C. HAMARD

Media literacy education in South Africa can help combat fake news - here’s what’s needed

Adapted from the article in *theconversation.com* by Herman Wasserman**, June 2022.**

Online platforms are replete with examples of false information. It’s increasingly common in South Africa. [More than 75% of South Africans](https://theconversation.com/study-sheds-light-on-scourge-of-fake-news-in-africa-106946) say they regularly come across political news they think is false. [Eight out of 10 South Africans](https://danimadrid.net/research/2021_how-do-african-audiences-engage-with-disinformation-what-do-they-know-about-fact-checking.pdf) believe that disinformation (or “fake news”) is a problem or a serious problem in the country.

Researchers and policy makers have been working on strategies to counter disinformation for years. Some policymakers have suggested [new regulations](https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/) or [pressuring technology companies to do more](https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation). These actions often raise the question of [how to balance](https://en.unesco.org/publications/balanceact) free speech and regulation.

Another option is to increase the [levels of media literacy among citizens](https://edmo.eu/media-literacy/the-importance-of-media-literacy-in-fighting-disinformation/). Media literacy refers to the ability to read media texts critically, understanding the relationship between media and audiences, and knowing how media production processes work. In different parts of the world, research has shown that making people more media literate can help reduce the [spread of disinformation](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/strengthen_media_literacy_to_win_the_fight_against_misinformation). We recently worked with [Africa Check](https://africacheck.org/), the largest fact-checking organisation in Africa. We found that South Africa lacks a comprehensive national media literacy programme. Often it comes down to individual teachers and schools to make learners more media literate.

Some skills are taught in different subjects, such as life orientation, technology, language, or history. This means media literacy content is fragmented, diffused, and limited. Learners are taught how to use the media, how to stay safe online and how to produce media content, but much less focus falls on how to fact-check and verify the media.

Our report is the first in South Africa to survey educators at both schools and universities about their views on the need to teach media literacy to combat the spread of disinformation online. Our research found that educators in South Africa agreed with the statement that news literacy is important to democracy and that increasing the amount of time spent teaching media literacy would help reduce the amount of disinformation circulating in schools (and online, in general). A life orientation teacher that we talked to said teaching media literacy was “essential” because *we’re dealing with everyday real situations, and the kids can’t identify what’s real and what’s fake, because they don’t know it.*

All the stakeholders included in our study, from educators at different levels of their career to policymakers and professional media researchers, agreed on the importance of media literacy. But they had different views on what exactly should be taught.

For example, high school educators were more inclined to introduce learners to how to use different media devices, find reliable information sources and be aware of their online behaviour. University lecturers focused more on how to access and critically evaluate information gleaned from the media.

Online safety also featured high on the list of important subjects to cover among high school teachers. One reason for this might be that students often face online harassment and bullying, “catfishing” ([people using false online profiles](https://theconversation.com/have-you-caught-a-catfish-online-dating-can-be-deceptive-109702)) scams and similar problems. Teachers are the first line of defence when dealing with those issues in schools. Over 90% of teachers we surveyed said they had seen instances of learners sharing misinformation and rumours. (519 words)