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Audience Motivations for Sharing Dis- and Misinformation: A Comparative Study in ~~Five~~ (Four and a Half) Sub-Saharan African Countries

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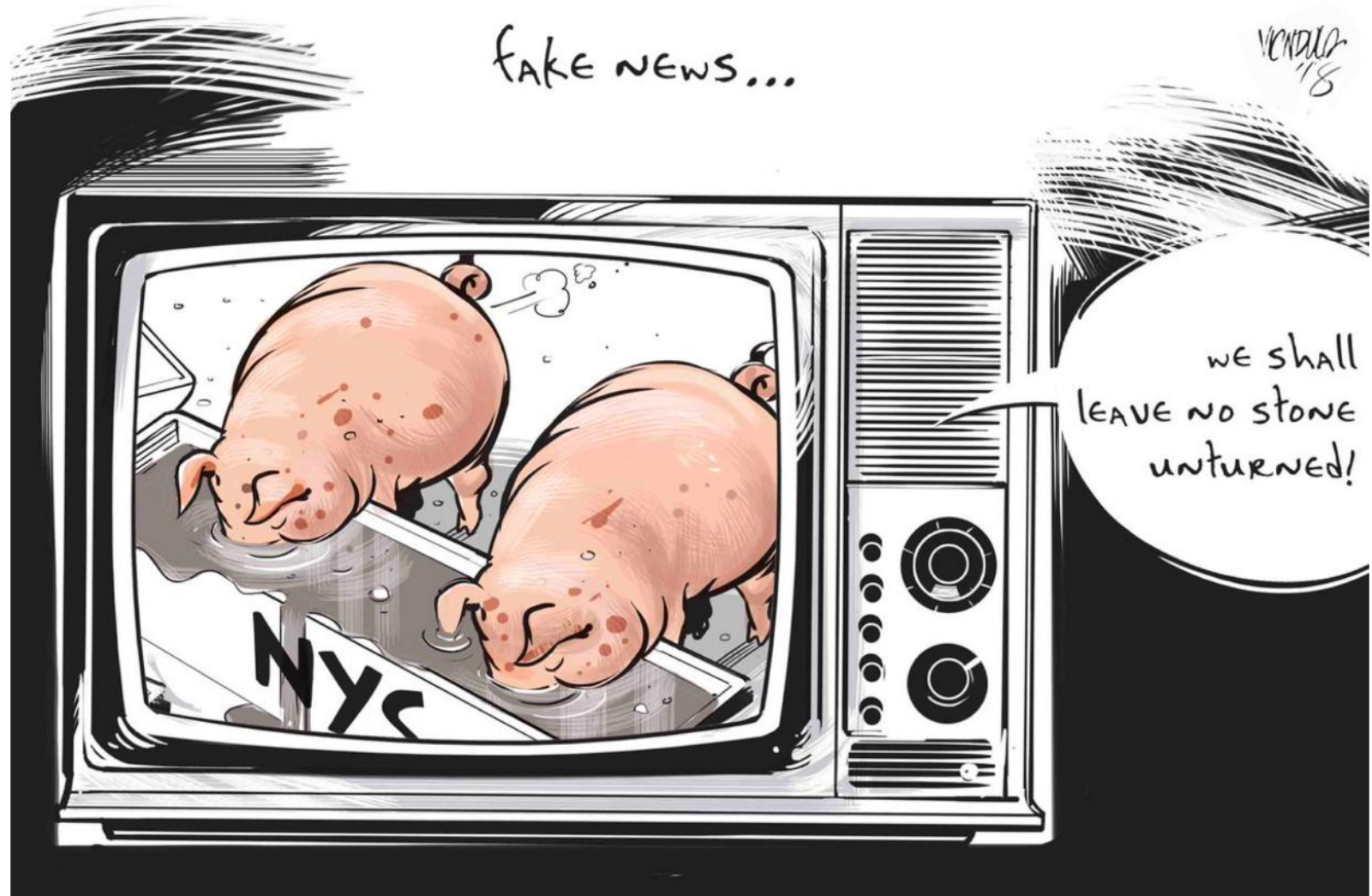Admire Mare, Namibia U of Science and Technology | @admire2mare

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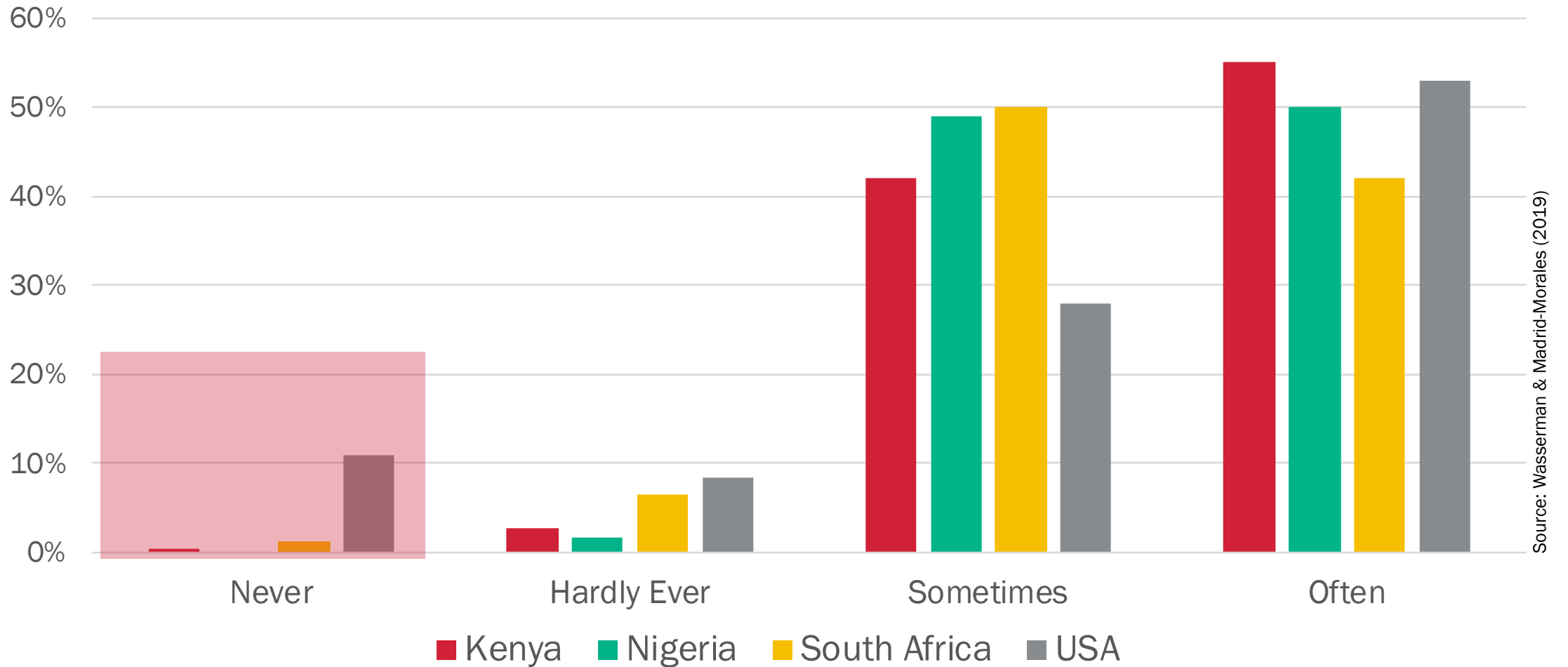
Old wine in a new bottle

Source: https://twitter.com/ndula_victor/status/1001123438604554245

Disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa – A research agenda

Exploratory three-country nonprobability online survey

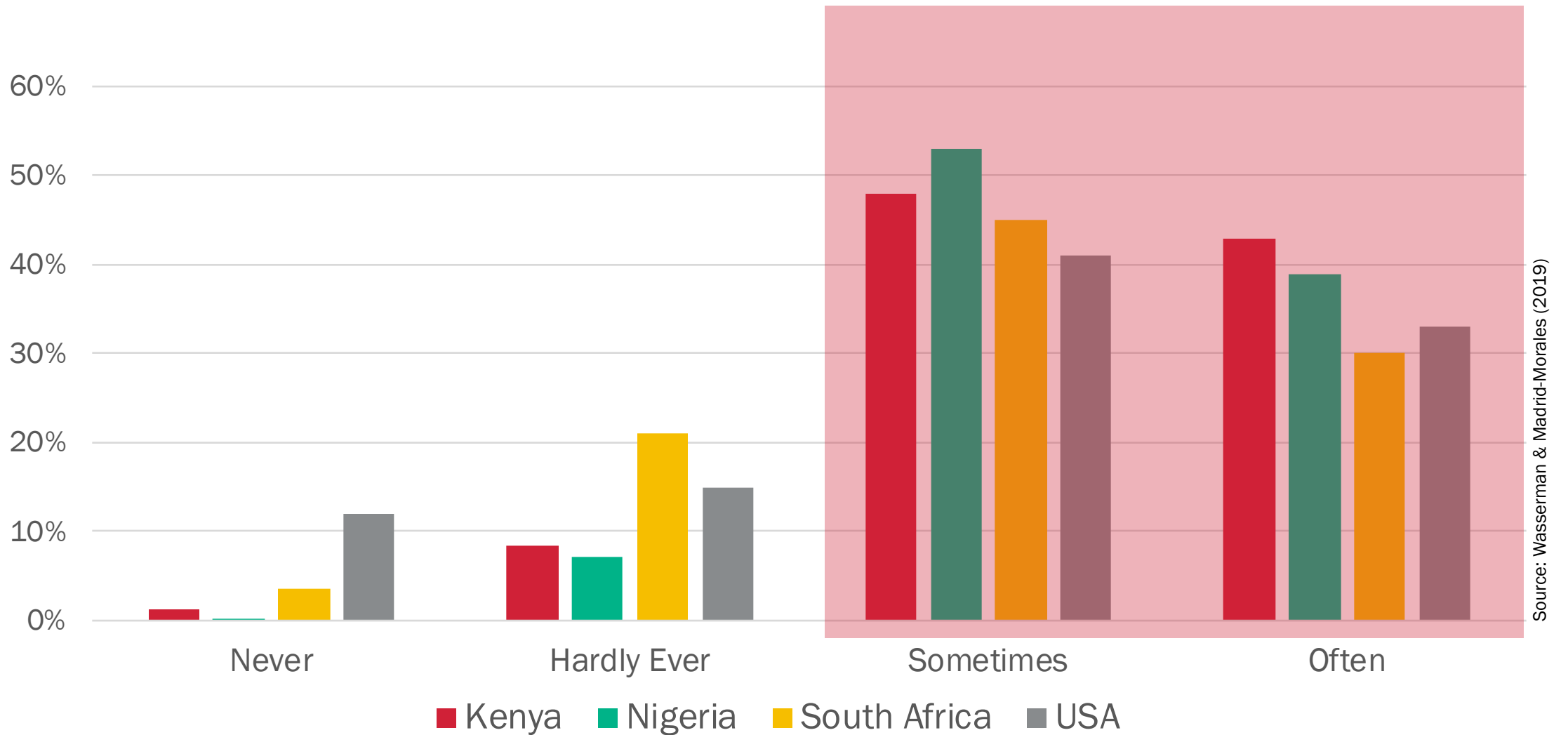How often do you come across news stories about politics and government online that you think are *not fully accurate*? (*N* = 2,784)

Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019)
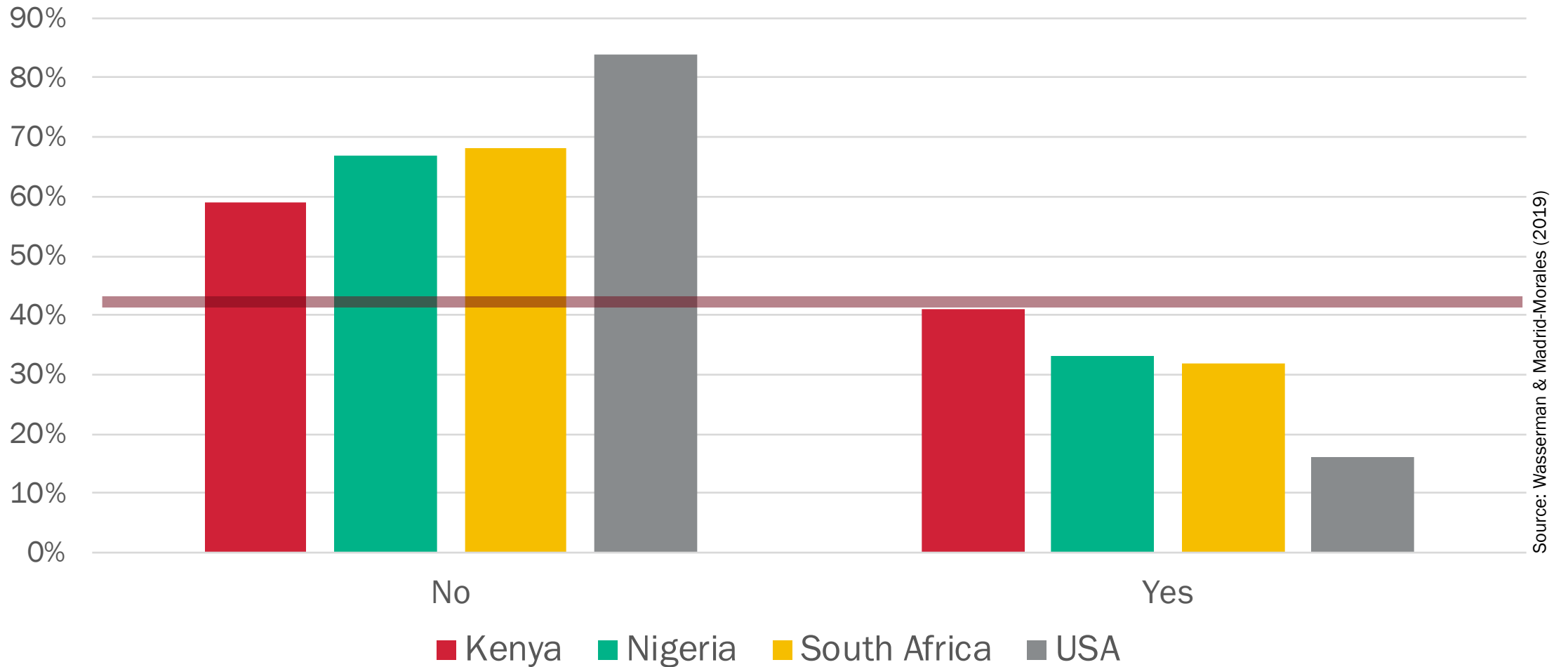
Kenya ■ Nigeria ■ South Africa ■ USA

How often do you come across news stories about politics and government online that you think are *completely made up*? (*N* = 2,784)


Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019)

Legend: Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, USA

Have you ever shared a political news story online that *you later found* out was made up? (*N* = 2,784)

Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019)

Kenya Nigeria South Africa USA

Have you ever shared a political news story online that you thought *at the time* was made up? (*N* = 2,784)

Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019)

Legend: ■ Kenya ■ Nigeria ■ South Africa ■ USA
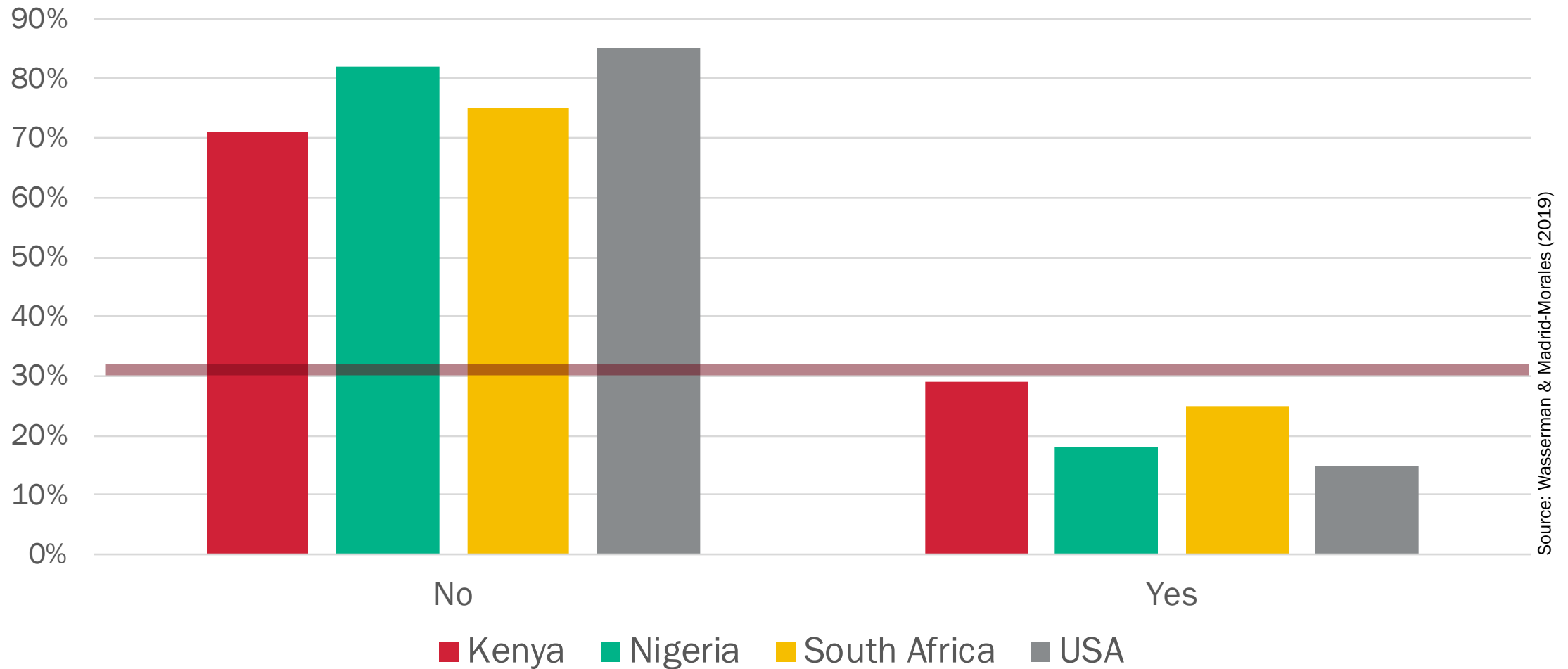
Unanswered questions

- Our previous work helped us understand how much **we still don't understand** about the spread of mis- and disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa…

1. Can these results be **replicated** among those with lower levels of formal education?

2. Are the patterns identified in these three media saturated countries applicable to **other African nations**?

3. What is the **direction of the relationship** between exposure to "fake media" and decreasing media trust?

4. What makes Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans **share inaccurate news** rather frequently?

News sharing

- A wide range of individual and societal motivations for sharing dis- & mis-information have been identified in different socio-political contexts.

  - In "advanced" democracies, it responds to "'**chaotic**' motivations to "burn down" the entire established democratic 'cosmos'" (Petersen, Osmundsen, & Arceneaux, 2018)
  - In the UK, people share inaccurate information to "**express their feelings**"; "to **inform others**", and "to **find out other people's opinions**" (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019)
  - In Singapore, "fake news" & rumors are shared to "cope with **uncertainty**, **build relationships**, and for **self-enhancement**" (Duffy, Tandoc & Ling, 2019)
  - In Kenya and Nigeria, sharing information is... (Chakrabarti, Rooney, & Kewon, 2018)
    - a form of **social currency** that derives from a desire to be "in the know"
    - a **civic duty** to share warnings of impeding crises or disasters
    - a democratic right - **information is democratic** and needs to be shared.

Disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa – A research agenda

Exploratory three-country nonprobability online survey

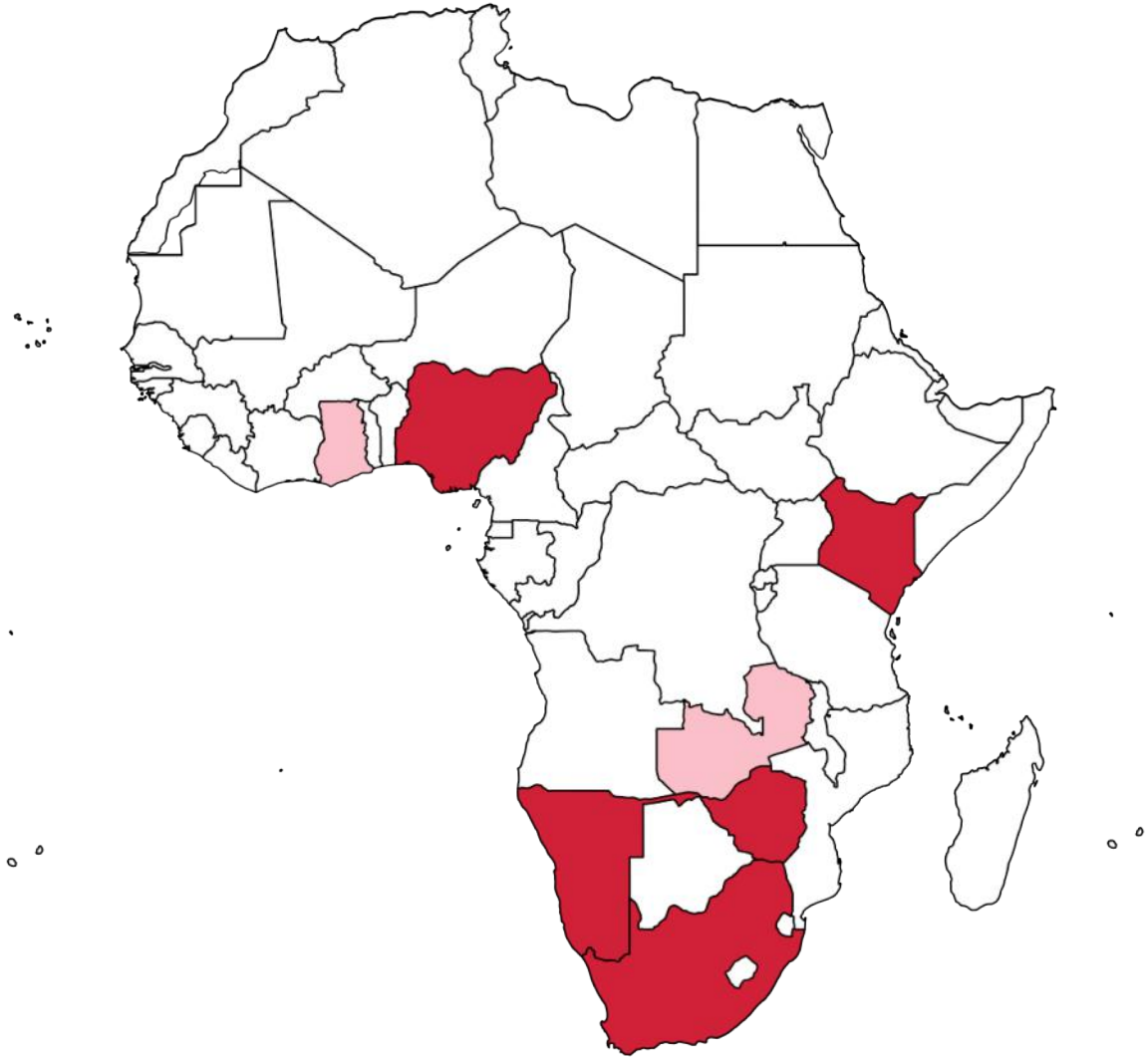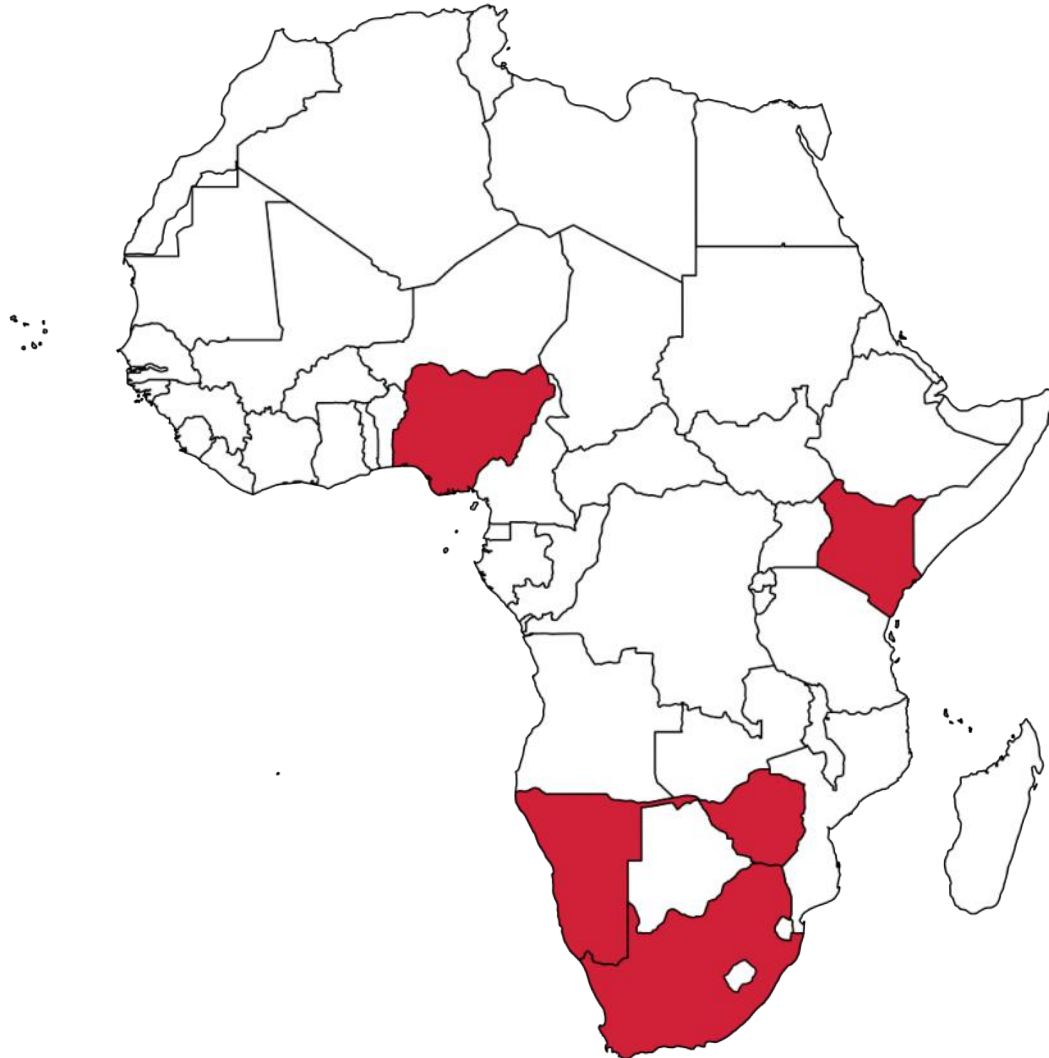Focus group discussions with university students in 5+ countries

Country selection

Methods – Stimuli (I)

Methods – Stimuli (II)

RQ1

How do audiences decide which information they share through digital and social media?

'Take all news with a pinch of salt'

- Widespread use of cues to decide how credible a piece of news is:
  - Authorship, format, sources cited, quality of photos, verified vs. non verified users...

- 'Knee jerk reaction' when faced with dubious information is to do additional research:
  - From a simple Google search to cross-referencing with "established" sources
  - Not a single participant suggested they'd use fact-checking websites.

- Information sharing not seen as a form of social currency, but some types of sharing practice could be.

RQ2

To what extent do different types of content and sources affect shareability?

'It's more harmful not to share than to share'

- Very few found political stories shareable
  - General dislike towards encountering political content on social media

- Quite a few thought health-related stories merited sharing because
  - They create awareness, just in case it is true…
  - It is a way of showing people that stories are not true (meta-sharing)
  - It helps to get a sense of people's opinion on a topic

- In South Africa, Kenya & Nigeria, undergraduates would share inaccurate stories "just for fun"
  - Quite a few share content from parody accounts, also comedians (e.g. Trevor Noah)

RQ3

What differences and similarities exist between sharing practices across countries?

'I use WhatsApp for everything'

- We found very few between-country differences, but consistent within-country differences (undergraduate vs. postgraduate)

- Global international media (BBC, CNN, New York Times) are seen as reliable sources of information. Also, some legacy media in each country are respected.
  - Zimbabwean & Nigerian participants were the most distrustful; but there's no narrative of 'the media cannot be trusted'.

- We found no evidence of "chaotic" motivations to share mis- & dis-information.

Final Ideas

- A persistent topic in all discussions was the idea of a "generational divide" in information sharing and media literacy:
  - Older relatives are "blamed" for spreading information because.

- There was a quasi unanimous support (except for South Africa) for stricter laws on social media content, particularly "fake news".
  - The potential negative consequences of widespread disinformation justify curtailment of freedom of speech.

- Information sharing is most prevalent in small and large groups on WhatsApp in all five countries.
  - News consumption on Twitter & Facebook is not consistent. YouTube (SA) and Instagram (NG) alternative sources of information.

Understanding disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Exploratory three-country nonprobability online survey

Focus group discussions with university students in 5+ countries

Computational content analysis of disinformation on Facebook

Focus group discussions in non-urban settings in 5+ countries

Multi-country nationally representative survey