



# RETHINKING DEMOCRACY, MEDIA AND SOCIALIZATION IN AFRICA

*Policy Brief, September 2025*

*Inaugural Roundtable on Democracy, Media and Socialization in Africa*

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## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**Capacity building and professional development:** The African Union (AU) should lead ongoing training for journalists on democracy, fact-checking and civic reporting to strengthen professionalism and understanding of democratic processes. This includes partnerships with universities and media bodies.

**Media literacy and information integrity:** The AU should develop a continent-wide media and digital literacy framework and protocols to combat misinformation, supported by open-access African data and ethical artificial intelligence (AI) guidelines.

**Education and curriculum development:** The AU should help integrate standardized democracy education into school curricula and produce widely accessible civic education materials in multiple languages.

**Journalism protection, ethics and labour rights:** The AU should ensure journalist protection, fair labour conditions and stronger ethics through enforcement of existing frameworks and partnerships with governance institutions.

**Media industry support and collaboration:** The AU should foster media collaboration, invest in community and investigative journalism, and create platforms and programmes to support media excellence and cross-border information sharing.

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## INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING DEMOCRACY, MEDIA AND SOCIALIZATION IN AFRICA

In much of Africa today, democracy is understood in terms of intangibles such as public trust, participation, and the shared belief that governments can, and should, work for everyone. That understanding is an expression of a deeper desire to sustain a democratic culture with informed, active and engaged citizens, as well as accountable leaderships and continuous, meaningful civic education. The goal is to build political systems across all 55 African Union (AU) member states, in which responsive public policies, grounded in the lived experiences of citizens, are designed and delivered for sustainable progress.

Many African countries have made visible progress in inculcating a democratic culture, with regular elections, peaceful transfers of power and increasingly active civil societies. However, there is an enduring fragility in the foundations of democratic resilience—as regards public trust in institutions, freedom of expression, strong and independent journalism, and even meaningful public involvement. Sometimes, the risks to democracy in Africa come from entrenched power structures impervious to change, weakened and captured public institutions or political systems that promote impunity to avoid

accountability. At other times, the risks are shaped by powerful geopolitical forces that exploit social vulnerabilities and influence narratives in ways that undermine democratic development.

It is against such a backdrop that, on 3–4 May 2025, an inaugural roundtable entitled ‘Democracy, Media and Socialization in Africa’ took place in Nairobi. It was convened by the Governance and Conflict Prevention Directorate of the AU Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department (AUPAPS), along with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. The event brought together diverse groups—including diplomats, academics, public servants, journalists, youth leaders and civil society actors—to take stock of democratic progress on the continent and to reckon with the deeper currents shaping civic life, specifically the ways in which the media and socialization processes are helping people in Africa negotiate the continent’s democratic future and safeguard democratic resilience.

Democracy is a governance system in which people meaningfully participate in decisions that affect their lives, with guarantees of freedom, rights and their leaders’ accountability. ‘Media’ refers to the means through which people engage with each other and with their leaders, that is, platforms of communication to build a shared understanding in the public sphere. ‘Socialization’ is the process whereby individuals internalize the norms and customs, values and ideologies of their society (Tambe and Kopacheva 2024).

Therefore, for this policy brief, ‘democratic socialization’ refers to the slow and often invisible process of embedding democratic norms into everyday life (Schwarz 2021). It occurs through forms of media (including social media), schools and public forums. This requires that democracy must be nurtured and taught in communities, schools, religious institutions and homes, but also online—and that is where the role of the media comes in. Democratic socialization is key to reminding all engaged citizens that democracy is a habit, a culture and a social infrastructure.

Given the complexity and evolution of the media terrain in the digital and artificial intelligence (AI) age, it is more urgent than ever that Africa has a free, responsible and well-supported media sector, with trained journalists who are protected and supported to work independently. This remains the best insurance against creeping authoritarian drift and elite capture on the continent. A plethora of new voices, stories and platforms, and an increasing civic awareness all mean more transparency. However, increased openness and engagement have also given rise to manipulation and information pollution (including disinformation), leading to a social media infrastructure that often spreads hate speech and makes social cohesion difficult. That, in turn, makes it easier to disseminate lies, incite violence and manufacture distrust.

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This policy brief, borrowing from the objectives of the Nairobi roundtable, therefore calls for urgent democratic socialization in Africa through media that inform and educate—connecting people with their politics, and governments with their people—and which keep retelling truthful stories in a way that builds trust in institutions, merging the ideals of democracy with the everyday realities of the people.

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## **1. DEFINING DEMOCRACY, MEDIA AND SOCIALIZATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

Democracy is increasingly being tested in Africa, with questions and doubts regarding its utility to the continent's development (Agbor and Matlala 2025). At the same time, the incorrect perception of democracy in Africa as being an import from the West continues to be challenged, because of evidence that many African societies, including monarchies, were deeply deliberative and democratic in practice, even if they did not resemble Western liberal models (Arthur 2025). Historically, decisions were made through council deliberation, consensus building and a layered accountability process, including institutionalized advisors (Burchard 2014).

As the African Union (AU)—through its Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department (AUPAPS)—rekindles the debate about 'an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law' (Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, the continent's development roadmap (African Union Commission 2015)), the focus is on how to get a critical mass of African citizens to make that journey of democratizing the continent.

With 75 per cent of Africans expected to be under the age of 35 in 2030 (African Union 2019), the window for transformative change is open with generational potential. This is a rare demographic moment. It could move the continent towards deeper civic engagement and democratic renewal, or it could move it towards despair, disillusionment and authoritarian drift. The difference will be made by how—indeed, whether—young people are socialized into democratic norms as lived every day, through systems of accountability and participation.

However, policy debates often overlook political socialization, that important process through which such citizens are made—from early in their lives—by a matrix of cultural, familial, educational and (increasingly) media influences.

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Also, the context in which that socialization must now occur has shifted fundamentally. We are no longer in the era of broadcasting. Foreign-owned social media and technology platforms, and foreign-built AI tools (Adu Amoah 2025), continue to rewire the public sphere, ensuring that information flows are no longer top-down or even easily regulated, and that algorithms shape public attention and opinion (Salami 2024). Yet, paradoxically, less than half of

the African continent has meaningful access to the Internet. This means that the digital divide has shifted beyond merely the question of access to information to being about who gets to participate in defining what counts as truth, legitimacy and political possibility. That is why a multilayered, multi-tentacled approach—embracing aspects of the old influence infrastructure as well as new information-resilience strategies—needs to be imagined, one that is responsive to the current political climate and hybrid media environment in Africa.

This policy brief fills that gap by explaining the value of the media in political socialization and democratic resilience in Africa. It unpacks the governance tension built into the extractive, command-and-control colonial structure of most modern-day African governments, set against a backdrop of the deliberative, accountable and participatory traditions of many African societies—attributes that align with the liberal democratic model. These traditions must be built upon, taking them beyond the selfish aim to possess power and the performative aspects of democracy, so as to pave the way for enduring good governance that gives primacy to the voice of the people in leadership and decision making.

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## 2. OUTCOME AND FINDINGS FROM THE NAIROBI ROUNDTABLE ON DEMOCRACY, MEDIA AND SOCIALIZATION

In a continent where political engagement is mediated through digital platforms, radio waves, television screens and, increasingly, smartphones, it is increasingly crucial to understand that democratic socialization is about a broader, slow process of seeding values and practices that sustain democratic life—about helping individuals appreciate constitutional rights, civic norms, accountability, pluralism, respect for the rule of law, independent institutions and the fact that the people remain supreme.

The roundtable on ‘Democracy, Media and Socialization in Africa’, convened by the AU on 3–4 May 2025 in Nairobi, agreed that Africa already has the scaffolding for a more inclusive, civic-minded media environment. Brilliant journalists are working in print, broadcast and digital media, risking their lives for the truth. Youth-led media collectives are using social media to hold governments accountable. Rural radio stations are integrating citizen-voice segments into their broadcasts. There are fact-checking and information-resilience organizations working in multiple languages to counter misinformation and disinformation in real time across the continent. What is missing is coordinated, continent-wide investment—backed by governments, civil society and tech platforms—to protect media workers, support public interest journalism, regulate the new gatekeepers, and ensure that media literacy is not the preserve of a privileged few.

The Nairobi roundtable participants noted, helpfully, that democracy concerns laws, institutions and the everyday habits of engagement. And those habits are shaped, above all, by the media environments in which people live.

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The discussion of democratic socialization in Africa therefore becomes a discussion of the media—about who tells the story, whose voices get heard, and how power is framed and contested in the public sphere.

Specifically, the Nairobi roundtable produced a finding that the media are useful agents for democratic socialization because:

1. The media help shape political identity and offer a platform for debate on important issues, shifting the political culture to one where leaders are evaluated based on their visions and abilities to deliver. Thus, the media give people the language for critiquing power, the tools for organizing and the confidence for demanding change.
2. The integrity and resilience of democracies depend on access to credible information. Credible journalism and fact-checking initiatives protect democracies from the corrosive effects of disinformation and polarization, teaching audiences—and even the journalists themselves—about information hygiene, digital literacy, data analysis and (now) AI literacy.
3. When well-supported and trusted media outlets investigate, verify and explain, they are enacting democracy in a way that educates people to be alert and suspicious of unverified or unverifiable information, to ask questions and to value the truth.
4. The use of community and digital media platforms opens the door to meaningful interactions, creating habits of engagement, reinforcing the idea that governance is personal, local and participatory. Digital tools can support this participatory ethos.
5. Platforms that crowdsource information, map local service-delivery failures or collect citizen feedback on public policy extend democratic participation beyond the ballot box. They turn media consumers into active agents of change.

In Africa, where media systems are rapidly evolving alongside fragile democratic institutions, the risks of deploying media as tools for democratic socialization were also assessed. According to the Nairobi roundtable, the specific risks and in this regard were as follows.

1. The (in)visible, (c)overt and (in)direct control of media outlets—through the use of advertising budgets, regulators and ownership structures that influence or undermine editorial credibility—can mean that a political elite creates an illusion of diversity where little independence exists. Governments in Africa are also deploying digital militia, including influencers-for-hire, trolls and fake accounts, to harass critics, spread confusion and amplify false or misleading narratives. These underhand tactics make democratic socialization difficult, because they seed ideas

that democracy is not working, dissent is dangerous, and the media are inevitably biased and controlled. There is the risk that—rather than an engaged and empowered citizenry—a cynical and pliant citizenry is created.

2. In Africa, where there is a low level of digital literacy and dwindling trust in institutions, information pollution is a risk to meaningful civic engagement. Social media platforms, driven by profit-maximizing algorithms, are optimized to generate engagement, and that can be in a way that provokes outrage, reinforces bias, creates competing artificial realities or generates strong emotional reactions, such as fear, anger or resentment, that distort public discourse and democratic deliberation. Joy based on falsehoods also leads to an astroturfed decision that, once determined to be deceptive, generates despondency. Democratic socialization becomes difficult in an environment that is structurally hostile to deliberation and truth.
3. Foreign powers—both state and non-state actors—actively intervene in African information spaces to advance their strategic or commercial interests. These external forces often promote stability over democracy or economic influence, or over citizen agency. They fund media infrastructure, sponsor training programmes or buy influence in digital platforms, with most of these investments aimed at shaping public opinion in ways that undermine democratic sovereignty.
4. In authoritarian-leaning regimes, and even in transitional democracies, governments have been seen to have criminalized online speech, deployed surveillance technologies or arrested journalists and activists for social media posts. In these ways, citizens are punished for engaging with democratic content, and the very act of socialization becomes dangerous.
5. Many newsrooms in Africa are understaffed, underfunded and ill-equipped to produce high-quality, in-depth journalism. As a result, even when the intent is to support democracy, the output may fall short, as outlets end up resorting to clickbait, shallow reporting and unverified information in a way that crowds out serious civic content. In this environment, the media distract, overwhelm and/or disappoint, with the consequence that citizens may tune out entirely, reinforcing disengagement rather than democratic participation.

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### **3. CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD—AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the Nairobi roundtable, policymakers, media practitioners, diplomats, academics, public servants, journalists, development partners, civil society members, youth leaders and experts in governance gave the following recommendations (3.1–3.5) regarding the current state of democracy and the media, and the ways of inculcating a democratic culture in Africa while guaranteeing free media and expression.

The African Union Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department should lead the progress tracking, anchoring accountability within existing AU structures. Co-funding should be secured through strategic partnerships with development actors—such as United Nations agencies, the European Union and the World Bank—while delivery should leverage the agile networks already in place, such as journalist associations, universities, media councils, and information integrity networks and hubs doing the hard work on the ground. The aim here is to connect what works already and scale it up through intentional coordination.

#### **3.1. Capacity building and professional development for journalists and communication professionals in Africa**

It is urgent that the AU plays a leading and coordinating role in actualizing the continuous capacity building and professional development of journalists by engaging member states, development partners, regional institutions, regional economic bodies, regional mechanisms, journalist associations, civil society, traditional groups and intergovernmental actors. More specifically, the roundtable recommended that:

1. There is a need for capacity building and professional development through pan-African universities in collaboration with other African institutions, including appropriate professional development and certification programmes in civic education, democracy, information integrity, and African norms and values. This effort is important for equipping journalists with an understanding of democracy in the African context, for authentic storytelling.
2. Also, training is needed with regard to tackling information disorder, verifying facts, building a culture of investigations, and preparing the media to create projects on themes like civic education, electoral reporting and democracy for at least two years. The training of trainers is also essential.
3. In building capacity, there is a need to facilitate access to information for the media, to encourage dialogue, and to promote self-regulation.

### 3.2. Media literacy, information integrity and knowledge generation

The African Union—working with specialist African think tanks, academics, development partners and civil society organizations—should lead information-resilience efforts across the continent, using its internal mechanisms and multilateral networks, so as to gain from the ongoing work that has already been done. More specifically, the roundtable recommendations were:

1. To develop and roll out a framework for media, information and digital literacy (MIDL), as a foundation, and to strengthen the implementation through MIDL toolkits in all AU languages so that people in Africa understand how to vet the credibility of information. This should be done using the Media and Information Literacy policy and strategy of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2013) and the ongoing work with the African Union. The roundtable agreed that gatekeeping should begin with the audience.
2. To develop a protocol for information integrity to help in the regulation of information disorder, so as to clean up the information ecosystem and make accurate information available, in a way that promotes transparency and credible content in the media.
3. To develop and promote open-access data sets that recognize African cultural values, norms and languages, in order to feed into AI systems and inform civic technologies and governance tools, thus making information on Africa accessible and visible.
4. To run dedicated continent-wide news and fact-checking programmes that actively fight misinformation and disinformation.
5. Using the AU Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy (African Union 2024), formulate frameworks for the ethical use of AI, the safeguarding of information integrity in the age of AI, and the use of AI to support and promote democratic processes, including engagement, elections and governance accountability.

### 3.3. Education and curriculum development

The African Union's department of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation should be approached to provide leadership on the development of education policies and curricula for media and democratic socialization on the continent. The relevant actors to work on this include member states, electoral management bodies, media houses, think tanks, trade unions, religious leaders and student organizations. More specifically, the roundtable recommendations were:

1. To develop a continental protocol for a standardized module on democracy in school curricula, to help in the socialization of young Africans on the value of democracy.

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2. To educate all demographics in Africa on democracy and its pillars, including elections, through the (re)production of information, education and communication materials in AU official languages, and to have some of the material translated into Indigenous languages. These materials should be disseminated widely using a database of key actors in public media organizations and community media, and via community dialogues.
3. To design data-informed and interactive peace and civic education content, targeting children and youth on the platforms they use (social media), shaping age-appropriate narratives in order to build democratic resilience from a young age, and thus also creating a generation that is harder to divide and better equipped to identify information pollution.

### 3.4. Journalism protection, ethics and labour rights

The African Union should engage relevant actors—including member states, media institutions and trade unions on journalism protection, ethics and labour rights—in three specific ways:

1. Protect journalists and media freedom by requesting media owners to respect labour laws and provide conducive working conditions, through the operationalization and enforcement of the national and continental journalist protection framework and existing AU instruments.
2. Establish a continental journalist welfare policy, in order to address fair compensation and well-being.
3. Promote partnerships between media and governance institutions (such as legislatures, the judiciary and security agencies) so as to sensitize the public on civic education laws and democracy.

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**Media can play a role in socialization through strategic partnerships with member states, development partners, regional institutions, regional economic bodies, regional mechanisms, journalist associations, civil society, traditional groups and intergovernmental actors**

### 3.5. Media industry support, collaboration and reinvestment in media recognition

Media can play a role in socialization through strategic partnerships with member states, development partners, regional institutions, regional economic bodies, regional mechanisms, journalist associations, civil society, traditional groups and intergovernmental actors. More specifically, the roundtable recommended that:

1. The African Union should facilitate the creation of a pan-African association of media houses, through a public–private partnership (including better collaboration among African public-sector media houses), to ensure that resources align for an Africa-wide media enterprise while maintaining journalistic independence, boosting credibility and enabling cross-border information sharing.
2. The African Union should create and institutionalize a permanent engagement platform—the African Union Media and Democracy Working Group—with representation from the AU, media, pro-democracy civil society organizations, academia, development partners and the private

sector (especially telecommunications companies). If possible, it should consider the periodic co-option of representatives from technology platforms, to provide tools and needed data, which in the end affect media visibility, audience engagement and AI development

3. Together with development partners, the AU should invest in investigative journalism and community media, so that trustworthy, relevant information reaches the people that national outlets often do not reach, in their local languages, contexts and realities. Supporting these grassroots platforms would strengthen the information ecosystem from the ground up.
4. The African Union should establish mechanisms for assessing the role of the media in elections and democracy—such as the media’s involvement in AU election observation missions, taking appropriate caution to avoid the risk of journalists exercising their reporting roles while on such missions.
5. The African Union should create a platform for knowledge exchange, introduce an AU prize that recognizes media excellence, and establish fellowship and mentorship programmes for young journalists.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AI</b>	Artificial intelligence
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>AUPAPS</b>	African Union Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department
<b>International IDEA</b>	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
<b>MIDL</b>	Media, information and digital literacy

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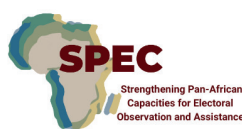
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## THE AFRICAN UNION

The AU is a continental body consisting of the 55 member states that make up the countries of the African continent. It was officially launched in 2002 as a successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, 1963–1999). The AU is guided by its vision of ‘An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena’.

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## THE ELECTORAL INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA (EISA)

EISA is a pan-African, not-for-profit organisation committed to advancing credible elections, inclusive governance, and resilient democratic institutions across the continent.

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## INTERNATIONAL IDEA

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