

# Regional report

Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa



## Fact vs. Fake

### The impact of fact-checking and its measurement by African fact-checking organisations

*Franziska Krämer*

Foreigners are overburdening South Africa's public hospitals. This is what Aaron Motsoaledi, South Africa's then Health Minister, claimed in November 2018 when he spoke at the Nurses Summit in Johannesburg. There, he discussed the challenges hospital staff face in their everyday working life. In an interview with radio station SAfm, Motsoaledi blamed the country's immigration policy for overburdening the healthcare system. 700 babies were born in May 2017 at Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital in Johannesburg, "and 400 of them were not South African at all," Motsoaledi said, for instance.

Shenilla Mohamed, Executive Director of Amnesty International South Africa, warns that Motsoaledi fuels xenophobia with such statements. Deputy Public Protector Kevin Malunga tweeted that the Minister of Health's statements are aimed at deflecting from his own challenges regarding the health system. His tweet triggered a discussion in the comments on whether or not foreign nationals are responsible for overburdening the health system.

The fact-checking organisation Africa Check contacted the hospitals and checked the figures the Minister of Health quoted in the interview.

The result: none of the figures quoted by Motsoaledi could be substantiated. Wrong information circulating in public can cause great harm, depending on the topic.

The issue of migration, for example, is particularly sensitive, and a lot of misinformation has been circulating in South Africa. "Misinformation about the actual figures of migrants living in the country, blaming of migrants for most socio-economic ills including crime, stealing jobs and business opportunities, drugs and burdening of public resources etc. has been presented to the public by politicians and the media. This does not only result in grossly overstated figures, but fuels the negative rhetoric presented on migrants in the public domain," explains Silindile Mlilo, researcher at the African Centre of Migration and Society in Johannesburg.

Motsoaledi's example shows how quickly false information can reach the public – not only spread by politicians but also by journalists. Trust in the traditional media has been weakened: In the past, economic imbalances of media companies and the resulting cost-cutting measures led to poor research by journalists. Unreflected, one-sided reports or even fictitious stories aggravated the situation. Fact-checking organisations, however, try to pick up from here as Kate Wilkinson, Africa Check's deputy editor-in-chief explains: "We try to determine whether what people in the public domain say is true or not. We look at influential people, whether it is politicians, union leaders, business leaders, sometimes journalists and media."

Africa Check's goal is it to provide true information to the public. "If a government is trying to make the best decision regarding education or health or infrastructure development and they don't have the best available information or they are making a decision based on wrong information, they might end up making a decision that has negative consequences."

Africa Check was founded in 2012 at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg as the first independent fact-checking organisation on the African continent. The non-profit organisation has expanded rapidly and now has offices in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Senegal. Indicat-

ing that the worldwide growth of the fact-checking industry is also being experienced in Africa, the Duke Reporter Lab currently mentions nine fact-checking organisations on the continent, five more than at the beginning of 2018. They include Africa Check, Pesa Check in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, BuhariMeter and Dubawa in Nigeria, Congo Check in the Congo, ZimFact in Zimbabwe and the recently founded Namibia FactCheck. This year also saw the continent of Africa host the global fact-checking conference for the first time. Sixty African fact-checkers – 49 more than the past year – attended the Global Facts 6 Summit in Cape Town in June 2019 giving Africa the second highest continental representation after Europe.

Much energy, effort and money from public institutions and foundations is now being invested in fact-checking. Society is well aware of the problem of fake news and its dissemination, especially through social media. Fact-checking organisations worldwide offer a possible solution for tackling this problem. The question remains: How can fact-checking organisations measure if their work is effective?

## **Congo Check: The Size of the Audience**

Tracking one's own effectiveness means first of all one thing: more effort. In addition to their actual task – the checking of facts – the organisations have to find ways to determine their own impact. A simple possibility, which in particular the younger fact-checking organisations use, is to see how many people the organisations reach with the fact-checks: it is relatively easy for them to measure how many people visit their own website or react to contributions on Facebook or Twitter without too much effort.

In 2018, Sammy Mupfuni co-founded Congo Check, the first independent fact-checking organisation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Today, 16 journalists are working to check information in Congo. And social media is indispensable for the younger fact-checking organisations on the African continent, especially since fake news and fact-checks are often spread via Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. But social media is

also important in order to receive reactions from readers and thus to understand how effective the work is.

"We measure the impact of our online work by the size of the audience on our social networks mainly and then from the number of visits to our website. We are currently relying much more on the number of our subscribers on our social media channels, namely Facebook and Twitter, and also on the level of commitment that our publications generate. This is for example the number of comments and sharing," says Mupfuni. Congo Check also offers seminars for young journalists, bloggers and Internet users in which participants learn to fact-check information online. The team also considers the number of participants in its evaluation.

His conclusion: Congo Check's fact-checks have an impact as the team receives messages and supportive comments for the work the fact-checkers do. However, Mupfuni is not yet satisfied: "Indeed, our work has an impact in the community but it is still too low compared to what we want. Among the biggest challenges is the fact that we are not yet reaching a wide target on social networks and this affects the number of visits to our website. And this is mainly due to the fact that we don't have the money to sponsor our Facebook page continuously." In addition to that, better tools need to be implemented to measure the impact of Congo Check, as Mupfuni points out.

### **Dubawa: Fact-checks must reach politicians and media**

The younger fact-checking organisations in particular are only gradually beginning to measure their impact more systematically. Ebele Oputa, works as deputy editor-in-chief for the Nigerian fact-checking organisation Dubawa. As a small team with few resources, it was more important to first check the facts and publish the fact-checks. In the future, Dubawa's team would also like to focus on monitoring and evaluation – which, however, involves a lot of work. "To measure the impact on the side of the public, we would have to undergo surveys and intensive social media monitoring," says Oputa.

Instead of only including the number of people reached by the fact-checks, more aspects can be taken into account when measuring the impact. Rather, for the Dubawa', the effect is also defined by the reaction of other media and politicians, but also journalists and editorial offices, who are supported by Dubawa in fact-checking, says Oputa. "For us, we know we are contributing to the society through audience reaction, that is, when people delete or edit false information online based on a fact-check we did; when our fact-checks are cited or reposted by mainstream media or even government officials; and when the journalists or newsrooms we train continue to produce fact-checks without our direct support."

### **Africa Check: Setting goals for successful fact-checking**

For newly founded and smaller fact-checking organizations, measuring impact is a problem since they lack resources such as money and time. As the first independent and largest fact-checking organisation on the African continent, Africa Check has existed for seven years now – but even for them the question of how its work's impact can be measured systematically has not yet been clarified.

Nicola Theunissen is Impact Manager at Africa Check since November 2017. Her work consists of answering exactly this question. "I have worked as a communication consultant in the monitoring and evaluation field for five years and attended conferences in many countries but I have not attended a single session that sets out how to rigorously measure the impact of the media. And even at journalism and fact-checking conferences, speakers agree that it's not an exact science," says Theunissen.

Africa Check's team considers fact-checking as effective when it makes a noticeable difference. "We consider our long-term impact if we have improved the quality of debate and if we have improved the decision-making capacity of policy-makers and the public. And that will eventually help to strengthen democracy and life out-

comes," says Theunissen. However, these aspects are not easy to measure.

Nicola Theunissen and her colleague Unathi Beku measure the influence of fact-checking on different levels: on a micro-level, i.e. on the level of the individual reader, where Theunissen and Beku take the amount and kinds of reactions to stories on social media into consideration. At a meso level, it is about the influence on a larger community or organisation. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), for example, referred to the work of Africa Check in 2018: "Chimezie Anueyiagu, Communications Director of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, said a health workshop Africa Check held in Abuja, fills a crucial gap in the health communication space and builds the NCDC's capacity to achieve its mission of protecting Nigerians and ensuring the integrity of health information," Theunissen said.

At the macro level, the impact of Africa Check's work can be considered as a social change on an institutional or political level. As an example, Theunissen mentions a speech by South Africa's current Minister of Transport, Fikile Mbalula, in which he referred positively to Africa Check's research on the ANC's manifesto before the 2019 South African elections. "We considered this as quite impactful because it's an indicator that we improved the quality of public debate when a politician references us in public."

Various tools, such as programs to record results, help Theunissen and Beku to be more systematic in their analysis – but that is it. "There are a bunch of tools, but I don't think there are a lot of them that demonstrated an actual worth for the fact-checking organisations," Theunissen says. According to her, the African fact-checking community should work together on a universal tool to understand their impact: for readers, donors, and not least also for its own editorial staff and the fact-checking community in order to perceive its own successes.

However, the most important questions remain: Is democracy strengthened by fact-checking? Does the fact-checking of Africa Check have any impact? Theunissen agrees, but also speaks of "anecdotal evidence", i.e. individual stories show-

ing the significance of Africa Check. At the beginning of 2019, for example, a major South African party asked the Africa Check team to review its manifesto before it was published. "Politicians are aware that South African voters are now aware of misinformation and interested in an accurate debate," says Unathi Beku, Africa Check's Impact Researcher. The mere fact that Africa Check exists ensures that politicians worry about whether the information they provide is correct which shows the impact of fact-checking.

## The problem of the target group

Neither small nor large fact-checking organisations are currently able to answer one aspect satisfactorily: How do the fact-checkers reach people who do not want to follow the organisations on social media or are not even able to do so? How do the fact-checkers reach people who do not actively inform themselves about their work – or even share false information?

In Nigeria, many people have no access at all to the fact-checks that are shared online. This is a big challenge for Dubawa's team. "We have been working on partnering with media organizations that have access to offline platforms like radio or print media," says Ebele Oputa. However, such cooperations are difficult to establish and maintain in Nigeria.

Africa Check tries to reach more people via community radio and by translating the fact-checks into different local languages. It is not known whether the fact-checks reach people who share false information, Nicola Theunissen says. "You actually don't know whether your fact-checks are reaching the right persons. What we know is, and this is one of our challenges, that we are reaching educated people. The majority of our audience has a post-graduate level, and this is an international trend by the way," says Theunissen. These are not necessarily the people who disseminate or believe false information.

Social media offers an opportunity to tackle this problem: some fact-checking organisations like Dubawa or Africa Check are now cooperating with Facebook. If false information is identified as such by the fact-checkers, Facebook users are

less likely to see it through a Facebook algorithm. Users who have shared false information will also receive a notification. "In that way this is an excellent way for me to reach the people who spread the misinformation," Theunissen says.

At the same time, Facebook collects data on the extent to which this cooperation and fact-checking generally works by measuring how often users actually delete information that they have shared, and which were identified as false by fact-checkers for instance. However, the company does not pass this data on to the fact-checking organisations although it is precisely this kind of information that the fact-checking organisations would need in order to measure the influence of the fact-checks much more systematically and thus close this gap.

In the current era of fake news and deliberate misinformation fact-checking has emerged as a new discipline in journalism. Still, the impact of fact-checking is currently not possible to understand systematically, even for large, long-

standing fact-checking organisations like Africa Check. There is a lack of relevant methods and instruments for this purpose. For younger organisations such as Congo Check, which are still in the process of being set up, it is even more difficult because they need money, time and skills to do so. The ambition of the fact-checkers to measure their impact as accurately as possible has, however, been awakened. At conferences like Global Fact 6, they discuss new possibilities and tools and exchange their ideas.

Their motivations are noble – to identify and correct misinformation. And although it might still be a challenge to measure their positive influence in African society, their work may perhaps hold the key to re-establishing credibility in media.

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