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Between Regulation and Media Literacy: Moroccan Public Policies in the Face of Digital Disinformation

KERROUDI Mariam

PhD Candidate in Humanities, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Tetouan, Morocco. ORCID : https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2094-1179

RAZKAOUI Yassin

Professor, Faculty of Sciences and Techniques, Tangier, Morocco. ORCID : https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4435-8989

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ABSTRACT : Digital disinformation spreads rapidly on social media and online platforms, posing a major challenge for Moroccan citizens (CESE, 2023). In light of this situation, it is essential to understand how government initiatives can strengthen citizens' media literacy and critical thinking skills (HACA, 2021).

This study therefore asks: to what extent do the actions undertaken by the Moroccan state contribute to developing citizens' capacity to identify and evaluate online information? It also contributes to the discussion on public policies for regulating digital information in Morocco by offering a critical analysis of current initiatives. It should be noted that this study focuses on public policies and institutional mechanisms rather than citizens' social practices, which constitutes an explicit limitation of its analytical scope.

To answer this question, the research relies on a document analysis of official reports published between 2018 and 2024 by the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication, as well as a qualitative analysis of regulatory measures and awareness campaigns undertaken within the framework of the national digital transformation strategy. The corpus comprises twelve official documents and press releases relating to the fight against disinformation and the promotion of digital culture, notably from the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), and other institutions.

The analysis highlights several concrete initiatives implemented by the Moroccan state to combat disinformation and strengthen media literacy. These include collaboration with TikTok to reduce the spread of false information and protect user privacy; the establishment of a national strategy to safeguard Morocco's image, including monitoring international media and producing reports on false information; and the drafting of a bill to penalize the dissemination of false information online, thereby strengthening the legal framework.

Furthermore, the CESE (2023) indicates that 93% of Moroccans have already been exposed to false information, while 51% admit to having shared disinformation, and 30% state that it is difficult to verify the reliability of a source.

The CESE report highlights that government actions are primarily focused on legal regulation, particularly through Laws 88-13 and 447-2, while a more limited number of initiatives address continuing education and public awareness. These legal frameworks provide, for example, for fines for disseminating false news (Article 72 of Law 88-13) and prison sentences for spreading false allegations online (Article 447-2 of the Penal Code).

These findings underscore real progress, but also persistent challenges, such as unequal access to digital tools, the need to improve coordination among relevant institutions, and the management of public perceptions of certain media outlets.

In conclusion, the study proposes avenues for improvement: strengthening the critical thinking skills of young citizens through educational initiatives and media literacy awareness programs; strengthening collaboration between media outlets and public institutions, particularly through fact-checking platforms such as “Tahaqaq” and the “True or False” initiative launched by SNRTnews; and promoting a responsible and participatory digital culture, in line with the 2030 National Cybersecurity Strategy. These measures aim to equip Moroccan citizens to navigate a complex digital environment autonomously and critically.

KEYWORDS : Disinformation, Media literacy, Critical thinking, Journalism, Media, Fake news

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the massive spread of disinformation on social media and digital platforms has become a major challenge for contemporary societies. Morocco is no exception to this trend: according to the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE, 2023), disinformation is growing at the national level, amplified by the widespread adoption of smartphones and the intensive use of social media. The CESE emphasizes that fake news can have detrimental effects on individuals, organizations, and, more broadly, on social cohesion and trust in institutions. This

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situation highlights structural weaknesses, such as the insufficient dissemination of official data, the lack of effective verification platforms, and the unequal ability of citizens to verify the authenticity of information online.

In this context, the issue of media literacy—that is, the set of skills enabling citizens to decode, analyze, and critically evaluate media content—takes on paramount importance. The HACA guide on disinformation emphasizes that "fake news" is not limited to simple errors: it involves deliberately misleading information, sometimes based on falsified data, images or videos taken out of context, sensationalist headlines ("clickbait"), or distorted facts designed to manipulate public opinion (HACA, 2022).

It is also important to clarify the conceptual link between media literacy and digital citizenship. Media literacy, understood as the set of cognitive, critical, and technical skills that enable individuals to decode and evaluate online content, forms the foundation upon which digital citizenship is built. Indeed, as Buckingham (2007) and Hobbs (2010) emphasize, a critical understanding of media environments is the essential condition for individuals to participate actively, knowledgeably, and responsibly in the contemporary public sphere. Thus, strengthening media literacy goes far beyond a simple defensive posture against informational excesses; it is a fundamental condition for exercising full, complete, and informed digital citizenship (UNESCO, 2013).

In response to this phenomenon, the HACA prioritizes two lines of action: the systematic deconstruction of disinformation and fact-checking. The objective is to educate citizens, whether they use the internet or not, on critical information consumption by providing them with concrete tools (checklists, guidelines, a "dictionary of disinformation") to learn how to verify sources, cross-reference information, and not simply accept the first media buzz.

This approach goes beyond simply denouncing fake news: it aims to make fact-checking a civic reflex, an individual "barrier" against disinformation. Thus, more than just rhetoric, the HACA guide embodies an operational approach, a call to empower users of digital media and to promote a culture of reliable and shared information.

This article aims to analyze the extent to which public initiatives contribute to strengthening citizens' critical thinking skills in the face of fake news and, more broadly, to structuring a safer digital environment. The central question is: to what extent do the actions undertaken by the Moroccan state promote the development of media literacy and citizens' ability to recognize and evaluate online information?

From this perspective, it becomes essential to carefully examine the public mechanisms implemented in Morocco to regulate the digital space, strengthen media literacy, and limit the spread of disinformation. This analysis allows us to understand the overall coherence of the policies adopted and to assess their actual impact on social and media practices.

The resulting analysis highlights, on the one hand, significant progress, such as the gradual strengthening of the regulatory framework, the increasing number of partnerships between public institutions and digital platforms, and the emergence of fact-checking and awareness-raising initiatives. On the other hand, it reveals persistent limitations, particularly in media literacy, inter-institutional coordination, and reducing disparities in access to essential digital skills.

By adopting a critical analysis of Moroccan public policies, this article aims to contribute to understanding the challenges related to the regulation of digital information and the fight against disinformation. It also proposes to identify areas for improvement that could strengthen media literacy, critical thinking, and citizen autonomy within a rapidly changing information ecosystem.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on two main methods. The first is documentary analysis, based on a corpus of twelve official documents published between 2018 and 2024, including reports from the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication, the HACA, the CESE, as well as various press releases and legislative texts.

The second method is qualitative content analysis, in which documents were examined according to several thematic categories: initiatives against disinformation, media skills and media education, legal regulation, partnerships with digital platforms, and awareness campaigns.

This dual approach makes it possible to identify both the political orientations and the operational mechanisms implemented in Morocco. While this study is primarily based on a documentary analysis of public policies, the quantitative data from the CESE report (2023)—revealing that 93% of Moroccans have already been exposed to false information, that 51% admit to having shared it, and that 30% struggle to verify the reliability of a source—offer an indirect but significant glimpse into citizens' actual practices in the face of digital disinformation.

Table 1 : presents the corpus of this study:

Document	Year	Institution	Type
Guide to combating disinformation: References, practices and tools	2022	High Authority for Communication and Audiovisual (HACA)	Official document
Fake news: from disinformation to access to verified and available information	2022	Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE)	Notice
Disinformation specifically targeting women in electoral contexts: the case of Morocco	2024	Francophone Electoral Skills Network, under the aegis of the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior (RECEF)	Report / communication
Annual Report	2022	Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE)	Report
For an inclusive and child-friendly digital environment	2024	Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE)	Notice

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Document	Year	Institution	Type
Mapping of research structures and capacities on disinformation in the Francophone world	2023	International Organisation of the Francophonie (OIF)	Study
Artificial intelligence and audiovisual and digital production in Morocco	2024	High Authority for Communication and Audiovisual (HACA)	Study
Law No. 31-13 relating to the right of access to information	2018	Official Bulletin	Law / legal text
The "Digital Morocco 2030" Strategy	2024	Ministry of Digital Transition and Administrative Reform (MTNRA) of Morocco	Institutional brochure
Report of the Ministry of Digital Transition and Administrative Reform for the Year 2024	2024	Ministry of Digital Transition and Administrative Reform (MTNRA) of Morocco	Report
Promoting media and information literacy	2021	High Authority for Communication and Audiovisual (HACA)	Framework document / position paper

3. RESULTS

After analyzing official documents and institutional reports (cited in the Methodology section), the following results can be identified regarding media and digital initiatives and skills in Morocco in the face of disinformation:

1. Moroccan initiatives

The initiatives can be grouped into several categories:

a) Education, awareness and media literacy:

- Promoting fact-checking and media literacy education in journalism schools and through educational programs for citizens.
- Organization of workshops, seminars and awareness campaigns on information verification, responsible use of media, and critical reading of digital content.
- Digital education for children and young people on the informed and responsible use of social networks, integrating the prevention of misleading content and the understanding of information dissemination algorithms.
- Development of programs enabling citizens to distinguish objective information from sponsored or biased content and to verify the accuracy of the information they consult or share.

b) Monitoring, detection and denial:

- Active monitoring of audiovisual and digital content by the HACA, particularly during election campaigns.
- Public denials of false information identified during this monitoring.
- Setting up platforms and databases to identify and track fake news, with an emphasis on traceability and analysis of misleading content.

c) Institutional support and regulation:

- The right of access to public information was enshrined in Law No. 31-13, strengthening access to reliable official information.
- Recommendation for rapid access to official documents, creation of public fact-checking platforms, and support for and labeling of verification sites.
- Promoting ethical digital governance and regulation that integrates digital transformation and the fight against misleading content.

d) Production and management of information:

- Regulation of information processing by audiovisual media, respect for ethical rules, and distinction between facts and opinions.
- Publication of guides and educational resources to support professionals and citizens in developing media and digital literacy.
- Encouraging training for media professionals on the responsible use of AI and digital tools in content production.

e) Observation, research and cooperation:

- Contribution of Moroccan media and institutions to information monitoring and the production of knowledge on disinformation.
- Encouragement of scientific research and international cooperation to deepen the understanding and prevention of disinformation.

2. Media and digital skills developed or mobilized

The documents analyzed highlight several key skills necessary to deal with digital disinformation and develop media literacy:

a) Critical and analytical skills:

- Ability to analyze, compare and verify information, including through fact-checking and critical reading of the media.
- Critical thinking skills when faced with digital content and the ability to distinguish between facts, opinions, and biased content.
- Understanding the mechanisms of fake news propagation and the algorithms influencing the visibility of content on social networks.

b) Technical skills:

- Proficiency in digital tools for monitoring, detecting and cataloging fake news.
- Understanding and responsible use of technologies, including AI, in content production and verification.

c) Civic and citizenship skills:

- Holding content producers (journalists, bloggers, influencers) accountable for disseminating reliable information.
- Citizens' ability, including young people and children, to use digital media and networks in an informed and critical manner.

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- Access to and proactive use of official information to limit the spread of rumors and strengthen trust in institutional sources.

d) Institutional and organizational skills:

- Production of reference materials and educational guides to support the continuing education of media professionals.
- Structured monitoring and observation to detect misleading content, particularly during election periods.

Moroccan initiatives to combat digital disinformation combine educational, regulatory, technical, and institutional actions. They aim to strengthen the media and digital literacy of citizens and the media by developing critical, technical, and civic skills. At the same time, they reinforce the legal and institutional frameworks for accessing reliable information.

The documents analyzed show an integrated effort by the State, regulators, and educational institutions to promote a culture of vigilance, verification, and responsibility toward information disseminated in a rapidly changing digital context.

4. DISCUSSION

The results reveal Morocco's growing commitment to combating digital disinformation, particularly through educational, technical, institutional, and regulatory initiatives. The analysis shows that the actions implemented target citizens, media professionals, and institutions alike, illustrating a comprehensive and integrated approach. However, these mechanisms should be critically examined by comparing their relative effectiveness and highlighting the fundamental tension between the imperative of information regulation and the guarantee of freedom of expression (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While the Council of Europe (2022) emphasizes that this reconciliation is the central challenge of any normative framework for combating disinformation, it is clear that Moroccan public policies are precisely at the heart of this dynamic, still seeking a stable balance between control and freedoms.

1. Strengthening media and digital literacy: Educational programs and awareness workshops demonstrate that Morocco takes seriously the need to develop individuals' critical thinking skills regarding online information. This approach aligns with international recommendations on digital literacy, which advocate early and ongoing education to prevent the spread of fake news and enhance users' discernment. The emphasis on critical reading, understanding algorithms, and distinguishing between objective and biased content shows that these initiatives go beyond simply disseminating information and are geared towards proactive and critical citizen education.

2. Institutional and regulatory approach: Enshrining the right of access to information in law and promoting public fact-checking platforms demonstrate a commitment to providing reliable and accessible sources. This not only protects the public from disinformation but also holds content producers accountable. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on citizen adoption and the actual visibility of these tools, particularly among the least connected or least informed populations.

3. Skills developed and practical implications: The combination of critical, technical, and civic skills aligns with international standards for combating disinformation. Mastery of digital tools and AI for detecting misleading content represents a strategic advantage in a context of rapid online information dissemination. However, the development of these skills remains uneven across social groups and educational levels, suggesting the need for targeted and inclusive reinforcement.

4. Cooperation and research: Initiatives in monitoring, research, and international cooperation demonstrate an awareness of the global dimension of disinformation. These efforts allow Moroccan strategies to be adapted to international best practices, but coherence between institutions and private actors remains a challenge for maximizing impact.

5. LIMITATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Despite significant progress, some limitations remain:

- Awareness remains insufficient in some regions or among certain audiences.
- The need to regularly measure the effectiveness of initiatives in order to adjust educational programs and technical tools.
- The importance of promoting a sustainable culture of verification and accountability, so that acquired skills do not remain theoretical but translate into concrete behaviors in the face of disinformation.

In summary, the results show that Morocco has laid a solid foundation for combating digital disinformation and developing media literacy. The discussion highlights the importance of a multidimensional approach, combining regulation, education, technology, and cooperation, while emphasizing the need for ongoing monitoring, inclusion, and evaluation to ensure lasting effectiveness.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that Morocco has made significant efforts to combat digital disinformation and strengthen the media and digital literacy of its citizens.

The initiatives analyzed show a multidimensional approach, combining education and awareness-raising, legal regulation, development of technical and critical skills, as well as institutional and international cooperation.

The results reveal that, while concrete progress has been made—such as the establishment of fact-checking platforms, the training of citizens and media professionals, and the adoption of appropriate legal frameworks—persistent challenges remain. These include the inclusion of less connected populations, the harmonization of actions between institutions, and the sustainability of a culture of vigilance and verification regarding information.

Thus, to strengthen the effectiveness of public policies, it is essential to continue developing media literacy from a young age, to promote inter-institutional coordination, and to put in place mechanisms for continuous evaluation in order to adapt programs to the rapid changes in the digital ecosystem.

Ultimately, Morocco now has a solid foundation to deal with disinformation and promote a safer and more responsible information environment.

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The Moroccan experience illustrates the importance of combining education, technology, and regulation to equip citizens in a constantly changing digital context, and it constitutes a reference for disinformation-countering policies in the region and beyond.

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Corresponding Author: KERROUDI Mariam