

From reducing fake news to validating the facts:

A triangulated evaluation of the awareness and impact
of Africa Check's work in Nigeria

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Ifeoma Theresa Amobi

January 2019

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About the author

Dr Ifeoma Theresa Amobi is a senior lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. She holds a BA in Mass Communication from the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, and an MA in Public Administration and MSc and PhD degrees in Mass Communication from the University of Lagos. She has also participated in the one-year post-doctoral Structured Training for African Researchers (STARS) programme sponsored by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility Programme at Birmingham City University in the UK.

In addition, she holds certificates in Multimedia and Online Journalism from the Knight Centre for Journalism in the Americas, the University of Texas at Austin, the DW-AKADEMIE, Voltau, Berlin, Germany, and the University of Westminster, London. She also holds a certificate in Multimedia Technology and Cinematography from the Academy of Film and Television at Noida, India, as well as a certificate in Foundations of MOOC from the Darden School of Business, Center of Global Initiatives, at the University of Virginia in the USA.

Dr Amobi, an Erasmus+ scholar, teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate Mass Communication courses at the University of Lagos. Her areas of research include multimedia and online journalism, social media, broadcast journalism and film, international and health communication, media and gender, media and migration, media and terrorism, communication theory and methods, and data and accountability journalism.

She is coordinating editor of the Journal of Multimedia Technology and Communication Studies, a publication of the World Bank Centre of Excellence in Multimedia and Cinematography at the University of Lagos; the Communication Review, a journal of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos; and the Journal of Business and Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lagos.

She sits on the board of trustees of the University of Lagos Multimedia Ventures. She is also supervisory lecturer at Unilag TV, Nigeria's first university campus television station, and the lecturer in charge of the Centre of Excellence in Multimedia and Cinematography at the University of Lagos.

Dr Amobi has published books and papers in local and international journals in the areas of new media, international and development communication, media and gender, communications theory, and Nollywood films. Her latest book is "Issues and Techniques in Multimedia and Online Journalism". A book on broadcasting and film is forthcoming.

She has been a consultant for international development agencies, government and media organisations that include the Ford Foundation, Unesco, the United Nations Information

Center (Unic) and the Lagos State government. She has also presented research papers at several local and international conferences, and facilitated training and workshops. Dr Amobi was a member of the Unesco Journalism Curriculum Review communiqué drafting committee in 2012 and a member of 2013 Nigerian Press Council/Unesco/NUC Journalism and Mass Communication Curriculum Review Committee. She has also served on film and social media panels including the African Movie Academy Award (AMAA) College of Screeners from 2014 to 2018, the 2014 AMAA Media Recognition Awards and the 2015 UN Global Day of Parents organised by Unic, among many others.

She has received training, teaching, conference and workshop funding from the Ford Foundation, DW Akademie, Unesco, the World Bank, Erasmus+ and Unicef. She has also received research grants from Tertiary Education Trust Fund, the Lagos State Government Research and Development Council and the World Bank, with the research output published in institutional publications and reputable journals.

Dr Amobi hails from Oba in the Idemili local government area of Anambra State, Nigeria. She is married to Eric Amobi and their marriage is blessed with two children, Lilian Amobi Udodi and Denzel Amobi.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the invaluable contributions of the following researchers in this study: Dr Oloruntola Sunday, Vincent Obia, Oluwakemi Akiniluola, Lilian Udodi and Simon Godwin, all of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

Introduction

Africa Check commissioned this triangulated evaluation to determine the impact of its work, under a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to fact-check health and development claims in Nigeria.

Using a survey and intensive interviews, the study assessed awareness of Africa Check and perceptions of its importance, usefulness and fairness, as well as any potential gaps in its approach to fact-checking. The consultant also participated in Africa Check's Health and Misinformation Workshop held in Abuja, Nigeria, in September 2018. This provided a Nigerian context for the analysis of Africa Check's work.

This report gives an overview of Africa Check before discussing the underpinning theory of change and falsehood. It then provides the survey questions guiding the study, the results of the survey, a list of interview subjects, and a summary of key findings from the interviews. It concludes with a narrative on the findings of the survey and intensive interviews, and then gives recommendations. The survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide used to gather data are included in the appendix.

The narrative makes extensive use of verbatim quotes from interview subjects to illustrate their perspectives and include observations that may not be evident in the survey results.

Africa Check: a brief background

Africa Check is the continent's leading fact-checking organisation (Unesco, 2018), working to promote accuracy in the dissemination of information in Africa. It seeks to encourage and entrench a culture of fact-checking – particularly the verification of health and development claims – among people living in Africa's 55 countries.

The organisation was established on 26 June 2012 to promote accuracy and honesty in Africa's public debate and media, and to create enabling platforms for civil society and the wider public to check the accuracy of claims themselves. These aims come from a belief that factual and deceit-free information will strengthen democracy and improve the quality of people's lives.

Africa Check verifies claims on the key areas of health and development, as well as on politics, economy, statistics, crime and more. Misinformation and fake news continue to be a major problem in today's world – including Africa. In Nigeria, there are many instances of false claims causing avoidable harm to citizens. From 2002 to 2009, for example, rumours about the polio vaccine caused a surge in polio cases in northern Nigeria.

There are many dangers in incorrect information (misinformation), intentionally faked information (disinformation) and other forms of false communication. They can, for one, distort public opinion. In public debate, false and unclear claims can cause people to misunderstand their government's policies. In extreme cases this misunderstanding can spark public violence and civil unrest.

False information also undermines the economies and democratic processes of African countries. Africa Check's "promise trackers" keep track of how well elected governments keep the promises they made during election campaigns. This helps to hold governments accountable to their people.

Africa Check has a number of broad aims. The first is simply to reduce the circulation of fake and misleading claims by government officials, politicians, media houses, online influencers, ordinary people and everyone else involved in communication in Africa. Second, it aims to spread and help others to share accurate information on important issues, allowing people to be correctly informed and so able to make better decisions.

A third aim is to give both policy makers and the public a more accurate understanding of important issues, thereby bridging the gap between them. When policy makers understand the needs of the people, and the people understand the aims of policy makers, there is likely to be less misunderstanding – and less friction.

But Africa Check can only reduce false information with the help of ordinary people. This is why the organisation works to improve the fact-checking skills of the public – particularly the

youth. Online is the media of choice for young people, and fact-checking skills are indispensable to media literacy in the 21st century. Part of Africa Check's work is to encourage a community of non-partisan fact-checkers across the continent.

In Nigeria, Africa Check's media partners include the Punch, Daily Trust, Business Day and FRCN (Radio 103.5 Lagos). Africa Check holds regular training sessions to improve the fact-checking skills of its Nigerian stakeholders. And reports show that both individuals and organisations in Nigeria – such as the Nigeria Police Force – are beginning to use Facebook and its partners, which include Africa Check, to fact-check potentially false claims (Adegoke, 2018).

The theory of change and falsehood

Africa Check's goals are situated in the theory of change, which Jamil (2014) defines as the exploration of how change happens and its significance in a particular context. Its cycle includes carrying out activities or input, to immediate output, then outcomes and finally goals. It gives an explanation of how and why things work. More specifically, it deals with an understanding of how a series of activities combine to achieve identified goals, ranging from short- to long-term (Stein & Valters, 2012). In other words, it explains how the connection between an initial activity and an eventual outcome is formed and the usefulness of creating individual, group-based, institutional, and social or macro change. The theory of change emerged in the 1990s in the US from the evaluation of informed social practice streams. Its assumptions are generally based on doing an "if" in order to get a "then" (CARE, 2012).

In 2017 the UN Development Group laid the groundwork for a theory of change that included a focus on the goal at hand, identifying what is needed for the desired change to take place, establishing both assumptions and risks, and identifying key partners and actors.

The theory of change developed by Africa Check covers a series of activities: fact-checking claims, relating with the media, making fact-checking tools available, and training. These lead to short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, with the ultimate impact of strengthening democracy and ensuring that life outcomes are improved by better decision-making.

Africa Check's vision, anchored in the theory of change, is – broadly – the existence of a society where falsehood is discouraged and can be easily detected by enlightened media and citizens.

Africa Check strives to reduce misinformation by prompting people and organisations to retract false information after a claim has been checked.

Its work also helps to:

- Persuade public figures and organisations to stop making false claims they might otherwise have repeated several times,
- Persuade public figures and organisations to first get their facts right, before their statements enter the public domain,
- Persuade the mainstream media to verify information before it is published, and
- Persuade the owners of social media sites to be more sceptical, to swiftly check suspicious claims, and to secure the correction of any misinformation published on their platforms.

Media and academics often disagree on whether a statement can be determined to be false and if a statement found to be false should be retracted. However, the general view is that any retraction begins with the concession that a false statement was made (Marques, 2017).

False claims

False claims can be identified in several ways. One sign of falsehood is overstatements such as “every, all, none, least, always”. Another is concessive repair, in which a speaker makes an extreme statement and then balances it with a less extreme version, allowing them to deny the extreme statement. The extreme view is nonetheless upheld by the speaker and registers in the mind of listeners, promoting a measure of falsehood (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson, 2005).

A contemporary example of falsehood is fake news, which remains difficult to define. Fake news devalues the voice of experts and borders on propaganda intended to deceive people. This understanding of fake news makes it a form of disinformation, distinct from misinformation, which is the innocent dissemination of falsehood (Woods, 2017; Unesco, 2018). Misinformation spreads when a fake post’s many likes and retweets make it appear credible. While the information is misleading, this perceived credibility ensures its continued distribution.

People also tend to only follow those who share their beliefs. This reduces the effectiveness of fact-checking. People who expose themselves to falsehoods generally do not expose themselves to fact-checking (Information Society, 2017).

False claims in Nigeria

Information should be true, reliable and sacrosanct. Any information communicated by a public individual or organisation helps shape a society and the world at large. False information can result in unwarranted confusion, manipulation and deception, even causing unrest in that society, and the world. Kuman and Shah (2018) argue that false information has a far-reaching impact on those who consume it, in both the short and long term.

False information has always existed. But new media has allowed it to evolve, to spread more widely and more quickly. False claims may now be perceived and defined differently, but they still do harm.

The following are some examples of false claims that have entered the public space in Nigeria.

Conspiracy theories cause rise in polio cases

Africa Check (2017) argues that from 2002 to 2006, false claims about the polio vaccine contributed to the increase in polio cases in Nigeria. Political and religious leaders in the northern Kano, Zamfara and Kaduna states claimed, without evidence, that the vaccine was laced with HIV, antifertility agents and carcinogens, so as to reduce the population of a

mainly Muslim region. The claims ended vaccination campaigns, allowing the crippling disease to claim more victims.

Rumours cause panic in schools

In 2017, the Nigerian Army had just begun a free medical service of administering polio vaccination as part of its military operations in south-eastern Nigeria. Then rumours began to circulate that the army was going to schools to inject pupils with the monkey pox virus. The rumours caused massive panic that led to the closure of some schools. Students hurriedly left their schools, and worried parents came to pick up their wards.

Ebola ‘cure’ kills two

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, a fake text message claiming people could avoid catching the disease by bathing in and drinking large quantities of salt water went viral. The consequence, reported by Vanguard News, was that two people died and 20 were hospitalised for excessive consumption of salt water (Okafor, 2018).

Fake Facebook post stokes regional crisis

In central Nigeria’s Plateau State, false information on Facebook is said to have caused an inter-ethnic crisis (Adegoke, 2018). A graphic image of a mutilated baby, killed in Congo-Brazzaville in 2012, was shared with the claim that the act was perpetrated by the Fulanis against the Beroms in Jos, in 2018. The media reported that Berom youths took to the streets and systematically sought out Fulani men for reprisal attacks, with the authorities believing the Facebook post contributed to the attacks. The same image has been used to stoke deadly crises in other regions of Africa (Adegoke, 2018).

Photos inflame tensions between herders and farmers

Another fake claim using repurposed photos fuelled a conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria. The BBC article “Fake news and Nigeria’s herder crisis” (2018) reveals that after one clash between herders and farmers left over 200 people dead, a gruesome photo of a woman lying in a pool of blood circulated on Twitter with the claim that she was a victim of the violence. The photo garnered hundreds of retweets, accompanied by inflammatory comments. But a fact-check showed that the image first appeared in a 2011 story on domestic violence in Nigeria. The BBC article identifies another photo of half a dozen people supposedly killed in the herder-farmer clash. Fact-checking revealed that the image was of a traffic accident in the Dominican Republic.

Claims of under-age voting in elections

Nigeria's political scene is also not free of fake claims. After the 2015 presidential elections, false reports emerged that the Independent National Electoral Commission had determined that under-age youth in northern Nigeria had voted in the elections. The claim caused a serious uproar among the public and opposition parties. However, the Vanguard newspaper reported that the electoral commission, which oversaw the elections, produced factual evidence that debunked the claims.

False claims spread in an instant

Instant messaging platforms are among the greatest purveyors of misinformation and disinformation. False messages on religion, health, politics, security, food, and job and scholarship offers spread like wildfire on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. They are quickly shared among thousands of people and, before there is time to check them, they have already done harm. For example, a photo of a woman currently circulating on WhatsApp falsely accuses her of being a trafficker of children in Lagos. The post aggravated people and, in no time, became the trending topic.

- Other WhatsApp messages claim that a certain fruit, drug or treatment can cure specific diseases. One said okra had many health benefits that included curing urinary problems, another claimed that pears could kill cancer cells, and a third claimed a “miracle drink” could prevent cancer and heart attacks.
- Another message on WhatsApp prescribed cocktails that could treat ulcers, asthma, arthritis, cholera, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, menstrual problems, obesity, insomnia and other ailments.

False claims are on the rise in Nigeria, partly because of citizen journalism, where there is stiff competition to be the first to publish information. The advent of social media and users' ability to generate their own content has further increased the presence and reach of misinformation. False claims can spread in less than a minute, taking on the garb of truth and making the need for swift verification more pressing.

Research questions

The overarching research question is: What is the level of awareness of the work Africa Check is doing, specifically in the area of fact-checking health misinformation in Nigeria, and what has been its impact on public debate?

The following sub-questions guided the study.

RQ1. What is the overall awareness of the work of Africa Check in Nigeria among the media, policymakers and civil society organisations? Which cluster of society has the highest awareness and where did they learn about Africa Check and the work it is doing?

RQ2. How do the stakeholders define the role and importance of Africa Check's work in Nigeria?

RQ3. What has been the positive and negative impact of Africa Check's work on the scale of public debate on health, political, social and environmental issues in Nigeria?

RQ4. What can Africa Check do to increase its impact on public debate in Nigeria? Are there any gaps that must be addressed?

Methods and participants

The triangulation approach, comprising the in-depth interview and survey, was used for the study. This approach was chosen because of the inability of only one method to generate data that could adequately answer the research questions guiding this study. While the survey method is appropriate for eliciting quantitative data from a large sample in a systematic way, it is unable to intensively explore perspectives on particular ideas or situations. This gap is filled by the in-depth interview method, in which qualitative data may be extracted from a small number of experts.

For the survey, people were selected from different clusters of society such as government agencies, civil society organisations, media and academia. Thus the sampling frame comprised a list of universities in Nigeria, a list of civil society organisations in Nigeria, a list of media organisations in the country, and a list of federal ministries and parastatals. The list of universities was further stratified and one federal, one state and one private university selected from each stratum. Academic staff from the departments of Mass Communication at the Universities of Lagos, Novena University, Oguma, Delta State and Kwara State University in Ilorin were selected as some of the survey respondents. Health reporters and news editors were selected from a list of news media organisations in Nigeria and added to the sample. Staff of the Federal Bureau of Statistics and Ministry of Health were also selected and added to the sample. Participants at the Africa Check Health Misinformation Workshop, held in Abuja in September 2018, were also added to the sample list. The survey sample size was eventually 618 respondents.

Copies of the questionnaire were administered both physically during selected events – such as the ACCE Conference at the Pan Atlantic University in Lagos – and online, as well as on selected WhatsApp groups. The events and WhatsApp groups were selected by identifying places where the required category of respondents would gather. The online survey was hosted on Google Forms. Respondents were invited to click on a link which took them to the 25-item questionnaire. Eleven questions were closed-ended while 14 were open-ended. The questionnaire remained online for six weeks and daily reminders were sent to elicit a high response rate.

Many of the returned questionnaires were made unusable by respondents who were not aware of Africa Check and could not complete the survey beyond answering demographic questions. In all, 141 people responded to the physical and online approaches, giving a 23% response rate. Of this number, only 58 of the questionnaires were usable.

For the in-depth interview, 23 people were purposely selected from the survey respondents and participants at the Africa Check Health Misinformation Workshop. The state minister for health and the United Democratic Party presidential candidate were also interviewed. The survey respondents and workshop participants, who comprised the sampling frame for the in-depth interviews, included journalists, academics, health workers, politicians, executives of NGOs, financial experts, and Africa Check staff. The data collected from the interviews was analysed qualitatively, while the survey data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Survey findings

Results to the four research questions that guided this study are presented in the tables below.

RQ1. What is the overall awareness of the work of Africa Check in Nigeria among the media, policymakers and civil society organisations? Which cluster of society has the highest awareness and where did they learn about Africa Check and the work it is doing?

Table 1: Respondents' overall awareness of Africa Check

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
YES	58	41.2%
NO	83	58.8%
Total	141	100%

Table 2: Respondents' awareness by job category

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Media	34	58.6%
Government/policy maker	6	10.4%
Academics	10	17.2%
Civil society organisation	8	13.8%
Total	58	100%

Table 3: Source of respondents' awareness of Africa Check

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Twitter	4	6.9%
Facebook	1	1.7%
Instagram	1	1.7%
WhatsApp	3	5.1%
Online news websites	7	12.1%
Newspaper	1	1.7%
Radio	0	0%
Television	2	3.4%
Interpersonal sources (family, friends, colleagues, trainings, workshops, hospitals, places of worship, schools etc.)	34	58.6%
Google	5	8.6%
Total	58	100%

Data in table 1 indicates that 41.2% were aware of Africa Check in Nigeria and the work it is doing. Table 2 shows that awareness was higher among media practitioners (58.6%), with academics a distant second (17.2%). On respondents' source of awareness of Africa Check, data in table 3 indicates that most (58.6%) respondents were exposed to Africa Check by interpersonal sources such as family, friends, colleagues, trainings, workshops, hospitals, places of worship and schools. Online news websites followed at a distant second (12.1%), while social media platforms and traditional media outlets trailed the pack.

RQ2. How do the stakeholders define the role and importance of Africa Check's work in Nigeria?

Research question 2 was answered with data from answers to the open-ended questions. Data in table 4 shows that most respondents were of the view that Africa Check was of great importance to public discourse in Nigeria and were able to define its role in impacting discourse in various sectors of society. Regarding the health sector in Nigeria, respondents said Africa Check had helped by fact-checking false claims and releasing valuable and evidence-based information on health issues. While acknowledging Africa Check's significant role in advancing fact-based discourse on environmental and social issues, respondents observed that Africa Check needed to urgently extend its focus to political issues in Nigeria, especially in the face of the upcoming 2019 elections.

Table 4: Defining the role and importance of Africa Check in Nigeria

Importance and role of Africa Check in Nigeria	Responses
Health issues	Most respondents agreed that Africa Check is playing an important role in the health sector, with the following outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making data agencies more careful about their methodologies and the statistics they release. • Providing more factual data to aid government in developing better health policies.
Political issues	Most respondents observed that Africa Check's fact-checking had limited focus on political issues and claims by politicians in Nigeria.
Social and public policy issues	Most respondents observed that Africa Check's work helped throw more light on the pervasiveness of misinformation and its danger to society, as it continues to expose fraud and untruths in the areas of health, planning, budgeting and social issues in Nigeria.
Environmental issues	Most respondents pointed to Africa Check's focused attention on environmental issues in Nigeria, exposing and fact-checking false claims about the environment and human activity, and even environmental regulatory bodies.
Other issues	Other areas identified by respondents included issues in the oil sector, the economy, and governance, where Africa Check is playing a leading role in holding public office holders accountable for their claims.

RQ3. What has been the positive and negative impact of Africa Check’s work on the scale of public debate on health, political, social, and environmental issues in Nigeria?

Table 5: Perceived impact of Africa Check on public debate

Impact	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	48	88.9%
Negative	0	0%
Both	6	11.1%
Total	54	100%

Research question 3 produced the quantitative data on table 5 and answers to an open-ended question. Data on table 5 shows that most (88.9%) of the 54 respondents who answered the question on impact believed Africa Check had made a positive impact on public discourse in Nigeria. Data gleaned from the response to the open-ended question suggests that Africa Check’s work has positively impacted stakeholders’ personal and professional lives, as the journalists and academics among them claimed to have become more restrained in publishing stories or research reports without thorough verification. They further noted that the work of Africa Check was focused on making the truth known, thus bringing about developmental change in the country. As one of the respondents said, “When people think right, they can address issues rightly, vote rightly and support right claims.”

RQ4. What can Africa Check do to increase its impact on public debate in Nigeria? Are there any gaps that must be addressed?

Table 6: Gaps to be addressed

Gaps	Responses
Citizen awareness	Most respondents said that for Africa Check’s impact on public debate in Nigeria to be increased, citizens should be made aware of the existence of fake news and misinformation, and the brilliant work Africa Check is doing, through organised promotional activities on social media and in town hall meetings.
Government involvement	The minister of state for health and statistician-general participated in Africa Check’s Health Misinformation Workshop in Abuja. Related to this, respondents noted that if the government embraces Africa Check’s vision, it will create supportive policies that will enhance the organisation’s work, by making data readily available and monitoring the accuracy of information released into the public domain.
Training and retraining	Although Africa Check has trained 350 journalists and journalism students since it started ground operations in Nigeria in 2016, respondents suggested that it should continue to train and

	retrain the staff of partner organisations to enable them deal with the increasing challenge of misinformation.
Inclusion of accountability journalism in curriculum of tertiary institutions	The respondents recommended the inclusion of accountability journalism and fact-checking in the curriculum of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, with Africa Check supporting by teaching students and advocating for inclusion. It is worth noting that Africa Check is indeed hoping to develop exactly this programme.
Increased partnership with social and traditional media organisations	The respondents submitted that Africa Check would have greater impact if it were to partner more with traditional and social media, preventing damage by ensuring the increasing volume of misinformation in the public domain was swiftly checked.
Expanding its publishing platforms	The respondents suggested that Africa Check should increase its publishing platforms to include more print and broadcast outlets.

Findings of in-depth interviews

In-depth interview participants

Name	Organisation	Position
Ms Chika Onyesi	Silverbird Television	Health journalist, Abuja
Dr Emmanuel Effa	University of Calabar, Nigeria & Cochrane Collaboration Nigeria	Senior lecturer in Medicine
Prof Ralph Akinfeleye	Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos	Professor of Communication
Dr Osagie Ehanire	Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja	Minister of State
Prof Bayo Olojede	Redeemers' University	Professor of Communication
Mr Jeremiah Agenyi	Nigeria Centre for Disease Control	Corporate risk communicator
Mr Emeka Akpa	Nigerian Medical Association	
Ms Niniola Soleye	Stella Ameyo Adadevoh Health Trust	Managing director
Mr Lekan Otufodunrin	The Nation newspaper	Online editor
Prof Ezekiel Asemah	Department of Mass Communication, Novena University, Ogume, Delta State	Professor of Communication
Ms Adaobi Ezeokoli	Nigeria Health Watch	Editor
Dr Isiaka Olanrewaju	National Bureau of Statistics	Director, Health Data and Multi-Indicator Surveys
Prof Innocent Okoye	Kwara State University, Ilorin	Professor of Communication
Mr Chibueze Ebii	Heinrich Boll Foundation	
Husseini Shaibu	Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos	Fellow
Mr Judd-Leonard Okafor	Daily Trust	Health editor
Mr Godson Okoye	United Democratic Party	Presidential candidate, Abuja, Nigeria
Mr Phil Hazelwood	Agence France-Presse	AFP bureau chief, Lagos
Mr Ajibola Hamzat	International Centre for Investigative Reporting	Senior Editor

Name	Organisation	Position
Mr Kolo Kenneth	Code for Africa	Head, Communication Projects
Ms Adenike Adebawale	Premium Times	Health Desk Reporter
Prof Olayinka Akanke Abosedo	Department of Public Health, College of Medicine, University of Lagos	Professor of Medicine
Africa Check staff		
David Ajikobi	Africa Check (Nigeria)	Editor
Allwell Okpi	Africa Check (Nigeria)	Researcher and community manager

Summary of key findings

RQ1. What is the overall awareness of the work of Africa Check in Nigeria among the media, policymakers and civil society organisations? Which cluster of society has the highest awareness and where did they learn about Africa Check and the work it is doing?

- All interviewees were familiar with the work of Africa Check. This is in contrast to the survey, in which less than half of the respondents (41.2%) were aware of the organisation. In the interviews, media professionals and academics had the highest level of awareness, NGOs had a fair level of awareness and policy makers had poor awareness. The overwhelming majority of people (in both the interviews and survey) viewed Africa Check simply as a fact-checking organisation, while some could identify other functions related to training and workshops.
- Exposure to Africa Check came from two sources: interpersonal sources and the internet. Analysis showed that interpersonal sources formed the higher point of exposure. For the internet, Twitter and Google were dominant. Unlike the survey, in which three respondents mentioned the traditional media as their source, none of the interviewees identified a traditional media source as a point of exposure.

RQ2. How do the stakeholders define the role and importance of Africa Check's work in Nigeria?

- The importance of Africa Check was largely recognised both in the intensive interviews and the survey. Interviewees said Africa Check was playing a pioneering role and had provided a structure for fact-checking in Nigeria. Its importance was largely felt to be in the health sector. Africa Check's work in fact-checking claims on social media was also pointed out.

- Interviewees were quick to describe Africa Check as a “watchdog” needed to “curb fake news” and “ascertain the level of truth in information”. Africa Check’s staff were however content with the term “fact-checkers”. They noted that they publish four different kinds of fact-checking reports, producing an average of five Nigeria-related reports a month. They emphasised their non-partisan stance and openness to criticism.
- Africa Check’s staff said claims were chosen for fact-checking according to their significance. They explained Africa Check’s established fact-checking methodology as first reaching out to those who made the claim, verifying the claim using publicly available data, and consulting experts. Most respondents had nothing against Africa Check’s fact-checking methods. In fact, over 80% of the survey respondents approved of it.
- The reactions of those who had been fact-checked by Africa Check were simply to take the fact-checking in good faith. Africa Check’s staff did however note that in their experience, people’s reactions to being fact-checked were mixed: some were happy and sometimes grateful, while others were resentful.
- Africa Check’s work with the media was described as symbiotic. This is because the media help disseminate Africa Check’s reports, while Africa Check trains journalists. Africa Check currently works with three newspapers and a radio station, but does not yet collaborate with any television station. It recently entered a partnership with social media platform Facebook.

RQ3. What has been the positive and negative impact of Africa Check’s work on the scale of public debate on health, political, social, and environmental issues in Nigeria?

- Interviewees and survey respondents emphatically concluded that Africa Check’s impact was more positive than negative. This impact was largely felt in the health sector. It has caused people who have been exposed to fact-checking to be more careful with the information they release.

RQ4. What can Africa Check do to increase its impact on public debate in Nigeria? Are there any gaps that must be addressed?

- For potential new areas of work, interviewees suggested that Africa Check focus more on politics, training, and partnerships with civil society, the media and tertiary institutions. The concern with politics was in the context of Nigeria’s 2019 general elections, as politicians have been known to spread misinformation. Other suggestions were for Africa Check to consider fact-checking information on the cultural life of the people, and Nigeria’s international relations.
- Results of the interviews, as in the survey, pointed to a gap in general public awareness of Africa Check, especially among clusters of society other than the media

and academia. Most respondents said that this gap should be filled to increase the impact of Africa Check's work. The interviewees suggested promotional activities such as media partnerships and active social media engagement as ways to fill the awareness gap.

- Africa Check has trained about 350 journalists and journalism students in Nigeria since it started ground operations in 2016. This training includes that done exclusively by Africa Check, training in partnership with other organisations, and organisations it has invited to train journalists. These organisations include:
 - Nigeria Institute of Journalism
 - US Embassy Lagos
 - Abuja Code For Nigeria
 - Elizade University, Ilara Mokin
 - Social Media Week
 - IREX/ Channels Television
 - Premium Times
 - Centre for Investigative Journalism
 - The Cable Foundation
 - International Press Centre
 - PRCAN
 - Journalists from the newsrooms of Africa Check's media partners – including Business Day, Punch Newspaper, Radio One 103.5, Metro FM and Bond FM – were also trained.

In addition to advocating for government agencies to make their data readily available, Africa Check is currently working to secure partnerships with the federal Ministry of Health, the National Bureau of Statistics and the National Centre for Disease Control, with a view to enhancing its multi-stakeholder approach to awareness creation.

Narrative of the interview and survey results

Awareness of Africa Check and its work

The overarching research objective of this study was to determine the level of awareness and impact of Africa Check's work on public debate in Nigeria and to identify gaps to be filled. All the people selected for the intensive interviews were familiar with the work of Africa Check, in contrast with the survey respondents, of which fewer than half (41.2%) claimed awareness. These results were expected as the interviewees were selected to include experts who had related with Africa Check in one way or another and academics from Mass Communication departments who were likely familiar with accountability journalism. Some participants had attended Africa Check's workshops and training, and others were drawn from media outlets, including one of Africa Check's media partners. In the survey, the highest rate of awareness in the various clusters of society was among participants from the media and academia. There was moderate awareness among participants from civil society and nongovernmental organisations, while policy makers had a low level of awareness of Africa Check and its work.

When interviewees were asked to define Africa Check and the role and importance of its work, most considered it to be largely a fact-checking organisation. One said Africa Check's work was to ascertain the veracity of information before publication. Another interviewee noted that this was particularly true for the health sector in Nigeria. One of the survey respondents described Africa Check as responsible for fact checking public statements made by leaders as well as articles written by journalists, while another saw it as "an organisation that works to promote accurate reportage and statements made by public leaders". One respondent put it thus:

Africa Check is engaged in checking the veracity of information that goes on social media and across the globe. It boils down to fact-checking. It is about making sure that information that is available to the public is true, and not misinformation that is untrue, and can cause problems to the society.

To demonstrate his familiarity with the work of Africa Check and other fact-checking organisations, Innocent Okoye, a professor of communication, mentioned Dubawa as an alternative fact-checking source. Another interviewee, part of a national newspaper's editorial team, noted that fact-checking already existed in Nigeria before Africa Check, but was unstructured and took the form of informal checks and balances among journalists.

One of the interviewees lauded Africa Check for holding events, workshops and training, while another mentioned that the training was usually conducted for journalists and other

fact-checkers. Another interviewee viewed Africa Check's work as "an attempt to organise an institution or community of fact checkers or fact checking".

Survey respondents' and interviewees' awareness of Africa Check and its work came from two broad sources: the internet and interpersonal networks. Three survey respondents identified newspapers and television as their source of awareness, but none of interviewees mentioned traditional media as the source. Some 58.6% of respondents gave interpersonal networks as the source of their awareness, and 36.1% identified the internet. Most of the respondents who said they had learned of Africa Check on the internet identified news websites, Google and social media – Twitter and WhatsApp – as the source.

The intensive interview results were similar to those of the survey. Some interviewees said that they got to know of Africa Check through friends, while others identified workshops. One said the Global Evidence Summit in Cape Town was his first exposure to the organisation. Another interviewee, a communication health professor, said he got to know about Africa Check when it held a seminar in his university. Another gave a Unesco book as her source. The book, *Journalism, Fake News and Misinformation*, is a recommended text for MSc students in a course titled News Electronics. Another interviewee said Africa Check staff was her source. For interviewees who learned about Africa Check on the internet, social media – especially Twitter – was the highest source of exposure, followed by Google and the Africa Check website.

Considering that Africa Check is barely two years old in Nigeria, the overall awareness among different sectors of society is moderate, with room for growth. However, increased engagement and collaboration with social and traditional media outlets will enhance the visibility of Africa Check and drive up its awareness and impact.

The importance of Africa Check

All interviewees acknowledged Africa Check's important role in Nigeria's public discourse. They lamented the spate of misinformation, saying it was likely to have an impact on ordinary people who were unable to verify information for themselves. For this they said they appreciated the work Africa Check is doing. Most interviewees saw Africa Check as being crucial in fighting "false information", keeping the information space "sane", and ensuring "proper accountability".

For health, there is a lot of misinformation about treatments for diseases circulating on social media, and those who circulate this information are called social media doctors. Usually, this information has not been scientifically proven. However, because it is on social media, most gullible people believe them and do likewise and

get into more serious health issues. With Africa Check, there can be a stop to all these.

Most interviewees' areas of concern were misinformation in politics and the use of false or unavailable statistics in health claims. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

In Nigeria, and especially in the health and political sector, people throw around a lot of data and statistics which may not necessarily be true, and some may be deliberately distort information for political gains. Also, in the health sector, the data may not be available, and then people quote whatever is available, and this may not be able to stand scientific rigour. All these emphasise the importance of Africa Check as a fact-checking organisation in Nigeria.

Another interviewee said Africa Check should do more to help hold traditional health practitioners accountable:

I teach communication and public health. There are so many issues with fake news when it comes to health. More come from the trado-medical practitioners. They claim that one herbal medicine cures multiple illnesses and diseases. Many people fall into their trap due to the easy accessibility to them and cheapness of the medicines. So, Africa Check should work towards correcting misinformation in this aspect.

While in agreement with the others, one interviewee said Africa Check appeared to give limited attention to political issues, continuing:

I think the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria is great. The people need to know the truth, as fact is sacred. I know Africa Check has been noticed in the health sector in Nigeria more than all the other sectors. For health, the truth should be known; Africa Check is contributing immensely in that area in Nigeria. Again, as Nigeria advances towards the 2019 general elections, there are growing cases of fake news, especially on social media, planted by unscrupulous propagandists to score cheap points.

Another interviewee noted the importance of Africa Check's efforts to highlight the danger of false information:

Misinformation is bad for the polity because as a politician you say anything because you want the support of the people. There is also fear mongering. Remember when they said, "If you vote Goodluck Jonathan back to office there will be war." Or that 100 soldiers died after being attacked recently; how true is that? Politics lacks truth, values and principles. Politicians believe in "Let me get there and explain later."

Some were concerned that, other than Africa Check, no recognisable organisation had risen to the task of fact-checking in Nigeria. One interviewee raised the danger of citizen journalists who, due to lack of training, were quick to share any piece of information on the

internet. Some pointed to the information overload that has come with the internet and the near impossibility of fact-checking every piece of information. In one interviewee's words:

The function being carried out by Africa Check is extremely important in Nigeria in the sense that citizen journalists are on the rise. In the light of new information the world moves on but if half-truth and truth are taken to be gospel truth, humanity suffers for it.

Discussing the importance of Africa Check's work, another interviewee said the volume of misinformation on social media could hamper good decision making.

My assessment of the importance of Africa Check is that it is very important because there is so much misinformation flying around on social media, TV and radio and without the right information, you can't really make good decisions.

Some interviewees saw Africa Check as a kind of watchdog to "keep leaders on their toes", while others said it helped provide the information necessary for accurate decision-making. One interviewee said:

It is an organisation that is needed in our society, which is known for making bogus claims. Many general statements are made without empirical evidence. But with Africa Check, this can be fact-checked. What makes public discourse real is discussing with facts, statistics and figures. And this is what Africa check does. They help people and government agencies with correct information for planning.

The results reveal that the interviewees saw Africa Check as important to the dissemination of accurate information in Nigeria, especially on the subject of health. As regards to politics, the respondents repeatedly pointed to the 2019 general elections and the range of false information politicians were likely to spread to achieve political success. They identified this area as a gap in Africa Check's work. The interviewees viewed Africa Check as an information watchdog, and noted that accurate information was vital for good decision-making. In general, the interviewees appeared wary of the volume of false information published on the internet and acknowledged the importance of Africa Check's role here. All these findings were corroborated by answers to the open-ended survey questions. The same sentiment was recorded for topics such as the environment, the economy, governance and social issues.

Defining the work of Africa Check

The interviewees' general response was that Africa Check was an organisation that checked the veracity of information in the public space. Common terms used to describe Africa Check were "fact-checkers" or a "watchdog/surveillance" team who "stop fake news". One interviewee described it as an organisation responsible for "curbing fake news" and another

defined it as “a group of persons interested in facts and the dissemination of facts”. One viewed it as helping to “ascertain the level of truth in information”, while another had this to say:

I believe Africa Check fact-checks information that goes around, be it myth or rumour that circulate on social media. I also like the fact that Africa Check is based on data, i.e. research and even statistics. I also like the fact that they help stop fake news before it goes viral.

Some defined Africa Check’s work as holding events such as workshops and award ceremonies.

For Africa Check staff, the question of whether they should be considered “journalists” or “the watchdog” did not matter. They were simply content to be “fact-checkers” committed to making Nigerians fact-checkers themselves. This is how they described their work:

We carry out advocacy visits to different classes of people, including government officials and heads of organisations. We also organise workshops to get feedback. We are also present on social media: Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. We encourage people to use our platforms to send us claims that they would love to fact check. However, our broader aim is to make Nigerians fact-checkers. We have media partnerships to make this happen.

One interviewee, Jeremiah Agenyi of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, agreed with this view:

I would describe Africa Check as an attempt to organise an institution or community of fact-checkers or fact-checking.

Virtually all the interviewees agreed that Africa Check was fair in its work. One felt that the organisation was all about “making sure that information that is available to the public is true”. Another interviewee described their fact-checking as “good for accurate information in the public sphere”. One noted that Africa Check was “quite useful”, while another had glowing words for them:

They are doing commendable work in fighting hate speech and misinformation.

Perceptions of impact

On the question on whether Africa Check has had a positive or negative impact, data from both the interviews and the survey suggest that its impact has been positive. This was clearly shown in the survey, where 88.9% of the 54 respondents who answered the question on impact agreed that Africa Check has had a positive impact in Nigeria, while the rest said the

impact has been mixed. One of the survey respondents, a health journalist, gave this answer to an open-ended question:

Africa Check's work has been positive. An example was in the data released on hypertension and HIV in Nigeria. While false data was released on other news sites, only Africa Check had the true results backed with evidence.

As noted earlier, the interviews produced the same outcome. Even for the sole interviewee who had been fact-checked by Africa Check, said the impact had been “more positive than negative”:

The work of Africa Check has been positive in the area of enlightenment and negative in the face of those who are politically affiliated and are embarrassed when their claims are shown to be false. They have a positive impact because they cross-check information about health indicators and enlighten the public about their findings.

On the question of whether he had become more careful with the information he releases since that fact-checking, he said, “Maybe.”

In describing their perceptions of the impact of Africa Check's work, both interviewees and survey respondents pointed to the following:

Providing figures on maternal and infant mortality rates can help in planning; this is how Africa check has helped in our health system.

They have generally helped in correcting misinformation about health issues like HIV/Aids.

Africa Check has had a positive impact in correcting statistics. There was this instance of a claim about the percentage of adult Nigerians with high blood pressure, which Africa Check corrected.

It has had a positive impact. On health, Africa Check has contributed to fighting the information on fake drugs and the claims that one drug can cure all diseases.

I can't really give specific examples but with regards to health, Africa Check has had a significant impact on combatting misinformation. There was a workshop in Abuja which was helpful and from there a WhatsApp group was created for people to share items on misinformation that are being received and it has been very helpful for us in our work.

Africa Check is an organisation that is doing amazing work. Their work influences different sectors. Indirectly, they are influencing governance issues, accountability issues, transparency issues, data management and collection issues. And this is across all sectors.

Besides these, most interviewees simply stated that Africa Check has had a positive impact in Nigeria. But its impact on the health sector alone, a large proportion of interviewees said, has been profound:

Africa Check is at its best at the moment. It is the first organisation I came across trying to curtail the trend of health misinformation.

This finding should be taken with some caution as, out of the 22 interviewees who were not Africa Check staff, nine had attended the organisation's 2018 workshop in Abuja. Yet most of the other interviewees were of the same view. Some said Africa Check has had an impact on "planning" and in "forestalling unnecessary anxiety attributable to fake news". Again, politics and health were the focal points. In slight contrast with the majority, one interviewee noted that although Africa Check has been playing an important role, its impact was just beginning to be felt:

Africa Check is raising the standard of information in the public space in Nigeria, but its impact is only beginning to trickle down.

Another interviewee said Africa Check had alerted him to importance of scrutinising information on social media, while another said the organisation had helped provide a structure for fact-checking:

I have not been fact-checked before but we've always had fact-checking in Nigeria. It is just that it has not been structured in the manner that Africa Check has done. People in the past have come to me to say, "You made an error here."

The findings show without a doubt that Africa Check's impact in Nigeria has been felt the most in the health sector. This was the dominant answer to the overarching research question of this study, with data showing that the impact has been felt in areas such as the provision of information on fake drugs and on diseases such as HIV/Aids, as well as on maternal mortality and high blood pressure. Most of the interviewees agreed that Africa Check should give more attention to politics, especially as the 2019 general elections draw near.

Reactions of those fact-checked by Africa Check

As mentioned earlier, four people – one interviewee and three survey respondents – claimed to have been fact-checked by Africa Check, and their reactions were mixed. The interviewee said Africa Check had fact-checked a report he had published on child mortality and unemployment rates in Nigeria. When asked if he agreed with the fact-checking, he made light of the issue, saying:

It was just a confirmation of data released by the National Statistical Agency.

One survey respondent said they had been fact-checked for a story on hypertension prevalence in Nigeria. The second said the fact-checking was done for reasons of “accuracy and balance”, and the third said their “story about a governor” had been fact-checked. All three said they accepted the fact checking in good faith, although one expressed embarrassment at being corrected in the public space.

Africa Check staff highlighted the difficulties they encounter while doing their work. They said that when they reach out to those being fact-checked, the responses are mixed. Some responses are swift, others slow and some do not respond at all:

It has been mixed reactions. Some would say thank you for pointing out my mistake, and there are others who are not happy at all about it.

They gave the example of the Emir of Kano, who replied when they told him they were fact-checking his claim about teenage marriage, but did not react when the fact-checked report was published. In their words:

The Emir of Kano once made a claim, and we sent him a mail that we were fact-checking the claims he made about teenage marriage and he replied. When I was done with the report, I sent it to him; he didn't call back to say why are you fact checking me or anything of the sort. He read it and he moved on. I would say it's been mixed, some people will get good feedback, and some people do not give us feedback at all.

On the whole, the survey showed that a substantial majority of those who have come across corrections made by Africa Check, agreed with them. (Out of 39 responses, 34 said they agreed with Africa Check's corrections.)

Africa Check's staff also said a few people had challenged their reports. The concern that these people could accuse them of bias made them even more objective:

We give people the opportunity to fact-check us. People have gotten back to us with corrections and whenever this happens we include the corrections in our publications. We don't like it when this happens, so we try to be as transparent as can be.

Africa Check's approach to fact-checking

Africa Check's staff described the series of activities that go into producing fact-check reports:

- They monitor a range of media that include print newspapers, online reports and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. WhatsApp is monitored by asking people to send questionable claims to the Africa Check Nigeria WhatsApp

group. They also use the Facebook-owned online tool CrowdTangle to monitor claims on social media. The goal is to find claims presented as fact that may be incorrect.

- After collecting claims for possible fact-checking, they meet to discuss and critique the claims until they select one or two.
- Then they reach out to the person who made the claim. They ask if he or she was quoted out of context and ask for clarity on ambiguous words. They also request the source of the data used in the claim. Africa Check's staff estimates the response rate to these requests at about 60%.
- The fact-checking itself uses publicly available data. They also consult experts. These are usually academics at top-ranking global universities, but at least one local source is thrown into the mix. The experts recommend data sources and provide a better understanding of the issue. All the evidence gathered is examined, and they arrive at a verdict. A claim will be given one of a range of ratings: correct, mostly correct, unproven, misleading, exaggerated, understated, or incorrect.

Most of the survey respondents approved of Africa Check's fact-checking methods. Most of the 12.3% of the respondents who did not approve, answered in the negative because they had not been exposed to Africa Check's work.

One respondent said the data Africa Check used for fact-checking might not reflect a context-based and timely analysis:

Whatever information they put out is simply based on collated and verifiable data. This simply means that, when generalisations are made, they may not reflect the actual reality on ground. However, this is not to say that the data produced cannot be utilised and that is why I agree – to an extent – with the data churned out.

Africa Check's staff did note that some claims simply cannot be fact-checked. These include claims for which there is no available data to verify their authenticity. They said unavailable data and difficulty in accessing data were the major challenges affecting their work as fact-checkers. Other challenges were:

We face the cultural pushback. It's almost un-African to ask people questions, and being critical is not our nature. When we tell people to give us proof to substantiate claims, they always get defensive. So we have a lot of reports that are still awaiting proof and evidence to be backed up with. Also, in the area of resources, we need more resources to do what we want to do.

Africa Check staff said three questions guide them in deciding what claims to fact-check, out of the available avalanche of information:

1. What will go wrong if we don't fact-check this claim?
2. Who made this claim?

3. Is the claim related to a development issue such as healthcare, the economy, politics, education or history?

They said Africa Check published four different types of reports: fact-checks, spot-checks, factsheets and analysis. Fact-checks are the focus of their work, each usually containing over 700 words. All the reports provide important information that people need to know, particularly about development issues: health, electricity, politics and more. One factsheet, for example, explains “Ebola risks, diagnosis and treatment”.

Africa Check’s staff described themselves as “researchers” who deal with “data” and consider the openness of their data sources to be vital for “transparency and fairness” in their fact-checking work. As one said:

We are non-partisan and we take this very seriously because that is where our credibility lies. We don't put in our opinion in the reports we release. Even if I have an opinion, I keep it to myself so that the experts can comment with information backed up by data. We always ask for data links from our experts because they can also be biased, and we include the links in the reports we publish. So the data is transparent.

Working with the media

Africa Check’s relationship with media organisations could be described as symbiotic. Africa Check trains journalists in fact-checking, while the media publish Africa Check’s reports. To ensure its reports reach a wider audience, Africa Check partners with three newspapers and one radio station:

We publish on our website and then push the information through our social media accounts. We also have partnerships with media houses such as the Punch, Daily Trust, Business Day and FRCN (Radio 103.5 Lagos). For FRCN, we have a 15-minute radio slot on Monday afternoons where we talk about what we have published on our website. In return, we offer training to their journalists on fact-checking.

However, one staff member said they were not satisfied with the rate at which the reports are published:

The newspapers help us republish our reports, and this is happening, but not very satisfactorily.

Another staff noted that Africa Check also partners with the social media platform Facebook.

We also partner with Facebook, which in response to criticisms started a fact-checking third-party programme. The idea is that they do not want to do the fact-checking directly and that is how Africa Check got involved. There is a platform on

Facebook that gives us access to fake news that people have flagged. We then consider the posts with the aim of fact-checking them. Whatever information we confirm to be fake, Facebook reduces its circulation by about 80%. Then the fact-checked report is put close to the flagged post so that those who want to share it are alerted that the information is false. We've been discussing having access to WhatsApp but not much has come out of this because WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption and that is the selling point it has.

In a separate interview, Africa Check's Executive Director, Peter Cunliffe noted that at the end of January 2019, Africa Check established a partnership with Twitter, to provide support for Twitter's efforts to "provide better, accurate context" for Nigerians on key moments in the 2019 election campaign, and Africa Check hopes to build on this relationship after the election.

During the in-depth interviews, most media professionals recognised Africa Check's role in training and workshops. One said he had worked with Africa Check:

The first time I got exposed to Africa Check was at the global evidence summit in Cape Town last year, and after that I even fact-checked information for Africa Check.

On the whole, Africa Check's effect on the media was recognised, with some media professionals expressing satisfaction, saying the organisation had influenced the way they work:

Africa Check has made a lot of impact, especially in my own life as a journalist. As a journalist, I am more cautious because I know there is an organisation called Africa Check that fact-checks people, and also as an individual that has access to the internet and millions of people, I see myself discrediting false posts and championing the call that people should stop posting wrong information because I know better with Africa Check.

With Africa Check now on board, the media in Nigeria will be forced psychologically and practically to be more sceptical about what it regards as the gospel truth and about publishing it.

Gaps to be addressed for increased impact

Overall, the interviewees seemed satisfied with the quality of Africa Check's work, but they queried its quantity. The identified gaps and their general recommendations were for Africa Check to improve its visibility, and to create more awareness. The interviewees thought most people were not aware of the organisation and its activities, and that anything that could be done to remedy this would be the key to Africa Check increasing its impact on public debate

in Nigeria. One interviewee said Africa Check should use social media more, and should also engage with government partners:

I think they should use social media; they can do a lot of social media campaigns to create awareness. Also, they can collaborate with government, media outlets, the Nigerian Communications Commission and the National Broadcasting Commission.

Africa Check needs to improve its visibility in Nigeria. They also need more partners, more people and organisations to join the fact-checking train. This they are doing well by training journalists, but more is needed.

Another suggested that media campaigns be organised, noting that the public cannot access most of Africa Check's work:

Apart from social media – by that I mean WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – I think they can also broadcast on radio. They need to partner with radio stations in cities that have large population like Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Kano, and all those places. They should also partner with television stations, because people want the graphics too, i.e. having a programme on TV. Also, they need to get columns in newspapers.

I also believe there are a lot of data that need to be fact-checked and published on other mediums such as social media, apart from Africa Check's website, so that it can be seen by a lot of people.

Personally, I think they need to collaborate more with Nigerian newsrooms because by collaboration, they are giving more exposure to one another. They should involve more media organisations and journalists in what they do, and then through these newsrooms, Nigerians will get to know more about them as well.

Other interviewees highlighted a need for increased social media engagement:

They need to go social and involve the young people. For instance, if I go on their website and see the information that has been fact checked I should be able to share it on my social media handles. They should use the WhatsApp handle too. They should create memes containing the truth that can be easily shared with their logo on it. Through this, their awareness level in Nigeria will increase.

One interviewee suggested a new way of getting people to think about information:

For long term, Africa Check should be getting people to think more and question more when they hear things. This can be done through awareness activities. They can think of using traditional media, maybe a radio show where they deal with one topic of misinformation per week. There are a lot of creative ways that Africa Check could improve its impact by simply reaching more people with the work they are doing.

In identifying potential new areas of work, the survey respondents were full of suggestions, such as grassroots participation in the fact-checking process. The respondents also thought Africa Check had not done enough in the area of politics and public governance. The respondents also said Africa Check should continue to train and retrain its staff and partners. Other suggestions included partnerships with civil society organisations, the media and tertiary institutions, as well as creating increased awareness and sustained conversations using both traditional and social media platforms. The survey respondents also suggested more focus on the activities of state governments and increased tracking of politicians' statements.

The interviewees, on the other hand, especially those from the health sector, agreed that Africa Check had done a lot in the area of health, even if the intervention was still in its nascent stage. In suggesting potential areas of work, the interviewees also mentioned politics. Again, this call was tied to the upcoming elections. It seemed the interviewees feared that false and harmful information would increase as the elections drew closer:

I know their focus has always been health, but I think they can branch out and be known for other areas, and not the health sector alone. They can help debunk fake news in what politicians are claiming in Nigeria, and even what the government is claiming in Nigeria.

I want to believe that Africa Check has had positive impact in Nigeria so far. However, in the election cycle coming up, people are going to use their services, whether directly or indirectly.

Others suggested increased partnerships with journalists through town hall meetings, and a need to do more on fact-checking. In particular, the need to track statements made by leaders was highlighted:

I think we should start first and foremost with practitioners. The starting point is to provide information about Africa Check to media houses all over the country.

They should do more tracking. And once the tracking is done, they must publicise its outcome.

The utterances of public figures should be tracked and they should be held accountable by having regular town hall meetings,

Another interviewee suggested that Africa Check should also explore religion and cultural life in Nigeria. Another said information about Nigeria's international relations should be fact-checked:

Africa Check should deal with the issue of the plight of Nigerians outside Nigeria; for instance, those in Libya, South Africa and even in Asia, Europe or America.

Conclusion

This study has extensively examined the awareness and impact of the work of Africa Check on public discourse in Nigeria, especially as it relates to fact-checking health misinformation in the public domain. From the findings, it can be surmised that awareness of Africa Check's work is marginal at best, but highest among media professionals. This is premised on the argument that although 41.2% of the survey respondents said they were aware of Africa Check and its work, the respondents (both survey and interview) could be considered stakeholders in the fact-checking business. Again, the fact that majority of them got to know of Africa Check through interpersonal networks points to the need to spread the word of Africa Check's activities on new and traditional media. For traditional media the outcome was very low: none of the interviewees said they got to know of Africa Check through this media. This brings to question the nature of Africa Check's partnership with the Nigerian newspapers and radio station, as most participants were not familiar with this relationship.

The respondents were quick to say that Africa Check has been important in addressing public debates and has played an important role in Nigeria. However, this should also be taken with caution, largely because of the respondents' tendency to view the worthiness of Africa Check's work in and of itself as a substitute for its importance and impact in Nigeria. In other words, they were likely to see Africa Check as having a positive impact, even if this was not the case, simply because it exists for a worthy cause. They were particularly eager to note Africa Check's impact in the health sector, but said more work should be done in the area of politics. But when one considers the Nigerian public space, it is safe to say that Africa Check's impact has been only a drop in the bucket.

Comparing the respondents' perception of Africa Check's impact with its theory of change (activities), commendable work has been done in training journalists, but less has been done to educate the general public in media literacy and provide them with fact-checking tools. Regarding the media, more needs to be done to widen and strengthen the relationship. The overarching implication of these shortcomings is fact-checking that is moderately impactful in terms of the number of claims checked and the number of people reached.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made.

Increasing awareness

A prominent area identified is the need to increase awareness of Africa Check by using a range of different media. The use of traditional, interpersonal and digital platforms for audience engagement should be considered. Whatever the reason for the awareness gap, there remains a need to review the relationship between Africa Check and media outlets in order to increase awareness.

Extending fact-checking on social media

In the area of social media engagement, Africa Check should extend its fact-checking to claims published on Twitter, and even Instagram. It should also fact-check claims more quickly, to avoid losing readers to other interesting stories. Twitter and Instagram are successful dissemination tools in Nigeria and their usefulness in raising awareness should be exploited. Africa Check needs to come up with innovative ways to meet this challenge.

Increasing impact

Given the misinformation deluge, Africa Check needs to do more to improve its impact on public debate in Nigeria. More fact-checking on social media will increase user exposure and engagement, and so improve awareness. This will eventually impact public discourse.

Africa Check should also partner with government agencies, thus improving its multi-stakeholder approach to giving exposure to its work, and increasing its impact.

Training and workshops

The necessity of training and re-training Africa Check staff and other professionals is underscored.

In addition to training professionals on fact-checking, Africa Check should conduct train-the-trainers workshops on media literacy. This will equip civil society organisations with media literacy tools, allowing them to teach community members how to read, understand and verify information.

Expanding subject focus

Africa Check should involve itself more fully in Nigeria's political discourse. In the upcoming election cycle, claims made virtually every day will require real-time fact-checking

to verify their accuracy. This is an opportunity for Africa Check to duplicate its success in Nigeria's health sector.

Setting the agenda

Africa Check should consider the possibility of fact-checking issues not covered by the media to force them into the public domain.

Engaging more hands

With the surge of health misinformation in the public domain, there is need for swift and aggressive fact-checking to keep pace. Africa Check should engage more hands, and partner with more stakeholders, to confront this clear and present danger.

Response from Africa Check Executive Director Peter Cunliffe-Jones

This excellent report will, over coming months be, very useful to the Africa Check team, providing valuable ideas and input as we work to develop our organisation and activities from 2019 onwards.

Our strategic goals for 2019-2022 include:

- building up our media partnerships in Nigeria, particularly with broadcasters, to ensure that our work reaches an ever-wider audience;
- working on an online fact-checking curriculum for educators to ensure we grow both awareness of our work and vital factchecking skills among younger people, and;
- in the health field in particular – engaging with a group of stakeholders ranging from media houses to health practitioners and policy-makers to harness their power in tackling misinformation.

The experience we have had in South Africa and Senegal, where we have operated since 2012 and 2015 respectively, shows us that awareness of our work and the impact we have grows over time; a lot of our impact coming cumulatively.

That, the plans we are developing for 2019-2022 and the larger team we are seeking to build in Nigeria will, we hope, enable us to do all this more.

That said, we are delighted that having operated as a one-person office for most of 2017, and just three people last year, our work is seen even so by most respondents interviewed for this study as already having a positive impact on public conversation and policy-making in Nigeria.

“Africa Check is contributing immensely in that area in Nigeria,” one said. “It is an organisation that is needed in our society, which is known for making bogus claims,” said another. “What makes public discourse real is discussing with facts, statistics and figures. And this is what Africa Check does. They help people and government agencies with correct information for planning.” Another said: “They are doing commendable work in fighting hate speech and misinformation”. Several referred to work we did, correcting misunderstandings about blood pressure and HIV. “While false data was released on other news sites, only Africa Check had the true results backed with evidence.” Another pointed to the impact of our work on policy and planning. “Providing figures on maternal and infant mortality rates can help in planning; this is how Africa check has helped in our health system,” they said. “As a journalist, I am more cautious because I know there is an organisation called Africa Check that fact-checks people,” one member of the media said.

As Dr. Amobi has correctly identified, we believe that the partnerships we are developing are crucial to our work – in health (the subject of 29% of our factchecks last year); education (23%); the development of the economy (25%), crime, security and justice (11%).

For that, the partnership we launched in 2018 with Facebook, the new one just agreed with Twitter, and those with media partners will be crucial – and so too the plans to build a wider network of factchecking organisations, policy-makers, practitioners and community groups, to tackle health misinformation from 2019 onwards.

One interviewee, Jeremiah Agenyi of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, told Dr. Amobi: *“I would describe Africa Check as an attempt to organise an institution or community of fact-checkers or fact-checking.”* He is right. And this excellent report points ways for our very young organisation to achieve that in the years ahead.

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Appendices

Interview guide

1. Are you aware of Africa Check?
2. If yes, can you describe the activities carried out by Africa Check?
3. What are your channels of exposure to Africa Check?
4. How would you describe or define Africa Check?
5. What is your assessment of Africa Check's importance to public discourse in Nigeria?
6. What crucial roles do you believe Africa Check is playing in Nigeria?
7. Why do you say so?
8. Has Africa Check had more of a positive or negative impact on public conversation in Nigeria? *Please reference actual examples of Africa Check's work.*
9. What are these positive and negative impact? *Please reference actual examples of Africa Check's work.*
10. With specific regard to health, has Africa Check had an impact on combatting misinformation? *Please reference actual examples of Africa Check's work.*
11. Have you ever been fact-checked by Africa Check?
12. If yes, for what?
13. Did you agree with the fact-checking?
14. Has the fact-checking made you more careful with the information you release?
15. How would you describe your experience of being fact-checked in terms of Africa Check's objectivity and the limitations you had to grapple with?
16. What other areas can Africa Check explore to improve its impact on public debates in Nigeria?

Research questionnaire

1. Gender of respondent?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male

2. Which of the following category do you belong to?
 - a. Media
 - b. Policy maker
 - c. Health Practitioner
 - d. Academics
 - e. Non-governmental organisation
 - f. Others.....

3. Where do you work?
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4. Have you ever heard of Africa Check?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

5. If yes, what is your source?
 - a. Twitter
 - b. Face book
 - c. Instagram
 - d. Whatsapp
 - e. Online news websites
 - f. Newspaper
 - g. Radio
 - h. Television
 - i. Interpersonal sources
 - j. Google
 - k. Others.....

6. Have you ever visited the Africa Check website?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. What do you understand about the work Africa check does?
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8. Do you agree with the corrected information published on the website of Africa Check?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes

9. If No, why do you disagree?
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10. Have you ever been fact checked before?

- a. Yes
- b. No

11. If yes, was it done by Africa Check?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. If yes, for what reason were you fact checked?
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13. Do you agree with Africa Check's correction?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. If No, why do you disagree?
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15. What do you think is the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria on Health Issues?

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16. What do you think is the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria on Political Issues?

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17. What do you think is the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria on Social Issues?

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18. What do you think is the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria on Environmental issues?

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19. What do you think is the importance of Africa Check to public discourse in Nigeria on other issues not listed above?

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20. What kind of impact do you think Africa Check's work has had in Nigeria?

- a. Positive Impact
- b. Negative Impact
- c. Both

21. If positive, why?

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22. If negative, why?

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23. What do you think can be done so that the work of Africa Check can have more exposure in Nigeria?

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24. What do you think can be done so that the work of Africa Check can have greater impact in Nigeria?

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25. What role do you think Africa Check plays in the media landscape of Nigeria?

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