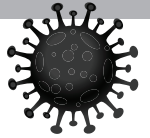
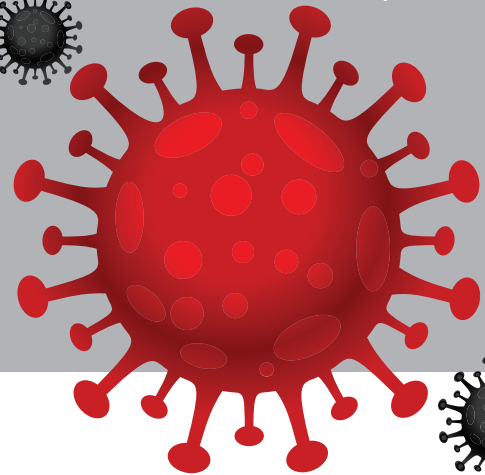
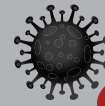




Issue 1 | July 2020



COVID-19 in Namibia

Countering the 'Disinfodemic'

Namibian Social Media¹ & COVID-19 disinformation By Frederico Links²

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread outwards from its initial epicentre in China since December 2019, so too has a rising tide of disinformation.

It has become clear over the months, since January 2020, that this disinformation tide is contributing to polluting and corrupting the health communication information space and is undermining the effectiveness of information-driven health responses that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic.

As never before, disinformation has become substantially concerning as a global public health issue.

Namibia has not been spared the COVID-19 related disinformation contagion that has been amplified by social media networks and messaging applications.

With lives and livelihoods on the line, it has become increasingly critical to study, understand and create awareness of the unfolding COVID-19 disinformation phenomenon as it grows and spreads with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

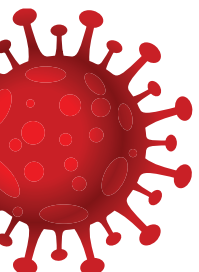
1. Key Observations

Following are insights that have emerged from witnessing and monitoring the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation on the Namibian information landscape, including and especially Namibian social media.

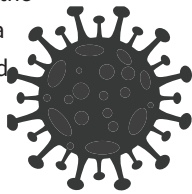
- Since January 2020 COVID-19-related disinformation has become prevalent on Namibian social media;
- Mutual disinforming has become a feature of especially group engagements on WhatsApp and Facebook;
- It would appear that a significant portion of Namibian social media users use others on social media platforms as their primary sources of information and many appear to be largely oblivious to information emanating from official sources or the reporting of traditional news media, both off- and online;
- COVID-19-related disinformation spread via social media has contributed to instances of real-world harm;
- COVID-19-related disinformation has fuelled online divisiveness and confrontation, expressions of xenophobia and racism, as well as tribalism and hate speech;
- As in other parts of the world, the COVID-19 health emergency in Namibia has also become a political emergency, with the health emergency having become a marker for a larger political governance and socio-economic crises, which much of this disinformation exploits;

¹ The term is used to denote Namibian generated social media profiles and groups on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the messaging application WhatsApp.

² Frederico Links is the editor and lead researcher at Namibia Fact Check. Namibia Fact Check is a project of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).



- Despite increasing evidence of harm, judging by their responses it seems that Namibian public health and other relevant authorities do not adequately recognise or appreciate the current and potential future threats posed by rampant and pervasive health-related disinformation to Namibian public health interventions;
- COVID-19-related lies, myths, hoaxes and conspiracy theories have all been virally ‘shared’ and ‘forwarded’ across and between social media and messaging platforms;
- Namibian social media users have on the whole demonstrated a concerning susceptibility to viral COVID-19 related lies, myths, hoaxes and conspiracy theories;
- Indications are that the vast majority of COVID-19-related disinformation content encountered on Namibian social media emanates from ‘outside’ Namibian social media;
- Prominent Namibian individuals and social media influencers – from politicians, lawyers, academics to media practitioners and news organisations – have been instrumental in spreading COVID-19 related disinformation on social media;
- Namibian authorities, including public health authorities, have on the whole been reactive, slow, and disjointed in responding to or countering the tide of COVID-19 related disinformation;
- Communication missteps and lack of transparency on the part of public health and other state authorities have by all indications contributed to declining trust in official sources, thereby elevating the tractability of COVID-19-related disinformation³;
- State of emergency regulations criminalising the spread of COVID-19-related disinformation appear to not have had a deterrent effect on social media users sharing and spreading such content;
- On the other hand, there appears to not have been any concerted effort from relevant government or law enforcement authorities to enforce the state of emergency regulations criminalising the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation;
- Namibian news media organisations and news reporters have been substantially and conspicuously absent from efforts to debunk or fact check COVID-19 related lies, myths, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, and instead some have been prominently part of the disinformation problem;
- The substantial absence of Namibian news media in debunking and fact checking COVID-19-related disinformation has spotlighted coverage weaknesses and shortfalls, and exposed a news media not attuned or responsive to where and how public discussion is taking place and shifting;
- What this arguably points to is that Namibian news media generally do not appear to fully grasp or appropriately appreciate the potential public health consequences, or the potentially disastrous trust-related impacts on the media sector itself, of the occurrence of pervasive health-related disinformation.



2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered to generally improve Namibian responses to and mitigation of pervasive disinformation:

- Media and information literacy needs to be prioritised as a matter of urgency by Namibian public health and education authorities, and civil society and the news media alike;
- Namibian health authorities need to establish crisis or emergency communication measures and mechanisms to proactively, appropriately, accessibly and continuously communicate, both offline and online, the

facts, developments and other critical health-related information during times of public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic emergency;

- Similarly, relevant Namibian government authorities, such as the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), in collaboration with public health authorities and state media, also need to put in place effective crisis or emergency communication mechanisms and strategies to proactively pre-empt and counteract disinformation;
- With it being increasingly evident that the criminalising of the spread of disinformation has not had the desired deterrent effect, and given the potential constitutional quandary

presenting with the enforcement of such regulations, it is recommended that the regulations lapse at the end of the state of emergency and not become part of a future, proposed social media regulatory framework;

- Similar to increasing numbers of news media outlets in other parts of the world, Namibian news media organisations need to develop in-house fact checking and debunking capacities, moving beyond reporting of events and statements, and abandoning a half-in approach to online and social media presence and engagement;
- It is specifically recommended that Namibian public health and



³ This is an area that would need in depth study and analysis.



news media, as well as civil society, learn from and look to emulate emergent best practices in how to counter the rising tide of COVID-19-related disinformation;

- It is recommended that comprehensive studies be conducted into the factors that make Namibians susceptible to receiving, believing and sharing disinformation content, such as foreign originating COVID-19

related lies, myths, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, towards understanding and unearthing effective responses to future similar emergencies or crises;

- Finally, it is recommended that Namibian media consumers and social media users become more critical receptors and disseminators of information, both online and offline, and that they individually and

collectively take responsibility for depolluting the information landscape by actively engaging in ensuring that shared information is credible, verified information.



**ONLY A
DESIGNATED LAB TEST CAN
DIAGNOSE THE VIRUS**

3. Situation Overview

Pervasive information pollution has become a feature of the global health communication and information environment surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

The problem was already highly visible and problematic by February 2020. On 2 February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO), in its daily situation report of the

COVID-19 pandemic, coined the term “infodemic” to describe the flood of disinformation that was accompanying the disease. The WHO stated: “The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ – an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”⁴

In late April 2020, as the disinformation tide was rising, parallel to a rapid increase in global COVID-19 infections,

the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), coined another label, calling the tide of falsehoods, conspiracy theories and hoaxes a ‘disinfodemic’. In doing so UNESCO stated: “COVID-19 has led to a parallel pandemic of disinformation that directly impacts lives and

livelihoods around the world. Falsehoods and misinformation have proven deadly and sowed confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices.”⁵

UNESCO identified “nine key themes”⁶ of the ‘dis-infodemic’, specifically:

- Origins and spread of the coronavirus/ COVID-19 disease;
- False and misleading statistics;
- Economic impacts;
- Discrediting of journalists and credible news outlets;
- Medical science: symptoms, diagnosis and treatment;
- Impacts on society and the environment;
- Politicisation;
- Content driven by fraudulent financial gain;
- Celebrity-focused disinformation.

To illustrate the ‘disinfodemic’, consider that the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance⁷ – bringing together over 100 fact checking, including a number of African, organisations in 70 countries around the world – of the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) had logged more than 7,000 COVID-19 related fact checks from January 2020 to end June 2020. That’s a staggering average of over 1,000 fact checks and debunks of false claims, conspiracy theories, myths and hoaxes per month, at a rough average of about 140 fact checks per day, as the following graph from the alliance’s website illustrates.

⁴ <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>

⁵ For more insights, visit the UNESCO webpage: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/disinfodemic>

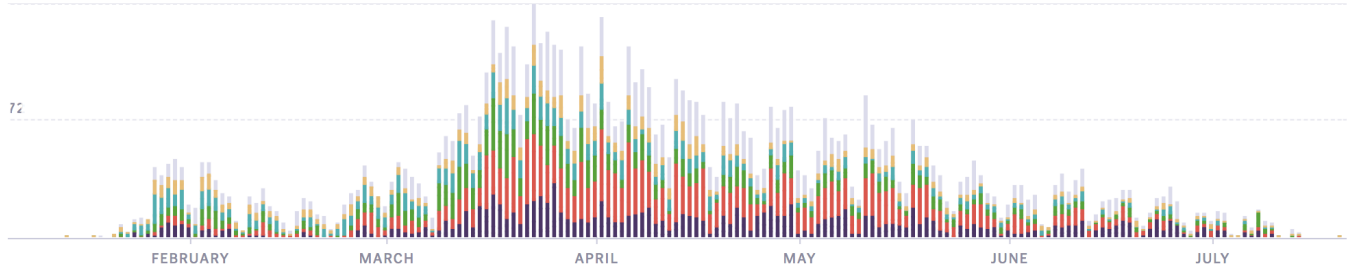
⁶ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf

⁷ <https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/>



Graph: Frequency of COVID-19 related fact checks January – June 2020 by the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance

143 NEW FACT CHECKS PER DAY



All the fact checks and debunks are viewable in the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance Database⁸.

Similarly, and to illustrate how truly internationalised the ‘disinfodemic’ is, on 30 June 2020 a collaboration of fact checkers across five European countries published a report detailing the spread of disinformation in those countries. The research identified the following common types of disinformation occurring across all five countries: The claim that the virus was man-made; cures and remedies; vaccine misinformation; masks and PPE; 5G misinformation; avoiding or preventing infection; Bill Gates; comparisons between coronavirus and seasonal flu.

Based on what *Namibia Fact Check* has witnessed to date on Namibian social media since January 2020, the following are the types of COVID-19 related disinformation encountered. *Namibia Fact Check’s* COVID-19 related fact checks, debunks and explainer articles that speak to these types of disinformation content are viewable on its website⁹.

Most common COVID-19 disinformation on Namibian social media

- Bogus cures & remedies
- Virus is man-made / a bio-weapon
- Anti-vaccine conspiracies
- Vaccine imperialism
- 5G conspiracies
- Bill Gates conspiracies
- Coronavirus vs the Flu claims
- Preventing COVID-19 misinformation
- Mask misinformation
- COVID-19 linked racial / ethnic disinformation

Beyond these counter-measures and insights at local, regional and international levels, there have been other international responses and interventions to stem the disinformation tide.

To counter the ‘infodemic’ the WHO created its Myth Busters¹⁰, the WHO Health Alert channel on WhatsApp¹¹, and the WHO information network for epidemics to spread COVID-19 related information and facts.¹²

In late May 2020, the United Nations (UN) launched its Verified¹³ initiative that aims “to push back against the tide of lies and hate that has risen in tandem with the COVID-19 pandemic, by empowering people worldwide to share accurate information to help save lives and promote global solidarity”¹⁴.

And in late June 2020, 132 countries from around the world endorsed a ‘Cross-Regional Statement on “Infodemic” in the Context of COVID-19’¹⁵, which states: “In times of the COVID-19 health crisis, the spread of the “infodemic” can be as dangerous to human health and security as the pandemic itself. Among other negative consequences, COVID-19 has created conditions that enable the spread of disinformation, fake news and doctored videos to foment violence and divide communities. It is critical states counter misinformation as a toxic driver of secondary impacts of the pandemic that can heighten the risk of conflict, violence, human rights violations and mass atrocities.”

At country level, in response to the ‘disinfodemic’, like a number of countries around the world, the Namibian government has criminalised disinformation under its COVID-19 state of emergency regulations.

On 17 April 2020 the Namibian government issued amended regulations – ‘Amendment of State of Emergency COVID-19

⁸ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/>

⁹ www.namibiafactcheck.org.na

¹⁰ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

¹¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication>

¹² <https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication>

¹³ <https://www.shareverified.com/en>

¹⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064622>

¹⁵ https://onu.delegfrance.org/IMG/pdf/cross-regional_statement_on_infodemic_final_with_all_endorsements.pdf

Regulations: Namibian Constitution¹⁶ – introducing a section that states:

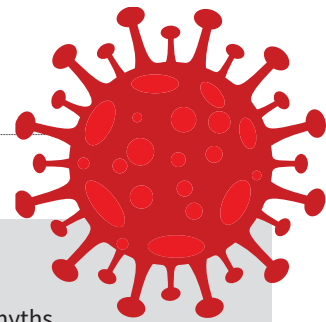
- “(1) A person commits an offence if that person –
(e) publishes, through any form of media, including social media -
(i) any false or misleading statement about or in connection with the COVID-19;
or
(ii) any statement that is intended to deceive any other person about the COVID-19 status of any person or measures to combat, prevent and suppress COVID-19 as specified in and under these regulations.”

According to the regulations, someone found to have published disinformation could be fined N\$2,000 or be sentenced to six months in prison.

These regulations followed shortly on the heels of a tragic suicide at the coastal town of Walvis Bay, when an apparently

mentally disturbed young woman hung herself because she believed she had been infected with COVID-19 by 5G signals emanating from a cellular communications tower in the vicinity of her home.¹⁷ The incident went viral on social media, especially in WhatsApp groups, as videoclips were shared among groups of the frantic young woman, who was alone in lockdown at the time, complaining about feeling ill and pointing to the cell tower through her windows. To be clear, 5G mobile technology is not available in Namibia.

However, since the introduction of the regulations only one person has been criminally charged and fined under them¹⁸, despite numerous examples of disinformation content being published and shared across social media and messaging platforms on a daily basis over the more than two months (to end June 2020) since the regulations have been gazetted.



4. Conclusion

The ‘infodemic’ / ‘disinfodemic’ has become a damaging and dangerous infection on the global public health information landscape and is busy drowning out credible, expert and authoritative voices on the pandemic. The constant noise of lies and conspiracy theories has created fertile grounds for many people around the world to reject expert advice and guidance precisely when it is needed and should be adhered to the most. This could lead to large-scale confusion and chaos as uncertainty reigns and the pandemic worsens as a consequence.

Despite the best efforts of many around the world, stemming the disinformation tide remains a huge challenge as COVID-19 infection rates continue to rise sharply across parts of the world (at the time of writing in early July 2020).

It should be emphasised that much of the disinformation amplified by various social media and messaging platforms continued to circulate globally despite attempts by fact

checking organisations to debunk such myths.

Such disinformation also gained traction despite efforts by governments and multilateral bodies to transmit credible information and health-related facts to populations.

And despite the introduction of innovative projects, methods and collaborations to counter the ‘infodemic’ / ‘disinfodemic’, throughout early to mid-2020 disinformation continued to flow across the public health information landscape fuelled by rising socio- and geo-political tensions and confrontations.

Also, by end June 2020, it was clear that the practices of social media and messaging platforms were part and parcel of the disinformation problem. Social media is the single most important element in the disinformation equation.

¹⁶ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Xi3o7fOiRwU1MlfCymzHLIPq_yZAhw3u/view

¹⁷ <https://neweralive.na/posts/young-woman-commits-suicide-in-walvis>

¹⁸ <https://www.namibian.com.na/91561/read/Man-arrested-for-spreading-fake-Covid-19-news>

