

# Combating Misinformation as a Matter of Urgency: An African Perspective

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Misinformation constitutes a resurgent and serious threat to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising misinformation on social media led to mistrust in health authorities, undermined public health responses to the pandemic, and resulted in individuals engaging in risky behaviours. In the broader context of sustainable development, misinformation posed a threat to the promotion of good health and well-being (SDG 3) through the spread of harmful, inaccurate health information and to the promotion of peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) through its role in undermining trust in public institutions.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria became an early warning signal for the devastating impact misinformation could have on national health interventions. In 2003, political leaders of the Kaduna, Kano, and Zamfara states in northern Nigeria called for a mass boycott of the national polio immunization campaign. The leaders claimed that the vaccine was contaminated with HIV and cancer-causing agents and would make its recipients infertile as part of a Western plot to lower fertility rates in the Muslim world. The leaders also linked the vaccine campaign to the occupation of Iraq by the United States of America, claiming that the war was part of an attack by the United States against Muslims as a whole.<sup>2</sup> The false claims about the polio vaccine were linked to efforts by President Ibrahim Babangida's administration in the 1980s to slow population growth by allowing women to have no more than four children. All of this misinformation fed a powerful anti-vaccine campaign that set back the country's fight against polio, with Nigeria still battling to recover lost ground as late as 2016.

The recent pandemic brought with it large-scale misinformation campaigns similar to those seen in Nigeria. The Nigeria and COVID-19 experiences each provide clear examples of the long-term harm misinformation can cause to a country's public health and highlight the need for Governments to address this issue as a matter of urgency. However, there is a risk that overly punitive approaches to the spread of information may weaken the bonds between Governments and constituents by infringing the right to freedom of expression. How, then, do Governments strike a careful balance between facilitating the spread of accurate information and ensuring that the right to freedom of speech is protected? This contribution proposes that Governments should forgo punitive legal measures in favour of improving media literacy and access to accurate information through partnerships with local media and private organizations.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of misinformation, the term generally refers to inaccurate information. In a 2022 report, the Secretary-General of the United Nations observes that "while misinformation refers to the accidental spread of inaccurate information, disinformation is not only inaccurate, but intends to deceive and is spread in order to do serious harm".<sup>3</sup> This distinction is important but is not particularly relevant within the present context, given the contribution's focus on the impact of (rather than the motivations behind) the dissemination of false information, so for the sake of expediency, the term "misinformation" is used here to refer to both.

With the aid of social media platforms, the production and spread of health misinformation during the pandemic exploded into what the World Health Organization termed an infodemic—a flood of both accurate and inaccurate information whose veracity is difficult to distinguish. Research indicates that the ability of audiences to discern factual information from misinformation varies across education and age groups, with older adults being less able to recall specific details.<sup>4</sup> The ability of information consumers to discern fact from fiction is particularly compromised during times of crisis, when levels of uncertainty, panic and confusion are heightened. Actors who wish to spread information take advantage of the chaotic climate to provide alternative explanations based on bad science or their own special interests. The problem is compounded when misinformation is spread over and over through sharing on social media, as research has found that audiences are more likely to believe information that has been repeated.<sup>5</sup> Audiences are particularly drawn to content that is high in emotion and easy to understand.

How can Governments combat this problem? One positive trend in Africa has been the increase in the number of countries that have introduced laws or other mechanisms governing access to information. Among the 15 countries in Africa responding to a 2022 survey sent out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on legal protections governing access to information, 11 had access-to-information laws on the books, three had laws that were in the process of being elaborated, and nine reported having a dedicated oversight institution.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, legal safeguards such as these provide media organizations with the support they need to actively combat misinformation—including health misinformation. Community radio broadcasters in Malawi hosted round-table discussions with panels of health experts in which listeners were able to call in and ask questions about COVID-19. These efforts from

community broadcasters were carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders, including Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, affirming the potential for effective cooperation and coordination between the media and governmental and non-governmental actors.<sup>7</sup>

The Central African Republic is another country that felt the devastating impact of misinformation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic when in 2014 the propagation of hate speech further polarized the Muslim and Christian communities and sparked a wave of attacks. The Government responded that same year, seeking to combat misinformation by re-establishing an official body called the High Council for Communication, which is mandated to develop and promote a free press and has the authority to introduce regulations to counter misinformation. The Government has also introduced initiatives to train journalists and bloggers on verifying information and identifying reliable sources.<sup>8</sup> While these initiatives show promise, they have been hampered by a lack of funding and operational capacity. This highlights the need for Governments to prioritize the allocation of resources to combat misinformation.

Because misinformation is not limited to traditional media, neither should efforts to combat it. There is potential for Governments to utilize social media, which is frequently used to disseminate misinformation, as a tool to debunk and correct false information. An example of this from the non-governmental sector is the What's Crap on WhatsApp initiative created by Africa Check and podcast company Volume in South Africa. This is a monthly podcast that utilizes the popular messaging platform WhatsApp to fight WhatsApp misinformation. Users submit viral messages they have been sent, and fact-checkers then verify the information in the messages in the form of a short WhatsApp voice note that can be easily shared on the platform. Subscribers are also regularly sent messages with links to Africa Check reports that have verified viral posts on social media.

In terms of impact, the most important action Governments can take is ensuring immediate or early access to accurate information. Research has shown that those who are introduced to accurate information are much less likely to believe misinformation later on.<sup>9</sup> Governments need to take a

proactive, multimodal approach to public messaging, activating campaigns that utilize both traditional and new media to spread accurate information.

Another critical step Governments should take is to build the foundations for smart information consumption. One example of this can be found in South Africa. In 2020, the Western Cape government collaborated with Google Africa to launch an initiative that included an online safety curriculum to be taught to secondary school students across the province as well as associated training for 500 teachers.<sup>10</sup> The curriculum covers a range of activities, including teaching students how to protect their safety online and how to identify fraudulent activities such as scams and phishing attempts. There is limited information about the implementation of the programme. However, this kind of campaign underscores the potential for curricula to include teaching students media literacy skills such as identifying misinformation and fact-checking information they find online. There is a genuine need for such programmes; research shows that over 90 per cent of schoolteachers in South Africa have reported seeing learners share misinformation online,<sup>11</sup> and nearly 40 per cent of teachers feel they lack the necessary training to teach media literacy skills.<sup>12</sup> The example provided here shows that public-private partnerships can provide young people with the tools they need to become more discriminating consumers of information.

The COVID-19 infodemic and previous examples of misinformation campaigns highlight the need for Governments to take misinformation seriously. During the pandemic, misinformation undermined public health interventions and sowed distrust in health authorities. It is critical that action be taken to prevent the same thing from happening in future crises. Rather than taking punitive measures, Governments can create enabling environments in which citizens are guaranteed access to information, media institutions are supported through government-media partnerships, and innovative approaches are adopted to utilize social media as a tool to spread accurate and accessible information. Governments also need to prioritize teaching media literacy skills to children and youth still in school. Partnerships with private organizations can play a vital role in providing resources and training, especially in contexts where government resources may be limited.

## Endnotes

- 1 Naledi Mashishi is a former researcher for Africa Check.
- 2 Ayodele Samuel Jegede, “What led to the Nigerian boycott of the polio vaccination campaign?”, *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 4, No. 3, e73 (20 March 2007), available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0040073>.
- 3 United Nations, “Countering disinformation”, available at <https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation>; this summary also includes a link to the actual report, entitled “Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (A/77/287, 12 August 2022).
- 4 Dora-Olivia Vicol, “Who is most likely to believe and to share misinformation?”, a joint briefing from Africa Check, Chequeado and Full Fact (February 2020), p. 7, available at <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/who-believes-shares-misinformation.pdf>.
- 5 Dora-Olivia Vicol, “Health misinformation in Africa, Latin America and the UK: impacts and possible solutions”, a joint briefing from Africa Check, Chequeado and Full Fact (May 2020; updated July 2020), available at <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/en-tackling-health-misinfo.pdf>.
- 6 UNESCO, “Commitment versus action in Africa: implementation is as important as adoption of access to information laws” (2021; last updated 20 April 2023), available at <https://www.unesco.org/reports/access-to-information/2021/en/africa-ati-case-study>; this summary highlights key points from *To Recovery and Beyond: 2021 UNESCO Report on Public Access to Information (SDG 16.10.2)*.
- 7 Jack McBrams, “Fighting myths with truth: Karonga journalists trained on countering Covid-19 misinformation”, UNICEF, 14 July 2022, available at <https://www.unicef.org/malawi/stories/fighting-myths-truth>.
- 8 Brianna Ferebee and Rachel Sullivan, “Beyond fake news: the Central African Republic’s hate speech problem”, United States Institute of Peace, 16 August 2021, available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/08/beyond-fake-news-central-african-republics-hate-speech-problem>.
- 9 Dora-Olivia Vicol, “Health misinformation in Africa, Latin America and the UK: impacts and possible solutions”, p. 24.
- 10 Zodidi Dano, “WCED and Google launch online safety curriculum guideline”, Independent Online (IOL), 22 October 2020, available at <https://www.iol.co.za/education/schools/secondary/wced-and-google-launch-online-safety-curriculum-guideline-990f6923-5162-4636-85f7-fc27c0f6a1bb>.
- 11 Dani Madrid-Morales and Herman Wasserman, “Media literacy education in South Africa can help combat fake news—here’s what’s needed”, *The Conversation*, 29 June 2022, available at <https://theconversation.com/media-literacy-education-in-south-africa-can-help-combat-fake-news-heres-whats-needed-185338>.
- 12 Ibid.