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Disinformation Risk Assessment: The Online News Market in Senegal

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The Global Disinformation Index is a not-for-profit organisation that operates on the three principles of neutrality, independence and transparency. Our vision is a world free from disinformation and its harms. Our mission is to catalyse industry and government to defund disinformation. We provide disinformation risk ratings of the world's news media sites. For more information, visit www.disinformationindex.org.

Paradigm Initiative is a leading pan-African organisation that connects underserved young Africans with digital opportunities and ensures the protection of their online rights. We have worked in communities across Nigeria since 2007 and across Africa since 2017, building experience, community trust, and an organisational culture that positions us as a leading non-profit in ICT for Development and Digital Rights on the continent.

Across our regional offices in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and beyond, we have impacted more than 150,000 youth with improved livelihoods through our digital inclusion and digital rights programs. Our programs include Life Skills; ICT; Financial Readiness; Entrepreneurship (LIFE) training program, a digital readiness workshop for girls, and life at school club program. We have been operating in the region for over 15 years, with ground-level engagement in 27 African countries.

Our work involves driving systemic change through capacity building, research, advocacy, creative communications, strategic litigation, policy and legislative change, and organising the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF). We have also been at the forefront in advancing Internet freedom, proposing policy solutions and monitoring legal and policy frameworks around Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Africa to ensure citizens' rights.

Additionally, we have built online platforms that educate and serve as safe spaces for reporting digital rights violations. These mediums, in the form of reports, short films, and educational online platforms, include Ayeta, Londa, and Ripoti.



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Executive summary

Since the news business has expanded to the online world, transformations in news production and distribution have exposed the industry to new disinformation risks.

News websites have financial incentives to spread disinformation, which can increase their online traffic and, ultimately, their advertising revenue. Meanwhile, the dissemination of disinformation has disruptive and impactful consequences. The disinformative narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are a recent – and deadly – example. By disrupting society’s shared sense of accepted facts, these narratives undermine public health, safety and government responses.

GDI defines disinformation in terms of “adversarial narratives that create real world harm.” The GDI disinformation risk assessment methodology is based on a range of indicators related to the risk that a given news website will disinform its readers by spreading these adversarial narratives. These indicators are grouped under the index’s **Content** and **Operations pillars**, which measure the quality and reliability of a site’s content and its operational and editorial integrity, respectively.¹ A site’s overall risk rating is based on its aggregated score across all the indicators and ranges from zero (maximum risk level) to 100 (minimum risk level).

The GDI risk rating methodology is not an attempt to identify and label disinformation sites or trustworthy news sites. Rather, GDI’s approach is based on the idea that a combined set of indicators can reflect a site’s overall risk of carrying disinformation. The ratings should be seen as offering initial insights into the Senegalese media market and its overall levels of disinformation risk, along with the strengths and challenges the sites face in mitigating disinformation risks.

The following report presents the findings pertaining to disinformation risks for the media market in Senegal, based on a study of 20 news domains. These findings are the result of research led by GDI with Paradigm Initiative from July through December of 2023. All sites included in the study were informed of their individual scores and risk ratings to allow for engagement, feedback and improvement. The goal of this report is to present an overview of the media market as a whole and its strengths and vulnerabilities. Individual site ratings contribute to GDI’s various aggregate data products and, in most cases, are not released publicly to avoid naming and shaming media outlets facing high levels of risk.

Key findings: Senegal

In reviewing the media landscape for Senegal, GDI's assessment found that:

All 20 domains in the sample carried a medium to high risk of disinforming their readers.

- Overall site scores fell between 33 and 62 out of 100 possible points.
- Most of the sites fell under the high to maximum risk categories, with just one classified as medium risk.

The main source of disinformation risk in Senegal stems from the lack of transparent operational checks and balances.

- Sites scored an average of 22 in the **Operations pillar**.
- Most of the sites in the sample lacked editorial checks and balances and information about their site policies.
- None of the sites had accuracy, and sources and byline policies on their websites. Most also published little information about their funding structures.

Sites scored higher in the Content pillar, but concerns remain.

- Sites scored an average of 78 in the **Content pillar**.
- All 20 sites scored strongly in avoiding negative targeting, out- and in-group dynamics and article bias, but were less consistent in proper attribution and sourcing.
- The sites in our sample sometimes resorted to sensational language and sensational visuals to tap into the emotionality of the reader, and journalistic policies to mitigate disinformation risk were not consistently present.

The Senegalese media market: Key features and scope

The Senegalese media environment has been historically dominated by public service media, but has recently grown through private initiatives.

The internet has begun to make inroads in a market heavily reliant on radio, leading to the diverse and vibrant media environment that Senegal enjoys today.

From the early 2000s to the 2010s, radio and television were the main media sources for much of Senegal. In 2006, the National Audiovisual Regulatory Council (Conseil National de Régulation de l'Audiovisuel, CNRA) was established. This body is responsible for enforcing laws and regulations in the sector, most notably the Press Code. In recent years, the surge in social media usage on platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and Tiktok has influenced the way in which youth have been receiving and sharing news, with the internet becoming a key part of their media diet.²

To understand the media landscape in Senegal, the Ministry of Communication was interviewed for this report. The Ministry stated that based on 2021 data from the Telecommunications and Posts Authority (Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications et des Postes, ARTP), radio remains the most prevalent medium in Senegal with 491 frequencies granted.³ Additionally, with the transition to digital terrestrial television, Senegal now has 30 authorised channels, which has grown from about fifteen a decade ago, according to CNRA data sent to the Ministry of Communication in October 2023.⁴

The Ministry of Communication lists 54 print news media titles, which are currently facing stiff competition from online press. The number of online news sites is often difficult to quantify for a given region, but Ibrahima Lissa Faye, President of the Association of Online Press Professionals (Association des Éditeurs et Professionnels de la Presse en Ligne, APPEL),

estimates that there are between 350 and 400 Senegalese news sites.⁵ Of these sites, the Ministry of Communication lists 38 news sites registered in accordance with the Press Code and emphasises that this number is increasing. This media landscape is made up of a variety of public service media and private media owned by politicians, businessmen and religious leaders.⁶ The large number of online news sites seems to be compatible with Senegal's high internet penetration rate of 108.31%, with an estimated 10.19 million users by early 2023.⁷

Despite recent growth, economic difficulties often hamper media pluralism. With the exception of state-owned media and a small number of private media groups, most news media rely on limited resources. Key challenges to business operations include the fact that newspaper sales often fail to cover operating costs, press subsidies are insufficient and advertising is unevenly distributed.⁸

Most business models for Senegalese media outlets are largely dependent on press subsidies and advertising. Historically, press subsidies were reserved solely for public service media, but many subsidies are now accessible to private media recognised under the terms of the Press Code.⁹ The advertising market lacks significant regulation. Data on advertising revenue for individual outlets is generally more accessible but it is difficult for researchers and government regulators to assess the total value of the market.

A 2018 study revealed that "no one, neither at government level nor among professionals, is in a position to establish with any certainty the sales that this sector generates annually, due to a lack of reliable statistics."¹⁰ Online news sites, whose advent dates back to 1997, most commonly fund themselves via programmatic advertising.¹¹ Media professionals recognise that advertising placements on online news sites are increasing in the form of advertorials and banner ads.¹² Some news sites seem to be better

served by advertising than others, but additional reliable data and research regarding advertising in Senegalese news media is needed to draw meaningful conclusions.

Senegalese journalists face a number of pressures under the financial structure of the news media in the country. According to a 2019 study, journalists working in private companies feel more pressure from public relations practitioners and advertisers than journalists working in public media. In contrast, journalists at public media organisations feel more pressure from top managers and executives because of their ties to the Head of State, who has the power to appoint and dismiss the general managers of public media.¹³ The result of this dynamic is that privately owned media typically includes closer scrutiny of the government in their coverage. Private media also tends to stimulate more diverse political debate compared to public media as they often provide a platform to all political parties, while state-owned media usually focuses on the government and ruling coalition's activities.¹⁴

During the electoral period, online media outlets are a key platform for politicians to run their campaigns and circulate information about their opponents. Public media – as well as some privately-owned news outlets – are sometimes perceived as closely aligned with the government.¹⁵ For instance, in 2018, the CNRA criticised some public media outlets for their biased coverage of the campaign to collect sponsorships for Macky Sall, who was running in the 2019 presidential election.¹⁶ Interestingly, just over half (51%) of Senegalese people say that the media were impartial towards the various candidates in the 2019 presidential elections, compared with 41% who feel that they did not cover all candidates fairly.¹⁷

This stark opinion divide may be attributable to recent shifts in the Senegalese political environment. Senegal has historically been held up as a pinnacle of democracy in West Africa, as the country underwent peaceful elections and transfers of power for more than 20 years. However, in 2023, Freedom House rated the country as “partly free” due to changes in electoral laws that could considerably stifle political opposition as well as the controversial arrest of prominent opposition leader Ousmane Sonko,¹⁸ which has been interpreted as an attempt to hinder Sonko's candidacy in the upcoming 2024 elections.¹⁹

Although freedom of expression is enshrined in the Constitution and the Senegalese legal framework creates the conditions for a favourable media environment, concerns for press freedom have recently emerged in the months leading up to the 2022 parliamentary elections. In this period, threats against journalists from political actors escalated, along with unlawful arrests, attacks and judicial persecution against media professionals.²⁰ The Senegalese government also intermittently cut off the internet at certain hours under the stated goal of fighting misinformation. Additionally, the social media platform TikTok remains banned in Senegal due to its widespread use in organising protests and sharing information following Sonko's arrest.²¹

Security conditions for journalists worsened after press offences were made potentially punishable by imprisonment under the press code adopted in 2017, prompting Reporters Without Borders to drop Senegal from the 73rd place to 104th place in the 2023 world ranking.²² An illustrative example is the recent prosecution of journalists Pape Alé Niang and Pape Ndiaye, who worked for the media *Dakar Matin* and *WalFadjri*, respectively. They were arrested between November 2022 and March 2023 after reporting or commenting on Sonko's arrest and trial.²³ Each faced charges of allegedly disseminating “false news likely to discredit state institutions” during their coverage of the Sonko trials.²⁴ Another famous example of a journalist facing charges of offending the Head of State, punishable under article 254 of the Senegalese penal code, is Adama Gaye who questioned the management of the hydrocarbon sector by the president.²⁵

Despite these challenges, many of the right circumstances are in place for the Senegalese media environment to foster media plurality, but there are additional layers of complexity that have a deep influence on news media production in Senegal. Financially driven dynamics within newsrooms, along with the evolution of Senegal's political context need to be understood so the country can maintain a healthy media environment for journalists, politicians and citizens.²⁶

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High-traffic news sites disinformation risk ratings

Market overview

The GDI risk rating framework used in this study is based on a range of indicators related to the risk that a given news website will disinform its readers by spreading these adversarial narratives.

These indicators are grouped under the index’s **Content** and **Operations pillars**, which respectively measure the quality and reliability of a site’s content and its operational and editorial integrity.²⁷ A site’s overall risk rating is based on that site’s aggregated score across all the indicators, and ranges from zero (maximum risk level) to 100 (minimum risk level).

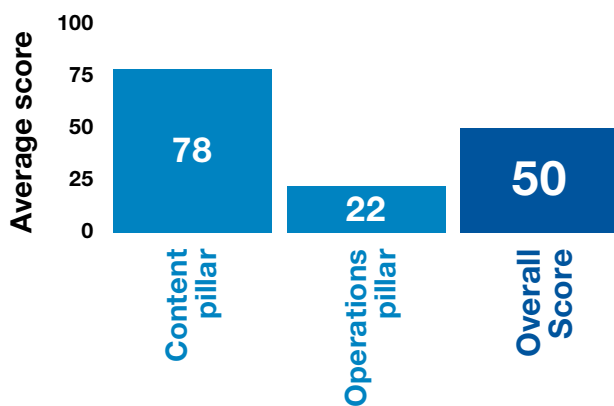
This study looks specifically at 20 high-traffic news websites in French based in Senegal.²⁸ These sites received overall scores between 33 and 62 out of 100 possible points, and mainly fell under the high and maximum disinformation risk categories, with the exception of one site that received a medium-risk rating. These results are the direct consequence of very low scores in the **Operations pillar** (on average, 22 out of 100), as most of the sites reviewed in this study lack full transparency when it comes to operational transparency and editorial checks and balances in their newsrooms. On the other hand, the **Content pillar** scores for these sites range from 56 to 87 out of 100, with an average of 78. These results capture the fact that Senegalese news outlets in our sample publish fairly reliable content on their website.

Table 1. Media sites assessed in Senegal (in alphabetical order)

News outlet	Domain	News outlet	Domain
Café Actu	www.cafeactu.com	Sanslimitesn.com	www.sanslimitesn.com
Dakaractu.com	www.dakaractu.com	Sene Plus	www.senepus.com
Dakarbuzz	www.dakarbuzz.net	Senegal7.com	www.senegal7.com
Dakarmatin	www.dakarmatin.com	Senego.com	www.senego.com
Emedia.sn	www.emedia.sn	Senenews.com	www.senenews.com
Igfm.sn	www.igfm.sn	Seneweb.com	www.seneweb.com
Kewoulo.info	www.kewoulo.info	Sunubuzz	www.sunubuzzsn.com
Le Quotidien	www.lequotidien.sn	Sunugal 24	www.sunugal24.net
Leral.net	www.leral.net	Xalimasn.com	www.xalimasn.com
Pulse Senegal	www.pulse.sn	Xibaaru	www.xibaaru.sn

Source: Global Disinformation Index

Figure 1. Overall market scores, by pillar



Source: Global Disinformation Index

Pillar Overview

Content pillar

The **Content pillar** focuses on the reliability of the content provided on the site. Analysis for this pillar is based on the assessment of a sample of anonymised articles for each website. The scores for this pillar are based on a scale of zero (worst) to 100 (best). Overall, Senegalese news sites show limited disinformation risk in their content. On average, the sampled sites tend to avoid implying or establishing in their articles a dynamic with an “inferior” social out-group and a “superior” in-group. Additionally, they rarely resort to negative targeting against a specific person, identity-based group, institutions or other actors. This is captured by very high scores in the *Out- and in-group dynamic* and the *Negative targeting* indicators, which reached scores of 97 and 90 out of 100, respectively.

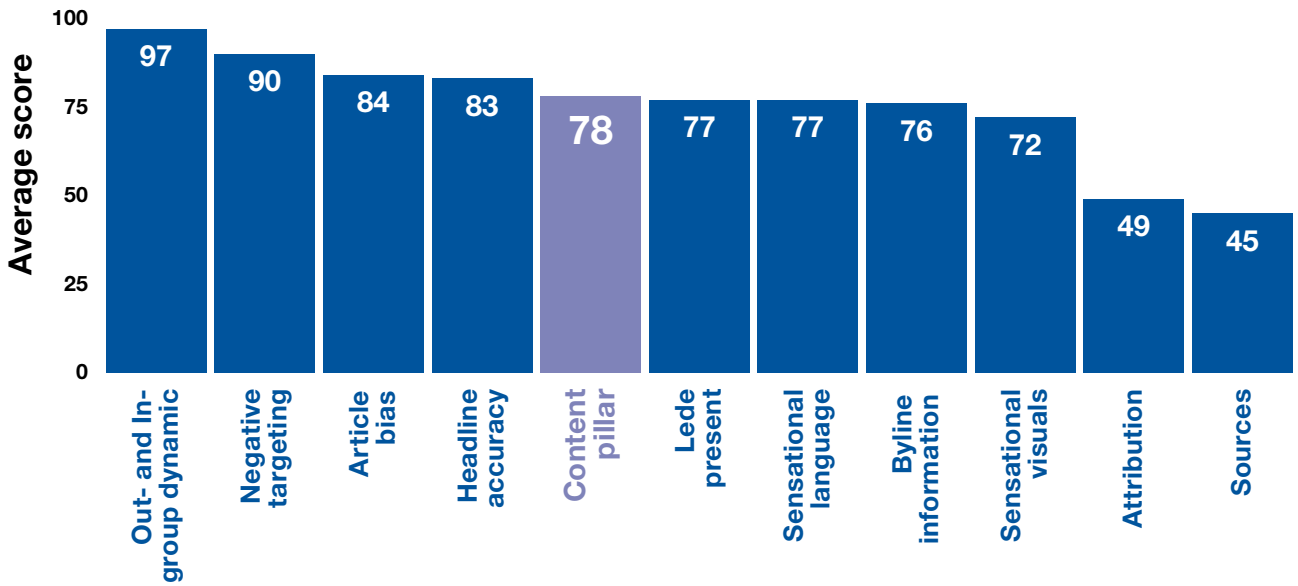
The *Article bias* indicator scored also fairly high (84 out of 100) on average, highlighting that most of the article text published by Senegalese sites is typically factual and makes arguments in a fair and balanced

way.²⁹ However, only one site in the sample received a perfect score of 100, suggesting that the rest of the outlets at times may fail to maintain an unbiased perspective. The articles in the sample also carry fairly accurate headlines, indicating that the use of clickbait, misleading or sensational headlines seems to be limited, with a *Headline accuracy* indicator score of 83 out of 100.

The indicator scores for *Sensational language* and *Sensational visuals* (77 and 72, respectively), however, show that the articles reviewed in the study sometimes resort to a sensational tone in their text and sensational visual cues embedded in the text or around it such as images, videos, etc., to tap into the emotionality of the reader. Other journalistic elements that could mitigate disinformation risk, such as the presence of a fact-based lede before the article dives in the topic at hand and the presence of a byline for accountability to the public, were not consistently present in the sample, as shown by the *Lede present* indicator score (77 out of 100) and the *Byline information* indicator (76 out of 100).

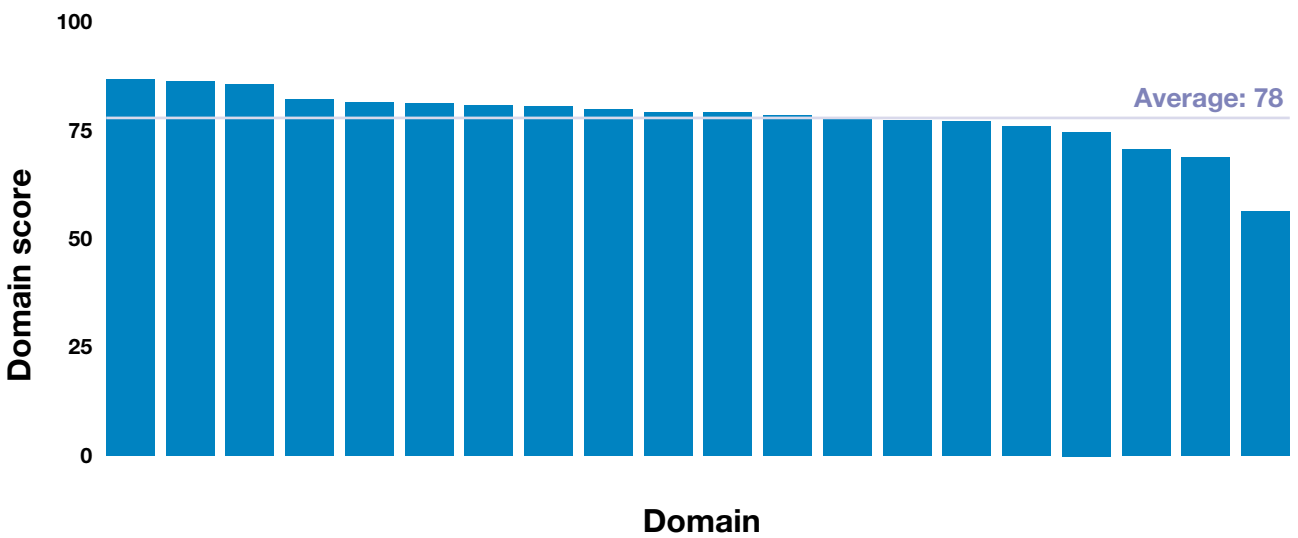
The *Attribution* and the *Sources* indicators scored the lowest within the **Content pillar**, obtaining a score of 49 and 45 out of 100, respectively. These results capture a well-known phenomenon in Senegalese online news media, as many sites publish content based on social media sources without verification or triangulation.³⁰ These results highlight the area most in need of improvement when it comes to content reliability and quality in the Senegalese media market. The sites assessed could improve their scores by adding more information regarding the attribution of the quotations, statistics and external media the articles rely on (such as the link to or quotation of the original source). Further, these sites could increase the number of sources for each article, corroborate the social media sources with non-social media sources and clearly state that they gave the opportunity to comment to all the parties involved in the story reported.

Figure 2. Average Content pillar scores by indicator



Source: Global Disinformation Index

Figure 3. Content pillar scores by site



Source: Global Disinformation Index

Operations pillar

The **Operations pillar** assesses the operational and editorial integrity of a news site in terms of its published policies and other information on the website. All scores were based on a scale of zero (worst) to 100 (best), as scored by the country reviewers according to the information available on the site and elsewhere online at the time of the study. The Senegalese news outlets in our sample scored 22 out of 100 on average, which indicates vast room for improvement in the level of transparency of their operations. The **Operations** indicators are the quickest wins to improve their scores and mitigate disinformation risk, as they represent policies that websites can immediately establish and publish for accountability.

The *Ownership* indicator is the highest scoring indicator within the **Operations pillar**. Across all sites, the scores oscillate between 25 and 100. Only two sites publish enough information about their ownership structure to reach a perfect score of 100.

Three-fourths of the sites evaluated (15 out of 20) scored below 60. These sites could improve their scores by publishing information regarding the entity that owns the news site as well as any additional details about the ownership structure (if more complex than direct ownership). Additionally, publishing information about the management of the entity that owns the site (if there is one) could help increase transparency and accountability to the public.

Similarly, the *Comment section* indicator scored an average of 43 out of 100, with a wide range between the minimum and the maximum scores. Most of the sites could improve in this area by establishing and publishing a clear policy to moderate user-generated comments, including details on the timing and type of comment moderation provided by the news site (if there is a comment section associated with the articles on the news site). These policies will ensure that user-generated comments avoid spreading harmful content and, in case such comments do get posted, the site will remove them.

The *Editorial guidelines* indicator reached a score of 31 out of 100, with almost all of the sites scoring below 50. Considerable improvement could be achieved by establishing and publishing a clear statement of editorial independence and/or a statement that prohibits conflict of interests. These statements

should protect the production of content from editorial interference and mitigate conflicts of interest involving parties such as the outlet's owners, external financial pressure, political influence, sources with competing interests or foreign interests. Scores on this indicator would further improve with the publication of guidelines or a code of ethics for journalistic content production, which helps ensure that accurate and fact-based information is reported in a fair manner.

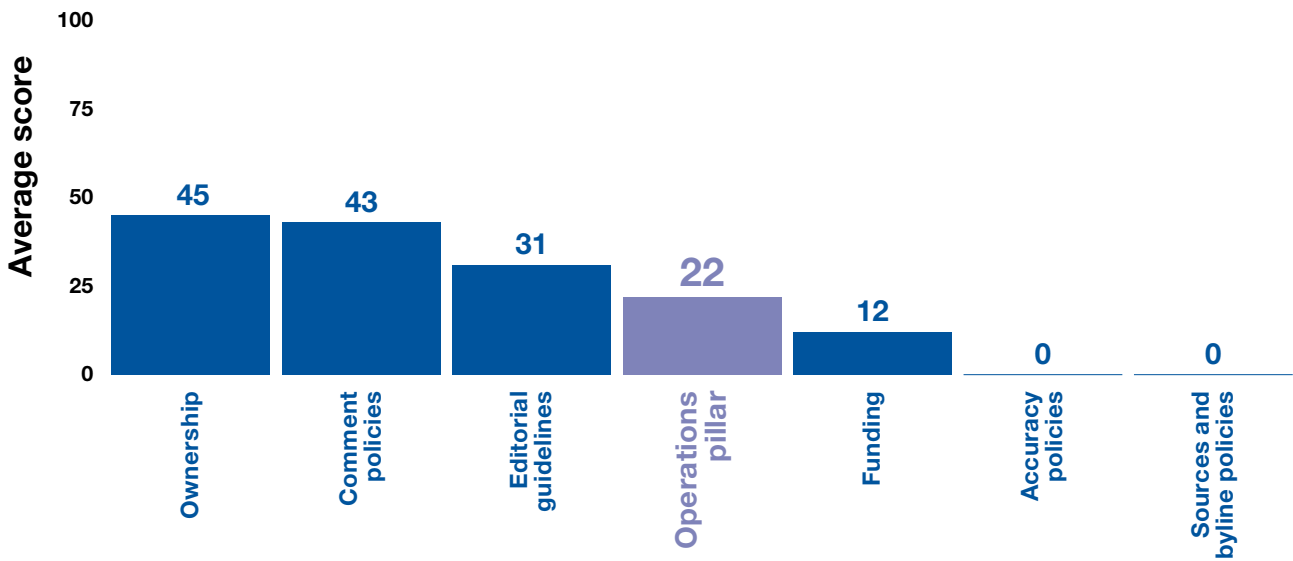
The Senegalese websites in our study disclose very little information about their funding structure, as highlighted by an average score of 12 out of 100 in the *Funding* indicator. Publishing details on the sources of revenue the news site is funded by, along with any details on the share of each source of funding, could help improve the score and increase transparency and accountability regarding possible financial incentives to influence a publication's content.

Lastly, none of the sites evaluated in the study have published *Accuracy policies* and *Sources and byline policies* on their websites, with an overall indicator score of 0. All the sites in the sample could mitigate their disinformation risk by establishing and publishing a clear policy that guarantees the publication of corrections for errors published on the news site's articles. The site should also clearly state details on how readers can communicate these errors to the site as well as how and where the site will issue corrections. Additionally, establishing and publishing a clear policy that requires a fact-checking process before the publication of the articles, including details on the way the articles will be fact-checked and who will be responsible for this process, will also improve the scores for the *Accuracy policies* indicator.

The *Sources and byline policies* indicator will improve by publishing policies about the types of sources used in the articles, including details on the source structure behind the article and the treatment of particular sources, such as anonymous sources or social media sources. This will ensure that the articles are based on an appropriate number of sources and that anonymous and social media sources are corroborated by other sources. Further, if the publication chooses to avoid publishing bylines, it will be helpful to publish a bylines policy on the site to ensure that the absence of bylines is acknowledged and justified.

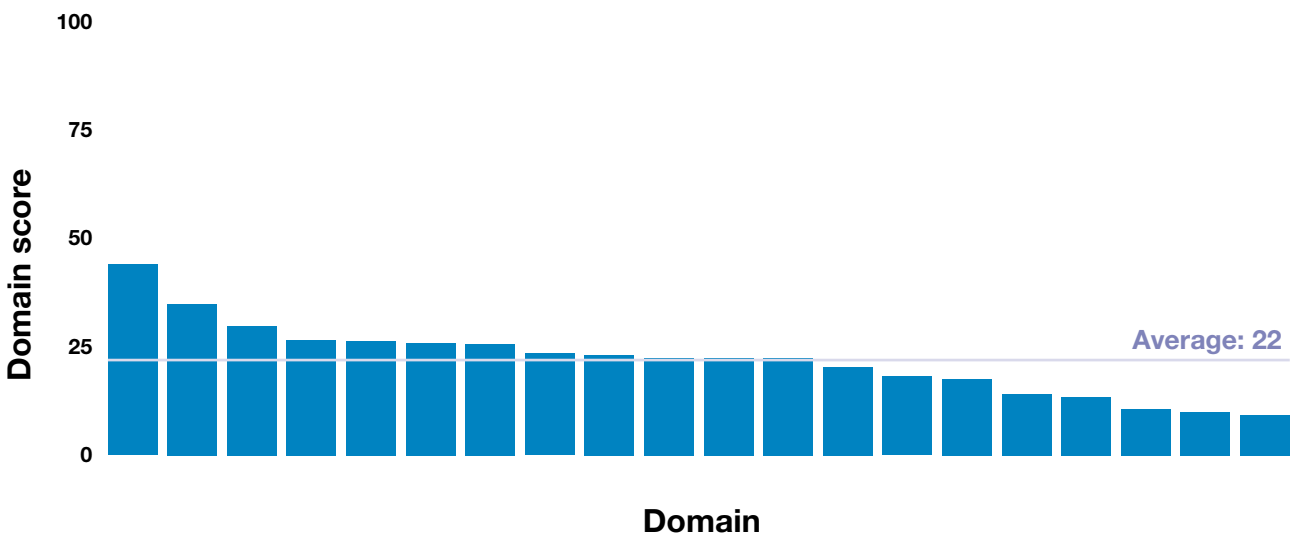
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Figure 4. Average Operations pillar scores by indicator



Source: Global Disinformation Index

Figure 5. Operations pillar scores by site



Source: Global Disinformation Index

Foreign influence in Senegal

In this section, we examine the role that state-seeded, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) plays in Africa and how Senegal media production might be impacted.

FIMI is an intentional, coordinated and manipulative pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes.³¹ Perpetrators may be state or non-state actors and their proxies.

The enduring impact of colonisation and Cold War politics has led to a competition for influence in Africa. In recent years, Russia and China have actively promoted media initiatives to cultivate soft power throughout African nations, in competition with similar efforts from the United States and Europe. To date, the US remains the largest entertainment exporter and American media is widely consumed across Africa in English, dubbed or indigenised versions.

China has pursued a slightly different – though not necessarily less impactful – path of influence through increased trade, investment in infrastructure and training African journalists. Kremlin efforts to promote a favourable image of the Russian Federation have gained ground in the last few years, tapping into anti-colonial sentiment, normalising authoritarianism, agitating for a “multipolar” world and centring Africa in the growing geopolitical contest between Russia and the West.

China

Chinese influence in Africa focuses both on media and on investment. Through media influence, China promotes positive narratives about itself through content partnerships and journalist training. In addition to China’s well-documented investment in emerging economies as part of the Belt and Road Initiative – of which Senegal was the first African joiner – China also invests in ICT infrastructure and related media technologies.³²

Type of state involvement

China has greatly increased its role in ICT and infrastructure, manufacturing, culture and health in Senegal. Senegal’s bilateral dealings and relations with China are growing, especially through its relationship with Huawei, a Chinese multinational technology company. In 2021, Senegal announced that it would migrate all digital platforms and government data to Huawei servers, making its digital infrastructure heavily reliant on Chinese technology.³³

China has invested significantly to secure favourable media coverage to “promote a positive view of China, to counter [Western influence], and to assert and normalise China’s territorial claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea.”³⁴ Between January 2019 and December 2021, 18 out of 30 African countries studied by Freedom House witnessed increased efforts by the CCP to ramp up media influence.^{35,36}

In Senegal, China has established a local presence through the foundation of the French-language China Radio International (CRI), which is part of a broader effort to influence Francophone West African audiences. In a country where radio and television serve as the main sources of information, CRI’s French and Chinese broadcasts across seven FM frequencies have increased the potential to influence large audiences. The station has also employed and trained several Senegalese journalists to cover local events and issues, lending it a greater air of credibility.³⁷ China Global Television Network (CGTN) Français, Xinhua and China Central Television (CCTV), have also established an in-country presence to serve similar aims.

African media officials and journalists are offered bilateral and multilateral media training in China. These media professionals, in turn, sometimes contribute to promoting the country’s image and interests.³⁸ Senegalese journalists have been offered trips, study tours, and scholarships through programs such as the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN) organised by the Chinese government.³⁹ Journalists who

have undergone such training may also engage in censorship and self-censorship as a result of loyalties developed through funding and partnerships. Such training often promotes the notion that patriotic news is favourable for societal development, an idea that runs counter to the concept of a so-called fourth estate holding truth to power.

China has also facilitated affordable content exchanges and syndication deals between its media entities, like Xinhua, and various African news organisations. These agreements exploit the financial pressures faced by many newsrooms to promote the republication of Chinese media content.⁴⁰ Notably, several Senegalese media outlets have established content-sharing partnerships with Chinese state media and embassies. For instance, Xinhua signed a content-sharing agreement with Seneweb, a popular website in sub-Saharan Africa which has resulted in the publication of numerous opinion pieces from China's ambassador to Senegal. These arrangements have influenced Senegalese state-owned news agencies to incorporate narratives from Chinese state media into their publications, undermining their independence.⁴¹

Finally, China has focused on building media infrastructure for digital television in rural areas, ensuring the population is exposed mainly to Chinese media.⁴² StarTimes, the Chinese satellite television provider, has been part of Senegal's television infrastructure since 2010 when the company signed an agreement with the national broadcaster to support the transition from analogue to digital signals.⁴³

Narrative examples

Chinese state media narratives in Africa generally promote a favourable picture of the country, Chinese development in science and technology and its bilateral relations. Specifically, the narratives focus on the benefits African countries enjoy because of their relations with China, and official accounts emphasise economic projects built or financed by Chinese companies.⁴⁴

China Radio International (CRI) Français maintains a dedicated Senegalese website.⁴⁵ Similar to Seneweb, Xinhua has also penned content-sharing agreements with the Senegalese Press Agency and Radiodiffusion Télévision Sénégalaise (RTS), the national television broadcaster.⁴⁶ This content results in narratives that undercut criticisms of China and trust in Western press.

In one example from 2021, Seneweb disseminated a piece authored by the Chinese embassy in France, criticising researchers and organisations that have documented human rights abuses in Xinjiang.⁴⁷

CGTN French, a subsidiary of the Chinese state-owned media company that falls under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government's information ministry, is targeting Senegalese users with advertisements promoting Chinese infrastructure projects around the world. These advertisements, while not explicitly focused on Senegal, are part of a broader strategy to disseminate pro-Chinese and anti-Western narratives in the region. These narratives seek to counter Western media portrayals of China's involvement in Africa as exploitative and to encourage the view of China as an equitable economic ally to Senegal.

Impact

China's diplomatic efforts and media messaging in Africa have prompted African countries like Burkina Faso, Malawi, Liberia, Senegal and others to eliminate recognition of Taiwan's sovereignty. Indeed, Eswatini is the only African nation still to recognise Taiwan's government as of 2023.⁴⁸ Officially, Senegal declares strong support for China, as seen in the statement by the PRC MFA, "Senegal firmly pursues the one-China policy, appreciates China's foreign policy of peace, and hopes to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with China."⁴⁹

Despite these media efforts, the impact in terms of China's ability to influence how local media portray China and influence local media's narrative vis-a-vis Chinese narratives is fairly modest. Unless there is a major event concerning China, African media coverage about China and its priorities tends to be somewhat limited. Even if such an event is happening, the narratives promoted by Chinese media rarely trickle into or shape domestic narratives.^{50,51}

This situation, however, varies by country. In regions where Chinese media has reached a wider audience, like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, influence appears to be stronger – the perception of China and its narratives has improved in relation to this exposure.⁵² In Senegal, while the impact on the general Senegalese population seems to be limited, it does reach Francophone political and economic elites with possible decision-making power.⁵³

Russia

Russian influence in Africa focuses on media, trade, civil-military operations and education. Through closer contact via Russia-Africa Summits, increased trade of crucial goods such as arms, promises of cross-cultural education and Russian language training, journalist exchanges and private military company interventions in unstable states, the Kremlin seeks to further ingratiate itself with African leadership.

Type of state involvement

The Russian African strategy was launched at the 2019 Russian-African Sochi Summit. Key points included becoming a reliable economic and security partner on the African continent to replace Western partners.⁵⁴ Although Russia appears to play a limited economic trade role in Africa, Senegal saw a significant increase in imports from Russia between 2013 and 2019, bumping the Russian Federation up to the 6th position from the 10th on the list of Senegal's primary suppliers.^{55,56,57} Additionally, trade between Senegal and Russia has increased by a factor of 2.2 between 2020-2021, making Senegal Russia's second largest African trading partner after South Africa.⁵⁸

The Kremlin promotes its narratives in the region through "influence entrepreneurs," such as the late Yevgeny Prigozhin. These entrepreneurs build a network of influence with the support of paramilitary groups (such as those led by Wagner) and private influence operators (such as the Internet Research Agency). These complementary groups coordinate and execute business deals, often involving natural resource exploitation and construction, that are favourable to the Kremlin's geopolitical interests.^{59,60}

RT and Sputnik have a well-established audience in Francophone African media and have seen a spike in popularity across the continent, particularly in the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Following the March 2022 suspension of access to RT and Sputnik in the EU, Sputnik France rebranded itself as Sputnik Afrique, doubling down on Francophone presence in the Majority World, also referred to as the Global South.⁶¹ To supplement these efforts, the Russian Vice-Minister of Communication Alexey Voloshin organised a so-called knowledge and expertise exchange – inviting African journalists to meet RT and Sputnik teams in Russia and sending these same teams to Africa to deliver training.⁶²

As a result, African media outlets tend to share information from RT and Sputnik in the same manner that they do other international media such as AFP or Reuters without context or caveats. In Senegal, Seneweb.com – the fourth most visited site in the country at the time of this report's writing, with over 1.5 million followers on Facebook – regularly shares articles from Sputnik.⁶³ Concurrently, RT has partnered with Afrique Media TV, a self-described pan-African multilingual news television channel that reaches millions across the continent and has a propensity for disseminating Kremlin narratives.⁶⁴

Narrative examples

Russian narratives seek to underscore the importance of African-Russian collaboration by emphasising Russia as a military and economic partner as well as overstating contributions to humanitarian assistance and aid in Africa.⁶⁵ These narratives weaponise anti-colonial sentiment to discredit or target states with legacies of Western colonisation, the West more broadly, as well as multilateral organisations. Narratives often cast doubt on Western claims of the universality of human rights, aggravate societal fractures, promote anti-establishment sentiment and flood the information space, undermining faith in the existence of truth.⁶⁶

Russian leadership has a long history of garnering support from African nations through its criticism of Western imperialism. In presenting itself as an alternative to former colonial powers, Russia claims to help West African countries to counter alleged Western foreign interference. This strategy is often employed in new relationships with African states with no preexisting historical ties to Russia, the Soviet Union, or communism. In this context and others, the Kremlin builds on statements made by the Soviet Union in favour of decolonisation, while omitting its own history of contiguous empire and ethnic discrimination.⁶⁷

As the Russian Federation seeks to expand its geopolitical reach and influence in Africa, Senegal is likely vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns and political interference. For example, Sputnik seeks to undermine support for Ukraine by playing on anti-democratic narratives negating the country's sovereignty and maligning Ukraine for siding with former European colonisers. This narrative adoption in the mainstream can be seen in a recent interaction

between a senior Senegalese government minister and Ukraine's ambassador to Senegal, Yuriy Pyvovarov. Citing Sputnik, the minister asked the ambassador to respond to claims that Ukraine is the aggressor in the Russo-Ukrainian war and harbours neo-Nazis.⁶⁸ Additionally, in 2022, Russian adversarial narratives appeared in at least three dominant Senegalese newspapers—Le Soleil, Actualites, and L'observateur. These papers published justifications for the invasion of Ukraine that echoed the Kremlin's claims about “denazification” and safeguarding Russian speakers.⁶⁹

Impact

Diplomatic efforts, such as high-level visits, debt relief and strategic partnership agreements, have led many African states to back Russia on key UN votes. These votes include the 2014 General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea, the 2018 resolution urging Moscow to demilitarise the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and the 2022 resolution condemning Russia's attempted annexation of four Ukrainian regions.⁷⁰

This voting pattern, however, is not uniform and reflects that the African continent does not vote in support of Russia as a bloc.⁷¹ Senegal abstained from two consecutive votes at the United Nations regarding Russia's invasion, and Senegalese President Macky Sall made a point of reminding President Putin of this decision and calling for an end to the war during his subsequent visit to Russia.⁷² Notably, Senegal is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a forum of 120 countries created to counter rapid bi-polarisation between the US and USSR during

the Cold War. Today, the NAM promotes unity among emerging economies, focusing on multilateralism, non-aggression and decolonisation, and influences abstention votes in large international fora such as the UN. Many of these states depend on sizable trade and aid provided by both Russia and the West, resulting in a practical decision to formally “fence-sit” during votes and informally chastise in public-private audiences, such as Senegal's approach.

Other countries

To engage more deeply with Senegal, other countries invested in the media sector to promote a positive image of their countries and culture. However, their efforts are not as extensive and purposeful as China and Russia. India, whose news and entertainment media in Africa traditionally focused on its own diaspora audience, in recent years has attempted to expand media and communication networks in Africa along with bilateral trade and other investments. One notable example is the Indian government's \$125 million Pan-Africa E-Network (PAN) with its hub in Senegal.⁷³ Turkey has also increased its economic engagement over the past decade by building infrastructure, increasing its military presence, and providing greater humanitarian aid to Senegal.⁷⁴ Turkey has also exported media and cultural products, such as TV programmes, to promote a positive image of the Turkish country, culture, and customs among African viewers.⁷⁵

By the Global Disinformation Index.

Domestic adversarial narratives in Senegal

While foreign information manipulation and interference pose a considerable threat to the stability of democracies such as Senegal, it is critical to note that online domestic adversarial narratives seeded by non-state actors, such as political, social or religious groups, can lead to significant real-world harm.

The most prominent domestic adversarial narratives in Senegal fall within the harm categories of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and misogyny.

Anti-LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ persons in Senegal are often subject to discrimination, prejudice and persecution, and can face a maximum penalty of up to 150,000 francs (approximately 252 USD) and a jail sentence of 5 years. Despite the growing number of LGBTQ+ organisations established in Senegal, many still face threats of violence and political persecution.⁷⁶ Religion is an important aspect of society and many anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are rooted in fidelity to religious moral values.⁷⁷ For example, in May 2022, there was substantial backlash against the French Football Federation's National Ethics Council for requesting that a Senegalese football player wear an LGBTQ+ football jersey and support the fight against homophobia. The Senegalese Football Federation extended support to Idrissa Gueye for his refusal to wear the jersey, noting it is an expression of religious freedom and any resistance was a form of institutionalised harassment.⁷⁸ President Macky Sall tweeted supporting Gueye, stating religious values must be respected.⁷⁹

Anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in Senegal habitually feature narratives of protecting the family and upholding societal values. The Senegalese press has heavily critiqued French channels like Canal+ for allegedly indoctrinating Senegalese children with LGBTQ+ propaganda through popular media.⁸⁰ Some of these narratives lean into a conspiracy that suggests Masonic lobbies are behind the promotion of homosexuality in children's cartoons. These argue that the secret group aims to create a society without religious beliefs by subtly introducing and normalising deviancy through animated shows.⁸¹

There is a pan-African narrative promoted by religious and political leaders that suggests homosexuality is "Un-African" and part of the Western colonial project.⁸² Therefore, resistance to LGBTQ+ acceptance is considered by some as anti-colonial. In Senegal, some people espouse anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in the name of sovereignty, refusing to follow the commands of the West.⁸³ A consistent narrative points to the alleged financing of so-called "destabilising programmes" in Senegal by the US, including the promotion of contraception, abortion and sterilisation in the Majority World (Global South) in an attempt to control African populations. This sentiment is presented alongside the idea that the US is forcing Africans to conform to the "amoral injunctions of the LGBT movements."⁸⁴

Misogyny

Senegal is recognised globally for its strides toward gender equality in areas such as political participation and education.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, widespread misogyny still affects the daily lives of many women in Senegal.⁸⁶ Academics, human rights experts and political organisers have condemned the portrayal of women in Senegalese media, linking it to gendered discrimination. They criticise the media for

sensationalising rape cases and discrediting victims, emphasising that women are often depicted as objects rather than subjects. One journalist characterised much of the media as "made by and for men."⁸⁷

In one example, two press outlets highlighted a scholarship offered to 10 girls from Dakar to schools in Morocco and Tunisia, using it to exemplify an alleged growing trend of male discrimination, creating unfair disparities that excluded boys from excelling in higher education.⁸⁸ These reports appear to overlook the numerous governmental and non-governmental scholarships offered to marginalised children, both girls and boys, in Senegal. By pinpointing the Dakar scholarship, these articles tie the exclusion of boys with female leadership, suggesting that women politicians are responsible for the marginalisation of men in the name of feminism.

Press narratives and prevailing sentiments regarding sexual assault in Senegal are contentious; victims of sexual violence often face criticism and ridicule if their experiences do not align with the expectations of a "perfect victim."⁸⁹ Some media outlets have promoted narratives that equate rape to a natural life consequence, drawing parallels to the "right of life and death over wildlife."⁹⁰ These narratives frame the victimisation of women as natural or inevitable, depicting women who speak out as going against the status quo.

One example is the alleged assault of 2020 Miss Senegal pageant winner Ndèye Fatima Dione. Her mother reported that Dione was drugged and raped by a member of the committee, later finding out she was pregnant. Following this report, the chairwoman of the pageant committee responded, alleging that Dione had "asked for it." This statement was republished across various media outlets, sometimes accompanied by narratives that trivialised the alleged assault or downplayed the severity of the comment.⁹¹ Anti-violence group Collectif Dafadoy demanded an apology from the chairwoman, promoting the use of #Dafadoy, which translates to "enough is enough" in Wolof, and calling attention to endemic gender-based violence across Senegal.

The narrative framing by the press were seen as emblematic of the state of rape culture in Senegal as well as how the media treats victims of sexual assault.⁹² Reflecting on the impact of the hashtag campaigns such as #Dadafoy, one journalist commented that "large segments of Senegalese society do not know what constitutes rape and view sexual assault as a misdemeanour at best," which gives way to dangerous attitudes towards victims and survivors.⁹³ Demands for responsible journalism ensued in the wake of these hashtags, emphasising the need to prioritise the voices of those directly affected by sexual violence.⁹⁴

By the Global Disinformation Index.

Conclusion

Senegal's media market is dynamic and rapidly growing, creating the conditions for media pluralism to thrive.

However, economic constraints, worsening safety and security for journalists and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) all make the Senegalese media landscape vulnerable to disinformation. All of the Senegalese media outlets researched in this study could take several immediate steps to reinforce their safeguards against

disinformation by being more transparent about their policies and operations, especially in relation to funding. Emerging trends that could shape the future of this media market include FIMI from Russia and China, political instability and culture war-focused adversarial narratives. Further research into Senegal's digital advertising market, the influence of FIMI and continued study of the country's evolving political and media landscape is necessary to understand the full media market.

Appendix: Methodology

The Global Disinformation Index evaluates the level of disinformation risk of a country's online media market. The country's online media market is represented by a sample of 20 news domains, selected on the basis of online traffic.

The index was composed of the **Content** and **Operations pillars**. The pillars were, in turn, composed of 16 indicators. The **Content pillar** included indicators that assess elements and characteristics of each domain's content to capture its level of adversariality, credibility, sensationalism, and impartiality. The **Operations pillar's** indicators evaluated the transparency and enforcement of policies and rules that a specific domain followed to ensure the reliability and quality of the news being published.

Site selection

The market sample for the study was developed based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative criteria. GDI created a list of news websites with the greatest traffic in the media market. This list was internally vetted to gauge relevance and reach. The final media market sample reflected the set of sites for which complete data could be collected throughout the review process. International news outlets are generally excluded, because their risk ratings are assessed in the market from which they originate.⁹⁵ News aggregators are also excluded, so that all included sites are assessed on their original content.

Data collection

The **Content pillar** indicators were based on the review of a sample of 10 articles published by each domain. The sampled articles were anonymised by removing any information that allowed the analysts to identify the publisher or the author of the articles. Each anonymised article was reviewed by three country analysts who were trained on the GDI **Content pillar** codebook. For each anonymised article, the country analysts answered a set of 13 questions designed to evaluate the elements and characteristics of the article text and its headline. After the information was recorded based on the anonymised text, the analysts subsequently reviewed how the article was presented on the domain.

The **Operations pillar** was based on the information gathered during the manual assessment of each domain performed by the country analysts. The country analysts answered a set of 72 questions designed to evaluate each domain's ownership, management, and funding structure, editorial independence, principles and guidelines, attribution policies, error-correction and fact-checking policies, and rules and policies for the comments section.

Data analysis and indicator construction

The data gathered by the country analysts for the **Content pillar** were used to compute ten indicators. The **Content pillar** indicators included in the final risk rating were: *Article bias*, *Attribution*, *Byline information*, *Headline accuracy*, *Out-group and in-group dynamic*, *Lede present*, *Negative targeting*, *Sensational language*, *Sensational visuals*, and *Sources*. For each indicator, values were normalised to a scale of 0 to 100. The pillar score for each domain was the weighted average of all the scores for all of the pillar's indicators, and ranged from 0 to 100. Table 2 gives the weights.

Table 2. Content pillar indicator weights

Indicator	Weight
Article bias	1
Negative targeting	1
Out-group and in-group dynamic	1
Sensational language	1
Sensational visuals	1
Sources	0.5
Attribution	0.5
Headline accuracy	0.5
Lede present	0.25
Byline information	0.25

Source: Global Disinformation Index

For the **Operations pillar**, the answers gathered during the Operations and Enforcement reviews by the country analysts were translated into a set of sub-indicators. The six indicators were calculated as the averages of these sub-indicator scores. The resulting **Operations pillar** indicators were: *Accuracy policies*, *Comment policies*, *Editorial guidelines*, *Funding*, *Ownership*, and *Sources and byline policies*. For each indicator, values were normalised to a scale of 0 to 100. The domain score for the **Operations pillar** was the average score across indicators. The complete list of sub-indicators and indicators for both pillars is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Global Disinformation Index pillars and indicators

Pillar	Indicator	Sub-indicators	Unit of analysis	Definition	Rationale
Content	Article bias	None	Article	Rating for the degree of bias in the article. Biased writing misrepresents facts, is based on faulty logic, and/or fails to include or unfairly engages with different views on the story.	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Negative targeting			Rating for whether and to what degree the story negatively targets a specific individual or group	Indicative of hate speech, bias or an adversarial narrative
	Out-group and in-group dynamic			Rating for whether and to what degree the story builds upon or establish that one group is inferior and/or that one group is superior based on identity and to what degree	Indicative of hate speech, bias or an adversarial narrative
	Sensational language			Rating for the degree of sensationalism in the article text	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Sensational visuals			Rating for the degree of sensationalism in the visual presentation of the article	Indicative of neutral fact-based reporting or well-rounded analysis
	Sources			Rating for the quantity and quality of the story's sources	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Attribution			Rating for whether the story's statistics, quotations, and external media are clearly attributed to a source	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Headline accuracy			Rating for how accurately the story's headline describes the content of the story	Indicative of clickbait
	Lede present			Rating for whether the article begins with a fact-based lede	Indicative of fact-based reporting and high journalistic standards
	Byline information			Rating for how much information is provided in the article's byline	Attribution of stories creates accountability for their veracity
Operations	Editorial guidelines	Editorial independence	Site	Rating for the number of policies identified on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflict of interest)	Assesses the degree of editorial independence and the policies in place to mitigate conflicts of interest
		Adherence to narrative		Rating for the degree to which the site is likely to adhere to an ideological affiliation, based on its published editorial positions	Indicative of politicised or ideological editorial decision making
		Content guidelines		Rating for the number of policies identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses the policies in place to ensure that factual information is reported without bias
		News vs. analysis		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses the policies in place to ensure that readers can distinguish between news and opinion content
	Accuracy policies	Pre-publication fact-checking		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses policies to ensure that only accurate information is reported
		Post-publication corrections		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site practices stealth editing)	Assesses policies to ensure that needed corrections are adequately and transparently disseminated
	Sources and byline policies	None		Rating for the number of policies and practices identified on the site (adjusted if the site violates guidelines)	Assesses policies regarding the attribution of stories, facts, and media (either publicly or anonymously); indicative of policies that ensure accurate facts, authentic media and accountability for stories
	Funding	Diversified incentive structure		Rating for the number of revenue sources identified on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflict of interests)	Indicative of possible conflicts of interest stemming for over-reliance on one or few sources of revenue
		Accountability to readership		Rating based on whether reader subscriptions or donations are identified as a revenue source	Indicative of accountability for high-quality information over content that drives ad revenue
		Transparent funding		Rating based on the degree of transparency the site provides regarding its sources of funding	Indicative of the transparency that is required to monitor the incentives and conflicts of interest that can arise from opaque revenue sources
	Ownership	Owner-operator division		Rating based on the number of distinct executive or board level financial and editorial decision makers listed on the site (adjusted if there are episodes of editorial interference or conflict of interest)	Indicative of a separation between financial and editorial decision making, to avoid conflicts of interest
		Transparent ownership		Rating based on the degree of transparency the site provides regarding its ownership structure	Indicative of the transparency that is required to monitor the incentives and conflicts of interest that can arise from opaque ownership structures
	Comment policies	Policies		Rating for the number of policies identified on the site	Assesses policies to reduce disinformation in user-generated content
		Moderation		Rating for the mechanisms to enforce comment policies identified on the site	Assesses the mechanism to enforce policies to reduce disinformation in user-generated content

Source: Global Disinformation Index

Risk ratings

The overall index score for each domain was the average of the pillar scores. The domains were then classified on the basis of a five-category risk scale based on the overall index score. The risk categories were defined based on a reference dataset that was

standardised to fit a normal distribution with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. The standardised scores and their distance from the mean were used to determine the bands for each risk level, given in Table 4

Table 4. Disinformation risk levels

Risk level	Lower bound	Upper bound	Standard deviation from mean
Minimum risk	80.28	100	> 1.5
Low risk	68.84	80.27	> 0.5 and ≤ 1.5
Medium risk	57.41	68.83	> -0.5 and ≤ 0.5
High risk	45.97	57.40	> -1.5 and ≤ -0.5
Maximum risk	0	45.96	≤ -1.5

Source: Global Disinformation Index

Endnotes

- 1 The GDI assessment framework is outlined in the annex of this report.
- 2 See <https://academic.oup.com/heapro/article/31/1/73/2355615>.
- 3 For this report, an interview with Amadou Kanouté, Head of the Press and Information Division at the Senegalese Ministry of Communication, was conducted by one of the local researchers.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 For this report, an interview was conducted with Ibrahima Lissa Faye, President of the Association of Online Press Professionals (APPEL).
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- 8 See <https://rsf.org/en/country/senegal>.
- 9 See <https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-enjeux-de-l-information-et-de-la-communication-2015-1-page-19.htm>.
- 10 See <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/614232/economie-entreprises/senegal-des-propositions-pour-reglementer-la-publicite>.
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- 19 See <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230607-democracy-at-stake-say-senegalese-youths-protesting-controversial-arrest>.
- 20 See <https://rsf.org/en/alarmed-increase-threats-and-attacks-against-journalists-run-senegal-s-elections>.
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- 23 See <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/senegal-le-journaliste-pape-ndiaye-ecroue-apres-avoir-critique-la-justice-dans-laffaire>.
- 24 See <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-visits-senegalese-journalist-pape-al%C3%A9-niang-prison> and <https://rsf.org/en/increase-threats-journalists-senegal>. The charges are based on Article 255 of the Senegalese penal code and carry the potential prison sentence of one to three years (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/49f5d8262.html>).
- 25 See <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190905-senegal-proces-journaliste-adama-gaye-poursuivi-offense-president>.
- 26 Other limitations that journalists face include the fact that the country does not have a law on access to information, which makes it difficult to deal with topics that are deemed state-held information.
- 27 The GDI assessment framework is outlined in the annex of this report.
- 28 The sample was defined based on the sites’ online traffic and the ability to gather complete data for the site.
- 29 This result is based on the anonymised text of a sample of articles for each website.
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- 47 See https://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/ce-qu-il-faut-savoir-sur-tous-les-menson_n_367156.html.
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- 58 See <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-d-intelligence-economique-2021-1-page-37.htm> and <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/le-senegal-la-voix-de-lafrique-dans-la-crise-russo-ukrainienne>.
- 59 See <https://www.cairn.info/revue-questions-de-communication-2022-1-page-129.htm>.
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