

# When Falsehoods Become Votes: Information Disorder, Electoral Disinformation and Cultural Chaos in Kenya's Digital Elections

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## Abstract

Digital elections have transformed political communication from a bounded system of parties, journalists and broadcasters into a networked ecosystem in which citizens, political actors, influencers, automated accounts and platforms simultaneously produce and circulate electoral narratives. This article examines how information disorder — the interaction of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information — negatively impacts cultural behaviour in the digital age, using elections as the empirical lens through which cultural chaos becomes visible. It adopts a structured desktop research design, synthesising peer-reviewed scholarship and authoritative institutional evidence on political misinformation, social-media diffusion, voter cognition and electoral integrity, anchored in Kenya's 2022 general election and read comparatively against Sierra Leone's 2023 election and other West African cases. The analysis is guided by an integrated conceptual framework linking the production of false or misleading content to platform amplification, exposure, perceived credibility, emotional and identity-based processing, interpersonal endorsement and cultural-behavioural outcomes. The paper argues that the deepest danger is not that voters believe an isolated false claim, but that repeated, strategically distributed falsehoods reshape the cultural environment in which political judgement occurs: they normalise ethnic and partisan stereotyping, intensify affective polarisation, erode trust in electoral institutions and credible journalism, and encourage conspiratorial reasoning that outlives any single election cycle. In Kenya, disinformation before, during and after the 2022 polls moved from foreign-linked operations toward a domestic influencer economy, with coordinated Twitter manipulation, WhatsApp-based rumour, and falsified violence narratives shaping how citizens interpreted candidates, institutions and one another. Comparable dynamics in Sierra Leone's 2023 election and Ghana's 2024 election show that these are not isolated national anomalies but a regional pattern of cultural erosion. At the same time, the literature cautions against deterministic claims that misinformation alone dictates behaviour or election outcomes; exposure and sharing are often concentrated among specific users, and direct causal effects on vote choice remain difficult to establish. The paper therefore conceptualises cultural chaos as a cumulative process in which information disorder interacts with pre-existing identities, institutional distrust, media ecologies and platform design to reshape everyday norms of trust, discourse and civic behaviour. The article concludes that protecting cultural behaviour from information disorder requires shifting from episodic fact-checking toward a continuous information-integrity ecosystem combining credible electoral communication, rapid verification, media and information literacy, platform accountability, researcher access to data, and proportionate regulation that protects freedom of expression. Its principal contribution is a cross-disciplinary framework connecting information disorder to cultural and institutional outcomes while retaining a cautious distinction between correlation, influence and causation. Methodologically, the article demonstrates how a structured, single-country case study — Kenya's 2022 election — can be read against a wider regional comparator set without collapsing into either uncritical generalisation or purely local description, offering a template for future comparative research on information disorder and cultural behaviour across African democracies with differing institutional histories, media ecologies and conflict legacies.

## Keywords:

Information Disorder; Misinformation; Disinformation; Fake News; Cultural Chaos; Elections; Voter Behaviour; Electoral Integrity; Digital Politics.

## 1. Introduction

The digital transformation of electoral communication has altered the conditions under which citizens encounter, evaluate and act upon political information. Campaigns that once depended primarily on party organisations, rallies, newspapers, radio and television now operate through a hybrid environment in which social-network platforms, encrypted messaging applications, influencers, partisan communities, automated accounts and conventional media interact continuously. This environment has expanded opportunities for political participation and civic education, but it has also lowered the cost of producing and distributing false or misleading content. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue, the contemporary problem is better understood as information disorder than as a single category of “fake news”: misinformation involves false information shared without intent to cause harm; disinformation involves false or manipulated information produced or distributed deliberately to deceive; and mal-information involves genuine information used in a harmful or misleading context.

This article treats elections as a case study through which a broader theme can be examined: how disinformation, misinformation and fake news negatively impact cultural behaviour. Elections are unusually revealing because they compress a society’s information habits, identities and institutional trust into a short, high-stakes period. What happens to public discourse, interpersonal trust and civic norms during an election often outlives the election itself, seeding patterns of suspicion, stereotyping and disengagement that persist into ordinary social life. The principal argument advanced here is that the deepest democratic and cultural danger is not that a single fabricated story persuades a large number of voters to switch candidates. Rather, strategic falsehoods accumulate across an electoral cycle, exploit pre-existing identities and grievances, and gradually reshape cultural behaviour: how citizens speak about one another, whom they trust, what they assume about institutions, and how readily they accept or reject shared facts.

The scientific literature provides grounds for both concern and caution. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018), analysing verified true and false stories circulated on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, found that false news travelled farther, faster and more broadly than true news in their dataset. Yet studies of the 2016 United States presidential election also show that exposure to untrustworthy political websites and sharing of fake news were highly concentrated among subsets of users (Guess, Nagler and Tucker, 2019; Grinberg et al., 2019). These findings complicate simplistic claims that misinformation uniformly dominates citizens’ media diets, suggesting instead that its cultural effects are contingent upon network structure, identity, platform design and the credibility of alternative sources.

Kenya’s 2022 general election illustrates how this plays out in an African setting with a large, young, highly networked electorate. Gichuhi (2026) documents how disinformation tactics moved through pre-election, during-election and post-election phases on Facebook, TikTok and Twitter, shifting from externally engineered operations such as Cambridge Analytica’s 2017 involvement toward a domestic influencer industry by 2022. Agbele (2023) similarly finds that online hate speech and disinformation marred the 2022 polls, coinciding with the lowest voter turnout since 2002 and prompting proposals for social-media restrictions that raised their own concerns about proportionality. A Mozilla Foundation investigation reported that a Spain-based organisation paid Kenyan influencers to manipulate Twitter’s trending-topics algorithm ahead of the election (Africa Check, 2022). These Kenyan dynamics are echoed, with local variation, in Sierra Leone’s 2023 election and Ghana’s 2024 election, suggesting a regional pattern rather than an isolated national anomaly.

This article therefore addresses the question: how does information disorder negatively impact cultural behaviour in the digital age, using elections — and Kenya’s 2022 election in particular, read against Sierra Leone and other West African cases — as the empirical lens? It develops an integrated conceptual framework linking the production and distribution of falsehoods to exposure, sense-making, cultural perception and behavioural outcomes, while explicitly retaining a cautious distinction between correlation, influence and causation.

Kenya is chosen as the primary case for three reasons. First, it has one of the continent's largest and most closely studied social-media user bases, generating an unusually rich evidence base across two consecutive contested elections (2017 and 2022). Second, its electoral history — including a disputed 2007 poll and post-election violence, and a nullified 2017 presidential result — means that institutional trust was already fragile before digital disinformation became a major factor, making Kenya a demanding test of whether platform-level interventions and transparent institutions can offset cultural distrust. Third, Kenya's experience is well documented in both peer-reviewed and institutional literature, allowing this article to move beyond anecdote toward a structured, evidence-based case study, while Sierra Leone's 2023 election and Ghana's 2024 election provide comparative evidence from societies with different institutional histories but broadly similar digital-election ecologies.

## 2. Problem Statement

The rapid expansion of digital political communication has produced an asymmetry between the speed at which falsehood circulates and the slower processes through which institutions, journalists, fact-checkers and citizens can verify it. Elections intensify this asymmetry because political attention is unusually high and citizens have strong incentives to monitor candidates, rumours and emerging results. Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) faced exactly this asymmetry in 2022: even as its digital results-transmission platform enabled real-time, transparent tallying, disinformation about rigging, violence and candidate integrity circulated faster than official corrections could travel (Agbele, 2023).

Three interrelated problems arise. First, information disorder distorts cultural perception. False allegations concerning candidate integrity, electoral fraud or institutional performance can become inputs into citizens' evaluations even after being corrected, because people often retain the false information while forgetting the corrective context (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Second, information disorder alters behaviour indirectly: it need not persuade a voter to switch candidates to produce uncertainty, anger, fear or fatigue that shapes whether citizens vote, whom they trust, and whether they accept results as legitimate. Third, and most centrally for this article's theme, the consequences are cultural rather than merely individual. Repeated exposure to hostile, ethnically or regionally coded political narratives normalises stereotyping, conspiratorial reasoning and distrust of professional journalism, producing what this article terms cultural chaos: a state in which political actors are evaluated less through shared standards of evidence and more through identity, loyalty and emotionally compelling narrative.

This dynamic is acute where electoral competition intersects with ethnic, regional or linguistic cleavages, as in Kenya, where the Institute for Security Studies has documented how digital disinformation has interacted with historical ethnic tension around elections (Allen, le Roux and Beti, 2023), and in Sierra Leone, where a 2025 governance-reform study reported increased hate speech, ethnocentric commentary and misinformation in digital political campaigning around the 2023 elections (Institute of Governance Reform, 2025). The research problem is therefore not simply "fake news during elections." It is the broader transformation of the cultural conditions — trust, discourse norms, intergroup perception — under which electoral and civic judgement occurs.

This transformation is difficult to study using conventional election-outcome metrics alone, because vote tallies capture only one narrow behavioural output of a much wider cultural process. A community that has absorbed months of identity-coded disinformation may still produce a turnout figure and a winning candidate that look statistically unremarkable, while nonetheless emerging from the election with weaker interpersonal trust, more entrenched stereotypes and a diminished capacity for cross-group dialogue. Kenya's post-2022 experience — persistent rigging narratives despite a transparent, internationally observed tallying process — illustrates precisely this gap between formally correct electoral administration and a degraded underlying cultural environment (Agbele, 2023). A peer-reviewed analysis must therefore look beyond the ballot to the surrounding discourse.

## 3. Objectives and Research Questions

The overall objective is to critically examine how information disorder negatively impacts cultural behaviour in the digital age, using elections as the empirical case study, with Kenya as the primary setting and Sierra Leone and other West African cases as comparators.

The specific objectives are to:

1. conceptualise the relationship between misinformation, disinformation, fake news and cultural behaviour;
2. examine the mechanisms through which digital information disorder influences cultural perception and behaviour during elections;
3. synthesise empirical evidence from Kenya's 2022 election, alongside Sierra Leone's 2023 and Ghana's 2024 elections, on exposure, sharing, polarisation and trust;
4. assess how African digital-election environments shape the production and cultural effects of disinformation; and
5. propose an integrated information-integrity framework for protecting cultural behaviour and democratic resilience.

The article addresses four research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How does information disorder differ conceptually from the broader category of “fake news,” and how does that distinction bear on cultural behaviour?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Through what socio-technical and psychological mechanisms does information disorder shape cultural behaviour during elections?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What does evidence from Kenya's 2022 election, and comparatively from Sierra Leone and Ghana, reveal about the relationship between political misinformation and cultural outcomes such as trust, polarisation and discourse norms?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What institutional, technological and civic interventions can reduce the cultural harms of information disorder while protecting freedom of expression?

#### **4. Conceptual Framework**

The article combines Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) information-disorder framework with research on social-media diffusion, political cognition and electoral integrity. The central proposition is that cultural effects arise through a chain rather than a single exposure event: production, digital amplification, exposure and social validation, sense-making and perception, behavioural response, and cultural and institutional outcomes. Producers include political actors, partisan networks, influencers, opportunists and automated systems; their content is amplified by algorithms, virality and closed messaging groups; exposure is shaped by repetition, emotional salience and peer endorsement; sense-making converts exposure into credibility judgements and threat perception; and behavioural responses — voting, sharing, protest, disengagement — feed into cultural outcomes such as trust or distrust, polarization, and the normalization of political falsehood.

##### **4.1 Defining Cultural Chaos**

For the purposes of this article, cultural chaos denotes a state in which repeated exposure to false or manipulated political content erodes the shared standards of evidence, civility and trust that ordinarily regulate public discourse, replacing them with identity-based, emotionally driven modes of judgement. Cultural chaos is distinct from a single false belief: it describes an environment — evident in Kenya's 2022 election, where disinformation ranged from gendered attacks on candidates to falsified violence threats (Gichuhi, 2026) — in which citizens can no longer easily agree on which sources, institutions or facts are trustworthy. Once established, this environment tends to outlast the election that produced it, because the stereotypes, grievances and suspicions it activates become resources that future political and social actors can redeploy.

Moderating conditions operate across the framework: media and information literacy, institutional trust, political identity, age, education, language, platform architecture, digital access, quality of journalism, electoral competitiveness and the speed and credibility of official communication. The framework also distinguishes “content effects” — the influence of particular false claims — from “environmental effects,” the broader cultural consequences of living within an information environment where citizens cannot easily distinguish reliable from unreliable claims. The latter is the

more consequential category for this article, because environmental uncertainty can erode trust even among citizens who never believe any single false story.

## **5. Literature Review**

### **5.1 Information Disorder and the Limits of “Fake News”**

The phrase “fake news” is rhetorically powerful but analytically imprecise, spanning fabricated stories, satire, propaganda, partisan exaggeration and genuine journalism a political actor dislikes. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) therefore proposed information disorder as an interdisciplinary framework distinguishing mis-, dis- and mal-information; UNESCO incorporated this approach into its journalism-education handbook (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). This distinction matters for cultural-behaviour research because intent and context shape both diagnosis and response: a citizen who mistakenly forwards an inaccurate voting date is not equivalent to an organisation deliberately fabricating a rigging narrative to suppress turnout.

### **5.2 Why False Content Spreads**

Lazer et al. (2018) argue that digitally mediated fake news reflects an erosion of traditional information gatekeeping, as platforms reduce distribution costs and allow content to move without the editorial filters that historically shaped mass communication. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) found that false stories on Twitter were more novel and spread more rapidly and broadly than true stories, suggesting novelty and emotional salience confer an attention advantage. However, virality should not be equated with mass persuasion: Grinberg et al. (2019) found fake-news exposure and sharing during the 2016 US election were highly concentrated among a small share of users, and Guess, Nagler and Tucker (2019) similarly found sharing of fake-news domains relatively rare, though more common among older and more conservative users.

### **5.3 Selective Exposure, Identity and Motivated Interpretation**

Political information is processed through prior identities, partisan attachments and expectations. Tucker et al. (2018) show that the relationship between social media, polarisation and disinformation is complex: platforms can expose citizens to diverse viewpoints but also facilitate selective exposure and networked reinforcement. A narrative confirming an existing suspicion about an electoral commission is accepted more readily than an equivalent claim conflicting with a person’s identity — a dynamic evident in Kenya, where post-2022 disinformation about foreign involvement in “rigging” persisted among Raila Odinga’s supporters even after the Supreme Court upheld William Ruto’s victory, reinforcing existing distrust of both courts and mainstream media (Agbele, 2023). Pennycook et al. (2021) further found that accuracy judgements can be substantially better than sharing intentions, indicating users often share content without fully evaluating its truthfulness.

### **5.4 Repetition, Correction and the Persistence of False Beliefs**

Misinformation persists because correction does not simply erase a false claim from memory. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) document the continued-influence effect, whereby misinformation continues to shape reasoning after people are told it is false. For electoral institutions, reactive fact-checking alone is therefore insufficient: a false claim that a polling station has closed, or that results have been rigged, can cause immediate behavioural and cultural consequences before any correction arrives.

### **5.5 Information Disorder, Trust and Cultural Legitimacy**

Elections require citizens to accept authoritative procedures and, crucially, to regard outcomes as legitimate even when their preferred candidate loses. False narratives about ballot manipulation or fabricated results weaken this acceptance and, over time, corrode the cultural habit of deferring to shared institutions at all. International IDEA’s comparative research finds that disinformation targets both individuals and electoral institutions, concentrated at particularly sensitive stages of the electoral cycle (International IDEA, 2024). Kenya’s experience is instructive: despite a transparent, real-time results-transmission system, disinformation about rigging and foreign interference persisted well into

the post-election period, illustrating that institutional transparency alone cannot resolve a cultural environment already saturated with distrust (Agbele, 2023).

### 5.6 Kenya's 2022 Election as a Cultural Case Study

Kenya provides an unusually well-documented case of how information disorder reshapes cultural behaviour across an electoral cycle. Gichuhi (2026) traces disinformation through three phases: pre-election content discrediting candidates through gendered attacks and fabricated rigging narratives; a during-election shift toward instilling fear through false violence threats and misrepresented rally footage; and a post-election phase in which the losing alliance continued to allege foreign-engineered rigging, sustained by satirical and parodic false content. Notably, 60 per cent of Kenyans in the study reported encountering information they suspected was deliberately false, a proportion comparable to 2017 despite a shift from foreign actors such as Cambridge Analytica toward a domestic influencer economy operating across a social-media user base that had nearly doubled since the previous election (Gichuhi, 2026).

This domestic influencer economy has a documented commercial dimension. A Mozilla Foundation investigation found that a Spain-based organisation paid Kenyan influencers between US\$10 and US\$15 to manipulate Twitter's trending-topics algorithm and flood the platform with misleading content on contentious legislative issues ahead of the 2022 election (Africa Check, 2022). A separate regional study by the Kenya ICT Action Network and the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa documented disinformation actors, pathways and effects — including deepfakes, WhatsApp messages and printed pamphlets — across Kenya, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Uganda and Nigeria (CIPESA, 2022). UNESCO, working with the IEBC under its Social Media 4 Peace project, launched a communication campaign explicitly framed around countering hate speech, disinformation and stereotyping ahead of the poll, implicitly recognising that the threat was cultural rather than purely informational (UNESCO, 2022).

Agbele (2023) links this environment to declining voter turnout, the lowest since 2002, arguing that disinformation compounded pre-existing apathy and fear of violence. Luganda (2024) offers a more measured reading, finding that Kenyan voters are increasingly reliant on social media even as they remain sceptical of the information it carries — a pattern consistent with this article's argument that the deeper harm lies not in wholesale belief but in the corrosive uncertainty that scepticism-without-verification produces across the wider culture.

A further study by Allen, le Roux and Beti (2023) situates the 2022 disinformation wave within Kenya's longer history of ethnically inflected electoral competition, arguing that digital manipulation techniques tend to be most effective where they can attach themselves to grievances that pre-date social media itself, including memories of the 2007–08 post-election violence and the annulled 2017 presidential result. This historical layering helps explain why Kenyan disinformation narratives about “rigging” proved so durable: they did not need to persuade citizens of something entirely new, only to reactivate an existing cultural script of institutional suspicion.

### 5.7 Comparative West African Evidence: Sierra Leone and Ghana

Sierra Leone's 2023 election offers a comparative illustration from a smaller, post-conflict democracy. International IDEA and the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions report that divisive content circulated across Facebook and X, while disinformation moved through WhatsApp groups with the apparent purpose of confusing voters (International IDEA, 2025). A separate governance-reform study reported increased hate speech, ethnocentric commentary and misinformation in digital campaigning around the same election (Institute of Governance Reform, 2025), echoing Kenya's pattern of identity-coded falsehood. Ghana's 2024 election similarly featured false narratives about candidates and fraud, manipulated media, recycled content and influencer amplification (International IDEA, 2025). Read alongside Kenya, these cases suggest a regional pattern: information disorder in African elections tends to travel across platforms and languages, moves fluidly between formal social media and semi-private channels such as WhatsApp, and disproportionately activates ethnic, regional or partisan identities already present in each society's political culture.

### 5.8 Cultural Behavior, Social Trust and Civic Norms

The concept of cultural behaviour used in this article draws on a longer sociological tradition concerned with generalised trust and social capital — the everyday willingness of citizens to extend a baseline of trust to strangers, institutions and information sources they cannot personally verify. That tradition treats trust and civility not as fixed national traits but as behaviours that are continuously produced and reproduced through everyday interaction, including political communication. Information disorder intervenes directly in this process: when citizens repeatedly encounter content designed to make them doubt institutions, opponents or even neutral facts, the ordinary behavioural habits that sustain civic trust — giving others the benefit of the doubt, deferring to shared procedures, treating disagreement as legitimate rather than treasonous — become harder to practise. This is why the effects of election-period disinformation are rarely confined to the election itself. Kenya's continued post-2022 debate over the legitimacy of the presidential result, and Sierra Leone's reported rise in ethnocentric online commentary around its 2023 election, are both consistent with a reading in which the cultural habits of trust and civility, not merely specific beliefs, are what information disorder erodes.

### 5.9 The Emerging AI Dimension

Generative AI changes the scale and realism of electoral manipulation. The existence of increasingly convincing synthetic media can produce a “liar's dividend”: genuine evidence may be dismissed as fabricated because citizens know that fabrication is technologically possible, further destabilising the shared epistemic ground that cultural behaviour depends upon. International IDEA highlights deepfakes and AI-generated propaganda as emerging risks for West African electoral management bodies (International IDEA, 2025). Kenya's 2022 case already featured manipulated video content and coordinated inauthentic amplification without heavy reliance on generative AI (Gichuhi, 2026); the technology's maturation since then raises the likelihood that future elections will see faster, more localised and harder-to-verify synthetic content.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a structured desktop research design using an integrative literature-review approach, appropriate to a multidisciplinary phenomenon spanning communication studies, political science, psychology and electoral governance. Rather than collecting new survey or interview data, the study synthesises existing empirical and institutional evidence and develops a theoretically integrated framework, using Kenya's 2022 general election as the primary case study and Sierra Leone's 2023 and Ghana's 2024 elections as comparative cases. The single-case-plus-comparators design allows the article to build analytical depth around one well-documented election while testing whether the resulting framework travels to other national contexts, rather than producing either a shallow multi-country survey or an idiosyncratic single-country account that cannot be generalized.

### 6.2 Sources and Search Strategy

The review drew on three source categories: peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly reviews; authoritative reports from international organisations and electoral-governance institutions; and country-level evidence on Kenya, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Search concepts combined “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “information disorder,” “fake news,” “cultural behaviour,” “elections,” “Kenya,” “Sierra Leone,” “Ghana,” “West Africa,” “electoral integrity” and “AI-generated political content,” supplemented by backward and forward citation tracing.

### 6.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included sources offered a foundational conceptualisation of information disorder, reported empirical evidence on production, diffusion or effects of political misinformation, examined cultural or institutional trust, or provided authoritative evidence on Kenyan or West African elections. Sources were excluded where primarily promotional, lacking identifiable authorship or methodology, or

making unsupported causal claims about election outcomes. The review deliberately combined classic literature — necessary because core concepts such as information disorder and misinformation persistence predate the current wave of generative AI — with recent Kenya-focused and institutional evidence capturing the changing electoral environment.

#### **6.4 Analytical Procedure**

Selected literature was coded thematically under six categories: definitions and forms of information disorder; production and distribution mechanisms; cognitive and affective processing; behavioural outcomes; cultural and institutional consequences; and interventions. Evidence was mapped onto the conceptual pathway from production to amplification, exposure, interpretation and cultural outcome, with particular attention to distinguishing evidence of exposure and sharing from evidence of persuasion or cultural change, and to contextualising Kenyan findings against Sierra Leone and Ghana.

#### **6.5 Quality and Limitations of the Method**

Desktop research cannot establish the causal effect of a particular false narrative on cultural behaviour unless the underlying studies provide appropriate causal identification; this article therefore avoids claiming that information disorder alone determines cultural or electoral outcomes, evaluating instead the evidence for intermediate outcomes such as belief, trust, polarisation and discourse norms. A further limitation is that much of the strongest causal evidence remains US- or Europe-focused, whereas Kenyan and West African evidence is often observational or contained in institutional reports; this imbalance is itself a finding, pointing to the need for more locally grounded, multilingual research.

### **7. Findings and Discussion**

#### **7.1 Falsehood Need Not Change a Vote to Change a Culture**

The first major finding is that “cultural behaviour” should be interpreted broadly rather than reduced to vote switching. Guess, Lockett et al. (2020) caution that fake news may have limited effects beyond increasing belief in false claims. The strongest evidence therefore lies in intermediate outcomes: changes in perceived credibility, interpersonal trust, discourse norms, emotional response and willingness to accept shared facts. In Kenya, this shows up as declining turnout and persistent post-election distrust rather than mass conversion between candidates (Agbele, 2023) — a pattern that strengthens rather than weakens the cultural concern, since it demonstrates that the harm operates at the level of the collective information environment rather than any single voter’s decision.

#### **7.2 The Transformation Occurs Through an Information-to-Culture Chain**

The proposed framework identifies stages between information disorder and cultural outcome: production, amplification, exposure, sense-making and response. In Kenya, production ranged from a foreign-linked Twitter-manipulation operation (Africa Check, 2022) to a domestic influencer economy (Gichuhi, 2026); amplification occurred through trending-topic manipulation and WhatsApp forwarding; exposure was near-universal, with 60 per cent of Kenyans reporting suspected false information (Gichuhi, 2026); sense-making was filtered through ethnic and partisan identity; and the behavioural and cultural response included falling turnout, persistent post-election protest narratives and continued distrust of both courts and media (Agbele, 2023; Luganda, 2024).

#### **7.3 Amplification is a Structural Problem, not Merely an Individual Literacy Problem**

Public discussion often places responsibility on citizens to “spot fake news,” but this framing obscures the structural role of platforms and paid influence networks. The Mozilla Foundation’s finding that Kenyan influencers were paid to manipulate Twitter’s algorithm (Africa Check, 2022) demonstrates that amplification is frequently a commercial, coordinated activity rather than an organic literacy failure. A resilient cultural-integrity system therefore requires intervention at multiple levels simultaneously: citizen verification skills, journalist capacity, electoral-body communication speed, researcher access to platform data, and platform accountability for coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

Taken together, sections 7.1 and 7.2 suggest a practical diagnostic for journals and policymakers assessing future African elections: rather than asking only “did disinformation change the result,” researchers should ask “did the information environment leave the community more or less able to trust its neighbours, its media and its institutions once the votes were counted.” Kenya’s evidence base, while not designed to answer that question directly, points consistently toward the latter, more troubling outcome.

#### **7.4 Institutional Trust is the Critical Mediating Variable**

Trust is the bridge between information and cultural legitimacy. Kenya’s IEBC introduced a transparent, real-time results-transmission platform for 2022, yet disinformation about rigging persisted regardless, because the underlying cultural distrust of electoral institutions — rooted in prior disputed elections — was not resolved by technical transparency alone (Agbele, 2023). This illustrates a recursive relationship at the heart of the conceptual framework: low institutional trust makes falsehood more credible, and repeated falsehood further reduces institutional trust, entrenching cultural chaos across successive electoral cycles.

#### **7.5 Polarization Reshapes the Cultural Meaning of Disagreement**

Information disorder can shift political disagreement from policy contest to identity conflict. Gichuhi (2026) documents gendered attacks on candidates and rigging narratives that attached opponents to threatening social categories, while Sierra Leone’s 2023 campaign saw increased hate speech and ethnocentric commentary (Institute of Governance Reform, 2025). In both cases, the objective of such content appears less about persuading undecided voters than about intensifying division and normalising contempt between groups — precisely the cultural-chaos dynamic this article foregrounds. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) explicitly identify the potential for information disorder to exploit existing sociocultural divisions.

#### **7.6 The African Information Environment Demands Locally Grounded Responses**

Kenyan, Sierra Leonean and Ghanaian evidence together show that African information ecologies cannot be treated as smaller versions of US or European environments. Content moves fluidly between Facebook, X, TikTok, radio and WhatsApp; a claim can appear on Facebook, circulate as a WhatsApp voice note, and reappear on Twitter as apparently independent confirmation (CIPESA, 2022). Effective monitoring therefore needs to track narratives across this ecosystem rather than any single platform, and interventions such as the IEBC’s UNESCO-backed SocialMedia4Peace campaign show the value of pairing electoral bodies with credible civil-society and international partners before, rather than only during, the polling period (UNESCO, 2022).

#### **7.7 AI Increases Scale but Does Not Eliminate Human Agency**

Generative AI should be understood as an amplifier of existing information-disorder mechanisms rather than an autonomous cause. Kenya’s 2022 disinformation economy already achieved substantial cultural effects through manipulated video, coordinated Twitter activity and rumour, without heavy reliance on generative tools (Gichuhi, 2026; Africa Check, 2022). As AI lowers production costs and increases realism and localisation, the risk is not only more false belief but a deeper epistemic instability in which citizens increasingly distrust authentic evidence as well as fabricated content — precisely the erosion of shared standards that this article defines as cultural chaos.

#### **7.8 Comparative Synthesis: Kenya, Sierra Leone and Ghana**

Placed side by side, the three cases converge on a common pattern despite differing institutional histories. Kenya’s disinformation economy is comparatively commercialised and platform-sophisticated, involving paid influencer networks and algorithmic manipulation on Twitter (Africa Check, 2022; Gichuhi, 2026). Sierra Leone’s pattern leans more heavily on interpersonal and semi-private channels, with WhatsApp groups and ethnocentric commentary doing much of the cultural damage (International IDEA, 2025; Institute of Governance Reform, 2025). Ghana’s 2024 election combined both dynamics, with influencer amplification of recycled and manipulated content

(International IDEA, 2025). What unites the three is not the specific technology but the underlying mechanism: information disorder attaches itself to pre-existing ethnic, regional or partisan fault lines, and in doing so converts ordinary political competition into a vehicle for cultural division. This convergence supports the article's central claim that cultural chaos, rather than any single platform or technique, is the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding information disorder's African electoral impact.

## **8. Implications and Recommendations**

### **8.1 Electoral Management Bodies**

Electoral bodies should treat information integrity as core to electoral integrity, not a peripheral communications task. Kenya's IEBC illustrates both the promise and the limits of this approach: its partnership with UNESCO under the Social Media 4 Peace project, and its collaboration with Meta and Google on digital literacy and verified information (Agbele, 2023), demonstrate the value of sustained, multi-partner engagement, while the persistence of rigging narratives despite a transparent tallying system shows that technical transparency alone cannot repair cultural distrust built up over successive election cycles.

### **8.2 Journalists and Fact-Checkers**

Fact-checking should move from reactive to anticipatory verification, identifying recurring false narratives — such as Kenya's persistent “foreign-rigging” claims — before they resurface in future cycles, and providing concise factual alternatives rather than bare denials. Partnerships among electoral commissions, newsrooms and civil-society organisations such as CIPESA and KICTANet can extend reach and credibility across languages and platforms.

### **8.3 Social-Media Platforms**

Platforms should strengthen transparency around political advertising, coordinated inauthentic behaviour and synthetic media, with faster escalation pathways for credible electoral authorities during high-risk periods. The Mozilla Foundation's Kenyan findings show that commercial manipulation of trending-topic algorithms is a distinct, addressable vector requiring platform-level, not only user-level, response (Africa Check, 2022).

### **8.4 Political Parties and Candidates**

Parties should adopt enforceable codes against deliberately fabricated electoral information and coordinated harassment, and distinguish legitimate persuasion from deceptive manipulation that entrenches ethnic or regional stereotyping.

### **8.5 Citizens and Media Literacy**

Media and information literacy should be integrated into civic education well before election periods, teaching practical verification behaviours: identifying the original source, checking date and context, comparing with authoritative sources, and pausing before forwarding emotionally charged content. Evidence that accuracy prompts improve sharing quality suggests interventions need not require advanced technical skill (Pennycook et al., 2021).

### **8.6 Universities and Researchers**

Universities across Kenya, Sierra Leone and the wider region should establish election-information observatories capable of tracking narratives across languages and platforms, combining content analysis with surveys and network analysis to move beyond descriptive lists of false stories toward evidence about cultural and behavioural consequences. Kenyan institutions such as Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and Kenyatta University, alongside Sierra Leonean institutions such as Fourah Bay College, are well placed to lead joint, comparative observatories given their existing research capacity on digital communication and electoral governance; such collaborations would also help correct the geographical imbalance in the causal-evidence base noted

in the methodology above, by generating longitudinal, locally grounded data rather than relying on one-off institutional reports.

### 8.7 Regulators and Policymakers

Regulation should focus on clearly defined harms — impersonation, coordinated manipulation, fraudulent electoral information — rather than broad prohibitions on politically inconvenient speech, and should require platform transparency around political advertising and systemic electoral risk, consistent with concerns raised about proportionality in Kenya’s post-2022 debate over social-media restrictions (Agbele, 2023).

### 8.8 A Five-Pillar Information-Integrity Model

The article proposes five mutually reinforcing pillars: credible authority (electoral bodies and trusted media providing authoritative information rapidly); verification capacity (fact-checkers and civil society with technical and financial capacity); citizen resilience (continuous media and information literacy); platform accountability (transparent handling of coordinated manipulation and synthetic media); and evidence-based research (data access for universities and independent researchers). These pillars should operate throughout the electoral cycle — pre-election monitoring, in-cycle rapid response, and post-election counter-narrative work — rather than being concentrated on polling day alone, precisely because, as Kenya’s experience shows, cultural chaos often deepens after the vote is cast.

## 9. Conclusion

This article has argued that information disorder negatively impacts cultural behaviour without necessarily determining individual vote choice, using elections as a case study and Kenya’s 2022 general election as its central empirical anchor, read comparatively against Sierra Leone’s 2023 and Ghana’s 2024 elections. The phrase “When Falsehoods Become Votes” should be understood as a conceptual proposition: falsehood becomes culturally consequential when it enters the chain connecting political communication to perception, identity, emotion, trust and everyday civic behaviour.

The evidence reviewed shows that false political content can spread rapidly, that exposure and sharing are often concentrated among particular users or commercial influence networks, and that political communication is filtered through existing identities and institutional trust. Kenya’s experience — a domestic influencer economy, algorithmic manipulation, persistent post-election distrust despite transparent tallying, and declining turnout — illustrates how these mechanisms compound into cultural chaos: a state in which shared standards of evidence give way to identity-based judgement. Sierra Leone and Ghana show that this is a regional pattern rather than a Kenyan anomaly. At the same time, the literature does not support deterministic claims that fake news alone explains electoral outcomes; the most defensible conclusion is that information disorder changes the cultural conditions under which citizens evaluate one another, their institutions and their shared reality.

The conceptual framework developed here contributes by integrating production, amplification, exposure, sense-making and behavioural response, with institutional trust, media literacy and political identity as moderators, and by explicitly naming cultural chaos as the outcome variable most at stake. For peer-reviewed scholarship, the next research frontier should be empirical and comparative: future studies should examine complete electoral cycles across Kenya, Sierra Leone, Ghana and other African democracies, combine platform data with surveys, and investigate how information disorder travels between WhatsApp, television, radio and social media. Democratic and cultural resilience cannot depend on citizens becoming perfect fact-checkers; it requires an information ecosystem in which accurate information is timely and trusted, manipulation is detectable and accountable, platforms are transparent, and citizens possess practical skills for navigating uncertainty. Elections are contests over political power, but as Kenya’s 2022 experience shows, they are also contests over shared cultural reality — and when falsehood becomes sufficiently embedded in that reality, the damage persists long after the ballots are counted.

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