Exploring Audience Agency in Countering Misinformation

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Drawing on 41 in-depth interviews with media professionals, policy and media experts, and 50 social media users in Kenya and Senegal, this study uncovers conceptual gaps in how the two groups understand misinformation and reveals differences in how they view the role of "the audience" in stopping the spread of misinformation. Although media professionals and policy and media experts connect misinformation to the news, social media users relate it to "everyday" misinformation. We also find that professionals believe they have a role in stopping misinformation by creating high-quality information but are not always confident that audiences engage with their work. This is supported by interviews with social media users who say they rarely seek out fact-checks or media literacy messages. Our findings also suggest that some social media users believe they have high levels of agency in addressing misinformation, but not all exercise it.

Keywords: misinformation, Kenya, Senegal, audience agency, in-depth interviews

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Concern about the spread of misinformation around the world has grown in recent years as researchers, educators, media professionals, and citizens have raised alarm over the causes and possible consequences of engaging with false and misleading news and information (Balakrishnan, Ng, Soo, Han, & Lee, 2022; Tandoc & Seet, 2022). Although much attention has focused on health and political misinformation, particularly in recent years with the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of populist politicians (Ong, 2022), less is known about these issues in Africa. In this article, we contribute to the study of misinformation on the continent by addressing the perceptions of and experiences with misinformation of two groups that are often, and simultaneously, vilified as the spreaders of misinformation *and* touted as the possible solution to addressing its spread: media professionals/experts and social media users.

Drawing on an analysis of 91 in-depth semistructured interviews with media professionals (e.g., journalists, fact-checkers, news editors), policy and media experts (e.g., policy makers, media freedom advocates, members of trade organizations, journalism educators), and social media users in Kenya and Senegal, this study explores how these groups articulate audience agency and the role of "the audience" in stopping the spread of misinformation. First, we explore media professionals' and policy/media experts' views of audiences and engage with their perceptions of an "imagined audience" (Nelson, 2021). Next, we examine how audience members view their own behaviors and experiences with online misinformation and the tactics they use to engage with news and (mis)information in their daily lives (Tandoc, Ling et al., 2018; Tully, 2022a). Our analysis shows that there are key points of connection and disconnection between how media professionals and policy and media experts view audiences (and "the people"), and how audiences view themselves and their behaviors.

We begin by offering an overview of misinformation in sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on audiences in Kenya and Senegal, and by discussing how other researchers have thought of news audiences and the public. Throughout this study, we use "misinformation" as a catch-all term to describe false or misleading information, unless quoting interview participants who used other terms. We opt for this term because it is often used as a more inclusive concept that attempts to capture a range of false and misleading information without purporting to know the intentionality, and it helps us move beyond debates around typologies of "problematic information" (Jack, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation in Kenya and Senegal

Although concerns about the impact of misinformation are global and the experiences in Kenya and Senegal, the two countries this study focuses on, are not unique, they need to be understood in their national, regional, linguistic, colonial, and postcolonial contexts (Chakravartty & Roy, 2017; Wasserman, 2020). In Kenya, as Otieno and Ndonye (2020) show, the fact that political elites own most media outlets leads to a narrow focus on political agendas. It compromises the media's independence and role as a watchdog. Similarly, in Senegal, legacy media, especially the press, has historically been the closed-off domain of political elites (Wittman, 2006). Recent shifts toward online news consumption—31% in Senegal and 36% in Kenya said in 2021/23 that they use the Internet to get their news every day (Afrobarometer, 2022)—have led to the creation of new digital spaces where critical political and social discourse is possible. In this context, digital news outlets, social media platforms, and messaging apps have become tools for political engagement, especially among the youth (Ndlela & Mulwo, 2017). At the same time, however,

these spaces have either been co-opted by powerful factions in society or weaponized by certain pressure groups, leading to the exacerbation of long-standing issues, such as extreme speech and misinformation (Udupa, Gagliardone, & Hervik, 2021; Wamuyu, 2021).

In Senegal, misinformation tends to intensify around elections when political actors leverage falsehoods to influence public opinion (Badji, 2022). This is compounded by the public's distrust of traditional media (Wittman, 2006). Although some efforts to fight misinformation, such as Meta's #NoFalseNewsZone campaign, have been deployed, challenges remain in addressing an underlying systemic distrust (RFI, 2022). In Kenya, misinformation often revolves around ethnic tensions and political scandals, with misinformation also typically surfacing during election periods to exploit divisions. The 2022 Kenyan general election highlighted the critical role of social media, as local politicians employed influencers to manipulate narratives, further undermining trust in news outlets (Wamunyu, 2024). Social media platforms contributed to amplifying these narratives, complicating efforts to address the issue (Madung, 2022; Mudavadi, Tully, & Lomoywara, 2025).

Although audience research related to misinformation in sub-Saharan Africa is still limited, a growing body of work suggests that African audiences believe they are exposed to misinformation regularly (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019) and respond to it in myriad ways, from ignoring it to sharing it (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). Concerns about misinformation are also high on the continent, where 72% of respondents in Kenya and Nigeria reported they struggled to tell what is real and false online, compared with a global average of 54% (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022). Qualitative research in Kenya supports these findings as Kenyans express frequent perceived exposure to misinformation and view it as a problem (Chakrabarti, Rooney, & Kweon, 2018; Tully, 2022b; Tully, Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, Gondwe, & Ireri, 2022).

Misinformation research in Senegal is less expansive—a trend that is consistent with the broader field of African media studies, which prioritizes research in Anglophone Africa (Cheruiyot, 2021). In an overview of misinformation in the country, Badji (2022) describes how misinformation spreads offline in town squares and marketplaces and online by political actors and social media users. Researchers have also found that rumors and unclear information contributed to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in the country (Ba et al., 2022). Participants in this study recalled rumors about the speed of development and efficacy of the vaccine, as well as more insidious falsehoods about the vaccine being used to reduce the African population (Ba et al., 2022), an example of misinformation that spread elsewhere on the continent (Gagliardone et al., 2021; Tully & Singer, 2023).

In both Kenya and Senegal, as well as in most of sub-Saharan Africa, misinformation has a history that predates digital media. Research has highlighted the significance of official and unofficial falsehoods, rumors, and other forms of mediated deception and audiences' responses to this information environment for decades (Ellis, 1989; Wasserman, 2020; Willems & Mano, 2017). Colonial and postcolonial regimes in Africa and the Global South relied on media capture or coercion to convey their official messages with little regard for "the truth." Audiences often relied on word-of-mouth and informal media to share information and to push back on official narratives. In the early days of "modernization," the media were used to educate "the masses" without considering social, political, and cultural contexts (Chakravartty & Roy,

2017). This messy information environment, where traditional media is a purveyor of falsehoods *and* purported to be an educational agent, can create a fertile ground for spreading misinformation. This issue has lasted into the postcolonial and contemporary era. In addition, blaming "the masses" or audiences for spreading misinformation while not addressing the role of elite-sponsored disinformation campaigns has continued in sub-Saharan Africa (Ekdale & Tully, 2019) and throughout the Global South. In the Philippines, Ong, Fallorina, Lanuza, Sanchez II, and Curato (2022) have noted that some countermisinformation work tends to focus on "*anti-masa* (anti-poor) sentiments" (p. 45) rather than shedding light on elites as spreaders of falsehoods.

Audience Agency and Misinformation

Audience responses to misinformation are issue-specific, contextual, and socioculturally embedded (Almenar, Aran-Ramspott, Suau, & Masip, 2021; Tamboer, Kleemans, & Daalmans, 2022). In the Kenyan context, Tully (2022a, 2022b) has noted that media users describe their willingness to respond to misinformation depending on the issue itself, interest level, perceived importance, potential consequences, and sociocultural dynamics of the group in which misinformation is spread. For instance, because respect for elders is important for many Kenyans, this may influence if and how a person responds to misinformation shared by a parent, grandparent, or other elder (Tully, 2022a). These decisions are not made in a vacuum; they are also affected by broader political and structural dynamics (Pype & Kakaya, 2022). In many African countries, including Kenya and Senegal, government responses to misinformation have included harsher laws that curtail free speech (Yadav, Erdogdu, Siwakoti, Shapiro, & Wanless, 2021). Equally, the media system in which misinformation is created and spread affect audiences' ability to respond to it. As Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones (2022) note, audiences have more opportunities to find accurate information if high-quality news is abundant. However, their interest and willingness to seek it out may not necessarily align with its availability. In countries with less open media, the opportunities are far less and restrain audience agency.

Although societal, political, and systemic constraints are not to be disregarded, the myriad considerations that media users contemplate in (dis)engaging with misinformation reflect a high degree of agency. Thinking of audiences as "active" or "participatory" actors is nothing new in media studies. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model emphasized that audiences do not passively consume media messages but actively interpret, negotiate, and even resist these messages based on their sociocultural positions. Building on Hall's insights, Livingstone (2005) has long argued that the rise of interactive and participatory media has deepened audience agency, positioning audiences not only as interpreters but also as cocreators of meaning. This empowerment, however, is not uniform across all audiences, as Das (2017) emphasizes in her critique of what she sees as outdated assumptions of audiences in the Global South as "the masses." Work by Livingstone (2005), Das (2017), and other scholars who have pushed back against passive views of audiences reveals a complex interplay between digital participation and sociopolitical realities, particularly in postcolonial settings. Together, they illustrate how participatory media has expanded Hall's framework by accounting for both the technological shifts and the diverse, context-specific ways audiences engage with mediated content, including misinformation.

Challenges to once-predominant discourses around media audiences as passive and acritical have also come from research into how media professionals imagine those engaging/interacting/consuming their work (Nelson, 2021). For instance, Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon (2021) have suggested that journalists tend to perceive audiences as "rational." Whether these views extend to how media professionals/experts view audiences' responses to misinformation is an area that remains underexplored. Similarly, we still know little about how audiences perceive their own agency and roles in responding to false information, particularly in the countries this study focuses on (Tully et al., 2022). In other contexts, research has shown that audiences believe multiple-pronged responses (including audience-centered solutions) are necessary for addressing problems related to misinformation (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020; Tandoc, Ling et al., 2018). These perceptions resonate with "whole-of-society" approaches to misinformation (Mudavadi & Madrid-Morales, 2024; Ong, 2022).

In summary, existing research shows that people believe misinformation is abundant online, that it is cause for concern, and requires responses from multiple actors (Tully et al., 2022; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). However, when it comes to thinking of solutions, there's limited empirical evidence of whether audiences see themselves as having agency in addressing the problem or not and, if so, how their view differs/coincides with that of media professionals/experts. Therefore, this study examines the issue of audience agency by exploring audiences' perceptions of their own behaviors and the perceptions of media professionals. We do so by asking the following questions:

RQ1: In what contexts do social media users and media professionals think about misinformation?

RQ2: How do social media users and media professionals perceive audience agency in addressing misinformation?

Methods

To answer these questions, we thematically analyzed the content of 91 in-depth interviews in Kenya and Senegal with media professionals and policy and media experts on the one side and social media users on the other. The interviews were conducted predominantly in English and French, but in some instances, interviewers used Swahili or Wolof, languages widely spoken in Kenya and Senegal, respectively. Most interviews were conducted online, but some were done over the phone or via WhatsApp, particularly those with social media users outside large urban centers. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2021. The research design was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Iowa and the University of Houston.

As noted earlier, research on misinformation in sub-Saharan Africa tends to highlight the need to consider the social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts in which misinformation is produced, distributed, and spread (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Gagliardone et al., 2021), and it stresses the importance of comparative research (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). These two principles guided our choice of countries to include in the study. Kenya and Senegal offer a diverse sample of social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts that allow comparisons between and within countries. They are also the two largest media hubs in English-speaking East Africa and French-speaking West Africa, which often translates into

having an oversized impact on media practices and behaviors in neighboring countries. In other words, they are good exemplars in an exploratory study. Furthermore, although research on misinformation in Kenya is abundant, much less has been written in English about Senegal. With this study we are advocating for more cross-lingual comparative research in Africa.

Sampling

To recruit media professionals (N_{Kenya} = 21; $N_{Senegal}$ = 20), we used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Using personal contacts, we approached individuals who belonged to one of two categories: (a) those working in the news media, both online and offline (e.g., journalists, reporters, editors, fact-checkers) and (b) those involved in making policy or exerting some influence in the policymaking process (e.g., government officials, people working in think tanks and NGOs, and academics with subject expertise in media and regulation). At the end of each interview, we asked participants to recommend additional possible interviewees. Our sample includes 39% women and covers a range of age groups from early 20s to mid-60s, although most (76%) are in the 30 to 45 age group (see Appendices). By professional role, the sample includes media professionals, namely fact-checkers (19%) and journalists (48%), covering a range of positions from health reporters to news editors and community radio presenters, followed by policy and media experts (33%) such as professors, government officials, media freedom advocates, and trade union members.

To recruit social media users (N_{Kenya} = 24; $N_{Senegal}$ = 26), we hired two research firms, one in each country. We chose this approach to secure a more diverse sample, as these firms maintain a diverse pool of participants they can call upon. Our sample includes slightly more women (52%), a wide range of age groups (the largest one being those between 35 and 44, at 30%), and individuals from 10 different cities/regions (urban, peri-urban, and rural in both countries). In compensation for their time, we offered interviewees mobile phone airtime top-ups or mobile money transfers. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity in research reports, and therefore, we refer to them using a numeric ID.

Questionnaire

We tailored our interview guides for the different categories of media professionals, maintaining a common structure that began with an introduction about the interviewee's professional role, followed by three question blocks. Two question sets were used in all groups, covering definitions of misinformation (e.g., "What does 'fake news' misinformation and disinformation mean to you?") and solutions to misinformation (e.g., "Who is most responsible for the spread of misinformation?"). Specific blocks were included for journalists on COVID-19's impact on journalism, for fact-checkers on who the main targets of fact-checking are based on the questionnaire proposed by Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), and for policy/media experts on technology and regulatory measures. Interviews with social media users focused on news consumption (e.g., "Tell me about how you regularly get news and information"), social media use (e.g., "How does your use of WhatsApp compare to other social media sites?"), COVID-19 information sources (e.g., "Which source of information do you think gives the most reliable information about COVID-19?"), and media literacy (e.g., "Have you ever heard about media or news literacy? What do you think these terms mean?").

Analysis

The average length of the interviews was 46 minutes for media professionals (*Min* = 23 minutes; *Max* = 68 minutes) and 45 for media users (*Min* = 17 minutes; *Max* = 67 minutes). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed manually (social media users) or computationally (media professionals). All transcriptions were checked for accuracy by native speakers. All interviews were translated into English before thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo using a codebook with seven themes (e.g., "fact-checking" and "COVID-19-related issues") and 51 subthemes (e.g., under the theme "responses" we identified subthemes such as "media literacy & education, models," or "individual responses"). The codebook was designed through both inductive and deductive processes. We initially listed themes from the interview guide and the notes taken during the interviews. We then read a sample of the transcriptions to identify additional themes. All coauthors participated in the coding of all 91 transcriptions.

To answer RQ1, we also plotted two unweighted semantic networks around the words "misinformation" and "fake news" and another two around the terms "responsible" and "response." For easier visualization and analysis, we grouped the words "misinformation" and "fake news" under one common term, "misinformation" in the first set of networks. To generate these figures, we counted frequently co-occurring words within a seven-word window around the target terms (i.e., misinformation and responsible, responsibility, and response). In determining a suitable context window, we followed conventions in other studies (Segev, 2021). These semantic networks were created using the quanteda package in R (Benoit et al., 2018). Each network includes the top 40 co-occurring nouns, verbs, and adjectives (all other features were removed) as identified by the R package spacyr (Benoit & Matsuo, 2020).

Understandings of Misinformation and Responses to It

To answer RQ1, we draw on the findings of the thematic analysis and use the four semantic networks as additional evidence. We find a gap in how media professionals and social media users discussed the term "misinformation." To media professionals, misinformation is connected to (a) *the media industry and the news production process* (i.e., misinformation is a quasi-synonym with current affairs and news/media events or the type of content one would find in spaces where "newsworthy" events are discussed), (b) *politically motivated activities*. Although we found examples of both (a) and (b) in interviews with all types of media professionals, (b) appears to be more prominent in interviews with Kenyan professionals than Senegalese ones. Neither (a) nor (b) is significantly present in interviews with social media users, even though we did find some references to "fake news" related to politics in their responses. For this group, false information has less to do with the type of content one would associate with that published/broadcast by the news media and more to do with information related to one's everyday life, such as fake commercial offers or job advertisements. In addition, misinformation is often discussed in relation to people with whom interviewees have a close relationship, such as friends, family members, coworkers, or fellow worshippers. These people, not the news media, are their perceived primary "source" of misinformation.

When prompted to think about misinformation, media professionals consistently referred to and used examples from the news media (without making a clear distinction between online and offline spaces) as opposed to other types of misinformation mentioned by social media users (e.g., financial scams and

fraud, chain-messages, fake job advertisements). In other words, media professionals and policy/media experts connected misinformation to information about politics, sports competitions, celebrity news, and health reporting, but made no reference to "everyday" misinformation. Several media professionals referred to misinformation as the antithesis of news. As a lecturer in Kenya put it, "News is . . . information that is accurate, verified, and well researched," and, by contrast, misinformation "is anything that is not verified, that is not very well researched, and anything that is inaccurate" (KE_MP016). Misinformation is a consequence of not following the "standards" of orthodox journalistic praxis. In the words of a former Kenyan news reporter, misinformation is spread when poor information "processing occurs." "What does 'processing' mean? It means going to the source, verifying whether the information is accurate and true, and then disseminating it" (KE_MP010).

Because media professionals think of misinformation in the context of the news media, they often discuss misinformation in connection to ongoing changes in the media industry and the consequences that these have/could have on journalistic practice. These changes include the shrinking audience of legacy media (radio, print, and television); the emergence of new styles of journalism, such as "clickbait journalism"; or the consequences of misusing new technologies (e.g., bots, AI, deepfakes) on trust in institutions, including the media. Several interviewees, including a Senegalese university dean, verbalized their concern about the costs of these transformations:

> Disinformation is, first, at a global level. The truth is attacked from all sides, and, honestly, today, those of us who are in the information sector, or, in any case, at least me, the feeling that I have sometimes is . . . I feel a little helpless. I'm somewhat distraught because I tell myself: "Picture this; you are in a sector where every time information is given, the first reflex is to doubt: is it true?" [Just] a few years ago, when we discussed the news, a priori, it was presupposed to be true. (SN_MP003)

It is possible that discussions around misinformation with media professionals and policy and media experts, like the example above, focused on the news media not because we prompted them to think of their own work specifically when defining the concept but, possibly, because they are most likely to encounter inaccurate information in the context of their profession.

The second dimension in media professionals' discussion of misinformation was connected to the intentions of those disseminating false content. These intentions were often connected to politics, particularly among Kenyan interviewees. There were frequent references to a "hidden agenda" (e.g., SN_MP020, a journalist and fact-checker, and KE_MP016, a university lecturer), which informants connected to political motives. A Senegalese journalist talked about misinformation being spread because some people might want to "harm someone else" out of "ignorance" or "malice in general." Often, they added, this is done to "settle scores" between "political actors" (SN_MP005). This view of false information creation and dissemination aligns with academic definitions of "disinformation," often defined as intentionally false or misleading content created to cause harm (Tandoc & Seet, 2022). Interviewees referred multiple times to political misinformation in the United States under the presidency of Donald J. Trump. Others used examples closer to home:

> Think of the Ministry of Health kind of playing politics and shifting goalposts here and there. They allowed people who had bad intentions, I would say, their end intentions [were] to spread information that is not correct [about] the vaccine. . . . If you go and ask loyal supporters of the Deputy President, they'll tell you that it's the President who's using the Ministry of Health to prevent the Deputy President from getting the second jab. (KE_MP005, journalist)

A few interviews with social media users also mentioned the connection between misinformation and politics, more so among Senegalese than Kenyan users, but it was not a dominant theme.

In contrast to the views of media professionals, for most social media users, concepts such as "misinformation, fake news," and "false information" do not immediately evoke news content but more routine information that is sent to them through WhatsApp and, to a lesser extent, Facebook and/or X/Twitter. We found a few instances of social media users who gave examples of content they had seen/read/heard on the news media when asked for instances of false information they had come across recently. These few cases were related to COVID-19. However, most examples were unrelated to traditional news: a scam that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was donating money to residents; false advertisements promising discounted products that are, in fact, phishing messages; made-up stories about people becoming ill for not following certain religious practices; chained e-mails promising rewards if a message was forwarded to a given number of friends; a manipulated image of a severely ill acquaintance who was, in fact, healthy; and, a campaign claiming to collect money for a missing person who was, in reality, not missing. When asked whether coming across this type of false information happened often, many agreed, like this Kenyan lawyer:

> [I get these types of messages] several times, especially those that the government is giving out money for COVID, the employment . . . There are a lot of conmen with those forwards in terms of luring people, seeking to receive some money; Safaricom is awarding airtime . . . My problem is mainly why people are forwarding to those groups without even checking the legitimacy of those forwards. Somebody was conned seventy thousand [Kenyan schillings] out of those forwards. (KE_MP023)
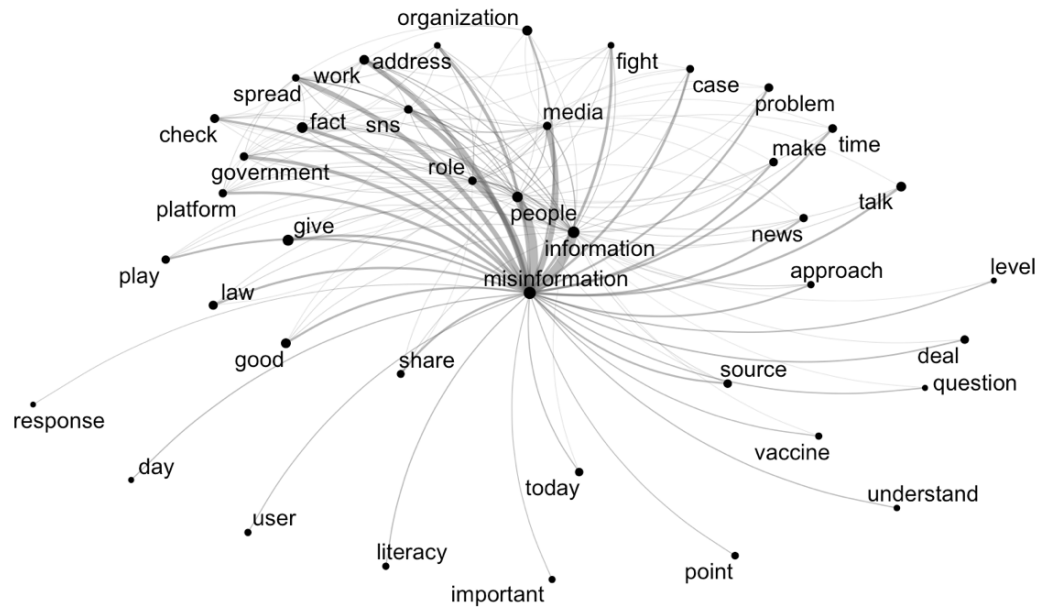
Figure 1. Semantic network around "misinformation" (media professionals).

Figure 2. Semantic network around "misinformation" (social media users).

Figure 3. Semantic network around "response" and "responsible" (media professionals).
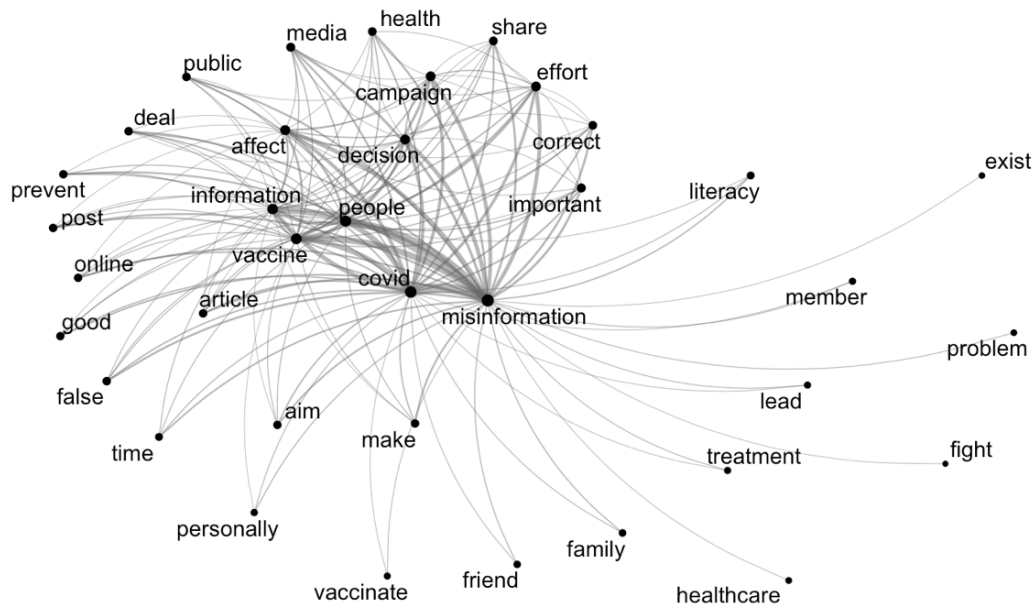

Figure 4. Semantic network around "response" and "responsible" (social media users).

The conceptual gap in how the two groups think of misinformation can also be seen in the semantic networks formed around the terms "misinformation" and "fake news" that we present in Figure 1 (media professionals) and Figure 2 (social media users). In these networks, the thicker the edge is between two

words, the more often they occur together in interview responses. When discussing misinformation, media professionals do so in a semantic space that is connected to their employment, physically and conceptually, with words such as "organization, work, media," and "news." This semantic space also includes references to the places where misinformation behaviors and responses to them might be taking place: social media ("social media networks [SNS]"[1] and "platform") and institutions ("government" and "law," for example). These semantic spaces are largely absent from the network plotted for social media users. Instead, we find several words related to COVID-19 ("vaccine, health, covid, treatment"), which is a topic that featured prominently in both interview guides but appeared to be strongly associated only with discussions about misinformation in conversations with social media users. When talking about COVID-19, media professionals often did so in relation to their work, which could be because of an interview question that asked media professionals about how COVID-19 affected their jobs.

Aside from the differences we describe above, we find some overlaps in Figures 1 and 2. The clearest one is the centrality of the term "people." Not only is the term central in discussions with both groups, but it is also connected in both networks to words that refer to possible solutions to misinformation. In Figure 1, we see strong links between "people" and "role," and between "address" and "fight," whereas, in Figure 2, there are thick edges between "decision" and "effort" and "prevent." The term "people" is also prominently featured in the semantic network around the terms "response" and "responsible" in interviews of media professionals (Figure 3). The thickest edges connected to "people" are, precisely, those linking the term with "response" and "responsible." Other actors connected to these terms include platforms, the government, and social media networks. The word "people," however, is absent from the semantic network for social media users (Figure 4). "Response," in this case, appears in the context of individual actions (or responses) to misinformation (e.g., "share" and "send"). All of these seem to speak of media users' perceived agency in their engagement with information: they attribute themselves (and their friends, families, colleagues, and others) the ability to (dis)engage with misinformation. In the next section, we unpack this notion of agency, as seen from both the perspective of media professionals; policy and media experts, who regularly refer to "people" (and, to a lesser extent, "the audience"); and social media users.

Audience Agency in Addressing Misinformation

Like the schism we identified in how different groups think of misinformation, we also found a gap between media professionals, policy, and media experts' images of audiences' behaviors and audiences' self-reported behaviors when encountering (mis)information. In the eyes of media professionals and policy and media experts, many media users/consumers cannot discern good and bad quality information, rarely check the veracity of content, and do not necessarily engage with the type of quality information media professionals create. In combatting misinformation, media consumers are imagined as actors needing to exercise agency but rarely doing so. Audiences, one health reporter said, cannot tell "truth from lies" and "what is [true] and what isn't" (KE_MP019). They are sometimes described as "ignorant" (SN_MP004, journalist), "so gullible that they believe in everything they see" (SN_MP013, radio journalist), and unable

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[1] To facilitate the graphical representation of the network, we replaced instances of terms such as "social media" and "social networks" in the transcriptions with the key SNS ("social networking sites").

to "recognize who is a journalist and who isn't, who is a host, who is a journalist, who is an influencer" (SN_MP009, journalist). This view of audiences is echoed by some social media users, who seldom describe themselves in these terms but often offer examples of other people who they see as "vulnerable" groups: the elderly, the young, the lesser educated, those living in the countryside, and those who are politically engaged.

Despite the relatively homogenous view of audiences that can be drawn from interviews with media professionals, we found a diverse range of behaviors in how social media users describe their engagement (or disengagement) with misinformation. We identified three user profiles: the *engaged*, the *detached*, and the *analogue*. These groups mirror certain demographic and social fault lines, but we did not observe clear cross-country differences in the size or composition of the groups. For instance, the *analogue* user profile tended to be older and more rural, whereas the *engaged and detached* groups were more heterogeneous about age and socioeconomic status.

The *engaged*, who, in our sample, tended to be younger and/or more highly educated, are individuals who can describe in detail how they go about verifying information, are critical consumers of the media, and have an array of strategies to assess the quality of information. Their actions, such as examining the sources of information or triangulating information with reputable news organizations, mirror those prescribed by media professionals when we asked them what individuals' roles should be in combatting misinformation. A 46-year-old pharmacist from Ziguinchor (Senegal) described her approach as following a "scientific logic" (SN_SM020), whereas a 24-year-old digital professional from Nairobi (Kenya), half-jokingly, referred to the process of checking the accuracy of information as a "research project" (KE_SM024). Another Kenyan, an office clerk from Kisumu (52 years old), is a good example of this type of user:

> *What do you do when you come across a post online?*
> KE_SM002: It depends on my level of interest. Some, I ignore if I can tell it is not true. But there are those you may not be able to say . . . I can share it with a friend or two, asking them if they have heard of it and if it is true. Then someone will say it was posted 2 years ago; it was a different thing, but somebody has brought it now. There are many ways I can verify. I can cross-check on Google.
>
> *Is there a specific site that you go to?*
> KE_SM002: I just do a search. Someone can share a photo or something with a caption. Based on what the caption is, I use that caption to verify. If I find that it also appears in other forums, then I can say it is true, but if you do not see it anywhere else . . .
>
> *What forum would it be?*
> KE_SM002: There was a time somebody shared a photo of a massacre. He put it in a different context and claimed that it had happened in our country. I went to the different TV stations on Google and found that it appeared nowhere. The things which are based on their level should be widespread in terms of coverage. It cannot appear on WhatsApp but not on the mainstream news. That is one way that I verify.

The *detached*, who are not very predominant in our sample, tend to have low levels of engagement with information online. That means their default behavior when faced with dubious information is ignoring it. Some, like this 32-year-old student from Dakar (Senegal), attribute their behavior to their lack of trust in general, which is partly caused by their perceived hyperexposure to inaccurate information:

> SN_SM006: If I see it's false, I continue without comment. You know, social networks are a vast field, we don't know the intention of the person who publishes the information. Some people just create fake news to get views. I don't go into too much detail, so I pass when I see information that isn't good.

> *Do you have any strategies to check the quality of messages?*
> SN_SM006: If I look at the content, I can tell whether it is true or false, and I don't look at other sources. If you have to go around and check [the accuracy of] information on social media, it might take too much time.

Finally, the *analogue* is a media user with low self-perceived media and information literacy levels. They tend to be older and, in our sample, include both men and women. Some are illiterate, like a trader in Senegal who has a WhatsApp account and needs to ask for help from his children to read the messages out loud. Their social media use is linked to interpersonal and intergroup communication, but incidental news exposure occurs. This group of users, although less tech-savvy, still engage in some verification practices, albeit none that are mediated, such as searching on Google or reading fact-checks. Verification strategies for the *analogue* include asking friends and relatives, making phone calls to those sharing the information for further details, or seeking confirmation on legacy media, such as radio or television.

None of the three groups we describe above are hermetic. There is a fluidity of behaviors that responds to different uses of different social media platforms, interest in particular topics, and the sender of information. Although all groups have agency, how they enact it might not align with what media professionals imagine their audiences do (or not do), but it cannot be discounted. However, many acknowledged that, although they might be doing enough in their view, other social media users could benefit from more media and information literacy training. At the same time, however, and in line with what other researchers have found (e.g., Tully et al., 2022), the social media users we interviewed would expect other actors, from governments to social media platforms, to do more.

Discussion

This study is among the first to explore how media professionals, policy and media experts, and social media users conceptualize the term "misinformation" and to describe their views on how audiences should respond to it. Differences in definitions of misinformation between these groups—with professionals and experts focusing more on false news and audiences focusing more on scams and everyday experiences—reflect a disconnect that may account for some of the issues that journalists and fact-checkers face when trying to create content that will resonate with audiences. Audience research consistently shows that news consumers (and nonconsumers) have a view and definition of news that is far broader than traditional definitions of news (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). The same may be true for

misinformation as audiences define and conceptualize misinformation in the context of their lives and experiences and not necessarily in ways that align with professional or academic definitions (Hameleers et al., 2022; Tandoc & Seet, 2022).

The conceptual gaps we describe in the study also speak of a much more worrisome disconnect between the multiple ways audiences think they exercise their agency and the rather reductionistic and nihilistic view that some professionals and experts expressed in the interviews. Rather than imagining their audiences as active, engaged, and rational (Coddington et al., 2021; Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 2005), they stand closer to the infantilizing and pathologizing views of audiences described by Ong and colleagues (2022). Although this is problematic in its terms, it also has broader implications, including that by projecting blame on audiences for not exercising their agency, some media professionals and experts fail to shift the discussion and attention to the primary sources of misinformation, which tend to be political and economic elites (Ekdale & Tully, 2019).

If journalists and media professionals have a more traditional view of news and misinformation than audiences, it would reasonably follow that they would focus their time and energy on creating content that aligns with those definitions. This means, for instance, that news outlets and fact-checking organizations tend to counter misinformation by focusing on the factuality of news content (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018), particularly about politics (e.g., live fact-checks of political debates or detailed explainers of controversial topics). However, as our findings suggest, a key driver in both Kenya and Senegal of the oversized perception that misinformation is ubiquitous is that media users believe they encounter it in everyday contexts (from job ads and fintech scams to fake promotions of popular brands on social media) more than in news content. It is possible that social media users preferred not to discuss politics and news in the interviews, and therefore, our findings might be skewed. However, other research has already pointed out that fraud and scams are a constituent part of the digital world in much of sub-Saharan Africa (see, e.g., Mogaji & Nguyen, 2022). Although addressing the challenge of misinformation in the news media is essential, so is reducing other forms of misinformation, as understood by audiences, given that their prevalence might contribute to overall levels of distrust in institutions as recorded in public opinion polls (Afrobarometer, 2022).

Given these different understandings of both misinformation and ways to address it, countermisinformation interventions should consider the actual behaviors and perceptions of audiences, tailoring solutions to what people already do to verify the information they encounter in their daily lives (Tamboer et al., 2022; Tandoc et al., 2018; Tully, 2022a). This approach requires media professionals to focus on issues relevant to their audiences rather than prescribing desired actions. For example, Africa Check, a fact-checking organization, counters common scams shared on social media and WhatsApp that, while not consistently recognized as traditional fact-checking by audiences, serve as practical tools for information verification. Providing these kinds of fact-checks reflects that some professionals recognize audience concerns about misinformation that has real implications and costs for people's lives—lost time, money, and identity. Enhancing media and news literacy skills can better prepare people to critically engage with information across various contexts (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Tully, 2022b). By focusing on this preemptive approach, media professionals can work to cultivate a more mindful audience. Several fact-

checking and other professional organizations are engaging in this work by building media and news literacy tactics into their fact-checks and providing additional resources (Tully & Singer, 2023).

These tailored approaches must also account for the multiplicity of (dis)engagements with misinformation described in the study. Our typology of user-profiles shows that audiences respond to misinformation in ways that align with their broader information habits. For the *engaged*, turning to online resources and employing tactics to check information quality aligns with how they approach news and information. News and misinformation are not a priority for the *detached*, and their behaviors reflect that reality. Finally, for the *analogue*, turning to offline and interpersonal sources better aligns with their abilities and needs. Each user profile also speaks of broader (and essential) sociopolitical dynamics that should not be taken for granted in designing countermisinformation interventions. The *engaged* and the *detached* are, in a way, two sides of the same coin: The former represents a cross-generational politically and socially involved citizenship that sees merit in the democratic process, whereas the latter constitutes a heterogenous group of citizens for whom democratic institutions, like the media, have lost value. As for the *analogue*, they serve as a reminder that, despite their growth, digital media spaces are not the only public square in some parts of Kenya and Senegal.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. First, our convenience sample of predominantly male professionals and experts may not fully represent the diversity of opinions in the field. Second, we employed different interview protocols for professionals and social media users, potentially influencing the differences in perceptions observed. Future studies should continue to examine the various stakeholders in the (mis)information ecosystem and engage a broader range of participants to close the conceptual gaps that exist among researchers, practitioners, and audiences in both understandings of misinformation and ways to address it (Tandoc & Seet, 2022). Our comparative focus, which includes Senegal, a country often overlooked in English-language media studies (Cheruiyot, 2021), can be seen as one of the study's strengths. More work in Francophone Africa is needed to explore the nuances of misinformation outside Anglophone countries and to situate media professionals' and audiences' experiences in their specific contexts (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). Although comparative work is challenging—logistically, linguistically, culturally, and politically—it is necessary to grasp the true nature and actual costs of global misinformation flows.

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Appendices

Table A1. Interviews With Media Professionals in Kenya.

Interviewee	Position	Gender
KE_MP001	Senior Digital Reporter	Female
KE_MP002	Fact-Checker	Male
KE_MP003	Creative Producer	Male
KE_MP004	Lecturer & Former Journalist	Male
KE_MP005	Journalist	Male
KE_MP006	Journalist	Male
KE_MP007	University Professor	Male
KE_MP008	Sports Journalist	Male
KE_MP009	Health Reporter	Female
KE_MP010	Former News Reporter	Male
KE_MP011	Fact-Checker	Male
KE_MP012	Journalist & Fact-Checker	Female
KE_MP013	Health Reporter	Female
KE_MP014	Policymaker	Male
KE_MP015	Fact-Checker	Male
KE_MP016	University Professor	Female
KE_MP017	Fact-Checker	Female
KE_MP018	Journalist	Male
KE_MP019	Former News Editor	Female
KE_MP023	Community Radio Journalist	Male
KE_MP024	Policymaker	Female

Table A2. Interviews With Media Professionals in Senegal.

Interviewee	Position	Gender
SN_MP001	Journalist & Policymaker	Male
SN_MP002	Journalist	Male
SN_MP003	University Dean	Male
SN_MP004	Media Advocacy	Male
SN_MP005	Journalist	Male
SN_MP006	Policymaker (government official)	Male
SN_MP007	Journalist & Policymaker (regulatory agency)	Male
SN_MP008	Journalist & Fact-Checker	Female
SN_MP009	Journalist	Female
SN_MP010	Journalist	Male
SN_MP011	Fact-Checker	Male
SN_MP012	Media Specialist (government official)	Male
SN_MP013	Radio Journalist	Female
SN_MP014	Journalist	Female
SN_MP016	Journalist	Female
SN_MP017	Journalist	Female
SN_MP018	Communications Director	Male
SN_MP020	Journalist & Fact-Checker	Male
SN_MP021	Community Radio Journalist	Female
SN_MP022	Policymaker (regulatory agency)	Male

Table A3. Summary of Interviews With Social Media Users in Kenya.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Job	Location
KE_SM001	45–54	Female	Teacher	Mombasa
KE_SM002	45–54	Male	Clerk/Administration	Kisumu
KE_SM003	55+	Female	Businessperson	Eldoret
KE_SM004	25–34	Male	Businessperson	Nakuru
KE_SM005	18–24	Female	Student	Nyeri
KE_SM006	25–34	Male	Technical/Manual Job	Kisumu
KE_SM007	25–34	Male	Student	Eldoret
KE_SM008	35–44	Male	Lawyer	Nakuru
KE_SM009	45–54	Male	Farmer	Nyeri
KE_SM010	18–24	Female	Student	Nairobi
KE_SM011	25–34	Female	Teacher	Eldoret
KE_SM012	25–34	Female	Clerk/Administration	Nakuru
KE_SM013	25–34	Male	Businessperson	Nyeri
KE_SM014	35–44	Male	Farmer	Eldoret
KE_SM015	35–44	Female	Clerk/Administration	Mombasa
KE_SM016	45–54	Female	Teacher	Nakuru
KE_SM017	35–44	Female	Clerk/Administration	Nyeri
KE_SM018	35–44	Male	Technical/Manual Job	Nairobi
KE_SM019	35–44	Male	Salesperson	Mombasa
KE_SM020	25–34	Female	Businessperson	Kisumu
KE_SM021	18–24	Male	Student	Mombasa
KE_SM022	35–44	Female	Salesperson	Nairobi
KE_SM023	35–44	Female	Lawyer	Kisumu
KE_SM024	35–44	Male	Digital Professional	Nairobi

Table A4. Summary of Interviews With Social Media Users in Senegal.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Job	Location
SN_SM001	18–24	Female	Student	Tambacounda
SN_SM002	35–44	Male	Teacher	Tambacounda
SN_SM003	18–24	Male	Student	Ziguinchor
SN_SM004	55+	Male	Health Worker	Tambacounda
SN_SM005	35–44	Male	Computer Scientist	Matam
SN_SM006	25–34	Male	Student	Dakar
SN_SM007	35–44	Male	Technical/Manual Job	Matam
SN_SM008	45–54	Male	Salesperson	Dakar
SN_SM009	55+	Female	Shopkeeper	Dakar
SN_SM010	18–24	Female	Home Keeper	Dakar
SN_SM011	55+	Male	Clerk/Administration	Matam
SN_SM012	18–24	Female	Student	Tambacounda
SN_SM013	25–34	Male	Businessperson	Tambacounda
SN_SM014	45–54	Female	Clerk/Administration	Tambacounda
SN_SM015	18–24	Female	Student	Matam
SN_SM016	35–44	Female	Clerk/Administration	Dakar
SN_SM017	35–44	Female	Salesperson	Ziguinchor
SN_SM018	55+	Male	Teacher	Ziguinchor
SN_SM019	25–34	Female	Clerk/Administration	Ziguinchor
SN_SM020	45–54	Female	Health Worker	Ziguinchor
SN_SM021	45–54	Female	Shopkeeper	Matam
SN_SM022	35–44	Female	Shopkeeper	Kaolack
SN_SM023	18–24	Female	Businessperson	Kaolack
SN_SM024	25–44	Male	Student	Kaolack
SN_SM025	55+	Female	Shopkeeper	Kaolack
SN_SM026	45–54	Male	Technical/Manual Job	Kaolack