Fighting Disinfodemic in Central Africa: Fact-checkers Experience Against Covid-19 Fake News

Combatendo a Desinfodemia na África Central:Experiência de verificadores de fatos contra notícias falsas da Covid-19

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

University of Duisburg-Essen,
Duisburg, Germany
fabiola.ortizsantos@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1374-379X

Abstract: Coupled with the vast and fast spread of the new coronavirus, another dangerous pandemic unfolds, the one of "disinfodemic". The World Health Organization (2020) described disinformation as a "massive infodemic" being a major driver of the pandemic itself. The term disinfodemic was coined by UNESCO (2020) to describe the falsehoods fuelling the pandemic due to the huge "viral load of potentially toxic deadly" disinformation. In Central Africa internet surfing to many means accessing only social media, since owning data is unaffordable to most population. Amidst a digital divide reality, connected journalists bridge the online world and the offline spheres of the oral traditions that feature African cultures. This qualitative study asks the questions: How are online journalists fighting Covid-19 disinfodemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR)? And what are the challenges they face to counteract fake news, disinformation and report the pandemic in countries where press freedom is undermined? The CAR and the DRC are ranked as the least press freedom — 132 and 150 respectively out of 180 countries, according to 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders). This chapter discusses two cases of new media formats combining journalistic skills, creativity and innovation when communicating risk and acting against disinfodemic, the collaborative website 'Talato' for fact-checking on the coronavirus in CAR and the fact-checking online platform 'Congo Check' in the DRC. Their accounts feed the discussion of how disinfodemic is spreading in the region and how their communication strategies are serving as riposte against this major threat. The chapter sheds light to how these independent initiatives contribute to halt the pandemic disinfodemic in their localities. It moreover reveals fact-checking procedures and obstacles faced when journalists attempt to access verifiable and official information in settings where press is not entirely free to operate.

Keywords: disinfodemic; coronavirus; fact-checking; pandemic; risk communication; media; fake news.

Resumo: *Juntamente com a vasta e rápida disseminação do novo coronavírus, outra perigosa pandemia se desencadeia, a da "desinfodemia". A Organização Mundial da Saúde (2020) descreveu a desinformação como uma "infodemia massiva" sendo uma das principais impulsionadoras da própria pandemia. O termo desinfodemia foi cunhado pela UNESCO (2020) para descrever as falsidades que alimentam a pandemia devido à enorme "carga viral de desinformação potencialmente tóxica e mortal". Na África Central, navegar pela internet significa para muitos acessar apenas as redes sociais, uma vez que possuir dados é inacessível para a maioria da população. Em meio a uma realidade de exclusão digital, jornalistas conectados criam pontes entre o mundo online e as esferas offline das tradições orais que caracterizam as culturas africanas. Este estudo qualitativo faz as seguintes perguntas: Como os jornalistas online estão a lutar contra a desinfodemia da Covid-19 na República Democrática do Congo (RDC) e na República Centro-Africana (RCA)? E quais são os desafios que estão a enfrentar para neutralizar as notícias falsas, a desinformação e cobrir a pandemia em países onde a liberdade de imprensa está comprometida? A RCA e a RDC são países classificados com menos liberdade de imprensa – 132 e 150, respetivamente, de 180 países, de acordo com o Índice Mundial de Liberdade de Imprensa de 2020 (Repórteres sem Fronteiras). Este capítulo discute dois casos de novos formatos de média combinando habilidades jornalísticas, criatividade e inovação ao comunicar risco e atuar contra a desinfodemia: o site colaborativo 'Talato' de verificação de fatos sobre o coronavírus, na RCA, e a plataforma online de verificação de fatos 'Congo Check', na RDC. O relato dos jornalistas alimenta a discussão de como a desinfodemia está a espalhar-se na região e como suas estratégias de comunicação estão a servir como uma resposta contra esta grande ameaça. Este capítulo lança luz sobre como essas iniciativas independentes contribuem para conter esta pandemia desinfodêmica em suas localidades. Ademais, revela procedimentos de verificação de fatos e obstáculos enfrentados quando jornalistas tentam acessar informações oficiais e passíveis de serem verificadas em ambientes onde a imprensa não é totalmente livre para operar.*

Palavras-chave: *desinfodemia; coronavírus; verificação de fatos; pandemia; comunicação de risco; meios de comunicação; notícias falsas.*

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Introduction

Coupled with the vast and fast spread of the new coronavirus, another dangerous pandemic unfolds, the one of "disinfodemic". The World Health Organization described disinformation as a "massive infodemic" being a major driver of the pandemic itself. Disinfodemic was coined by two scholars to describe the falsehoods fuelling the pandemic with potentially toxic consequences. Access to reliable and accurate information is generally critical, but during a crisis it can be a matter of life and death (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020). Proliferating disinformation even when the content is harmless can have serious and lethal health ramifications in the context of a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The fabrications that contaminate public health information today use the same tools traditionally employed to distribute disinformation. The novelty are the themes and the direct impacts they represent.

In Central Africa internet surfing to many means accessing only social media, since owning data is unaffordable to most population. Connectivity in the continent remains low, but change is afoot led by the growth of mobile internet access (Frère, 2012). This qualitative study asks the questions: How are online journalists fighting Covid-19 disinfodemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR)? And what are the challenges they face to counteract fake news, disinformation and report the pandemic in countries where press freedom is undermined?

The CAR and the DRC are both ranked as the least press freedom countries, 132 and 150 respectively out of 180 countries, according to the World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders (2020). This chapter discusses two cases of new media formats combining journalistic skills, creativity and innovation when communicating risk and acting against disinfodemic. Born out of the Ebola outbreak in 2018, Congolese journalists created the first fact-checking online platform 'Congo Check'. In CAR, a small group of independent journalists built the collaborative website 'Talato' for fact-checking on the coronavirus.

In such a global risk society, communication serves as an adaptive response to the threats we, locals, face in a global environment (Beck, 1992). The information strategies for global-local networks in times of the Covid-19 disinfodemic could inspire change in the way communities consume and make use of information. The interviews conducted with the founders of Congo Check and Talato offer insightful revelations of the status of the pandemic disinformation in their countries. Their accounts feed the discussion of how epidemic of fake news is spreading and how their communication strategies are serving as riposte against this major threat. It besides reveals fact-checking procedures and obstacles faced when Congolese and Central African journalists attempt to access verifiable and official information in settings where press is not entirely free to operate.

This chapter conceptualises disinfodemic and fake news and how false claims go viral in an environment that challenges the strategies of communicating risk within a health crisis.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

It goes on by reviewing the fact-checking movement in journalism against the spread of false information and further examines the challenges of connectivity in sub-Saharan Africa. By posing pressing questions and presenting these media initiatives, it is followed by a section that discusses the journalists' narratives and their efforts as fact-checkers. The last part remarks final considerations and points to a way forward.

Disinfodemic: The Epidemic of Fake News

This section discusses the epidemic of disinformation, recently named "disinfodemic". It conceptualises the term "fake news" and examines why it is seen as an emerging threat within the health and risk communication field. It adds some layers of reflection on the role of fact-checkers and why fact-checking has become a prominent tool against disinfodemic.

The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres repeatedly denounced the "massive infodemic" of mis-/disinformation around the spread of the new coronavirus as a driver of the crisis (UNESCO, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the word "infodemics" to indicate an excess of information and its rapid spread of misleading or fabricated news, images, and videos. "Like the virus, it is highly contagious and grows exponentially" (2020). Infodemics can spread rumours during a health emergency, as well as obstructs public health responses by creating confusion and distrust among people (United Nations, 2020).

The Global Director of Research at the International Center for Journalists, Julie Posetti, and Kalina Bontcheva, from the University of Sheffield's Centre for Freedom of the Media have coined the term "disinfodemic" (2020). In a recent policy brief published by UNESCO they offered critical insights into the fast-growing Covid-19-related mis-/disinformation. Whereas disinformation occurs when a false information is an intentional lie and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country; misinformation, instead, depicts a false information that is not intentionally created to harm and that the person disseminating it may believe to be true (Posetti & Ireton, 2018, pp. 45–46; UNESCO, 2018).

The impact of spreading false content, regardless the intentions, are analogous. People are disempowered by being "actively disinformed" resulting in fatally serious impacts (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020). Covid-19 disinformation creates confusion about medical science with immediate impact, it is more "toxic and more deadly than disinformation about other subjects" (p. 2). By being deceived, populations are unable to understand and adopt health preventive measures. One domain of Covid-19 disinfodemic is its instrumentalisation for political, racist, xenophobic and sexist ends.

> Disinformation connected to Covid-19 is threatening not just individuals but societies as a whole. It leads to citizens endangering themselves by ignoring scientific advice; it amplifies distrust in

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

policy makers and governments; and it diverts journalists' efforts towards reactive disproving of falsehoods instead of proactive reporting of new information (p. 5).

The motivations may be varied — money-driven, political advantage, undermining confidence, blaming, polarising, and challenging responses concerning the pandemic. Other drivers can include ignorance, individual egos, or even ill-advised intention, discussed Posetti and Bontcheva who warned that disinfodemic generally hides falsehoods among true information that are widely shared by individuals, organised groups, news media, and official channels deliberately or inadvertently. Covid-19 disinfodemic has affected content disseminated about the disease's origin, forms of contamination and incidence of the virus; symptoms and treatments; as well as governments' responses.

> They frequently smuggle falsehoods into people's consciousness by focusing on beliefs rather than reason, and feelings instead of deduction. They rely on prejudices, polarisation and identity politics, as well as credulity, cynicism and individuals' search for simple sense-making in the face of great complexity and change (p. 5).

The main types of disinfodemic comprise emotive narrative constructs and memes; fabricated websites with authoritative identities; fraudulent or decontextualised images and videos; and, orchestrated campaigns. Very commonly are the false narratives mixing appealing emotional language, lies, incomplete information and personal opinions. Since they might display elements of truth, these formats are "particularly hard to uncover on closed messaging apps" (p. 5). Key main themes entail the origins of the disease with conspiracy theories blaming other actors and speculating causes; as well as celebrity-focused disinformation with made-up stories; and false information about the economic and health impacts of the pandemic, suggesting that social isolation is not economically justified. These campaigns undermine trust in the verified news with public interest.

False claims go viral

Fake news are articles intentionally and verifiably false. They include (un)intentional reporting mistakes, rumours, conspiracy theories difficult to verify and are usually originated by people who believe them to be true, false statements by politicians, and reports that are misleading (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, pp. 213–214). It is not a new phenomenon and refers to viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports (Gelfert, 2018, p. 113; Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138). When combined with online social media, it becomes strong and potent.

Given the increasing permeability online-offline news sources, societies find themselves

confronted with publicly disseminated disinformation that "masquerades as news, yet whose main purpose is to feed off our cognitive biases in order to ensure its own continued production and reproduction" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 113). The declining trust in mainstream media could be one plausible cause and consequence of fake news gaining more attraction (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Two important motivations trigger the production of false news: economic and ideological. News articles that go viral on social media can draw advertising revenues when users click to the original site. It is not rare that fake news providers attempt to advance political candidates by discrediting others (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 217; Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138). "Fakeness" depends on whether the audience perceives the fake as real. "A successful fabricated news item (...) is an item that draws on pre-existing memes or partialities" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 143) often loaded with political bias that the reader accepts as legitimate.

Popularity on social media serves as a "self-fulfilling cycle" (p. 139) well-fitting to the propagation of unverified information. Receiving content from socially close circles, from people that are trusted, can help to legitimate the veracity of a certain information that is shared on social networks, even if the users rarely venture themselves to verify what they share or receive. People tend to find information that agrees with their prior-held beliefs (Bode & Vraga, 2015, pp. 621–622). Another layer is further added to the "triumph" of fabricated items. They can be more successful when it is shared on an environment with pre-existing social tensions — such as with political, sectarian, racial or cultural differences, where people would be more vulnerable and exposed to adhere to fabricated news (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 143).

Vosoughi et al. (2018) use the term "rumour cascade" to refer to a social phenomenon of an allegation spreading in the online world. A rumour cascade can be activated on Twitter when a user makes a claim about a topic in a tweet, which could include written text, photos, or links to articles. By retweeting this post, other users contribute to propagate the rumour (p. 1). Some of the content is shared unwittingly by people on social media clicking the 'retweet' command without checking first. The content may be amplified by journalists who are under "more pressure than ever to try and make sense and accurately report information" on the social web in real time, wrote Claire Wardle (2017) the director of research for the digital education non-profit *FirstDraftNews*.

Gelfert (2018) proposes his own definition of fake news that captures its distinctive features: it is the deliberate presentation of false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design. The novelty about fake news is its systemic dimension, he argues (pp. 108–109). It involves deception, not only of the consumer but also editors who may be as well deceived during their work of newsgathering. It has come to be associated with anonymous sources that spread falsehoods by manipulating the users' emotions and tapping into deeply held partisan beliefs. Much of the initial credibility of fake news derives from real world back-stories:

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Many fake news stories are not wholly false, but mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths as a means of obfuscation. The latter — deliberately misleading one's audience — can be achieved even without reliance on falsehoods, simply through selective presentation of partial truths (p. 100).

Farkas and Schou (2018) suggested that the term fake news has increasingly become a "floating signifier" (p. 198), i.e. a signifier that is sheltered between hegemonic projects seeking to provide an image of how society is to be structured. This concept has mobilised political struggles to hegemonise social reality. It is meant to be a "frontal attack" on traditional core values of journalistic practice (p. 308) challenging those who have the power to define what is deemed as truthful, who can portray social reality accurately, and in what ways.

Unfiltered communications

In a global risk society, communication serves as an adaptive response to the threats we, locals, face in a global environment, discussed the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992). Risks are socially constructed through societies' concern for the future. They can be "changed, magnified, dramatised or minimised within knowledge" (pp. 22–23) and to that extent they are open to social definitions. In health crises, effective strategies for risk communication are necessary, pondered Vaughan and Tinker (2009) who hold the view that communications must successfully instruct, inform, and motivate appropriate self-protective behaviour; build trust in officials; and dispel rumours. Pandemic communications would "maximise the public's capacity to act as an effective partner" (p. 234). Communication processes should prepare the public to adapt to changing circumstances or uncertainties during an emerging pandemic, as well as educate public decision makers about vulnerabilities, and foster dialogue between affected populations and risk managers, as well as nurture an environment of mutual trust.

The explosion of unfiltered communications during a pandemic is seen as a concern by Walker (2016). He warned in an article about the civil society's role in a public health crisis: "When the next major pandemic strikes, it will be accompanied by something never before seen in human history: an explosion of billions of texts, tweets, e-mails, blogs, photos, and videos rocketing across the planet's computers and mobile devices" (lines 1-3). What he called as "repeated tidal waves of messages and images" (lines 5-6) would result in millions of people receiving incorrect assertions and unqualified guidance. This could jeopardise the population's health, damage economies, and undermine the stability of societies. Walker cautioned that panic, chaos, and disorder could break out during the next major pandemic. How well civil societies address crises depends, in part, on their power of resiliency, he argued by

suggesting that volunteer communications both amateurs and professionals should craft media with skills that the public would easily be able to understand and relate to.

Fact-Checking: a response to disinfodemic

Monitoring, fact-checking and supporting the audiences against disinformation with educational and empowerment efforts are among possible responses of crafting the media. According to Wasserman (2020), news whether fake or real should not be understood outside of its particular context of production and consumption, and that the investigation into the phenomenon of fake news needs to take account local specificities. According to him, the discourses that surround the debate of false information, responses by audiences and the journalistic community have to be understood within their particular social, cultural and political backgrounds (pp. 4–5).

The context of production of fake news in Africa should be understood within the contours of media repression, digital literacy (or lack of it), resource-constrained newsrooms and the use of popular channels of communication (Mare et al., 2019, p. 5). Fake news consumption in the continent is largely leveraged by "educational levels, digital literacy and competencies, limited access to information and exposure to various kinds of self-sorting online groups" and that sharing fake news might be influenced by "ignorance and the sheer desire" to inform friends and family members (p. 6).

As this chapter shows, journalists now turned fact-checkers in the DRC and CAR have embraced their commitment to be the ones responsible for identifying disinfodemic in their respective countries and, at the same time, they have imbued their pledge to educating their audiences on how to avoid falling into the disinfodemic trap. Although most fact-checking procedures rely on human judgements and decisions, the use of software may foster further verification techniques. Initiatives aimed at supporting audiences during a pandemic embrace media and information literacy seeking to address users and receivers. Such educational responses are intended at promoting citizens awareness of how to consume media, develop critical thinking and even acquire some digital verification skills (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020, pp. 12–13). Such type of response is framed under the work Congo Check and Talato have undertaken.

Fact-checking has emerged as a form of accountability journalism (Mantzarlis, 2018). It is not applied to opinions, nor does its exercise contradicts pluralism (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020, p. 8). Traditionally, fact-checkers used to be employed in newsrooms in the United States and Europe to proofread and verify factual claims made by reporters in their news pieces. This kind of fact-checking appraises the solidity of the reporting, double-checks facts and figures, and serves as an overall round of quality control for a news outlet's content before publication (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 86). Due to the shrinkage of news organisations and the merging with copy-editing desks, fact-checking positions have been eliminated in the newsrooms.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

The global debate on disinfodemic involves another type of fact-checking that has grown in relevance in the recent decade. It is what Mantzarlis calls "ex-post fact-checking" that pursues to make public figures accountable for the truthfulness of their statements. In this sense, fact-checkers seek "primary and reputable sources" that can either confirm or refute claims made to the public (p. 86). This upsurge of fact-checking public claims addresses the need for debunking viral hoaxes. It would be, however, naïve to suggest that facts are "perfect characterisations of the world and that humans are entirely rational beings who incorporate new facts flawlessly regardless of previous belief and personal preferences", pointed Mantzarlis (p. 89) who acknowledges the existence of biases about factual information. Fact-checking itself is an "imperfect instrument", even if it is 100% accurate it may still leave out important context.

> Facts are invariably constructed, ordered and reordered meaningfully within broader narrative structures which can provide different significance to the same basic facts. The truth, moreover, is more than a collection of facts. Fact-checking is not a tool to be deployed to shut down alternative interpretations as much as underwriting a series of facts that can impact on narrative and individual predispositions, so as to ground rational debate (p. 92).

Social media has changed journalism practice with real-time audience engagement, added Trewinnard and Bell (2018). While journalism remains in essence a "discipline of verification", the methods of verifying a content and its sources demand continuous updating following the fast-changing pace of digital technologies (p. 103). Due to its daily presence in many users' lives, social media may offer an opportunity to combat disinformation. Bode and Vraga (2015) pointed to the existence of methods for correcting misinformation that are especially applicable to social media (pp. 620–622).

The information strategies for global-local networks in times of the Covid-19 disinfodemic could inspire change of the way communities consume and make use of information. As we have discussed in this section the spread of false information may generate perverse effects to societies. This situation is even more conspicuous during a health crisis. The journalists' narratives of Congo Check and Talato feed with relevant and pertinent input to understand the status of the unbridled pandemic disinformation. Their accounts offer insightful revelations of how disinfodemic is spreading in their countries and how they, as professional journalists are imbued with the fact-checking mission serving as riposte against this major threat.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Challenges of Connectivity

Internet surfing to many in sub-Saharan Africa means accessing only social media, since owning data is unaffordable to most population. Connectivity in the continent remains low, but change is afoot led by the growth of mobile internet access (Frère, 2012). This section discusses the increasing use of social media in the region as well as the obstacles to the rising of connectivity.

The outbreak of Covid-19 and the general lockdown triggered a massive migration to digital. However, internet usage remains a "luxury" since half of the world's population does not have access to internet, either through a mobile device or fixed line broadband (García-Escribano, 2020). It is not easy to determine the actual internet penetration in the sub-Saharan African region, since internet subscriptions do not accurately reflect its usage. Not rarely an internet subscription (fixed or mobile) is shared by several people (Akue-Kpakpo, 2013, p. 4). Mobile download speeds in the region are, on average, more than three times slower than in the rest of the world (Simione & Woldemichael, 2020). Whereas countries such as the United States, Canada and in Central Europe have between 80 to 100 internet users per 100 inhabitants, countries like the DRC and CAR have no more than 20 internet users per 100 inhabitants (García-Escribano, 2020).

The pandemic is an abrupt reminder of the existent digital divide. Digitalisation can play a "vital role" in supporting the region's post-pandemic recovery informed economists from the International Monetary Fund (Simione & Woldemichael, 2020). Expanding its access in sub-Saharan Africa by 10 percent of the population could increase per capita gross domestic product (GDP) by 1 to 4 percentage points. A report recently released in June 2020 by a British consultancy group highlighted that the region concentrates less than 20% of people using internet, leaving over 800 million people unconnected (Abecassis et al., 2020, p. 7). Availability, affordability, relevance and readiness are among the challenges to connectivity, described this report that had been commissioned by Facebook.

In 2018, the proportion of the population in sub-Saharan Africa connected to mobile internet was 24% corresponding to 250 million people, according to the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA, 2019), an industry organisation that represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide. The region accounts for 40% of the global population not covered by a mobile broadband network with 300 million people living outside a mobile broadband network. Mobile phones spread quickly addressing the huge demand for communication, however, the spread of the internet has still to catch up with the mobile sector, as its expansion is slowed by factors such as unaffordability of mobile devices, insufficient internet and electricity connections, and a lack of general literacy and digital skills in the population (Zamfir, 2015, p. 2). Internet service is considered affordable by the UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development if the price of 1GB of data equates to

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

no more than 2% of gross national income per capita. On average across the continent, 1GB of data accounted for 8% of average income at the end of 2018 — compared to 2.7% in the Americas and 1.5% in Asia. Noting that 1GB per month is equal to 40 minutes' daily usage of web browsing and social media (Abecassis et al., 2020, p. 7).

While most internet research in the entire region covers East, West and Southern Africa, there is a very limited amount of academic research available on Central African countries, informed the Internet Policy Observatory (2018) at the Annenberg School of Communication in the University of Pennsylvania. With a population of more than 86 million people, the DRC scores 26 in the Mobile Connectivity Index (MCI) in a range of 0-100 having the higher score the stronger performance. The DRC concentrates only 17% of mobile broadband penetration, 40% of mobile connections (number of SIM cards divided by population) and a proportion of 53% of the population covered by 3G network (GSMA, 2020). The CAR with 4,7 million people is in an even lower position, scoring 17 in the MCI ranking. Its mobile broadband connection has 12% of penetration with 29% of its population covered by 3G network. The mobile connections represent 46% of penetration (GSMA, 2020).

Congo Check and Talato

Two cases of new media formats are portrayed in this chapter. Together they combine journalistic skills, creativity and innovation to communicate risk, act against disinfodemic and the fake pandemic news. Born out of the Ebola outbreak early in 2018 and imbued with the mission to counter fake information with facts in the DRC, twenty journalists based in the eastern town of Goma created the first fact-checking digital platform named 'Congo Check'. Last March 2020, the special section 'Fact-check COVID19' was launched with a work mostly done voluntarily. Similarly in a neighbouring country, the CAR, nine journalists built the digital collaborative website 'Talato' for fact-checking against disinformation on the coronavirus. Talato is a project of the Association of Central African Bloggers (ABCA) based in the capital Bangui.

Within the challenges of internet connectivity but at the same time the increasing of internauts and social media users; coupled with the imminent spread of fake news and disinfodemic on Covid-19, this study asks twofold questions: 1) How are online journalists fighting Covid-19 disinfodemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic? And, 2) what are the challenges they face to counteract fake news, disinformation and report the pandemic in countries where press freedom is undermined?

These research interrogations unfold on layers of fact-checking mechanisms used by the journalists; their verification processes; the dissemination strategies after an information is checked; the obstacles and difficulties they encounter to fact-check ; and what lacks to

improve their work. This study relies on qualitative interviews done with eight members of Congo Check and Talato in July and August 2020. The analysis explored five thematic blocks that included: fact-checking mechanisms; when it is not possible to verify; dissemination strategies; obstacles and difficulties; need for improvements.

It is the process of identifying, describing, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes. Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative research providing a flexible yet complex account of data. Its aim is to organise and describe the dataset in richer detail (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017, 2018; Evans & Lewis, 2018). Thematic analysis was the method used to examine the factors that influence, underpin, and contextualise particular processes, as well as identifying views about a certain phenomenon (Braun et al., 2018, p. 8). The analysis began at the stage of data collection and continued throughout the course of transcribing, reading, and analysing (Evans & Lewis, 2018, p. 3) providing a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data.

Journalists' accounts

How are online journalists fighting Covid-19 disinfodemic in their countries? What are the challenges they face to counteract fake news, disinformation and report the pandemic?

Members of Congo Check and Talato informed about their verification process as well as their dissemination strategies. In order to detect disinfodemic, Talato journalists try to be alert and tuned for any false information that might be spreading on the streets and communities or that has potential to become a rumour on the media and on the web. In Congo Check, a similar process unfolds as the reporters informed that they have a team of "real" journalists that monitor the social media in search of hints for potential fake news. C1 mentioned they receive warnings from the population through social media or by email asking for Congo Check to verify certain claims:

> We have a great team, we are real journalists who do the monitoring (...) to know what is the fake news circulating on social media. We also receive alerts from the population who ask us to verify this or that information. [C1, translated from the original in French]

The verification process in Talato appears to be concentrated and centralised. The founder of the project is the solely one to verify or to give the last word of a verification. The technique generally used is to first capture the link or do a screenshot of where the false information was published and to search for hints about the institution or the person that is being subject to the false claim. The founder of Talato tries to reach out to the person, the public personality or authority in question. The person's biography is searched and analysed. The

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

verification also tries to reach to the person's circle of close contacts. Besides, Talato's process of verification attempts to obtain some type of document to serve as evidence, such as a police report or a legal paper.

Privileging official sources

Talato privileges voices from official sources or institutions particularly in the case of the coronavirus, i.e. the WHO and health authorities. Although the final word of the fact-checking seems to be given by the head of the project, the other journalists do take part in the verification process and shared tasks. T2 informed they get in contact right away with the concerned institutions being targeted with the false information. They also attempt to engage the population in terms of gathering their voices, opinions and apprehensions in relation to the pandemic in CAR.

> To verify the facts, (...) we make contact with the institution and the person in question who give us their version of things so that we can establish the truth. For example, the cases of masks [donated by the EU], we use ourselves these masks, we checked with the population, 'did you use the masks, how did you feel afterwards?'. [T2, translated from the original in French]

If a fake information is spread through images — either photos or videos — they attempt to obtain as much detailed evidence as possible about the context of the image, when it was taken, where, and in which circumstances. The philosophy underneath is to gather and crisscross as much evidence as possible for each fake claim in order to deliver what they call "the good information". In contrast, the work in Congo Check is generally carried out in teams appearing to be a more horizontal strategy where "everyone is an editor" and "everyone writes a fact-checked article".

> We have a team where we discuss, we always work as a team and (...) everyone is editor, that is to say, someone can write a text and I can edit it (...) it depends on the person who is available at the time. [C4, translated from the original in French]

The Congo Check journalists routinely 'meet' at their online newsroom, i.e. a group chat. Although the project has nowadays a physical bureau what they call "a start-up house" in downtown Goma where they can physically meet to share the agenda for the upcoming verifications, they are joined online by corresponding journalists based in other Congolese provinces. Every day they are able to detect nationwide an average of five to ten false information circulating on the web. The mechanism for verifying is the first and foremost

the identification of a source who is producing the potential false claim, the domain of such information (what it is about, if it touches politics, health, etc) and then they try to reach to sources who could offer the true data and counter argue the wrong one.

When the fake news circulates in the form of images, they are required to use certain software programmes to help detecting falsities. The team attempts "every possible way" to reach the sources, said C2. For verifying video images that are potentially fake or decontextualised, they attempt to be at the place where it might have been shot, either by going themselves or reaching out to their network of correspondents across the country. Once there is no evidence that an image was taken in the DRC, they try to locate where it has circulated before.

> The difference is that Congo Check goes to the source. (…) For the videos that are circulating (…) we send to this place (…) our correspondent, our journalist to verify (…) if this place matches the photo (…). We have another mechanism to verify if these photos are really from the DRC or if they have been posted elsewhere. [C3, translated from the original in French]

"A fact-checking cannot allow space for doubts"

What marks the difference with Congo Check ways of reporting in comparison with other media in the country is that they verify information, said the reporters. The staff usually works on teams to help one another, they share a common "subject notebook" to distribute the tasks and follow updates on each other's advancements. "A fact-checking cannot allow space for doubts", said C3. For cases that demand in-depth verification, it might take over a week. Cases that are considered "easy" or that do not pose difficulties in verifying can be done within two hours.

Both Congo Check and Talato journalists stressed they are cautious so as not to fall themselves into the fake information circle. In order to assert the veracity of a certain information, it is necessary to obtain all elements. T2 said they take their time to verify, but when it is not possible to corroborate or substantiate whether a claim is true or false, "when they realise there is a doubt, when things are not clear and when sources do not want to take a stand on an issue", they do not publish so as not to incur in the risk of publishing something that might not be true.

In Congo Check, when it has not been possible to reach certain sources it means that "we have poorly done the fact-checking", C2 told. In the cases where the sources are not reachable, they do not publish right away any article, and continue pursuing until they reach a source of confirmation or rejection of a given claim. There was never a fake information in the hands of Congo Check that journalists were not able to debunk, recalled C3: "we always reach our end".

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Amplifying channels of dissemination

The strategy to disseminate a fact that has been checked either as false or true starts by publishing an article in Talato's website and on their social media, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. Since many journalists of Talato work in other media outlets, they usually co-operate and share the fact-checked posts in order to amplify the channels of dissemination, such as the website *Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme en Centrafrique* (Network of Journalists for Human Rights in the Central African Republic — RJDH), radios, and individual blogs.

Another important tactic is to share in the several chat apps, mainly on diverse WhatsApp groups each journalist is member, as well as in their personal contact lists. Particularly in times of Covid, if a fake claim touches upon an institution, they try to tag the organisations (government, European Union representation, United Nations agencies, UN peace mission and NGOs) or other involved actors. Alternatively, a strategy adopted to disseminate fact-checked information is on a personal level within the journalists inner circles of family, friends and private life. T2 said they do the work "*de bouche à oreille*" (from word to mouth) by passing of information from person to person using oral communication. An average of three verification articles are published every week on Talato, they informed.

The strategy is somehow similar for Congo Check. After being able to verify an information, the team write a fact-checking article to first publish on their website and share the link through various channels on social media and online groups. The main strategy is to disseminate the fact-checked data through the same channels that the false information had circulated before, explained C4. If once an information is verified as true but still creates confusion, they publish an article attesting the veracity of such allegation and offer further evidence to reinforce it, described C3.

SMS Covid-19 and Fact-checking Academy

Beyond the stratagem of sharing a fact-checked post through internet, Congolese journalists have come to realise that they might be even more impactful if they spread the fact-checked information through mobile SMS on a program created under the name 'SMS Covid-19'. C2 acknowledges that many people and communities are not internet surfers due to several hindrances, thus they find useful to disseminate the fact-checked information through short messages by SMS. In partnership with a telecommunication company, Congo Check created a list of phone contacts of subscribers to send automatic SMS to all registered numbers.

From the reporters' perspectives, they acknowledged that despite their efforts and determination, their action is still not enough to totally brake the wave of disinfodemic in their

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

respective countries, but at least they admit having carried out efforts in order to bring about some change in how people consume information and that they should be more aware and become suspicious of the information they receive and believe to be true.

On the journalists, accounts, conventional mainstream media have now started to take into consideration the verification of Congo Check before publishing news pieces or airing the news. Such observation has rendered more credibility and legitimacy to the project. As a way of outreaching and enlarging their impact against fake news, the project has launched a school of verification that it is still at its first stages of running and that they call it 'Congo Check Academy' to inform the population on the basics of verification so as to empower citizens interested on how to take the lead themselves in their circles to halt disinfodemic.

> That's why we created Congo Check Academy which is a Congo Check training school to teach people, not just journalists, but also the local population, all the inhabitants on how to detect false information, verify information (...). We train them, we talk to them about how they can verify information, how they can know such information is true, such information is false, such information is good, such information is bad. [C4, translated from the original in French]

Hindrances and impediments

When it comes to the obstacles and challenges to counteract disinformation, the quality of internet connection is said to be one major hindrance for their work. Added to the poor connection it is coupled with the high price of data paid to surf on the web, stressed Talato journalists.

In terms of the organisational level, most (or the totality) of Talato's work is conducted on a voluntary basis. This may discourage the journalists to keep a continuous work due to lack of remuneration.

> The voluntary nature of our work does not motivate certain contributors, certain members of the editorial staff. I, as the editor in chief of the group, cannot force them to do voluntary work. And often we miss the opportunity to write an article, often we miss something. [T1, translated from the original in French]

In relation to the procedures of fact-checking, there are many difficulties in accessing the sources that are trustworthy and who have reliable information. On Covid-19, the sources are usually official and governmental ones, thus the bureaucratic procedure to reach them might take at least 48 hours or even more since most of the contacts are done by telephone. The journalists also accounted for the difficulty to have an 'on the record' information from a source.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Sometimes physicians, doctors, scientists have the true data, but only agree to speak off the record. Although there are weekly press briefings from the Health Ministry in CAR, the minister is solely the only person authorised to answer the demand and inquiries from the press, making it even more difficult for journalists to reach out and get some available minutes for interviews.

> The management of Covid-19 is really complex over here. (…) for example, there was a press release that (…) contained reporting errors. I noted these errors and published them. (…) they called me from the presidency of the Republic to threaten me. These are difficulties that we encounter. [T2, translated from the original in French]

In relation to material resources, journalists face a situation in which they have to work with their own means, such as their proper notebooks, use their private cell phones, afford and consume their individual data for internet. Additionally, the protection material against the disease, such as masks, gloves and hand sanitiser have to be afforded by each one of the journalists. All this creates a dynamic that the reporters end up paying to do their work and their means of transport when it is necessary to move around the capital Bangui. They incur in all expenses to exercise their profession. Such precarity may condition their availability to work and might impact the quality of fact-checking.

The financial means are likewise seen as the main obstacles for Congo Check. The shortage of funds impede that they reach a wider audience with different formats of dissemination and even to include more journalists on the team across the country. They have as well majorly worked with their own means. Lack of capacity building on updated tools for fact-checking and verification strategies has also been mentioned as one important challenge. During their work on fake news against Ebola, Congo Check received some financial support from Congo's Health Ministry and an American based NGO working with media assistance. At that moment they also started a partnership with Facebook. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, they received support from the American agency for international development (USAID) to implement the section of fact-checking on Covid that lasted for six months and has recently ended.

Having journalists fact-checkers being remunerated would account for a stimulus for journalists. Having at their disposal material resources that journalists can use to do their work, such as computers, cell phones and internet connection available to them, are the main types of improvements on a short term that could enhance the conditions of their work, and thus, increase the standards of their fact-checking services.

> We say that in CAR, for example, ten billion (dollars are sent) for the Covid, but what is the share reserved for the media? Virtually, there is nothing. And yet the media does communication work that goes in the direction of the response (against the pandemic), but the media have little or nothing. Journalists themselves are not protected. [T3, translated from the original in French]

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Final Remarks

We have discussed in this chapter that fact-checking, as an important communication strategy against the spread of the Covid-19 disinfodemic, could inspire change in the way communities make use of information. Disinfodemic is used to broadly refer to content that is false and that has potentially negative impacts with possible fatal consequences during a pandemic.

By asking how online journalists are fighting Covid-19 disinfodemic in their countries and the challenges they face to counteract fake news, disinformation and report the pandemic in places where press freedom is undermined, Congo Check and Talato journalists revealed critical accounts on their efforts to promote a pandemic risk communication.

They are constantly alert and tuned for any false information with the potential to become a rumour on the traditional media and on the web. Although both projects show some differences on their *modus operandi* — Talato being more centralised in the fact-checking decisions, in contraposition to Congo Check that shows more horizontality — they converge on their goals of halting disinfodemic. They are aware they might as well be 'victims' of fake information and stressed they are cautious so as not to fall into the trap themselves.

Despite the determination, these projects are mainly based in the urban centres. Whereas Talato concentrates its activities in the capital Bangui and Congo Check in Goma, the second largest town in the DRC, the Congolese project attempts to create a rhizomatic span with correspondents throughout the country.

The journalists attempt to enlarge the dissemination of their fact-checked articles by cooperating with other media outlets, either online or offline like radios and newspapers. In the online sphere, they share on social media accounts and groups of chats. In the offline world, they orally pass the information from person to person, doing a work from word to mouth. Their main strategy is to disseminate the verified data through the same channels that the false information had circulated before, creating a 'fact-checked cascade' rather than a 'rumour cascade'. The Congolese journalists have been innovative in opening a new channel for propagating the fact-checking information, by mobile SMS.

Is it enough? Despite their efforts and creativity, it is still not sufficient to halt the amount of rumours circulating, they said. But according to them, they have at least started a movement to raise awareness on how to consume information more responsibly. The population has shown proof of being engaged in this 'movement' by sending to the journalists warnings about certain fake information and asking them to verify. An ambitious initiative has been the media digital literacy project launched by Congo Check with a school of verification in Goma. It still has a small scope but has, with no doubt, a compelling potential.

If these projects received funds to afford material resources and remunerate human capital, it would certainly serve as trampoline or a necessary push for improving the quality of their work, the sustainability of their mission, it would offer an incentive for the journalists

to exercise quality fact-checking and increase their credibility within the society. An additional improvement would be to access capacity building workshops and updates within the verification world against fake news so the journalists would be trained in the most updated technologies and mechanisms for verifying false information.

Although the limitations of this study are various since it relied solely on the journalists' testimonials and did not conduct a content analysis of the fact-checked articles on their websites, the posts shared or the engagement of the users on social media and online forums, this chapter aimed at sparking a discussion. It aims at qualifying the debate for the need of developing and supporting locally-based independent journalistic projects in areas where media is not entirely free to operate and where there is a need for building digital literacy on responsible information consumption. Despite the challenges of connectivity and the wave of disinformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, the journalists expressed their commitment to help building a society that is engaged in consuming less false information.

Future research could be conducted by comparing experiences across the continent in sub-Saharan and Northern Africa, spanning from the Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone countries.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

References

Abecassis, D., Korsukova, E., Kende, M., Morgan, R., & Novik, S. (2020). *The Impact of Facebook's Connectivity Initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa* [Report for Facebook]. Analysys Mason Consulting. https://www.analysysmason.com/contentassets/f8a396952f9c4481982c674724d85356/the-impact-of-facebooks-connectivity-initiatives-in-the-ssa-region---30-june-2020.pdf

Akue-Kpakpo, A. (2013). *Study on international Internet connectivity in sub-Saharan Africa* [Regional groups of the ITU Study Group 3 for Africa (SG3RG-AFR) in May 2012]. Direction of the Regulatory and Market Environment Division, Telecommunication Development Bureau. ITU. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Documents/IIC_Africa_Final-en.pdf

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(2), 211–236. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Sage Publications.

Bode, L., & Vraga, E. K. (2015). In Related News, That Was Wrong: The Correction of Misinformation Through Related Stories Functionality in Social Media: In Related News. *Journal of Communication*, *65*(4), 619–638. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12166

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage Publications.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic Analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences* (pp. 1–18). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2779-6_103-1

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 297–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2018). Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *18*(2), 107–110. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12165

Evans, C., & Lewis, J. (2018). *Analysing Semi-Structured Interviews Using Thematic Analysis: Exploring Voluntary Civic Participation Among Adults*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526439284

Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2018). Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood. *Javnost — The Public*, *25*(3), 298–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047

García-Escribano, M. (2020, June 29). Low Internet Access Driving Inequality. *IMF Blog*. https://blogs.imf.org/2020/06/29/low-internet-access-driving-inequality/

Gelfert, A. (2018). Fake News: A Definition. *Informal Logic*, *38*(1), 84–117. https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v38i1.5068

GSMA. (2019). *Mobile Internet Connectivity 2019 Sub-Saharan Africa Factsheet*. GSMA. https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-SSA-Factsheet.pdf

GSMA. (2020). *2020 — GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index*. https://www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/

Internet Policy Observatory. (2018). Sub-Saharan Africa | Internet Policy Observatory. *Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania*. http://globalnetpolicy.org/resources/sub-saharan-africa/

Mantzarlis, A. (2018). Module Five: Fact-Checking 101. In *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Posetti & Ireton, pp. 85–100). UNESCO Digital Library. https://en.unesco.org/node/296054

Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., & Moyo, D. (2019). "Fake News" and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda. *African Journalism Studies*, *40*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1788295

Posetti, J., & Bontcheva, K. (2020). *Disinfodemic: Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation* [Policy Brief]. UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/disinfodemic

Posetti, J., & Ireton, C. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation: Handbook for journalism education and training*. UNESCO Digital Library. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552

Reporters Without Borders. (2020). *2020 World Press Freedom Index*. RSF. https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table

Simione, F., & Woldemichael, M. T. (2020, June 15). Digitalizing Sub-Saharan Africa: Hopes and Hurdles. *IMF Country Focus*. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/15/na061520-digitalizing-sub-saharan-africa-hopes-and-hurdles

Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "Fake News": A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(2), 137–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

Trewinnard, T., & Bell, F. (2018). Module Six: Social Media Verification. In *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Posetti and Ireton, pp. 102–114). https://en.unesco.org/node/296055

UNESCO. (2018, September 3). *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews

UNESCO. (2020, September 1). *The Pandemic and the Infodemic: Disinformation in the Modern Age*. UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/news/pandemic-and-infodemic-disinformation-modern-age

United Nations. (2020). *UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis* [The United Nations Department of Global Communications]. https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19

Vaughan, E., & Tinker, T. (2009). Effective Health Risk Communication About Pandemic Influenza for Vulnerable Populations. *American Journal of Public Health*, *99*(S2), S324–S332. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.162537

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, *359*(6380), 1146–1151. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559

Walker, J. (2016, December 5). Civil Society's Role in a Public Health Crisis. *Issues in Science and Technology*, *32*(4), 16.

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

Wardle, C. (2017, February 16). *Fake news. It's complicated*. First Draft. https://firstdraftnews.org:443/latest/fake-news-complicated/

Wasserman, H. (2020). Fake news from Africa: Panics, politics and paradigms. *Journalism, 21*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917746861

WHO. (2020, August 25). *Immunizing the public against misinformation*. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/immunizing-the-public-against-misinformation

Zamfir, I. (2015). *Digital development in Sub-Saharan Africa* [Briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571334/EPRS_BRI(2015)571334_EN.pdf

Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos