Audience Motivations for Sharing Dis- and Misinformation: A Comparative Study in Five Sub-Saharan African Countries

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The notion of 'fake news' and related concepts of 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' have rapidly become areas of scholarly inquiry after the 2016 US presidential election, covering issues ranging from election manipulation through the media to the implications for mainstream news routines and practices (Tandoc et al. 2019). While the case of the United States is the one most often talked about, multiple other countries around the world have been grappling with the consequences of different expressions of "fake news", including Myanmar (Stevenson, 2018), Nigeria (Funke, 2019) and India (Udupa, 2017). Scholarship in the area however still reflects a lack of geographical diversity (Valenzuela et al. 2019: 2).

While 'fake news' is seen as a novel scholarly topic in recent literature, false news as a phenomenon in Africa and the Middle East pre-dates the era of online news, and journalists have always had to learn to treat journalism as a contested area vulnerable to manipulation by governments and powerful social elites (Mutsvairo & Bebawi 2019: 5). Recent discourses on 'fake news' have however given a new opportunity for governments to restrict freedom of expression on social media (Mutsvairo & Bebawi 2019: 2). Facebook and WhatsApp have been sources of viral content in these contexts (Mutsvairo & Bebawi 2019:4), and the perceived exposure of

African users to 'fake news' have been found to be higher than in similar contexts in the US (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019).

This is true of contexts as diverse as the US, (Bigman et al. 2019:2), Britain (Chadwick & Vaccari 2019:5), Singapore (Tandoc et al. 2019), Chile (Valenzuela 2019), Kenya (Wahutu 2019) and South Africa (Roper 2019:149) (although in the latter two countries, legacy media such as radio still overshadows digital media as a news source, see Wahutu 2019:11). This changing pattern of news consumption is often linked to a sharp decline in trust in mainstream news sources. Not only does this mean that the veracity of information available online is of increasing importance, but also that knowing the factors shaping the sharing of such information is a crucial step towards improving the quality of online discourse and to understand the reasons why disinformation might spread. There is concern that the sharing of news on social media platforms can negatively reshape online culture and the ability of the internet to contribute to liberal democracy (Chadwick & Vaccari 2019:7). In an established democracy such as the United Kingdom, more than half of social media users (57.7%) have reported that they have recently come across news on these platforms of which the veracity was in doubt. Nevertheless, a high percentage (42.8%) of users admit to have shared false or inaccurate news, of which 17.3% said they thought the news was false at the time of sharing it. This distinction between knowing at the time of sharing that news is false and only finding out later that it was untrue, leads Chadwick & Vaccari (2019:14) to make a distinction between the concepts of 'disinformation' (the former, unintentional kind) and 'misinformation' (the latter, intentional sharing).

However, as Chadwick & Vaccari (2019:4) point out, very little is currently known about the reasons and motivations prompting people to share news online. What may prompt social media users to share information they find on social media? One

factor to consider is the social identity of the user. Bigman et al. (2019:14) found that race is one influence on how young social media users select exposure to news on social media. Black students in their study reported 'both seeing and posting more content about race on social media'. They see their study as providing evidence that 'selective sharing is likely to result in racially differentiated retransmission of news about disparate racial impact' (2019:14). In Britain, Chadwick & Vaccari (2019:5) found that users who willingly and/or knowing shared false information on social media platforms were 'likely to be male, younger, and more interested in politics.' Not only social position, but also political orientation was found to play a role in the likelihood of British social media users sharing false information. Supporters of the Conservative Party and those with right-wing leanings were found to be more likely to share inaccurate or false news, whereas those on the opposite end of the political spectrum – Labour supporters and those adhering to left-wing ideological beliefs – were more likely to share inaccurate news (Chadwick & Vaccari 2019:5).

When asked to reflect on the reasons why they share news on social media, British respondents reported as the top three reasons 'To express my feelings' (65.5%), 'To inform others' (also 65.5%) and 'To find out other people's opinions' (51,1%) (Chadwick & Vaccari 2019:11). These reasons display an orientation towards civic participation or purpose. Duffy et al. (2019) explored the social utility of sharing 'fake news' in Singapore and draw comparisons between the sociality of 'fake news' and rumour – both are used to 'cope with uncertainty, build relationships, and for self-enhancement'. The main types of news stories that are shared, Duffy et al. (2019: 5) argue, are those that have a 'high informational utility – 'news you can use" 'which resonates with their own lives and that have a high emotional impact. They encourage an understanding of sharing practices that looks beyond the political implications of the

sharing of 'fake news', to its interpersonal and social uses for sharer and recipient. Sharing news, their study finds, is seen as contributing to social cohesion – users doing so are motivated by the emotional impact the news is seen to have, the relevance it might have for the receiver, and the sender's intention to 'provide advice or warning' (Duffy et al 2019:10). Sharing 'fake news', Duffy et al (2019:10) argue, can therefore be seen as a sign of trust between sender and recipient: 'What is shared – and reciprocated – is more than just news or information; it is also a marker of trust, fellow-feeling and mutuality'. Interpersonal relationships, can also be seen to be one of the main factors determining whether users would correct false news they receive (Tandoc et al. 2019:13). They remain inconclusive with regard to the possible outcome of these practices – the sharing of 'fake news' could, in their opinion, either erode the trust in any received information even further, or it could encourage users to return to authoritative sources of news (Duffy et al. 2019:12).

Rumor can, however, also be detrimental to the social fabric, as Petersen et al. (2018:4) show. When hostile rumors are shared, the aim is to '(1) coordinate the attention and action of the audience with the goal of mobilizing against the target group and (2) signal their willingness to engage in conflict escalation (i.e., helping push the collective over the tipping point for collective action).' In this context, the rumor is 'akin to a rallying cry' (Petersen et al. 2018:4). The motivations behind sharing this kind of false rumor online can be partisan in nature – to mobilize against a political opponent – or as a way to rail against the whole political system and mobilizing receivers of the message against the political order as such (Petersen et al. 2018:6). Drawing on data from the US and Denmark, Petersen et al. (2018:31) find the latter to be the overriding psychological motivation underpinning the sharing of false news. The

consumption of 'fake news' is linked to a general distrust and cynicism about the credibility of the news ecosystem as a whole (Wagner & Boczkowski 2019:11).

The motivation to inform others corresponds with the findings of Chakrabarti et al. (2018) who have so far been the only study to have explored comparatively audiences' interaction with "fake news" in an African context. Their study identifies three reasons that help explain the sharing of "fake news" in Kenya and Nigeria. First, according to them, there is the desire to be "in the know" socially, so that sharing "fake news" becomes a form of social currency. Although this motivation may not be unique to Kenya and Nigeria, the long-standing use of humour in African societies, which has been noted to play a politically progressive role on the continent, may amplify the social capital obtained through sharing satirical information. Second, there is a sense of civic duty that might lead social media users to share warnings of impending disasters or crises. Even if the information might turn out not to be true, the harm done by not informing others may be seen as outweighing that of not informing them. And, third, there's the sense that information is democratic and needs to be passed on. Users may take the popularity or virality of a shared piece of information as indication of its veracity (Chakrabarti et al. 2018: 44). This motivation might be especially relevant in African countries where the state exercises a great deal of control or ownership over the media, which may lead to a decline in trust in mainstream media. A previous study (Wasserman & Morales 2019) of the spread of 'fake news' in the African context established a link between lack of trust in the news media and the sharing of false news. It was found that a significant relationship exists between higher levels of perceived exposure to disinformation and lower levels of media trust. This corresponds with similar findings elsewhere (e.g. Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019:23 in the British context)

that suggest the widespread sharing of false news may point to a growing cynicism about the veracity of news in general.

In the African context, further cultural influences such as the long-standing importance of informal sources of information such as gossip, rumour and satire (see Nyamnjoh, 2005) may play a further role in the likelihood of media users to share news found on social media. The history of an untrustworthy news media, often owned or captured by the state or social elites, have given rise to a vibrant alternative circuit of news and information that may take a variety of forms and genres. This background has to be borne in mind as we seek to explore in this paper is the motivations for African audiences to consume and share false information online.

Methods

In this paper, we propose to explore the motivations for sharing inaccurate and made up news stories in five Sub-Saharan African countries (Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe). More specifically, and given the context in which the current increase in mis- and disinformation occur in most African countries, we seek to answer three questions: how do audiences decide which information they share through digital and social media? To what extent do different types of content and sources affect shareability? What differences and similarities exist between sharing practices across countries? We seek answers to these questions by conducting focus groups with undergraduate and graduate student in the aforementioned five countries. Focus groups have been shown to aide researchers in identifying "participants' preferences, attitudes, motivations and beliefs," while providing "interviewing flexibility and insights regarding group dynamics" (Brennen, 2013, p. 59). Moreover, as Kamberlis and

Dimitriadis (2013) argue, focus groups are likely to "generate more focused, richer, more complex and more nuanced information" (p. 40) than other methods of inquiry.

Data presented in this paper comes from eight focus groups (two in Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, and one in Namibia and Zimbabwe) convened between late August and early September 2019. A total of 59 participants joined the discussion, in groups ranging from 5 (postgraduate FG discussion in Kenya) to 15 (undergraduate FG discussion in Zimbabwe). Discussions lasted between 50 and 65 minutes and covered the following general topics: media consumption, news sharing online, sharing of political information, the prevalence of fake news, and possible solutions to existing problems with mis- and disinformation. To spark discussion, participants were presented with two stimuli: constructed Facebook and Twitter posts discussing health-related examples of false news stories [common to all countries], and original political blog articles [specific to each country].

The project will use a combination of quantitative methods (an online survey administered to social media users) and qualitative methods (in-depth, semi-structured interviews in five African countries. These countries are South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Namibia and have been selected to reflect a variety of political and media systems as well as a geographical spread. South Africa and Namibia are two Southern African countries with high levels of media freedom, self-regulation and an open, participatory media culture and an established digital media sphere. Kenya is an East African country with a vibrant independent media as well as a strong presence of international media, notably Chinese media who have made Nairobi a hub from where it expands into the region. Kenya also has a vocal, active community of social media users which makes it suitable for a study of dis- and misinformation online. Nigeria, Africa's most populist country, represents the West African region and has a strong private

media sector as well as a vibrant online community. Zimbabwe, in contrast, has a repressive media environment and high levels of state ownership and interference in the media. At the same time, there are also several examples of how Zimbabwean citizens have used alternative channels, including social media platforms such as Facebook, to undermine authoritarian control of the media. Previous work by the applicant (see Wasserman & Madrid-Morales 2018) have focused on South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. This sample will build on the existing work by complementing existing quantitative surveys in these countries with qualitative methods, while adding two additional countries, Zimbabwe and Namibia, to extend the reach of the inquiry.

Taken together, the countries that make up the sample will represent geographical diversity as well as a variety of political and media systems, thus allowing for comparisons and contrasts to be drawn in the analysis.

Preliminary Findings

With the analysis of focus group discussions still in progress, we present some preliminary findings grouped by country.

Kenya

The focus group with undergraduate students had many heavy social media users. They seemed to be discerning users who think about the content that they see and share. When we looked at the examples, they tended to use "cues" to decide how reliable content would be. For example, the "verified" check on Twitter seemed to indicate that content was coming from a trustworthy source. Some participants thought the fake rice post was legitimate and would consider sharing it. No one would consider sharing the phone post. They all recognized the political post as unreliable and would not share it.

In general, they were sceptical of sharing political information. It's not something that most of them do very often.

The participants in the graduate focus group did not come off as heavily social media users. One doesn't use social media, except for WhatsApp, and she doesn't even like it, but feels like she has to be one it. Only 3 have Twitter accounts and only one uses it regularly for news. They tend to get their news from news websites, aggregators, and YouTube. None of them would share the rice post or the phone post. They thought the rice post could be legitimate because contaminated food was a big issue in Kenya, and rice was one of the suspected foods. Some said they would watch the video, but they probably wouldn't share it. None of them would share the Raila story. They're not really that interested in politics, particularly that kind of politics, and they don't think it would be relevant to their friends.

Namibia

Most participants, undergraduate students, indicated that the relied on social media for the day-to-day news seeking behaviors. WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram were mentioned by the students as the most popular forms of social media in Namibia. Some indicated that it has become a daily routine for them to wake up and check their social media accounts for news and information before proceeding with their routine chores. Only one out of the ten participants indicated he had a Twitter account, which was dormant. The reason why most participants detested Twitter was that in the Namibian context, "it was too political".

Participants recounted several incidences where they have consumed and shared of fake news in Namibia. Most of the fake news focused on President Hage Geingob and his wife Monica Geingos. In one of the fake news stories, a meme was circulated which indicated that the First lady had encouraged parents to have sex with their

children. Yet the original story was about the First Lady encouraging parents to have honest discussions with their children about sex and sexually transmitted diseases in order to mitigate against the spread of HIV and AIDS. In another fake news story, the President was said to have said he doesn't care about the youth vote in the upcoming elections. This was again another election-related fake news article.

Nigeria

Interview responses with undergraduate students suggest that participants source news through different social media platforms. While a majority use Twitter as a primary source of news, others rely on Instagram, Snap Chat and Social influencers. Interview responses suggest that WhatsApp is the leading social media platform for sharing fake news because it is the most trusted communication for family and friends. Hence, participants tend to trust information shared by family members and friends more than strangers. In terms of sharing fake news, participants are more likely to share misinformation about entertainment and politics news. They are also likely to share trending misinformation that has elements of patriotism and emotions.

As for graduate students, the news consumption pattern of participants suggests there is a hybrid approach to media consumption. Participants explained that while they source news through social media platforms, they also visit online sites of media organisations to source news. Respondents are more likely to share on social media news focusing on job adverts, political, religious, ethnicity, and kidnapping. They are also likely to share it on social media if it comes from trusted third-party sources such as religion or ethnic organisation or someone they hold in high esteem and share the same faith with. While participants do not use fact-checking websites, there is a consensus that tracing the origin of news on social media is a way to check misinformation on social media platforms.

South Africa

News consumption by undergraduate students is almost entirely done online, although there is quite a lot of consumption of radio as well. Around 60% of them said they have a Twitter account, but it is really WhatsApp that takes the lead as the main form of communication. And this is not only interpersonal, but group-based communication. It is through WhatsApp that some said they had received similar posts to the ones presented in the first stimulus. It is mostly family members who share this information, and most participants tend to blame "older generations" for circulating this type of information. The post about Julius Malema got a unified response: nobody would share it… except that, on second thoughts, some said they would actually share it for "fun".

Most participants in the graduate students focus group are not active users of Twitter, but they all acknowledge that WhatsApp is the main tool through which they communicate with family and friends. It is also through WhatsApp that they share information that they believe is "funny" or "weird". They do not think they would share information such as the story on the health impact of using cell phones or the fake rice piece. However, some brought up an example of a news story about microwaves being related to higher cancer risks, and acknowledged they would indeed share it. When it comes to a political story (and some students also brought up religion as a similarly polarising issue), answers were slightly different. There was a very general lack of understanding of what fact-checking websites are.

Zimbabwe

Among the respondents, a group of undergraduate students, no one had an active twitter account, but some had Facebook accounts, though one of them said they've never chatted with anyone on Facebook despite having an account. One female respondent said she uses it for advertising since she's a self-employed tailor. Most of the

respondents said they use Facebook for connecting with long lost friends and others said they follow academic pages since most are teachers or studying to be teachers. One respondent noted that they use Facebook for religious purposes "getting daily verses and following church pages". WhatsApp is the most common social media platform as all respondents were on WhatsApp. WhatsApp is generally used for personal communications, workplace communication, communicating with classmates via group chats and keeping up to date with the news. One respondent was emphatic that they use WhatsApp for entertainment "to send and receive jokes".

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