Journalistic Cultures Matter: Mainstream News Media Responses to Disinformation in Sub-Saharan African and Western Countries

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To Lars Nord

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Nord will not read these few words dedicated to him: he passed away on 7 August 2024. Rest well my mentor. I and the many other people you impacted miss you so much.

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Abstract

The past two decades have been marked by the increased propagation of disinformation in the public sphere and its emergence as a structural feature of our contemporary media environments. This remarkable surge in the spread of false and misleading claims is partly due to the advent of social media and artificial intelligence, which anyone can use to produce and circulate information, without necessarily having to ensure its accuracy and reliability. The dissemination of disinformation is potentially harmful for democracy, as it can lead to political polarisation; violence; cynicism; as well as public distrust in political processes, political actors, and democratic institutions. The news media is one democratic institution threatened by disinformation as it challenges the very essence of journalism, which is to provide accurate information to citizens to help them make informed choices. In this context, mainstream news media throughout the world have been pushed to respond to disinformation. These responses mostly involve fact-checking and corrective news reporting. However, mainstream news media show variable conceptions, approaches, and practices regarding fact-checking and corrective news reporting, with significant differences across political and media systems. These differences suggest that national journalistic cultures, which are negotiated from contextual constraints and pressures, might have a significant influence on how mainstream news media understand and fact check and correct disinformation within distinct political and media environments. Against this background, this dissertation aims to understand how journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation across Sub-Saharan Africa and Western countries. This research uses seven countries as case studies: four democratic

countries including three in the West (France, Sweden, and the United States), and one in sub-Saharan Africa (South Africa); two countries in sub-Saharan Africa which are transitional democracies (Kenya, Nigeria) and one authoritarian country in sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon). This dissertation is theoretically grounded in journalistic culture theory. Methodologically, it employs a mixed-methods design, namely quantitative content analysis and qualitative in-depth interviews. The results show that mainstream news media responses to disinformation in the democratic countries mainly reflect the influence of monitorial journalistic culture. Nevertheless, the priorities differ significantly across France, South Africa, Sweden, and the United Sates, primarily because of the diverse ideologies supported in respective media systems. Furthermore, the results show that the mainstream news media responses to disinformation in the transitional countries, reflect the influence of more multilayered and hybrids journalistic cultures. However, the interventionist role of journalism tends to be more emphasised in Kenya which has more experience with democracy than in Nigeria which came out relatively recently from a long succession of military rules. This is suggestive of the possibility that experience with democracy has implications on interventionism. Moreover, the results show that the mainstream news media responses to disinformation in the authoritarian country, Cameroon, reflect the influence of ad hoc journalistic cultures, circumstantially adopted and adapted, for navigating contextual freedom restrictions, political repression as well as, social and economic constraints. In view of these results, I argue that journalistic responses to disinformation are conditioned by journalistic cultures embedded within broader political, media and democratic contexts.

Sammanfattning

De senaste två decennierna har präglats av den ökade spridningen av desinformation i den offentliga sfären och dess framväxt som ett strukturellt inslag i våra samtida mediemiljöer. Denna anmärkningsvärda ökning av spridningen av falska och vilseledande påståenden beror delvis på tillkomsten av sociala medier och artificiell intelligens, som vem som helst kan använda för att producera och sprida information, utan att nödvändigtvis behöva säkerställa dess riktighet och tillförlitlighet. Spridningen av desinformation är potentiellt skadlig för demokratin, eftersom den kan leda till politisk polarisering; våld; cynism; samt allmänhetens misstro mot politiska processer, politiska aktörer och demokratiska institutioner. Nyhetsmedier är en demokratisk institution som hotas av desinformation eftersom den utmanar själva essensen av journalistik, vilket är att ge korrekt information till medborgarna för att hjälpa dem att fatta välgrundade val. I detta sammanhang har etablerade nyhetsmedier över hela världen pressats att reagera på desinformation. Dessa svar involverar mestadels faktakontroll och korrigerande nyhetsrapportering. De etablerade nyhetsmedierna uppvisar dock varierande uppfattningar, tillvägagångssätt och praxis när det gäller faktakontroll och korrigerande nyhetsrapportering, med betydande skillnader mellan politiska och mediesystem. Dessa skillnader tyder på att nationella journalistiska kulturer, vilka förhandlas fram utifrån kontextuella begränsningar och påtryckningar, kan ha ett betydande inflytande på hur etablerade nyhetsmedier förstår, faktagranskar och korrigerar desinformation inom olika politiska och mediemiljöer. Mot denna bakgrund syftar denna avhandling till att förstå hur journalistiska kulturer påverkar etablerade nyhetsmediers reaktioner på desinformation i Afrika söder

om Sahara och västländer. Denna forskning använder sju länder som fallstudier: fyra demokratiska länder, varav tre i väst (Frankrike, Sverige och USA), och ett i Afrika söder om Sahara (Sydafrika); två länder i Afrika söder om Sahara som är övergångsdemokratier (Kenya, Nigeria) och ett auktoritärt land i Afrika söder om Sahara (Kamerun). Denna avhandling är teoretiskt förankrad i journalistisk kulturteori. Metodologiskt använder den en blandad metoddesign, nämligen kvantitativ innehållsanalys och kvalitativa djupintervjuer. Resultaten visar att etablerade nyhetsmediers reaktioner på desinformation i demokratiska länder huvudsakligen återspeglar inflytandet från en övervakande journalistisk kultur. Prioriteringarna skiljer sig dock avsevärt mellan Frankrike, Sydafrika, Sverige och USA, främst på grund av de olika ideologier som stöds i respektive mediesystem. Dessutom visar resultaten att etablerade nyhetsmediers reaktioner på desinformation i övergångsländerna återspeglar inflytandet från mer mångbottnade och hybrida journalistiska kulturer. Journalistikens interventionistiska roll tenderar dock att betonas mer i Kenya, som har mer erfarenhet av demokrati, än i Nigeria, som relativt nyligen uppstod ur en lång rad militära regelverk. Detta tyder på möjligheten att erfarenhet av demokrati har konsekvenser för interventionism. Dessutom visar resultaten att etablerade nyhetsmediers reaktioner på desinformation i det auktoritära landet Kamerun återspeglar inflytandet från ad hoc-journalistiska kulturer, som omständigheterna antagits och anpassats för att navigera kontextuella frihetsrestriktioner, politiskt förtryck samt sociala och ekonomiska begränsningar. Mot bakgrund av dessa resultat argumenterar jag för att journalistiska reaktioner på desinformation är betingade av journalistiska kulturer inbäddade i bredare politiska, mediemässiga och demokratiska sammanhang.

List of Articles

Article I
Facebook and Fake News in the `Anglophone Crisis´ in Cameroon.
Published in African Journalism Studies, 2020.

Article II
The Influence of Journalistic Cultures in Fact-checkers' Perceptions of their Roles in France, Sweden, and the United States: A Comparative Approach.
Published in Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies, 2026.

Article III
Fact-checkers' Perceptions of their Roles and Challenges in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Co-written with Chikezie E. Uzuegbunam, Chinedu Richard Ononiwu, and Enock Magack Masaki.
Published in Journalism Practice, 2026.

Article IV
Falsehoods Amplifiers? Comparing the French, Swedish, and US Newspapers Coverage of Disinformation of False and Misleading Stories.
Under Review.

Article V
Understanding Journalists' Perceptions of Mainstream Media Coverage of Disinformation in Cameroon through the Lens of Journalistic Cultures. Co-written with Dominic Forcha Elempia, and Brain Binebunwi.
Under Review.

1 Introduction

In edition number 6632, dated 30 September 2025, the Cameroonian daily newspaper La Nouvelle Expression published a story titled 'Yaoundé: Un immeuble faussement attribué à Atanga Nji' ('Yaoundé: A building falsely attributed to Atanga Nji'). This news story aimed to debunk and correct inaccurate information which had been widely circulating on social media, claiming that the minister of territorial administration of Cameroon owned a certain apartment building located in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon (La Nouvelle Expression, 2025). According to the report, this false claim pushed several tenants living in the building to vacate their apartments because they feared that the property would be attacked by individuals hostile to the minister.

In Sweden, an article titled 'Stor rädsla för socialtjänsten i utsattta områden' (Great fear for social services in vulnerable areas) published on the 31st of October 2021 in the daily morning newspaper Dagens Nyheter, reported about false claims and rumours that social services take children from migrant families living in socially vulnerable areas into compulsory care on fallacious reasons (Ferhatovic, 2021). According to Ranstorp and Ahlerup (2024) the article showed that a large number of residents in these vulnerable areas believed these unsubstantiated claims and that some even choose to leave Sweden when they receive a notification from social services.

These two examples taken from Cameroon and Sweden illustrate the efforts of mainstream news media to counter the propagation of false and misleading information in the public sphere, which has become a serious concern in many societies, especially since the advent of social

and digital media (Kalsnes et al., 2021). Indeed, although disinformation has always circulated through the mass media (Tandoc et al., 2018), social media (Humprecht, 2020) and more recently artificial intelligence (Uzuegbunam, 2026; Farooq & de Vreese, 2026) have contributed to create a "turbulent digital ecology" (Cheruiyot, 2024, p.294), which is tremendously favourable for the flourishing of falsehoods (Orgeret et al., 2026). The reason why social media facilitates the propagation of disinformation is because contrarily to traditional news media, which normally ensure the accuracy of the information they publish due to editorial gatekeeping, there is basically no such comparable constraints with social media (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In fact, social media have made it possible for anyone to propagate unsubstantiated claims and potentially reach instantly large portions of the public throughout the world (Mena, 2019).

Disinformation has broadly been defined as the intentional spread of false and misleading claims publicly to deceive (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Beyond deceit, the literature further conceives disinformation as a phenomenon potentially harmful for society as it can fuel mistrust of political representatives, the media, and ultimately democracy (Custody et al., 2026). Studies have emphasised that disinformation challenges the very essence of journalism as a democratic institution (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Custody et al., 2026), in charge of providing accurate information to the citizens in everyday life, as well as in particular contexts such as during elections, pandemic, or wars (Westlund et al., 2022) and help them make informed choices (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022).

In view of this context, mainstream news media have been forced to push back against disinformation. They mostly respond to disinformation by using fact-checking and corrective news reporting, through which they can expose, debunk, and correct inaccurate claims (Bakir & McStay, 2022; Kalsnes et al., 2021). However, the orientations and priorities of mainstream news media in their responses to disinformation differ strikingly across countries (Ferracioli et al., 2026). Specifically, mainstream news media differ in different countries in terms of how they define disinformation; actively intervene against it; frame the problem; balance corrective intervention with norms of objectivity, neutrality, fairness; and prominently cover it (Nounkeu, 2022; Tsfati et al., 2020). Hence, the mainstream news media responses to disinformation cannot be fully explained by platform logics, technological affordances, or political polarisation alone (Spyridou, 2026).

Meanwhile, fact-checkers perceive their own mission in very different ways crucially because they operate in diverse political and media environments (Cazzamatta et al., 2023). It should be noted that fact-checking is considered a branch of professional journalism, reproducing journalistic logic, and sharing productive routines (Ferracioli et al, 2026). Fact-checkers in most cases operate in special sections in news media outlets, or work with independent organisations (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). So, the fact that fact-checkers perceive their function in very different ways depending on the environment within which they operate suggests that the concept of journalistic cultures is useful for understanding mainstream news media responses to disinformation across different contexts. The reason is because journalistic cultures are 'particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously,

legitimate their role in the society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others' (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369). Therefore, journalistic cultures are negotiated and constructed out of constraints and pressures shaped by political, economic, cultural, technological and historical factors (Esser et al., 2012; Weaver & Willmat, 2012), and within particular national contexts (Hellmueller et al., 2026).

However, most studies about journalistic cultures have been conducted with a focus on Western countries, whereas countries of sub-Saharan Africa have been given insufficient attention (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Furthermore, although research on disinformation has grown rapidly, it is still marked by a paucity of scholarly interest to the relationship between journalistic cultures and mainstream news media responses to disinformation, especially in African contexts. Yet, broadening the knowledge of how mainstream news media respond to disinformation in various contexts is very important from the point of view of society and democracy. The reason is because the ways with which mainstream news media address disinformation assumably have implications for citizens, political processes, and political institutions. Moreover, in many countries across the globe, mainstream news media still constitute a significant source of political information – and in some cases the most important- despite the remarkable rise of digital and social media as platforms for political news consumption (Newman et al., 2025).

Against this background, this dissertation aims to understand how journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation across Western and sub-Saharan African countries. More specifically, it explores how the patterns of diverse constituents of journalistic cultures, including role orientations, epistemological perspectives, and ethical ideologies (Hanitzsch, 2007) reflect on

mainstream news media professionals' perceptions and performances of their roles regarding the confrontation of strategically produced falsehoods.

Theoretically, this research is grounded in journalistic culture theory, particularly frameworks that conceptualise professional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies. The ideal models of journalistic cultures which have been developed by Hanitzsch et al. (2019) based on their large-scale quantitative survey project *Worlds of Journalism* are of importance in this dissertation. These propositions are interesting because they are unified conceptual foundations useful systematic research. However, there are dynamics which cannot be captured and explained in such a large-scale quantitative study. So, qualitative methods are also needed to provide critical insights that add to the understanding of journalistic cultures. Therefore, this dissertation employs a mixed-methods design consisting of qualitative in-depth interviews and quantitative content analysis.

Seven countries are examined as case studies: three Western democracies (France, Sweden, and the United States), one sub-Saharan Africa democracy (South Africa), two sub-Saharan Africa transitional democracies (Kenya and Nigeria), and one sub-Saharan Africa authoritarian regime (Cameroon). Thus, these countries represent different levels of democracy (Nord et al., 2026). Moreover, France, Sweden, and the US are prototypes of the three different models of media systems in Western Europe and Northen America (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

This dissertation contributes to academic research on journalistic cultures through an empirical analysis of sub-Saharan African

countries which have thus far been underexplored. Furthermore, this dissertation contributes to broadening the understanding about the journalistic culture theory through journalists' perceptions expressed in in-depth interviews. Moreover, this dissertation contributes to scholarly research on disinformation by using the context of disinformation as a ground for testing the theory of journalistic culture with respect to news media tackling of the spread of falsehoods.

2 Theoretical Framework: Journalistic Cultures

The concept of journalistic cultures provides a relevant theoretical framework to guide this dissertation because it seeks to understand how and why mainstream news media in different contexts respond to disinformation the way they do. The concept is precisely concerned with the cognitive and evaluative structures that shape journalistic practices (Weaver, 1998; Pattersson & Donsbach, 1996) and that are perpetuated by journalists through their professional performance (Ferracioli et al., 2026). In fact, Siebert et al. (1956) in their seminal book the Four theories of the press laid the foundation that different social systems influence the operations of the media of mass communication in diverse ways.

The idea of the plurality of journalistic cultures challenges the assumptions of a universal understanding of journalism. In fact, several studies have argued that there are fundamental journalistic practices which are normally common to professionals. This perspective has been captured in Deuze's (2005) occupational ideologies of journalism including public service, neutrality, objectivity, and fairness, which are assumed to be common to every newsroom. It is in the same order of ideas that Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) argue that journalism is by essence a discipline of verification, with every professional expected to maintain independence from sources, monitor power, offer a voice to the voiceless, all in clear and comprehensive manner for the public.

The postulate of a convergence of practices in journalism, and even homogenisation has also been explained as part of the processes of Americanization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b) and globalisation

(Thussu, 2022). The impact of the cultural diffusion of the US practice of journalism including information-oriented reporting, professionalism, and personalisation of election news have been demonstrated for example in post-communist media systems Sarelska (2026).

However, even as journalists in countries across the globe share commitment to some basic, common, professional norms, and practices (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), and that the American programming still influence many media markets (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b), it still remain that journalists fundamentally experience their profession in different ways. Most often than not, it is the Western conception of journalism which is exhibited as the standard for every part of the world. But in reality, if journalists in the US, which is a democratic and developed country believe the role of journalism is primarily monitorial (Rosenstiel, 2016), their counterparts in Ghana which is transitional democracy and an underdeveloped country, view their role mainly as agents for fostering the economic development of the country (Haruna, 2009).

Moreover, the pertinence of a nation-states centrality with regard to journalistic cultures in a context of transnational, supranational and subnational media developments, has been challenged in scholarly debates (see Morris & Waisbord, 2001; Robins & Askoy, 2005). This perception appears to find even more relevance when considering that new media technologies realise the inherent transnationalism of media forms such as broadcasting (Hardy, 2012). While this argument is certainly relevant, it nevertheless remains that communication systems, to a significant degree are national in organisation and orientation, and nation-states retain important powers that shape provision and reception of media services, as well

as the circulation of news, information, and entertainment (Hardy, 2012).

In view of the above, this dissertation agrees with Hardy (2012) that national cultural differences and traditions, differences of language, geography, political systems and power structures, economies, international relationships and histories have implications for media systems and cannot be overlooked in studying journalism in different countries. It is capital to consider that journalists operate in different contexts, and thus likely to tailor their apprehensions and practices of journalism with respect to the local situations they face. It is on the strength of this understanding that is grounded the relevance of the theory of journalistic cultures for this dissertation which addresses the mainstream news media responses to disinformation in different political and media systems both in the West and in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.1 Journalistic cultures as negotiated configurations of journalism

Journalistic cultures consider the structural contingencies and constraints which shape meaningful differences in the understanding and practice of journalism in different contexts (Horváth & Bajomi-Lázár, 2025). Building on Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006), Custody et al. (2026) opine that in addition to political culture and economic structure within which each country's journalism is deeply embedded, other factors including resource constraints, ownership structures, ideological fragmentation, and uneven adherence to professional standards all shape how effectively journalists can respond to disinformation.

The notion of journalistic cultures points out different articulations and practices of journalism (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017), which are generally expressed at three levels of aggregation: journalistic subcultures or milieus, organisational or newsrooms cultures, and national cultures of journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In this dissertation, I am primarily interested in journalistic cultures at the national level, because I explore countries.

It is relevant to stress that the conceptualisation of national journalistic cultures does not imply that they are fixed or territorially bounded systems of ideas and practices. As Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 10) note, 'business, politics, culture, almost all aspects of human life experience increased globalisation'. Journalistic cultures are not exempt from these processes. Nevertheless, they continue to be articulated and enacted within national contexts, even if national borders themselves should not be treated as rigid or analytically absolute boundaries in journalism research (Li & Chitty, 2021).

Concretely, journalistic cultures become 'manifest in the way journalists think and act' (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369). They operate at three interrelated levels within news production: the cognitive level (e.g., the attribution of news values to events), the evaluative level (e.g., role perceptions), and the performative level (e.g., newsgathering and reporting practices).

2.2 Constituents and Dimensions of Journalistic Cultures

There are three core constituents of journalistic culture: *institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies* (Hanitzsch, 2007). These constituents are operationalised through *seven dimensions*: interventionism, power distance, and market orientation

(institutional roles); objectivism and empiricism (epistemologies); and relativism and idealism (ethical ideologies). Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the full range of journalistic cultural facets cannot be exhaustively captured in empirical research (Hanitzsch, 2007).

However, 'ethical ideologies have not been found to be a significant factor in other studies of journalistic cultures' (Vos et al., 2026, p. 10), building on Hanitzsch et al. (2011). Accordingly, the authors exclude this dimension from their analysis. In contrast, the present dissertation retains ethical ideologies as a relevant analytical component. The reason is because ethical ideologies illuminate forms of journalistic negotiation under structural pressures that are closely associated with political systems, perceived journalistic influence, editorial autonomy, socioeconomic working conditions, and broader cultural environments (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Given the scope of this study, spanning diverse contexts, ethical ideologies are therefore expected to constitute a meaningful dimension of journalistic culture.

Each of the three constituents is expressed along continua defined by the seven dimensions. For institutional roles (Norris & Odugbemi, 2008), interventionism ranges from interventionist to passive orientations; power distance from adversarial to loyal relationships; and market orientation from consumer-oriented to citizen-oriented logics. For epistemologies, that is journalists' beliefs about knowledge and truth (Harlow, 2019), objectivism ranges from correspondence based (Anderson & Baym, 2004) to subjective understandings of reality (Schudson, 2003) while empiricism spans empirical and analytical orientations (Harlow, 2019). Ethical ideologies included relativism along contextual to universal poles, and idealism along means-oriented to outcome-oriented reasoning (Forsyth, 1980).

Importantly, Hanitzsch (2007, p. 371) emphasises that 'each of the seven dimensions spans two ideal-typical extremes that rarely become manifest in the real world of journalistic practice. Most of the time, the truth lies somewhere between the poles.' He further argues that these dimensions are, to varying degrees, present across all national and organisational contexts, although their relative salience differs between settings. Hence, this framework is particularly useful for this dissertation, as it facilitates systematic examination of journalistic cultures across Western and sub-Saharan African contexts using a common analytical apparatus, thereby strengthening the theoretical robustness of explorative analysis.

2.3 Ideal Models of Journalistic Cultures

At the evaluative level, the Worlds of Journalism study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) provides a large-scale comparative survey of more than 27,000 journalists across 66 countries, examining perceptions of organisational and external influences, editorial autonomy, role orientations, trust in institutions, and ethical considerations. On this basis, the authors identify four ideal-typical models of journalistic culture: *monitorial, advocative, developmental, and collaborative*.

The monitorial journalistic culture is primarily associated with Western Europe and North America. This model emphasises the monitorial and accommodative functions of journalism and is characterised by strongly absolutist ethical orientations (Valič & Janja, 2026). These contexts are typically marked by liberal democratic systems; strong press freedom; mixed public and private media systems; and high levels of economic, human, and emancipative development, alongside high transparency and strong rule of law. Within this model, journalists report relatively low political and

economic pressures, high editorial autonomy, and moderate to high levels of trust in political institutions, depending on the specific country.

The advocative journalistic culture is most commonly found in parts of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Here, journalism is characterised by strongly interventionist role orientations alongside monitorial elements. Ethical reasoning tends to combine absolutist and situationist perspectives. These contexts are typically associated with transitional political systems; mixed media systems combining private, public service, and some state-run outlets; and medium levels of press freedom, economic development, rule of law, and transparency (Cheruiyot, 2024). Journalists in these settings report moderate to high editorial autonomy, strong organisational pressures, and relatively low trust in political actors and institutions.

The developmental journalistic culture is found predominantly in sub-Saharan African countries. In this model, journalists often adopt interventionist or partially collaborative role orientations, while ethical reasoning is largely shaped by absolutist and situationist frameworks (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2022; Ndawana, 2026). These contexts are commonly characterised by transitional political systems, limited press freedom, and a combination of private and state-controlled media environments. They also tend to exhibit lower levels of transparency, rule of law, economic and human development, and emancipative values. Journalists typically report significant political and organisational pressures, moderate editorial autonomy, and medium levels of trust in political institutions.

Finally, the collaborative journalistic culture is most frequently associated with authoritarian contexts, including parts of the Middle

East, Southeast Asia, and China (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In this model, journalism is understood as strongly collaborative, with ethical reasoning tending towards subjectivist orientations. These systems are characterised by authoritarian political structures, low press freedom, and mixed media ownership combining state and private actors. At the same time, they often display relatively high levels of economic development, rule of law, and transparency, alongside low emancipative values. Journalists in these contexts report high political influence, low editorial autonomy, and comparatively high trust in political institutions.

These four models are explicitly ideal journalistic cultures. They do not imply that any country exhibits a single, monolithic journalistic culture. Rather, multiple models may coexist within the same national context (Horváth & Bajomi-Lázár, 2025). Consequently, analytical attention should be directed towards the degree and pattern of model manifestation, as well as the dynamics of hybridity across contexts.

Extending the analysis to the performative level, Mellado et al. (2017) highlight the limitations of relying solely on professional perceptions, noting that journalists' stated views do not always correspond to their actual practices, and may not fully reflect organisational realities. Their content-based findings nevertheless reinforce the argument that journalistic cultures are multilayered; hybrid; and not reducible to fixed geographical, political, or ideal media system typologies.

In this regard, Hallin et al. (2023) conceptualise hybridity in journalistic cultures as the coexistence of diverse practices, genres, actors, and institutional arrangements produced through processes of

mixing, borrowing, adaptation, and innovation that blur established boundaries. Building on Mellado (2020), they further argue that 'at the level of journalism cultures, all different roles are present across a wide range of societal contexts, while at the micro level, the different roles tend to co-occur – even roles that might be thought to be incompatible' (Hallin et al., 2023, p. 225). Overall, journalistic cultures should be understood as dynamic formations shaped by shifting pressures, interactions, and constraints, within which journalists continuously negotiate role orientations, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies in relation to specific institutional and political contexts and issue domains (Raemy & Hellmueller, 2026).

Raemy et al. (2024) contend that negotiation is an important aspect of journalistic cultures given that journalists must make sense of a constant tension between ideals and the practicalities within which the operate. The authors thereby emphasise the importance of embeddedness when attempting to comprehend journalistic cultures. According to Vos and Hanusch (2024, p. 39), embeddedness is a key dimension in the construction of journalistic cultures; they define it as 'the extent to which journalists are enmeshed in the communities, cultures, and structures in which and on whom they report, and the extent to which this may both enable and constrain their work'.

In view of the above, this thesis adopts the theoretical position that journalistic cultures exhibit hybridity and embeddedness. Nevertheless, the four models of journalistic cultures suggested by Hanitzsch et al. (2019) serve as analytical points of reference from which the manifestations of diverse and hybrid patterns of journalistic cultures can be observed, identified and analysed in the seven countries examined in this dissertation.

Meanwhile, the theory of media systems is also relevant in studies examining how professionals make sense of and practice journalism. This is because journalists' perspectives are constructed and expressed within media systems (Lauer & Grave, 2024). In fact, Örnebring (2009) opines that for his project it is more appropriate to treat 'media system' as synonymous with 'journalistic culture'. Hence, Ferracioli et al. (2026) take different media systems into account to scrutinise the watchdog orientation within the realm of fact-checking. In fact, Raemy et al. (2024, p. 4909) describe this relationship by stating that 'the notion of journalistic culture has been extraordinarily useful in understanding journalism within and mostly across media systems'. While research has suggested that certain journalistic attitudes can be expected from particular media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), these attitudes are nevertheless ultimately defined, negotiated, constructed, and enacted at the level of newsrooms (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2022). Based on this understanding, Ferracioli et al. (2026) argue that the idiosyncrasies of each professional culture influence journalists' orientations. Therefore, media systems should be seen as the contexts within which journalistic cultures are expressed (Horváth & Bajomi-Lázár, 2025; Appelgren et al., 2019).

3 Disinformation as a context for observing journalistic cultures

During the past two decades, different terms have been used in scholarly debates and public discourse to refer to the propagation of false and misleading claims, including misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. In general, research differentiates between misinformation and disinformation on the basis of intentionality. On the one hand, disinformation is circulated purposely to deceive the public, while on the other, misinformation is shared inadvertently, that is, without any intention to mislead (Tsfati et al., 2020). This distinction is important because according to research, false and misleading claims which are spread deliberately to support particular political agendas are potentially very harmful for citizens, political processes, and democracy, though misinformation also can pose significant challenges to individuals and societies (Mahl et al., 2024). Bennett and Livingston (2018) even suggest the concept of strategic disinformation to describe a situation where several instances of falsehoods are generated in a planned and coordinated manner to achieve specific political agendas. For Bennett and Livingston (2018, p. 124), 'disinformation invites looking at more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them'.

Other concepts are close to misinformation and disinformation, including fake news, rumours, propaganda, and conspiracy theories (Boudana & Segev, 2026; Kapantai et al., 2021). Although fake news can mean different things to different people, scholars have described it as false information which is disguised under journalistic formats (Tandoc et al., 2018). Rumours represent unverified information that

may turn out to be true or false (Fine et al., 2025). Thus, a rumour becomes disinformation or misinformation only when it is confirmed to be false. Propaganda has been defined as state-sponsored dissemination of false information (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2026), while conspiracy theories refer to false information about powers and mighty people behind certain happenings and events (Sousa-Silva, 2026).

In view of the above, it has been suggested that fake news, false rumours, conspiracy theories, and propaganda can be seen as part of the two broader concepts, misinformation and disinformation (Boudana & Segev, 2026). So, this dissertation focuses on disinformation, with an examination of how mainstream news media respond to strategically produced falsehoods that potentially challenge democratic processes.

In the early 2000s, mainstream news media in the United States started fact-checking – refuting the accuracy of publicly disseminated falsehoods – exclusively as an effort to combat disinformation (Amazeen, 2015). It has since flourished worldwide (Mahl et al., 2024). Fact-checking in this context is defined as the journalistic activity of tracking, assessing, and reporting about the veracity of public claims (Humprecht, 2020; Mena, 2019). Thus, fact-checking appears to be a typical representation of the relationship between fact-checkers' efforts to combat disinformation and the negotiation of journalistic cultures (Mahl et al., 2024). Indeed, fact-checking crystallises journalistic role orientations, epistemologies, and ethical considerations. Moreover, particular truth regimes are institutionalised through fact-checking (Graves, 2016), and the extent of journalistic autonomy is revealed (Larssen, 2020). Building on the

work by Mena (2019), Mahl et al. (2024) argue that fact-checkers are committed to professional journalistic principles.

Clearly, journalism builds on claims about knowledge and truth (Lewis & Westlund, 2014), founded on principles such as accuracy, fairness, and objectivity (Deuze, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Ward, 2019). Hence, more than the mere spread of inaccurate claims, disinformation should be seen as a threat to the identity, legitimacy, and credibility of journalism as a source of information (Boudana & Sevged, 2026; Fink, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). As such, disinformation compels journalists to respond according to negotiated core role commitments, epistemologies, and ethical considerations (Mutsvairo, 2025), rending journalistic cultures visible through the explicit decisions professionals make about correction, verification, amplification, and silence (Bakir & McStay, 2021). So, disinformation provides a crucial context to examine the reflections of journalistic cultures based on how mainstream news media professionals perceive and practice fact-checking and corrective news reporting.

Let us consider some heuristic scenarios to illustrate this reasoning. Say a mainstream news media outlet publishes a report containing empirical evidence to debunk and correct a certain false and misleading claim circulating online. According to the literature, this attitude corresponds to the watchdog function of journalism. Thus, this case indicates the influence of the monitorial journalistic culture on how mainstream media respond to disinformation. Active debunking and clear public explanations reflect an interventionist role orientation, suggesting the influence of the advocative journalistic culture. When journalists cover a false claim in a way that prioritises stability or social cohesion over confrontation, this approach aligns with the social cohesion role of the press and points

to the influence of the developmental journalistic culture on how mainstream media respond to disinformation. Meanwhile, cautious or restrained reporting on disinformation may indicate a loyal-facilitator role, suggesting the influence of the collaborative journalistic culture in shaping the media's response.

Table 1 summarises the expectations concerning mainstream news media responses to disinformation, considering the four models of journalistic cultures and their distinctive journalistic role orientations and ethical ideologies (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The epistemological orientations are drawn from Hanitzsch (2007).

Table 1: Models of journalistic culture and the expected ways mainstream news media respond to disinformation

Model	Journalistic role orientation	Epistemology	Ethical ideology	Expected ways mainstream news media respond
Monitorial	Monitorial and accommodative (watchdog, informers, and educators)	Correspondence/ empiricist logic	Predominantly absolutist	Fact-checking and news reporting is informative and educational, emphasising accountability
Advocative	Strongly interventionist/ some monitorial (support political causes and mobilisation)	Analytical/ interpretive	Frequently situationist	Fact-checking and news reporting encompasses political mobilisation, activism, and the watchdog function
Develop-mental	Interventionist/ somewhat collaborative (support national development)	Analytical with a social harmony emphasis	Frequently exceptionist	Fact-checking and news reporting are frequently oriented to preserve cohesion and/or stability
Collaborative	Strongly collaborative (support political leadership)	Strongly subjectivist/ relational	Loyal-facilitator logic	Fact-checking and news reporting are often supportive of or align with the leadership or governance

Note. The journalistic culture models and their corresponding ethical ideologies are from Hanitzsch et al. (2019), while the epistemological tendencies are from Hanitzsch (2007).

In sum, how journalists understand and perform fact-checking and correcting news – key parts of responding to disinformation – reflects the influence of broader journalistic cultures, which are shaped under pressure. This study uses these assumptions about journalistic culture and media responses to define its aim and research questions.

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this dissertation is to understand how journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation across sub-Saharan Africa and Western countries. One of the most common approaches to examine journalistic cultures empirically is by assessing how journalists comprehend and perform their role (Hellmueller et al., 2026). In view of this suggestion, this research specifically explores how negotiated professional role orientations and performance, epistemological commitments, and ethical ideologies shape how mainstream news media professionals perceive and practice fact-checking and corrective reporting. This, in response to strategically produced falsehoods.

The main research question is: how do journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation across sub-Saharan Africa and Western countries? This research question is addressed by examining six sub-questions: (1) What are the patterns of strategically produced falsehoods which mainstream news media respond to by using fact-checking and corrective reporting? (2) In which ways do fact-checkers' conceptualisations of their professional

roles reflect journalistic cultures? (3) In which ways do the mainstream news media role performance in corrective reporting reflect journalistic cultures? (4) In which ways do journalists' perceptions of mainstream news media role in corrective reporting reflect journalistic cultures? (5) In which ways do fact-checkers' perceptions of epistemologies reflect journalistic cultures? (6) In which ways do fact-checkers' perceptions of ethics reflect journalistic cultures?

3.2 Contributions of this dissertation

This dissertation contributes to journalistic culture theory, disinformation research, and comparative media research. First, this dissertation facilitates a broader understanding of journalistic culture theory by extending empirical analysis beyond Western democracies, which overwhelmingly dominate the body of research. This dissertation adds to the knowledge about the dynamics of journalistic cultures in transitional democracies and authoritarian regimes of sub-Saharan Africa, which have thus far received quite insufficient scholarly attention.

Second, this dissertation reconceptualises disinformation as a boundary condition that reveals underlying professional commitments. Instead of approaching fact-checking and corrective reporting as technical interventions, this dissertation situates them within broader configurations of role orientations, epistemological commitments, and ethical ideologies. In doing so, it demonstrates that responses to disinformation are shaped not only by institutional capacity but also by negotiated professional identities.

Finally, by analysing countries across Western and sub-Saharan African contexts, this dissertation refines the relationship between

media systems and journalistic cultures, contributing to comparative media research. While political and media structures provide contextual conditions, journalistic cultures cannot be reduced to system-level determinants (Hanusch, 2016). This challenges deterministic readings of comparative media theory and supports a relational understanding of journalism as an embedded, negotiated practice.

4 Methodology and research design

This dissertation consists of five studies. I use a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. I use quantitative content analysis to investigate how nontraditional journalists disseminate disinformation on social media. This is because its provides a contextual background for understanding the patterns of falsehoods which mainstream news media have to tackle. Furthermore, I use a quantitative content analysis to scrutinize how journalistic cultures reflect on mainstream news media performance of their roles when they cover disinformation. The reason why I investigate the mainstream news media coverage of disinformation is because, in the chain of news production, journalistic cultures are articulated in how journalists do their work. This includes their methods of reporting and use of news formats (performative level), among other actions (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Moreover, I use semi-structured interviews to explore how patterns of journalistic cultures are mirrored in journalists' perceptions of their roles with respect to fact-checking, as well as their perceptions of mainstream news media coverage of disinformation. This methodological approach is valuable for examining, uncovering, and interpreting complex organisational dynamics (Blee & Taylor, 2002), as it facilitates the comparison of responses across participants while allowing flexibility to delve into topics specific to each interviewee (Della Porta, 2014). Thus, in the context of this dissertation it is useful for capturing the foundational structure upon which apprehension and interpretation of news and news work take place. In addition, semi-structured interviews are particularly relevant for this dissertation in the intent of capturing journalists' opinions about their profession and occupational ideologies (the evaluative level of

analysis). Moreover, the use of in-depth interviews with journalists is critical because they help to unveil meaningful insights and differences which cannot be captured with quantitative methods (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Given that most assumptions in journalistic culture research are grounded in large scale quantitative studies, the use of semi-structure interviews in this dissertation is useful for providing further explanations and to broaden the understanding of the existing propositions, as well as contributing to the field with new knowledge.

Based on the combination of the above-mentioned methods, this dissertation integrates both the evaluative and performative levels of analysis of journalistic cultures. This provides a broader understanding of the subject of interest, an especially important endeavour given that journalistic practices are shaped both by the cognitive and evaluative structures, and implemented through professional performance (Hellmueller, 2017).

Again, the focus of the five empirical studies that comprise this dissertation is on the roles of journalistic cultures. I identify the epistemologies and ethical ideologies of journalistic cultures from how professionals articulate their roles. I opt for this analytical approach because elements of epistemologies and ethical ideologies are intrinsically embedded in journalists' sense-making of their work. That is why Vos et al. (2026) explain that journalists' conceptions of their social roles are related to professional epistemologies. This approach is also consistent with the work by Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 201), who explore 'how journalists ethical orientations might relate to their perception of the justifiability of specific news-gathering practices'. Thus, journalists simultaneously asserts their epistemologies and ethical considerations.

4.1 Case selection

As mentioned, the seven case studies for this dissertation include three Western countries (France, Sweden, and the United States) and four sub-Saharan African countries (Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa). They differ in terms of level of democracy, as well as political and media systems. Indeed, four of the countries are democracies (France, South Africa, Sweden, and the US), two are transitional democracies (Kenya and Nigeria), and one is a nondemocratic country (Cameroon). In addition, the three countries selected in the West are prototypes of the three models of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). France is a classified under the Polarised Pluralist model, Sweden, the Democratic Corporatist, and the US, the Liberal model. Meanwhile, most emerging democracies in the developing world like South Africa for example exhibit features of the Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal models (Hadland, 2012). Therefore, I follow a *most different systems* design (Wirth & Kolb, 2004). The reason for adopting this design is because it is most helpful for identifying relevant variations in trends across countries under study (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Below, the political and media systems of each of the seven countries are described in alphabetic order.

Cameroon is in Central Africa and represents one of Africa's longest-standing autocracies (Lena & Morse, 2023). In the V-Dem 2026 report (Nord et al., 2026), Cameroon is classified as an electoral autocracy and ranks 137th out of 179 countries in the world in the Liberal Democracy index. The Cameroonian constitution guarantees the separation of powers, liberties, and freedom of associations and of the press, which could lead one to believe that Cameroon is a democracy (Gwaibi, 2022). In practice, however, Cameroon represents an

unbridled demagogy, where the multiparty system introduced in 1990 remains a façade and a charade, promising much but delivering little (Ngwane, 2004). It is a real 'cosmetic democracy' (Nyamnjoh, 2002, p. 5) which has helped keep the same party in power since the independence in 1960 and the same President with no interruption since 1982 (Mișcoiu & Kakdeu, 2021).

Media outlets in Cameroon have flourished since the liberalisation of the country in the 1900s. In addition to the state-owned national bilingual daily newspaper and the national broadcaster, there are more than 600 newspapers, approximately 200 radio stations, and more than 60 TV channels (Nfor, 2024). However, the Cameroonian government has adopted various forms of undemocratic policies in a bid to control the critical press. One example is not granting permanent licenses to private broadcast media, rendering them technically illegal and exposed to arbitrary severe sanctions and unpredictable closure (Endong, 2022). In addition, the government may offer economic assistance only to media organs which appear to be politically innocuous or loyal to the government (Endong, 2022).

France is a liberal democracy according to the V-Dem 2026 democracy report (Nord et al., 2026), ranking 9th in the Liberal Democracy Index. Liberal democracies are characterised by free, fair, and recurring elections, as well as well-functioning checks and balances on the executive power by the legislature and the judiciary. In addition, liberal democracies have a strong rule of law, ensuring that equal civil liberties are respected.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classify the media system in France under the Polarized Pluralist model. French journalism has traditionally been viewed as strongly connected to political parties, while

privileging the opinion and commentary-oriented reporting style (Esser & Umbricht, 2013). Recent research has confirmed that the French reporter still has a notable interventionist voice in the news (Pagiotti et al., 2024).

Kenya is classified as a transitional democracy or grey zone in the 2026 V-Dem report (Nord et al.,2026) ranking 74th in the Liberal Democracy index. Nyadera et al. (2023) opine that the postindependence political scene of this East African country has been characterised by continued efforts to structure and restructure the political system as well as prodemocratic struggles. In fact, Kenya's political institutions are becoming robust, and the country is on a steady path towards democratic consolidation (Cheeseman et al., 2024). Consistently, Gerzso (2023) notes that in 2017, Kenya's supreme court nullified the presidential election of the incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta, thus challenging the assumption that in hybrid regimes, courts always support power holders despite blatant evidence of electoral fraud. In this context, the constitution shields the courts from the executive branch's attempts to undermine its independence.

Cheeseman et al. (2024) argue that among sub-Saharan countries, Kenya is known to have an independent and vibrant traditional media landscape, with nearly 200 radio stations, 92 television channels, and 100 print publications currently licensed. According to Olivera and Cheruiyot (2023), Kenyan media outlets are often described as robust, sophisticated, and widely consumed in sub-Saharan Africa, despite being part of a neo-patrimonial system which thrives on endless cycles of impunity and corruption.

Nigeria is a West African country classified as a transitional democracy or grey zone in the 2026 V-Dem report (Nord et al., 2026), ranking 96th in the Liberal Democracy Index. It is the sixth most populous country in the world, with a population estimated at 208 million based on the 2006 census. By 2050, it is projected to be the third most populous country in the world, with a population of 500 million (Sule, 2023). Nigeria returned to universal suffrage in 1999 after 16 years of a military dictatorship. Since then, the country has held elections every four years (Oyuru, 2023). According to Akindoyin and Badru (2024), despite encountering considerable challenges, there is a deeply ingrained commitment to democracy among Nigerians.

The Nigerian mass media are arguably the most important channel of political news. Most newspapers are commercialised, market oriented and privately owned (Cervi et al., 2023). The Nigerian mass media run relatively independently of political actors in their daily business, although some may not be purely described as running on market mechanisms, given that ownership is often not very transparent and sometimes tied to political figures (Cervi et al., 2023). The ownership structure of the Nigerian media can be said to be both public and private, implying a correlation between ownership, control, and content (Cervi et al., 2023). The public radio and television space is dominated by government ownership and funding both at the state and federal levels, which make the state-owned electronic media less independent and commercially inclined (Cervi et al., 2023).

South Africa is classified as an electoral democracy in the 2026 V-Dem report (Nord et al., 2026), ranking 39th in the Liberal Democracy Index. South Africa has had a multiparty democracy since the end of the apartheid government, and the first democratically elected

government took office following the 1994 elections (Phakathi et al., 2026). Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman (2024) argue that South Africa is one of the fragile emerging democracies in the Global South which require the vigilant monitoring of power, typical of watchdog journalism, but also frequently require healing of deep social and cultural schisms inherited from a colonial or authoritarian past.

South Africa's media system is a mixture of public, commercial, and community actors across print and digital platforms. Recent industry reports have documented consolidation, retrenchments and a strong broadcast sector (National Association of Broadcasters, 2024). Public broadcasting remains a major national player while private groups dominate commercial print and pay TV; community radio and local digital outlets fill regional niches. Regulatory and market reviews have provided quantitative breakdowns of broadcast licences, newspaper groups, and digital reach when distinguishing national, regional, and local outlets. According to Jones and Hadland (2024), freedom of the press is constitutionally protected and generally respected in practice in South Africa. Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman (2024, p. 2) argue that 'in recent years, investigative (watchdog) journalism has played a critical role in South Africa', exposing corruption, undermining of constitution, exploitation and bribery. Cheruiyot (2024) opines that South Africa and Kenya can be considered to have very similar journalistic cultures in terms of strong private media that are relatively free from state interference, active press councils and strong press watchdogs, as well as relatively free digital space. At the same time, the two countries experience similar challenges to professionalism including commercialisation and market censorship, and political issues plaguing the media.

Sweden is a Nordic country classified as a liberal democracy. In the 2026 V-Dem report (Nord et al., 2026), it ranks 2nd in the Liberal Democracy Index. With respect to its media system, Sweden is a classic example of the Democratic Corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). According to Rolandsson (2026), the Swedish media system continues to stay true to its long-standing tradition of public service orientation, even though commercialisation has increased in recent years (Nord & Grusell, 2021). From a historical perspective, Båge and Örnebring (2026) explain that the early broadcasting policy in Sweden was grounded in consensus-oriented paternalism, which promoted a broadcast system that emphasised shifting between cultural uplift, moral guidance, welfare, and democratic participation. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal was always to help citizens to navigate an increasingly complex media and societal landscape.

Finally, according to the 2026 V-Dem democracy report (Nord et al., 2026), in 2025 the United States lost its place as a liberal democracy for the first time over 50 years. At present, it is classified as an electoral democracy, ranking 51st in the Liberal Democracy Index. Moreover, indicators of democracy such as civil rights, equality before the law, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press are at their lowest levels in the last 60 years, and the country has increasingly tended towards autocracy since President Trump began his second term in 2025 (Nord et al., 2026).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classify the United States as a prototype of the Liberal model. Consistently, U.S. journalism has traditionally been committed to providing the public with objective, fair, and balanced political reporting (Kaplan, 2009). Indeed, Patterson (1998, p. 22) opines that in U.S. journalistic culture, objectivity is about

'expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute'. This propensity could be partly explained by the fact that there is relatively limited media regulation in the United States (de Smaele 1999), and freedom is a 'natural right' (Siebert et al. 1956 p. 96). However, Weaver and Willnat (2016) argue that the professional autonomy of U.S. journalism has been threatened over the last two decades. In fact, the U.S. media coverage of politics is increasingly characterised by patterns of structural and partisan bias (Fico et al., 2006). This trend was already apparent with the creation of the cable news channel Fox news (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006) and became more pronounced with the divisive 2016 presidential campaign. Currently, a distinction is made between liberal media outlets, which reassert democratic values, and conservative media outlets, which practice journalism with a partisan spin (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Vos et al. (2026) confirm that US journalism is no longer essentially objective as it is now characterised by a combination of naturalist and constructivist orientations.

4.2 Material

The material for quantitative content analysis was collected from newspaper articles and news posts on Facebook, whereas the qualitative research involved data collection through semi-structured interviews with journalists (see Table 2). Journalists include both the ones doing fact-checking (fact-checkers) and those working with regular news reporting tasks.

Table 2. Methodological organisation of the articles

Study	Countries	Method	Sample	Unit of analysis	Main contribution to this dissertation
Article 1	Cameroon	Quantitative content analysis	Social media content	Facebook posts	Online disinformation patterns
Article 2	France, Sweden, and the United States	Semi-structured interviews	Fact-checkers	Interviews	Perceptions of the fact-checking role in Western contexts
Article 3	Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa	Semi-structured interviews	Fact-checkers	Interviews	Perceptions of the fact-checking role in African contexts
Article 4	France, Sweden, and the United States	Quantitative content analysis	News-papers	News article	Role performance in disinformation coverage in Western contexts
Article 5	Cameroon	Semi-structured Interviews	Editors	Interviews	Perceptions of role in disinformation coverage in Cameroon

Note: Table shows how the articles are organised methodologically as well as their main contributions to the dissertation

The data collection differed across the five articles which comprise this dissertation. Each of the five articles answer a particular research question of this dissertation as will be shown in a later section. Overall, the five articles address the empirical aim of this dissertation.

4.3 Operationalisation of journalistic cultures

This dissertation primarily operationalises journalistic cultures based on the journalists' perceptions and enactment of their roles with respect to fact-checking and the coverage of disinformation. The epistemological and ethical ideologies are identified based on the journalists' articulations of their roles.

Role orientations are operationalised based on the work of Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 173). These authors suggest four role orientations: monitorial, collaborative, interventionist, and accommodative. The monitorial role has four indicators: (1) 'provide political information'; (2) 'monitor and scrutinize politics'; (3) 'monitor and scrutinize business'; and (4) 'motivate people to participate in politics'. The collaborative role has two indicators: (1) 'support government policy'; and (2) 'convey a positive image of political leaders'. The interventionist role has four indicators: (1) 'advocate for social change'; (2) 'influence public opinion'; 3) 'set the political agenda'; and 4) 'support national development'. Finally, the accommodative role has three indicators: (1) 'provide entertainment and relaxation'; (2) 'provide news that attracts largest audience'; and (3) 'provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life'.

The epistemological orientations of mainstream news media are classified based on Vos et al. (2026, p. 12). Those authors suggest five epistemological approaches, namely objective, empirical, subjective, analytical, and intuitive positions. Responses aligning with any of the following statements are indicative of an objectivist standpoint: (1) 'facts speak for themselves'; (2) 'things are either true or false'; and (3) 'it's possible to represent objective reality'. Responses aligning with any of the following statements are indicative of the empirical

standpoint: (1) ‘standpoint should be transparent’; and (2) ‘can’t withhold beliefs’. Responses aligning with the following statement are indicative of the subjective standpoint: ‘interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts’. Responses aligning with the following statements are indicative of the intuitive standpoint: (1) ‘journalists should intuitively know what a story will be’; and (2) ‘journalists should trust their instinct’.

This dissertation uses the work by Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 204) to identify the ethical ideologies of mainstream news media. The authors suggest four ethical orientations: absolutism, situationism, subjectivism, and exceptionism. Responses aligning with the following statement are suggestive of an absolutist orientation: ‘journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context’. Responses aligning with the following statement are indicative of a situationist orientation: ‘what is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation’. Responses aligning with the following statement are reflective of a subjectivist orientation: ‘what is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgement’. Finally, responses aligning with the following statement are suggestive of an exceptionist orientation: ‘it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it’.

4.4 Analytical strategy

The findings are examined at the country level. This analysis is conducted at both the performative and evaluative levels of analysis to assess how perceptions and practices correspond across the two contexts. The analysis examines variation within findings among Western countries on the one hand and among sub-Saharan African countries on the other. This intra-regional assessment aims to identify

potentially meaningful differences in news media perceptions and responses to disinformation among countries that are expected to share similar ideal types of journalistic cultures. Indeed, research has shown that monitorial journalistic cultures are typically embraced by democratic countries in West, while developmental journalistic cultures (with the exception of South Africa) are commonly adopted by sub-Saharan African countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). However, these suggestions are based on large scale surveys. Meanwhile, this dissertation instead uses in-depth interviews with journalists. Therefore, it is expected that the analysis of countries with consideration to the regions to which they belong will disclose critical differences of perspectives within the broader models of journalistic cultures to which they normally adhere as pointed out in existing literature.

This analytical strategy is very beneficial for the body of research. The reason is because it adds to the context-specific understanding of countries' adherence to Hanitzsch et al. (2019) models of journalistic cultures, in sub-Saharan Africa and in the West. In other words, this dissertation is saying that knowing that countries of the Western Europe and Northern America usually embrace monitorial journalistic culture is important. But gaining understanding of how each countries comprehend the notion of monitorial journalistic culture is even more critical.

In view of the above, the discussion of the findings is structured according to the theoretical expectations outlined earlier, particularly those derived from ideal types of journalistic cultures associated with the countries under study (see Table 1). The relevant literature further informs the interpretation of the results.

4.5 Research paradigms

This dissertation is grounded in the pragmatist research paradigm. Building on Creswell (2009) and Greene (2007), Moeller et al. (2016) describe pragmatism as an approach that prioritises practice-oriented inquiry and focuses on what works in addressing a given research problem. In this sense, pragmatism is particularly well suited to mixed-methods research, as it integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Given that this dissertation involves an explorative analysis across countries, it is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of perspectives within their respective contexts. Accordingly, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods should be understood as complementary, despite differences in their analytical procedures.

Consistent with Fisher (2025), this study aims to generate empirical evidence while also providing interpretive depth in explaining perceptions and attitudes. As Durnova and Weible (2020) argue, the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches can produce mutually reinforcing insights and enrich the description of the phenomenon under study (Malterud, 2001).

4.6 Methodological limitations

There are limitations to the quantitative and qualitative methods used in this dissertation. First, quantitative content analysis cannot objectively reveal intent. Other limitations include the effect of the investigator on the study, the principles and consequences of sampling, and the process of organisation and interpretation during analysis, all of which affect research and are closely related to

different aspects of validity. Second, the results of semi-structured interviews cannot be generalised.

Furthermore, this dissertation must account for the role of reflexivity, insofar as the researcher's background and positionality shape methodological and interpretive decisions throughout the research process. This concern was partially mitigated in the studies conducted in collaboration with other researchers. The involvement of multiple researchers can strengthen study design; however, its value does not lie in achieving consensus or uniform interpretations, but rather in enabling researchers to complement and critically interrogate one another's perspectives and claims (Malterud, 2001).

5 Empirical studies

This dissertation comprises five articles that each examine different aspects of how journalistic cultures influence the mainstream news media responses to disinformation in Western and sub-Saharan African countries, with focus on the experiences of Cameroon, France, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sweden, and the US. Employing content analysis and interviews where appropriate, the five studies answer one or more specific research questions of the dissertation (see Table 3). Together, the five studies reflect the theoretical framework of this dissertation and ultimately address its empirical aim.

The first article investigates the patterns of online disinformation which mainstream news media have to confront. Then, the second and third articles discuss the how fact-checkers perceive their roles as well as epistemological orientations and ethical considerations. The fourth article captures the journalistic role performance manifested in the mainstream news media coverage of disinformation. Finally, the fifth article discusses how journalists perceive the role of mainstream news media with respect to the coverage of disinformation.

Table 3. Summary of the analytical dimensions of the five articles that comprise this dissertation

Article	Focus	Method	Analytical dimension	Related research question (RQ)
Article 1	Disinformation in a political crisis	Content analysis	Role of non-traditional actors in journalism	RQ1
Article 2	How fact-checkers in Westen countries perceive their role	Interviews	Role orientations, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies	RQ2, RQ5
Article 3	How fact-checkers in sub-Saharan Africa perceive their role	Interviews	Role orientations, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies	RQ2, RQ6
Article 4	News coverage of disinformation in Western democracies	Content analysis	Role performance	RQ3
Article 5	How journalists in Cameroon perceive mainstream media coverage of disinformation	Interviews	Role orientations	RQ4

Note: Table shows the research questions addressed by respective studies in a way that together answer the empirical aim of the dissertation

5.1 Article 1: Facebook and fake news in the 'Anglophone crisis' in Cameroon

There has been a prominent rise in disinformation in the public sphere in recent years. While the spread of false and misleading claims was initially a major concern mostly for established Western democracies, it has become a global problem. According to research, the rise in disinformation can be partly explained by the fact that social media offer all people the ability to produce and circulate information. However, these actions are not subjected to the editorial gatekeeping and fact-checking of mainstream media, removing the ability to control the quality and accuracy of the information.

Against this background, this study aims to add to the empirical knowledge about the use of social media to spread disinformation in sub-Saharan Africa. I use the case of Cameroon to assess the quality of information disseminated on Facebook by non-traditional journalists about the Anglophone crisis in the country. The research questions are: (1) to what extent are the news published on Facebook by citizen journalists about the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon reliable? (2) Which factors enhance/limit the publication of authentic/fabricated news on Facebook regarding the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon? (3) How does Facebook advance/limit the phenomenon of fake news?

Theoretically, I draw on gatekeeping theory and the concept of fake news. Methodologically, I use quantitative content analysis to examine the quality of news stories posted on Facebook by Anglophone activist Mark Bareta. He is one of the most popular activists on social media in terms of the number of followers, owns the news blog Baretanews, and openly supports the separatist cause.

The results reveal that most of the news disseminated on Facebook by Mark Bareta lacks basic elements necessary to appreciate quality, authenticity, accuracy, and reliability. This finding confirms that objective journalism is not partisan (White, 1950), and that the advancement of particular political agendas is one reason (along with financial gain) behind the production and circulation of fake news (Tandoc et al., 2018). Crucially, the findings confirm that peripheral actors in journalism propagating (dis)information on social media are not necessarily subjected to the gatekeeping process that is expected of mainstream news media to ensure the accuracy of their claims.

5.2 Article 2: The influence of journalistic cultures on fact-checkers' perceptions of their role in France, Sweden, and the United States: a comparative approach

Research has shown that social media platforms are fertile grounds for disinformation to flourish, especially in times of election campaigns, crisis, or pandemics (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Currently, harmful phenomena affecting political processes and institutions, such as the propagation of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, false rumours, and inaccurate statements uttered by political actors, primarily online, have become a global concern. This situation has forced mainstream news media organisations, as well as independent organisations, to fight against disinformation through fact-checking. In this context, fact-checking refers to the journalistic activity of tracking, assessing, and reporting on the truthfulness of public claims. However, researchers have argued that fact-checkers perceive their roles in very different ways, crucially because they operate in a variety of political and media environments.

Against this background, this study aims to explore and explain how fact-checkers in France, Sweden, and the United States perceive their roles. The research questions are: (1) how do fact-checkers in France, Sweden, and the United States perceive their roles? (2) How do the perceptions of French, Swedish, and U.S. fact-checkers' of their roles follow the journalistic cultures of the respective countries?

Theoretically, this study is guided by research on journalistic cultures. Methodologically, it uses semi-structured interviews with 12 fact-checkers operating in the three countries of interest.

The results show that in France, Sweden and the United States, fact-checkers mainly see their roles as monitorial. However, they differ in their priorities in this function. While French and Swedish fact-checkers prioritise providing facts and explanations to the public about the societal issues most debated in their countries, their U.S. counterparts primarily prioritise the watchdog role, holding political actors accountable for their statements. Moreover, fact-checkers in Sweden prefer not to verify the claims made by political actors because they believe it is hard to objectively assess such statements. On the contrary, U.S. fact-checkers strongly believe that the claims of political actors should be verified, even when this verification cannot be grounded on irrefutable evidence.

5.3 Article 3: Fact-checkers' perceptions of their roles and challenges in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa

Research has suggested that fact-checkers perceive their function in the society in very different ways because they operate in diverse political and media contexts. Although considerable scholarship has focused on the roles of fact-checking, it has been largely dedicated to

liberal Western democracies. Meanwhile, there has been insufficient attention paid to sub-Saharan Africa.

In view of this gap, this study explores how fact-checkers' in Cameroon (an authoritative regime), Kenya (a hybrid democracy), Nigeria (a hybrid democracy), and South Africa (a democratic regime) perceive their roles and challenges. The research questions are: (1) how do fact-checkers in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa perceive their roles? (2) How do fact-checkers in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa perceive the challenges of their work?

Theoretically, this study is guided by research on journalistic cultures. Methodologically, in-depth interviews are conducted with 19 fact-checkers working in the four countries.

The results reveal that, in general, fact-checkers in Cameroon primarily perceive their roles as verifiers of claims of a human-interest nature, while their counterparts in Kenya perceive their role as promoters of democratic engagement, settlers of political and social disputes, watchdogs ensuring accountability, and facilitators of citizens' critical interaction with information. In Nigeria, fact-checkers perceive their roles as providers of information to the public following normative journalistic principles. Finally, fact-checkers in South Africa perceive their roles as complementary to traditional journalism, and as a corrective force that strengthens information resilience.

5.4 Article 4: Falsehood amplifiers? Comparing how French, Swedish, and U.S. newspapers cover false and misleading stories

Research has shown that the reach of digital channels which propagate disinformation is very limited. However, large proportions of the public are aware of these misleading stories and claims. For most countries, mainstream media outlets represent the largest source of political information in terms of reach and believability. In view of such a paradox, scholars suspect that most people hear about false and misleading stories through coverage via mainstream news outlets. Indeed, there has been substantial research dedicated to the issue of online disinformation. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the role mainstream media play in the dissemination of online disinformation. Moreover, there are a lack of comparative studies that consider the contexts of multiple countries.

Against this background, this study investigates mainstream media attention to online disinformation in different political and media systems. The research questions are: (1) to what extent are the various kinds of falsehoods mentioned in French, Swedish, and U.S. newspaper articles about the spread of false stories? (2a) To what extent do French, Swedish, and U.S. newspapers cover false stories propagated in public spheres? (2b) To what extent do French, Swedish, and U.S. newspapers provide explanations about the causes and consequences of the propagation of falsehoods? (3a) To what extent do French, Swedish, and U.S. newspapers use the attribution of responsibility frame in their articles about the causes and consequences of falsehoods' propagation? (3b) To what extent does the use of the attribution of responsibility frame differ between

newspapers of different political leanings in France, Sweden, and the United States?

Theoretically, this study is guided by the concept of journalistic cultures. Methodologically, it employs quantitative content analysis of newspaper articles published in France, Sweden, and the United States during election campaigns held in 2022 in the three countries.

The results show that U.S. newspapers report more about false stories than their French and Swedish counterparts. Furthermore, French and Swedish newspapers publish more educational articles about disinformation than those in the United States. Moreover, U.S. newspapers largely attribute the responsibility for the spread of disinformation to political actors.

5.5 Article 5: Understanding journalists' perceptions of mainstream media coverage of disinformation in Cameroon through the lens of journalistic cultures

The fundamental mission of mainstream news media is to provide the public with accurate information that enhances political knowledge and helps the public make informed choices. However, scholars have noted an interesting paradox: by paying attention to disinformation that originates on social media, mainstream news media help disseminate it. Of note, this paradox has mostly been explored in established democracies in Western Europe and North America, with very little research in sub-Saharan African.

To address this gap, this study aims to understand how Cameroonian journalist perceive mainstream media attention of disinformation in their country. Furthermore, this study explores the measures

mainstream news media in Cameroon take to combat disinformation, as well as the challenge they face in this endeavour. The empirical enquiry is guided by the following research questions: (1) how do Cameroonian journalists perceive their mainstream news media's attention to online disinformation? (2) What measures do mainstream news media in Cameroon take to combat online disinformation? (3) How do Cameroonian journalists perceive the challenges their mainstream news media face in their fight against online disinformation?

Theoretically, this study is guided by research on journalistic cultures. Methodologically, 16 editors of mainstream news media in Cameroon are interviewed in depth.

The findings show that mainstream media outlets in Cameroon largely avoid reporting on false stories disseminated online because they do not want to give these misleading claims greater visibility and because they believe the function of mass media is primarily to publish only accurate information. However, they sometimes see that a false story circulating online is viral and significant enough to appear in the news. In that case, they focus of correcting information rather than the falsehood. Mainstream news media consider that their most important way to fight disinformation is to ensure that they themselves do not publish inaccurate information. For that reason, they strongly emphasise verifying the truthfulness of facts and events before publishing information. Despite these efforts, mainstream media in Cameroon face challenges in combating online disinformation. The most significant of these challenges is the unwillingness of government institutions to collaborate with private traditional media organs and facilitate their access to official sources.

6 Findings

This dissertation aims to understand how journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation in Western and sub-Saharan African countries, using Cameroon, France, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States as case studies. The dissertation comprises five studies, each addressing a specific aspect of the research problem. This section presents the overall findings of the dissertation.

Social media facilitate the spread of disinformation in Cameroon

Social media are used in Cameroon as a platform to produce and propagate disinformation with the intent of advancing particular political agendas. Mainstream news media are confronted with these strategically produced falsehoods, to which they respond using fact-checking and corrective news reporting. Information published on Facebook by citizen journalists lacks basic elements of journalistic accuracy, reliability, and transparency, indicative of the poor quality of the information and a propensity to intentionally propagate false and misleading claims.

The results confirm that when those who produce news are supportive a political cause, they have the tendency of forgoing the fundamental principles of journalism such as accuracy, balance, and clarity, in other to promote that cause. In that sense, Facebook with respect to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon is a platform that facilitates the dissemination of disinformation. Reason being that social media do not have such comparable gatekeeping constraints for ensuring the accuracy of news as with mainstream news media.

It is such instances of disinformation among others that mainstream news media confront by engaging in fact-checking and corrective news reporting. These responses reflect diverse journalistic cultures, which are the shared views and perspectives of professionals about journalistic work, and that are negotiated within specific contexts and with respect to particular structural constraints.

Different priorities in the appropriation of journalistic cultures reflect on mainstream news media responses to disinformation

Fact-checker's perceptions of their roles in the Western countries mostly mirror different priorities in monitorial journalistic cultures, while their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa reflect the influence of more diverse, complex and hybrid journalistic cultures.

Among Western countries, French fact-checkers perceive their roles mostly as debunkers of online disinformation, as watchdogs verifying political actors claims, and as educators, providing explanations to public about important societal issues. These role orientations are typically emphasised in the monitorial journalistic culture (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Swedish fact-checkers perceive that they primarily provide accurate information and explanations to the public about issues which are salient to society. Besides, they also believe they have a watchdog role for debunking false and misleading claims which are potentially harmful to the people. Both role orientations are held in high esteem in the monitorial journalistic culture. Finally, U.S. fact-checkers mostly view their role as watchdogs, holding political actors accountable for the claims they make. This watchdog function of journalism is at the heart of the monitorial journalistic culture (Henkel et al., 2019).

However, it is important to note that among the fact-checkers interviewed in Sweden, one with an American background, and which had previously worked as a fact-checker in the US before moving to the Nordic country did not share the view of the fact-checking role commonly supported in Sweden. For that journalist, the emphasis of fact-checking should be more on verifying political actors claims than providing explanations to the public about societal issues. In the discussion section which is dedicated to the interpretation of findings in this dissertation, I will explain how this divergence of viewpoint can be understood and what it signifies for the concept of journalistic cultures generally. Taken together, France, Sweden and the United States essentially represent the monitorial journalistic culture, albeit with different priorities across the large spectrum of monitorial journalism.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroonian fact-checkers mainly see themselves as debunkers of disinformation of a human-interest nature. This limitation to human-interest stories is due to the fear that verifying political claims which are detrimental to the regime can lead to backlash against them. Debunking disinformation, even when it concerns non-political claims, reveals the adoption of the monitorial role of journalism. Such a tendency normally suggests the influence of the monitorial journalistic culture. At the same time, the self-censorship that constrains Cameroonian fact-checkers indicates a hurdle to their role as watchdogs.

In Kenya, fact-checkers mostly perceive their roles as watchdogs, ensuring accountability and settling political and social disputes; as educators, enabling people to critically interact with information; and as mobilisers, promoting democratic involvement. These perspectives are consistent with the monitorial and interventionist roles of

journalism. Hence, Kenya shows a mixture of the monitorial and advocative journalistic cultures.

Nigerian fact-checkers mainly perceive their mission as watchdogs, tracking and verifying all kinds of viral contents, and as educators, promoting media literacy, civic empowerment, as well as the integrity of information. These perceptions highlight an inclination towards monitorial, interventionist, and developmental roles, thus reflecting the influence of the monitorial, advocative, and developmental journalistic cultures.

Finally, South African fact-checkers view themselves mainly as correctors of disinformation, and educators who engage in media literacy campaigns and promote civic empowerment. These views emphasise the monitorial, interventionist, and developmental roles of journalism, and are indicative of the influence of the monitorial, advocative, and developmental journalistic cultures.

Different perspectives on the performance of the watchdog role in Western mainstream news media

This dissertation shows that France and Sweden differ markedly from the United States regarding the watchdog role of mainstream news media. Indeed, newspapers in France and Sweden mostly publish news articles which inform and educate the public about issues related to disinformation, whereas newspapers in the United States largely publish news articles which merely account for cases of false and misleading stories propagation.

Moreover, newspapers in the United States demonstrate a strong tendency for polarisation through the use of the attribution of responsibility frame. While left-leaning newspapers mostly attribute

the propagation of disinformation to President Trump and the Republican party, their right-leaning counterparts mostly attribute the responsibility for the propagation of disinformation to the Democrats. Such propensity for attributing the responsibility for the spread of disinformation to national political actors – with a considerable editorial divide – is not manifested in the French and Swedish newspapers' coverage of disinformation.

In reality, both approaches are suggestive of the influence of the monitorial journalistic culture. However, the countries are differentiated based on how interested they are in performing their watchdog roles. While France and Sweden prioritise the role of neutral disseminators informing and educating the public, the United States is strongly interventionist and adversarial.

Correcting falsehoods and advocating for mainstream journalism without amplifying disinformation in Cameroon

The interviews with editors of mainstream news media in Cameroon show that they believe journalism is ultimately concerned with reporting about events and information which are accurate. Therefore, they prefer not to report about disinformation stories propagated online. However, if the disinformation is considered potentially harmful for the public or very significant in terms for example of economic implications, then the editors largely believe the disinformation should be covered in the news. However, the emphasis will be more on the correction than on the disinformation per se, in order to mitigate the amplifying effect which usually follows the repetition of falsehoods in mainstream news media coverage. This monitorial role perception reflect the influence of the monitorial journalistic culture.

Furthermore, Cameroonian editors also believe that covering disinformation is an opportunity to strengthen the central position of the mainstream news media as sources of political information. This, in a time when many people increasingly turn to social media to consume political news. Thus, by exposing the falsehoods propagated on social media, journalists in a way tell the public that reliable and accurate information is an affair of mainstream news media. This interventionist conception of the role of mainstream news media in the coverage of disinformation in Cameroon mirror the influence of the advocative journalistic culture.

Diverse epistemological and ethical ideologies across Western and sub-Saharan African countries

The findings reveal that in Western democracies, French and Swedish fact-checkers have a strong commitment to objectivism and empiricism as epistemological orientations. Meanwhile, U.S. fact-checkers point to the inclusion of both objectivism and subjectivism as epistemological perspectives. In a related manner, French and Swedish fact-checkers show an inclination for empiricism, while U.S. fact-checkers adhere to empiricism, but also opinions and commentaries. While the French and Swedish positions mirror the influence of the epistemological orientations typically emphasised in the monitorial journalistic culture, the United States reflects the influence of the epistemological orientations normally emphasised in the monitorial and advocative journalistic cultures.

Moreover, based on their perceptions, French and Swedish fact-checkers adhere to absolutism as ethical ideologies, while their U.S. counterparts follow both absolutism and situationism as ethical ideologies. Absolutism is theoretically connected to the monitorial

journalistic culture, thus suggestive of its influence on how French and Swedish fact-checkers perceive their roles. On the other hand, situationism is normally typical of the advocative journalistic culture. Therefore, it is fair to claim that the ethical ideologies emphasised in both the monitorial and advocative journalistic cultures are reflected in how U.S. fact-checkers perceive their roles.

The findings from sub-Saharan Africa reveal the adherence of fact-checkers to objectivism as an epistemological orientation and absolutism as an ethical ideology. However, as indicated above, Cameroonian fact-checkers prefer to avoid political fact-checking or corrective news reporting when it is not favourable to the political leadership. So, the epistemological orientations and ethical considerations which are typical of the monitorial journalistic culture should be understood as restricted to nonpolitical issues.

Finally, the perceptions of Kenyan, Nigerian, and South African fact-checkers mostly point to the adoption of both objectivism and subjectivism as epistemological orientations, and situationism and absolutism as ethical ideologies, which are usually suggestive of the influence of the advocative and monitorial journalistic cultures. Table 4 presents a summary of the main findings of this dissertation.

Table 4. Summary of the main findings of this dissertation

Country	Mainstream news media responses to disinformation	Main role orientation	Main epistemology adopted	Main ethical ideology considered	Main journalistic culture(s) reflected
France	Debunking online falsehoods; explanatory fact-checking; informative and educational news reporting about disinformation	Monitorial: watchdog and education	Objectivism	Absolutism	Monitorial
Sweden	Explanatory fact-checking; informative and educational news reporting about disinformation	Monitorial: information and education	Objectivism	Absolutism	Monitorial
United States	Watchdog fact-checking and news reporting to hold political actors accountable	Monitorial: watchdog	Often objectivism, sometimes subjectivism	Often absolutism, sometimes situationism	Monitorial
Cameroon	Debunking human-interest disinformation	Monitorial and Interventionist: Information and correction	Objectivism	Absolutism	Monitorial (ad hoc, constrained)
Kenya	Watchdog for accountability and political mobilisation	Monitorial and Interventionist: watchdog, civic empowerment, and political participation	Objectivism and subjectivism	Absolutism and situationism	Advocative, monitorial

Nigeria	Educational fact-checking, debunking harmful online disinformation	Monitorial and interventionist: education and civic empowerment	Objectivism and subjectivism	Absolutism and situationism	Advocative, monitorial, and developmental
South Africa	Watchdog, corrective and educational fact-checking	Monitorial: education	Objectivism	Absolutism	Monitorial

Note: table shows the main findings this dissertation. The role orientations presented are those mostly emphasised.

As demonstrated in this dissertation, different combinations of journalistic culture types are reflected in the mainstream news media responses to disinformation in Western countries and sub-Saharan-African countries. There are also interesting differences and similarities in the priorities emphasised across Western and sub-Saharan Africa countries. I discuss these findings in the following chapter.

7 Discussion

The results of this dissertation show that the ways mainstream news media respond to disinformation in countries with different levels of democracies reflect diverse influences of journalistic cultures. The influences of monitorial journalistic culture are overwhelmingly mirrored in the Western democratic countries, France, Sweden and the US, as well as the sub-Saharan Africa democratic country, South Africa, albeit with different approaches and foci. In the transitional democracies of sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, as well as the nondemocratic country, Cameroon, the influences of more complex, multilayered and hybrid journalistic cultures are reflected on mainstream news media responses to disinformation.

The first finding to be discussed is the different appropriations of monitorial journalistic culture in democratic countries. Mainstream news media responses to disinformation in France, South Africa, and Sweden demonstrate a stronger orientation towards providing accurate information and explanatory context to the public. This with respect to societal issues subject to the circulation of false and misleading claims. By contrast, those in the United States place greater emphasis on holding political actors accountable for their statements.

This education-oriented focus in Swedish and French mainstream news media responses to disinformation can be further understood through the market-orientation dimension of journalistic cultures as outlined by Hanitzsch (2007). The media systems of France, and particularly Sweden, are strongly grounded in a public service ideology, whereas the United States media system is characterised by a high degree of commercialisation. As established in the literature,

such orientations imply that in public service–oriented media systems, mainstream news media tend to treat audiences as citizens and therefore prioritise the provision of information deemed necessary for political understanding, rather than simply what audiences may prefer. Conversely, in highly commercialised media systems, audiences are more often conceptualised as consumers, and news provision is more closely aligned with audience preferences than with civic informational needs.

In addition, in relation to the power distance dimension within the role constituent of journalistic cultures, the watchdog-oriented emphasis observed in U.S. mainstream news media responses to disinformation can be explained by the more adversarial character of American journalism. This does not imply that French and Swedish journalism is passive or uncritical, as the findings clearly demonstrate otherwise. Rather, it suggests that France and Sweden are positioned at lower levels on this continuum in comparison to the United States.

It is also important to note that, although France and Sweden belong to different media system models, Hallin and Mancini (2004) emphasise that the French media system shares considerable similarities with those of Northern Europe. They specifically argue that 'in its media system, as in its political history and social structure, France is clearly a borderline case; in terms of our three models, it can be seen as falling somewhere between the Polarized Pluralist and the Democratic Corporatist models' (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 90). From this perspective, it is reasonable to conclude that journalists in France and Sweden share several ideological orientations and professional practices in their responses to disinformation.

In view of this interpretation, I can at this level argue that the adoption in democratic countries of particular orientations of the monitorial journalistic culture is strongly related to the values supported in the concerned media systems. The more the media system of a country in a less politically polarized democratic country is geared towards public service, the more the responses mainstream news media to disinformation will give priority to providing corrective information, explanations, and education. Conversely, the more a media system in a strongly polarized democratic country is inclined towards commercialisation, the more the responses of mainstream news media to disinformation will be adversarial, and more centred on political actors than societal issues. In both cases, mainstream news media responses to disinformation mostly reflect the influence of monitorial journalistic culture in conformity with Hanitzsch et al. (2019) suggestion that it is the model typical of Western democracies. However, there are differences in priorities and focus as this dissertation has unveiled.

Again, the fact that a journalist working with a Swedish news outlet, but with an American background and having previously worked for a fact-checking initiative in the US, share the same view of the role of fact-checking with journalists working in the US is somewhat interesting. It shows that the background in terms of journalism education, culture, and previous work experience of that person has a strong influence on their role perceptions. This construction is not altered even by new contexts of adoption. Even though this experience concerns a single individual and therefore cannot be generalised, it is nevertheless suggestive of the eventuality that adherence to journalistic cultures under certain circumstances might not be influence by news media organisations or media systems.

Instead, they might be solidly anchored in the individual journalist education and cultural background. This again consolidates my argument that journalistic culture are complex, dynamic, and negotiated at different levels of interest.

A key result that diverges from expectations in journalistic cultures research concerns U.S. fact-checkers, who reported that it is acceptable to adopt a subjectivist approach when evaluating and assessing certain claims made by political actors. This is noteworthy, as the literature generally identifies objectivism as the dominant epistemological orientation in journalistic cultures within established Western democracies. This finding aligns with Vos et al. (2026, p. 1), who argue that 'objectivity is no longer the unquestioned epistemology in U.S. journalism culture, replaced by a combination of naturalist and constructivist orientations'.

Moreover, the articulation of professional roles among U.S. fact-checkers also reveals occasional adoption of situationism as an ethical ideology. This again departs from journalistic cultures research, which typically associates absolutism with ethical orientations in Western liberal democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). These findings concerning epistemological and ethical orientations among U.S. fact-checkers altogether challenge the suggestions of journalistic cultures research that the journalism in democratic countries of the West usually associate the monitorial role with the objectivist epistemology and the absolutist ethical ideology.

With respect to the US experience, I argue also that the adoption of journalistic culture is not always linear across constituents and corresponding dimensions. In reality it is a much more complex and

dynamic positioning which journalists ultimately negotiate in view of contexts, defining circumstances, and political interests.

Also, the South African case is particularly significant, as it represents one of the few consolidated democracies in Africa. The findings indicate that the monitorial journalistic culture is strongly reflected in mainstream news media responses to disinformation in South Africa. In terms of role orientation, the monitorial function is emphasised through correction and public education. Epistemologically, objectivism is predominant, while ethical orientations are largely consistent with absolutism. These characteristics position South Africa's mainstream news media responses to disinformation closer to those observed in Sweden than to those in geographically proximate countries such as Kenya and Nigeria. This suggests that journalistic cultures are shaped more strongly by political and media system configurations than by geographical proximity. This finding reinforces Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 10), who argue that in the study of journalistic cultures, 'only national borders should be seen as the irrelevant boundaries'. Accordingly, countries situated in different global regions may nonetheless share similar journalistic orientations when their political and media systems exhibit comparable structural characteristics.

With regard to transitional and authoritarian contexts in sub-Saharan Africa countries, the reflection of hybrid journalistic cultures on mainstream news media responses to disinformation is observed. The findings on Cameroon are particularly significant. Mainstream news media responses to disinformation in this authoritarian context are characterised by a monitorial role orientation, objectivist epistemology, and absolutist ethical ideology – features typically associated with the monitorial journalistic culture. This appears to

challenge the assumption that collaborative journalistic cultures are predominant in non-democratic regimes (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). However, the Cameroonian case is shaped by the constraints of authoritarian governance, where journalists frequently rely on self-censorship as a strategy to mitigate the risks of state repression.

In this respect, a 2023 news article by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) confirms that many media outlets in Cameroon engage in self-censorship due to harassment and threats faced by journalists whose reporting is perceived as opposing government interests (BBC, 2023). Similarly, the 2025 Reporters Without Borders report notes that, despite having one of the most diverse media landscapes in Africa, Cameroon remains one of the continent's most dangerous environments for journalists (RSF, 2026).

The prevalence of self-censorship among Cameroonian journalists therefore warrants further theoretical attention, particularly regarding its implications for journalistic culture theory. While the existing literature suggests that media in authoritarian contexts often adopt collaborative cultures aligned with regime interests (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), the Cameroonian case indicates a different pattern. Although journalists do not actively perform a watchdog function in the sense of holding political actors accountable, they also do not consistently act as loyal facilitators of the regime. Instead, they often disengage from politically sensitive issues altogether. The avoidance of working on sensitive topics in fact-checking practices in conflict and authoritarian contexts has been confirmed in other empirical studies examining other countries such as Ethiopia and Mali (Badji et al., 2024) and Zambia (Ndawana, 2026). The position of Cameroon is somewhat similar to what Ndawana (2026) described in the case of Zambia as *ad hoc journalistic culture*, because it is not planned or

considered, but imposed by a harsh environment, very challenging for professionalism and ethics.

In view of the Cameroonian experience, I argue that the manifested journalistic cultures in authoritarian countries in sub-Saharan Africa might not always reflect the beliefs and ideologies of professionals. It is possible that mainstream news media and journalists are compelled to adopt a particular journalistic culture at a particular point in time because of the contextual constraints, even if they do not agree with such ideologies and would have done otherwise in other circumstances.

This is even more true with subtle authoritarian regimes like Cameroon which gives the impression of a democracy with regard to the freedom and liberties provided in the constitution, as well as the hundreds of news media outlets existing in the country (Forcha & Ngange, 2022). But in reality, the precarity of the work and living conditions of journalists have subjected the large majority of professionals to the government and economic elite control (Wantchami, 2025). In many cases, even news outlets which claim to be independent are undercover financed by political and economic elites to support particular agendas (Ndangam, 2009). Thus, the values, principles, and roles of journalism upheld by these professionals might be essentially circumstantial and contingent with their vulnerable situations instead of grounded beliefs and ideologies.

A further important insight from the Cameroonian experience is that journalists may uphold standards and normative professional ideals such as truth, accuracy, objectivity, fairness, transparency, and ethical codes of conduct (Custodi, 2026). However, this is essentially possible when addressing issues that are not politically or economically

sensitive. This suggests that journalistic culture is not solely defined by what journalists do, intend to do, or are capable of doing, but also by the nature of the issues they are permitted or able to address within specific contexts.

Regarding Kenya as a transitional democracy, the findings indicate that mainstream news media responses to disinformation reflect a hybrid and multilayered journalistic culture combining the monitorial, advocative, and developmental models. However, the advocative model appears to be more prominent than the others. This aligns with the broader literature suggesting that in transitional democracies, the advocative journalistic culture tends to dominate, as journalists often actively pursue social change and contribute to political and social reform (McIntyre & Cohen, 2024; Mellado et al., 2024; Mudavadi, 2025). Similarly, Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 166) argue that journalists in Kenya strongly emphasise 'a pedagogical role through which journalists raise public awareness and knowledge about social issues.

In contrast, Nigeria – also a transitional democracy included in this study – exhibits a hybrid and multilayered journalistic culture combining the advocative, monitorial, and developmental models. However, unlike Kenya, the advocative model is less dominant and does not clearly outweigh the other orientations. As a result, the Nigerian case does not fully align with expectations in journalistic cultures research. This variation may be linked to differing democratic trajectories, particularly the fact that Kenya has experienced a longer period of democratic consolidation, whereas Nigeria emerged more recently from prolonged military rule. Consequently, Kenyan journalists appear more strongly oriented towards interventionism and political engagement, while Nigerian

journalists continue to balance accountability reporting, civic education, and concerns for social cohesion and stability.

I therefore argue that in transitional democracies, negotiated journalism is connected to democratic trajectories. Indeed, the degree to which a transitional democracy will predominantly adhere to the advocative journalistic culture is dependent on the democratic experience that country has enjoyed. This argument adds more explanations to Hanitzsch et al. (2019) suggestion that countries in transitional democracies usually embrace the advocative journalistic cultures.

Altogether, the findings of this dissertation have shown that the journalistic cultures as manifested in the mainstream news media responses to disinformation should be understood beyond deterministic media-system models. Journalistic cultures are negotiated and embedded configurations. It is a fallacy to try to capture them in the box. Journalistic cultures which guide how professionals view and practice journalism are essentially dynamic and connected to a range of defining factors and circumstances. They are legitimised at different levels of power, relevance and intervention including primarily the journalist as an individual, and the news media organisation as structure within which several journalists operate and can collectively embrace and implement a particular orientation.

8 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to understand how journalistic cultures influence mainstream news media responses to disinformation across Western democracies and sub-Saharan African countries. The findings demonstrate that journalistic cultures do indeed shape such responses in diverse, complex, and hybrid ways, which are strongly conditioned by contextual and situational negotiations. Importantly, this dissertation reveals meaningful differences in how the monitorial journalistic culture is conceptualised across Western democracies. In France and Sweden, the dominant orientation emphasises the explanation of relevant societal issues to the public as central to fact-checking practices, whereas in the United States greater emphasis is placed on holding political actors accountable for the dissemination of disinformation.

Therefore, journalistic cultures should not be understood as fixed or deterministic, irrespective of context. Rather, they are continuously negotiated, appropriated, and legitimised in dynamic ways, and are subject to processes of reappropriation and adaptation depending on contextual conditions. Moreover, I argue that journalistic cultures are not only determined by political and media contexts. They are shaped by several other considerations beyond the political and media environments including for example journalism training, journalists' cultural background, professionals' emancipation, journalists' perception of safety and security, personal judgements, newsroom policies, as well as availability of resources for journalists to work conveniently.

From this perspective, the enactment of journalistic cultures within national contexts is not solely determined at the abstract level of

political or media system typologies. This is evident in the United States, where despite a highly autonomous and independent media system, mainstream news media may nonetheless adopt subjectivist epistemological orientations and situationist ethical ideologies. This stands in contrast to expectations derived from its media system characteristics, which would typically suggest a stronger alignment with objectivism and absolutism in epistemological and ethical terms.

The Cameroonian case further illustrates the limits of deterministic approaches to journalistic cultures. In this authoritarian context, mainstream news media responses to disinformation reflect elements of a monitorial journalistic culture; however, this orientation is largely the outcome of self-censorship practices driven by fear of state repression. Journalists consequently restrict their reporting to non-sensitive issues, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with political authorities. In doing so, they do not fully adopt the collaborative journalistic culture often associated in the literature with authoritarian regimes characterised by restricted press freedom but instead withdraw from politically consequential reporting altogether.

Moreover, the fact that countries share similar political system classifications, such as Kenya and Nigeria as transitional democracies, does not necessarily mean that they converge in the importance they give to advocative journalistic cultures. The findings show that Kenyan mainstream news media responses to disinformation place greater emphasis on an interventionist role, whereas Nigerian responses reflect a more balanced combination of the monitorial, developmental, and interventionist orientations. This divergence cannot be sufficiently explained by reference to political or media system similarities alone. A historical perspective is therefore necessary. Kenya's longer experience with democratic

governance contrasts with Nigeria's prolonged history of military rule prior to a recent democratic transition. This difference in democratic trajectories helps explain the stronger interventionist orientation among Kenyan journalists, whereas Nigerian journalists appear more inclined to balance accountability functions with concerns for social cohesion and political stability.

Furthermore, I contend that proximity in journalistic cultures is more strongly shaped by ideological convergence than by geographical proximity. This dissertation demonstrates, for example, that South Africa shares more similarities in journalistic culture with Sweden than with geographically closer countries such as Cameroon, Kenya, and Nigeria. This finding underscores the importance of ideological orientations and contextual constraints in shaping journalistic cultures, rather than spatial or regional proximity alone.

Again, this dissertation shows that mainstream news media tend to maintain consistent orientations when engaging in both fact-checking and corrective news reporting. On this basis, I argue that these two forms of journalistic responses to disinformation should be analysed jointly as part of a broader category of media responses to disinformation. This represents a significant contribution to the literature, which has typically treated fact-checking and corrective reporting as separate analytical domains.

To summarize, this dissertation has demonstrated that mainstream news media responses to disinformation are influenced by journalistic cultures in different ways, showing that journalistic cultures are dynamic, complex, circumstantial and contexts-related. Whether in sub-Saharan Africa or in Western countries, journalistic

cultures are negotiated within respective contexts and with respect a range of defining situations, circumstances, and interests.

Limitations and further research

Understanding how journalistic cultures shape mainstream news media responses to disinformation is crucial for democratic governance, as different media approaches carry distinct implications for public knowledge, media literacy, and citizens' ability to critically evaluate information sources. Prior studies suggest, for instance, that audiences in the United States may be more susceptible to disinformation than those in Sweden, where higher levels of media literacy, political knowledge, and source criticism have been observed. This raises an important question: to what extent might differences in mainstream news media responses to disinformation contribute to such cross-national variation? This question, among others outlined in the concluding section of this dissertation, warrants further investigation in future research.

That said, this dissertation is limited to seven countries, of which three are liberal Western democracies and four are sub-Saharan African countries. Additional projects that include non-democratic Western countries and other sub-Saharan African countries at different levels of democratisation will allow more robust empirical conclusions to be drawn. In addition, this dissertation did not include a quantitative content analysis to evaluate the role performance of mainstream news media in the coverage of disinformation in sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, Cameroonian journalists were interviewed to collect their perceptions of their mainstream news media coverage of disinformation. Further research employing content analysis to examine mainstream news media coverage of disinformation across

multiple sub-Saharan African countries would significantly advance scholarship in both journalism studies and disinformation research.

Finally, there is a clear need for additional studies on journalistic cultures and media systems within sub-Saharan Africa. These influential frameworks for understanding journalism have predominantly been developed and tested in the contexts of Western Europe and North America. Consequently, sub-Saharan Africa has rarely been examined as a context in its own right; instead, it has often served as a site for the application of assumptions derived elsewhere. Advancing the field would benefit from research that proposes context-specific typologies of media systems and journalistic cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, comparable to the models for Western Europe and North America. More empirical studies focused specifically on sub-Saharan Africa would make a substantial contribution to journalism studies.

9 Formalities

The five articles that comprise this dissertation are written in British English. Quotes in this dissertation that were originally in French or Swedish have been translated to English.

Two of the five articles have co-authors. Article 3 is co-authored by Dr Chikezie Uzuegbunam (Rhodes University, South Africa), Dr Chinedu Ononiwu (Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria), and Enock Magack Masaki (Howard University, United States), a PhD candidate. Each author conducted interviews in their respective country and collaborated in reporting and analysing the results. Besides, each author was responsible for writing a section of the article. I wrote the introduction and theoretical framework, Dr Uzuegbunam wrote the literature review, Enock Magack Masaki wrote the methodology, and Dr Ononiwu wrote the discussion and conclusion.

Article 5 also has two co-authors: Dr Dominic Forcha Elempia (University of Buea, Cameroon) and Brian Binebunwi (University of Buea), a master's student. In this article, I wrote the introduction, literature review, and methodology, while Dr Elempia and Brian Binebunwi wrote the results, discussion, and conclusion. Dr Elempia and I conducted the interviews.

The other three articles – 1, 2, and 4 – are solely authored by me. The articles have been included with the publishers' permission. To read the final, copyedited versions, seek out the journals.

10 Ethical considerations

The participants were provided with information about the project prior to the interviews. They were informed that the interviews were purely for academic research and that the data collected would only be used for that purpose. In addition, the participants were ensured anonymity: neither their identities nor any information about their functions in their mainstream news media organs would be disclosed. The participants consented to participate in the interviews, and they had the option to end their participation without explanation at any point in the process. Moreover, the participants were allowed to read their quotes and agree that they were accurate and could be published. In particularly, for the participants in sub-Saharan Africa, the researchers discussed the potential risks linked to their participation, given that they operate in countries which are not liberal democracies. The researchers and the participants did not view the interviews as posing any risk to the participants, as the questions focused on journalists' perceptions of journalism, without involving them in political disputes or criticism of the ruling regimes.

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