Cure Myths and False Ratings Lead COVID-19 Fact-Checks in Nigeria, With Governments as Most Targeted Entities

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Executive Summary

In this piece, we examined 203 coronavirus-related fact-checks published by Dubawa and Africa Check since the outbreak of the pandemic. Our analysis was limited to fact-checks focusing on Nigeria and general misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. Majority of claims in the analysed fact-checks centre on potential COVID-19 treatments and cures. Remarkably, government entities comprising the institution, its officials, and agencies were mostly targets of debunked claims in the study. While we cannot conclude, based on our findings here, that donor funding may have some influence on the fact-checking process, we found that fact-checks with potential interest to two major funders of fact-checking organisations, Facebook and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation were significantly higher than others within the entire family of fact-checking organisations.
Introduction

The advent of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, brought with it an unprecedented era of information disorder. From conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the coronavirus to several unfounded and unverified myths regarding treatment options and preventive practices, the world witnessed an enormous flood of misinformation, making it impossible for many to understand what is real and what is not. The information disorder is being spread by people across various demographics from world leaders, to religious leaders, traditional leaders, key government functionaries, and private citizens.

Information disorder around the pandemic is well-established, with the World Health Organisation (WHO) describing the situation as an infodemic, “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” Over 100 fact-checkers around the globe under the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance have been at the forefront of countering this misinformation, often creating a reference link for all covid-19 related fact-checks on their websites. As at 30th September, 2020, they have collectively published over 7,000 fact-checks in more than 70 countries in over 40 different languages.

Several social media platforms rose to the challenge, devising various means to track and dispel misinformation around the pandemic. Facebook, for instance, has a partnership with several fact-checking organisations to combat the spread of the pandemic. This is in addition to its policy of keeping its subscribers updated on fact-checks on information they have previously shared. Oftentimes, several posts are taken down and blocked from spreading further. Global and local health agencies such as the WHO and the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) are exploring online and other social media platforms to provide “evidence-based information” to the general public. They are also collaborating with fact-checkers to debunk false claims and curb the spread of misinformation around the pandemic.

In this analysis, we examine fact-checks on two leading fact-checking organisations in Nigeria, Dubawa and Africa Check. The NCDC is in partnership with the two organisations to continuously track and promptly debunk “coronavirus-related misinformation, disinformation and mal-information to limit the spread of false information around coronavirus in Nigeria”. The essence was to examine the nature of COVID-19 misinformation popularly spread among Nigerians.
Method

We employed content analysis research method to conduct the study, using a pre-established coding guide to gather required data. We explored the Dubawa and Africa Check websites for coronavirus-related fact-checks, with both having dedicated sections for coronavirus fact-checks on their respective pages.

From the coronavirus page on Dubawa, we extracted all 99 stories published on its page. Of these, 3 articles unrelated to the pandemic were eliminated from the study. General covid-19 misinformation media literacy articles and Dubawa’s bi-monthly newsletters were delisted to limit our analysis to core fact-checks. We also eliminated stories making reference to other African countries to limit the analysis only to fact-checks with specific reference to Nigeria and general COVID-19 misinformation which may likely trend locally. In all, we analysed 64 core covid-19-related fact-checks on Dubawa.

Africa Check also has a dedicated coronavirus page. It grouped its fact-checks into six categories with the number of fact-checks in each group indicated in a bracket. The six categories are: Cures and prevention (49), Hoaxes, half-truths and scams (88), Manipulated or out of context videos, images and articles (76), Conspiracy theories, origins and predictions (10), The odd and the bizarre (10), Things that are actually true (but you thought they weren’t) (35). The page also included two other links – Audio and podcasts (31), On Air: Webinars & media appearances by our staff (23) – for other related contents. A total of 268 (49 + 88 + 76 + 10 + 10 + 35 = 268) fact-checks are available across the 6 categories. We examined all 268 fact-checks and eliminated stories focusing on other Africa countries. All stories making reference to virality of contents, or mentioning officials in specific African countries than Nigeria were delisted and excluded from analysis. Fact-Checks on Madagascar were however included in the study owing to the popularity of its highly promoted covid herbal mixture. In all, 139 fact-checks were analysed on Africa Check for this analysis.
Hence, we analysed 203 coronavirus-related fact-checks on claims likely to have spread among Nigerians. The coding guide was the research instrument used to gather data for the study. A pilot study was conducted to test the instrument which was also subject to inter-coder reliability using two coders. The variables examined are misinformation source, content fact-checked, verdict of fact-checks, issue focus, fact-checking tool(s), and target entity of fact-checked claims. The study period covers from the inception of the pandemic with earliest fact-checks published in February, 2020 to September 30, 2020.
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Results

The first variable examined is the month of publication of the analysed fact-checks. Majority of the fact-checks were published in March and April, the months following the first recorded case of coronavirus in Nigeria and Africa. Almost half of the analysed fact-checks {45 in April (24.1%) and 49 in March (22.2%)} were published during this period. Africa Check had its highest fact-checks in April while Dubawa had its own in March. Thereafter, there was a gradual decline in the fact-checks, but with some form of consistency between June and July. By the end of the study period, September, published fact-checks had dropped to a mere 2% (n=4). It is observed that Dubawa published a number of coronavirus-related articles but they are mostly media literacy articles clarifying issues of concern to consumers of media products. These were excluded from our analysis which simply focus on fact-checks.

Figure 2. Monthly Distribution of Analysed Fact-Checks
We examined sources of the claims fact-checked. The identified sources here describe where the information was found and sometimes also publicly shared. Facebook led the list of sources with about 46% of total sources identified in the study. This excludes claims notably found/shared on more than one platform noted here as “across social media platforms”. Several claims were notably shared on “Facebook and WhatsApp” mostly on Africa Check. These were all recorded as “across social media platforms”. This might have also influenced the low frequency of claims fact-checked on WhatsApp in Africa Check. Dubawa however fact-checked its highest claims from WhatsApp followed by Facebook and Blog sites. News media were the least reported as sources of fact-checked claims. Fact-checks on news media reports focused on media coverage of issues as well as direct coverage of public officers’ speeches at public events.

Africa Check’s increased fact-checks on claims on Facebook might have been influenced by the organisation’s collaboration with the tech giant to limit the spread of false information. Africa Check has a public disclosure on this partnership which it includes at the end of its fact-checks. However, the organisation has claims it is striving “to ensure no donor has a controlling influence.”

Alternatively, the high fact-checking of claims of facebook might simply be as a result of its ubiquity among social media subscribers. As at the end of 2019, Facebook active subscribers in Nigeria are estimated to be over 27 million. Hence, it might be logical to assume that there will be more information and misinformation being shared on Facebook than on other platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp are reportedly the most common social media platforms in Nigeria. According to this survey, over 80% of respondents confirmed using each of Facebook and WhatsApp. This is in contrast to only 19% and 11% who confirmed using Instagram and WhatsApp respectively.

Claims in the fact-checks were reportedly presented as text, images/graphics, video and audio. Coding into text and images/graphics was tricky as the categorisation can sometimes be blurred. To address this ambiguity, we focused on the part of the content where the claim is made. We also relied on the description of the content as specified in the fact-check. Pictures, images, infographics, screenshots, pictures with embedded texts, and similar contents were coded as image/graphics since they are often presented as images and shared as such.
Majority of the fact-checked contents (61%; n=124) were thus categorised as text. This was followed by those categorised as images/graphics (24%; n=48) which accounted for about a quarter. Video (13%; n=27) and audio were the least with audio recordings only accounting for 2% (n=4) of the analysed fact-checks. The two organisations, Dubawa and Africa Check recorded similar patterns in contents in their analysed fact-checks.

Fact-checks often include verdicts (ratings) of fact-checkers on fact-checked claims. In this analysis, we found slight variations in the verdicts issued by each organisation. Dubawa appears more consistent with its regular use of True, False, Misleading, in its fact-checks. These are all within its published rating system.

Africa Check was, however, inconsistent as it regularly used False, Fake, Incorrect, on claims verified to be false with no identified distinctions in the use of these terms to describe false contents. Its published rating system included “incorrect”, but not “False” or “Fake” which were regularly used to rate several of the debunked fact-checks. Other claims are rated: Correct, Misleading, or Checked. Occasionally, both Dubawa and Africa Check declined giving any verdict in their fact-checks despite taking a stance in the body of the fact-check.
Over 80% (80.3%, n=163) of the analysed fact-checks were rated false and were grouped as Incorrect / False / Fake to integrate the ratings by both organisations. This was distantly followed by those rated as Correct / True (9%, n=18), and Misleading with 8% (n=17). Dubawa had two fact-checks rated Mostly False, Each of them was written on multiple claims and was rated as such because most of the claims were found to be false while others may be true or lack evidence for a logical conclusion. The fact-checks coded Insufficient Evidence were so rated by the organisations or concluded as such by the researcher where a fact-check has no rating but its contents make such suggestions. The high frequency of false claims might thus suggest that suspicious claims often turn out to be false, with obvious exceptions.

Fact-checks on the pandemic have debunked a wide range of claims since the outbreak. The global #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance has documented 26 clusters of misinformation in its waves of hoaxes around the pandemic. In this analysis, we identified 11 broad themes in the analysed fact checks. These include cure and prevention myth; official policies or pronouncements of governments or organisations; issues relating to COVID-19 funding, palliatives and freebies for the general public; prevention myth focusing on potential practices or behaviour to prevent individuals from being infected with the virus; issues
around testing capability, testing data and status of individuals; coronavirus-related or speculated deaths; number of cases; origin of the virus; risk factors, transmission myth on spread of the virus; copying myth describing specific behaviours necessitated by the reality of the pandemic; among few others.

Fact-checks around issues related to treatment and cure for the virus had the highest coverage accounting for nearly a quarter (23.2%, n=46) of the 198 issue-based fact-checks identified in the study. Issues of official policies and pronouncements; funding, palliatives and freebies; and prevention myths followed in close proportions. Fact-checks on transmission and copying myths, among others, were the least recorded categories.

Figure 5. Issue Focus of Analysed Fact-Checks
Apart from specific issues identified above, we also examined identified entities that were the target of misinformation in the analysed fact-checks. This was limited to 100 of the debunked fact-checks rated false among the analysed lot. Federal government, its officials and agencies and foreign governments and their officials each gulped almost a quarter of the identified entities in the relevant fact-checks. Claims targeting the federal government included key government officials falsely attributed to specific claims. The increased targets on foreign government and their officials were populated by false claims targeted at President Donald Trump of the United States, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and President Andry Rajoelina of Madagascar who became popular during this pandemic for promotion of his country’s self-acclaimed COVID-19 treatment formula. Several claims were falsely attributed to Trump despite reports that he regularly promoted coronavirus misinformation. Prominent individuals were also falsely targeted for COVID-19 false information. Prominent among these was Bill Gates and his Foundation targeted in 5 of the 10 fact-checks in this category. A New York Times report noted Bill Gates
as “the leading target for coronavirus falsehoods,” which might explain the increased fact-checks on him. Others in this category were business Mogul, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, entrepreneur and footballer Ronaldo reportedly giving freebies and donating business facilities as coronavirus treatment centres.

Fact-checking tools used in analysed fact-checks included Reverse Image Search mostly done through google and then through other image search engines such as TinEye and Yandex. Other tools used included CrowdTangle, LinkTally, and audio tracing. The most common fact-checking process identified is termed cross-referencing in this analysis. This describes a combination of verification steps such as referencing, scrutinizing the information, finding verifiable facts or evidence to prove the accuracy or otherwise of the claim. It also includes conducting interviews with key actors or experts on the topic of discourse. Almost 80% (78.5%) of identified fact-checking instances identified in the analysed contents involved cross-referencing.
Conclusion

In examining the focus of fact-checks on coronavirus in Dubawa and Africa Check, findings suggest that misinformation around the pandemic was rife in the early months of the outbreak, with high fact-checks published in March and April while experiencing gradual decline afterwards. Findings here might suggest some possibility of collaborative efforts driving publication of fact-checks around the issues of interest with high tracking of misinformation on Facebook and debunking of noticeably high number of claims targeting Bill Gates, especially on Africa Check. This is so as Africa Check regularly displays Bill Gates Foundation as one of its major funders. Such likely influence can however not be concluded as some other factors, as discussed above could be driving such fact-checks of potential interest to fact-check funders.

Fact-checkers need to provide clear understanding of meanings of their ratings and explain possible differences that might be intended for similar but perhaps different ratings. Some lack of consistency in fact-check ratings found in this study could suggest unintended conclusions for readers. The high rate of false, incorrect, and fake ratings, however, suggest that suspicious claims considered worthwhile for fact-checking often turn out to be false as suspected.

Findings from this study suggest that misinformation on potential cure, official policies and pronouncements, funding of COVID-19 and palliatives; and prevention, are frequently shared on social media platforms in Nigeria. This calls for concern and continuing vigilance of fact-checkers, as some claims can have costly consequences, proclaiming unwholesome practices, and could have gone viral before they are fact-checked and perhaps subsequently taken down. Most misinformation rated false were found to have targeted government entities both locally and beyond. This calls for concerted efforts of government institutions to continuously track misinformation about them in the public place and debunk them promptly. Facebook appears to be the dominant platform through which misinformation on coronavirus is mostly spread in Nigeria. This may be due to the intended tracking of misinformation on the platform due to existing collaboration with fact-checkers. Facebook, which also owns WhatsApp, has a stipulated policy to limit the spread of Covid-19 misinformation and harmful contents across its platforms.