

RESEARCHERS CHALLENGE



EDUCATION RESEARCHERS RESPOND TO LOCKDOWN



DATE

October 2020



NUMBER OF RESEARCHERS

18



APPROACH

Desktop research and a review of two quantitative online surveys of the impact of fake news on high schoolers in South Africa, Eswatini, Malawi and Zimbabwe.



2 CONVENIENCE SAMPLES:

South African survey - 49 high school learners and 24 parents and teachers. SADC survey - 313 high school learners from Eswatini, Malawi, Zimbabwe.



PLATFORMS USED

Google, Zoom, Google Hangouts, email services and social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram.

Theme lead:

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*Study 1: Education Researchers in South Africa Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Ameliorating the Impact of Fake News on High School Learners during COVID-19.

Study 2: SADC Researchers Challenge: Curbing the spread of fake news in Southern Africa - what we can and cannot do.

PURPOSE AND OPPORTUNITY

PURPOSE: To review two studies* on the impact of fake news on high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in four countries in southern Africa, give an overview of their education and media accessibility, provide an updated literature review and make recommendations for combatting fake news.

OPPORTUNITY: In southern Africa, most high school learners acquire their information through social media and online platforms, but also radio and television. During school closures due to COVID-19, learners are likely to have been exposed to the 'infodemic' – a confusing overload of information, accurate and false. If learners lack the critical skills to differentiate between true or false information, they are vulnerable to the dangers of fake news, especially about COVID-19. There is no literature on the impact of fake news on high schoolers in southern Africa, so the insights and results of this review will serve to fill that gap and inform the development of strategies that could best address the dangerous spread of mis- and disinformation.

GENERAL FINDINGS

- Most fake news is disseminated via social media that can be manipulated by human users or computer algorithms using social bots, trolls, cyborgs and clickbaits to fill the internet with lies, misleading information and half-truths.
- Fake news items with their emotive, sensationalist content travel much faster than accurate information.
- Fake news is created and spread for many reasons: from hatred, spite or jealousy; to feel powerful and derive pleasure from watching the impact on people and society; to sow confusion and fear; for political reasons; to promote an ideology or their personal beliefs; to harm business competitors or government; or to receive income/reward from it.
- During the pandemic, false information has proliferated and includes conspiracy theories about the virus being created by China as a biological weapon, and false claims such as coconut oil and hydroxychloroquine being cures for the virus.
- Both mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 are dangerous as they can cause people to become anxious, turn to ineffective and potentially harmful remedies, to overreact, or more dangerously, to underreact, thus placing themselves and others at risk.
- High schoolers are more likely to fall prey to fake news because their cognitive skills are not able to assess and process the information critically.
- Age and level of education are two main factors contributing to the spread and acceptance of fake news; older high school learners in higher grades/forms are more likely to be aware of fake news than younger high school learners.
- It remains largely unknown why high school learners continue to share false information, and even intentionally.
- Interventions incorporating strategies that focus only on raising awareness about fake news among high school learners will be ineffective unless they also equip the learners with the requisite skills to detect false information.
- Fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic can undermine critical public health measures to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus, keep people safe from infection, and save lives.
- South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe have criminalised fake news about COVID-19.
- Governments must be careful not to erode citizens' freedom of expression severely in their determination to combat misinformation about COVID-19.
- Three broad strategies to combat the spread of fake news comprise: the communication of accurate information; raising awareness of fake news; the development of critical thinking and media literacy skills to detect fake news.
- Governments, media, civil society and educators have critical roles to play in combatting fake news.

"Just as the virus lodges in people's lungs, dangerous ideas are infecting their minds"
(Lerman, 2020).

THEME 6: TRUE OR FALSE? THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ABOUT COVID-19 ON HIGH-SCHOOL LEARNERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Fake news can be simply described as either deliberate disinformation with malicious intent to deceive or unintentional misinformation spread with no thought of harming or misleading people.

THE COUNTRIES CONTEXTS

Schooling in the four SADC countries:

- In general, in all four countries the schooling is of poor quality and unequal, with a minority of learners achieving good results in better resourced, urban public schools and private schools, and the majority, in impoverished communities, informal settlements, and rural and remote areas, suffering from poor teaching and learning in under-resourced schools.
- Schools were closed for many months in all four countries.
- While in South Africa online learning was used as the main form of remote learning during school closures, in Eswatini, Malawi and Zimbabwe, given limited internet accessibility, television and radio programmes were used, with little or no online learning.

Media access

- Across the four countries, high-schoolers' primary access to the internet is through mobile phones, and their use of social media is a key factor in their exposure to fake news.
- Access to the internet is uneven and unreliable in the four countries, given the generally high cost of data and the urban-rural divide that favours those learners in better-resourced, urban households.
- In the region, radio has the highest penetration, followed by television.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regular and frequent communication should take place between SADC region governments, media and the public through all popular communication channels to provide up-to-date, accurate and trustworthy information about the state of the COVID-19 pandemic in their countries.
- Government and non-governmental partners and communities should develop joint anti-misinformation initiatives to create awareness about fake news, debunk myths about COVID-19, and support fact-checking organisations.
- SADC countries need to go beyond legislating and criminalising the spread of false information and build collaborative partnerships in society to educate people about the dangers of fake news.
- Media houses should continue to improve their ability to detect fake news by enhancing and updating their verification processes in the newsrooms before finalising their stories.
- WhatsApp and Facebook and other social media, working with African governments, should improve the detection of posts or links containing false information related to the pandemic, and take them down.
- High school learners need to be taught about fake news and learn critical thinking and media literacy skills to counter false information about the pandemic.
- The national education departments in the four countries need to review their school curricula to ensure inclusion of the development of critical thinking and literacy skills; key media education literacies should be included in initial teacher education and continuing teacher professional development.
- Education departments and schools should inform parents/caregivers about fake news so that they can monitor what online platforms and social media their children are accessing and correct misinformation and harmful posts.

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