

RESEARCHERS BOOTCAMP

THEME 6: AMELIORATING THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS DURING COVID-19

PURPOSE: To investigate South African high school learners' awareness of fake/false news during the COVID-19 lockdown, types of fake news, and the skills needed for distinguishing between false news and real news.

EDUCATION RESEARCHERS RESPOND TO LOCKDOWN



DATE

30 March – 30 April



NUMBER OF RESEARCHERS

10



APPROACH

Desktop research for literature review; online surveys for data collection



SAMPLE

High school learners; parents/caregivers and teachers of high school learners



AUDIENCE

Education department; media editors



PLATFORMS USED

Google and various social media platforms



FINDINGS

For both children and adults, there is a need to build skills for identifying fake news and knowing how to respond to false information.

In a sample of 49 learners, 92% self-reported that they were aware of what fake news is and the impact of spreading fake news.

WhatsApp was both the learners' and the parents'/teachers' most popular social media platform to use.

There was a positive correlation between parent/teacher support in counteracting the dissemination of fake news and learners' level of awareness.

Equipping South Africans in all sectors with the knowledge and skills to distinguish fake news from trustworthy information will aid the global effort to preserve lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full sample of 22 teacher/parent respondents indicated that they were aware of the meaning of the term "fake news". However, 22.7% were unsure if they were equipped to differentiate factual information from fake news. A further 9.1% reported not feeling equipped at all.

There was a direct correlation between the number of devices to which learners have access and their reported levels of both anxiety and risky behaviour.

Learners are only aware of the impact of fake news when it is relevant to them, but are unaware of their own roles in spreading it: 23% indicated that they hastily shared information with peers often without verifying it; 49% of them shared it sometimes.

Media houses should continue to update their ability to detect fake news by improving their verification processes in the newsroom before finalising their stories.

The introduction of information and digital literacy into the schooling curriculum should be aided and supported by the distribution of digital learning aids such as tablets.

The DBE curriculum should be reviewed as it relates to the teaching of critical literacies and skills, and these changes should be aligned to the developmental needs posed by increased digitisation.

Beyond criminalising the spread and distribution of false information, governmental and non-governmental partners should brainstorm practical and educational ways of creating awareness about fake news.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The curriculum needs to be equipped with content that teaches young people in high school about the dangers of spreading false information; and they should be taught critical literacy skills through subjects such as History or Home Language study.

To curb the diffusion of misinformation, the government should aim to provide timely, accurate and trustworthy information about COVID-19 through popular communication channels to work with people's reliance on social media for their information about the virus.

Social media companies should improve the detection of posts or links containing false information related to any pandemic as this drives risky behaviours and conspiracy theories.

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