the trust and local knowledge necessary to effectively deliver such programmes. The burgeoning ecosystem of local fact-checking organisations across the continent provides invaluable partners for media literacy initiatives (Africa Check, 2023).

Conclusion

The pervasive spread of disinformation in the digital age presents a profound challenge to African societies, impacting democratic integrity, public health and social cohesion. This study has firmly established that while the continent's rapid digital adoption creates unique vulnerabilities, it also underscores an urgent imperative for robust counter-strategies. The discussion has elucidated how disinformation exploits existing societal cleavages and leverages new media platforms for rapid, often unverified, dissemination, leading to tangible and detrimental real-world consequences.

Crucially, this study concludes that media literacy

campaigns stand as a fundamental and indispensable defence mechanism in this fight. By empowering individual citizens with the capacity to critically access, analyse, evaluate and create media, these initiatives foster digital resilience from the grassroots. The discussion highlighted that effective media literacy is not a generic solution; it demands contextual tailoring, cultural sensitivity and delivery through diverse channels, ranging from formal education integration to informal community-based programmes and a specific focus on mobile-first literacy. While acknowledging significant implementation challenges, including infrastructure deficits, resource limitations and concerns regarding political will, the continent's youthful demographic and widespread mobile penetration present unparalleled opportunities. Ultimately, media literacy campaigns, though part of a broader multi-pronged approach, represent a vital pillar for cultivating an informed citizenry and fostering resilient public discourse in Africa's evolving digital future.

Recommendations

To effectively combat disinformation and build resilient information environments across Africa, the following recommendations are proposed by the researchers:

1. Governments and educational bodies should prioritise the systematic inclusion of media and information literacy curricula from primary to tertiary levels. This should involve developing locally relevant content and providing comprehensive training for educators to ensure effective delivery.
2. Recognising varying educational access, civil society organisations, NGOs and local community leaders should be empowered and funded to develop and deliver targeted workshops and public awareness campaigns. These initiatives should utilise accessible formats, local languages and traditional communication channels like radio and storytelling to reach diverse populations, including rural and older demographics.
3. Given the predominant use of mobile phones for internet access in Africa, campaigns must specifically address the unique ways disinformation spreads via mobile messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) and short-form video platforms. Training should focus on verifying content received on these platforms and understanding their closed, encrypted environments.
4. To enhance effectiveness and trust, media literacy materials and training should be developed in local African languages and incorporate culturally relevant examples and contexts. Collaborating with traditional gatekeepers and community leaders can further boost the legitimacy and reach of these initiatives.
5. Governments, educators and civil society should actively partner with burgeoning local fact-checking organisations and reputable media outlets across the continent. These partnerships can provide expert knowledge, verified information and platforms for disseminating media literacy messages, thereby reinforcing critical evaluation skills.
6. Combating disinformation effectively requires long-term commitment. International donors, national governments and philanthropic organisations should allocate dedicated and sustained funding for media literacy initiatives, supporting curriculum development, teacher training, community outreach and research into local disinformation dynamics.
7. Governments must recognise media literacy as a tool for strengthening democracy and public health, rather than a threat. Efforts should be made to foster political will for these initiatives, ensuring that campaigns operate in an environment that safeguards freedom of expression and open civic space, avoiding any potential for censorship or manipulation.

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