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Regulating Expertise in the Age of Influence: Credential Governance, Contextual Legitimacy, and the Limits of Policy Transfer in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media influencer content in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has created an epistemic governance problem: audiences cannot reliably distinguish qualified professional guidance from unqualified imitation expertise in high-stakes domains including health, finance, and law. Two recent regulatory interventions offer potential models: China's Cyberspace Administration of China regulation of October 2025, which requires verified professional credentials for influencers producing content in protected domains, and Spain's Royal Decree 444/2024, which establishes a mandatory registration and disclosure regime for high-reach content creators. This paper assesses whether either model is transferable to five African contexts, namely Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Egypt, through comparative primary policy document analysis. It introduces the Contextual Expertise Legitimacy Framework (CELF), a two-dimensional analytical tool that maps content governance approaches against regulatory state capacity and social credentialing pluralism. The analysis finds that direct policy transfer from China or Spain into any of the five African cases would produce uninformed transfer failure, because both models presuppose institutional preconditions and a monist epistemic authority structure that do not characterize SSA digital public spheres. The CELF generates three differentiated adaptation pathways: disclosure-first platform co-regulation for Kenya and Ghana; hybrid credential-disclosure governance with sectoral prioritization for Nigeria; and institutional anchoring within existing statutory bodies for South Africa. Egypt's experience with reach-based influencer licensing documents the political capture risk that all three pathways must be designed to avoid. The paper contributes an original conceptual framework, a comparative regulatory analysis across seven cases, and context-sensitive governance design prescriptions for digital content quality in low-to-medium regulatory capacity environments.

Keywords:
influencer regulation, policy transfer, platform governance, Sub-Saharan Africa, contextual expertise legitimacy, content governance

INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers have become a dominant force in shaping public knowledge and behavior across Sub-Saharan Africa. By early 2025, Kenya recorded 15.1 million active social media users, representing 26.5 percent of the population, with TikTok ranking third among the most used platforms nationwide after WhatsApp and Facebook (Kemp, 2025b). Nigeria's digital economy is larger still, with over 107 million

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internet users as of October 2025 (Tila, 2025). Across this landscape, content creators without formal qualifications in medicine, law, finance, or construction regularly produce and circulate guidance that audiences treat as expert opinion. Newman et al. (2025) identified online influencers and personalities as the most concerning sources of misinformation across its surveyed markets, with TikTok cited by 55 percent of Kenyan respondents as the primary platform through which misleading content is spread. A 2025 study drawing on data from Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa found that 46.89 percent of surveyed social media users reported consistently trusting influencer opinions and regularly relying on their recommendations, regardless of the influencer's qualifications in the domain being addressed (Simba & Girma, 2025)).

The epistemic consequences of this environment are well documented. Social media platforms reward confidence, relatability, and production quality over factual accuracy, and unqualified creators who speak with authority consistently outreach credentialled experts who communicate with appropriate caution (Gorwa, 2019; Simba & Girma, 2025). Osuagwu et al.(2021) documented, in a cross-sectional survey spanning twelve Sub-Saharan African countries, that social media was the dominant vector for COVID-19 misinformation, with significant downstream effects on vaccine uptake and treatment behavior. Hove and Cilliers (2023) found that health infodemics in Africa were structurally amplified rather than isolated, with WhatsApp and TikTok functioning as the primary distribution channels for health falsehoods. The broader pattern extends beyond public health into financial advice, legal information, and construction safety, where unqualified influencer content regularly circulates without correction or labelling (Nyabola, 2023).

Governments in other parts of the world have responded to this pattern through formal regulation. In October 2025, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) introduced regulations requiring social media influencers who produce content on medicine, law, education, or finance to hold verified professional credentials, with fines of up to 100,000 yuan for non-compliant creators and the platforms hosting them (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025; Stojkov, 2025). Platforms including Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo were placed under statutory obligation to verify credentials and ensure content in professional domains carries proper citations and source disclosures (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025). Spain moved earlier, with Royal Decree 444/2024 establishing a mandatory registration regime for content creators meeting defined reach and income thresholds under the General Audiovisual Communication Law (Ley 13/2022), the first formal legislative instrument in the European Union to systematically address the influencer economy as a distinct regulatory subject (Bustamante, 2024). Together, these interventions represent what this paper terms the credential turn in global digital content governance.

Whether this regulatory turn offers transferable lessons for Sub-Saharan African states is the central question this paper addresses. Both the Chinese and Spanish models rest on institutional preconditions that most SSA states do not currently possess, including centralized enforcement infrastructure, functional professional credentialing databases, and reliable income verification systems. They also rest on an assumption that formal institutional credentials are the primary or sufficient basis for epistemic trust in public digital discourse. That assumption does not hold in contexts where religious authority, ethnic community knowledge networks, and lived experience each carry independent and substantial legitimacy alongside formal credentials (Fraser, 1990; Painter & Pierre, 2005). Transplanting a credential verification regime without accounting for these differences is likely to produce what Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) classify as uninformed policy transfer failure: a regulatory architecture that cannot be implemented at the required scale, or that is selectively enforced in ways that suppress legitimate non-institutional voices while leaving the misinformation problem substantially intact.

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METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analytical Approach

This paper adopts a comparative policy document analysis design. The method treats formal regulatory instruments, including national legislation, subsidiary regulations, codes of practice, and official regulatory body publications, as primary data sources, subjecting them to structured analytical comparison across seven cases. Policy document analysis is appropriate for this study because the research question concerns regulatory architecture and its transferability rather than the attitudes of regulated actors or the behavioral effects of regulation on end users. The design follows the logic of structured focused comparison as developed in the comparative politics and policy transfer literatures: each case is interrogated against the same set of analytical questions, and cross-case comparison generates the comparative findings (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

The analytical scaffold is Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) policy transfer framework, which organizes comparative analysis around seven core questions: who transfers, for what reasons, from where, to where, what is transferred, with what degree of completeness, and with what results. This framework is suited to the present study because it treats the institutional preconditions and contextual fit of transferred policies as analytic variables rather than background conditions (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). The CELF framework developed here builds directly on Dolowitz and Marsh's transfer failure typology, specifically the concept of uninformed transfer, in which receiving jurisdictions lack the institutional information required to assess whether a borrowed model fits their context. Regulatory capacity theory, as developed by Painter and Pierre (2005), is applied as a second analytical lens to assess the enforcement feasibility of credential governance in each African case.

Case Selection Rationale

Two benchmark cases and five African cases were selected through purposive sampling. China and Spain were selected as benchmarks because they represent the two dominant regulatory design philosophies in the contemporary influencer governance space. China's CAC regulation represents the credential enforcement pole: mandatory qualification verification, platform enforcement obligations, and statutory fine structures (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025). Spain's Royal Decree 444/2024 represents the disclosure and registration pole: reach-based thresholds, commercial transparency requirements, and self-regulatory administrative mechanisms (Bustamante, 2024; López, 2025; Ministry for Digital Transformation and Public Service, Spain, 2024). Selecting both cases allows the paper to bracket the realistic regulatory design space rather than treating a single model as the sole relevant comparator.

The five African cases were selected to capture meaningful variation along the two axes of the CELF framework. Kenya was selected because it has the most active current legislative debate on social media content governance in East Africa, a well-documented digital economy with 15.1 million active social media users (Kemp, 2025b), and the institutional architecture of the Communications Authority of Kenya as a potential regulatory vehicle (UNESCO, 2025). Nigeria was selected because it has the most developed influencer-adjacent regulatory infrastructure on the continent through the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria established under Act No. 23 of 2022, and a digital economy of over 107 million internet users (ITIF, 2025b; Tila, 2025). Ghana was selected as a West African comparator with a constitutionally liberal regulatory culture and a distinct institutional tradition from Nigeria (Freedom House, 2024). South Africa was selected because it has the strongest existing self-regulatory infrastructure in the sample through the Advertising Regulatory Board and its Memorandum of Understanding with the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, placing it closest to the institutional threshold at which credential governance becomes feasible (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa

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[ICASA], 2021). Egypt was selected as the sole North African case and because its 2018 Press and Media Regulation Law created the earliest formal influencer licensing architecture on the continent, making it an instructive case study in the consequences of premature credential governance in a context of limited institutional independence (ITIF, 2025a).

Data Sources and Collection

Primary data sources include the full text or authoritative English translations of the following regulatory instruments: China's Cyberspace Administration of China regulations of October 2025 (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025); Spain's Real Decreto 444/2024 and the parent Ley 13/2022 General de Comunicación Audiovisual; Kenya's Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018 and the Kenya Information and Communications Act (1998) as revised through 2022; Nigeria's NITDA Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms and Internet Intermediaries (2022) (Ishaku, 2025) and the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Establishment Act No. 23 of 2022; Ghana's Electronic Communications Act (2008, Act 775) and the National Communications Authority Act (2008, Act 769); South Africa's Electronic Communications Act No. 36 of 2005, the Advertising Regulatory Board Social Media Code of Conduct, and the ICASA-ARB Memorandum of Understanding (2021); and Egypt's Law No. 175 of 2018 on Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes and the Press and Media Regulation Law's Article 19 provisions on large social media accounts.

Analytical Procedure

Each benchmark case is assessed along three dimensions. First, the institutional assumptions embedded in the regulatory model are identified: what enforcement infrastructure, credential verification systems, and platform technical capacity does the model presuppose? Second, the enforcement mechanisms and their preconditions are described: what statutory authority, financial resources, and bureaucratic coordination does implementation require? Third, transferability constraints are assessed: which features of the model are replicable in lower-capacity environments, and which are structurally bound to the source context (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Painter & Pierre, 2005)?

Each African case is then assessed against the same three dimensions using primary regulatory documents. The CELF is applied to locate each case within the two-dimensional analytical space. Adaptation pathways are derived from the quadrant positions rather than from analogy with either benchmark model, which is the analytical contribution the framework makes over a simpler bilateral comparison.

Limitations

Three limitations bear noting. First, this study does not include qualitative fieldwork; no interviews with regulators, influencers, or platform compliance officers were conducted. The analysis therefore captures the formal regulatory architecture of each case rather than the informal norms, enforcement discretion, or implementation gaps that may differ substantially from what legislation prescribes. Second, China's CAC regulation of October 2025 is analyzed through English-language reporting and secondary analysis rather than the original Mandarin regulatory text. The regulatory analysis is grounded in multiple consistent secondary sources, but nuances in the original text may not be fully captured. Third, the regulatory landscape in all seven cases is evolving rapidly. The NITDA Online Harm Protection Bill in Nigeria and the Kenya Information and Communications Amendment Bill were both at draft stage at the time of writing, and their provisions may have been amended before or after publication.

GLOBAL CREDENTIAL TURN: CHINA AND SPAIN AS REGULATORY BENCHMARKS

The emergence of formal regulatory frameworks targeting influencer content quality represents a substantive shift in how states conceptualize the governance of digital public discourse. For most of the preceding decade, regulatory interventions

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in the influencer economy focused on commercial transparency: ensuring that paid promotions were disclosed, that advertising standards applied to sponsored content, and that platform terms of service were enforced consistently. The credential turn marks a different logic, one in which the problem is not primarily one of hidden commercial interest but of unqualified expertise reaching mass audiences in domains where misinformation carries material harm (Santos et al., 2025). China and Spain have adopted this logic through mechanisms that differ substantially in design, enforcement architecture, and political context, and that difference is analytically important for any jurisdiction considering what to borrow from either model.

China's CAC Credential Regulation of October 2025

Regulatory Architecture and Scope

The Cyberspace Administration of China's October 2025 regulations on online content creators represent the most operationally specific influencer expertise governance instrument currently in force globally. The regulation applies to creators producing content in four protected domains: medicine, law, finance, and education (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025). Within these domains, creators are required to hold verified professional credentials, including recognized degrees, professional licenses, or formal certification from approved bodies in the relevant field, and to submit those credentials for verification by the platforms on which they operate. Platforms including Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo bear statutory responsibility for conducting credential checks, ensuring that content in the four protected domains carries explicit source citations, and flagging or removing content produced by unverified creators (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025). Non-compliant platforms face fines of up to 100,000 yuan per violation, creating a financial incentive for proactive enforcement rather than reactive takedown (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025).

The regulation additionally requires creators to disclose when their content draws on specific studies or reports, and to label content that incorporates AI-generated elements (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025). This disclosure obligation extends the framework beyond credential verification into content transparency more broadly, addressing a secondary concern about synthetic or algorithmically generated professional advice circulating without attribution. The combined effect is a regulatory instrument that operates at two levels simultaneously: the credential level, which gatekeeps who may produce content in sensitive domains, and the attribution level, which governs how that content is framed and sourced.

Institutional Assumptions Embedded in the Model

The Chinese credential model rests on three institutional preconditions that are rarely made explicit in commentary on the regulation but that are essential to understanding its feasibility. The first is the existence of a centralized, high-capacity regulatory state capable of mandating and monitoring compliance across major digital platforms at scale. China's CAC operates with statutory authority over all internet-facing services in the country, can require platforms to modify their architectures and review workflows, and has demonstrated willingness to impose substantial penalties on major technology companies for non-compliance with content governance obligations (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2025; Santos et al., 2025). This institutional authority is not a generic feature of states with digital governance frameworks; it reflects a particular configuration of state-platform relations that does not exist in most other jurisdictions.

The second precondition is the existence of a comprehensive and digitally accessible professional credentialing infrastructure. China's professional licensing system, while not without gaps, maintains national databases of qualified practitioners in medicine, law, accounting, and education that are, in principle, machine-readable and cross-referenceable against platform account

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data. The verification requirement only works as a regulatory mechanism if there is something to verify against, and the construction of that verification infrastructure is itself a substantial institutional investment that predates the 2025 regulation by several decades (Painter & Pierre, 2005). The third precondition is platform technical capacity: the regulation assumes that platforms can implement credential-check workflows at the scale of their creator populations, store and process credential data securely, and surface labels and source citations in their user interfaces. For major platforms with hundreds of engineers and significant compliance budgets, this is operationally feasible. For smaller platforms or emerging digital economies where platform infrastructure is thinner, the same requirement creates disproportionate compliance burdens (Gorwa, 2019).

The Bundling Problem and its Implications

A feature of the Chinese regulatory model that receives insufficient attention in comparative governance analysis is what this paper terms the bundling problem. The credential mandate does not exist as a standalone epistemic quality instrument. It sits within a broader content governance architecture that also prohibits criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, restricts content questioning state institutions, bans discussion of topics classified as threats to national security, and gives the CAC broad discretion to order the removal of content it deems harmful to social stability (ITIF, 2025b; UNESCO, 2025). The credential requirement and the political speech restrictions are administered by the same body, enforced through the same platform obligation mechanisms, and subject to the same discretionary enforcement logic.

This bundling has two consequences for comparative analysis. First, it means that the credential mechanism is inseparable from its authoritarian enforcement context in any operational assessment of how the regulation functions. Platforms that comply with the credential verification requirement are simultaneously complying with a content governance architecture designed to suppress political dissent, and there is no institutional mechanism within the Chinese system that would allow them to implement one without the other (Santos et al., 2025). Second, it means that the credential mechanism may function as much as a tool for restricting who may speak authoritatively in public digital discourse as it does as a tool for improving the epistemic quality of that discourse. Requiring credentials in medicine or law concentrates legitimate speech in voices that are formally embedded in state-supervised institutional structures, which in the Chinese context means voices that are also subject to professional discipline for speech that diverges from state positions (Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2025a).

Transferability Constraints

Three features of the Chinese model create structural barriers to transfer into SSA contexts. The institutional authority barrier is the most fundamental: no SSA state currently has the statutory authority over major digital platforms that the CAC exercises, and the political economy of platform governance in the region is characterized by platform dominance of the regulatory relationship rather than state dominance (Gorwa, 2019; Nyabola, 2023). The credentialing infrastructure barrier is the second: professional licensing databases in most SSA countries are incomplete, not machine-readable, and administered by professional associations rather than state bodies, making automated credential verification technically infeasible at scale. The bundling risk is the third: SSA states with weaker democratic accountability mechanisms than either China or Spain face a higher risk that a credential governance framework would be used to restrict legitimate non-institutional voices, including community health workers, paralegals serving informal settlements, and financial advisors operating in unbanked economies, rather than simply filtering unqualified misinformation producers (Masaar, 2023).

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Spain's Royal Decree 444/2024: The Registration and Disclosure Model

Regulatory Architecture And Scope

Spain's approach to influencer governance proceeds from a different premise. Rather than targeting content quality through credential verification, Royal Decree 444/2024 targets the influencer economy as a commercial activity and imposes disclosure and registration obligations on creators who meet defined reach and income thresholds (Bustamante, 2024). The decree was enacted under the authority of Ley 13/2022, the General Audiovisual Communication Law, which transposed the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive and extended its scope to include user-generated content services and video-sharing platforms (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022). Under the decree, creators who publish at least 24 videos per year and meet both a follower threshold of one million and an annual income threshold of 300,000 euros from their content activity are classified as users of special relevance and must register in the state registry of audiovisual service providers maintained by the Comisión Nacional de Mercados y la Competencia (Bustamante, 2024).

Registration carries obligations that include compliance with advertising transparency requirements, protection of minor audiences, and provision of content labelling for commercial communications (Bustamante, 2024). The decree does not establish credential requirements for content in professional domains, nor does it create any mechanism for assessing the epistemic quality of the content that registered creators produce. Its primary instrument is transparency: ensuring that audiences can identify when a creator is operating in a commercial capacity and that the content they consume complies with the same advertising standards that apply to broadcast media (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022).

Institutional Assumptions Embedded in the Model

Spain's registration model rests on institutional preconditions that are less demanding than China's but still substantial. The income verification threshold of 300,000 euros per year presupposes a functioning tax administration system capable of auditing influencer income from multiple revenue streams, including platform monetization, brand partnerships, merchandise sales, and subscription services. It presupposes that influencer-brand contracts are formalized in writing and subject to audit, which requires a commercial legal framework in which platform payments to creators and brand payments to influencers are documented as taxable transactions rather than informal transfers. And it presupposes that the CNMC has the investigative capacity and enforcement budget to identify unregistered creators who meet the thresholds, audit their income, and impose meaningful penalties for non-registration (Bustamante, 2024).

The registration obligation also presupposes a creator population that operates at sufficient commercial scale to be captured by the thresholds. Spain's own assessment of the decree, reflected in analyses by the CNMC and the Council of Europe Audiovisual Observatory, acknowledged that the cumulative thresholds of one million followers and 300,000 euros annual income exclude the large majority of active influencers in the country (Council of Europe Audiovisual Observatory, 2024). Estimates suggest that fewer than 200 creators in Spain meet both thresholds simultaneously, which means the regulation applies to a very small fraction of the creator population while leaving the vast middle market of micro and nano influencers, who collectively drive a significant portion of health, financial, and legal misinformation, entirely outside the registration requirement (Santos et al., 2025).

Gaps in the Disclosure Model

The Spanish model's focus on commercial transparency generates a specific analytical gap that is directly relevant to the SSA context. Disclosure of paid partnerships addresses the problem of hidden commercial interest in influencer content, but it does not address the problem of unqualified expertise. A creator who produces health misinformation without any commercial relationship with a brand is not

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captured by the decree's disclosure obligations, and the registration framework provides no mechanism for assessing whether the content a registered creator produces is accurate, qualified, or safe (Spain, 2024; Santos et al., 2025). The decree is, in effect, an advertising standards instrument extended to digital creators rather than an epistemic quality governance instrument, and the distinction matters for how its lessons are assessed.

A second gap relates to enforcement geography. The decree applies to creators established in Spain and to creators targeting Spanish audiences from abroad who meet the thresholds, but enforcement against creators based outside Spain depends on international cooperation mechanisms that remain underdeveloped in the digital governance space (Council of Europe Audiovisual Observatory, 2024). For SSA contexts where a significant proportion of influential health and financial content is produced by creators in diaspora communities or on platforms headquartered in jurisdictions outside the regulatory reach of national bodies, this enforcement gap is not a minor operational detail but a structural limitation on any registration-based model.

Comparative Synthesis: What the Two Models Share and Where They Diverge

Despite the substantial differences in their regulatory design, the Chinese and Spanish models share a common epistemic assumption: that the problem of unqualified influencer content is primarily a supply-side problem, solvable by regulating who produces content in sensitive domains or by imposing disclosure obligations on high-reach commercial producers. Neither model addresses the demand side of the problem, which is the structural incentive that social media platform algorithms create for high-confidence, emotionally engaging content regardless of its epistemic quality (Gorwa, 2019). Both models are also designed for contexts in which the primary regulatory relationship is between the state and formal commercial entities, whether credentialed professionals, registered businesses, or major platforms, and neither provides a ready mechanism for governing the vast informal creator economy that characterizes digital content production across Sub-Saharan Africa (Nyabola, 2023).

The two models bracket the realistic regulatory design space for influencer content governance as it currently exists at the global level. The Chinese model is the maximum feasible intervention: credential verification, platform enforcement obligations, and statutory sanctions, administered by a high-capacity regulatory state. The Spanish model is the minimum formally structured intervention: registration thresholds, disclosure obligations, and sector-specific code compliance, administered through an existing media regulatory body. Everything that a realistic SSA regulatory framework could do sits somewhere between these two poles. The CELF framework, developed below, provides the analytical tools for identifying where each African case sits relative to both models and what forms of intervention are institutionally feasible and socially coherent in each context.

CONTEXTUAL EXPERTISE LEGITIMACY FRAMEWORK

The Contextual Expertise Legitimacy Framework is introduced as an analytical and prescriptive tool for assessing influencer content governance in contexts where the institutional preconditions and social epistemological conditions of the benchmark regulatory models do not apply. It builds on three bodies of theory: Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) policy transfer framework, which provides the scaffold for understanding why direct model transplantation fails; Painter and Pierre's (2005) regulatory capacity theory, which provides the conceptual vocabulary for assessing institutional feasibility; and Fraser's (1990) counter publics theory, which provides the conceptual basis for understanding why formal credential systems capture only one of several legitimacy channels operating in pluralist digital public spheres. The framework is not a general theory of digital governance; it is a diagnostic and design tool calibrated to the specific problem of expertise governance in low-to-medium

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regulatory capacity contexts characterized by high social credentialing pluralism.

Theoretical Foundations of the CELF

Policy Transfer Theory and Uninformed Transfer Failure

Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) define policy transfer as a process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, or ideas in one political system is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, or ideas in another. Their framework distinguishes between voluntary transfer, in which policy actors actively seek foreign models to borrow from, and coercive transfer, in which international organizations or dominant states impose policy models on receiving jurisdictions. For digital governance in SSA, the relevant failure mode is what Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) call uninformed transfer: a situation in which the receiving jurisdiction adopts a policy model without adequate understanding of the institutional conditions that made it work in the source context, and without assessing whether those conditions exist or can be created in the receiving context.

Uninformed transfer failure is particularly likely in fast-moving technical domains where pressure to regulate is high, where there is visible foreign precedent, and where the institutional assessment required to evaluate transferability is technically demanding (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). All three conditions apply to influencer content governance in SSA. The political pressure to act on social media misinformation is documented and rising, visible in Kenya's National Assembly TikTok petition, Nigeria's NITDA Online Harm Protection Bill, and Ghana's proposed National Media Commission digital code (ITIF, 2025b; Kaaniru, 2025). The Chinese and Spanish models are visible and widely reported. And the institutional assessment required to evaluate their transferability demands knowledge of professional licensing architectures, platform technical capabilities, tax administration systems, and social epistemological conditions that few digital governance policymakers in the region have systematically assembled.

Regulatory Capacity Theory and Enforcement Feasibility

Painter and Pierre (2005) define policy capacity as the ability of state institutions to marshal the necessary resources, including legal authority, financial means, administrative skills, and political support, to make intelligent collective choices and implement them effectively. They distinguish between analytical capacity, which is the ability to collect and process information about policy problems and options; operational capacity, which is the ability to design and implement programs and regulations; and political capacity, which is the ability to build the coalitions and legitimacy needed to sustain policy over time. Most SSA digital governance bodies have moderate analytical capacity, which explains why the misinformation problem is well diagnosed at the policy level across the region, and considerably weaker operational and political capacity, which explains why enforcement of existing digital content standards is inconsistent across most of the same countries (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Nyabola, 2023).

Regulatory capacity theory implies that the appropriate governance instrument for a given context depends not only on the severity of the problem being addressed but also on the institutional resources available to address it. An enforcement-intensive instrument, such as credential verification with platform compliance obligations, requires a level of operational capacity that is simply not present in most SSA regulatory bodies. Imposing such an instrument does not create the capacity; it creates a gap between the regulation on paper and the regulation in practice, which in turn creates space for selective enforcement that may be worse than the absence of regulation (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Santos et al., 2025). The CELF incorporates regulatory capacity as its primary axis precisely to prevent this analytical error from being reproduced in governance design.

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Counterpublics Theory and Social Credentialing Pluralism

Fraser (1990) introduced the concept of subaltern counter publics to describe parallel discursive arenas in which members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, allowing them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs outside the dominant public sphere. While Fraser's original formulation addressed the structural exclusions of bourgeois public sphere theory, the concept has been productively extended to digital media contexts where multiple overlapping publics, each with its own epistemic norms and authority hierarchies, coexist and interact across platforms (Nyabola, 2023). In SSA digital contexts, the relevant insight is that formal professional credentials are one legitimacy currency among several in circulation simultaneously.

Religious authority, conferred by ordination, community recognition, or denominational office, carries substantial epistemic weight in health, family planning, and social policy content across much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Ethnic community knowledge networks, built on accumulated lived experience and peer validation within specific communities, carry independent legitimacy in domains from agricultural practice to traditional medicine to legal customs. Lived experience, particularly of poverty, chronic illness, or systemic exclusion, is recognized by audiences as a legitimate epistemic basis for financial and legal guidance in contexts where formal professional services are inaccessible or mistrusted (Fraser, 1990; Simba & Girma, 2025). A credential verification regime that recognizes only formal institutional qualifications as legitimate bases for speaking in sensitive content domains does not eliminate these alternative legitimacy channels; it simply leaves them unregulated while creating compliance overhead for formal creators, thereby potentially worsening the information quality gap rather than narrowing it.

Platform Governance and the Regulatory Triangle

Gorwa (2019) conceptualizes platform governance as the interaction between three actors: platforms, which set terms of service and content moderation policies; states, which enact legislation and regulatory frameworks; and civil society, which pressures both platforms and states through advocacy, litigation, and public discourse. In well-functioning platform governance systems, all three actors exercise meaningful influence and the regulatory triangle is relatively balanced. In SSA contexts, the triangle is heavily skewed toward platform dominance: major platforms including TikTok, Meta, and YouTube set the effective content standards through algorithmic curation and community guidelines, while state regulatory capacity is limited and civil society technical capacity in digital governance is still developing (Gorwa, 2019; Kaaniru, 2025).

This skewed triangle has direct implications for influencer content governance design. It means that any regulatory framework that relies on platform enforcement obligations, as both the Chinese and Spanish models do, must account for the fact that platforms in SSA are subject to far less regulatory pressure than platforms in China or the European Union. Platforms have commercial incentives to comply with regulatory requirements in large markets with credible enforcement threat, and to do the minimum necessary in smaller markets where enforcement is unlikely (Gorwa, 2019). SSA markets, individually, do not represent the scale of regulatory threat that would motivate proactive compliance investment from major platforms. Regional coordination, through bodies including the African Union or the East African Community, may change this calculus, but no such coordination framework for influencer content governance currently exists.

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The CELF Framework: Two Axes and Four Governance Ideal Types

The Two Analytical Axes

The CELF framework is built on two axes that capture the two most analytically significant sources of variation in the influencer governance problem across contexts. The horizontal axis measures regulatory state capacity, defined as the composite ability of a state's regulatory institutions to enact, implement, and enforce content governance obligations across the digital platform ecosystem. High-capacity positions on this axis reflect states with statutory authority over major platforms, functional enforcement mechanisms, professional credentialing infrastructure, and institutional independence from political interference. Low-capacity positions reflect states where one or more of these elements is absent or insufficient to sustain an enforcement-intensive regulatory instrument.

The vertical axis measures social credentialing pluralism, defined as the number and diversity of independent epistemic authority channels that carry meaningful legitimacy in a given digital public sphere. Monist positions on this axis reflect contexts where formal institutional credentials are the dominant or near-exclusive basis for epistemic authority in professional domains; pluralist positions reflect contexts where formal credentials coexist with substantial alternative legitimacy channels including religious authority, community knowledge networks, lived experience, and peer validation (Fraser, 1990). These two axes are analytically independent: a state can have high regulatory capacity and high social credentialing pluralism, or low regulatory capacity and low pluralism, and all four combinations generate different governance problems and design requirements.

Four Governance Ideal Types

The intersection of the two axes generates four governance ideal types. In the first quadrant, characterized by high regulatory capacity and social credentialing monism, credential verification regimes are institutionally feasible and socially coherent. The state can enforce credential requirements at scale, and formal credentials are the dominant basis for epistemic authority, meaning credential verification captures the primary legitimacy channel without leaving major alternative channels unaddressed. China approximates this ideal type, though its monism is partly a product of active suppression of alternative epistemic channels rather than their genuine social absence. The governance recommendation for this quadrant is credential verification with platform enforcement obligations, calibrated to the enforcement capacity of the relevant regulatory body.

In the second quadrant, characterized by high regulatory capacity and social credentialing pluralism, disclosure and registration frameworks are institutionally feasible but credential verification alone is insufficient. The state can enforce registration requirements and commercial transparency obligations, but credential requirements would address only one of several legitimacy channels and would miss the substantial portion of misinformation that flows through non-institutional authority channels. Spain approximates this ideal type, which is why its model defaults to commercial transparency rather than epistemic quality governance; the Spanish regulatory tradition recognizes that epistemic pluralism limits the effectiveness of credentialing as a content quality tool. The governance recommendation for this quadrant is platform co-regulation with disclosure obligations and content domain labelling, complemented by professional association partnerships for credential-adjacent quality assurance.

In the third quadrant, characterized by low regulatory capacity and social credentialing monism, credential verification is socially coherent but institutionally infeasible at scale. This is a relatively rare combination in SSA, but partial approximations exist in contexts where strong professional association cultures mean formal credentials carry near-exclusive epistemic authority in specific domains while the state lacks the operational capacity to administer a mandatory credential check system. The governance recommendation for this quadrant is

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professional association-led voluntary credentialing, with platforms incentivized to surface credential labels through transparency guidelines rather than statutory obligations.

In the fourth quadrant, characterized by low regulatory capacity and social credentialing pluralism, both the Chinese and Spanish models fail as direct transfers. Credential verification is institutionally infeasible and socially partial in its epistemic reach, and registration-based disclosure is unenforceable at meaningful scale. The dominant SSA position falls in this quadrant, and the governance recommendation is correspondingly different from either benchmark model: disclosure-first, co-regulatory, community-embedded governance that works with the grain of the existing social credentialing landscape rather than attempting to impose an institutional monism that does not reflect how epistemic authority is actually distributed in these digital publics (Fraser, 1990; Painter & Pierre, 2005). The specific design of this alternative pathway varies by sub-position within the quadrant, reflecting the within-quadrant variation across the five African cases.

The CELF as a Diagnostic and Design Tool

The CELF framework is designed to serve two functions in the governance analysis that follows. As a diagnostic tool, it allows each African case to be located within the two-dimensional analytical space using primary regulatory document evidence, identifying not only where each case falls but why it falls there and what specific institutional and epistemic features place it in that position. As a design tool, it generates governance pathway recommendations that are derived from the quadrant logic rather than from analogy with either benchmark model, which prevents the uninformed transfer failure that Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) identify as the central risk in cross-jurisdictional policy borrowing. The framework does not generate a single optimal regulatory model for SSA; it generates differentiated prescriptions calibrated to each case's position, which is precisely the analytical contribution that a context-sensitive framework makes over a one-size-fits-all comparative analysis.

APPLYING THE CELF TO FIVE AFRICAN CASES

The five cases analyzed here represent distinct positions within the CELF's two-dimensional analytical space, and their differences are as analytically instructive as their shared challenge. Across all five cases, the fundamental problem is the same: the rapid expansion of social media content creation has outpaced the regulatory frameworks that govern it, leaving audiences without reliable mechanisms for distinguishing qualified from unqualified expertise in high-stakes content domains. What differs across the cases is the institutional infrastructure available to address that problem, the social epistemological context in which any regulatory instrument must operate, and the specific gaps that primary policy document analysis reveals in each country's existing framework.

Kenya: Regulatory Ambition Outpacing Institutional Capacity

Existing Regulatory Architecture

Kenya's digital content governance framework draws on several legislative instruments enacted over the past decade. The Kenya Information and Communications Act (KICA), originally enacted in 1998 and substantially revised through 2022, gives the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA) broad mandate over electronic communications and information services, but it does not address content quality or creator qualification standards in any domain (Kenya Information and Communications Act, 1998). The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act No. 5 of 2018 introduced provisions criminalizing the publication of false, misleading, or fictitious data that causes harm, but its application to influencer content operates through criminal prosecution after harm has occurred rather than through preventive quality governance. The Data Protection Act No. 24 of 2019 governs the processing of personal data and is relevant to influencer commercial relationships but not to

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content accuracy or creator qualification standards.

The Communications Authority's 2025 National Guidelines on Digital Disinformation and Harmful Online Content, developed in collaboration with UNESCO, represent the most current regulatory document directly relevant to content quality governance in Kenya (UNESCO, 2025). The guidelines identify categories of harmful content including health misinformation, financial fraud, and professional impersonation, and recommend platform and creator responsibilities. They are, however, non-binding. They carry no enforcement mechanism, no penalty regime, and no institutional accountability framework that would require platforms or creators to comply. Their status is closer to a policy statement of intent than a regulatory instrument. The Kenya Information and Communications Amendment Bill, under consideration by the National Assembly at the time of writing, proposed registration requirements for content creators, but the National Assembly's Public Petitions Committee had simultaneously recommended against a blanket TikTok ban on constitutional grounds, signaling the political caution that surrounds any mandatory content governance intervention (Kaaniru, 2025; Kamau, 2026).

CELF Positioning

Kenya sits firmly in Quadrant D of the CELF framework: low regulatory capacity, high social credentialing pluralism. On the regulatory capacity axis, the Communications Authority has demonstrated significant operational constraints. Its budget and staffing are calibrated for spectrum management, licensing of telecommunications operators, and broadcast standards oversight, not for the continuous monitoring and enforcement of digital content quality across millions of content creators. The CA's interaction with major platforms is largely reactive, responding to petitions and escalated complaints rather than conducting proactive compliance audits (Kaaniru, 2025). On the social credentialing pluralism axis, Kenya's digital public sphere is characterized by the simultaneous operation of multiple independent epistemic authority channels alongside formal professional credentials. Religious leaders including pastors, imams, and traditional healers circulate health and family advice that their communities treat as authoritative regardless of formal medical qualification. Community financial advisors operating in chama networks and informal investment groups carry epistemic weight in financial content domains that certified financial analysts cannot easily displace (Newman et al., 2025). The result is a context in which credential verification, even if institutionally feasible, would address only one of several active legitimacy channels.

Key Regulatory Gaps

Three gaps in Kenya's regulatory framework are analytically significant. First, no primary regulatory instrument establishes content quality standards for influencer content in professional domains. The KICA addresses communications infrastructure rather than content, the Cybercrimes Act addresses criminal harm after the fact rather than preventive quality governance, and the 2025 disinformation guidelines are non-binding. The gap between the documented severity of health and financial misinformation circulating on Kenyan platforms and the absence of any enforceable quality standard for professional domain content is the most operationally significant regulatory gap in the sample (Newman et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2025). Second, the CA has no formal regulatory relationship with major social media platforms operating in Kenya. Unlike the CAC in China or the CNMC in Spain, the CA cannot require platforms to implement content labelling systems, verify creator credentials, or surface disclosure information on professional domain content. Kaaniru (2025) noted that TikTok operates in Kenya without any formal content governance agreement with the CA, relying entirely on its own community guidelines for content moderation. Third, professional associations in medicine, law, and finance have not been formally engaged as regulatory partners in any digital content governance initiative. Their credentialing

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infrastructure exists and is accessible, but no regulatory instrument creates a pathway for linking professional association databases to platform content labelling systems.

Lessons from the Benchmark Models

Kenya cannot realistically adopt either the Chinese or the Spanish model directly. The CA does not have the statutory authority over major platforms that the CAC exercises, and it does not have the enforcement infrastructure to administer credential verification at national scale. The Spanish registration threshold of one million followers would, if applied in Kenya, capture only a handful of creators, leaving the mid-market of creators with between 50,000 and 500,000 followers, who collectively reach a much larger aggregate audience, entirely unregulated. The more transferable lesson from Spain is the disclosure logic: creating enforceable obligations for creators in professional domains to label their content with qualification status, whether qualified, unqualified, or community-based experience, gives audiences information without requiring state credential verification infrastructure. The more transferable lesson from China is the platform obligation concept: even without credential verification, platforms can be required to surface professional domain content labels and flag unlabeled professional advice as a condition of operating in the Kenyan market.

Nigeria: Regulatory Infrastructure Without Content Quality Standards

Existing Regulatory Architecture

Nigeria has the most developed influencer-adjacent regulatory infrastructure among the five African cases. The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act (ARCON), established under Act No. 23 of 2022 and replacing the former Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria, exercises statutory authority over all advertising and marketing communications directed at Nigerian audiences across all media, including digital platforms, social media, and influencer-produced content. ARCON's pre-exposure approval requirement, mandated from March 2023, means that all sponsored content and paid marketing communications produced by influencers must be submitted for vetting before publication, with fines of up to one million naira per infraction for non-compliance (Alex-Adedipe & Itah, 2025). The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act explicitly extends ARCON's jurisdiction to skit makers, vloggers, bloggers, and content creators producing content directed at Nigerian audiences regardless of the platform or the creator's geographic location. A Supreme Court of Appeal ruling in 2022 confirmed ARCON's authority to issue instructions over non-member advertisers, establishing the statutory reach of its mandate beyond the advertising industry membership that formerly limited its predecessor body's jurisdiction (Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act, 2022).

NITDA's Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms and Internet Intermediaries (2022) adds a second regulatory layer, placing obligations on platforms themselves to develop and enforce community standards, respond to government takedown requests within specified timeframes, and publish transparency reports on content moderation activities (ITIF, 2025b). The National Broadcasting Commission's Broadcasting Code, Seventh Edition (2023), extends broadcast content standards to internet-based broadcasting, covering streaming services and potentially applicable to video influencer content in professional domains. The Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission's consumer protection mandate provides a third avenue for addressing deceptive health and financial influencer content through consumer harm provisions rather than content quality standards directly.

CELF Positioning

Nigeria occupies a mid-Quadrant D position with meaningful upward mobility on the regulatory capacity axis, placing it closer to the Quadrant D to Quadrant B transition than any other case except South Africa. ARCON's pre-exposure approval mandate represents a substantive enforcement-capable mechanism that goes considerably beyond what Kenya's

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Communications Authority currently possesses, though its application to organic non-sponsored influencer content in professional domains remains unclear. The gap between ARCON's explicit focus on advertising and marketing communications and the broader category of organic influencer content producing health or financial misinformation without any commercial relationship is the central analytical tension in Nigeria's regulatory position (Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act, 2022; Alex-Adedipe & Itah, 2025). On the social credentialing pluralism axis, Nigeria's digital public sphere exhibits characteristics similar to Kenya's: religious authority, particularly through the large Pentecostal and Islamic media ecosystems, carries substantial epistemic weight in health and family content domains, and community-based financial knowledge networks operate alongside formal financial advisory services in ways that credential verification alone cannot regulate (Osuagwu et al., 2021).

Key Regulatory Gaps

The most significant gap in Nigeria's regulatory architecture is the commercial-organic divide. ARCON's jurisdiction covers advertising and marketing communications, meaning content produced by influencers in exchange for payment, goods, or commercial benefit. It does not cover organic content, that is, content produced by an influencer expressing personal views or providing guidance in a professional domain without any commercial relationship with a brand or sponsor. A medical influencer producing unqualified health guidance without any brand partnership is currently outside ARCON's enforcement remit, even though such content may generate more audience trust precisely because it appears non-commercial. The NITDA Code of Practice addresses platform obligations but does not establish creator-level content quality standards. Nigeria therefore has a regulatory framework that is well-designed for the commercial transparency problem but leaves the epistemic quality problem, which is the core concern of the credential turn, substantially unaddressed (Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2025b; Santos et al., 2025).

Lessons from the Benchmark Models

Nigeria's ARCON infrastructure provides the most realistic adaptive base for a hybrid credential-disclosure model among the five African cases. ARCON's existing statutory authority over digital advertising could be extended through subsidiary legislation to cover organic professional domain content in medicine, law, and finance, with a disclosure-first rather than pre-approval requirement for non-commercial content. Professional bodies including the Nigerian Medical Association, the Nigerian Bar Association, and the Securities and Exchange Commission maintain credentialing databases that could serve as verification partners for a voluntary creator credential labelling scheme administered through ARCON. The Chinese model's platform enforcement obligation concept is also partially applicable in the Nigerian context: NITDA's existing authority over platforms under the Code of Practice could be extended to require platforms to surface professional domain content disclosure labels as a condition of compliance, without requiring the state-level credential verification infrastructure that makes the Chinese model infeasible at scale elsewhere.

Ghana: Liberal Regulatory Culture and the Misinformation Deficit

Existing Regulatory Architecture

Ghana's digital content governance framework rests on three primary legislative instruments. The Electronic Communications Act 2008 (Act 775) establishes the National Communications Authority (NCA) as the primary regulator of electronic communications services, with licensing and compliance functions for telecommunications operators and internet service providers, but without any content quality mandate for social media or influencer-produced content. The National Communications Authority Act 2008 (Act 769) defines the NCA's institutional mandate in similar terms: sector regulation, spectrum management, and consumer protection in telecommunications, rather than

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content governance. The Cybersecurity Act 2020 (Act 1038) is the most directly relevant instrument for digital content quality, establishing the Cyber Security Authority (CSA) and penalizing under Section 63 the production or sharing of harmful digital content that is false or misleading. The CSA's mandate covers cybercrime prevention and critical information infrastructure protection, and its Section 63 provisions apply broadly to false content rather than specifically to unqualified professional advice (Cybersecurity Act, 2020; Ghana's Cybersecurity Act, 2020).

Ghana's 2024 National Child Online Protection Framework extends content governance obligations specifically in relation to minors, but does not address the professional domain misinformation problem in the adult population. The criminal misinformation provisions of the 1960 Criminal Offences Act have been applied reactively to social media content in specific cases, but their application is selective and politically sensitive in ways that the Freedom House (2024) assessment of Ghana's media environment characterizes as inconsistent with consistent content quality governance. No influencer-specific regulatory instrument exists in Ghana's primary legislative framework.

CELF Positioning

Ghana sits in Quadrant D, at the lower capacity end of the regulatory capacity axis and with high social credentialing pluralism comparable to Kenya. The NCA's institutional mandate does not extend to content governance, and the CSA's Section 63 provisions are designed for cybercrime prosecution rather than continuous professional domain content quality monitoring. Ghana's political culture is more constitutionally liberal than Nigeria's on media and expression issues, which creates both an opportunity and a constraint: the opportunity is a stronger civil society ecosystem of fact-checking organizations and media monitoring bodies that could serve as co-regulatory partners; the constraint is greater political reluctance to impose mandatory content governance frameworks that could be characterized as restricting expression (Freedom House, 2024). Freedom House (2024) notes that the NCA has faced criticism from civil society organizations for opaque licensing decisions, which further limits its credibility as an independent content governance body. Ghana's social credentialing landscape mirrors Kenya's in its pluralism: religious authorities in both the large Christian and Muslim communities carry significant health and social advice credibility that overlaps with and competes against formal professional credentials in the digital content ecosystem (Simba & Girma, 2025).

Key Regulatory Gaps

Ghana has three analytically significant gaps. First, the absence of any influencer-specific regulatory instrument means there is no legal basis for requiring professional domain content disclosure or creator qualification labelling in the current framework. The Cybersecurity Act's Section 63 false content provisions are criminal law provisions requiring prosecutorial action, not administrative content quality standards that can be applied routinely to misinformation below the threshold of deliberate fraud or criminal intent. The vast majority of health or financial misinformation produced by unqualified influencers in Ghana does not meet the criminal intent threshold and thus falls entirely outside the existing enforcement framework (Cybersecurity Act, 2020; Ghana's Cybersecurity Act, 2020). Second, the NCA and the CSA operate with separate mandates that do not intersect on the content quality governance question, creating an institutional gap between the communications regulator with no content mandate and the cybersecurity authority with a criminal content mandate but no professional domain content quality remit. Third, fact-checking organizations including Africa Check, which operates in Ghana, and GhanaFact have no formal regulatory status in the content governance framework and cannot exercise enforcement functions even where they identify and publicly refute unqualified professional advice.

Lessons from the Benchmark Models

For Ghana, the Spanish model's approach to civil society co-regulation, specifically the

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involvement of professional associations and media standards bodies as partners in implementing the registration framework, is more transferable than its registration thresholds or income verification mechanisms. Ghana's civil society ecosystem, including the Ghana Journalists Association, the Ghana Medical Association, and established fact-checking organizations, provides a foundation for a non-statutory content quality co-regulatory scheme in which professional bodies certify creators as qualified in specific domains and platforms surface those certifications through voluntary disclosure labels. The Chinese model's enforcement logic is almost entirely non-transferable to Ghana's constitutional and institutional context, both because the CSA lacks the operational capacity for proactive compliance monitoring and because Ghana's stronger civil society would resist a state-administered credential regime that concentrates speech rights in formally credentialed voices.

South Africa: Strong Infrastructure, Voluntary Compliance Ceiling

Existing Regulatory Architecture

South Africa has the most developed institutional infrastructure for influencer adjacent regulation among the five African cases. The Electronic Communications Act No. 36 of 2005 gives the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) statutory authority over broadcast content standards and electronic communications services, with enforcement powers including license revocation and administrative fines. The Advertising Regulatory Board, established in 2018 following the liquidation of its predecessor, the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa, administers the Code of Advertising Practice and the Social Media Code of Conduct (ICASA, 2021). The ARB's Social Media Code requires all paid social media communications to be clearly identifiable as advertising, requires disclosure of brand partnerships through standard labels including #Ad, #Sponsored, or #PaidPartnership, and prohibits deceptive, false, or misleading claims in influencer content regardless of commercial context (Mupangavanhu & Kerchhoff, 2023; Schoeman-Louw, 2023). In 2021, the ARB and ICASA signed a Memorandum of Understanding allowing ICASA to escalate broadcast licensee advertising issues to the ARB for adjudication, creating a formal institutional link between the statutory and self-regulatory systems (ICASA, 2021).

South Africa's Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008 prohibits deceptive, false, or misleading advertising and applies to influencer content where a commercial relationship exists, providing a statutory enforcement hook that goes beyond the ARB's self-regulatory jurisdiction. A 2022 Supreme Court of Appeal ruling in a case involving the ARB confirmed that the ARB has authority to issue instructions over non-member advertisers, substantially expanding its de facto reach beyond the advertising industry membership base (ICASA, 2021). The Competition Commission's 2023 Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry examined the structural power of major digital platforms in South Africa's media economy and recommended a series of regulatory interventions addressing platform dominance and content diversity, providing a further institutional basis for extending content governance obligations to platforms (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2023).

CELF Positioning

South Africa sits closest to Quadrant B among the five cases, with higher regulatory capacity than Kenya, Nigeria, or Ghana, and moderately high social credentialing pluralism. ICASA's statutory enforcement powers and the ARB's established adjudication system together constitute a regulatory infrastructure that approaches the institutional requirements for a disclosure-and-registration model similar in design to Spain's, though without the income verification capability that the Spanish model's commercial threshold requires. The critical constraint is that the ARB operates as a voluntary self-regulatory body: creators and brands who are not members and who have not signed the Code of Conduct are not subject to ARB adjudication, and no statutory

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mechanism currently compels participation. A well-documented study by Mupangavanhu and Kerchhoff (2023) on online deceptive advertising in South Africa found that rogue advertisers, precisely the creators producing health and financial misinformation without commercial disclosure, are the least likely to voluntarily subscribe to the ARB code, creating a systematic gap in the self-regulatory architecture. South Africa's social credentialing landscape is more pluralist than simple income data might suggest: the country's linguistic diversity, large informal economy, and significant trust deficit in formal institutions among historically marginalized communities mean that formal credentials carry less universal authority than the sophistication of the ARB framework might imply (Nyabola, 2023).

Key Regulatory Gaps

South Africa's most significant gap is the voluntary compliance ceiling. The ARB Social Media Code's prohibition on false or misleading content in influencer communications is substantively appropriate for the epistemic quality problem, but its enforcement depends on creators and platforms choosing to participate in the self-regulatory system. Creators producing unqualified health or financial advice without any commercial relationship are outside the Code's primary scope, and those who produce commercial misinformation face only the prospect of an ARB ruling, which carries no statutory sanction for non-members (ICASA, 2021; Mupangavanhu & Kerchhoff, 2023). ICASA's statutory enforcement powers apply to broadcast licensees rather than to social media creators directly, meaning the most powerful regulatory instrument in South Africa's framework does not reach the primary locus of the influencer content quality problem. No professional domain content quality standard exists for influencer content in medicine, law, or finance, and no credential or qualification disclosure requirement applies to creators operating in those domains.

Lessons from the Benchmark Models

South Africa's regulatory trajectory points toward what the CELF framework identifies as Pathway C: institutional anchoring within existing statutory bodies. The most feasible pathway for South Africa is not the creation of new regulatory architecture but the elevation of the ARB Social Media Code from voluntary to statutory status through amendment of the Electronic Communications Act, extending ICASA's content standards mandate to include social media professional domain content. The Spanish model is the more instructive benchmark for South Africa than the Chinese model: Spain's use of an existing media regulatory body as the vehicle for influencer registration demonstrates that statutory influencer governance can be built on existing institutional foundations rather than requiring new agencies or new enforcement mechanisms. The specific adaptation required for South Africa is the addition of a professional domain content quality dimension, requiring disclosure of qualification status in health, legal, and financial content, which neither the ARB's current code nor the Spanish model addresses.

Egypt: The Earliest Adopter and Deepest Authoritarian Entanglement

Existing Regulatory Architecture

Egypt has the oldest and most formally extensive influencer licensing framework among the five African cases, and also the one most thoroughly documented by press freedom and human rights organizations as an instrument of political censorship rather than epistemic quality governance. Egypt's Press and Media Regulation Law No. 180 of 2018 on Press, Media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation established the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) and, under Article 19, extended media outlet obligations to personal social media accounts, websites, and blogs with more than 5,000 followers (Masaar Technology and Law Community, 2023). Accounts meeting the threshold are required to comply with the same content standards as licensed media outlets, including prohibitions on publishing false news, content inciting violence or hatred, and material

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deemed offensive to religious beliefs. The SCMR has authority under Article 19 to suspend or block non-compliant accounts without prior judicial authorization. Licensing fees for qualifying accounts have been set at E£50,000, with digital platforms facing fees of E£500,000 and minimum capital requirements depending on platform classification, alongside obligations to store all published content on local servers for at least one year accessible to the SCMR on demand (ITIF, 2025a).

Egypt's Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law No. 175 of 2018 provides a parallel enforcement mechanism, penalizing electronic content that threatens national security, violates social peace, or contains content classified as harmful under the Press and Media Law. In June 2024, the SCMR announced plans to block all unlicensed platforms operating in Egypt within three months and ordered Egyptian banks to halt financial transfers to platforms deemed to be operating without compliance authorization (ITIF, 2025a). This enforcement escalation extended the SCMR's reach from individual content creators to the financial infrastructure supporting platform operations in Egypt.

CELF Positioning

Egypt presents a paradox within the CELF framework that is analytically instructive precisely because of its internal contradictions. On the regulatory capacity axis, Egypt appears to occupy a relatively high position among the five African cases: the SCMR has statutory authority, an explicit licensing mandate, fee-based enforcement mechanisms, and a demonstrated willingness to use blocking powers and financial interdiction. This is a level of operational regulatory capacity that no other case in the sample approaches. On the social credentialing pluralism axis, Egypt's digital public sphere is pluralist in ways that the formal regulatory framework does not acknowledge: Al-Azhar's religious authority, local community knowledge networks, and diaspora-connected information channels all operate independently of formal state-credentialed sources in health, social, and financial content domains. The paradox is that Egypt's high apparent regulatory capacity is substantially undermined by the documented selective application of its enforcement tools: the SCMR's blocking powers have been applied overwhelmingly to political journalists, civil society communicators, and government critics rather than to unqualified health or financial influencers (Article 19, 2019, Article 19; ITIF, 2025a; Masaar Technology and Law Community, 2023).

Masaar Technology and Law Community (2023) documented that the SCMR maintains what it characterizes as a continuous state of uncertainty regarding the legality of influencers' work, neither clearly licensing nor clearly prohibiting content creator activity, with the effect of creating a climate of self-censorship and fear that suppresses political and civil society voices far more effectively than it suppresses health or financial misinformation. The CELF framework locates Egypt not in Quadrant A, where China approximates, but in a distorted version of Quadrant D in which the apparent regulatory capacity is real in its political application but largely absent in its epistemic quality governance application, producing the worst outcome of the four quadrant types: high enforcement intensity directed at the wrong governance problem.

Key Regulatory Gaps

Egypt's regulatory framework has three gaps that are structurally different from those in the other four cases. First, the framework conflates reach-based licensing, targeting accounts with over 5,000 followers, with content quality governance, but the licensing requirements do not include any qualification, credential, or professional domain standard. An unqualified health influencer with 6,000 followers who has paid the E£50,000 licensing fee is, within the SCMR's framework, a fully compliant media outlet, while a qualified medical professional who has not paid the fee and registered is technically non-compliant. The framework addresses commercial scale and administrative compliance rather than epistemic quality. Second, the vagueness of the content prohibition standards, including the prohibition on false news and content violating public order,

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creates interpretive discretion that the SCMR has demonstrably used for political rather than epistemic quality purposes. Third, the absence of any appeals mechanism or judicial oversight of SCMR blocking decisions means that creators subject to enforcement action have no institutional recourse, which ARTICLE 19 identifies as a fundamental violation of international freedom of expression standards.

Lessons from the Benchmark Models

Egypt's case demonstrates the risk that the CELF framework identifies as the central danger of applying high-capacity regulatory instruments in contexts of low institutional independence: the governance tool is captured for political censorship rather than used for the epistemic quality purpose that motivated its creation. The lesson for other African states considering credential governance frameworks is not that Egypt's approach to reach-based licensing is technically without merit, since the threshold concept is not inherently flawed, but that the absence of judicial oversight, transparent standards, and institutional independence converts a potentially legitimate governance instrument into a censorship mechanism. The Chinese model's bundling problem, identified in the benchmark analysis, manifests in Egypt not as a design feature but as an implementation outcome: a content governance framework designed ostensibly for quality control functions in practice primarily as a political speech control instrument. For the other four African cases, Egypt's experience provides the most direct evidence available on the continent of what credential and reach-based governance frameworks produce when institutional independence and rule-of-law conditions are not in place.

ADAPTATION PATHWAYS FOR SSA GOVERNANCE

The five-case analysis demonstrates that no single regulatory model fits all African cases, and that direct transplantation of either the Chinese or the Spanish model into any of the five contexts would produce what Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) classify as uninformed transfer failure. The CELF framework generates three adaptation pathways calibrated to the institutional capacity and social credentialing conditions of the cases analyzed, each grounded in the evidence from primary regulatory documents and the theoretical architecture developed above. These pathways are not mutually exclusive at the regional level: they represent differentiated prescriptions for different quadrant positions, and a single country may need to implement elements of more than one pathway depending on the specific content domain being governed.

Pathway A: Disclosure-First and Platform Co-Regulation

Pathway A applies to cases in Quadrant D where state regulatory capacity is low, social credentialing pluralism is high, and the institutional conditions for either credential verification or mandatory registration are absent at the scale required for effective governance. Kenya and Ghana are the primary cases for this pathway, though elements of it are also relevant to Nigeria's organic content gap identified above.

The operational logic of disclosure-first governance is to shift the epistemic quality burden from the state to the creator and the audience, rather than requiring the state to verify credentials or register creators. Under this approach, creators producing content in defined professional domains, specifically health and medicine, finance and investment, and legal guidance, are required by platform terms of service and, over time, by subsidiary regulatory instrument, to label their content with one of three qualification status markers: a professional credential marker, confirming that the creator holds a recognized qualification in the relevant domain; an experience-based marker, indicating that the content is based on lived or community experience rather than formal credentials; or a general interest marker, indicating that the content is opinion or entertainment rather than professional guidance (Gorwa, 2019; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). The audience is thereby given the information required to calibrate their epistemic

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trust, without requiring the state to administer credential verification at scale.

For Kenya, implementing Pathway A requires three specific actions. First, the Kenya Information and Communications Act should be amended to give the Communications Authority statutory power to require platforms operating in Kenya to implement professional domain content labelling, with the label categories defined by subsidiary regulation rather than primary legislation, allowing for iterative refinement as the system develops. Second, professional associations including the Kenya Medical Association, the Law Society of Kenya, and the Capital Markets Authority should be formally engaged as credential partners, maintaining publicly accessible databases of qualified practitioners that creators can link to their content labels for voluntary verification. Third, the CA's 2025 disinformation guidelines should be elevated from advisory to enforceable status through a statutory instrument under KICA, with the platform co-regulatory obligations on professional domain content labelling included as a binding condition of platform operation in Kenya (Kaaniru, 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

For Ghana, the Pathway A implementation builds on the civil society co-regulatory strength that the CELF analysis identified as Ghana's principal institutional asset. The National Communications Authority and the Cyber Security Authority should jointly convene a multi-stakeholder content quality advisory body that includes the Ghana Medical Association, the Ghana Bar Association, established fact-checking organizations including Africa Check and GhanaFact, and platform representatives. This body would develop voluntary professional domain content labelling standards that platforms operating in Ghana commit to implementing through their community guidelines, with the Ghana Journalists Association providing a media ethics overlay. The Electronic Communications Act 2008 (Act 775) does not require amendment to enable this co-regulatory body; it can be established through existing NCA stakeholder engagement mechanisms and progressively given statutory grounding through the NCA Act 769 as the voluntary framework matures.

Pathway B: Hybrid Credential-Disclosure with Sectoral Priority

Pathway B applies to cases where institutional capacity is sufficient to support a more structured governance instrument than Pathway A's voluntary disclosure model, but where social credentialing pluralism and democratic accountability concerns make full credential verification either socially inappropriate or politically risky. Nigeria is the primary case for this pathway, with Egypt as a cautionary reference point for what Pathway B produces when institutional independence is absent.

The operational logic of Pathway B is to target the highest-harm professional domains first, concentrating enforcement resources where the misinformation risk is most severe and where professional association credentialing infrastructure already exists, rather than attempting a uniform credential governance framework across all professional domains simultaneously. For Nigeria, the three priority domains are health and medicine, financial advice and investment products, and legal guidance in consumer and tenancy matters, each of which has an established professional body with membership databases accessible for credential verification partnership (Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act, 2022; ITIF, 2025b).

The specific implementation for Nigeria involves three legislative and administrative actions. ARCON's pre-exposure approval mandate, currently applied to commercial advertising content, should be extended through subsidiary regulation under the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act No. 23 of 2022 to cover organic professional domain content in the three priority areas. The extension would not require pre-approval for all organic content, which would be operationally infeasible, but would require creators producing organic health, financial, or legal guidance content to register with ARCON as professional domain content creators, providing credential documentation to ARCON's Standards

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Panel for verification against the relevant professional association database. Verified creators would receive a digital content quality mark, surfaced by platforms through NITDA's Code of Practice obligations, as a condition of platform compliance (Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act, 2022; ITIF, 2025b). Unverified creators would not be prohibited from producing content in these domains but would be required to display the experience-based or general interest label specified under Pathway A's disclosure framework, ensuring that the two pathways are compatible and mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Nigeria's implementation of Pathway B also requires a specific reform of NITDA's Code of Practice to add an explicit professional domain content quality obligation for platforms. The current Code addresses platform obligations in relation to harmful content removal and government cooperation but does not address content quality labelling for professional domain creator content (ITIF, 2025b). A revised Code provision requiring platforms to surface ARCON-verified creator marks and Pathway A disclosure labels would complete the platform co-regulatory dimension of the hybrid framework without requiring new primary legislation.

Egypt's experience with Pathway B, understood as a reach-based licensing framework with content quality implications, provides the design constraints that any hybrid model in the region must observe. The CELF analysis of Egypt establishes that Pathway B requires three institutional safeguards to function as an epistemic quality instrument rather than a censorship mechanism: the credential and licensing standards must be content-domain specific rather than reach-based, targeting qualification in professional subjects rather than audience scale; the enforcement body must have formally guaranteed institutional independence from the executive, with judicial oversight of blocking or suspension decisions; and the appeals mechanism must be accessible, timely, and adjudicated by a body independent of the licensing authority (Article 19, 2019; ITIF, 2025a; Masaar Technology and Law Community, 2023). Absent these safeguards, Pathway B's hybrid model replicates Egypt's governance failure regardless of the technical quality of the credential verification system it employs.

Pathway C: Institutional Anchoring Within Existing Statutory Bodies

Pathway C applies to South Africa, the case closest to Quadrant B on the CELF framework's regulatory capacity axis. South Africa does not need new regulatory architecture; it needs the existing voluntary self-regulatory infrastructure to be elevated to statutory status and extended to cover professional domain content quality in addition to its current commercial transparency mandate.

The specific actions for South Africa involve two legislative interventions and one administrative reform. First, the Electronic Communications Act No. 36 of 2005 should be amended to extend ICASA's content standards mandate to include social media professional domain content, specifically creating an obligation for platforms operating in South Africa to comply with the ARB Social Media Code of Conduct as a condition of license or registration rather than as a voluntary commitment. This would convert the ARB code from a voluntary instrument that rogue creators can ignore into a statutory standard with ICASA's enforcement powers behind it. Second, the ARB Social Media Code should be revised to add a professional domain content quality dimension, requiring creators producing health, legal, and financial guidance content to display qualification status markers consistent with the Pathway A disclosure framework, providing interoperability with the governance instruments being developed in Kenya and Ghana. Third, ICASA and the ARB should establish a professional domain content quality adjudication panel, drawing on the existing ICASA-ARB Memorandum of Understanding framework, that includes representatives of the Health Professions Council of South Africa, the Law Society of South Africa, and the Financial Sector Conduct Authority as standing members, providing credentialing

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expertise within the adjudication process rather than relying solely on advertising standards expertise.

South Africa's Pathway C implementation has a regional dimension that the other pathways do not. As the country with the most developed regulatory infrastructure in the sample, South Africa's framework, once anchored in statutory obligation, is the most credible model for regional coordination under the African Union's digital governance agenda and the Southern African Development Community's ICT policy framework. The Competition Commission's Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (2023) recommendations, which address platform power and content diversity, provide a further basis for incorporating professional domain content quality obligations into the structural remedies imposed on major platforms operating in South Africa, extending the governance framework beyond voluntary creator compliance into the platform architecture itself

DISCUSSION

The Limits of Supply-Side Governance

The comparative analysis across seven cases reveals a shared limitation in the global credential turn that neither the Chinese nor the Spanish model addresses: both are supply-side governance instruments that attempt to regulate who produces professional domain content or how commercial content relationships are disclosed, without addressing the demand-side dynamics of social media platform algorithms that structurally reward high-confidence, emotionally engaging content regardless of its epistemic quality (Gorwa, 2019). This limitation is significant for all governance contexts but is particularly acute in SSA, where the mobile-first, low-data-cost consumption patterns that characterize platform use across Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Egypt mean that short-form video content, the format most susceptible to misinformation amplification, dominates the information diet of the largest audience segments (Kemp, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d; Newman et al., 2025). No credential requirement for creators and no registration threshold for high-reach accounts changes the algorithmic incentive that pushes unqualified but confident health and financial advice to the top of users' feeds. Any governance framework that does not address this platform-level algorithmic dimension will capture only a portion of the problem it is designed to solve.

The three adaptation pathways proposed here address this limitation partially through the platform co-regulatory dimension: requiring platforms to surface content quality labels as a condition of market operation creates at least the informational precondition for audiences to exercise epistemic discrimination. However, research on the effectiveness of content labels and warning labels on social media platforms suggests that label effectiveness depends heavily on label design, placement, and audience media literacy, none of which are determined by the regulatory frameworks analyzed here (Simba & Girma, 2025). Future governance development in the region should incorporate behavioral science evidence on label design alongside the regulatory architecture proposed in the three pathways.

Epistemic Pluralism as a Structural Governance Challenge

The CELF framework's identification of social credentialing pluralism as a structural feature of SSA digital public spheres has implications extending beyond influencer regulation. The same pluralism that makes credential verification an insufficient governance tool for influencer content also shapes the effectiveness of public health communication campaigns, financial consumer protection initiatives, and legal literacy programs across the region. Governance actors in these domains routinely encounter the problem that information produced by formally credentialed sources competes for audience attention and trust against information produced through religious, community, and experiential authority channels that carry independent and sometimes greater legitimacy for specific audience segments (Fraser, 1990; Osuagwu et al., 2021). The CELF framework's two-axis design is replicable across these adjacent governance domains: any content

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quality governance intervention in a high social credentialing pluralism context needs to account for the multiple legitimacy channels through which audiences calibrate epistemic trust, rather than designing governance instruments that privilege formal credential authority as the sole or primary legitimacy signal.

The Authoritarian Risk and Democratic Accountability

Egypt's case documents the most directly relevant African evidence on what credential and reach-based governance frameworks produce in contexts of limited institutional independence and democratic accountability. The CELF framework's identification of Egypt as a paradox case, with high apparent regulatory capacity directed toward political censorship rather than epistemic quality improvement, is not a finding specific to Egypt's political system. It reflects a structural risk present in any context where a reach-based or credential-based content governance instrument is administered by a body that lacks formal independence from political authority, a clear and specific mandate limited to epistemic quality rather than content control generally, and accessible judicial oversight of enforcement decisions. Among the five African cases, Nigeria's regulatory bodies face documented pressure from executive interference, Ghana's NCA has faced civil society criticism over opaque licensing decisions, and Kenya's Communications Authority has experienced directorship controversies that raised institutional independence concerns. Only South Africa's ICASA and the ARB operate with institutional independence mechanisms that approach the standard required for a credential governance instrument to function without political capture risk (Freedom House, 2024; Kaaniru, 2025; Masaar Technology and Law Community, 2023).

The adaptation pathways proposed here incorporate this risk by calibrating governance instrument intensity to institutional independence rather than simply to regulatory capacity. Pathway A's disclosure-first model is appropriate for contexts of low institutional independence not only because it requires less enforcement capacity but because it creates fewer political capture opportunities: a label requirement administered through platform terms of service creates far less political censorship risk than a credential verification regime administered by a state regulatory body with broad discretion over who may speak authoritatively in public digital discourse. The sequencing implication is that SSA states should implement Pathway A frameworks as a foundation before attempting Pathway B or C instruments, both to build the institutional record of accomplishment of content governance independence and to establish the audience information infrastructure that makes more intensive governance instruments more effective when they are eventually introduced.

Regional Coordination and the Role of Continental Bodies

The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020 to 2030) and the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (the Malabo Convention) provide the most relevant continental frameworks within which influencer content governance coordination could be pursued (Santos et al., 2025). Neither instrument currently addresses influencer content quality governance specifically, but both create institutional architecture for digital governance coordination that could accommodate the CELF framework as a diagnostic and design tool for member state guidance. The East African Community's digital economy framework and the Economic Community of West African States' supplementary acts on cybersecurity both create sub-regional coordination mechanisms that are even closer to the specific cases analyzed here. Regional coordination is not a precondition for the adaptation pathways proposed above: Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Egypt can each implement their relevant pathway unilaterally. However, coordination would substantially increase the credibility and enforcement reach of platform co-regulatory obligations, since platforms operating across multiple SSA markets have stronger incentives to implement content

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quality labelling systems when the requirement is consistent across markets rather than fragmented by national variation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the credential turn in global influencer governance, exemplified by China's October 2025 CAC regulation and Spain's Royal Decree 444/2024, cannot be transferred to Sub-Saharan African governance contexts without substantial adaptation. Both benchmark models rest on institutional preconditions, including centralized enforcement infrastructure, functional professional credentialing databases, and reliable income verification systems, that most SSA states do not currently possess. They also rest on an epistemic assumption, that formal institutional credentials are the primary or sufficient basis for audience trust in professional domain content, that does not hold in digital public spheres where religious authority, ethnic community knowledge networks, and lived experience each carry independent legitimacy alongside formal credentials.

The Contextual Expertise Legitimacy Framework introduced here provides a structured analytical and prescriptive tool for navigating this complexity. By locating governance contexts on two axes, regulatory state capacity and social credentialing pluralism, the CELF generates four governance ideal types that explain why direct policy transfer fails and what context-sensitive alternatives look like. The five-case analysis applying the CELF to Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Egypt demonstrates that the framework generates meaningfully differentiated prescriptions across cases that share the same fundamental governance problem but occupy different positions in the two-dimensional analytical space. Kenya and Ghana require Pathway A disclosure-first co-regulatory models. Nigeria requires a Pathway B hybrid credential-disclosure framework built on ARCON's existing statutory infrastructure. South Africa requires Pathway C institutional anchoring of its existing self-regulatory system within ICASA's statutory mandate. Egypt's case documents the risk that all three pathways must be designed to avoid: a content governance framework whose enforcement power is captured for political censorship rather than applied to the epistemic quality problem that motivated its creation.

Three directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, the absence of qualitative fieldwork data on how SSA audiences actually adjudicate epistemic authority across formal and informal knowledge channels is a significant empirical gap in the governance evidence base. Ethnographic and survey-based research on audience trust calibration in high social credentialing pluralism contexts would substantially strengthen both the CELF framework's empirical foundations and the design evidence available to governance actors implementing the three adaptation pathways. Second, longitudinal tracking of regulatory developments across all five cases would test the CELF framework's predictive validity: if Kenya implements Pathway A and South Africa implements Pathway C, do the outcomes align with the framework's prescriptions, and what adaptation is required in cases where they do not? Third, the CELF framework's analytical architecture is replicable across content governance domains beyond influencer regulation, including public health communication, financial consumer protection, and legal information access, where the same two-axis diagnostic logic applies. Extending the framework to these adjacent domains would both broaden its scholarly utility and generate a more comprehensive governance design toolkit for SSA digital public spheres.

The governance of expertise in digital public spheres is not a problem that will resolve itself through platform self-regulation or audience media literacy alone. The structural incentives that social media platforms create for high-confidence, unqualified content in professional domains are durable features of the attention economy, not temporary artefacts of an immature industry (Gorwa, 2019). SSA governments have both the legitimate interest and the governance obligation to address this problem on behalf of

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audiences who cannot reliably distinguish qualified professional guidance from imitation expertise. The adaptation pathways proposed here offer routes for doing so that are calibrated to the institutional realities of each case, informed by the documented failure modes of both the Chinese and Spanish models, and grounded in a theoretical framework that takes the social epistemological diversity of SSA digital public spheres seriously as a governance design input rather than an obstacle to be overcome.

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