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What is media literacy and why does it matter? Perspectives of Senegalese media professionals

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Abstract

Like other West African countries, Senegal has not been spared from the adverse political, social, cultural, and economic effects of misinformation. Although the country stands out as a pioneer in West Africa for introducing media literacy education within the school system in the early 1960s, it has not yet established a national strategy for promoting media literacy. At the same time, media literacy has been touted as one way to address misinformation. This study surveys media professionals to capture their understanding of the concept "media literacy" and explores their views on implementing a national media literacy policy. A thematic analysis of 22 in-depth interviews shows that although media professionals are not particularly knowledgeable about media literacy, they view the Senegalese government, the media, and opinion leaders as a potential agents of change in promoting media literacy in schools, mosques, markets, and other public spaces where information circulates.

Keywords: Media literacy, misinformation, regulation, media professionals, Senegal, Sub-Saharan Africa.

What is media literacy and why does it matter? Perspectives of Senegalese media professionals

Scholars, educators, activists, and the public have varying perceptions of the definition, content, purpose, and practices of media literacy (Potter, 2010). Early attempts to define the concept can be traced back to the early 1990s when representatives of the media literacy movement in the United States—known as the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy—gathered to discuss its conceptualization. At this meeting, they concluded that media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in various forms (Aufderheide and Firestone, 1993). Another definition, provided by the National Communication Association (NCA), focuses on the competencies involved in the communication process, asserting that a media-literate person "understands how words, images, and sounds influence the ways meanings are created and shared in contemporary society in ways that are both subtle and profound" (Potter, 2010, p. 679). More recently, Livingstone (2004) has suggested that media literacy competencies include understanding, assessing, communicating, and creating messages in diverse contexts, while McDougall and Rega (2022) argue that media literacy serves as a strategy for fostering positive change. They also note that the concept can be understood as "capacity-building" in specific contexts rather than a set of universal skills or neutral abilities.

Beyond the challenge of reaching a consensus on a definition, scholars have debated the types of media that should be considered, the skills necessary to engage with them, the knowledge base required to create them, and whether media literacy relates to specific political, social, or cultural activities and practices (Potter, 2010). There are also differing views on its purpose—whether it should aim to improve the lives of those developing media literacy skills, be integrated into educational curricula, or serve as a foundation for social

activism (Potter, 2010). However, scholars generally agree that prior knowledge of media and information creation and dissemination processes enhances the effectiveness of media literacy training. When audiences receive appropriate media literacy education, they are better equipped to detect and counter misinformation (Adjin-Tettey, 2022).

Most discussions and debates on media literacy in the literature have focused on the Global North, resulting in a shortage of studies centered on Global South contexts, although research in this area is growing (e.g., Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Tully and Singer, 2023). This study aims to add to the research in this area by examining the case of Senegal. Like many other African countries, Senegal has experienced a persistent wave of misinformation, a global trend that intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributing factors include an illiteracy rate estimated at 48% (The World Bank, 2023), high internet penetration, and the rise of various media actors in recent years (Diagne, 2021). Our study focuses on media professionals, who are often perceived as key players in the spread of and response to misinformation (Newman et al., 2020). We contribute to ongoing discussions on countering misinformation in three ways. First, we provide insights into how media professionals perceive the different types of misinformation circulating in Senegal. Second, we explore their attitudes toward media literacy, emphasizing the need to deepen current understandings of the concept. Third, we draw on the Senegalese context to highlight some of the challenges associated with implementing media literacy initiatives across the continent.

Misinformation in Africa and Senegal

Although research on misinformation in Africa is comparatively limited, studies indicate that most Africans believe they have been exposed to misinformation (Ahmed et al., 2022). Despite awareness of its prevalence, many struggle to distinguish between legitimate information and misinformation (BBC, 2018). Research further suggests that, rather than

being motivated to fact-check information before sharing it, many Africans feel a duty to disseminate breaking news to friends and family in case it is accurate and relevant to their social circles (Tully, 2022). Other motivations for spreading misinformation include the propagation of hate propaganda, a lack of knowledge and education to differentiate between real and fake content, political clickbait, and the influence of political bots (Ha et al., 2022).

Studies also show that African media users employ various strategies to counter misinformation, such as ignoring and refraining from sharing dubious content (Endong, 2021), engaging in fact-checking (Tully et al., 2021), confirming sources (Lazer et al. 2018), or consulting experts (Cohen et al. 2022). Media professionals utilise techniques such as reverse image searches (Stewart et al. 2022), fact-checking (Leidel 2024), and relying on organisations like Africa Check and Pesa Check (Tully et al. 2021). Media literacy has been widely promoted as a proactive strategy to address misinformation (Vraga and Tully 2019).

Although some have described Africa as a "misinformation factory" (Glez 2023), the Sahel region, where Senegal is located, has recently emerged as an epicentre of misinformation campaigns, particularly in West Africa's so-called "coup belt" (Glez 2023). Both external and internal factors contribute to the spread of falsehoods in a subregion marked by low media literacy, high illiteracy rates, and underdeveloped media institutions (USAID 2023). In Senegal, a country known for relative peace, misinformation is primarily driven by internal factors, with politicians' use of propaganda strategies (Badji 2022) and negative electoral campaigns (Sarazin 2019). For example, on the eve of the 2019 presidential election, misinformation was rampant, with a notable case involving opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko, who was falsely accused of receiving $195,000 from Tullow Oil (Badji 2022). Even the president was not immune, as false reports circulated claiming his national identity card had been photoshopped to misrepresent him as a French citizen (Sarazin 2019).

Adding to the complex dynamics of the Senegalese information space, a range of foreign actors have, in recent years, been blamed for spreading falsehoods both online and offline. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022), Russia has been accused of disseminating anti-democratic, anti-West, and anti-US misinformation in Africa through military operations led by the Wagner Group. Researchers at ACSS have also identified "virtual flotillas" of online keyboard warriors in sub-Saharan Africa who are hired by politicians to promote their agendas and attack opponents (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2022). In Senegal, this practice involves specialist firms producing large-scale misinformation for political purposes (USAID 2023). However, diasporic communities, media practitioners, social media users, and influencers are also implicated (USAID 2023).

Beyond election periods, misinformation in Senegal tends to spike during times of crisis. Badji (2022) argues that events such as the COVID-19 pandemic represent key moments when false information intensifies. For instance, on 26 March 2020, some Senegalese news websites shared a video obtained from WhatsApp, claiming that two individuals posing as COVID-19 vaccinators had been arrested in Dalifort, a district of Dakar (Diagne 2023). The same video resurfaced on social media two weeks later, now falsely asserting that seven children had died after receiving COVID-19 vaccinations. A fact-check published by *The Observers* later revealed the claim to be false (France 24 2020). Due to instances like this, media organisations have been criticised for spreading misinformation and have been blamed for contributing to high vaccine hesitancy in Senegal (Marzo et al. 2022).

According to Diagne (2023), misinformation is often driven by media content—such as video or audio—taken out of context from television and radio shows and then shared on social media platforms like WhatsApp. It is also a byproduct of interactions between traditional and social media. Traditional media outlets use social media not only for content dissemination but also as sources of information (Marzo et al. 2022). As a result, many social

media posts are republished as news articles by traditional press outlets without adequate fact-checking (Cunliffe-Jones 2021), fuelling a vicious cycle of misinformation (Diagne 2023).

To counter the spread of false information, the Senegalese government has used legal instruments that criminalise the publication, reproduction, or dissemination of false news (ARTICLE 19, 2022). Regulations such as Article 255 of the Penal Code have been invoked to prosecute individuals accused of spreading information that could incite disobedience of the law, discredit public institutions, or damage public morale (International Press Institute 2022). The government has also restricted internet access due to the spread of misinformation (Reuters 2023). However, since these policies fail to define what constitutes "fake news" (*nouvelles fausses*) or misinformation, they have been exploited by public officials (Global Voices Advox 2021), including to justify the incarceration of journalists (Crouch 2023).

Media Literacy in Senegal

Scholars have proposed various strategies to curb the spread of misinformation and mitigate its effects (Bontcheva et al. 2020), with a multi-pronged approach being widely favoured (Tully 2022). Alongside legislation and fact-checking, media literacy has emerged as a strategy for countering misinformation (Tully and Singer, 2023; Vraga and Tully 2019). Despite its recognised importance, media literacy is rarely incorporated into educational curricula in many African countries (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). Senegal's long-standing curriculum lacks a component dedicated to misinformation literacy (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). Nonetheless, recent campaigns have underscored the centrality of misinformation literacy in addressing disinformation and misinformation in the media landscape (Africa Check 2022). In spite of these developments, there remains substantial room for improvement in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Senegal (Diagne 2023).

Media literacy initiatives in Francophone Africa face numerous challenges, including linguistic diversity—the coexistence of multiple languages such as French, Wolof, Pulaar, Diola, and Mandingo in Senegal—and low educational attainment (Radovanović et al. 2020). While translation efforts are essential, they present formidable challenges (Vraga et al. 2020). French media institutions continue to exert influence over former French colonies (Naida 2016), and initiatives aimed at countering the spread of false narratives have played a pivotal role in developing media consumption skills and fostering a nuanced understanding of the political implications of media representation (Masterman 1985).

In Senegal, efforts to promote media literacy have been introduced to bridge linguistic divides. For instance, various stakeholders advocate for programmes conducted in both French and local languages (United Nations 2023). Under President Macky Sall, the Senegalese government has recognised the significance of equipping citizens with practical skills to combat misinformation and engage in responsible civic activities (Cunliffe-Jones 2021). The Senegalese government and international civil organisations have also supported and advocated for campaigns targeting young adults, aimed at training them in media literacy skills (Cunliffe-Jones 2021). These programmes include inter-community discussions designed to enhance media and digital literacy while refining media consumption abilities.

Given the growth of and interest in media literacy programs in Senegal, and the renewed attention on the role that media professionals may play in countering misinformation, we seek to explore two interconnected research questions: *how do Senegalese media professionals define media literacy (RQ1)? Who should be responsible for the resources for implementing a national media literacy program (RQ2)?*

Method

To address our research questions, we conducted a thematic analysis of 22 in-depth interviews involving media professionals and experts in media and policy in Senegal. These

interviews, held between March and June 2021, were conducted in French but occasionally incorporated Wolof. Most interviews were conducted online via Zoom, while some took place over the phone or through WhatsApp. The research design, detailed below, received approval from the Institutional Review Boards of The University of Iowa and the University of Houston. To recruit participants, we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Our sample comprises individuals belonging to four categories: a) those working in news media, both online and offline (e.g., journalists, reporters, editors); b) those engaged in fact-checking, whether employed by independent fact-checking organizations or embedded in newsrooms; and c) those contributing to policymaking or influencing the policymaking process (e.g., government officials, individuals in think tanks and NGOs, academics with expertise in media and regulation). Anonymity for all interviewees was assured, and they are referenced using numeric IDs.

Distinct interview guides were used for each category of professionals, but they all shared a similar structure. Interviews began with a general introduction regarding the interviewee's professional role and progressed through three blocks of questions. Two sets of questions were posed to all media professionals: those about misinformation (e.g., "*What does 'fake news'/misinformation/disinformation mean to you?*") and inquiries about potential solutions to misinformation (e.g., "*In your view, who is most responsible for the spread of misinformation?*"). Between these blocks, tailored sections addressed each group's specific concerns. Journalists were probed about the impact of COVID-19 on journalism (e.g., "*Have you worked on any stories around COVID-19?*"), fact-checkers responded to questions from Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill's (2018) study on fact-checking in Africa (e.g., "*Who are the main targets of fact-checking in your countries of operation?*"). Moreover, policymakers were queried on technology and regulation in the context of COVID-19 (e.g., "*What is your view around introducing legislation to curb the spread of misinformation?*").

The analytical process involved finding themes that reflected the content of the interview segments, while identifying new themes as they emerged. The search for meaning included "breaking down data into bits then 'beating' the bits together' (Dey 1993: 31) and closely studying the data through line-by-line coding. The narratives of the media professionals were later compared after reading and annotating the transcripts. At the end of this process, these annotations were grouped into themes referring to the significant elements of the analysis (Saldana 2009). Before this, all interviews were transcribed to French, first by an automated transcription tool, and then manually checked for accuracy.

Findings

All the media professionals interviewed for this study have over five years of experience, and many occupy leadership positions in public or private organizations. Their responses reveal a marked disparity in their understanding of media literacy. Despite years of practice in the media sector, some professionals have never heard of the term "media literacy", often seen as capacity-building for media actors. However, the analysis also reveals that a number of interviewees understands media literacy in connection to the following themes: *policy*, *content*, *people*, *targets*, and *places*. We structure our findings around each of these themes.

Definitions and policy-related themes

Senegal is one of several sub-Saharan African countries that is yet to develop a national media literacy program (Cunliffe et al. 2022). Although the country's Ministry of Education has supported several local projects to introduce media literacy in schools, media professionals deplored the lack of a clear strategy for promoting it. We found that many media professionals had never even heard of the concept. However, some participants said

that they got acquainted with the concept through seminars and events organized by non-governmental organizations such as the PANOS Institute (an NGO specializing in Communication for Development programs), which hosted a workshop entitled "Women Occupy the Media" and published a media literacy guide. Other respondents saw media literacy in terms of training, education, and awareness-raising initiatives for journalists. A media professional with a state-owned media organization equated media literacy with journalists' responsibility:

> Before Ramadan, the Regulatory Council met with the media networks to discuss their roles in disseminating information that can divide people… religion is a divisive topic in Senegal. The Council called for more responsibility from the media. It is a kind of media literacy. (SN_MP009)

Along with responsibility, other media professionals perceived media literacy as involving a heightened sense of accountability by media professionals and respect for ethical codes and journalism standards, including verifying information before publication, correcting mistakes, addressing misconduct, and forestalling future offenses. Most participants saw misconduct and ethical breaches in the media sector as arising because of the industry's liberalization, including the appropriation of media by profit-oriented businesses (Wittman 2006), and the appearance of actors who claimed to be journalists but lacked adequate (and sometimes no) professional training (Diop 2016). In connection to this, some interviewees suggested that media literacy would help audiences distinguish professional journalists from *entertainers* whose work on TV and radio depends on such characteristics as their appealing physical appearance, diction, or voice. Low-cost entertainers are often hired to present and report news, contributing to the precarity of the journalistic profession.

According to a TV reporter and sports show host, media literacy would mean ensuring the supervision and monitoring of journalism work within the news media and mentoring young people:

> The average age of media editors is problematic, varying between 25 and 30 years. You can hardly find editors in their fifties who can train young journalists and serve as mentors, meaning that journalists may no longer tell the difference between a piece of useful news and fake news. (SN_MP010)

While some media professionals saw media literacy as an education and training policy for media professionals, others talked about it as an extensive program that should include various stakeholders to help the public understand the process of newsgathering, production, and consumption. In their understanding of media literacy, it should also provide the tools to grasp the issues at stake and dissect accurate information from false information. To achieve these goals, a fact-checker noted that it should be an effort that involves multiple actors: “it is a vast program with many moving parts, including the State, the police, and the media. Even platforms that disseminate misinformation can participate.” (SN_MP001). Taking this idea further, a fact-checker agreed that this should be a multi-actor and multi-layered approach:

> Journalists can continue fact-checking and generalize the practice, but for me, the best solution is media literacy, which can be done at schools and universities to target pupils and students. It can also be done in mosques and churches. (SN_MP001)

In summary, for the media professionals we interviewed, media literacy should be understood as an introduction to the functioning and operations of the media, teaching the basics of journalism. However, some noted, media literacy goes beyond familiarity with journalism work and includes the development of critical thinking. The publisher of an online media outlet declared: “It is really about enabling people to get to the level where they can decipher information, understand what is at stake, and not be fooled” (SN_MP007). In this way, Senegalese media professionals considered media literacy promotion a valid alternative, along with fact-checking, to address challenges raised by the spread of misinformation.

Most respondents seemed to agree that Senegal needed a strategy for media literacy promotion, as is the case in France, where modules are set up for students. Also, in France, Press and Media Weeks in Schools, known as *Media Literacy Weeks*, are held to allow students to familiarize themselves with the news media, participate in workshops on news production, and share ideas with news professionals. One media professional working for a foreign radio network revealed that media literacy is integral to the company’s programs. The shows produced in this area aim to help the public detect false information and have the right reflexes and attitudes when accessing all types of news. When asked about the need for a national policy, a media professional at the Ministry of Education explained that, following the COVID-19 outbreak, educational television had become available, so the ministry created a network of high schools and colleges to promote media literacy. The ultimate objective was to have media clubs where students learn to produce news stories.

> They need to be able to produce news, and we will extend the project to high schools until we have a network that includes high schools, colleges, and elementary schools. [Therefore], teachers can be trained to support

> these students…The project also includes a TV channel allowing many students to express themselves and discuss their problems. (SN_MP006)

The Ministry of Education project, supported by UNESCO, can serve as a step toward formalizing media literacy promotion. In this regard, Senegal has been operating educational radio and television for many years and has a good starting baseline.

Targets, roles, and responsibilities

Many media professionals saw children as the primary target of any media literacy policy and program, noting that the high frequency of social media usage exposed children to various pitfalls. Participants felt that media literacy promotion ought to be tailored to children of all ages, particularly students and school-age children since these populations' presence in schools offered a framework for implementing and organizing activities that help raise awareness about journalism and misinformation strategies. Media professionals observed that when schoolchildren have the chance to learn about news gathering, writing, and production under the supervision of educators, they can become familiar with the different forms of manipulation and propaganda. The youth can also be agents of change, helping enlighten people at home:

> If it is a student who is alone with his family, when the family members talk about certain things, when they watch TV, when they watch commercials, at least the child will be able to tell them, 'Be careful, that has been edited, that is not what happened.' That is important. (SN_MP006)

Even though the French concept of *education aux media* ("media education", which is often translated as "media literacy") may sound like a reference to schools, a number of interviewees said that the target for media literacy should go beyond students and school-age children. The literacy rate in Senegal, estimated at 56.30% (Macrotrend 2023), appears to be a factor that predisposes many citizens to misinformation and other falsehoods. However, Senegalese media professionals believe the question is not about being literate or not, and as the chair of a school of journalism put it: "You can see people who have been to school but do not understand the issues and practices on the new platforms…They can receive a link from a hacker without knowing that" (SN_MP003). For media professionals who are well-versed in media literacy, an inclusive approach should be followed, with various targets such as students, parents, academics, workers, women, and children.

The Senegalese media professionals in the study argued that the targets of media literacy should be varied. They also believe that the people involved and the places where training takes place should be diverse including media organizations, social media platforms, schools, religious institutions, and others. A general view was that the state should be a primary player in implementing media literacy through the Ministry of Education. For instance, in the words of a media professional who worked as a fact-checker: "the Ministry of Education and other ministries should work to introduce media literacy modules in schools. Why not introduce the modules in physical education from elementary to secondary school?" (SN_MP001).

Several media professionals explained that the liberalization of the telecommunication sector in Senegal came along with the multiplication of services offered to customers without the citizens' preparation for how to use the technologies and their effects on society. Therefore, the ultimate responsibility for media literacy rests with the State, taxed with the task of rolling out policies to enable the population to navigate the new media environment.

The chair of a school of journalism declared: “They give you a tool without preparing you, and we all know that with the power of social networks, there are even acculturation phenomena going on” (SN_MP003). Some participants also noted that the role of the government should go along with the support of the media. As with media in the Global North such as France 24 and BBC, some suggested that Senegalese news organization should create media literacy or media education teams to inform young people and adults about journalism. A journalist at a foreign radio network insisted on the crucial role journalists could play: “… if we train as many journalists as possible, they will talk about it around them” (SN_MP013).

Alongside the government and the news media, social media platforms were also mentioned as having to be involved in media literacy. Some suggested that they could create content to educate users and warn them against potential threats. The reason for this, some argued is that, since social media networks represent the primary sources of misinformation dissemination, actions should be implemented on these platforms to raise users’ awareness and promote media literacy. For example, the head of a journalist organization insisted on the potential of WhatsApp for educating people: “Since people love WhatsApp and there are many WhatsApp groups, why not find people in WhatsApp groups to tell them to be careful about the information they receive?” (SN_MP007).

Participants also mentioned schools, civil society, as well as religious and opinion leaders as actors that should promote media literacy. The Council for Respect for Ethics and Deontology (CORED), an association run by Senegalese journalists, has set out to promote media literacy in Dakar, the country’s capital. A journalist who holds a leadership position within the CORED explained:

> We have even decided to go to middle schools and high schools here in Dakar, where people are still young, to teach them about the media because people do not often know how to use or behave in front of the media. That is why there are lots of misconduct and blunders. (SN_MP004)

Schools rank among the top places listed for media literacy promotion. They include all categories of schools from the primary level to universities. Teachers and professors have a central role to play. According to a journalist at a public media organization:

> Back in the day, educational radio aired specific shows. Today, the Internet is everywhere. We can work with the Ministry of French Education to produce short audio and videos that can be broadcast in the classroom, with comments, and the teacher can explain and develop the critical message children need to remember. (SN_MP002)

In addition to exposing students to media shows, schools could be spaces where students could learn how to produce media content. Such was the view of a reporter working for a foreign media organization in Senegal:

> It could also be through media creation at the level of high schools, college newspapers, and others that can encourage journalism practice and show how it is achieved. Accessing the media and understanding how a journalist's work can be challenging. (SN_MP013**)**

Summarizing the range of views on the topic, a media expert who worked as a fact-checker considered that there should be no restrictions on where media literacy could be

promoted. Radio and television networks were deemed ideal tools for producing and broadcasting media literacy content. However, the promotion could also take place in neighborhoods and other places where people gather and exchange information.

Content considerations

When it comes to the specific content that should be included in media literacy efforts, our analysis revealed that, wherever training takes place, the objective should be to educate the audience about changes in the media ecosystem and the challenges associated with digital technologies. It should also aim to foster critical thinking and caution in news selection and consumption to help media users fact-check. Most respondents described media literacy as teaching that sets up modules and broadcast programming that prepare citizens to be more cautious when consuming news and media texts. A journalist who worked as a fact-checker and media expert noted that objective should be to "draw people's attention to the need to be careful, not to consume everything presented on social networks" (SN_MP001). Media literacy should start by helping audiences understand the basics of media practice and journalistic work. According to the manager of an online news organization, media literacy should help with questions like:

> What is a fact? What are the criteria for accurate information? What are the requirements for a credible source? How do you verify information? How do journalists work? What are the issues raised by misinformation? Answering these questions will make them aware of the need to be cautious about any information they receive. (SN_MP007)

Media literacy, some media professionals noted, should also teach citizens how to protect their data and privacy online. In Senegal, where hackers' attacks on social media accounts have become commonplace, educating citizens about the potential dangers proves necessary. The chair of a school of journalism said:

> When Senegalese people set up their passwords, they do not look far. They often use their phone numbers, mothers' names, or other basic information. So even their passwords are not secure, and their accounts can be used to say anything. (SN_MP003)

Still in the realm of online safety, another aspect of media literacy content is the protection of citizens against deception, phishing, and other forms of catfishing that abound on social media. The chair of the school of journalism also declared:

> When hackers send them a form and say, 'It is your bank asking you to complete it. If not, your account will be closed tomorrow,' some people believe it… Other people think they can win large sums of money despite not buying a lottery ticket. (SN_MP003).

In Senegal, social media has recently been used by many people to settle scores and denigrate others in total violation of the laws and regulations that govern the country. That is why, some argued, in addition to the risks of manipulation, deception, and misinformation associated with digital technologies, a media literacy program should teach citizens the appropriate attitudes and behaviours toward the media and the sentences and penalties that may stem from their misconduct. This is the view of the chair of a school of journalism, who

said that Senegalese media users should understand that the anonymity that comes with social media does not ensure impunity in case of defamation or misconduct:

> People think they can record an audio message, say what they want, and disseminate it on different networks without any risks. [They should know that] defamation is punished by the Senegalese penal code, even if it is committed on social media. (SN_MP003)

Finally, media literacy content should also contribute to protecting children against the violence on social media, and it should raise awareness about the risk of acculturation and overt or covert ideological recruitment on social media. In the words of one interviewee: "there are many cases of false information that try to deconstruct things laid down by religion, culture, or society. If you are not well prepared, you take it" (SN_MP013).

Conclusion

Previous research has highlighted the global expansion of media literacy and the necessity for sub-Saharan African countries to align with these trends (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). This research provides an overview of misinformation practices in Senegal and examines the extent to which media professionals believe media literacy can mitigate its adverse effects. Although Senegal was a pioneer in introducing media training in schools in West Africa (Sarr 2022), the country lacks a national policy for promoting media literacy, leaving citizens vulnerable to various forms of manipulation, propaganda, and misinformation. To date, the criminalisation of misinformation dissemination (ARTICLE 19 2022) has not successfully curbed the spread of falsehoods. Alongside fact-checking and other reactive approaches, media literacy is widely touted as a proactive strategy to addresses misinformation (Matanji

et a., 2024; Tully and Singer, 2023). However, the concept remains vague in the minds of media professionals interviewed for this study.

Our findings suggest that media professionals have a limited understanding of media literacy, often perceiving it as either education for journalists or education through the media. Respondents agreed that the rise in misinformation—driven by increased digital access, high illiteracy levels, and the underdevelopment of media organisations (USAID 2023)—necessitates a multi-layered, multi-actor strategy involving government institutions, media organisations, social media platforms, and civil society (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020). In the view of media professionals, media literacy training should take place in schools, mosques, churches, and other community spaces. While children, particularly school-age children, are seen as primary targets, the country's high illiteracy rate means that older populations are also vulnerable to misinformation. Therefore, media literacy efforts should target the broader population, including individuals who often fall into misinformation traps.

Regarding content, respondents suggested that media literacy promotion could take the form of educational modules or broadcast programming aimed at fostering an understanding of media practices and journalism. Training should teach audiences about news gathering, processing, and dissemination, enabling them to better distinguish between accurate information and falsehoods. Participants also emphasised the need to equip individuals with tools and strategies for protecting their data and privacy online, as well as guidelines for identifying and countering deception, phishing, and other forms of online fraud. Research indicates that appropriate media literacy training can alter audience behaviour. A study conducted in France with youth aged 15–34 found that 65% of those who had attended media and information literacy courses checked the credibility of the information they received, compared to 42% of those who had not taken such courses (Camara 2018).

In a context where media organisations face financial instability and the education sector experiences prolonged crises, prioritising media literacy in schools may seem challenging. Sarr (2022) identified two media literacy promotion projects in Senegal that failed to achieve their stated objectives. As Cunliffe-Jones et al. (2021) noted, challenges hindering the implementation of media literacy in schools across sub-Saharan Africa include a lack of political will, limited classroom time, and poor teaching quality. In Senegal, where children spend only three years in primary and secondary school, alternative spaces should be explored for implementing a strategy to curb the harmful consequences of misinformation.

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