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COUNTERING MISINFORMATION IN AFRICA: LOCAL APPROACHES TO AI-POWERED CHALLENGES

WHITE PAPER
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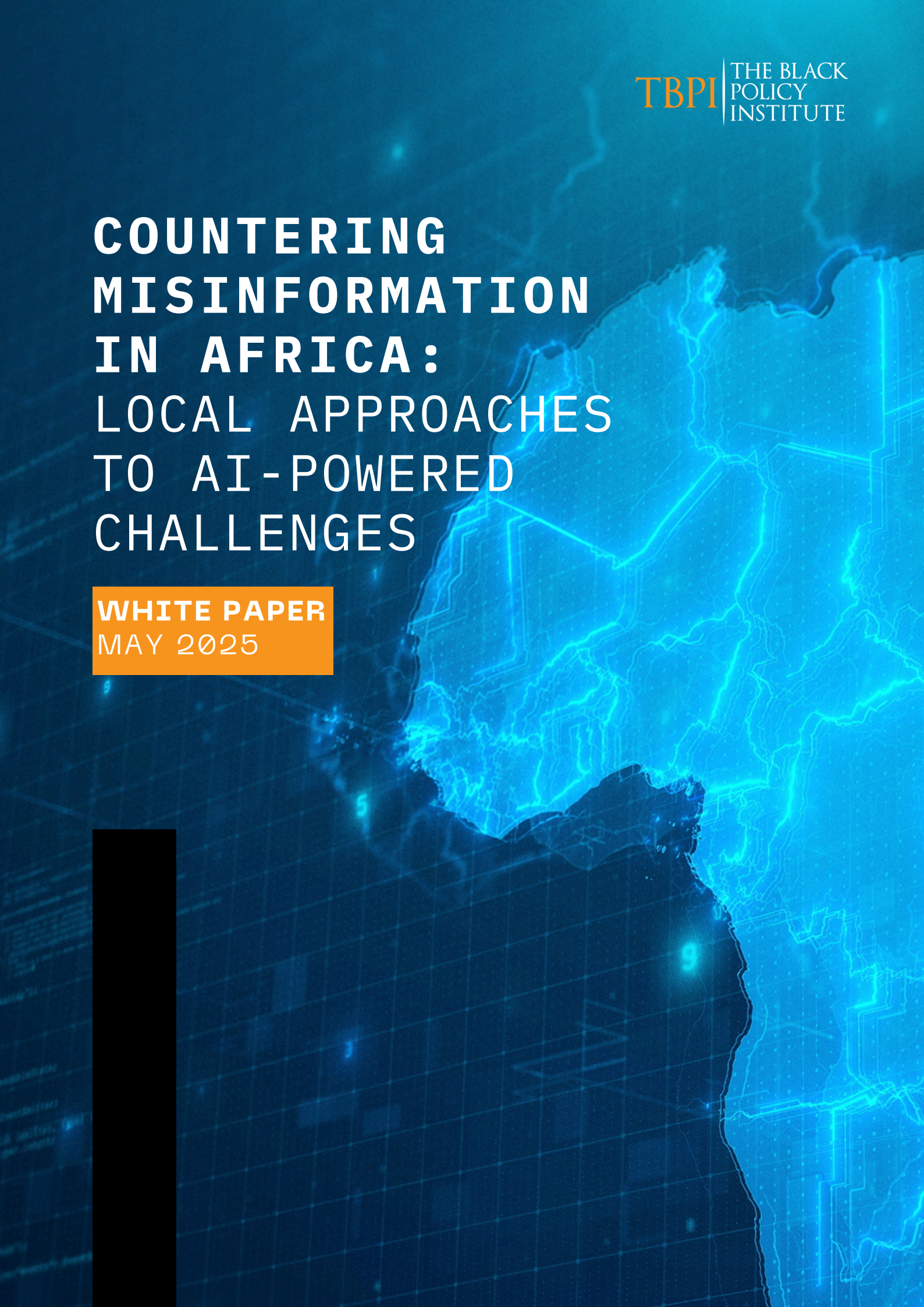

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Executive Summary

What is the AI and Digital Misinformation Challenge in Africa?

The rapid advancement of AI technology presents both unprecedented risks and opportunities for Africa's digital spaces. While AI tools like ChatGPT enable mass production of misinformation across multiple languages, they also offer potential solutions for detection and verification.[1,2]

However, with cumulative academic research publications on AI from sub-Saharan Africa representing only 0.77% of academic research publications in the field between 2010 and 2021,[3,4] the continent faces a critical gap in shaping AI development to address its unique linguistic and cultural needs.

80%

of online (X/Twitter) misinformation came from just 0.1% of users during the 2016 US elections [6]

0.77%

Sub-Saharan African publications account for only 0.77% of all AI research [3,4]

138.5%

Kenya has achieved a 138.5% mobile phone penetration rate (smartphones accounting for 80.5%), with population network coverage reaching 97%, demonstrating the urgency for AI-powered safety measures [7]

Critical Issues

AI Development and Control

Current AI systems are lacking African linguistic and cultural contexts, making them both a tool for spreading misinformation and an inadequate solution for detecting it.[8] Content moderation systems struggle with AI-generated content in local languages, while AI's "black box" nature complicates oversight.

Platform Investment Disparities

Major platforms invest minimally in AI-powered content moderation for Africa, despite the growing sophistication of AI-generated misinformation.[9] In a similar vein, language models in regional and local dialects remain underdeveloped.

Net Income

As AI capabilities rapidly evolve, current regulatory frameworks struggle to keep pace.[10] Anti-misinformation laws often target legitimate speech rather than addressing sophisticated AI-enabled disinformation campaigns. [11,12]

"If AI doesn't include Africa in its research and its development, Africa will continue to be left behind."

– Toni Adewuyi

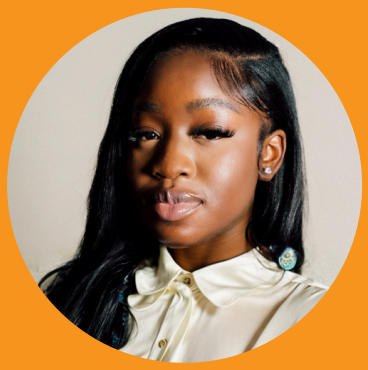
Emerging Solutions

Innovation is emerging through African-led AI initiatives:

- Dubawa AI: Local language AI tool for radio content verification [13]
- AI-powered fact-checking networks
- Community-led AI training and awareness
- Regional collaboration on AI governance

Our Expert Panel

This white paper draws from expert insights shared during the Black Policy Institute's October 2024 webinar on "Misinformation in Digital Africa." The webinar, moderated by Chimdi Igwe, brought together leading experts from media research, law, technology, and public health communications, with a focus on Kenya and Nigeria as case studies.



Toni Adewuyi

Senior Data and Communications Coordinator at a humanitarian NGO and Senior Marketing Manager at a media production startup. Adewuyi brings expertise in data analysis, public health communications, and strategic messaging, with a focus on the intersection of misinformation and health outcomes.

Silas Jonathan

Head of the DIDAC team at the Center for Journalism Investigative Development. Jonathan is an expert in media research and open source intelligence, with extensive experience tracking disinformation campaigns across sub-Saharan Africa and developing technological solutions for fact-checking.

Demas Kiprono

Public interest lawyer and human rights advocate with over 13 years of experience in freedom of expression and digital policies in Kenya. Kiprono has been at the forefront of legal challenges against both government overreach and platform accountability in digital spaces.

Mikhail Nyamweya

Researcher focusing on judicial policies and misinformation in African democracies. Nyamweya studies the intersection of technology, governance, and democratic participation, with expertise in Kenya's digital landscape.

1 The Challenge: AI and Misinformation in Africa

Key Points

- AI tools now enable mass production of misinformation across multiple languages
- This capability exploits Africa's underrepresentation in AI development (only 0.77% of academic research between 2010 and 2021) [3,4]
- The lack of investment in content moderation creates vulnerabilities
- These vulnerabilities are then exacerbated by regulatory approaches that often target legitimate speech rather than sophisticated disinformation

These challenges form an interconnected cycle: limited African input in AI development leads to systems ill-equipped for local contexts, which results in inadequate platform moderation, which in turn undermines effective regulation and governance.

1.1 AI Development and Control

The intersection of AI and misinformation presents unique challenges for African digital spaces. As Silas Jonathan observed, AI tools have dramatically lowered barriers to creating sophisticated misinformation: "All they need to do is to go on ChatGPT, and just describe the scenario, and ChatGPT will create almost a hundred tweets that fit into the context." This capability enables bad actors to rapidly produce contextually relevant content across multiple platforms and languages.

These capabilities are already being exploited in coordinated disinformation campaigns. Jonathan described specific instances where actors were "paid €10 for each post that has more than 1K reaction" as part of orchestrated efforts to manipulate public opinion. These financially-motivated campaigns use AI tools to generate content that appears authentic while spreading false narratives that undermine democratic processes and public trust. Jonathan further warns that democracy is under threat across the continent due to these campaigns. During Kenya's recent elections, Demas Kiprono noted that false images of war-torn areas were misrepresented as being within Kenya, sowing discord and influencing voters. Jonathan also described how millions of AI-generated bots were deployed to manipulate perceptions of candidates' popularity.

The problem is compounded by what Kiprono describes as AI's "black box" problem: "Sometimes you really do not know where the decision is coming from." This refers to how AI systems make decisions through processes that aren't transparent or explainable to humans, making it impossible to understand the reasoning behind their outputs or correct biases in their decision-making. This opacity makes it difficult to identify and counteract AI-generated misinformation, especially as the technology advances. As Kiprono notes, "As the technology gets better, as AI gets better, it'll be harder and harder to identify what is real and what is not."

Beyond content generation, AI's development trajectory raises concerns about representation and contextual understanding. Toni Adewuyi highlighted the severe underrepresentation of African perspectives in AI development: "African publications specific to AI only account for, I think, 1.06% of all AI publications." While the exact figure indicates that sub-Saharan African publications represent only 0.77% of AI research publications,[3,4] her point remains accurate: this underrepresentation creates AI systems that are poorly equipped to understand local languages, cultural nuances, and communication patterns across Africa's diverse communities. A 2021 Stanford AI index found that East Asia and North America account for 42.87% of AI publications, highlighting the dramatic disparity in global AI research representation.[3] This imbalance affects everything from content moderation to verification tools, creating systems that struggle with African languages and contexts.

"All they need to do is to go on ChatGPT, and just describe the scenario, and ChatGPT will create almost a hundred tweets that fit into the context."

– Silas Jonathan

The 2024 Global AI Index from Tortoise Media reinforces this pattern of regional disparities in AI development. Among the 83 countries assessed, African nations occupy positions predominantly at the bottom of the rankings: Kenya ranks 81st, Nigeria 73rd, and even the highest-ranked African nation (Rwanda) places just 68th.[14] This positioning quantifies the significant gap in AI development resources and capabilities between African nations and Global North countries that dominate the top rankings.

1.2 Platform Investment Disparities

Major technology platforms have failed to invest adequately in content moderation for African digital spaces. Kiprono's observation is stark: "Content moderation in the global South is really nothing big to them. They do not invest in moderation." He described Facebook's moderation hub for sub-Saharan Africa as "people sitting in one room moderating speech in different languages," highlighting the severe resource limitations.

The moderation challenge extends beyond simple resource allocation to fundamental linguistic barriers. As Kiprono explained, effective moderation requires understanding "not just different languages, but in pidgin [a simplified language combining elements from multiple languages], for example, different versions of languages." This linguistic diversity presents particular challenges for AI-powered moderation systems trained primarily on major Western languages.

The investment gap becomes especially problematic in the context of coordinated disinformation campaigns. As noted earlier, these operations often involve financial incentives for spreading misinformation, with bad actors being paid based on engagement metrics. These economic motivations drive sophisticated campaigns that exploit platform algorithms while evading underfunded moderation systems.

These platform investment disparities create a dangerous asymmetry: while bad actors can leverage AI to generate massive volumes of misinformation at low cost, platforms' detection and moderation capabilities remain severely limited, especially for content in African languages.

1.3 Policy and Enforcement Challenges

Current regulatory approaches to misinformation often miss the mark, focusing on punitive measures against individuals rather than addressing systemic challenges. Kiprono raised the fundamental question: "Can the government be the arbiter of truth?" This tension between regulation and free expression becomes especially acute as AI-generated content blurs the line between authentic and manipulated information.

Kiprono highlighted the concerning pattern in Kenya's enforcement of anti-misinformation laws: "If you analyze who has been arrested, who has been charged under these laws, you realize that it is usually activists, journalists, environmental protectors who speak truth to power." Rather than combating harmful disinformation, these laws have become tools to suppress legitimate speech and political dissent.

The policy challenge is further complicated by the transnational nature of digital platforms and AI development. As Kiprono observed, cross-border governance issues present significant hurdles for effective regulation. This recognition, however, has yet to translate into effective cross-border regulatory frameworks.

Meanwhile, emerging coordinated disinformation campaigns present sophisticated challenges that outpace current regulatory approaches. According to Jonathan, democracy across the continent is "under threat" as foreign and domestic actors employ strategic platforms and AI-generated content to manipulate public discourse and electoral outcomes.

"If you analyze who has been arrested, who has been charged under these laws, you realize that it is usually activists, journalists, and environmental protectors who speak truth to power."

– Demas Kiprono

2 African-Led Solutions and Innovations

2.1 Local Innovation: Dubawa AI

Despite these challenges, promising African-led solutions are emerging to combat AI-generated misinformation. One notable example is Dubawa AI, developed by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID): "We launched an AI tool...it is able to pick claims that demand verification that is being spoken on radio," as Jonathan explained. This tool addresses a gap in fact-checking infrastructure by focusing on radio content, which remains a primary information source in many African communities.

Launched in May 2024 in Nigeria, Dubawa AI consists of two main components: Dubawa Chatbot, which operates on WhatsApp to provide real-time fact-checking with access to current internet data, and Dubawa Audio, which can monitor radio programs, transcribe them, and extract verifiable claims for fact-checkers. Unlike tools such as ChatGPT which has limited access to the internet as of last year, Dubawa AI can access real-time information, allowing it to verify current events and breaking news.[13]

Dubawa AI highlights the importance of contextually appropriate technology. As Jonathan explained, effective AI tools require "a language model that fits into that" local context. Currently focused on English with plans to expand to Arabic, French, and other languages, the tool interfaces with widely used platforms like WhatsApp, making verification accessible through existing communication channels. According to CJID's innovation lead, the system has answered over 1,100 requests from more than 250 unique users since its launch.[15]

This innovation shows how African-led technology development can address specific regional challenges in ways that imported solutions cannot. As Jonathan emphasized, "This is, for the first time, one of the problems [where] only Africans...can drive the solution."

2.2 Community Approaches

Beyond technological solutions, community-based approaches show significant promise in combating misinformation. Jonathan emphasized the importance of engaging local influencers: "We need to collaborate with local young influencers who have mass following on TikTok, on Instagram." These influencers have built trust with their audiences and can effectively counter misinformation within their communities.

Community verification networks, particularly through widely used platforms like WhatsApp, provide grassroots mechanisms for identifying and countering false information. These networks leverage existing social connections and communication patterns rather than imposing external verification systems.

Mikhail Nyamweya highlighted how digital platforms can strengthen democratic participation when properly leveraged: "Many corruption scandals that are raised through Twitter...actually at the end of the day [are] true." This observation demonstrates how community-led verification can enhance government accountability and transparency.

These community approaches recognize that misinformation is not merely a technological problem but a social one, requiring solutions embedded within existing social structures and communication patterns.

2.3 Public Health Communication Models

The public health sector offers valuable models for effective communication strategies that counter misinformation. Adewuyi shared insights from health communication campaigns that successfully navigated complex information environments through culturally appropriate messaging.

She emphasized how language barriers significantly impact the effectiveness of public health communications, emphasizing that official messaging often fails to reach populations when not delivered in local languages.

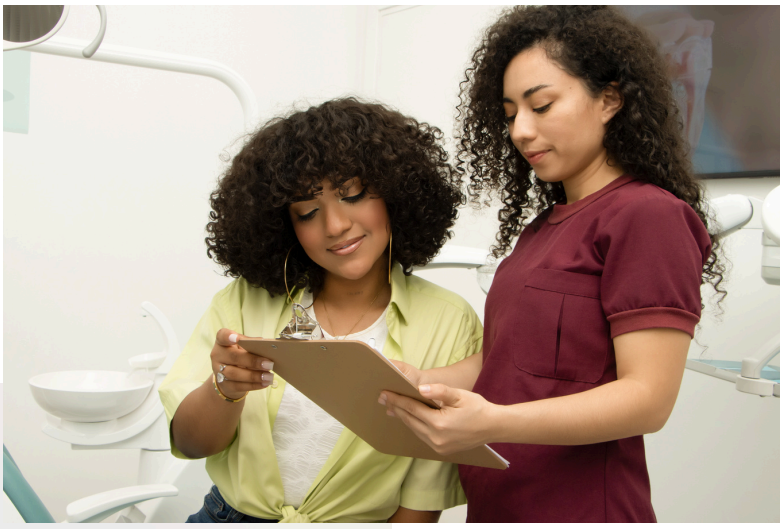
She also noted that this creates dangerous gaps where misinformation can flourish unchallenged (this linguistic disconnect is explored further in section 3.2).

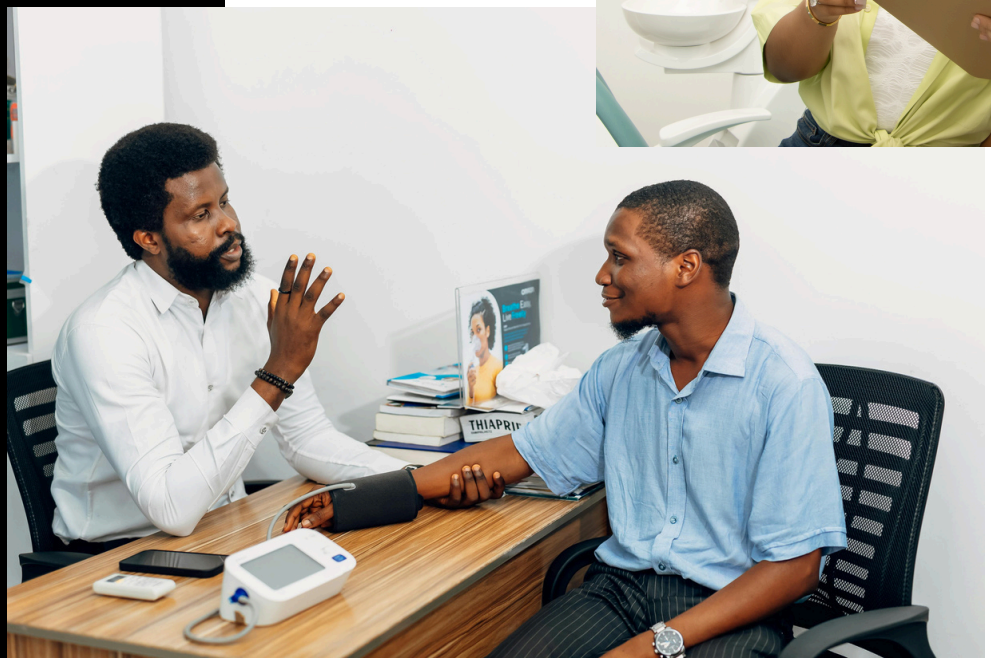
Adewuyi cautioned that the health impacts of misinformation should not be underestimated, noting that distrust in public health institutions has led to vaccine hesitancy, reluctance to engage with sexual health education, and worsening cycles of preventable diseases.

Successful health communication strategies identified by our panelists included:

- Partnerships with trusted local influencers
- Multi-language content distribution
- Community-based verification systems

These approaches from public health show how effective communication requires both appropriate channels and culturally relevant messaging, offering valuable lessons for broader misinformation response strategies.





3 Building Blocks for Resilient Systems

3.1 Digital Literacy and Citizen Empowerment

Building resilient systems against misinformation requires empowering citizens with verification skills rather than simply restricting information flows. As Kiprono emphasized, citizen empowerment creates bottom-up resilience that can effectively counter AI-generated misinformation.

However, significant gaps remain in digital literacy infrastructure. Nyamweya stated, "The people on the ground at grassroots level are not that educated about what AI can potentially do." This knowledge gap limits communities' ability to identify and counter AI-generated misinformation.

According to the Democracy Erosion Consortium, digital literacy interventions in Kenya and Nigeria show varying effectiveness across demographic groups. Research indicates that such interventions tend to be more effective for individuals with higher education levels, signaling the need for tailored approaches that address diverse educational backgrounds and digital literacy levels.[16]

Academic research reinforces these concerns about knowledge gaps. Studies highlight how African AI narratives are often missing from global discussions, resulting in technologies that don't align with local cultural contexts and potentially perpetuating historical injustices.[17, 18] Research also emphasizes how the lack of practical digital literacy and verification skills presents significant barriers to effectively combating misinformation. [19, 20] These studies underscore the necessity for tailored solutions that address Africa's unique socio-political and technological landscape.[21]

Effective digital literacy initiatives must balance technical knowledge with practical verification skills, ensuring citizens can navigate increasingly complex information environments where AI-generated content blurs the line between authentic and manipulated information.

3.2 Language-Specific Approaches

The linguistic diversity of African digital spaces presents both challenges and opportunities for misinformation resilience. As Adewuyi said, "If you are pushing out public health messaging in English, there is a gap in outreach because misinformation on the ground spreads in local languages."

This linguistic disconnect creates a dangerous asymmetry. Official information and fact-checking resources remain primarily in colonial languages, while misinformation flourishes in the languages people actually use in daily life. Addressing this disconnect requires language-specific approaches that reach communities in their primary languages.

Jonathan stated the technical challenges of developing language models for Africa's linguistic diversity: "We have to come up with a language model that fits into that." This work requires both technical expertise and deep cultural understanding, making it important for African developers to lead such initiatives.

> **"If you are pushing out public health messaging in English, there is a gap in outreach, because misinformation on the ground spreads in local languages."**
>
> **– Toni Adewuyi**

Language-specific approaches include:

- Local language fact-checking networks
- Indigenous language AI development
- Multilingual content verification systems
- Community-led translation initiatives

These approaches recognize that effective communication and verification must operate within communities' linguistic contexts rather than expecting communities to adapt to external systems.

3.3 Platform Investment Requirements

Addressing the severe underinvestment by platforms in African content moderation is critical for building resilient systems. According to 2024 research from the Center for Democracy and Technology, Facebook allocates 87% of its spending on misinformation countermeasures to English content, despite only 9% of its users being English speakers. This investment disparity is even more pronounced for low-resource languages with limited datasets for training language models. [22]

Kiprono highlighted this disparity with his observation: “Content moderation in the global South is really nothing big to them. They do not invest in moderation.” This neglect manifests through:

- Minimal investment in Global South content review
- Insufficient language support for diverse communities
- Limited local expertise development across platforms

The underinvestment extends to human moderation systems as well. In Kenya, human moderators evaluating AI training datasets are often paid less than two dollars per hour while being tasked with evaluating content in multiple languages and dialects.

Necessary platform investments include:

- Increased resources for local moderation
- Language-specific AI models
- Community engagement support
- Transparent content decision processes

As Kiprono said, platforms currently "do not invest in moderation," creating a situation where sophisticated AI-generated content easily overwhelms limited moderation resources. Addressing this investment gap requires both platform accountability and regulatory frameworks that ensure equitable resource allocation.

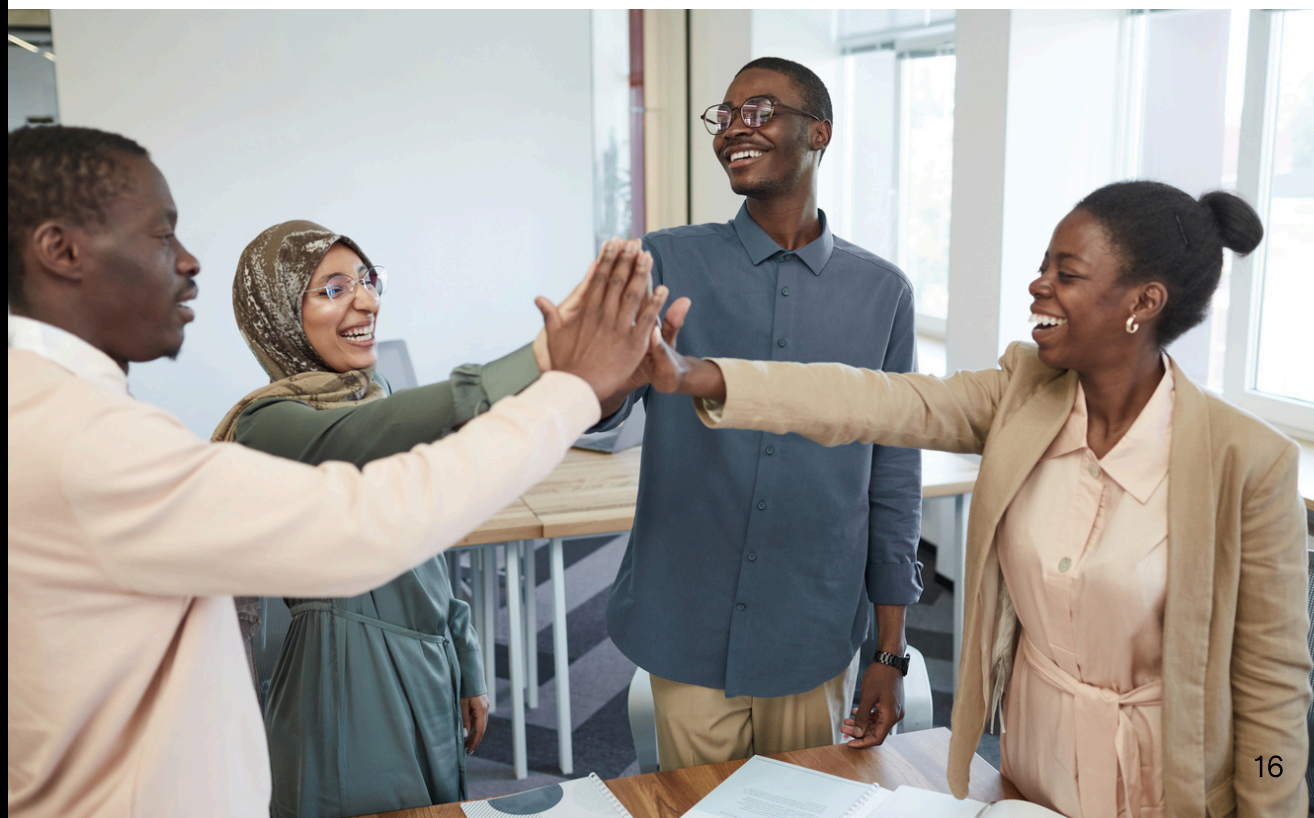
4 Stakeholder Roles and Collaboration

4.1 Community-Platform Integration

Building resilient systems against misinformation requires deliberate integration between global technology platforms and local communities. While section 2.2 highlighted the community perspective, platforms must also take responsibility by actively seeking out these collaborations. As Jonathan expressed in our panel, platforms need to move beyond passive hosting to actively engaging with local digital ecosystems. This requires platforms to invest specifically in technical infrastructure that supports local verification efforts and provides transparent moderation processes tailored to African linguistic and cultural contexts.

Successful community-platform integration includes:

- Working with local influencers for fact-checking
- Engaging with local language communities for content moderation
- Supporting grassroots verification networks
- Building transparent accountability systems



Meanwhile, Kenya's digital landscape shows the potential and urgency for building resilient systems. As Nyamweya said, "Kenya has almost a 100% mobile penetration rate, and nearly half of the population has access to Internet." In fact, according to the Communication Authority of Kenya (2024), the actual figure is even higher, with 65.7 million mobile devices connected to mobile networks, representing a 138.5% penetration rate. [7] This high mobile penetration in Kenya is part of a broader digital transformation across Africa. Recent data shows similar trends in other major African nations: South Africa (118.6 million connections, 195.4% of population), Nigeria (219.3 million active mobile subscriptions, 85% penetration rate), and Egypt (110.5 million connections, 95% penetration rate). The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) forecasts mobile phone users across Africa to reach 500 million by 2025, making it the world's fastest-growing mobile phone market. [23]

This widespread mobile access creates a double-edged situation: on one hand, it provides an excellent infrastructure for deploying AI-powered verification tools and digital literacy initiatives; on the other hand, it creates an environment where AI-generated misinformation can spread rapidly through millions of connected devices before verification systems can respond.

However, as discussed in Section 3.3, there remains a significant investment gap in content moderation for African digital spaces. Addressing this disconnect requires both platform commitment and community advocacy to ensure appropriate protection for the continent's rapidly growing digital ecosystem.

4.2 Government Approaches

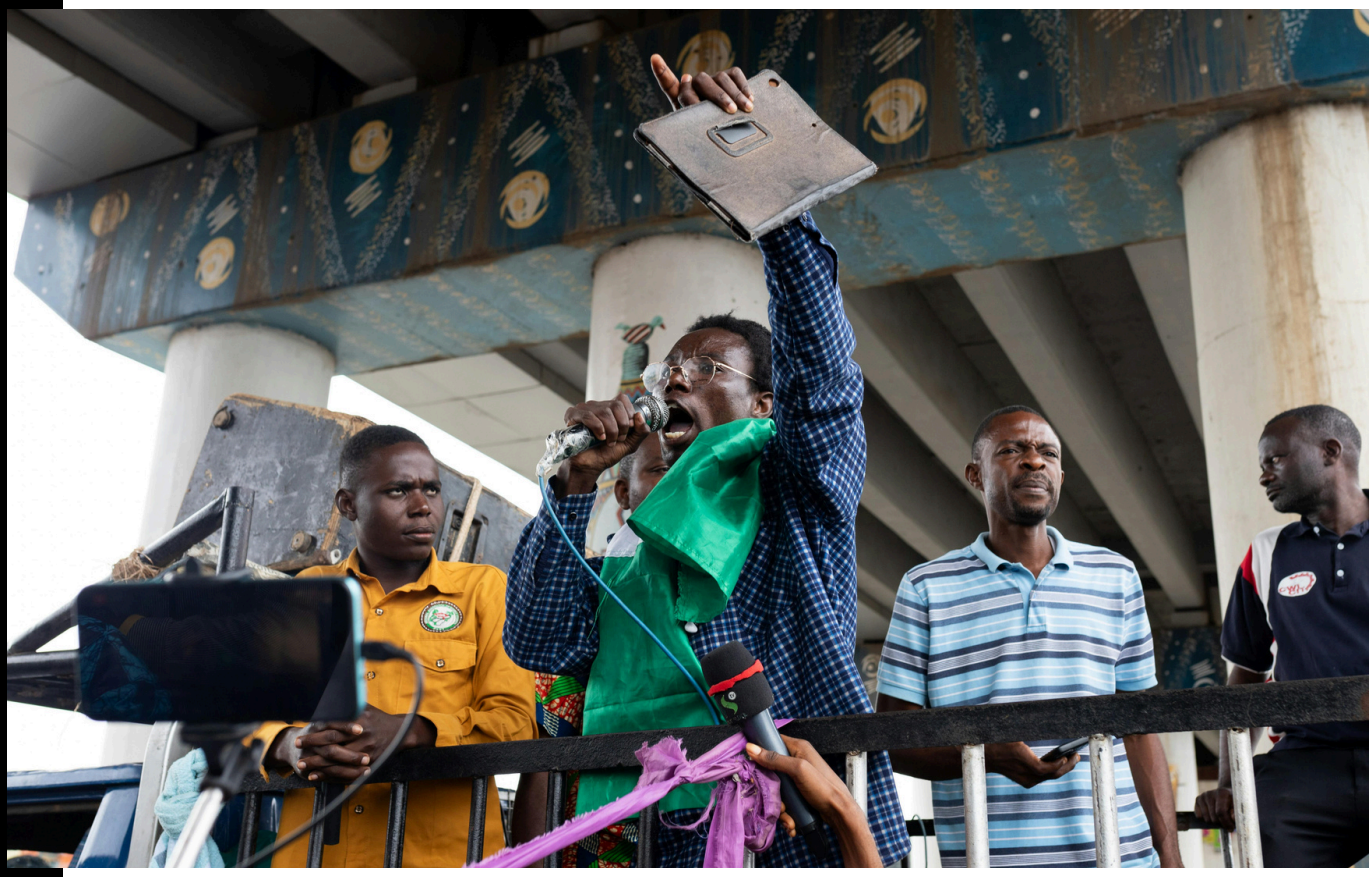
Effective government responses to AI-generated misinformation require balancing regulatory oversight with protection of legitimate speech. As noted earlier by Kiprono, a fundamental question in this space is whether governments should act as arbiters of truth. This becomes particularly challenging as AI systems continue to blur the line between authentic and manipulated content.

Current regulatory approaches often miss the mark, focusing on punitive measures that disproportionately impact legitimate speech. As Kiprono observed, "If you analyze who has been arrested, who has been charged under these laws, you realize that it is usually activists, journalists, environmental protectors who speak truth to power." This pattern suggests that anti-misinformation laws have become tools to suppress dissent rather than protect information integrity.

More effective government approaches emphasize:

- Citizen empowerment over restriction
- Support for community-led verification
- Protection of legitimate speech
- Transparent platform accountability

As Kiprono explained, "A more empowered citizenry is usually a better way of combating misinformation." This perspective shifts the focus from controlling information to building resilience through education and verification capacity.



4.3 Regional Coordination

The transnational nature of digital platforms and misinformation campaigns necessitates regional coordination. As Nyamweya observed, “Regional collaboration is something that would also be very effective in terms of combating, you know, misinformation.” This coordination becomes particularly important as misinformation flows across borders and languages.

> **“Regional collaboration is something that would also be very effective in terms of combating, you know, misinformation."**
>
> **– Mikhail Nyamweya**

Effective regional coordination includes:

- Cross-border content verification standards
- Shared technology resources
- United verification methodologies
- Harmonized regulatory approaches

Kiprono acknowledged the emerging recognition of this need: “Nations are recognizing transnational aspects of Internet governance of AI.”

This recognition, however, must translate into concrete coordination mechanisms that address the cross-border nature of digital misinformation.

Regional bodies like the East African Community and the African Union have important roles to play in facilitating this coordination, creating frameworks that enable consistent approaches while respecting national sovereignty and local contexts.

5 Recommendations and Path Forward

5.1 African-Led Development

Our analysis leads to a clear conclusion from our panelists. Effective responses to AI-generated misinformation in Africa must be African-led. As Jonathan said earlier, "This is, for the first time, one of the problems [where] only Africans...can drive the solution." This African leadership is essential because of the unique linguistic, cultural, and political contexts that shape the continent's information environment.

The current state of AI development, with African research representing less than 1% of global AI publications (as noted earlier), creates systems ill-equipped to address the continent's needs. Adewuyi's warning is clear: "If AI doesn't include Africa in its research and its development, Africa will continue to be left behind, and misinformation will continue to thrive in Africa and African spaces."

Priorities for African-led development include:

- Building local language AI models
- Developing contextually appropriate verification tools
- Creating community-based resilience networks
- Establishing African AI governance frameworks

Successful initiatives like Dubawa AI show the potential of African-led solutions that address specific regional challenges through locally developed technology. Scaling such initiatives requires both investment in African AI development and recognition of African expertise in addressing the continent's information challenges.

5.2 Multi-Stakeholder Coordination

Addressing the complex challenge of AI-generated misinformation requires coordinated action across multiple stakeholders. Building on the regional collaboration emphasized by Nyamweya in section 4.3, this approach must extend beyond governments to include technology platforms, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and local communities.

Effective coordination requires:

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Shared resources and expertise
- Transparent communication channels
- Mutual accountability mechanisms

The current fragmented approach leaves significant gaps in misinformation response capabilities. Platform accountability requires regulatory frameworks, which require technical expertise, which requires community input—creating an interconnected web that demands coordinated action.

As we've established earlier regarding Kiprono's observations on technology governance, the recognition of AI's transnational nature must translate into concrete coordination mechanisms that bridge national, regional, and global governance frameworks.

> **"This is, for the first time, one of the problems [where] only Africans...can drive the solution."**
>
> **- Silas Jonathan**

5.3 Democratic Technology Frameworks

As highlighted earlier in our analysis of policy challenges, anti-misinformation tools often disproportionately target activists, journalists, and environmental advocates who speak truth to power. This pattern suggests these mechanisms have become weapons against democratic participation rather than protectors of information integrity.

Building democratic technology frameworks requires:

- Citizen empowerment through digital literacy
- Protection of legitimate speech and dissent
- Transparent content moderation processes
- Community participation in governance

As emphasized earlier by Kiprono, empowering citizens through digital literacy creates stronger resilience than restrictive approaches. This approach shifts the focus from controlling information to building resilience through education and verification capacity.

Properly designed digital spaces can potentially strengthen democratic governance by providing platforms where citizens can demand accountability and transparency from their governments.

The Way Forward

Success Requires

- **Sustained commitment to African-led solutions**
- **Investment in local language capabilities**
- **Strong multi-stakeholder collaboration**
- **Community-centered approaches**

Africa's demographic trajectory positions the continent at the center of global digital development. As Adewuyi pointed out, "By 2025, one in four people worldwide will be African. So we have a huge population of youth that is continuing to grow." According to the World Economic Forum, Africa boasts the world's youngest population with more than 60% under age 25, and by 2035, more young Africans will enter the workforce each year than in the rest of the world combined.[24]

This demographic reality creates urgency and opportunity. The challenge of AI-generated misinformation requires immediate action, but Africa's growing youth population (digital natives with innovative potential) provides a foundation for developing uniquely African solutions to global information challenges. Success requires sustained commitment to African-led solutions, investment in local language capabilities, strong multi-stakeholder collaboration, and community-centered approaches.

The combination of technological capability, community strength, and collaborative will demonstrated by current initiatives provides a foundation for building resilient systems that protect the integrity of information while strengthening democratic participation across Africa's diverse digital landscapes.

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