Documentary Films as Tools for Combating Misinformation and Disinformation: A Case Study of Sunshine Cinema in Zimbabwe

Pretty Nxumalo

Documentary Films as Tools for Combating Misinformation and Disinformation: A Case Study of Sunshine Cinema in Zimbabwe

Pretty Nxumalo
Independent Researcher
nobuhlenxumz@gmail.com

Abstract

Misinformation and disinformation (mis/disinformation) have emerged as pervasive global challenges rapidly spreading and influencing perceptions. While fact-checking organisations have played a prominent role, especially during COVID-19 and election periods, in combating these challenges, limited research exists on the integration of marginalised communities as active participants in this critical undertaking. This article examines the potential of documentary films as a tool for empowering citizens with critical skills to counter misleading information. Using Sunshine Cinema's work in Zimbabwe as a case study, this paper investigates the use of documentary films in empowering communities to identify and resist false narratives. Through focus group discussions with individuals who have watched the films, this paper examines how documentary films are used as pedagogical tools to enhance critical media literacy within communities. The findings demonstrate the transformative power of films in promoting dialogue, fostering critical thinking, and empowering communities to become active agents in addressing information disorders within their spheres of engagement.

Keywords: *Misinformation, Disinformation, Pedagogy, Critical Media Literacy*.

Introduction

False and misleading information, and its ability to spread rapidly online, has been subject to scrutiny over the years due to its threat to democracy. "Fake news" or mis/disinformation have received enormous attention in contemporary times, especially during and after the 2016 American elections (Adjin Tettey, 2022:3; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017:212) with all the terms addressing false and misleading information peddled within media. There have been contestations among scholars on describing the concept and nature of false and misleading content, with some preferring to use the term "fake news" (Mare et al, 2019) which describes either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements, including un(intentional) misinformation, satirical news, hoaxes, news that is clumsily framed or outright wrong, (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 4; Lilleker 2017). Others like Wardle and Derakshan (2017) preferring to use "information disorders" to highlight the complexity of the concept including mis-, mal-/disinformation to differentiate between true messages and those that are false, as well as determining which are created, produced, or distributed by 'agents' who intend to harm and

those that are not. The notion of 'fake news' has become problematic as it tends to be "mobilised as part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality" (Farkas and Schou, 2018:218). This article will use the term disinformation to refer to the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false (Fallis, 2015:406) and misinformation to refer to the unintentional spread of false information. A dual focus on mis/disinformation ensures a holistic approach to comprehensively addressing the full spectrum of false information that audiences encounter.

Involving communities in combating mis/disinformation requires a multifaceted approach as it requires understanding the sociocultural context within which they spread (Ahjin-Tettey, 2022) and the motivations for sharing (Wasserman, 2019). Therefore, variations in pedagogical approaches determine the effectiveness of the efforts. This paper determines the potential use of documentary films as a pedagogical approach in empowering communities to identify and resist mis/disinformation. A documentary film is one of several types of film adopted as a medium or form of learning because it raises facts about issues in social life (Rikarno, 2015, cited in Nashur and Astuti, 2021). According to Irawanto and Octastefany (2019), documentary films are not only used to represent social issues, but can also be used to educate, raise awareness, and form certain attitudes in individuals. Several studies have explored the effectiveness of documentaries as an audio-visual medium for learning across diverse groups, including students (Utaminingsih and Cahyani, 2020; Daniels, 2012). These studies have demonstrated that documentaries can be an effective tool for educational purposes, enhancing understanding and engagement. Building on this foundation, the current research aims to investigate the role of documentary films specifically in empowering communities to identify and resist mis/disinformation. This focus is crucial as it expands the application of documentary films beyond traditional educational settings to address mis/disinformation. Thus, the paper contributes valuable insights into how communities can be better equipped and included in the efforts to deal with the scourge of this pressing global issue.

Background and context

With the proliferation of digital technologies and democratisation of media ownership and content creation, "fake news", and mis/disinformation undeniably permeate every fibre of society (Ahjin- Tettey, 2022). Mis/disinformation has been used to target audiences, either to cause harm, manipulate (political) attitudes and behaviour (Zimmermann and Kohring

2020:216, or generating advertising revenues (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 217). Social media is described as the main source of news for a growing number of individuals (Igwebuike and Chimuanya, 2021; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018; Burkhardt, 2017) largely due to its unparalleled reach and accessibility, allowing individuals to quickly and easily access information from a wide range of sources. Most people rely on social media platforms to create and share content conveniently that could reach many people (Bringula et al, 2022:166). Zimbabweans rely heavily on WhatsApp for accessing and sharing information, largely because of its lower data costs, and the anonymity it provides (MISA, 2018). This is especially pronounced in rural areas where there is limited reach of traditional information sources, including television and radio. Due to the heavy reliance on social media platforms for information and news content consumers develop trust in every news source and they are likely to fall prey to mis/disinformation. Thus, because of restricted access to verified information, particularly in such areas, individuals may be inclined to share fake news without the ability to verify its authenticity (Mare et al., 2019:9), hence the need to enhance media literacy skills to enable individuals to differentiate between accurate and false information. This aligns with critical media discourse which claims to empower people which are marginalised and misrepresented (Kellner and Share, 2007).

There have been initiatives run by civic society organisations, international institutions and media aimed at tracking and exposing false narratives, as well as finding ways to flag this online (Colomina et al, 2021:43). In Zimbabwe, civic society organisations and media organisations like Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), ZimFact and FactcheckZw have launched independent fact check platforms aimed at debunking fake news. While such initiatives show potential, they may be insufficient to address the challenge. Thus, Graves et al (2016) argue that the fight against disinformation requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond fact-checking and correction. This article asserts that while locally rooted fact-checking operations have an important role to play in this sense, the underlying rationale must be about how communities generate, consume and engage with information and not simply about correcting misleading information retrospectively. While fact-checking organisations provide essential services in verifying and debunking false information, there is a pressing need for research to explore how community engagement can complement and enhance these efforts. Pavleska et al. (2018) concur with this perspective, emphasizing that while fact-checking organizations have been instrumental in countering misinformation, a significant challenge

persists in the form of stakeholders' limited awareness of information disorder. This observation aligns with Mare and Munoriyarwa's (2022) assertion that fact-checking alone is inadequate for combating false narratives; instead, there is a pressing need to develop comprehensive strategies that address the underlying causes of mis/disinformation. Also, fact-checking and debunking may be perceived as a top-down approach that imposes correct information on individuals, rather than involving them in the process (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Thus, the present study emphasises the critical role of engaging community members in fundamental fact-checking and verification processes to enhance their awareness of these methods and to effectively counter the circulation or creation of misleading information.

Given the above, Sunshine Cinema is an innovative solar-powered cinema network in Africa, empowering communities to address social issues through film and dialogue. The organisation operates in four districts in Southern Zimbabwe - Gwanda, Gweru, Lupane, and Bulawayo and the geographical focus of these screenings is largely influenced by the priorities and allocations of donor funding Sunshine Cinema targets people aged 15 and above due to their capacity to engage with the social and political themes presented in the films. Film screenings are utilised as a primary method of engagement because when they are paired with pedagogical strategies like discussion, questioning, conceptualisation, learning is improved ((Bloom et al., 2015). By presenting information in a compelling and accessible format, films can effectively reach and resonate with diverse audiences (Aufderheide, 2007). The intention is to help participants examine important contemporary issues through the medium of film and in so doing develop a critical perspective on those issues. This paper focuses on film screenings designed to enhance critical media literacy, empowering individuals to discern accurate information while also actively mitigating the spread of mis/disinformation within their communities.

While Sunshine Cinema maintains a curated catalogue of more than 40 films that address specific social issues within communities, this study examines two selected documentaries to analyse their effectiveness as pedagogical tools in combating mis/disinformation among participants. Sunshine Cinema also incorporates various regional and locally produced documentary films into its programs. However, this article focuses on two specific documentaries that have been widely viewed by participants. The documentary films *Fake: Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* and *Influence* were selected due to their powerful examination of contemporary challenges in media landscapes, particularly their focus on the pervasive issues of "fake news", mis/disinformation, and the manipulation of public

opinion. Both documentaries are acknowledged for their relevance to the Zimbabwean media and political environment, resonating deeply with the audience's experiences as Nichols (2017) asserts that the effectiveness of a documentary is closely tied to its ability to engage with the specific social, political, and cultural contexts of its audience. Thus, the selected films do not only play a central role in conveying cultural and social messages but also raise critical consciousness on contemporary issues.

The documentary *Fake: Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* produced by Connecticut Public tackles the topic of fake news and misinformation in America during the 2020 election season. The film identifies the characteristics of fake news and evaluates the inherent biases of authentic news sources. Given the proliferation of "fake news" mis/disinformation in Zimbabwe particularly pre and post 2023 elections (Mare, 2024) such a documentary has become relevant in helping audiences discern the nature of misinformation circulating within the media and their platforms of engagement. This aligns with Tony's (2011) view that films should be chosen based on their ability to develop critical awareness and allow viewers to learn from the experiences faced by the characters, thereby fostering deeper understanding and engagement with these issues. Furthermore, *Influence*, a feature documentary, directed by Diana Neille and Richard Poplak, explores the negative impacts of corruption and disinformation, focusing on the role of Bell Pottinger, a British multinational public relations, reputation management and marketing company based in London. It highlights how Bell Pottinger contributed to the escalation of racial tensions in South Africa's democracy, raising critical questions about the ethics of the public relations industry, the power of media manipulation, and the vulnerability of democratic institutions to propaganda (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017). The film resonates with themes of manipulation, propaganda and disinformation which are prevalent within Zimbabwe. During the 2023 election period, social media platforms became the principal means through which purveyors of disinformation undermined, disparaged, and delegitimized opposing candidates and political parties (Mare, 2024). Thus, the film enables viewers to scrutinise widely accepted 'truths' in relation to actual social conditions and develop a critical understanding or ideological critique of the disinformation disseminated through these platforms.

Misinformation and Disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Mis/disinformation have become pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa (Madrid-Morales et al, 2021; Moyo et al, 2020) often employed as a tool for political manipulation and social control. Mare et al. (2019) critically assess efforts to address misinformation in sub-Saharan Africa. Their analysis highlights the shortcomings of Western-centric viewpoints, emphasising the need to consider local nuances and complexities in news production and consumption across the continent. They underscore the necessity for a context-sensitive approach to combating misinformation in the African context as Western-influenced dominant narratives highlight populist politics, digital capitalism, and changes in the public sphere as drivers of fake news and cyber-propaganda, therefore, lack of consideration for local nuances in news production and consumption in Africa. In Africa, however, different cultural, political, and social factors at play influence how mis/disinformation is produced and consumed. The analysis thus challenges one-dimensional trends in current scholarship by advocating for a more inclusive approach that recognises the diversity of experiences and perspectives in Africa. Having highlighted the limitations of Western-centric perspectives in understanding and addressing mis/disinformation in the region, the present study offers a distinctive perspective by adopting a context-sensitive approach.

Mutsvairo (2019) asserts that the dissemination of disinformation in Zimbabwe is often politically motivated, with various actors using fake news to influence public opinion and undermine the credibility of political opponents. The spread of false information has been exacerbated by the proliferation of social media platforms, where rumours and misinformation can quickly gain traction (Moyo, 2018). With most Zimbabweans being active users of platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, where false information can quickly go viral (Mabweazara, 2017), social media platforms have been used to amplify false narratives and manipulate public opinion leading to serious implications for the country's democracy. The impact of mis/disinformation in Zimbabwe extends beyond the political realm, affecting various aspects of society. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a significant spread of misinformation regarding the virus and its treatments, leading to confusion and potentially harmful behaviours among the population.Moyo et al. (2020) succinctly state that the spread of health-related disinformation in Zimbabwe underscores the need for improved media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public, a point that aligns with the objectives of the current study.

Focusing on the spread of "fake news" during the 2017 Kenyan elections, Mutahi and Kimari (2020) emphasise the role of digital platforms and social media in facilitating the dissemination of misinformation, spreading "fake news" intended mainly to win over voters, create fear and alarm, and sometimes criticising some of the independent institutions that were managing the elections. Mutahi and Kimari (2021) provide a notable example of how "fake news" strengthens prevailing prejudices, mirroring existing social and political schisms. Further studies have demonstrated that exposure to "fake news" can reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).The findings suggest that further research is essential to delineate strategies that diminish individuals' susceptibility to "fake news" in the presence of entrenched mindset and biases. People adjust their attitudes towards disinformation once they are faced with the truth (Keersmaecker and Roets, 2017). Addressing "fake news" and misinformation poses a significant challenge, primarily due to the susceptibility of the public and their lack of awareness, a point emphasised by Sharma et al (2019) in their research. Therefore, this article argues for the importance of community-based initiatives in dealing with the spread of mis/disinformation, citing that with awareness local communities can be best placed to identify and address false information on their platforms of engagement.

Mare and Munoriyarwa (2021) provide new evidence of how fact-checking organisations based in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia responded to the influx of conspiracy theories, and mis/disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study indicate a rising trend in collaborative fact-checking efforts, encompassing platform companies, fact-checkers, mainstream media, supranational bodies, and government departments. Specifically, the study highlights the involvement of fact-checking organisations such as ZimFact, Africa Check, and Namibia Fact Check in debunking a subset of detrimental, conspiratorial, and misleading claims associated with the coronavirus outbreak. Although fact-checking and replacing inaccurate information with accurate information has been demonstrated to curb the persistence of misinformation (Ecker et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2012), the study by Mare and Munoriyawa (2021) argues that fact-checking efforts, while valuable, were insufficient in isolation to effectively counter the 'disinfodemic' surrounding the coronavirus. Thus, Mabweazara (2017) argues that promoting a culture of fact-checking and verification is essential for combating disinformation and this resonates with the focus of the present study.

Media and Information Literacy

In light of the proliferation of mis/disinformation, there has been a burgeoning acknowledgement of the significance of media information literacy (Mabweazara, 2018; Mwangi, 2017; Motsa and Moyo, 2020). Efforts aimed at enhancing media information literacy have predominantly concentrated on educational programs, community workshops, and partnerships among governmental bodies, civil society organizations, and educational establishments. UNESCO defined the concept of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as a:

> set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create, as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities (UNESCO, 2013:29).

MIL equips individuals with the framework and abilities to actively shape their opinions and derive meaning from information acquired through various sources, including media exposure, libraries, individuals, and other information providers, such as the internet (Adjin- Tettey 2022:7). Potter (2001:4) concurs that media and information literate consumers are active users of information who are aware of the messages and are consciously interacting with them. Thus, MIL has emerged as a critical skill set that empowers media consumers with the necessary tools to navigate information effectively. It enables individuals to interpret, evaluate, and make informed judgments about media texts and messages.

Media literacy initiatives by organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa play a crucial role in promoting critical thinking and combating misinformation. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Africa, ZimFact, Africa Check, and Namibia Fact Check were recognised for effectively mitigating misinformation by employing a combination of manual and technology-driven verification processes to counter harmful and misleading narratives about the virus (Mare and Munoriyarwa, 2022). Similarly, CITE has been promoting media literacy and citizen journalism in Zimbabwe, empowering individuals to critically engage with information and media content (Muchadenyika, 2021). ZimFact, on the other hand, has been instrumental in fact-checking political statements and misinformation in Zimbabwe, contributing to a more informed public discourse (Chikwamba and Matamanda, 2018). These initiatives highlight the importance of media literacy in fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While MIL has been lauded as an antidote to the mis/disinformation pandemic and deemed essential in today's world, its effectiveness hinges on several factors. MIL in Sub-Saharan Africa encounters substantial challenges that impede its effectiveness and outreach. A key obstacle is the restricted access to information in numerous areas of the region. Additionally, the digital divide continues to pose a substantial challenge, manifesting in unequal access to online information and digital literacy. Disparities are evident between urban and rural areas, as well as within diverse socio-economic groups residing in urban centres (Ragnedda and Muschert, 2013). This disparity hampers the capacity of numerous individuals in the region to actively engage with media and information in a critical and informed manner.

Theory

This study employs a dual theoretical framework, drawing from critical pedagogy and critical media literacy, to examine how documentary films can serve as tools to combat disinformation. Rooted in critical theory, both frameworks emphasise the importance of analysing and challenging societal structures and power dynamics. Developed by Freire (1970), the critical pedagogy approach emphasises the necessity of dialogue, critical reflection, and active engagement with content. Freire advocates for an educational process wherein individuals are not passive recipients of information but are instead active interpreters and critical questioners of the material presented (Freire, 1974). Documentaries harness the power of visual and auditory elements to create an immersive experience that can deeply engage viewers (Nichols, 2017). Documentaries align with Freire's principles by using visual representation to create compelling and interactive experiences that encourage viewers to engage critically with the content. More so, the film screenings include post-viewing discussions, question and answer sessions that encourage viewers to engage with the film's content critically, aligning with Freire's notion of dialogue. It is through this kind of dialogue where participants problematise bias and common-sense beliefs that media texts show and reinforce (Kersch and Lesley, 2019). Freire stresses the importance of using culturally relevant materials, including films, to ensure that educational content resonates with the learners' own experiences and contexts (Freire, 1970; 1994). The study argues that, while the selected documentary films address themes of mis/disinformation from a global perspective, their relevance can be accentuated by contextualising lessons within the specific cultural and socio-political landscape of Zimbabwe. This resonates with Hall's (1997) assertion that meaning is not fixed but is constructed through the interaction between media texts and their audiences. Thus, the documentary film's

exploration of mis/disinformation can be linked to local examples and issues, making the content more relatable and impactful.

Building upon Freire's foundational ideas is the critical media literacy framework. The concept of critical media literacy offers a framework which emphasises the importance of understanding the construction and dissemination of media content, encouraging viewers to question underlying power dynamics, recognise bias, and identify the potential for manipulation (Kellner and Share, 2005). It embraces the concept of the audience as an active participant in meaning-making, recognizing the cultural struggle between dominant, oppositional, and negotiated readings of media content (Hall, 1980; Ang, 2002). Thus, this study delves beyond how participants read the information they receive in multiple formats towards nuanced transformative learning where there is a deep shift in perspective and noticeable changes in actions as a result of the shift (Cranton, 2010). Critical media literacy in this regard incorporates the notion of praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970:36). Therefore, critical media literacy moves beyond simply decoding media texts or analysing how audiences navigate media meanings. Instead, it goes further, and focuses on exploring how film audiences become agents of social change through challenging mis/disinformation narratives they encounter.

Methodology

Sunshine Cinema's media literacy outreach program in the southern parts of Zimbabwe consists of over 38 film screenings organised across four provinces—Bulawayo, Midlands, Matabeleland South, and Matabeleland North provinces. These screenings have collectively engaged 1423 participants, indicating a significant reach and impact on the local communities. Moreover, 68 individuals have voluntarily taken on the role of Community Champions, actively involved in countering mis/disinformation across various community platforms they utilise for receiving and disseminating information.

The study focuses on 30 participants selected through purposive sampling from 68 voluntary Community Champions who were actively involved in countering mis/disinformation. Purposive sampling is a non-random technique that enables researchers to use their discretion to deliberately and consciously select participants who address the research questions. According to Patton (2002), purposive sampling is particularly useful when the goal is to gain

in-depth insights from a targeted group rather than to generalise findings across a larger population. By selecting participants who are directly relevant to the study's focus, the researcher was able to gather rich, context-specific data that would be crucial for understanding the phenomena under investigation. These participants are selected from three districts in Southern Zimbabwe, namely, Lupane, Gwanda, and Bulawayo.

The selection criteria included active engagement in community platforms for receiving and disseminating information, as well as a demonstrated commitment to promoting media literacy and fact-driven action against mis/disinformation. The study employed focus group discussions (FGDs) as the primary data collection method. Data were collected in September 2023, following six months of implementing film screenings in the mentioned areas. The 30 selected participants were divided into smaller groups of 10 based on their respective districts to facilitate more focused and in-depth discussions. Each FGD was moderated by a trained facilitator who guided the conversation and ensured that all participants had an opportunity to share their experiences and insights.

Data was collected through audio recordings of the FGDs, which were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Additionally, field notes were taken during the discussions to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. The FGDs were conducted in a neutral and comfortable environment to encourage open and honest dialogue. All the participants were anonymised to encourage free and unconstrained participation. The transcribed data was analysed thematically Participants were informed of the study's objectives and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to the FGDs, and their identities were kept confidential in the analysis and reporting of the findings. The study acknowledges certain limitations, such as the small sample size and the focus on specific districts in Southern Zimbabwe. However, these constraints are balanced by the depth of analysis and the valuable insights gained from participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

This section presents an analysis of data collected to assess the potential of documentary films as pedagogical tools in empowering communities to counter mis/disinformation. With a focus on Sunshine Cinema's work in Southern Zimbabwe, the analysis aligns closely with the principles of critical pedagogy and critical media literacy. The focus group discussions

comprised 30 participants selected from Lupane, Gwanda, and Bulawayo districts, organised into three groups of 10 individuals each. Facilitated by the film screening facilitators, the discussions which took three to four hours each were structured around open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' experiences with mis/disinformation after watching selected documentary films. The data collection process involved recording and transcribing the discussions. Each participant's responses to all of the open-ended questions were read and potential themes were noted. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted, focusing on three key questions:

- What is the link between documentary films and mis/disinformation?
- How are documentary films empowering participants with critical media literacy skills?
- How are participants combating mis/disinformation post-film screening?

This methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the potential and challenges associated with the use of documentary films as tools in countering mis/disinformation within marginalized communities.

Documentary films as catalysts for critical media literacy and societal change

This analysis seeks to uncover how documentary films can serve not only as educational resources but also as catalysts for societal change. The focus is on the intersection of selected documentary films, and their potential role in addressing mis/disinformation, examined through the frameworks of critical pedagogy and critical media literacy. Sunshine Cinema fosters a contemporary manifestation of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas (1989), by providing accessible spaces for public discourse creating new and unique opportunities for public interaction, networking and information sharing. Before the film screening, the facilitator introduces the film with background information about the director, cast, and context and after participants discuss the relevance of the film, share their observations in relation to their own experiences, and reflect on how they would approach encountering or sharing information moving forward. This approach allows participants to construct their own interpretations by exploring various situations, understanding their own situation and devising possible solutions to address them. The film *Fake Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* illustrates various instances of misinformation, including fabricated news stories and their impact on public opinion. The film delves into the different

ways misinformation is created and disseminated in the digital era. It highlights the role of social media platforms, algorithms, and echo chambers in amplifying false narratives. This is particularly pertinent as many participants depend on social media platforms for information reception and dissemination. While Hall (1997) posits that media creators encode messages with specific meanings and values, which are subsequently interpreted in varied ways by audiences, the cultural relevance of the films significantly influences how they are received. In reflecting on the film, a participant shared,

> Watching the film *Fake Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* opened my eyes to the subtle ways information is framed to influence our thoughts and opinions. It was particularly enlightening about the issue of misinformation which we do every day as young people as we forward unverified messages blind to the consequences.

The participant's reflection on the film demonstrates a critical engagement with the issue of misinformation showing an awakening to the need for scrutinizing information carefully before sharing it with others. As Hall (1997) suggests, this process of reflection and critical engagement allows individuals to construct their own meanings and understandings of contemporary issues. Watching the film prompted the participant to reconsider their approach to disseminating information, particularly the lack of verification before sharing. The film prompted the participant to question and reassess their practices, fostering a deeper awareness of the importance of verifying information before dissemination.

Documentaries offer more than just a transfer of knowledge; they provide a narrative that can prompt viewers to reflect, critically, on their own beliefs and biases ((Nisbet and Aufderheide, 2009). The film *Fake: Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* does not simply present the existence of misinformation; it delves into the underlying mechanisms and motivations that drive the spread of false information. While much of the focus has been on how misinformation manifests in breaking news and mainstream media, in rural communities, the motivation to share information often stems from a well-intentioned desire to inform and protect rather than deceive. Chakrabarti et al. (2018) cited in Mare et al (2019) note that due to restricted access to a wide range of news sources, people often mistakenly believe that the popularity or widespread sharing of information is a reliable indicator of its truthfulness. One participant articulated this motivation clearly after watching the film:

> We share all the information we receive to alert or inform others of what we will have received, usually through forwarding it to WhatsApp groups and sharing through word of mouth. The urgency is not to deceive but to inform others.

While well-intentioned, participants inadvertently contribute to the spread of misinformation, however, after watching the film, participants' consciousness is awakened to a new discourse on sharing verified information. This represents a transition from a reactive to a reflective and proactive stance in their information-sharing practices, as discussed by Kellner and Share (2007), who highlight the role of critical media literacy in fostering a more informed and engaged approach to media consumption and dissemination.

Nisbet and Aufderheide (2009) argue that documentaries can influence public understanding and catalyse social change by bringing critical issues to the forefront of public discourse. The documentary film, *Influence,* sheds light on how powerful entities can manipulate media and public opinion for their gain. Given that the media landscape in Zimbabwe is characterised by limited freedom, polarisation and the use of propaganda to control narratives dating back to the colonial era (Msindo, 2009; Moyo, 2012), *Influence* exposes the complex, manipulative strategies employed by political parties and polarised media to shape public opinion. In Zimbabwe, disinformation often thrives on binary thinking us versus them, good versus bad, and friend versus enemy. For example, during election periods, political propaganda portrays one party as the sole saviour of the nation and the opposing party as the absolute enemy. This simplistic framing reduces complex political and social issues into a black-and-white narrative, making it easier for disinformation to spread. A participant noted that:

> The film Influence addresses our current issues, prior to elections politicians are using media to canvass for votes, through promises and repetition, emotional appeal, selective issue highlighting, then after we vote for them it turns out to be empty promises.

This shows how participants engage in critical reflection on their situation. Hooks (2014) asserts that films can be used as a means of disrupting the status quo. This resonates with another participant's view that:

> I never paid much attention to how media influences and shapes our perceptions but after watching the film I started having questions on certain prominent campaigns in both mainstream and social media platforms, we just get carried away as the public without deeply analysing the motivations, From the Labour does not work campaign I have learnt the importance to question content and context of campaigns.

The participant's experience underscores a fundamental principle of critical media literacy, the importance of not merely consuming media content, but engaging in a deeper analysis of its motivations and implications. The film led to a change of mindset when encountering or consuming information from the media. Another participant concurs and states:

> After watching the film Influence, we discussed a lot about propaganda within the media, so now I am aware that both state and private owned media are trying to achieve an agenda by pushing a certain narrative in a story, Unlike before where I believed everything shared by state or private owned media, I now do not take everything they post at face value, I do my own research through following what other media houses say before I draw a conclusion.

Critical reflection requires "moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, into questioning existing assumptions, values, and perspectives" (Cranton 1996:76). This also aligns with Kellner and Share's (2007) argument that media literacy is an essential element of critical pedagogy, as it empowers individuals to critically analyse media messages, comprehend the construction of meaning, and identify the power dynamics inherent in media production and dissemination.

Freire (1985) defends the idea that literacy in itself does not empower those who live in oppressive conditions, but it must be linked to a critical understanding of the social context and action to change such conditions. Public susceptibility and lack of user awareness have always been the most challenging problem when dealing with "fake news" and misinformation Sharma et al (2019). Prior to engaging with film screenings, participants possessed limited knowledge the importance of fact-checking and verification in combating the spread of false information. Describing their daily news or information consumption, more than half of the participants in the film screenings asserted that WhatsApp is the most reliable source of information in their communities. A participant noted,

> From our discussion, we realized that we were misled due to a lack of reliable information. We trusted everything shared on WhatsApp, believing it was true. In my community, we got information from a residents' WhatsApp group that led us to trust individuals claiming to be donors. We paid them money but never received the promised goods.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) emphasise that the spread of false information is often fuelled by cognitive biases and social dynamics, such as confirmation bias and social influence. What the participant utters resonates with Igwebuike and Chimuanya (2021) that the proliferation of misinformation is enhanced by the tendency of people to follow those who share their beliefs

and accept news shared collectively in groups by a person of authority. The dialogue held after the film screening heightened participants' awareness of the need to critically evaluate the information they receive on WhatsApp.In this consciousness-raising involves a shift from a passive or simplistic understanding of one's situation to a more informed awareness of oneself within their social environment. This resonates with Lankshear and McLaren's (1993:44) view that through dialogical reflection, people can come to understand how the myths of dominant discourses are, precisely, myths which oppress and marginalize them.

Documentary films as tools in combating disinformation

Documentaries offer a visual medium through which complex issues can be explored, providing audiences with a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Aufderheide, 2007). While documentaries improve participants' critical skills, there is an element of transformative action that remains among participants. Freire's notion of transformative action underscores the importance of moving beyond the passive consumption of information (Freire, 2000). Accordingly, post-film screening participants not on possess critical skills to discern reliable information from mis/disinformation but they are empowered to take constructive actions to address these in platforms they utilise to receive and share information. Participants have demonstrated how post-film screenings they have actively engaged in countering false narratives through utilising skills and information gained during the film screenings. One participant states:

> In the residents' WhatsApp group, a resident shared news on the death of Heath Streak, I could not believe the news and I used the sports WhatsApp group where I am a participant to verify if the news was true and I found out that it was fake news, I then corrected the information in the residents' group.

By going back to the community group with verified information, the participant likely broke the cycle of the spread of false information. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) suggest that providing corrections can be effective in reducing the impact of misinformation, especially when done promptly and with credible sources. This echoes Pennycook et al (2020) suggestion that when people are reminded or prompted to consider accuracy, they are more likely to demonstrate greater discernment and exhibit a higher intention to share accurate information. By correcting fake news in WhatsApp groups, the participants prevent the further spread of disinformation and promote a culture of fact-checking and critical thinking among group members.

According to Kellner and Share (2007), critical media literacy should evolve to encompass active participation and democratic engagement, going beyond traditional literacy skills to include advocacy and transformative action. With the technical know-how gained during dialogue, some participants could determine that images were not genuine or manipulated. For example, a participant shared how they used Google reverse image search to verify a picture. Not only did they verify its authenticity, but they also shared screenshots back in the group where a post was made. This proactive approach not only helps in identifying false information but also demonstrates a conscious effort to share accurate information with the group.

> There was a picture shared on community WhatsApp group showing soldiers beating people and the caption of that story was saying the soldiers have raided the command centre where the election results are being counted. I took that picture to Google reverse image and l learnt that the picture was taken long back ago and it is not even linked to election l took screen shot of what l have gathered and shared back to that community WhatsApp group to ease the fear on the members. I also shared with them that it is necessary to verify information before we forward them to the next persons because this can cause harm and instil fear on other members.

In this article, praxis is a crucial concept in the context of critical pedagogy, which, according to Freire (1970), involves both action and reflection on one's world to drive transformation. It represents a dynamic interplay between theoretical understanding and practical application aimed at enacting meaningful change. Utilising the Google Reverse Image Search method of verifying images reflects a critical approach to information consumption and dissemination. Returning to the group to correct the misinformation exemplifies practical action based on critical reflection. Consequently, this practice aligns with Kellner's (2001) view that critical media literacy extends beyond mere literacy to involve active engagement and transformative action, reinforcing the need for both thoughtful analysis and proactive correction in the fight against misinformation.

Locally contextualised documentary films in combating mis/disinformation

One of the key gaps identified in the use of documentary films as tools to counter mis/disinformation is the lack of films that are grounded in the local context. While documentary films like *Influence* and *Fake: Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* have been instrumental in initiating dialogue on mis/disinformation in Southern Zimbabwe, their predominantly Western perspectives may lead to disengagement among some local audiences. O'Leary and Sandler (2016) suggest that audiences are more likely to engage with

and retain information from films presented in a language that they understand. The documentaries are presented in English, a language that many participants struggle to understand. Despite facilitators providing summaries of the films, this language barrier hinders the effectiveness of the content and reduces its overall impact on the audience. Liu and Pallas (2017), emphasise the importance of using local languages to communicate effectively with audiences. When films are not accessible in participants' native languages, they may struggle to grasp the intended messages, leading to disinterest. Thus, the article recommends that collaborative efforts between filmmakers and local communities can help ensure that films resonate with audiences and effectively convey key messages. By prioritising cultural relevance and linguistic accessibility, documentary films can become more engaging and impactful tools for addressing misleading information.

Conclusion

This paper explored the potential of documentary films as a powerful pedagogical tool that empowers communities to critically engage with and resist misleading information. While fact-checking and debunking have been widely implemented as top-down strategies to address mis/disinformation, this paper posits that documentary films serve as a complementary, bottom-up approach. Through the examination of selected documentary films utilised by Sunshine Cinema, such as *Fake: Searching for Truth in the Age of Misinformation* and *Influence*, the paper demonstrated how these films offer a unique, visually compelling format that engages audiences to interrogate underlying power structures, biases, and assumptions embedded in media content. Through the integration of post-viewing dialogue, facilitators encourage viewers to reflect on the content they consume and question the authenticity and intent. Furthermore, the paper demonstrated that beyond reflective practices is transformative action that makes participants more proactive in dealing with mis/disinformation in their spheres of engagement, through verifying information and disseminating fact-checked content back into their WhatsApp groups.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on countering misleading information by demonstrating the potential of documentary films as a pedagogical tool for critical engagement in community empowerment against mis/disinformation, the study underscores the necessity for continued investigation into strategies that foster media literacy and strengthen community resilience against the pervasive impact of false information. The paper identifies the language

barrier as an existing gap that affects the effective utilisation of documentary films as tools in combating mis/disinformation. The limited comprehension of English, a language used in the documentary, among some participants impairs their ability to fully engage with and benefit from the documentary content, diminishing the films' potential to foster critical thinking and address mis/disinformation effectively. Research could further investigate the synergy between community-led initiatives and broader institutional frameworks, focusing on how to harmonise these approaches for a more robust and cohesive strategy against mi/disinformation. This includes understanding how community-based fact-checking efforts can complement and enhance the work of established fact-checking organisations, and how to address integration challenges for scaling and adapting these approaches to diverse contexts.

References

Adjin-Tettey, D. T. (2022) 'Combating fake news, disinformation, and misinformation: Experimental evidence for media literacy education', *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1). doi: 10.1080/23311983.2022.2037229.

Ang, I. (2002). 'On the politics of empirical audience research'. In M.G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Media and cultural studies: key works*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 177–197.

Aufderheide, P. (2007). *Documentary film: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Benkler, Y., Faris, R. and Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bloom, M., Binns, I.C. and Koehler, C. (2015). Multifaceted NOS instruction: Contextualizing nature of science with documentary films. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education* 10(3):405-428.

Bringula, R.P., Catacutan-Bangit, A.E., Garcia, M.B., Gonzales, J.P.S. and Valderama, A.M.C. (2022) "Who is gullible to political disinformation?": Predicting susceptibility of university

students to fake news', *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 19(2), pp. 165-179. DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2021.1945988.

Burkhardt, M. (2017). Social media as a source of news: A comparative analysis of the use of Facebook and television news. *Journalism Studies* 18(7):865-881.

Chikwamba, R. and Matamanda, A.R. (2018) 'ZimFact: A new voice in Zimbabwe's media space', in: M. P. M. G. C. J. K. J. C. (ed.) *Media Law and Ethics in the 21st Century*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 201-212.

Colomina, A., Sánchez Margalef, H., Youngs, R., Maslowski, A. and Dorokhina, O. (2021) 'Tracking and exposing disinformation: Initiatives by civic society organizations, international institutions, and media', *Journal of Media Ethics*, 10(3), pp. 43-58.

Cranton, P. (2010). Transformative learning in an online environment. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology* 1(2):1-9.

Daniels, J. (2012). Transforming student engagement through documentary and critical media literacy. *Theory in Action* 5(2): 83-100.

Dube, W. and Moyo, D. (2020). Covid-19 disinformation in Zimbabwe: Trends, impacts, and recommendations. *Africa Center for Strategic Studies Special Report* 1(1):1-10.

Fallis, D. (2015). What is disinformation? *Library Trends* 63(3):401-426.

Farkas, J., and Schou, J. (2018). Fake news as a floating signifier: Hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood. *Javnost - The Public* 25(3): 298-314.

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Freire, P. (1974). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1994) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30th anniversary edition. New York: Continuum.

Graves, L. (2016). How to fight fake news. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Available at: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/fake-news-guide.php (Accessed: 12 April 2024).

Hall, S. 1997. The work of representation. In Hall, S. (ed.). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage. 13-76.

Igwebuike, E.E. and Chimuanya, L. (2021). Legitimating falsehood in social media: A discourse analysis of political fake news. *Discourse & Communication* 15(1):42-58.

Irawanto, B. and Octastefany, T. (2019). Film Dokumenter Sebagai Katalis Perubahan Sosial Studi Kasus Ambon, Aceh, Dan Bali. *Jurnal Kawistara* 1(9):107-119.

Keersmaecker, J.D. and Roets, A. (2017). "Fake news": Incorrect but hard to correct. The role of cognitive ability on the impact of false information on social impressions. *Intelligence* 65:107-110.

Kersch, D. and Lesley, M. (2019). Hosting and healing: A framework for critical media literacy pedagogy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 11(3):37-48.

Kellner, D. (2001) 'The media and the triumph of the spectacle', in: M. Gottdiener (ed.) *Media Spectacle*. Routledge, pp. 1-28.

Kellner, D. and Share, J. (2005). Toward critical media literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26(3):369-386.

Kellner, D. and Share, J. (2007) *Critical media literacy: Crucial policy choices for a twenty-first-century democracy*. Policy Futures in Education, 5(1), pp. 59-69.

Lankshear, C. and McLaren, P. (1993) *Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U.K.H., Seifert, C.M., Schwarz, N. and Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13:106-131.

Lilleker, D.G. (2017). Political communication and the 2017 general election: Why attention is not enough. *Political Quarterly* 88(3):458-463.

Liu, Y. and Pallas, J. (2017). Communicating effectively with rural audiences: The role of local languages. *Journal of Rural Communication* 15(3):78-92.

Mabweazara, H.M. (2017). Digital activism in Zimbabwe: Unpacking implications of hybrid logic of political engagement in the post-2013 general elections period. *Journal of African Media Studies* 9(2):169-184.

Mabweazara, H.M. (2018). Media literacy in Zimbabwe: Challenges and prospects. *African Communication Research* 11(2):143-160.

Madrid-Morales, D. et al. (2021). Motivations for sharing misinformation: A comparative study in six Sub-Saharan African countries. *International Journal of Communication* 15 (20):1200-1219.

Mare, A., Mabweazara, H.M. and Moyo, D. (2019). "Fake news" and cyber-propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the research agenda. *African Journalism Studies*. 40(4): 1-12.

Mare, A. (2024). Electoral disinformation during the disputed 2023 elections in Zimbabwe. *Kujenga Amani*. Available at: https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2024/02/15/electoral-disinformation-during-the-disputed-2023-elections-in-zimbabwe/ (Accessed: 20 March 2024).

Mare, A. and Munoriyarwa, A. (2022) 'Guardians of truth? Fact-checking the 'disinfodemic' in Southern Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of African Media Studies*, 14(1), pp. 63-79. DOI: 10.1386/jams_00065_1.

Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). (2018). *Digital rights report*. MISA.

Moyo, M., Masocha, S. and Mutsikiwa, C. (2020). The role of social media in disseminating misinformation during a pandemic: A scoping review. *Journal of Public Health in Africa* 11(2).

Moyo, D., Mare, A. and Mabweazara, H.M. (2020). Social media, the press, and the crisis of disinformation in Africa. *Communicatio*, 46(4):1-6.

Moyo, D. (2018) 'A vicious online propaganda war that includes fake news is being waged in Zimbabwe', *The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/a-vicious-online-propaganda-war-that-includes-fake-news-is-being-waged-in-zimbabwe-99402 (Accessed 20 March 2024).

Motsa, M.E. and Moyo, D. (2020). Media literacy and youth: A case study of South Africa. *Journal of African Media Studies* 12(2):245-262.

Muchadenyika, D. (2021). Digital technology and youth political engagement in Zimbabwe: The case of the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE). *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(1):75-90.

Mutsvairo, B. (2019). *Digital activism in the social media era: Critical reflections on emerging trends in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mutahi, P. and Kimari, B. (2017) 'The impact of social media and digital tech on electoral violence in Kenya', *IDS Working Paper*, 2017(493).

Mwangi, R. (2017). The impact of media literacy programs on combating misinformation in Kenya. *African Journal of Journalism Studies* 8(3):213-228.

Nashur, R.D. and Astuti, D.D. (2021) 'Producing documentary film as a project on project-based learning approach in improving critical thinking', *Journal of Education and Social Science*, 5(1), pp. 11-23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24036/jess.v5i1.

Nichols, B. (2017) *Introduction to Documentary*. 3rd edn. Indiana University Press.

O'Leary, Z. and Sandler, D. (2016). Engaging rural communities through culturally relevant documentary films. *Journal of Community Engagement* 10(2):45-58.

Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Pavleska, T., Školkay, A., Zankova, B., Ribeiro, N. and Bechmann, A. (2020). Performance analysis of fact-checking organisations and initiatives in Europe: A critical overview of online platforms fighting fake news. In: Terzis, G., Kloza, D., Kużelewska, E., and Trottier, D. (eds.). *Disinformation and Digital Media as a Challenge for Democracy*. European Integration and Democracy Series. Intersentia. 217-246.

Pennycook, G. and Rand, D.G. (2018). The implied truth effect: Attaching warnings to a subset of fake news stories increases perceived accuracy of stories without warnings. *Management Science* 66(11):4944-4957.

Pithers, R.T. and Soden, R. (2000). Critical thinking in education: A review. *Educational Research* 42(3):237-249.

Potter, W.J. (2001). *Media literacy*. London: Sage.

Public Affairs Research Institute (2017). *Betrayal of the Promise: How South Africa is Being Stolen*. Retrieved from: http://pari.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Betrayal-of-the-Promise-25052017.pdf

Ragnedda, M. and Muschert, G. (eds) (2013) *The Digital Divide: The Internet and Social Inequality in International Perspective*. Routledge.

Ribeiro, R., Buntain, C. and M. R. C. (2015). What do you mean? A review of online information disorder. in *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM)*. Available at: [link] (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

Rikarno, R. (2015) 'Film documenter sebagai sumber belajar siswa', *Ekspresi Seni: Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan dan Karya Seni*, 1(17), pp. 129-149.

Sharma, K., Qian, F., Jiang, H., Ruchansky, N., Zhang, M. and Liu, Y. (2019) 'Combating fake news: a survey on identification and mitigation techniques', *ACM Transactions on Intelligent Systems and Technology* (TIST), 10(3), pp. 1-42. DOI: 10.1145/3305260.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

Utaminingsih, S. and Cahyani, A. (2020). The documentary films as learning media for education of Pancasila and citizenship. *International Journal of Education and Research* 8(11): 257-265.

Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe report.

Wasserman, H. (2019). *Media, geopolitics, and power: A view from the global South*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Zimmermann, F. and Kohring, M. (2020) 'Mistrust, disinforming news, and vote choice: A panel survey on the origins and consequences of believing disinformation in the 2017 German parliamentary election', *Political Communication*, 37(2), pp. 215-237. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2019.1686095.