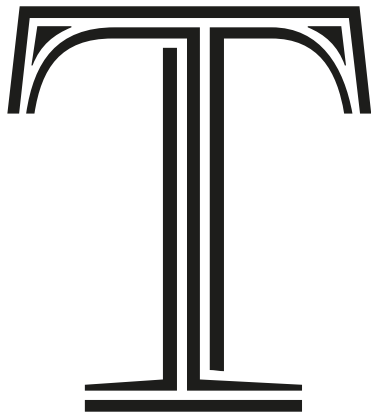# Fighting ⎯ fakes

How do you know what you know, and who can you trust? *The Africa Report* investigates the world of misinformation in an era when, more than ever, we are dependent on online sources for our truths

By **EUGENE YIGA** in Cape Town

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The old saw that "truth is the first casualty of war" still cuts. This time the war is virtual, as cyber-guerillas and information activists fight to gain ground over our hearts and minds, armed with words, GIFs and memes. There is no international arbitrator.

So what can be done? The Nairobi-based PesaCheck offered one approach when they fact-checked a story in the state-owned *Ethiopian Herald* on 9 March 2021 headlined 'Axum massacre neither occurred nor substantiated'. The *Ethiopian Herald* reported that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had investigated claims of a massacre at Axum in Ethiopia's Tigray Region and found them to be groundless.

USAID said this was false: 'USAID has neither investigated nor sent a team to investigate the reported events that took place in Axum,' it said in a statement.

The era of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and now Signal, increases the complexity of deciding who you can trust. Technology permits information to travel further and faster than before; even before the Covid-19 pandemic restricted our face-to-face contact, the definition of 'friend' had irrevocably changed. Sweeping into power and taking aim at "fake news"' while his supporters fanned QAnon conspiracy theories, former

Disinformation in Africa can be a matter of life and death

US president Donald Trump seized a moment to raise doubts about the professional news media and what you should believe.

The origins of the term 'fake news' are as nebulous and subject to interpretation as is much of the 'fake news' itself: *BuzzFeed* journalist Craig Silverman is largely credited with coining the term when tweeting about a fake story concerning an Ebola outbreak in Texas by nationalreport.net in 2014. Today he rues the fact that 'fake news' became a rallying cry of the Trump presidency. He was not the only journalist concerned about the spread of fake news. In the UK, Nick Davies published *Flat Earth News* in 2008, exposing how the move to desk-based research left the media prey to false information that was not being verified by reporters on the ground.

Misinformation and disinformation are easier to define. Misinformation is when a person does not know the content is false and spreads it in good faith, and disinformation is


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Vax facts

As soon as Covid-19 began spreading around the world, so too did the conspiracy theories. Some of the common ones in Africa include the idea that Microsoft founder and billionaire Bill Gates is trying to kill or put microchips into Africans; or that an 'evil entity' is trying to control people. Another is that the coronavirus was created in a lab by pharmaceutical companies wanting to profit from the vaccine, which is supposedly made from 'forcefully aborted babies'.

"Concerns about the side-effects of a new vaccine are entirely valid," says writer and researcher Robyn Porteous. However, those concerns do not negate the scientific processes and practices that have been put in place, as well as the rigorous testing that has been done the world over, to ensure they are as safe as they can be when used in human beings.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology research and studies have shown that disinformation spreads faster than accurate information. "Personal networks are aided and abetted by the algorithms of the social media platforms, which prioritise content of a similar nature to that which the user has engaged with previously, thus repetitively eliciting strong emotive responses, without providing much information to the contrary," Porteous says. "This reinforces the echo-chamber effect." ●
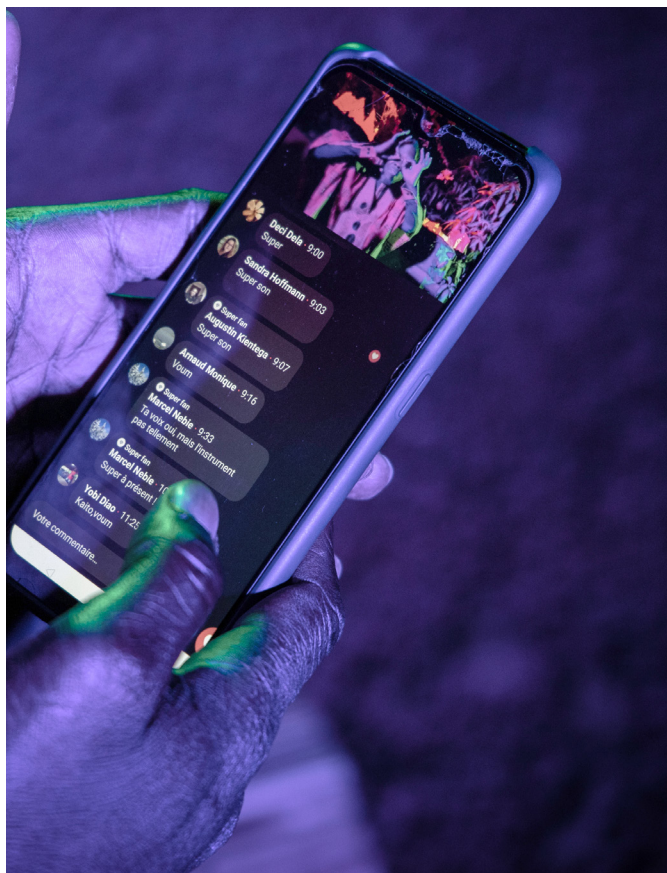
A 'live' Facebook video is worth a thousand words in the game of disinformation

when a person knows the content is false and spreads it anyway. However, they are hard to spot out in the wild. This requires an educated and critical population using critical thinking, checking facts, and evaluating information.

Chasing down fake news can cut both ways in the polarised media landscape: sometimes it exposes government machinations; sometimes the disingenuity of the regime's opponents. PesaCheck tracked down another story about Kenya's deputy president William Ruto, who on 6 March was accused of donating a bus to a local community, which was later repossessed by the manufacturer. Ten days later, the bus's manufacturers, General Motors Isuzu, tweeted a statement saying the claim was entirely false and Ruto had paid in full for the vehicle.

As such disinformation flourishes online, often combined with blitz campaigns emanating from troll farms, civil society organisations such as PesaCheck and Africa Check are trying to fight back. But most of the funding against disinformation is going into initiatives in the US and Europe.

Disinformation in Africa can be a matter of life and death. In the US, misinformation is causing cultural fractures and armed confrontations; in South Sudan it can can contribute to calls for ethnic cleansing. For this reason, news wire services such as Reuters and Bloomberg are also backing anti-fake-news initiatives.

Malevolent misinformation

In March, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) ran a simulation of events involving misinformation in Harare, Bangkok and Hanoi. The idea was to test responses to potential crises, the UNDP's Milica Begovic Radojevic told Reuters: "Simulations provide a safe, yet powerfully experiential and real space for participants to generate models about implications of, and response to, various events." These included cyberattacks and reputational damage via social media.

Fake news comes in differing guises, often in search of revenue. For example, a group in South Africa set up a fake Facebook page advertising non-existent jobs in supermarkets to gain access to the applicants' personal and financial details. An investigation by Africa Check identified the site and had it taken down. Some of the most threatening fake stories are reports on health (claiming to validate

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**Vax, or anti-vax?
You decide…**

ineffective or even dangerous medicines) or politics (used to mobilise ethnic or regional sentiment). Amidst a wave of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, thousands of social media posts claimed that 70% of the country's informal economy was controlled by foreigners. According to Africa Check, and based on data from Gauteng province, the figure is closer to 20%.

Controlling the narrative

Governments and ruling parties felt threatened by the power of social media and the possibilities of cyber-activism a decade ago. Now, they have joined in the battle to 'control the narrative', as communication experts call it. In Zimbabwe's most recent election campaign, in May 2018, President Emmerson Mnangagwa told a Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front rally: "Some of us are old [but] you are still youthful and masters of technology." Mnangagwa was trying to mobilise a group he calls '*varakashi*' ('destroyers' in Shona).

"The new digital chatrooms are war rooms. Jump in and hammer party enemies online. Don't play second fiddle." What John Marshall, CEO of the World Ethical Data Forum, calls

the "the apparent erosion of the authority of evidence" has been seized on by governments and ruling parties for political advantage. "[Such governments] have no concern for the health of their populations and political systems," says Marshall. "Instead, they look to crush the opposition, and the collateral damage of this can be devastating."

Marshall argues that societies should be "focusing on the effects [of fake news] at whatever cost", but he adds that it "comes with sacrifices that I don't believe we're willing to make." Some tech platforms are

Information complications

While only 10% of the world's internet users are in Africa, more than half of the people on the continent have mobile phones – and the numbers are rising. Given that many Africans depend on social media for their news, the threat of misinformation (when the spreader doesn't know the content is false) and disinformation (when the

spreader knowingly spreads false information) is serious. The problem is vast, since the continent's population is young and studies tend to find that younger people tend to be more vulnerable to 'fake news' and online persuasion.

"If you look across Africa now, you see a number of more authoritarian-leaning governments looking

trying to address the problem. This requires the development of algorithms that can automatically flag and remove bad content, as well as real-time monitoring and people on the ground to evaluate and verify what is going on.

"Social media started during a period that was a completely different world," says Emmanuel Lubanzadio, Twitter's head of public policy for sub-Saharan Africa. "[But] technology has limits." In other words, certain content requires the watchful eye of a human being. Twitter claims that it employs "hybrid solutions" to remove harmful information while also promoting credible sources. *The Africa Report* did not receive a reply to its request for further information.

The Covid-19 pandemic has strengthened the imperative of 'having the conversation' about fake news. Twitter has been working with governments, outlining how its platform can be used to deal with misinformation. For example, it has mechanisms to enable governments to flag up content that may lead to offline harm. But more collaboration and communication is needed, Lubanzadio says.

Propaganda party

There is also a risk that governments might abuse these powers. Twitter publishes a bi-annual Transparency Report showing government requests with which it has complied and those it has ignored because they conflict with the platform's policies. "Open conversation is dear to our heart," Lubanzadio says.

Fake news numbers

Academics Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales conducted an online survey that compared experiences with fake news stories in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and the US in 2018. More people in Africa said that they had shared fake news stories: in Kenya it was 38% of those surveyed, 28% in Nigeria and 35% in South Africa, compared to 16% in the US. And more people also said they often saw fake news stories: Kenya (45%), Nigeria (34%), South Africa (28%) and the US (33%).

"Therefore, we don't comply with regimes that have been considered repressive."

As the ideals of accurate, truth-seeking journalism are being undermined by market forces and new technology, responses may have to go further downstream. Such an approach could involve fact-checking and news literacy programmes for students and others. Another option could be to regulate and moderate online content – something on which social-media companies are beginning to take a lead.

Who is responsible?

But can social-media companies be trusted to regulate themselves? Should Africa look to Germany, which holds companies legally accountable for any harmful stories they propagate? Or to the US, with its Section 230, which provides immunity for website platforms publishing third-party content? Rules and regulations can go only so far. A government might identify and eliminate the source of harmful content without realising that it is joining what Marshall calls an "information arms race".

"The problem of disinformation is local because it's targeted at specific audiences," says Daniel Kimmage, principal deputy coordinator of the US Global Engagement Center, which tries to counter propaganda and disinformation by state and non-state actors. This holds true in Africa just as much as anywhere else. The US state department works with local partners because this allows it to match those who have technical skills with those who have a deeper knowledge and understanding of the social context.

There are no panaceas to ensure that people can easily obtain correct and unbiased information. As technology advances and making hyper-realistic 'deepfake' videos becomes easier and more ubiquitous, the challenge for spotting what is real and what is fake will only get harder.

"We look to individuals to do their part just as we look to institutions to do their part," Marshall says. "That responsibility is a reminder that there's a cost to the lives we wish to live. Luckily, it's not financial. It demands intellect and critical effort." ●

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to strip away knowledge and to strip away access to information," says Tomiwa Aladekomo, CEO of Big Cabal Media, a digital media company targeting a youthful audience. This has led to social media bans and full internet shutdowns, as was the case during the Ugandan presidential election earlier this year.

There are many examples of how this has played out across the continent, including social media starting a revolution in Cairo's Tahrir Square, and the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria last year. However, as Covid-19 vaccines are rolled out across Africa, harmful campaigns against this pandemic response could cost lives. ●