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Misinformation in countries with limited technological literacies: How individuals in sub-Sahara Africa engage with fake news

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Abstract

In an event where the problem of information access is almost terra incognita, the derivate challenge is whether too much information is bad. Most research suggests so, yet very few attempts have been made to examine the digital inequalities and literacies that shape how an individual is exposed, consumes, shares, and ends up believing in fake news. This study builds upon focus group data from six sub-Saharan countries to examine how people in sub-Saharan Africa engage with misinformation. This study focuses on variations in digital access and literacy, which indicate how individuals in Africa are exposed to, consume, spread, and believe in misinformation. The findings suggest that access is not an impediment to fake news exposure, consumption, or sharing. However, the presumed news-literate individuals did not seem to believe in misinformation, except in events that compromised their moral fibre. Because of eco-chambers, news-literate people were more susceptible to misinformation. The overall findings question

the notion of news literacy and whether it is indeed a panacea for fighting misinformation.

Key words: *Misinformation, digital access, digital literacy, sub-Saharan Africa, social media consumption*

Introduction

Mis/disinformation and media often exist concurrently. Early scholars, such as Walter Lippmann, pointed out the intentional flaws that media imposed on its audience. In Liberty and News, Lippmann (1920) argued that modern democracy was a journalism crisis. Referring to WWI, Lippmann asserted that journalism was characterized by personal opinions that superseded reality in favor of misinformation, thus creating 'pictures in our heads'. "When these pictures come from distant places, brought to us by a press without much self-discipline or sophistication or intellectual weight, our actions, our votes, our choices, are at the mercy of the flawed picture provided by the media" (Lippman, p. 38). This assertion precedes the lack of knowledge in the matrix of mis/disinformation.

Unlike Lippmann's world, the digital age has increased connectivity, and the reliance on a single 'press without much self-discipline, sophistication, or intellectual weight' is almost terra incognita. Although mainstream media continues to uphold the position of an 'essential sounding board', accidental witnesses and citizen journalists have also emerged to play a pivotal role in the dissemination of information. The dichotomy, or rather the competition between what is professional and what is not, has become a bone of

contention. For example, President Donald Trump constantly referenced mainstream news as fake.

While professional journalists accuse 'accidental witnesses' as inept and thus compromising the practice, the same accusation is imposed otherwise. These unresolved debates have translated into who spreads fake news (Fazio, 2020; Kuo & Marwick, 2021), and who is responsible for correcting it (Tully, Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, Gondwe, & Ireri, (2021). As a result, the problem is no longer about access to information but the ability to critically analyze news content and determine whether it is fake. Vraga, Bode, and Tully (2022) referred to news literacy.

The nature of Mis/Disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa

In most of sub-Saharan Africa, the schism between the 'haves' versus the 'have nots', and the literate versus the non-literate are still wide. While most people have access to digital information gadgets, many have little or no access to electricity or networks to power their gadgets. However, because it is related to misinformation, it is probably scanty. A comparative study conducted in six sub-Saharan African countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) suggested that even people in rural areas have access to misinformation (Madrid–Morales et. al., 2020). Nonetheless, engagement levels differed. A subsequent study indicated that people in rural areas consume and share misinformation at the same rate as those in urban areas. The underlying argument of the findings is that, because of limited access (not to technology but to electricity, and sometimes internet networks), people in rural areas are in haste to consume and share any kind of social media information, including fake news. However, individuals in urban

areas consume unlimited time and share social media information during their leisure time. This provided them sufficient time to think through a post before sharing it.

News literacy is the most challenging issue. Arguably, news literacy in Africa is correlated with all forms of literacy, particularly the ability to read and write (Chikoko and Nthembu (2020); Obasuyi and Rasiah (2019). Of the 25 sub-Saharan countries studied, only Zimbabwe had moderate levels of educational equality, suggesting that most countries had a handful of educated individuals. The implication is that only a handful had the ability to critically analyze news content and determine whether it is fake. However, almost everyone, including those who can barely read or write, is on social media. Most non-literate individuals use WhatsApp and share visual images. Unlike normal mobile texting or calling which costs money, WhatsApp allows people to communicate via recorded audio messages. One needs the ability to press a single button and record what one wants to send. This suggests that not only are educated individuals exposed, but non-educated individuals are also less able to criticize news content.

Essentially, those with low levels of news literacy are considered dangerous in terms of misinformation consumption and spread. Given the existing gaps between the less-educated and the many uneducated in Africa, it can be argued that most Africans are prone to misinformation. Theoretically, they are more likely to consume, believe, and spread misinformation than other geo-continents are. Surprisingly, our findings supported this hypothesis. A deep dive into this question reveals that fake news resides more among individuals with partisan or religious affiliates. Taking Zambia as an example, we were able to demonstrate that most educated individuals were obstinate

in their values and did not leave room for change. For example, a pretest of graduate students and lecturers (the educated community of Zambia) on their perceptions of homosexuality suggested that they did not even want to attempt to understand the topic. Therefore, any negative misinformation about homosexuality was likely shared and ostracized by the elite. The same is true of certain political views and chambers. Although we found that most individuals were open to reading content that criticized their political values, the reading of that information was not open-minded. At most, many read information with the intention of finding a fault.

On the contrary, individuals with low news literacy levels seem to consume and share more information. However, their consumption and sharing were not vested. They did it for fun, and most of them said that they did not even know what the information was about. One respondent, for example, averred to one of the following experiences: There is one time I shared something because I thought it was my responsibility, and that my family and friends would like it that I am active on social media. I immediately received a call from my nephew from town, asking me why I shared that information in public. He asked me to immediately remove it, but I did not know how, and it was too late – everyone had seen it until a young man helped me. Do I care? Perhaps not, unless it compromises my moral standing, and even so, I did not knowingly share it.

This means that exposure, consumption, and the spread of misinformation are only part of the bigger problem of whether one believes in the content. As Tandoc, et. al. (2017) would ask, "Does fake news remain fake if it is not perceived as real by the audience? In other words, can an article that looks like news but is without factual basis, with an immediate intention to

mislead, be considered fake news if the audience does not buy into the lie? (p.148)". Thus, it is highly contested whether those with low levels of news literacy are susceptible to fake news and misinformation.

Conclusion

Overall, the nature and impact of fake news and mis/disinformation across the globe are highly politicized (Wasserman, 2020), such that some governments continue to use the terminology to intimidate opposing views. For example, Cunliffe-Jones, Finlay, and Schiffrin (2021) found that after 2016, most African countries had passed a flurry of laws and regulations penalizing the publication or broadcast of what they deemed as 'misinformation'. In their data analysis, the researcher found that "while these laws have a chilling effect on political and media debates, they did not reduce misinformation harm'"(p. 203). It is also evident that certain media have embarked on creating misinformation on their own agenda. Tully (2022) and Stewart, Madonsela, Tshabalala, Etale, & Theunissen (2022) observe how certain media created misinformation related to COVID-19 to sway individuals from getting the vaccine. However, the central thrust remains as to whether one believes in this content.

To iterate Tandoc, et. al. (2017)'s question, "Does fake news remain fake if it is not perceived as real by the audience? (p. 148)". The authors' responses are no. Therefore, the extent to which fake news and misinformation affect those who do not (a) perceive it as real and (b) who are simply non-news literate to understand it. As shown in our study, these two variables have a major effect on how one is exposed to, consumes, shares, and beliefs about fake news. Most importantly, the believability of the information determines

fake news. However, this belief is highly correlated with education, which in most African countries, defines news literacy. How do we reconcile these four variables in Africa? However, this requires further investigation.

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