# Effect of Artificial Intelligence on Media and Public Discourse in Africa: Democratic Information Crisis, Algorithmic Disinformation, and Media Resilience Governance

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines how artificial intelligence is reshaping media and public discourse in Africa, with a focus on the spread of disinformation, the challenges facing local journalism, and the need for stronger governance. It adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining documentary analysis, comparative regulatory review, and data from organisations such as UNESCO, the Reuters Institute, Africa Check, the Mozilla Foundation, and Research ICT Africa, alongside reports from regulators in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Egypt. The study identifies six key areas of disruption. These include the use of AI to spread electoral disinformation, the rise of health misinformation, and the role of algorithms in amplifying ethnic and communal tensions. It also highlights AI-driven financial scams targeting mobile money users, the growing pressure on local journalism as global platforms dominate advertising revenue, and the lack of clear AI-specific media regulation across the countries studied.*

*Findings point to what the study describes as an "African AI democratic information crisis," where AI systems shape public discourse without sufficient accountability. In this context, false information spreads more easily, credible journalism struggles to compete, and public debate becomes increasingly distorted. Overall, the study finds that media systems across the selected countries remain poorly equipped to manage these challenges. It therefore proposes practical responses, including stronger disinformation regulation, better labelling of AI-generated content, increased support for public interest journalism, improved media literacy, and greater regional cooperation on AI governance.*

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence; media Africa; public discourse; disinformation; democratic information crisis; AI content governance; computational propaganda; media resilience; press freedom; algorithmic journalism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Media and public discourse form the informational foundation of democratic governance, public health decision-making, and peaceful coexistence. The ability of citizens to access accurate information, participate in informed deliberation, and hold power accountable through free and independent journalism is constitutive of democratic legitimacy. Across Africa, these foundations are being structurally altered by artificial intelligence systems that determine what content reaches millions of citizens, what journalism survives economically, and what narratives shape political and social understanding.

Artificial intelligence has restructured media and public discourse through three intersecting mechanisms. AI content recommendation systems deployed by Meta, Google, TikTok, and YouTube now serve as the primary information gatekeepers for hundreds of millions of Africans, determining what news, opinion, and social content reaches users based on engagement optimisation rather than public interest criteria. AI-powered disinformation tools have democratised the production of fabricated content at scale, enabling coordinated inauthentic behaviour, synthetic media, and precision-targeted misinformation at costs previously available only to state actors. AI-driven advertising allocation systems have systematically extracted revenue from African journalism ecosystems, depriving local and independent media of the economic foundation required for independent operation.

This paper makes two distinctive analytical contributions. The AI Disinformation Threat Escalation Matrix severity-ranks seven distinct threat types by scale of harm, AI mechanism, documented African incident evidence, and governance response, providing policymakers with a prioritised basis for regulatory action. The Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard assesses AI governance capacity across six resilience dimensions and five countries, identifying not merely the presence or absence of governance but the specific dimensions in which each country has partial capacity that could be developed into full AI-era governance.

The primary contribution to knowledge is the identification of the African AI democratic information crisis: the structural condition in which AI systems governing African public discourse operate without accountability to African democratic institutions, producing information environments in which disinformation is algorithmically amplified, authentic journalism is algorithmically starved, and democratic deliberation is systematically distorted. The paper addresses four research questions: what AI disinformation threat types are operating in African media ecosystems; what is the current state of democratic media resilience across six governance dimensions; what regulatory and policy gaps permit these conditions; and what democratic media protection framework can restore informational integrity?

## 2. BACKGROUND AND POLICY LANDSCAPE

### A. African Media Ecosystems and the AI Transition

Africa's media landscape encompasses over 3,000 radio stations, 800 television channels, and 6,500 print and online publications, serving linguistically and culturally diverse populations across 54 countries [1]. This rich ecosystem has historically served as the informational backbone of democratic governance, public health communication, and civil society mobilisation. The transition to AI-mediated information environments is restructuring this ecosystem profoundly: social media platforms now reach more Africans daily than any traditional media channel, and the AI recommendation systems governing those platforms have become the de facto editors of the African public sphere [2].

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 documents that social media is the primary news source for 47 percent of internet users in Nigeria, 52 percent in Kenya, 38 percent in South Africa, 49 percent in Ghana, and 41 percent in Egypt [3]. These platforms do not merely distribute news: their AI recommendation systems actively select, rank, and amplify content based on engagement metrics that systematically favour emotionally provocative, partisan, and sensational content over verified, complex, or locally relevant journalism [4]. The consequence is an information

environment in which disinformation frequently reaches larger audiences than corrections, local African journalism reaches smaller audiences than global entertainment, and AI-selected content shapes political and social perceptions in ways that no single editor or publisher could previously achieve.

### B. The Computational Propaganda Crisis

Computational propaganda, defined by Howard and Bradshaw as the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to distribute misleading information over social media networks, has emerged as a structural threat to African democratic processes [5]. The Oxford Internet Institute Internet Manipulated report documents organised social media manipulation campaigns in 29 African countries, with AI tools including chatbots, automated amplification networks, and generative AI content increasingly central to these campaigns [6]. The Threat Escalation Matrix in Figure 1 synthesises this evidence into a prioritised analytical framework for regulatory response.

**Table 1**

*Policy and Regulatory Landscape: AI Governance in African Media and Public Discourse*

| Instrument | Jurisdiction | Type | AI Media-Specific | Provisions and Governance Gaps |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UNESCO Windhoek+30 Declaration (2021)** | International | Declaration | No | Affirms press freedom and media independence. Non-binding. No AI-specific disinformation accountability or content algorithm provisions. |
| **African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights: Declaration on Freedom of Expression (2019)** | African Union | Declaration | No | Reaffirms freedom of expression. Non-binding. No AI media governance provisions. Adopted before AI disinformation emerged at current scale. |
| **Nigeria: Nigeria Press Council Act; NBC Act; Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023)** | Nigeria | Legislation | No | Press Council and NBC govern conventional media. NDPA provides data protection applicable in principle. No AI disinformation accountability, deepfake labelling, or content algorithm transparency requirement. |
| **Kenya: Kenya Information and Communications Act; Media Council Act (2013)** | Kenya | Legislation | No | Media Council and CA govern conventional media and telecoms. No AI content governance provisions. Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018 applicable to some disinformation but no AI-specific standard. |
| **South Africa: ICASA Act; Electronic Communications Act; Films and Publications Act (2009)** | South Africa | Legislation | No | ICASA governs broadcasting. Films and Publications Board covers some online content. POPIA provides data protection. No AI disinformation, deepfake, or content algorithm governance provision. |
| **Ghana: National Media Commission; National Communications Authority Act** | Ghana | Legislation | No | NMC and NCA govern media and communications. No AI media provisions. Cybersecurity Act 2020 addresses cybercrime broadly but not AI-specific content governance. |
| **Egypt: Media Regulation Law (2018); Supreme Council for Media Regulation** | Egypt | Legislation | No | SCMR regulates media including digital platforms broadly. Applied to block websites and platforms but no AI content governance standard. Press freedom concerns documented by RSF and Freedom House. |
| **All jurisdictions: AI-Specific Content Governance and Disinformation Accountability** | All five | Gap | **ABSENT** | No African jurisdiction has enacted AI disinformation accountability legislation, synthetic media labelling requirements, AI content algorithm transparency mandates for news ranking, or public interest media support addressing AI advertising |

| | |
|---|---|
| | displacement. Universal governance gap confirmed. |

Note: Sources: UNESCO 2021 [7]; ACHPR 2019 [8]; NPC Nigeria 2023 [9]; Media Council Kenya 2023 [10]; ICASA South Africa 2023 [11]; NMC Ghana 2023 [12]; SCMR Egypt 2023 [13].

### D. Policy Gaps

The regulatory mapping confirms six critical governance gaps across all five focus countries. No African jurisdiction has enacted AI disinformation accountability legislation requiring platforms to prevent AI-generated electoral disinformation or AI-amplified ethnic incitement. No African jurisdiction has enacted synthetic media labelling requirements making AI-generated content identifiable to consumers. No African communications regulator has enacted content algorithm transparency requirements for AI news ranking systems. No African media funding framework specifically addresses AI-driven advertising revenue displacement from local journalism. No African media regulatory authority has AI technical audit capacity. No continental coordination framework exists for cross-border AI disinformation incidents of the type documented in the Threat Escalation Matrix.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYTICAL MODELS

### A. Democratic Theory

Democratic Theory, as systematised by Habermas [14] in his theory of communicative action and applied to media governance by Fraser [15] and to African democratic contexts by Mudhai, Tettey, and Banda [16], holds that democratic legitimacy requires a public sphere in which citizens can access accurate information, deliberate freely, and hold power accountable through independent media. The theory identifies three necessary conditions for a democratic information environment: informational pluralism ensuring citizens can access diverse, accurate perspectives; media independence protecting journalism from undue state and commercial interference; and communicative equality ensuring that participation in public discourse is not structurally distorted by power asymmetries. Applied to AI media governance, the theory requires that AI systems functioning as de facto information gatekeepers be accountable to these democratic requirements rather than solely to commercial engagement optimisation.

### B. Computational Propaganda Research Theory

Computational Propaganda Research Theory, developed by Howard and Bradshaw [5] and extended by Woolley and Howard [17] and applied to African contexts by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales [18], provides the empirical framework for understanding how AI tools are weaponised to distort democratic information environments at scale. The theory identifies five mechanisms through which computational propaganda operates: automated amplification giving minority viewpoints the appearance of majority consensus; microtargeted disinformation delivering fabricated content to identified vulnerable audiences; coordinated inauthentic behaviour using AI to simulate organic political mobilisation; synthetic media generating fabricated audio, video, and images of real individuals; and algorithmic exploitation using knowledge of platform AI reward functions to maximise the reach of misleading content. All five mechanisms are documented in the African incidents catalogued in the Threat Escalation Matrix.

### C. AI Disinformation Threat Escalation Matrix

Figure 1 presents the AI Disinformation Threat Escalation Matrix, which severity-ranks seven AI-enabled media threats operating in African ecosystems. Unlike previous models in this series that assessed governance gaps by sector or population, the Escalation Matrix assesses threats by their harm severity, enabling policymakers to prioritise regulatory action according to the urgency of harm rather than the administrative convenience of sector boundaries. Each row represents a distinct threat type with its own AI mechanism, scale of harm, documented African incident evidence, and governance response status. The Extreme and Critical severity bands require immediate regulatory action; the High bands require high-priority attention; the Medium band requires systematic long-term intervention.

Figure 1: AI Disinformation Threat Escalation Matrix: Seven Threat Types in African Media Ecosystems

**FIGURE 1: AI DISINFORMATION THREAT ESCALATION MATRIX — SEVEN THREAT TYPES IN AFRICAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS**

| THREAT TYPE | SEVERITY | SCALE OF HARM | AI MECHANISM | DOCUMENTED AFRICAN INCIDENT | GOVERNANCE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Electoral Disinformation** | **CRITICAL** | 80-130M voters per election cycle across five focus countries | AI micro-targeting delivers fabricated candidate statements, deepfake audio/video, and coordinated inauthentic amplification to identified swing voter segments via platform recommendation systems | Nigeria 2023: AI-generated audio falsely attributing statements to candidates circulated to millions via WhatsApp. Kenya 2022: AI-coordinated Twitter/X campaigns documented by Mozilla Foundation and Africa Check. | **ABSENT** |
| **2. Health Disinformation** | **CRITICAL** | 200M+ in low-health-literacy populations | AI recommendation algorithms prioritise health misinformation because it generates higher engagement than verified public health content; AI translation tools spread disinformation across language barriers at zero marginal cost | COVID-19: WHO documented AI-amplified health disinformation driving vaccine hesitancy and treatment avoidance across all five focus countries. Mpox 2022: AI-generated misinformation circulated faster than health authority responses in all five countries. | **ABSENT** |
| **3. Ethnic and Communal Incitement** | **EXTREME** | Conflict-vulnerable populations: estimated 50M+ in documented flashpoint zones | AI content ranking rewards emotionally provocative content; ethnic slurs and incitement generate high engagement metrics that AI optimises for; translation AI removes language barriers to cross-community incitement | Ethiopia 2021-2022: Independent researchers documented Meta AI systems allowing Amharic-language ethnic incitement to circulate widely before content removal. Three additional African countries documented AI amplification of incitement content preceding communal violence 2020-2023. | **ABSENT** |
| **4. Financial Fraud and Scams** | **HIGH** | Estimated 40M financially vulnerable mobile money users | AI generates personalised scam messages at scale; voice cloning AI impersonates trusted figures including bank officials and family members; AI analyses social media profiles to identify fraud-vulnerable targets for precision scam delivery | South Africa 2023: AI voice cloning impersonating banking officials documented by FNB and Nedbank fraud units. Nigeria 2023: AI-generated investment scheme content reached estimated 12M users via WhatsApp according to EFCC reports. | **PARTIAL** |
| **5. Political Propaganda Amplification** | **HIGH** | Active social media users: estimated 180M across five countries | AI recommendation systems amplify politically funded content through engagement optimisation; coordinated inauthentic behaviour networks deploy AI to appear organic while serving political clients for hire | Ghana 2024 election period: Research ICT Africa documented AI-coordinated inauthentic amplification. South Africa 2024 elections: multiple AI-generated deepfakes of political leaders circulated widely before content removal. | **ABSENT** |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **6. Synthetic Media Manipulation** | **HIGH** | Professional, civil society, and journalistic communities: estimated 5M | AI generates photorealistic synthetic images, video, and audio of real individuals in fabricated scenarios; deepfake generation democratised to low-cost tools requiring no technical expertise | Egypt 2022: Deepfake videos of journalists used to discredit critical reporting; perpetrators not prosecuted. Kenya 2023: Synthetic images of government officials at fabricated events circulated before official response possible. | **ABSENT** |
| **7. Algorithmic News Deserts** | **MEDIUM** | Rural and low-income populations: estimated 120M without quality news access | AI recommendation systems deprioritise local African journalism because it generates lower engagement metrics than entertainment and viral content; AI-driven advertising allocation starves local media of revenue | ReSeCo Africa 2023: 34% of African local news outlets surveyed reported revenue decline directly attributable to AI platform advertising algorithm changes. UNESCO 2023: documented 200+ African local news outlets closed 2020-2023 partly attributable to AI advertising displacement. | **ABSENT** |

Severity classification: EXTREME = immediate threat to human life and physical security. CRITICAL = direct threat to democratic processes and public health. HIGH = significant harm to individuals and communities. MEDIUM = structural harm to information ecosystems. Governance column: ABSENT = no applicable framework; PARTIAL = general framework applicable but AI-specific provisions absent; PRESENT = AI-specific framework enacted. Source: Authors threat escalation matrix applying Democratic Theory (Habermas 1989) and Computational Propaganda Research (Howard and Bradshaw 2017) to primary documentary analysis, Africa Check incident database 2020-2023, Mozilla Foundation Africa reports 2021-2023, and Research ICT Africa media monitoring 2023.

Note: The Matrix reveals that six of seven threat types have zero AI-specific governance response across all five focus countries. The sole Partial governance rating for financial fraud reflects the applicability of financial sector regulation, not AI-specific media governance. The juxtaposition of EXTREME severity for ethnic incitement with ABSENT governance response represents the most acute governance failure in the matrix, given documented links to physical violence in African conflict-affected contexts. Source: Authors Threat Escalation Matrix applying Democratic Theory (Habermas 1989) and Computational Propaganda Research Theory (Howard and Bradshaw 2017) to Africa Check incident database 2020-2023, Mozilla Foundation Africa reports 2021-2023, and Research ICT Africa media monitoring 2023.

### D. Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard

Figure 2 presents the Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard, which assesses AI governance capacity across six resilience dimensions and five focus countries. Unlike the Threat Escalation Matrix which assesses threats, the Resilience Scorecard assesses protective capacity, enabling identification of dimensions where partial existing frameworks could be developed into full AI-era governance without requiring new institutional creation. The scorecard uses three ratings: Full indicating an AI-specific framework is enacted and operational; Partial indicating a general framework is applicable but lacks AI-specific provisions, jurisdiction, or technical capacity; None indicating no applicable framework or enforcement mechanism exists.

Figure 2: Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard: AI Governance Capacity Across Six Dimensions and Five Countries

**FIGURE 2: DEMOCRATIC MEDIA RESILIENCE SCORECARD — AI GOVERNANCE CAPACITY ACROSS SIX DIMENSIONS AND FIVE COUNTRIES**

| RESILIENCE DIMENSION | NIGERIA | KENYA | SOUTH AFRICA | GHANA | EGYPT | SERIES SCORE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| FULL = AI-specific framework enacted and operational. PARTIAL = general framework applicable but AI provisions absent. NONE = not applicable framework or enforcement mechanism. | | | | | | |
| 1. AI Disinformation Detection and Removal Mandate | NO | 0/5 NONE | | | | |
| 2. Synthetic Media and Deepfake Labelling Requirement | NO | 0/5 NONE | | | | |
| 3. AI Content Algorithm Accountability for News Ranking | NO | 0.5/5 NONE | | | | |
| 4. Media Ownership Transparency Including AI Actors | NO | 2/5 PARTIAL | | | | |
| 5. Public Interest Media Funding Counter to AI Displacement | NO | 1/5 PARTIAL | | | | |
| 6. AI Literacy and Critical Media Education | PA | 2.5/5 PARTIAL | | | | |
| **OVERALL RESILIENCE RATING** | **VERY LOW** | **VERY LOW** | **LOW** | **VERY LOW** | **VERY LOW** | **VERY LOW** |

Source: Authors Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard applying Democratic Theory (Habermas 1989) to comparative regulatory mapping of media laws, broadcasting regulations, AI governance instruments, and independent media funding frameworks from all five focus countries. Country ratings verified against NCC Nigeria 2023, CA Kenya 2023, ICASA South Africa 2023, NCA Ghana 2023, NTRA Egypt 2023, and UNESCO Media Freedom Report 2023. The scorecard deliberately separates governance capacity from intent: a PARTIAL rating does not imply regulatory inaction but rather that existing frameworks were designed before AI media disruption and lack the specific provisions, jurisdiction, and technical capacity required for AI-era governance.

Note: The Scorecard reveals that AI Literacy and Critical Media Education is the only dimension where any country has achieved even Partial ratings across the board, making it the most developed resilience dimension available for rapid enhancement. Media Ownership Transparency achieving four Partial ratings across five countries represents the second-most developed dimension. AI Disinformation Detection and Synthetic Media Labelling both score zero Full ratings across all countries, representing the most acute governance gaps relative to threat severity. Source: Authors Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard applying Democratic Theory (Habermas 1989) to comparative regulatory mapping of NCC Nigeria 2023, CA Kenya 2023, ICASA South Africa 2023, NCA Ghana 2023, NTRA Egypt 2023, UNESCO Media Freedom Report 2023, and RSF Press Freedom Index 2023.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design following the explanatory sequential model of Creswell and Creswell [19]. Qualitative methods comprised systematic documentary analysis of 87 regulatory instruments, media governance frameworks, and AI governance documents from all five focus countries and relevant international bodies, and thematic analysis of 63 peer-reviewed academic publications, policy reports, and investigative journalism reports on AI disinformation in African contexts. The Threat Escalation Matrix was constructed from documented incident reports verified by Africa Check, Mozilla Foundation, and Research ICT Africa sources. The Resilience Scorecard was constructed from comparative regulatory mapping verified against current official documents from all five national regulatory authorities.

### B. Data Sources

Primary sources: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 [3]; Oxford Internet Institute Computational Propaganda Project Africa data 2020-2023 [6]; Africa Check incident database 2020-2023 [20]; Mozilla Foundation Africa disinformation reports 2021-2023 [21]; Research ICT Africa media monitoring 2023 [22]; UNESCO Media Freedom Report 2023 [23]; RSF Press Freedom Index 2023 [24]; UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression 2022 [25]. Secondary sources: regulatory instruments from all five focus countries. Tertiary: peer-reviewed literature identified through systematic searches on AI disinformation Africa, computational propaganda Africa, algorithmic media governance, and press freedom AI. Of 112 publications identified, 63 met inclusion criteria.

### C. Limitations

Three limitations apply. First, incident documentation for AI disinformation in African contexts is incomplete: many incidents are not formally investigated and Africa Check and similar organisations have capacity constraints limiting systematic coverage. Second, the boundary between AI-enabled and non-AI disinformation is increasingly blurred as AI tools become embedded in all digital communications infrastructure, potentially causing underestimation of AI-specific harm. Third, media governance frameworks in several focus countries are currently under review, meaning the Resilience Scorecard reflects a point-in-time assessment that may not capture reforms in progress.

## 5. AI IN AFRICAN MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE: APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### A. Current AI Applications

AI is deployed across seven functional domains in African media and public discourse. AI content recommendation and ranking systems operated by Meta, Google, TikTok, and YouTube determine what news, entertainment, and social content reaches African users across the dominant social media platforms that serve as primary information sources for the majority of Africa's internet-using population [2]. AI-powered advertising allocation systems determine which publishers receive digital advertising revenue, systematically favouring platforms with large engagement data sets over local African journalism outlets that lack the user data infrastructure required to compete in AI-mediated advertising markets [4]. AI disinformation production tools including generative AI text, image, and audio generation enable the creation of fabricated content at negligible cost and at scales previously requiring significant organisational resources [5]. AI fact-checking assistance tools deployed by Africa Check and other verification organisations use natural language processing to identify potential misinformation for human verification [20]. AI translation tools deployed by both legitimate media organisations and disinformation operators dramatically reduce the language barriers that previously confined mis- and disinformation to monolingual audiences [26]. AI-powered news aggregation and summarisation tools alter the economic model of journalism by extracting value from news content without directing traffic to the publishing organisations that produced it [27]. AI audience analytics tools used by

media organisations to optimise content for engagement can create incentive structures that push journalism towards sensationalism and away from public interest reporting [28].

### B. Benefits and Opportunities

Three documented benefits are established. First, AI fact-checking assistance has demonstrably increased the scale at which organisations like Africa Check, PesaCheck, and Dubawa can identify potential misinformation for human verification, with Africa Check reporting a 40 percent increase in claim verification throughput following AI assistance tool deployment [20]. Second, AI translation capabilities have genuinely expanded the reach of verified information across Africa's multilingual landscape, enabling public health communications, civic information, and verified journalism to reach communities in local languages that were previously excluded from digital information access [26]. Third, AI audience analytics, when used with appropriate editorial ethics frameworks, have enabled some African digital media organisations to better understand reader needs and build sustainable subscription-based revenue models less dependent on AI platform advertising [28].

### C. Risks and Harms

Seven risk categories are identified. Electoral disinformation represents the most acutely time-sensitive risk: documented AI-generated fabrications targeting African elections in Nigeria 2023, Kenya 2022, Ghana 2024, and South Africa 2024 have demonstrated that AI disinformation can be produced and distributed faster than fact-checking organisations can verify and counter it [20, 21]. Ethnic and communal incitement represents the most severe risk by potential harm: the documented link between AI-amplified ethnic incitement content and physical violence in African conflict-affected contexts places this risk in the Extreme severity category of the Threat Escalation Matrix. Algorithmic journalism displacement represents the most structurally damaging long-term risk: UNESCO documents over 200 African local news outlets closing between 2020 and 2023, with AI-driven advertising displacement identified as a contributing factor alongside COVID-19 economic impacts [23]. Health disinformation, financial fraud amplification, synthetic media manipulation, and algorithmic news deserts constitute the remaining documented risk categories, all with zero AI-specific governance response in any focus country.

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Key Findings

Finding 1: The Threat Escalation Matrix confirms that six of seven AI-enabled media threat types operating in African ecosystems have zero AI-specific governance response in any of the five focus countries. The sole exception is financial fraud, which benefits from partial coverage through financial sector regulation not designed for AI disinformation contexts. The EXTREME-rated threat of ethnic and communal incitement, with documented links to physical violence, has zero governance response across all five countries despite being the highest-severity threat in the matrix.

Finding 2: The Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard confirms that zero of six resilience dimensions achieve Full ratings in any focus country. The most developed dimension is AI Literacy and Critical Media Education, where all five countries have Partial ratings representing existing frameworks that could be enhanced to AI-specific standards without requiring new institutional creation. The least developed dimensions are AI Disinformation Detection and Synthetic Media Labelling, both scoring zero Full and zero Partial ratings, representing dimensions where regulatory frameworks must be created from scratch.

Finding 3: South Africa achieves the highest overall resilience rating of Low, driven by ICASA's broader mandate and POPIA's data protection framework. Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and Egypt all achieve Very Low overall ratings. No focus country achieves a Medium, High, or Full resilience rating.

Finding 4: The juxtaposition of EXTREME threat severity for ethnic incitement with ABSENT governance response across all five countries, combined with documented links to physical violence, establishes the most acute governance

priority emerging from this research. This finding has direct implications for the sequencing of the six-pillar democratic media protection framework proposed in Section 7.

### B. Discussion

The findings confirm Democratic Theory's requirement that AI systems functioning as de facto information gatekeepers must be accountable to democratic public interest requirements rather than commercial engagement optimisation [14, 15]. They extend Computational Propaganda Research Theory by demonstrating that all five mechanisms of computational propaganda are operating simultaneously across African media ecosystems without corresponding governance response, creating a compound threat to democratic information environments that individual mechanism-specific responses cannot address [5, 17]. The Threat Escalation Matrix contributes the analytical innovation of severity-ranked threat prioritisation, enabling governance responses to be sequenced according to harm urgency rather than administrative sector boundaries. The Resilience Scorecard contributes the distinction between zero-base dimensions requiring new framework creation and partially developed dimensions where enhancement of existing frameworks is possible, enabling more efficient allocation of limited regulatory development resources.

## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Table 2**

*Summary of Policy Recommendations: Democratic Media Protection Framework*

| Priority | Recommendation | Target Actor(s) | Timeline |
|---|---|---|---|
| **HIGH** | Enact AI disinformation accountability legislation requiring platforms to prevent AI-generated electoral disinformation and AI-amplified ethnic incitement during elections and conflict-sensitive periods, with mandatory takedown timelines, transparency reporting, and civil society oversight mechanisms. | ICT and Media Ministries; Communications Regulators | Short-term: 1 to 2 years |
| **HIGH** | Enact synthetic media labelling requirements mandating that AI-generated audio, video, image, and text content is technically labelled at creation and platform-level identified before distribution, with liability for platforms that distribute unlabelled deepfakes in election and public health contexts. | ICT Ministries; Media Regulators; Electoral Commissions | Short-term: 1 to 2 years |
| **HIGH** | Establish a public interest journalism investment fund providing financial support to African local media organisations adversely affected by AI advertising displacement, with eligibility criteria prioritising editorial independence, local language coverage, and democratic accountability journalism. | Finance Ministries; Media Development Agencies; AfDB | Short-term: 1 to 2 years |
| **MEDIUM** | Mandate AI content algorithm transparency for news ranking requiring platforms to disclose the criteria by which news content is ranked, provide public interest weighting options for verified journalism, and submit to independent algorithmic audits for democratic harm assessment. | Communications Regulators; Competition Authorities | Medium-term: 3 to 5 years |
| **MEDIUM** | Expand and enhance AI media literacy education across primary, secondary, and tertiary curricula, building on the Partial frameworks documented in all five focus countries, with specific modules on identifying AI-generated content, understanding algorithmic recommendation, and using AI-assisted fact-checking tools. | Education Ministries; Media Regulators; Civil Society | Medium-term: 3 to 5 years |
| **LOW** | Establish an African AI content governance architecture under the African Union and continental fact-checking and AI detection infrastructure fund, enabling cross-border coordination on AI disinformation incidents, | African Union Commission; Smart Africa; Civil Society | Long-term: 5 or more years |

| | |
|---|---|
| | shared AI detection tools for smaller fact-checking organisations, and harmonised continental standards. |

Note: Pillar sequencing follows threat severity in the Escalation Matrix: Pillar 1 addresses EXTREME and CRITICAL threats; Pillar 2 addresses the synthetic media mechanism underlying multiple threat types; Pillar 3 addresses structural journalism displacement. Pillars 4-6 address systemic governance, education, and continental coordination.

**Pillar 1. AI Disinformation Accountability Legislation**

ICT and media ministries must enact AI disinformation accountability legislation requiring social media and content platforms to implement specific protections against the highest-severity AI-enabled media threats identified in the Threat Escalation Matrix. Legislation must require platforms to prevent the circulation of AI-generated fabrications impersonating electoral candidates and public officials in the period surrounding elections; to implement expedited content review protocols for AI-generated content matching documented ethnic incitement patterns in conflict-sensitive contexts; and to provide transparent reporting on takedown actions, with civil society oversight of implementation. The evidence base is Finding 1 and the Threat Escalation Matrix, particularly the EXTREME rating for ethnic incitement combined with zero governance response.

**Pillar 2. Synthetic Media Labelling Requirements**

ICT ministries and media regulators must enact technical synthetic media labelling requirements applicable to all AI-generated content created or distributed within African jurisdictions. These requirements must mandate that AI content generation tools embed technically verifiable provenance labels at the point of creation, that social media platforms detect and display these labels to users, and that platforms bear liability for the distribution of unlabelled deepfakes in election and public health sensitive contexts. The evidence base is Finding 2 and the zero Full and zero Partial ratings for Synthetic Media Labelling in the Resilience Scorecard across all five focus countries, combined with documented incidents of deepfake use in Egypt, Kenya, and South Africa.

**Pillar 3. Public Interest Journalism Investment Fund**

Finance ministries, media development agencies, and the African Development Bank must establish public interest journalism investment funds in each focus country, providing direct financial support to local media organisations adversely affected by AI-driven advertising revenue displacement. Fund design must prioritise editorial independence as a primary eligibility criterion, excluding state-owned or commercially captured media entities; local language coverage serving communities underserved by global platform content; and democratic accountability journalism covering government, public institutions, and civil society. Funding mechanisms must include direct grants for newsroom operational costs, subsidised access to AI fact-checking and audience analytics tools that enable local media to operate competitively in AI-mediated information environments, and training programmes building journalist capacity to identify, investigate, and report on AI disinformation. The evidence base is the Algorithmic News Deserts threat type in the Threat Escalation Matrix, which documents 200 or more African local news outlet closures between 2020 and 2023 partly attributable to AI advertising displacement, and the zero Full rating for Public Interest Media Funding in the Resilience Scorecard across all five focus countries.

**Pillar 4. AI Content Algorithm Transparency for News Ranking**

Communications regulators and competition authorities must mandate AI content algorithm transparency for news ranking systems, requiring social media and content platforms that serve as primary news sources for significant proportions of African internet users to disclose the criteria by which news content is ranked, selected, and amplified for distribution to users. Transparency requirements must specify: public disclosure of the optimisation objectives governing AI news ranking, enabling citizens and regulators to assess whether engagement maximisation is systematically rewarded over public interest, accuracy, or local relevance criteria; public interest weighting options allowing users to elect verified journalism prioritisation in their content feeds; and mandatory submission to independent algorithmic audits assessed against democratic harm criteria including disinformation amplification, electoral content distortion, and ethnic incitement facilitation. The evidence base is the zero Full and zero Partial rating

for AI Content Algorithm Accountability for News Ranking in the Resilience Scorecard across all five focus countries, and the documented AI recommendation system role in amplifying all six highest-severity threats in the Threat Escalation Matrix.

**Pillar 5. AI Media Literacy and Critical Media Education**

Education ministries, media regulators, and civil society organisations must expand and enhance AI media literacy education across primary, secondary, and tertiary curricula, building on the Partial frameworks documented across all five focus countries in the Resilience Scorecard, which represents the most developed resilience dimension available for rapid enhancement without new institutional creation. Enhanced curricula must incorporate specific modules on identifying AI-generated content and synthetic media, including practical exercises in detecting deepfakes and AI-written text; understanding algorithmic recommendation and the engagement optimisation dynamics that cause disinformation to spread faster than corrections; using AI-assisted fact-checking tools including those deployed by Africa Check, PesaCheck, and Dubawa; and recognising the specific AI disinformation patterns documented in the Threat Escalation Matrix, including coordinated inauthentic behaviour, electoral deepfakes, and AI-translated ethnic incitement. Civil society organisations must receive dedicated funding to deliver community-based AI literacy programmes targeting populations with lower formal education access, recognising that the 200 million low-health-literacy and rural populations identified as most vulnerable to AI disinformation in the Threat Escalation Matrix are least likely to be reached through formal educational channels alone. The evidence base is Finding 2 and the Resilience Scorecard, which identifies AI Literacy as the sole dimension where enhancement of existing frameworks is possible across all five focus countries without requiring creation of new institutional infrastructure.

**Pillar 6. African AI Content Governance Architecture and Continental Fact-Checking Infrastructure**

The African Union Commission, Smart Africa Alliance, and civil society organisations must establish an African AI content governance architecture providing the continental coordination framework without which Pillars 1 through 5 risk being undermined by cross-border AI disinformation incidents that national regulators cannot address in isolation. The architecture must comprise three components. First, harmonised continental AI disinformation standards establishing minimum requirements for platform accountability, synthetic media labelling, and content algorithm transparency that all African Union member states implement, preventing foreign platforms from exploiting divergent national frameworks by directing harmful AI operations to the least regulated jurisdictions. Second, a continental AI disinformation detection and response mechanism enabling rapid cross-border coordination when AI disinformation campaigns targeting elections, public health emergencies, or conflict-sensitive contexts cross national borders, as documented incidents in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa confirm they routinely do. Third, a pan-African AI fact-checking infrastructure fund providing shared access to advanced AI detection tools, training datasets, and technical expertise for smaller fact-checking organisations that currently lack the resources to independently develop AI-specific disinformation identification capabilities. The evidence base is Finding 1, which documents zero AI-specific governance response to six of seven threat types across all five focus countries, and the Policy Gaps analysis confirming the complete absence of continental coordination mechanisms for cross-border AI disinformation incidents.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the effect of artificial intelligence on media and public discourse in Africa through Democratic Theory and Computational Propaganda Research Theory, presenting an AI Disinformation Threat Escalation Matrix severity-ranking seven threat types and a Democratic Media Resilience Scorecard assessing governance capacity across six dimensions and five countries. The Matrix confirms six of seven threat types have zero AI-specific governance response, including the EXTREME-severity threat of ethnic incitement with documented links to physical violence. The Scorecard confirms zero Full ratings across all six dimensions and all five countries, with South Africa achieving the highest overall rating of Low. The central contribution is the identification of the African AI democratic information crisis: the structural condition in which AI systems governing African public discourse operate without

accountability to African democratic institutions, producing information environments in which disinformation is algorithmically amplified, authentic journalism is algorithmically starved, and democratic deliberation is systematically distorted. The paper proposes a six-pillar democratic media protection framework, with three high-priority pillars, AI disinformation accountability legislation, synthetic media labelling requirements, and public interest journalism investment, all implementable within existing regulatory authority. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of AI disinformation legislation across different African electoral and conflict contexts; assess the net welfare effects of AI media literacy interventions on citizen resilience to AI-generated disinformation; and develop African-specific AI content detection models trained on African linguistic and cultural datasets.

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## 10. DECLARATIONS

**Author contributions**. All authors contributed to the conceptualization, documentary analysis, comparative regulatory mapping and drafting of this study. E.U.N. led the research design and supervised the work. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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