

YOUTH MEDIA LITERACY

FACT-CHECKING

MANUAL



ABOUT



ARISA is a five-year USAID funded human rights program being undertaken by a consortium of four partners - Freedom House, American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative, Pact and Internews. ARISA works in select Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries to improve the recognition, awareness, and enforcement of human rights in the region, including protecting the region's most vulnerable and marginalised groups.



Internews is leading the implementation of activities in ARISA that will support civil society organizations and the media in the SADC region to promote human rights public education campaigns in the areas of media freedom and digital rights, women's customary land rights, indigenous peoples' rights and the protection of human rights defenders.

Internews, is an international media development organization which empowers local media worldwide, and which has been in operation since 1982. With international headquarters in Washington DC and Africa headquarters in Nairobi, Internews works to ensure access to trusted, quality information that empowers people to have a voice in their future and to live healthy, secure, and rewarding lives.



Africa Check is a non-profit fact checking organization set up in 2012 to promote accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa. The organization's goal is to raise the quality of information available to society across the continent.

CONSORTIUM PARTNERS:



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ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This dis- and misinformation fact-checking toolkit was developed by Africa Check for young African journalism students and members of NGOs and CSOs with a focus on youth-led organisations. It aims to equip members of the youth with the knowledge and practical tips to stop the spread of false information. This toolkit, which was developed as the world was in the midst of its battle against the Covid-19 pandemic, provides an easily understandable overview of fact-checking with a focus on health information. For further information as well as the latest fact-checking reports, visit Africa Check's website at africacheck.org.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE REPORTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE



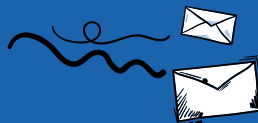
THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE REPORTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In today's fast-paced digital world, unverified information can quickly find its way onto social media platforms and WhatsApp messages, potentially adding to a flood of false information. The impact of half-truths, hoaxes and misleading information can be life-threatening, as seen in the negative effects on the containment of polio¹, HIV and now the coronavirus². Dis- and misinformation can spread quickly – often faster than factual information.

Research has shown³ that it's much harder to chase bad information with a correction than it's to get the right information out the first time. If you're a journalist or fact-checker, you have a responsibility to be extra careful and verify claims. If you don't, you're adding to the so-called "information disorder". Journalists are arguably under more pressure than ever before and are competing against non-traditional "reporters" too. Anyone with access to a mobile phone and the internet can share information, images and videos as if they are reporters, but without necessarily checking the veracity of the content.

However, we all have a responsibility to be cautious when we share information and verify the content as well as the source. This toolkit will help you to understand false information, identify it and decide when and how you can share information.

How and why false information spreads



Many people simply refer to false information as "fake news", a phrase made famous by former US president Donald Trump. The first "fake news" websites were designed to make money by writing stories, and especially headlines, in a sensational way in order to get people to click on them to let them go viral. In this way, the website owners would get thousands of clicks and pocket lots of advertising income. Another example is a group of Macedonian teenagers who wanted to make a quick buck in the lead-up to the 2016 US election and used headlines such as "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President"⁴ as clickbait to lure readers in.

If it's fake, however, it can't be news. This is why we use the phrase "false information", which consists of dis- and misinformation.

- **Misinformation** is false or inaccurate information that is communicated and shared without the intention of causing harm. An example of this are potential cures for diseases. Many of us may have encountered people advising steaming with various herbs and oils being a cure for the disease at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. These messages were circulated by loved ones who meant well but this is still false information.
- **Disinformation** on the other hand is false information that is created and shared with the intention to mislead. An example of this could be the dubious news headlines that often come up around election times, in an effort to discredit a particular party or members of opposition parties. These forms of false information are particularly dangerous as they can affect people's livelihoods and in severe cases, can cause warfare and loss of life.

Watch this video for a summary of how false information spreads⁵.



Fact-checking and why facts matter

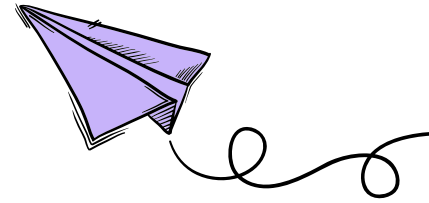
Fact-checking, as practised by independent fact-checkers, such as Africa Check, is the verification of claims made in the public arena, using journalistic skills and evidence drawn from the latest credible and publicly available data and information. It aims to keep public figures accountable and provide reliable information that allows the public to make well-informed decisions. Many of the fact-checking and verification tools, and online data used by fact-checkers can be used by journalists and sub-editors in newsrooms to get the right information out the first time, which is much easier than chasing bad information.

As a journalist, you might feel awkward for a few moments for having to publish a correction or retraction if you share false information. For the public, however, facts matter because it has consequences how they use the information at their disposal. This information is what they base their decisions on, whether it's about what to spend their money on, who to vote for in an election, or how to take care of their health. While this toolkit was being developed, the world was battling to bring the novel coronavirus under control. People were seeking more health information and the World Health Organization stated that the pandemic had been accompanied by an "infodemic: an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not, making it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance"⁶.

This speaks to the nature of false information - it rises around events that have the attention of the public and media as bad actors create disinformation and people are more prone to sharing misinformation in the hope to get a better understanding of the topic.

Example 1:

In mid-2003, polio was on the verge of being eradicated in Nigeria, when religious and political leaders in northern Nigeria advised their followers against having their children vaccinated⁷ and claimed the vaccine would make them infertile. Although tests showed the claims were baseless, the media reported on it without checking. By the time the reports were withdrawn, the damage was done; polio surged in northern Nigeria and spread to other countries.



Example 2:



Many⁸ say that 5G telecoms technology somehow causes or spreads the new coronavirus⁹. But these claims have been widely debunked by fact-checkers¹⁰ and many credible sources¹¹, such as the World Health Organization¹². The International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection¹³, for example, says¹⁴ these claims are not backed by science, "not even extremely weak evidence". The commission is the body behind international guidelines on exposure to radiation. Scientists have said the idea of a connection¹⁵ between Covid-19 and 5G is "complete rubbish" and biologically impossible.

Example 3:



In 2020, a message circulated on social media claimed that "masks were only supposed to be used for a limited time" as prolonged use would reduce oxygen to the blood and brain and could lead to death. Most versions of the message include references to other false claims and conspiracy theories. One¹⁶ warns: "Many people will Die in the coming months ahead because of Mask wearing." Africa Check has debunked the claim¹⁷ that wearing a face mask can lead to death.



Fact vs opinion: what can be fact-checked?

Not every statement can be fact-checked. The first question you should ask yourself before trying to fact-check a claim is whether it's verifiable, or "fact-checkable", or not¹⁸.

WHAT CAN BE FACT-CHECKED?	WHAT CAN'T BE FACT-CHECKED?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A claim that can be verified with evidence and proof 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opinions Promises or predictions about what's going to happen in the future




A fact can be checked and backed up with evidence. Proof and evidence are the cornerstones of facts.

An opinion is based on beliefs or points of view, which often display bias as they fit our worldview and own experience. Thinking something is true because we agree with it, doesn't make it a fact. Two people might be in the same room, one saying it's hot and the other that it's cold. These opinions can't be fact-checked. What can be fact-checked, however, is the exact temperature in the room.

A prediction, which can also not be fact-checked, is a statement predicting or promising that something will happen in the future. A fact-checker can, however, take note of what a politician promises or a medical expert predicts will happen in the future and then at a later stage fact-check whether these promises were kept or the predictions were accurate. Fact-checking organisations, such as Africa Check, often do this by using a promise-tracker tool¹⁹.

Fact-checkable or not?

For a statement to be fact-checkable, you have to be able to verify it by using publicly available data. Look at the examples below:

	<p>Statement: No South African will have a reason to get vaccinated outside the country.</p> <p>Can I fact-check it? No, it's a prediction (and someone's opinion).</p>
	<p>Statement: The government is doing the best it can in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Can I fact-check it? No, it's someone's opinion and different people will have different perceptions of "the best it can do".</p>
	<p>Statement: Covid-19 is caused by a strain of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Can I fact-check it? Yes, it can be verified using publicly available scientific evidence.</p>



The impact of bias

To understand why false information spreads, you have to understand the concept of bias. Bias is an unfair prejudice for or against a person or group.

We like to think that we are rational and logical in our thinking, but the increase of false information suggests that people's thoughts are often distorted and influenced by cognitive bias. What we already believe is shaped by multiple factors – how we were raised, our education, what we were and are exposed to, and so on. Together, all these factors form our belief systems and biases.

Research has shown that we tend to agree with evidence that correlates with what we already believe, even when the facts don't support our ideas. This is especially true when a claim makes us feel emotions like fear or anger, and relates to issues we have deeply held personal beliefs about.

Let's look at a simple example: which animal are you most afraid of?



In Africa Check's experience, most people answer snakes or sharks. But when you look at the facts, mosquitoes transmitting malaria cause far more deaths worldwide than snake bites or shark attacks. Our answers are thus based on our own perceptions or experiences.

How does bias influence the stories we tell and share?

Confirmation bias

We actively seek, or only agree with, sources we already believed in the first place.

Story

We look for stories that are personally interesting to us. On social media, through artificial intelligence our interests are tracked and so too more information that will appeal to us is exposed to us. This is referred to as a "social media bubble".

Source

Bias can influence whether or not we believe a source. An example of this is how the public commonly tends not to question information when it's shared by public figures or politicians, because they are held in high regard and therefore what they say is taken as truth. This makes it that much easier for false information to spread if it comes from said public figures.

Narrative

We tell stories in a way that conforms with our existing beliefs.

Addressing your own bias

It's not easy to get rid of bias, but it certainly helps to be aware of it. Ask yourself:

- Am I objective?
- Am I giving all sides of the story?
- Have I checked all the facts – whether I personally agree with them or not?





THE “SHARING OF INFORMATION TRAFFIC LIGHT”

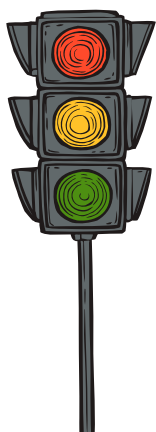


THE “SHARING OF INFORMATION TRAFFIC LIGHT”

The traffic light can help you to decide which information you can share when you have to be careful and which you should not share. It will help you to consume and share information responsibly.

Decide which category best describes the information before sharing it (and remember that any new information or data point about the claim can change the category it will fall into):

	ASSESSMENT BASED ON QUESTIONS BELOW	TRAFFIC LIGHT: DECISION TO OR NOT TO SHARE
Red	1. There are signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information.	Red - Stop! Do not share.
Yellow	1. There are no signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information. 2. However, you can't verify the source or content	Yellow - Slow Down! Do not share the content or alert the recipient that you are unable to verify it.
Green	1. There are no signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information. 2. You can verify the source and content.	Green - Go! You can share the information.



The following questions can help you to decide on the traffic light of the claim or information:

1. **Are there signs that the information is a hoax or obviously false information?**
 - a. Is it a post from an anonymous source? For example, was it written by a well known credible journalist or released on the Facebook page of someone who consulted a local fortune teller?
 - b. Does the message play on my emotions? False information often attempts to make us scared or angry or includes shocking pictures, video or audio.
 - c. Am I sure this is not a hoax? Search online to see if the message has already been fact-checked or reported as a hoax.
 - d. Are there typos in the messaging or other signs questioning its legitimacy? Images can be used from another country or a different year.
 - e. Does my common sense indicate this is a hoax or the information is too good to be true? Products sold as a cure-all or capable of treating a range of ailments are usually hoaxes. Also are they really giving away free televisions to everyone who sends through their credit card details?
2. **Can I verify the source or content of the information?**
 - a. Can I verify the claim? Can I have the claim verified through information released by a third party and is it in line with official guidelines, e.g. clinical testing in medicine?
 - b. Can I find the same claim on any trusted news site or other sources? Many messages can be verified through reliable news sites or fact-checking websites.
 - c. Can I verify the source? News or information can be verified by checking mainstream news organisations. Ask the sender about the author or the source if you can't identify it.
 - d. Do search engines confirm this information or breaking news? Search engines give context about widespread information or breaking news.
 - e. Do official organisations or fact-checkers verify this information? Government websites or international organisations are a useful source to verify information.



FACT-CHECKING NEWS

This section deals with dis- and misinformation that comes in the forms of news, this can be from reputable news sources or questionable ones.

The urge to share major breaking news events quickly is often born out of anxiety and uncertainty. But this hurry means very few people take the time to check if what they are sharing is accurate. Journalists also face this risk as they find themselves under greater pressure to deliver, under tight deadlines. Added to this trend are people deliberately sharing unverified information to grow their online influence, and others who deliberately wish to spread panic.

A recent example of a news story that demonstrates how even journalists are susceptible to sharing unverified information. Published in June 2021 it's about a South African woman who gave birth to 10 babies at once. The story's author relied only on what he was told by the parents of the alleged babies and without verifying critical parts of the information. Once published, it was shared by other international publications²⁰ also without prior verification or concrete evidence²¹. Two weeks after the story was first published, the provincial Department of Health, where Tembisa is located, released a statement advising that investigations revealed that the woman had not given birth. The story was never true.

Here's a quick, simple guide you can use to verify breaking news²²:

1. What is the source? Verify news by checking mainstream news organisations. Tip: Spelling or grammatical errors are often signs that information is untrustworthy.
2. What do search engines say? Do a quick search on Google, Bing or Yahoo for example. Tip: Google shows an SOS Alert for search results and maps during crises with the latest verified information.
3. Which information have official organisations and fact-checkers shared? Government websites or international organisations are a useful source to verify breaking news. Fact-checking websites have often debunked recurring false news.
4. Can you crowdsource the information? Ask people for help via email, phone calls, on social media platforms, website forms or discussion groups like Quora or Reddit. Tip: Sifting through user comments on a possibly false breaking news story can provide valuable insight.
5. Which information can be verified using fact-checking tools? This toolkit includes an overview of helpful tools.



Use the traffic light to decide whether to share the information:

If you can't verify the content in the news, it will be YELLOW or even RED and you shouldn't share it!

Uncertain about the accuracy of information? Keep these red flags in mind:

- Use your common sense. If something sounds too good, shocking or strange to be true, it probably is.
- Always be critical. Ask yourself why someone would create the content you're looking at?
- Another dead giveaway that information might be false is grammatical and spelling errors.
- If you hear rumours that something is happening, for example, a violent protest, and you're not sure it's accurate, do a Google News search (news.google.com). If it's a big story and it has happened, it's likely that a reputable news organisation has started covering it already.
- If you suspect you're looking at false information, have a look at other stories, photos and videos on the website. Do they seem credible? Do a search for other content produced by the same person to see if it seems legit.
- Look at the "About us" page for a disclaimer to make sure you're not looking at a satirical site.



FACT-CHECKING POLITICAL STATEMENTS AND INFORMATION

This section deals with mis- and disinformation that comes from politicians or relates to political discourse. The following questions can help you to identify false information and verify the content of a claim before you share it.

1. Who is making the claim and what is known about them?

- Who made the claim?
- Is there anything that makes you doubt that they know what they are talking about? What are their credentials and are they relevant to the specific statement?
- What is their motive for making the claim and could they benefit from it in any way?

2. Has it been covered by mainstream media?

- Is there any proof that this event occurred and what was said? Media houses will cover talks or appearances by politicians because of the level of interest the public has around politics and public figures.
- Many claims circulating on social media never make it into mainstream media.
- Also look at the context of a specific information, e.g. when and in which situation something was said.

3. Are these claims coming from independent parties and could there be bias?

- As politicians and politics in general are of great interest, there are often many testimonials either in support or in opposition of parties or their candidates, especially if elections are approaching.
- Be careful with one-sided information or information challenging or discrediting politicians or political parties. Always assess all information available and try to get a balanced view.
- Could the information come from inauthentic activity or sources, e.g. during the 2020 Ugandan elections there was a network of inauthentic activity on social media in support of one candidate and eventually Facebook and Twitter decided to take down the information from their platforms.

4. What are the claims being made about this candidate, is the messaging sensational?

- Could this possibly be a smear campaign or fear mongering? Identify the source and ask yourself what intention they might have to share the information.
- Could it be from a satire page hoping to gain traffic and attention to their site by having the latest scoop on politicians? Make sure you check the source and the “about us” page.



Use the traffic light to decide whether to share the information:

If you can't verify the source or the information, you feel it's biased or sensationalist, the claim would be red or yellow and you shouldn't share it! If information about elections or political discourse is yellow, it's advisable not to share it considering the negative impact it can have if you can't verify the source or information.





FACT-CHECKING INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA



FACT-CHECKING INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA



Fact-checking on videos and images

This section will deal with dis- and misinformation on open social media networks, meaning platforms that are not encrypted, such as Twitter or Facebook. Social media has dramatically changed the way we obtain information. It also encourages the sharing of videos and images and often unverified, dodgy and outright fake images and videos can quickly go viral. Fact-checking methodology teaches us to spend time verifying the origin of images and videos, treating them as sources on their own, to ensure we don't become part of a chain of dis- and misinformation.

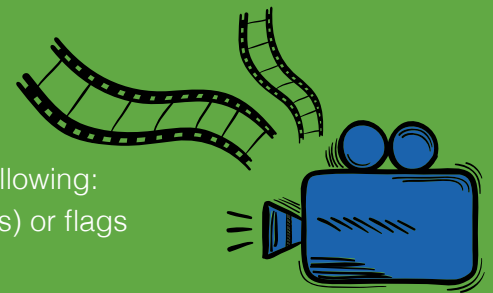
One example is a video published by Breitbart and viewed or shared by millions of people on social media. In the video, members of a group called America's Frontline Doctors speak at a press conference outside the Supreme Court in Washington D.C. calling for the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat Covid-19. Politifact did a fact-check on the video and found it's not a proven treatment for the disease.

It's important to establish the context in which they should be used to ensure we don't become part of a chain of dis- and misinformation. More often than not, problematic images haven't been "photoshopped" and videos haven't been altered, but their captions or the information they contain are false or have been created to mislead. Many images and videos are shared and re-shared online so many times that their original context and information are lost. Remember that verifying images and videos is not necessarily about whether the content was tampered with or altered in some way. It's often about finding out if the image has appeared before and, if so, when and in what context.

One example for a video taken out of context was a three-second video appearing to show Nigeria's minister of education, Adamu Adamu, saying all schools in the country will reopen on 7 September 2020. It was heavily shared on social media and the accompanying hashtag #school reopening was among the top trends on Twitter on Tuesday, 18 August 2020. Africa Check did a fact-check and explained the red flags about the video's legitimacy and showed that the original clip came from a news broadcast by the National Television Authority news on 12 January 2016.

When looking at an image or video, ask yourself:

- Was it taken at the mentioned time and location? Look closely at the following:
 - a. Any form of writing, signage or language (for example on billboards) or flags
 - b. What vehicle licence/ number plates look like
 - c. The side of the road people drive on
 - d. Geographical and architectural landmarks (e.g. skyscrapers, bridges and mountains)
 - e. Weather
- What languages are spoken in a video?
- Any time-specific advertising campaigns? Does the style of clothing give anything away?
- Can you see whether the photo or video material has been altered in any way to exclude information? Does it look enhanced in any way? Look for blurry lines, differences in visual quality and colours that fade out, etc.



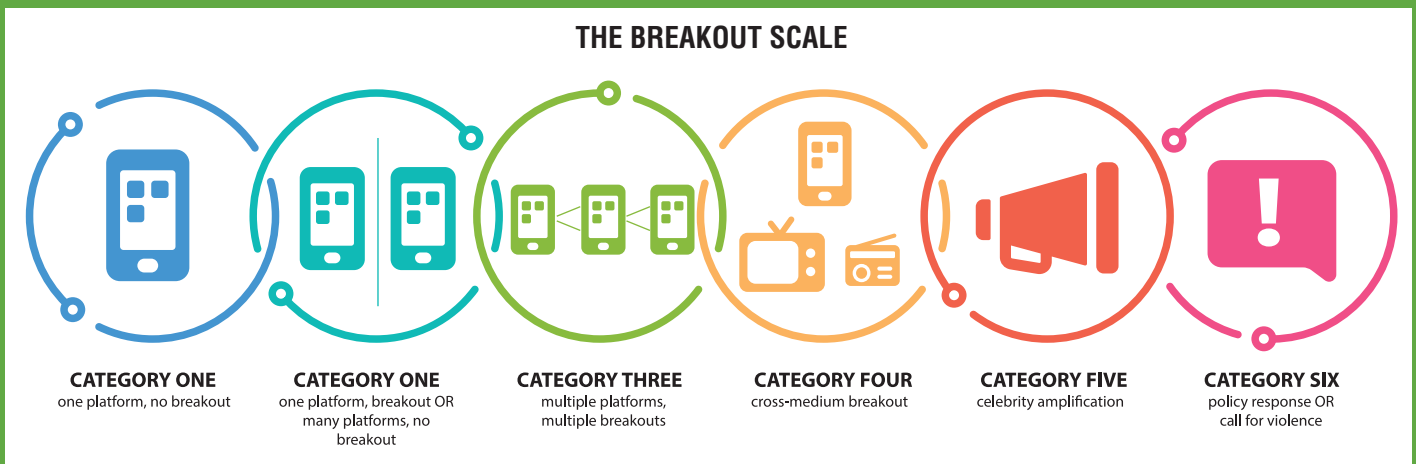
Use the traffic light to decide whether the image or video can be shared.

If you can't verify the images or it's taken out of context, the video or image would be yellow or even red and you shouldn't share it!



Disinformation networks on social media

The main objective of any disinformation campaign is to get the false information to reach audiences outside of its own network. These are known as breakout attempts, and Brookings released a handy scale to measure the extent of these breakouts:



A disinformation network can be classified into three sections:

Originators.

These are the accounts, websites or similar media that generates the original social posts or content that contains the false information.

Amplifiers.

These are the accounts, websites or similar media that amplifies the false content by deliberately sharing it to their followers.

Useful idiots.

These are people that knowingly shares the false information because it aligns with their political or ideological views. The falseness is ignored, either knowingly or otherwise.,

A critical part on achieving these objectives is co-opting journalists and the traditional media to share the disinformation, either knowingly or not. This immediately gives the disinformation credibility it would otherwise not enjoy, increases the reach of the false information significantly and even exposes it to audiences that do not make use of social media.

It is therefore imperative to understand how and why disinformation networks aim to achieve this.

Motivation as a measure of intent

With intent being the main difference between disinformation, understanding the motivation that prompted the deliberate sharing of false information is crucial. While the open-source investigation techniques in this manual makes it possible to determine the behaviour of the accounts within a network, determining their motivation is harder.

The obvious question then arises: how do you determine the intent?

The answer lies in understanding the motivation or goals of the network. If you understand why a network is spreading disinformation, you can begin to ask who will benefit and how. Once you understand the motivation of a network, campaign, website or account, it also becomes easier to guide your investigation into areas that would present the best results.



Broadly, disinformation networks have variations of three main motivations:

Commercial Objectives:

Some disinformation campaigns rely on disinformation for commercial objectives. Websites that use sensational headlines based on false information rely on the traffic generated this way to make money using adverts placed on their websites. These websites can either sell website space directly, or make use of programmatic platforms such as Google Ads to do so. In these cases, the main beneficiary is the individual making money, be it from adverts on a dodgy website, the sale of snake-oil cures for illnesses or the scamming of individuals.

Political/Ideological Objectives:

Politically or ideologically motivated disinformation networks care less about monetising their content than getting their message across. As a result, strong, clear messaging and little evidence of monetisation (such as no adverts on a website) are telltale indicators that a network is politically motivated.

Recreational:

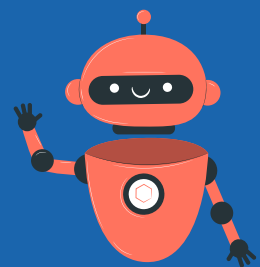
In some cases, the disinformation is motivated by nothing more than the thrill of seeing their content go viral, or the rush of new followers on social media platforms. In cases like these, the objective is simply engagement for engagement's sake, and neither political, ideological or monetary motivations play a role. Most often these are once-off events by individuals instead of coordinated.

Tools of the trade

These objectives are carried out by several types of accounts. Regardless of platform, you can differentiate between bots, sockpuppets and troll accounts.

Bots:

Although this is often used to refer to any suspicious accounts online, a bot is technically defined as an automated account that performs certain scripted actions when certain conditions are met. A bot can automatically tweet at set times, automatically share posts containing specific keywords, automatically respond to DM's or messages and a host of other tasks. An important distinction is that there is no human interaction involved with bot accounts, and as a result a bot is bad at portraying "real" interactions between users. Bots are excellent amplifiers however, and can give a social media post the impression of lots of engagement through retweets or shares.



Sockpuppets:

Sockpuppets, as the mental image implies, is an account pretending to be something or someone they are not. Many users have legitimate reasons for anonymity on social media, but some abuse this and create accounts that impersonate real or fictitious people online. An account operated from India, but pretending to be South African, is an example of this, or a man impersonating a woman when discussing reproductive rights. Sockpuppets are generally used to give the impression of "real" support, as they engage and interact like humans would.



Trolls:

Trolls are real or sockpuppet accounts that use rude and condescending responses on social media to get their "point" across. Often, these accounts employ logical fallacies in an attempt to disrupt, dismay or distract other users. The antagonising nature of these accounts are most often seen during political discussions, or on polarising social issues.



TIPS FOR SHARING (OR NOT SHARING) POSTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

First, think carefully before sharing any content:

- Think twice before you (re)tweet, (re)post, or share.
- Use your common sense. If something sounds too good, shocking or strange to be true, it probably is.
- Always be critical. Ask yourself why someone would have created the content you're looking at?
- When citing social media sources, always keep a record, e.g. screenshots.

Second, verify the source of the content:

- Check the social media handle and verify that the account exists.
- Look at the user's history on social media and see who they have interacted with in the past, the kind of content or material they post and if it seems legit. Find out how long the user has been on social media to rule out that the account was created for a specific purpose.
- See if you can triangulate their social media posts through checking other user-generated content sites. Are they on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and/ or LinkedIn and do the accounts and content match up?
- Look at the "about us" page for a disclaimer to make sure you're not looking at a satirical site.
- Have a close look at the addresses (URLs) of websites or the handles of social media pages. Websites containing false information or fake social media accounts often have a URL or social media handle that looks similar to that of a credible news source to deceive their audiences.

Third, verify the content:

- Find the original post – never rely on links, retweets, screenshots or reposts.
- Cross-check the information against other independent sources.
- Always verify images before reposting.
- Before sharing a video or image you see on social media, read the replies or comments to see if there are questions about its authenticity.
- Check the time, date and location of posts, and see that these match up to the user or content's description.
- When you see a quote attributed to someone, do a comprehensive Google search to make sure it was said by that person.
- Check links within the story. Does the story link back to the actual content or source that it's referring to?

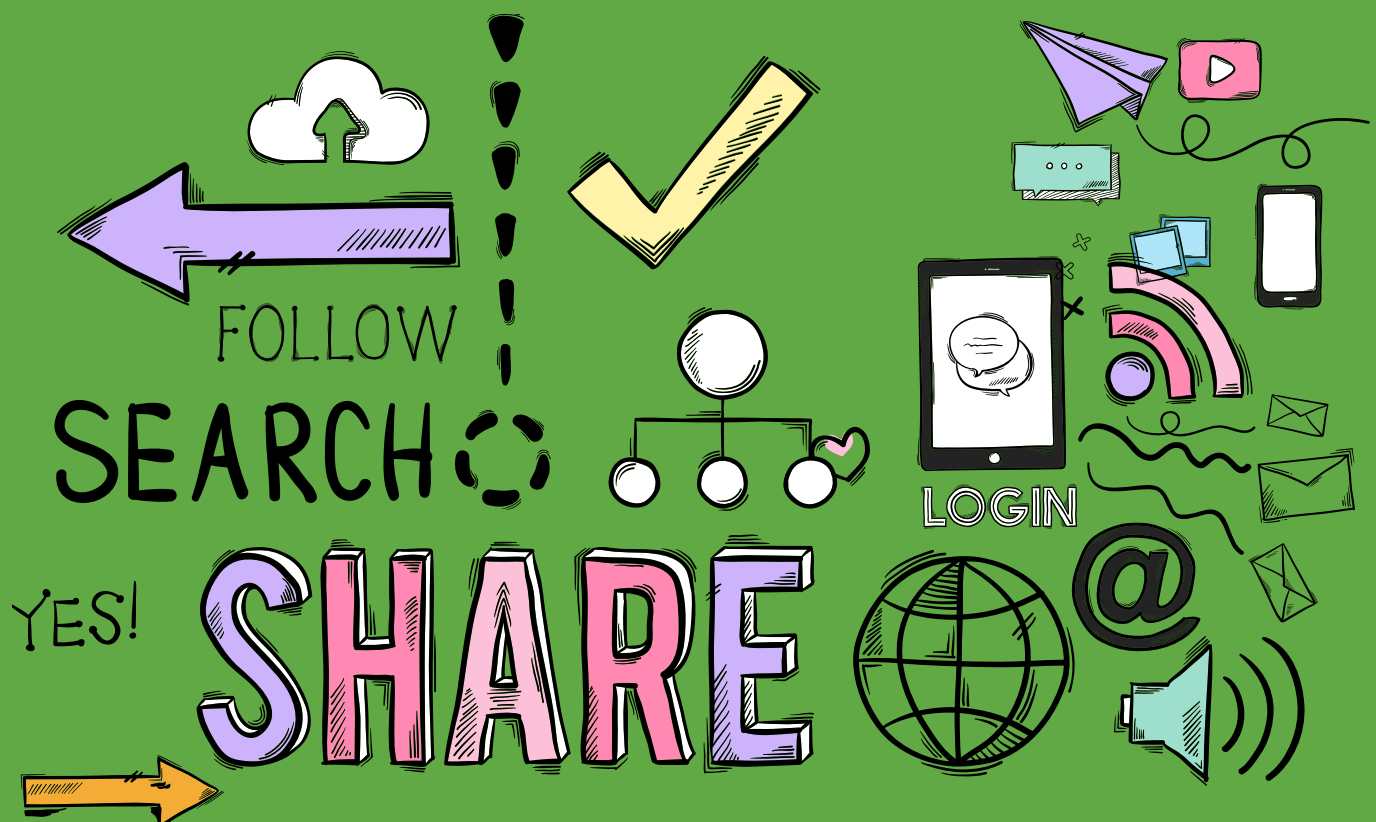


Use the traffic light to decide whether to share information on social media.

If you can't verify the content or the source, the information would be yellow or even red and you shouldn't share it!



FACT-CHECKING INFORMATION ON CLOSED SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS



FACT-CHECKING INFORMATION ON CLOSED SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

This section will deal with dis- and misinformation on closed social media networks, such as WhatsApp.

Have you experienced family or friends sending you “home remedies” to cure diseases on WhatsApp? Maybe even those links to scandalous “news reports” about a local celebrity? Have you also then shared these messages hoping to inform and help others?

We have all at some point done this but unfortunately this can spread false information, no matter how well intentioned. False information relies on us putting our guard down when information is shared by loved ones as we are less critical of it. With platforms like WhatsApp, people are likely to be in groups with their friends and relatives, or to message people they personally know and trust and therefore information shared in such groups is then deemed to be true and trustworthy.

There is a lot of health related false information on WhatsApp. One example was a picture of meat with white bubbles stating that these bubbles are a sign of tuberculosis in animal meat and can be very dangerous when consumed. Africa Check did a fact-check²⁹ that was viewed over 600,000 times on our website highlighting that experts say simple precautions can kill bacteria in meat and organs.

The reality of the matter is, as great as these closed networks are when used correctly, mis- and disinformation is rampant on WhatsApp, especially now during the Covid-19 pandemic.

WhatsApp messages need to be fact-checked for the following reasons:

- WhatsApp is an encrypted platform that cannot be monitored - it's private, which makes it easier to share mis- and disinformation.
- WhatsApp is more accessible because the cost of data is lower: not everyone using the platform has access to trustworthy information.
- The platform allows anyone, nearly all over the world, to subscribe and forward messages.

To fight dis- and misinformation on the platform, WhatsApp has taken the following actions:

- They put together a list of IFCN fact-checkers: <https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/ifcn-fact-checking-organizations-on-whatsapp>
- They added limits to forwarding: <https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/chats/about-forwarding-limits>



Use the traffic light to decide whether to share information on WhatsApp.

Don't share any information that would qualify as red, meaning it shows signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information. Be particularly careful with information that is yellow, meaning you can't verify the source or the content because people in your social networks are likely to trust you easily and rely on the information you are sharing with them on WhatsApp.



“WHAT’S CRAP ON WHATSAPP”



Africa Check has started an initiative called “What’s Crap on WhatsApp” in partnership with the podcasting company, Volume. You can subscribe, quickly forward potentially false information and receive podcasts in the form of a 5-minute voice note updating you about the false information circulating on WhatsApp.

The idea behind this podcast show was to share facts with people on a popular encrypted platform, give them a chance to submit information for fact-checking and engage with them about false information. To date, it has over 5000 subscribers spread across 20 different broadcast groups.

This is how you can sign up:

- Save the following number: +27 82 709 3527.
- Send them a message with your name and you will be added to their broadcast list.
- You can then also send them any claims that you need to have to fact-check.



You can submit a claim for fact-checking on What’s Crap on WhatsApp by first asking yourself these three questions:

1. Is the message presented as a fact or opinion?

Fact-checking organisations only investigate messages put forward as fact. The opinions of people can’t be fact-checked.

Example 1: “Chakalaka is a nutrient rich food” - this can be fact-checked and verified or disputed through scientific research versus “my aunt makes the best umqombothi” although this may be true to you, unfortunately this is just an opinion and can’t be fact-checked.

2. What impact would the message have if it went unchecked?

The greater the impact, the more likely we are to check the claim you suggest. Let us know why you think we need to investigate the claim you send in. Does it put people in danger, for example either from damage to their reputation or from a health perspective?

3. Has this topic or the person making the statements been previously fact-checked?

Whether it’s a politician, union leader, a health association, a social media influencer or an environmental group, if you think the story is false and is misleading people, send it through to be verified. You can send it to the following number via WhatsApp: +27 82 709 3527.



Use the traffic light to decide whether to share information on WhatsApp.

If you come across information that is yellow, meaning you can’t verify the source or the content, you can send it to “What’s Crap on WhatsApp” and find out if it qualifies as red or green and whether you can share it.





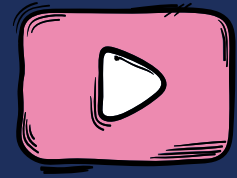
FIVE-STEP FACT-CHECKING PROCESS



FIVE-STEP FACT-CHECKING PROCESS

The following section provides you an overview of the five-step fact-checking process that we use at Africa Check to verify information.

STEP 1. VERIFY THE CLAIM AND IDENTIFY THE ORIGINAL SOURCE



The first step in Africa Check’s fact-checking process is to verify the exact wording of the claim. People are often incorrectly quoted, although this is sometimes just a handy excuse. If the claim was reported in a newspaper or online publication, try to get hold of an audio or video recording.

Tips for finding a recording:

- Contact a colleague or journalist who attended the event and ask whether they recorded it and if they would share it with you.
- Try to find a video of the event on YouTube or an official social media account.
- Radio stations often package their shows as podcasts, or contact the producer for a clip.

If you’re unable to locate a recording, make it clear that the claim “was reported to” have been made. Also ask the person or organisation whether they were quoted correctly and for the evidence on which their claim was based. You have to find the original study or survey conducted.

To reach a public figure or organisation, liaise with their official spokesperson. Try to find this person’s contact details on an official website, or a fellow journalist may have the number. Twitter, LinkedIn or searching for the CV of the person may also yield a phone number or email address.

STEP 2. DEFINE THE TERMS AND CONCEPTS WITHIN THE CLAIM



Never assume you know what someone meant – ask them exactly what they were referring to. Make sure you define and understand each term and concept in a statement.

Think of the term “literacy”. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “the ability to read and write”, but it can be defined and measured in different ways. One way is to use school attendance, say up to Grade 3, as a stand-in. Another is to give people a sentence to read. Some surveyors merely ask people whether they can read without testing them.

Tips for staying on the right track:

- Consult Africa Check’s archive. There’s a good chance we’ve written about the topic before or compiled a factsheet.
- Ask experts. Someone working in the field will be able to tell you how a concept is defined in their area of expertise. Remember different standards or definitions may apply to different countries.

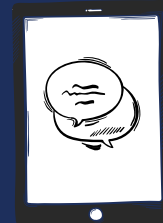




STEP 3. INSPECT THE EVIDENCE USING THE LATEST RELIABLE DATA

If the person or organisation provided you with evidence for their claim, first check that it applies to the country, area or group they are referring to and, if so, if it's based on representative data. Sometimes data from other places, especially the United States or Europe, is transposed to African countries as though the context is the same.

Check whether the evidence has been updated. Claims tend to live on long after their sell-by date due to mindless repetition. Carefully go through the report or study, or at least the sections relevant to your fact-check. Check out every footnote as well as the metadata. You need to understand how the data was gathered to explain it to readers. This is also necessary to ask experts sensible questions.



STEP 4. APPROACH EXPERTS

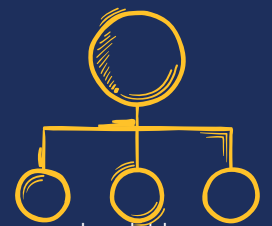
Show the claim to experts in the field and ask them which databases and studies are the best to use to judge it. Ask: Is the claim correct based on the studies you referred me to? If an expert provides a database or study you need to go through it in detail so you can explain to your audience how it was put together. If you don't understand something, always ask.

Tips for finding the best available experts:

- A university's media desk or personnel pages is a useful first stop.
- When speaking to an expert, ask if they can refer you to someone else, especially someone they respect but who may disagree with them.
- A useful Google trick is to search for professor + [specific subject area] + .ac or .edu.

Cast your net wide from the beginning. Deciding which comment to cut is much better than having to pressurise people at the last minute to get back to you.

STEP 5. SET OUT THE EVIDENCE



Explain how you went about fact-checking the claim in as much detail as possible. Someone should be able to follow the evidence you set out and reach the same conclusion. For this reason, fact-checkers hyperlink to the source of each factual statement in a written report or attribute it to an expert. Upload any documents you obtained to the internet so that others may refer to them in future.

Transparency builds trust and so does fairness. Therefore, if you find that the claim is incorrect, first present your finding to the person or organisation who made it and offer them the opportunity to comment before publishing.

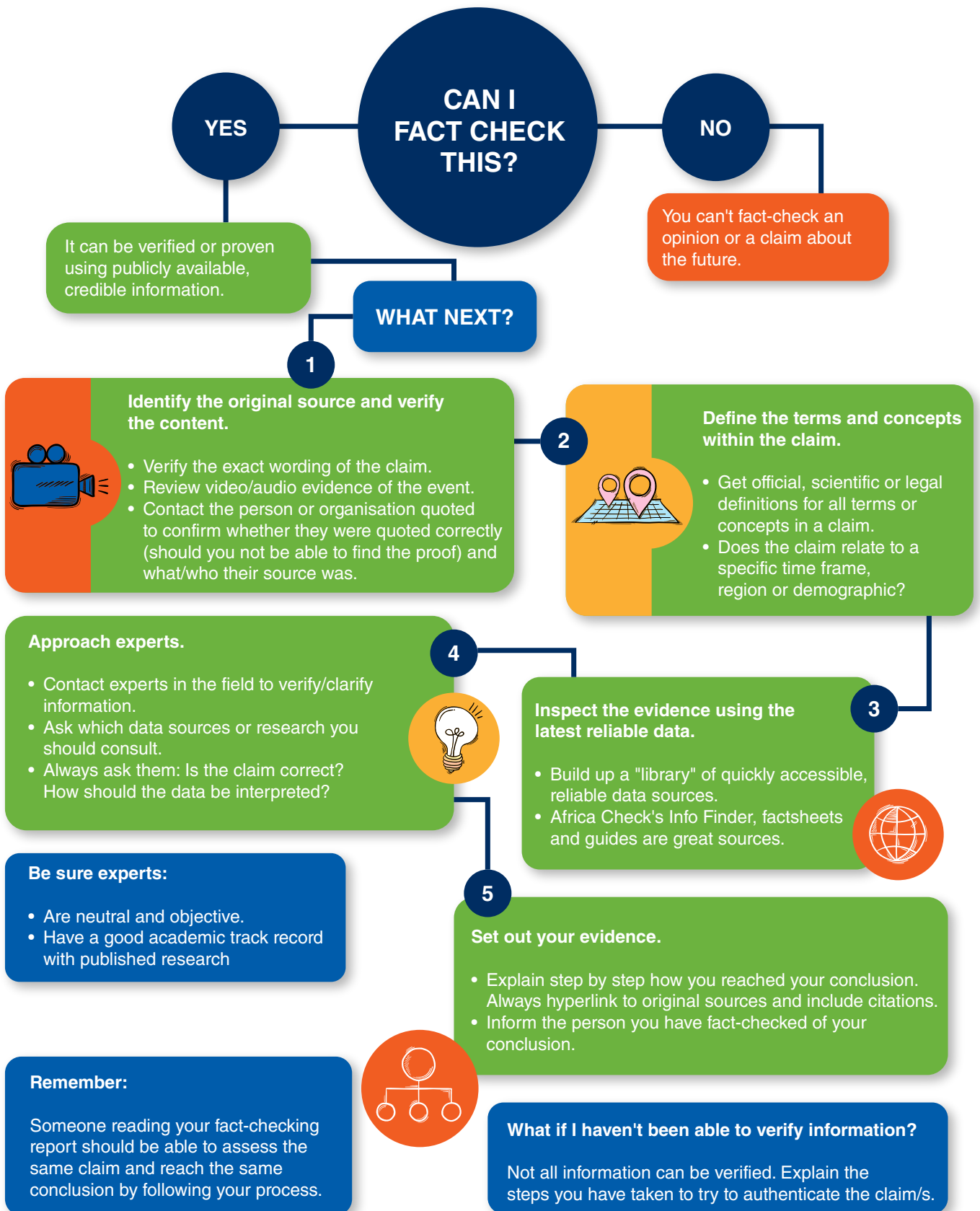


Fact-checkers commonly rank their fact-checks as correct, misleading, incorrect or unproven.

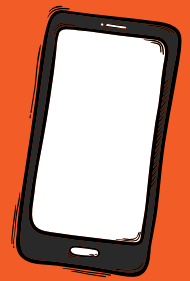
You can use the traffic light to assess the information. Green means you were able to verify the source and content - you can share the information. Yellow means there are no signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information but you were not able to verify it so don't share it or alert the recipient that you are unable to verify it. Red means there are signs that it's a hoax or obviously false information and you shouldn't share it.



THE FIVE-STEP FACT CHECK



VERIFICATION TOOLS FOR IMAGES AND VIDEOS



Google reverse image search:

Similar to an ordinary Google search but for an image. Your results should give you an idea of how long the image has been shared online and will often give you other data like location and context. Save or download the image you want to check, or copy the web address (URL) and go to images.google.com. Click on the camera icon in the search bar to give you the option of pasting the URL or uploading the image to be searched. You can also drag and drop the image into the search bar.

TinEye:

Go to tineye.com and follow the same steps as with a Google reverse image search. TinEye gives you the option of sorting your search results. Should you choose to sort them according to “oldest” or “newest” you will easily get an idea of when, where and in what context an image was uploaded on the internet. When you sort your results according to “most changed” you might discover that the image you’re looking for has been manipulated.

RevEye:

RevEye Reverse Image Search³⁰ is an extension you can add to the Chrome browser on your computer for verifying images you’ve found online. Once you’ve installed it, right-click on a picture and choose the “all search engines” option to do a search on multiple image search engines at once.

Reverse image search:

Use a screenshot or thumbnail from a video and do a reverse image search to find the video online.

Amnesty International’s YouTube DataViewer:

Go to citizenevidence.amnestyusa.org and paste the web address (URL) of a YouTube video into the search bar. Your results should include the first time the video was uploaded, as well as the accompanying story, if any. It will also provide you with thumbnails from the video.

InVID Verification Plugin:

This plugin is an all-in-one tool for video and image verification you can download (invid-project.eu/tools-and-services/invid-verification-plugin) if you use Chrome or Firefox as browser.

Verifying Twitter accounts:

- If there’s a blue tick next to the Twitter name, the account has been verified.
- Use Foller.me to inspect a Twitter account’s history.
- Determine whether an account is likely to be a bot with Botometer (botometer.osome.iu.edu).
- Advanced Twitter Search (twitter.com/search-advanced) lets you search for people, subjects and images on Twitter.

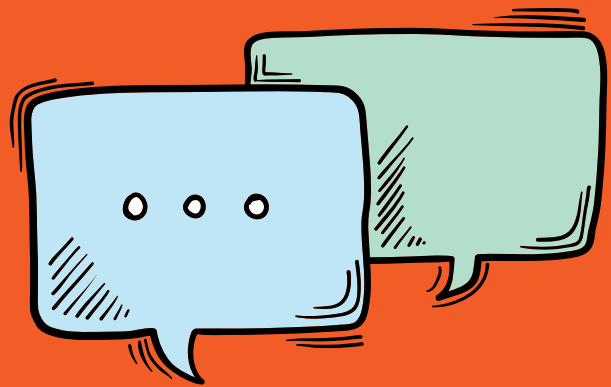


Verifying location:

- Do a Google search for images (images.google.com) to get an idea of what a location, city or town looks like.
- Google Earth (google.com/earth) and Maps (google.com/maps), especially the Street View function, are easy to use and valuable to establish what a certain location looks like.

Determining possible crowd size:

This is an online resource to help you check the number of people at a crowd by estimating the capacity of the location. Next time a politician claims a certain number of people attended a rally, go to mapchecking.com, search for and outline the location (e.g. a square or public park) and establish the maximum crowd density and size.



USEFUL RESOURCES

These sources can serve as a good starting point for trying to find the best data. Always keep in mind, however, that you can't merely take any statement and assume it's the best and latest data about a topic. Get in touch with the source to find out if you are looking at the latest research results, cross-check the information against other sources, or contact an expert in the field who might be able to put the data into perspective.

Sources of information

- Statistical agencies
- International organisations, e.g. United Nations and the World Bank
- Leading universities and research institutions
- Professional bodies
- Reputable peer-reviewed journals
- Fact-checking organisations like Africa Check

International sources of health data

- Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (healthdata.org)
- World Health Organization (who.int)
- World Bank (worldbank.org)
- Unicef (unicef.org)

Sources of Covid-19 data

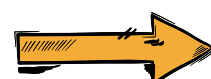
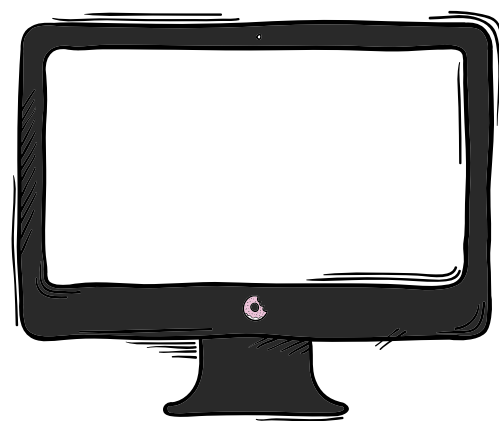
- World Health Organization who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019
- National ministries or departments of health
- Poynter's CoronaVirusFacts database poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/

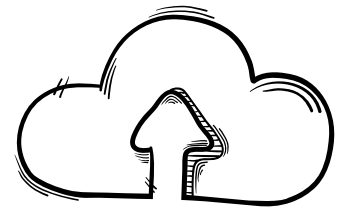
Sources of information - South Africa

- Education Statistics in South Africa (education.gov.za)
- General Household Survey (www.statssa.gov.za)
- Living Conditions Survey (www.statssa.gov.za)
- Mid-year Population Estimates (www.statssa.gov.za)
- Mortality and Causes of Death (www.statssa.gov.za)
- Non-financial Census of Municipalities (www.statssa.gov.za)
- Poverty Trends in South Africa (www.statssa.gov.za)
- South Africa Demographic and Health Survey (www.mrc.ac.za)
- South African Health Review (hst.org.za)
- South African Police Service Crime Statistics (saps.gov.za)
- State Land Audit (<https://africacheck.org/sites/default/files/sources/Land-Audit-Report-Draft-1.pdf>)

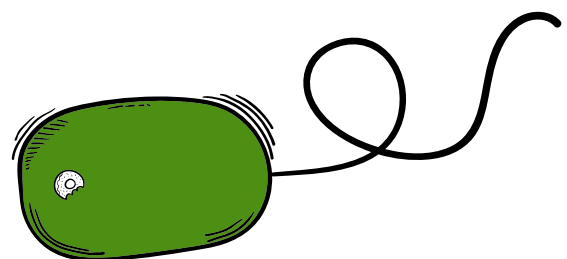
Africa Check's sources

- On Africa Check's website, you'll find factsheets and guides on how to understand, research and report on health and other topics (africacheck.org/how-to-fact-check/factsheets-and-guides).
- Info Finder (africacheck.org/infofinder), a repository of data sources and facts from Africa, now also includes a section that focuses on information about the Covid-19 pandemic (africacheck.org/infofinder/#/facts/covid-19).





1. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/comment-fighting-falsehood-reducing-harm-lessons-africas-complex-countries>
2. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/fighting-covid-19-infodemic-five-strategies-african-fact-checkers>
3. Science: The spread of true and false news online <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146#F2>
4. BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-42724320>
5. Africa Check: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHDEM9KAUiY&feature=youtu.be>
6. WHO: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>
7. Africa Check: <http://africacheck.org/donate/the-difference-fact-checking-makes/>
8. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/infofinder/explore-facts/covid-19-spread-through-5g-mobile-networks-and-radio-waves>
9. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/fbchecks/plenty-evidence-covid-19-exists-no-evidence-pandemic-caused-5g>
10. Fullfact: <https://fullfact.org/health/5G-not-accelerating-coronavirus/>
11. WHO: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/5g-mobile-networks-and-health>
12. WHO: <http://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/>
13. International Commission on Non-ionizing Radiation Protection: <https://www.icnirp.org/>
14. International Commission on Non-ionizing Radiation Protection: <https://www.icnirp.org/en/activities/news/news-article/covid-19.html>
15. BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/52168096>
16. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/496523863886874/permalink/1337350119804240/>
17. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/spot-check/no-face-masks-dont-reduce-oxygen-in-blood-and-wont-kill-you/>
18. Africa Check: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6DPFh0Fvi8>
19. Africa Check Promise Tracker: <http://africacheck.org/promise-trackers>
20. News24: <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/fridaybriefing/friday-briefing-tembisa-10-saga-anatomy-of-fake-news-20210617>
21. Snopes: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/south-africa-10-babies/>
22. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/guides/guide-how-verify-breaking-news-year-crisis>
23. <https://archive.vn/xMPYK>
24. Politifact: <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/jul/28/fact-checking-video-doctors-talking-about-coronavi/>
25. <https://twitter.com/BenedictAthana1/status/1295697666408669184>
26. <https://twitter.com/hashtag/schoolreopening?lang=en>
27. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/spotchecks/did-nigerias-education-minister-announce-schools-will-open-7-september-2020>
28. NTA News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rU0LE0FLlg&t=31s>
29. Africa Check: <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/white-spots-meat-sign-tb-thorough-cooking-can-make-it-safe>
30. <http://chrome.google.com/webstore>



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