



GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST  
MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

Platform for Prevention

# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS ATROCITY CRIME TRIGGER IN AFRICA

NATURE OF MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS AND RELATED HATE SPEECH

By Adewale Adeboye, PhD.

With the support of Mò Bleeker, Stephen Aloro, Jude Thaddues Njikem, the Community Centre for Integrated Development, Aatsa Atogho, Zainab Naseer Ahmad, Nura Ahmad Muhammad, Salisu Musa Muhammad, Dr. Michael Femi, Uchenna Ezeah, Dr. Philip Olayokun and Dr. Solomon Ayantayo Ojo.

Copyright: Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes  
and Africa Working Group, September 2021

GAAMAC thanks its donors, in particular the Swiss Federal  
Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), for their continuous  
and generous support.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT GAAMAC</b>	2
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	3
<b>FOREWORD</b>	4
Introduction	5
Understanding Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech	7
Pandemic and Dimensions of Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech in Africa	9
Why People Share Covid-19 Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech-Related Communication	10
Basic Misconceptions Regarding Covid-19 in South Sudan and Nigeria	13
Some Community Level Efforts to Prevent and Address Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech	16
Roles Associated with Women in Addressing and Preventing Misinformation, Fake News or Hate-Related Speech Associated with Covid-19	17
The Direct and Indirect Victims and At-Risk Population of Covid-19-Related Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech	17
Areas of Capacity Development Suitable for Addressing Pandemic-Triggered Atrocity Crimes	19
Conclusion	20
<b>LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	21
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	22

# ABOUT GAAMAC

---

## ABOUT THE GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

The Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC) is a global inclusive network of states, civil society and academic institutions that aim to support states in establishing national architectures and policies for the early and permanent prevention of atrocities. As a platform, GAAMAC convenes its diverse community in-person and online to openly share good practices, expertise and experiences without pointing fingers and to look instead for concrete and feasible solutions. Since 2013, it organizes global meetings every two years.

[www.gaamac.org](http://www.gaamac.org)

## THE AFRICA WORKING GROUP

The GAAMAC Africa Working Group (G-AWG) is one of the regional initiatives originally created during the GAAMAC II global meeting held in Manila, the Philippines, from 2-4 February 2016. The G-AWG is made up of a cross-section of practitioners, academics and policy makers working on mass atrocity prevention in the African continent.

[www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group](http://www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Fake news, misinformation and related hate speech are malicious. They cause havoc, confusion and conflict within a society or any given environment where they are allowed to fester.
- Individual's association or classification as either an ingroup or outgroup created false ideas of supremacy, identity or threat and showed the potential to translate into hate and violence.
- Fake news, misinformation and related hate speech are usually generated or disseminated by sources held to be respectable and trustworthy by the target audience.
- Media consumption is by itself individual and more often than not trust is at the centre of fake news misinformation and hate speech.
- Fake news and misinformation erode trust, build and feed on community divisions, are toxic for public discourse and ultimately weaponize information, making it lethal for human consumption.
- Amidst other pre-existing socio-political differences in Africa, Covid-19 manifested in already sharply divided societies of South Sudan and Nigeria.
- The influence of mobile technology is getting more problematic as it provides the atmosphere where anyone can create information at random and then disseminate to people who are ignorant but have capacity to spread such information within the shortest period of time.
- Social media has offered space to more women intending to engage.. Hence, women can play an equal role to men in generating and spreading misinformation, as well as in countering it.
- Fighting fake news, misinformation and related hate speech requires collective responsibilities with each country needing suitable policy frameworks to prevent and punish fake news, misinformation and hate speech carriers.
- Without retribution, it would be very hard for policy makers to go on with countering hate speech. Punitive measures are needed as a working tool.
- Covid-19 supplied the opportunity for very different actors with a range of different motivations and goals to produce a variety of misinformation, fake news and hate speech.
- An important takeaway from this research was the need for governments across Africa to build trust in their citizens and learn to provide timely and accurate information that dispels myths and misconceptions thereby reducing the people's vulnerability to atrocity risks.

# FOREWORD

The Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC), with a culture of bringing together prevention experts and practitioners from across the world, commissioned the research that led to the production of this special report through the GAAMAC-Africa Working Group (G-AWG). The aim of the research was to garner evidence-based analysis regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and elections as atrocity crime triggers in Africa, and identify populations at risk of related hate speech, misinformation and fake news in three selected countries, Nigeria, Cameroon and South Sudan. As such, this empirical report through virtual and physical interviews, draws on the knowledge and expertise of different atrocity crimes prevention stakeholders and specialists at the local and national level, including regional and international atrocity crimes subject matter experts within and outside of Africa. The idea was to underscore how the Covid-19 pandemic on one hand and elections on the other serve as atrocity crime triggers on the continent.

The research has fake news, misinformation and hate-related speech as key components, attesting to the importance of what GAAMAC regional initiatives bring to the table. These include being able to better inform, enlighten and educate the public regarding atrocity prevention, thereby strengthening nationally owned prevention architectures, complementary to existing regional and multilateral efforts. It also fits squarely into the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, emphasizing that addressing hate speech requires a coordinated response that tackles the root causes and drivers of hate speech, as well as its impact on victims and societies more broadly.<sup>1</sup>

The research on which this report is based provides an African-centred review of the contexts characterizing both the Covid-19 pandemic and elections as atrocity crime triggers in Africa. Specific information on the nature of misinformation, fake news and related hate speeches was sought in three pilot countries, Cameroon, South Sudan and Nigeria. The research had a two-pronged approach. The first was the correlation between elections-related hate speech and atrocity crimes, which was brought to the fore using Cameroon as a case study. The second explored Nigeria and South Sudan cases to tease out the dynamics of Covid-19 and hate speech-related communication.

Specifically, this report was based on extensive consultations, interviews and a desk review held between 12 October 2020 and 14 November 2020. The virtual and physical interviews were held mainly to validate the information from the desk review and possibly obtain new data from local NGOs, health-care practitioners and grassroots organizations. Evidence from the different communities in this study indicates that misinformation, fake news and related hate speech associated with Covid-19 in South Sudan and Nigeria are expressions of latent and manifest conflicts that persists between different groups within and across societies. Fundamentally, Covid-19 occurs within the intersection of pre-existing multiple tensions and differences, which the pandemic itself continues to reinforce.

Research participants were unanimous in their opinion that technologies have transformative power, presenting different opportunities and challenges. They therefore call for urgent regulatory and non-regulatory mechanisms to counter the production, dissemination and impact of hateful messages suitable to address health the pandemic and elections.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml>

## Introduction

---

Fake news, large-scale disinformation, deliberate misleading information and outright hate speech have become major violence triggers in the world. In particular election seasons are prime periods when deliberate disinformation or misinformation takes place. The 2016 and 2020 US Presidential elections, Britain's exit from the European Union, Russian involvement in Ukraine, 2015 general elections in Nigeria and the 2013 and 2017 elections in Kenya all have the components of fake news. However, the spiral emergence of Covid-19, starting in the last quarter of 2019, has generated another level of disinformation, misinformation and outright hate speech. With the Covid-19 pandemic emergence, a broad range of disparaging expressions against certain individuals and groups has grown. Scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatization and the use of derogatory language on individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian, or belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and foreigners, have been used to vilify people as responsible for spreading the virus.<sup>2</sup> Regrettably, most of these actions are grounded in misinformation and fake news.

The attendant surge of Covid-19 in itself poses human security risks to many populations, including already fragile and vulnerable communities and the negative influence of fake news and misinformation has exacerbated the risks. The unprecedented threat of Covid-19 has shaken the most stable economies of the world and also reduced the pace at which weaker economies are being transformed. The African continent therefore became a source of global concerns in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic coupled with persisting issues such as electoral violence. In relation to Covid-19, the World Health Organization (WHO) and many other public health stakeholders, including atrocity prevention actors, have emphasized the likely bigger consequences of uncontrolled Covid-19 interventions in Africa.

In one of the UN Secretary-General's public addresses regarding Covid-19, he stressed the need to tackle hate, xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering manifesting through the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The UN subsequently notes that while hate-related speech is often spread by private individuals, its consequences are most severe when it is propagated by political leaders, public officials, religious leaders and other influencers, or when it is part of concerted efforts by individuals or groups to spread hate or incite violence.<sup>4</sup> There are further genuine fears associated with Covid-19-related hate speech and fake news intersection with election periods in Africa. The fear is not far-fetched as the virus outbreak in some cases complicated the conduct of elections in Africa, America and elsewhere, prompting postponements, suspicions and uncertainties among political parties and their loyalists.<sup>5</sup> Covid-19 also has created openings for leaders to exploit fears and tighten their grips on power.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Posetti, J. and Bontcheva, K. 2020. Disinfodemic: Dissecting responses to COVID-19 disinformation. UNESCO [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic\\_dissecting\\_responses\\_covid19\\_disinformation.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_dissecting_responses_covid19_disinformation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> António Guterres. COVID-19: Secretary-General's Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 Hate Speech. *Africarenewal*. 8 May 2020 <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/covid-19-secretary-generals-global-appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

<sup>6</sup> Darren Taylor. How COVID Is Affecting Elections in Africa. *VOANews*. 3 June 2020 <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/how-covid-affecting-elections-africa>.

Various empirical studies have been conducted into fake news, large-scale disinformation and hate speech in Nigeria,<sup>7</sup> and beyond. Some of the studies (Citron and Norton, 2011;<sup>8</sup> Benesch, 2014;<sup>9</sup> Cherian, 2016;<sup>10</sup> Bennett and Livingston, 2018;<sup>11</sup> SSRC, 2020<sup>12</sup>) consistently concluded that fake news and hate speech are part of the long-term history enablers and triggers of conflict and violence. While efforts are being made to mitigate the negative consequences of fake news and hate speech among journalists, policymakers are at a crossroads when reckoning with the scale of the problem across different digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and many more.

However, the approach presented here is a radical one, but commensurate with the GAAMAC's approach to issues relating to atrocity crimes prevention. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, GAAMAC has conducted a number of regional and thematic focused webinars for members of its community to engage, discuss and share good practices in the area of pandemic-focused atrocity prevention and response, including hate-related speech. One such series of four high-level online conversations was named Decoding Hate Speech and brought together leading voices to discuss the linkages between hate speech, technology and atrocity prevention.<sup>13</sup> The G-AWG remained active during the pandemic holding periodic meetings to plan and highlight strengthening atrocity crimes prevention in Africa.

The report of this empirical study provides regional and country level atrocity crimes prevention actors and other related stakeholders in human rights and human security with a synopsis of attendant issues for consideration to address hate speech, misinformation and fake news in the context of the health pandemic. As a global state-led coalition of government and non-governmental entities, GAAMAC has been identifying and sharing best practices and creative ideas related to atrocity crimes prevention and responses. GAAMAC does this by bringing people, organizations and institutions together to compare their experiences and also support one another in an exercise that Jim Waller classified as "Confronting Evil", which is about our collective will to engage and prevent mass atrocity.<sup>14</sup>

To inform this study, G-AWG commissioned these case studies of insights on how misinformation, hate speech and scapegoating trigger or contribute to atrocity crimes manifestation within pandemic periods in selected African countries of Cameroon, Nigeria and South Sudan. Using purposive sampling information on the specific experiences of local community members, the research was conducted between 12 October 2020 and 14 November 2020 using virtual interviews in South Sudan and physical and virtual interviews in Cameroon and Nigeria to (i) identify the nature and dynamics of Covid-19 and or election-

---

7 Pate, U. & Ibrahim, A. 2019. Fake News, Hate Speech and Nigeria's Struggle for Democratic Consolidation: A Conceptual Review in In book: Handbook of Research on Politics in the Computer Age (pp.89-112) Edition: 2020Chapter: 6. Published by IGI Global. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336145125\\_Fake\\_News\\_Hate\\_Speech\\_and\\_Nigeria's\\_Struggle\\_for\\_Democratic\\_Consolidation\\_A\\_Conceptual\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336145125_Fake_News_Hate_Speech_and_Nigeria's_Struggle_for_Democratic_Consolidation_A_Conceptual_Review)

8 Citron, D. K. & Norton, H. 2011. Intermediaries and Hate Speech: Fostering Digital Citizenship for Our Information Age. *Boston University Law Review* 91: 1435–1484. [https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/fac\\_pubs/1056/](https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/fac_pubs/1056/)

9 USHMM, 2014. Countering Dangerous Speech, Protecting Free Speech: Practical Strategies to Prevent Genocide Report of the 2014 Sudikoff Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar. <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20150512-sudikoff-report.pdf>

10 Cherian, G. 2016. *Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

11 Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. 2018. The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 122–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>

12 Udupa, S., Gagliardone, I., Deem, A. & Csuka, L. 2020. Hate Speech, Information Disorder, and Conflict. SSRC. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new\\_publication\\_3/the-field-of-disinformation-democratic-processes-and-conflict-prevention-a-scan-of-the-literature.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/the-field-of-disinformation-democratic-processes-and-conflict-prevention-a-scan-of-the-literature.pdf)

13 GAAMAC Online series: Decoding Hate Speech <https://gaamac.org/web-pages/view/22>

14 Waller, J. 2002. *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*. New York, Oxford.

related misinformation, fake news and hate speech in Cameroon, South Sudan and Nigeria; (ii) categorize the direct and indirect victims of Covid-19 and election-related misinformation, fake news and hate speech including the religious component in Burundi, Cameroon, Nigeria and South Sudan; and (iii) classify within the public health pandemic the preventive strategies and areas of elections capacity building, suitable for addressing atrocity crime triggers of the at-risk population. Beyond the data elicited from countries' case studies, additional information was retrieved from secondary sources that included a desktop review of policy documents and media interviews, including some webinar transcripts of the GAAMAC Decoding Hate Speech series. The case studies' findings on South Sudan and Nigeria are incorporated into this special report.

This empirical research reflects one of the G-AWG's many action points developed and designed within the Covid-19 pandemic period. GAAMAC IV meeting was initially scheduled to be held in The Hague in November 2020 but has been postponed to November 2021, owing to Covid-19. Such research remains necessary to recognize, monitor, collect data and analyse trends on Covid-19-related hate speech, at national and global level, to support effective responses. The report consists of information that clarifies and provides local communities' understanding of fake news and hate speech; the perceptions of people regarding Covid-19; why it is difficult for people to dissociate from fake news and hate speech-related communication; the direct and indirect victims of Covid-19-related misinformation; women's roles in preventing misinformation associated with Covid-19; and the larger community level efforts to prevent and address the questions of hate speech and fake news.

## **Understanding Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech**

Against the backdrop of mitigating-related atrocity crimes, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) maintains that to prevent escalations and outbursts of violence and conflict, the world needs to understand how violent actions are triggered. One of the ways to understand this is what FDFA classified as adaptive anticipation, a process of forecasting based on an awareness of scientific trends and a dialogue about their implications among diverse and multidisciplinary communities.<sup>15</sup> Adaptive anticipation requires understanding and being able to define or classify key terms relating to the subject matter. In this report such terminologies that require understanding and definitions are fake news, misinformation and hate speech.

According to Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, fake news is “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”.<sup>16</sup> Whereas, Wardle and Derakhshan explain that misinformation consists of information that is false, but not necessarily created with the intention of causing harm, and that it is important to differentiate messages that are created, produced or distributed with intention to do harm from those that are not.<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of more clarity, in this report we would adopt the definition of misinformation described as “cases in which people's beliefs about factual matters are not supported by

---

<sup>15</sup> Preventing Atrocities; Towards New Paradigms? 2020. Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). [https://gaamac.org/media-uploads/resource-library/Atrocities%20%E2%80%94%20Genocide/Politorbis\\_68\\_1\\_2020\\_-\\_Atrocity\\_prevention.pdf](https://gaamac.org/media-uploads/resource-library/Atrocities%20%E2%80%94%20Genocide/Politorbis_68_1_2020_-_Atrocity_prevention.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. 2017. Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2): 211–236. <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>

<sup>17</sup> Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. 2017. Information Disorder: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy-Making, Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-forresearch/168076277c>

clear evidence and expert opinion”.<sup>18</sup> As for the third concept, hate speech, it is indeed a complicated concept with no known universally accepted definition. Brittan Heller and Larry Magid, however, describe hate speech as any form of expression intended to vilify, humiliate or incite hatred against a group or class of people. It can occur offline or online or both. It can be communicated using words, symbols, images, memes, emojis and video.<sup>19</sup>

To further clarify the three concepts of fake news, misinformation and hate speech particularly in the context of Africa and our report, the Chair of the Kenya National Committee on the Prevention of Genocide, Jamila Mohammed, provided the following explanations that help to put the concepts in better perspective.<sup>20</sup>

**Fake news** – The creation and dissemination of news that has not actually taken place. For instance, pictures from past incidents of violence are circulated to insinuate that the violence is taking place currently. The sole purpose of fake news is to mislead the target audience. This mostly happens during critical moments, such as political campaigns or election periods, and it serves to polarize communities or groups against each other. Currently, fake news has rooted itself in the emotionally charged Covid-19 pandemic period.

**Misinformation** – Unlike fake news, misinformation may occur without the intention of misleading the target audience. However, it entails the dissemination of false information, or sometimes the lack of sharing certain information, which results in the society being disinformed. A good example may be wrong additions of election statistics. Although mostly unintentional, misinformation has as severe an impact as fake news.

**Hate speech** – These are remarks made by influential speakers with a considerable audience whose aim is to incite feelings of hate against a group.

Misinformation and disinformation about health topics is neither new nor unique as pandemic or health-related issues. However, misinformation concerning Covid-19 attracted a great deal of attention with much of the initial research focusing on the types, origins and the spread of the virus.<sup>21</sup> Academic, health industry and journalistic accounts have examined the propagation of Covid-19 disinformation by state actors,<sup>22</sup> including the prevalence of Covid-19 conspiracy theories and why people believe such tales.<sup>23</sup> There have been some data as well on the spread of misinformation on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter<sup>24</sup> as well as

---

<sup>18</sup> Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., Richey, S. & Freed, G. L. 2014. Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial. *Pediatrics* 133(4), e835–e842. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2365>

<sup>19</sup> Heller, B. & Magid, L. The Parent’s and Educator’s Guide to Combating Hate Speech. <https://www.connectsafely.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Hate-Speech-8.5x11.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Mohammed, J. Chair, Kenya National Committee on the Prevention of Genocide, KNC personal communication, 24 November 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Brennan, J. S., Simon, F. M., Howard, P. N. & Nielsen, R. K. 2020. Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation. RISJ Factsheet. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>

<sup>22</sup> Swan, B. W. 2020. State Report: Russian, Chinese and Iranian Disinformation Narratives Echo One Another. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-china-iran-disinformation-coronavirus-state-department-193107>

<sup>23</sup> Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A. M., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Funchion, J., Everett, C., Wuchty, S., Premaratne, K. & Murthi, M. 2020. Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories? *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/why-do-people-believe-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/>

<sup>24</sup> Hollowood, E. & Mostrous, A. 2020. Fake News in the Time of C-19. Tortoise. <https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2020/03/23/the-infodemic-fake-news-coronavirus/content.html>

interventions to counteract misinformation on social media.<sup>25</sup> What is obvious is that, whether in public health or other public matters, these three concepts are essentially dangerous to the wellbeing of humanity. Fake news, misinformation and hate speech have at one point or the other resulted in distrust in authorities and impediments to the public good. From the point of view of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), hate speech lies in a complex nexus with freedom of expression; individual, group and minority rights; and concepts of dignity, equality and safety of person.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the voices from the grassroots communities in South Sudan also emphasize that hate speech in the country can be described as any communication in speech, writing or behaviour that seeks to attack or use any pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or group based on who they are; this often based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or any other identity factor.<sup>27</sup> Nearly everyone who provided definitions of the three concepts agreed that hate speech and related fake news or misinformation are malicious, and they can cause havoc, confusion and conflict within a society or any given environment.

## **Pandemic and Dimensions of Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech in Africa**

Both the pandemic and elections involve opportunities and risks. In the case of the pandemic, what opportunities exist? From the WHO's 2020 estimate, more than 80 percent of the urban population are exposed to detrimental outdoor air, with air pollution killing about 7 million people every year.<sup>28</sup> However, largely because people stayed home during the pandemic, there was a significant improvement in air quality, especially in hard-hit areas such as Wuhan, China, as well as in northern Italy and a number of metropolitan areas throughout the USA.<sup>29</sup> Alongside public health and economic costs, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has also resulted in a broad range of social harms. Prominent among the latter has been a sharp increase in incidents of hate speech targeting members of various ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, at the basic level, elections offer golden opportunities to deepen the well-being of a nation. Pandemics and elections beyond offering opportunities also come with attendant risks which have proven vulnerable to hate speech.<sup>31</sup> Regrettably, fake news, misinformation and hate speech, particularly through social media, have increasingly threatened electoral integrity and citizens' trust in their democratic institutions.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G. & Rand, D. G. 2020. Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media: Experimental Evidence for a Scalable Accuracy-Nudge Intervention. *Psychological Science* 31(7): 770–80. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956797620939054>

<sup>26</sup> <http://en.unesco.org/system/files/244834e1.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Gonda Keffa, South Sudan, Zoom communication, 28 October 2020.

<sup>28</sup> WHO-World Health Organization. 2020. Air Pollution. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution>

<sup>29</sup> Khan, I., Shah, D. & Shah, S.S. COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Positive Impacts on Environment: An Updated Review. 2021. *International Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 18: 521–530. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13762-020-03021-3>

<sup>30</sup> Benier, K., Bonotti, M. & Collings-Hall, J. 2020. Hate Speech in the Time of COVID-19. Research Brief 3. Monash Migration and Inclusion Center. [https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Hate\\_Speech\\_in\\_the\\_Time\\_of\\_COVID-19/12721133](https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Hate_Speech_in_the_Time_of_COVID-19/12721133)

<sup>31</sup> Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies. 2018. IFES. [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_ifes\\_countering\\_hate\\_speech\\_white\\_paper\\_final.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2017_ifes_countering_hate_speech_white_paper_final.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity: IFES Working Paper. 2019. [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_working\\_paper\\_social\\_media\\_disinformation\\_and\\_electoral\\_integrity\\_august\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_working_paper_social_media_disinformation_and_electoral_integrity_august_2019.pdf)

Nigeria's Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, was quoted as saying that beyond damaging Nigeria's reputation, fake news was destroying the media industry and sowing national disunity. He described fake news as a "time bomb" waiting to explode and misinformation and hate speech as threats to peace, unity, security and corporate existence of Nigerians.<sup>33</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic, and its potential to serve as a trigger for mass violence, makes our shared work of atrocity prevention more urgent than ever.

Turning to the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, atrocity crimes "are not spontaneous or isolated events; they are processes, with histories, precursors and triggering factors which, combined, enable their commission".<sup>34</sup> Atrocity crimes are processes<sup>35</sup> where pandemic and elections can act as triggers capable of transforming general risk into an increased likelihood that atrocity crimes will be committed.<sup>36</sup> The risk factors described in the UN Framework, if left unchecked either in pandemic or election situations, can start an escalatory process that may lead to mass atrocities. Of course, many accelerating factors are identifiable and modifiable (for instance, regime transitions, gradual isolationism, marked increase in unemployment, failed peace agreements, an upsurge in hate speech, regional destabilization); triggering factors are single events typically difficult to predict or identify in advance. The range of triggers is broad and diverse, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political assassinations, coups, environmental crises, legal judgments, epidemics and global pandemics.<sup>37</sup>

To understand more about fake news, misinformation and hate speech in times of crisis, we must first understand the motivations that often trigger them. Roussos and Dovidio observed that an individual's association as either an ingroup or outgroup member including intergroup bias, created by ideas of supremacy, identity or threat, has the potential to translate into hate and violence.<sup>38</sup>

## **Why People Share Covid-19 Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech-Related Communication**

The BBC<sup>39</sup> identifies 10 reasons why fake news, misinformation and hate speech matter as issues of public concern. These are:

- Fake news erodes trust.
- Misinformation builds and feeds on community divisions.
- Fake news threatens the notion of truth.
- Misinformation and fake news are toxic for mainstream media.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, P. 2019. Tackling Fake News: The Case of Nigeria. ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/tackling-fake-news-case-nigeria-23151>

<sup>34</sup> United Nations, 2014 Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention.

<sup>35</sup> (ibid., p. 4)

<sup>36</sup> (ibid., p. 5–6)

<sup>37</sup> Waller, J. 2020. Policy Challenge Brief Implications of COVID-19 for Atrocity. <http://www.auschwitzinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/AIPG-Pandemic-Policy-Challenge-Brief.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Roussos, G. & Dovidio, J. F. 2020. Tolerating Hate: Racial Bias, Freedom of Speech, and Responses to Hate Crimes, in Sternberg, R. J. (ed.), *Perspectives on Hate: How It Originates, Develops, Manifests, and Spreads*. American Psychological Association, pp. 225–249. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000180-011> on 3 May 2021.

<sup>39</sup> What We've Learnt About Fake News in Africa. BBC. 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46138284>

- Citizens are less able to make decisions based on facts.
- Fake news is toxic for public discourse.
- Fake news, misinformation and hate speech are threats to human health and well-being.
- In worst-case scenario, fake news fuels hate speech and leads to violence and death.
- Fake news, misinformation and hate speech distort democratic processes.
- Fake news weaponizes information making it lethal for human consumption.

Media consumption is by itself individual and more often than not **trust is at the centre of fake news, misinformation and hate speech**. It was observed that people care more about who the sender is than the source. As long as the sender is someone they trust, as opposed to a stranger or unknown, many simply trust a story to be true or accurate. As such, fake news and hate speech-related communication are usually generated or disseminated by sources held to be respectable and trustworthy by the target audience.<sup>40</sup> **Sharing news and information is socially validating**. By becoming the first to share information with a group of friends, people can prove to the group that they are aware. Hence the saying that, reading is hard, but sharing is easy. Amidst other socio-political differences, **Covid-19 manifested itself in already sharply divided societies**. However, it is accompanied by specific fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories. The three pilot countries of Cameroon, South Sudan and Nigeria are already charged or volatile environments where groups are in latent or even open conflicts with each other. In such scenarios, Covid-19 and elections-related fake news, misinformation and hate speech appeal less to the intellect and more to the emotion. **The situation reinforces the role of the interpreter** as central to any attempt to understand the spread of fake news, misinformation and hate speech. **General distrust of elites, leaders and politicians**, absence or most often **late arrival of official information on issues**, create vacuums conveniently filled by rumours and disinformation while **low capacity of the media to gather, process and verify immediate and distant information in real time** are some of the reasons that allow fake news to spread in Nigeria.<sup>41</sup> An important area of misinformation in Nigeria was the extent and degree of stigma faced by people who had Covid-19 and later recovered. People were very sceptical about mingling with such survivors. To address this, various government agencies and taskforces embarked on a robust risk communication and community engagement strategy working with the Islamic scholars, imams, pastors in churches and also with traditional rulers to serve as champions of an anti-Covid-19 stigmatization workforce. The message was distributed that Covid-19 is neither like leprosy, which leaves patients deformed, nor HIV infection, where a person may suffer social stigmatization.

However, the following additional information was identified by the interview respondents as reasons why it was difficult for people to dissociate from Covid-19 fake news, misinformation and hate speech in both South Sudan and Nigeria:

---

<sup>40</sup> Mohammed, J. Chair, Kenya National Committee on the Prevention of Genocide, KNC personal communication, 24 November 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Pate, U. A. 2018. Fake News, Hate Speech and Nigeria's Democratic Sustenance. PowerPoint slides of a presentation at a colloquium to mark the Press Week of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, Plateau State Chapter, Jos, pp. 6–10.

## DILEMMA AND CONFUSION OVER WHAT COVID-19 PROTOCOLS ENTAIL

Hawa Adam, a women's rights activist from Central Equatoria State, who serves as acting chairperson for the women's association YECONT in Yei River County, explained that the confusion associated with Covid-19 serves as motivation for people to share fake news and misinformation. "When Covid-19 first arrived, government officials, health workers and nearly everyone were uncertain of the best approach to address the pandemic leaving room for different interpretations of interventions and needed protocols".<sup>42</sup> The confusion was also manifested in Kano, Nigeria. Nura Ahmad Muhammad explains that "some people who were tested and found positive and then isolated made a video saying that they are well and this Covid-19 was nothing but scam as there were no medications in the isolation center but they were just kept there to eat food." This video not only added to existing confusion about Covid-19 in Nigeria but further created doubts in the minds of a lot of people in Kano that Covid-19 was not true.<sup>43</sup> Such thinking occurred in many parts of Nigeria with many people not adhering to the necessary guidelines. At the market, parking lots, and worship centres, for a long time after the pandemic, in Nigeria, you hardly see people putting on their face mask. As new confirmed cases were on the rise daily, many Nigerians did not behave as if anything was happening in their domain, constantly flouting preventive measures with reckless abandon.

## LACK OF ACCESS TO THE RIGHT SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND INFORMATION MISMANAGEMENT

In South Sudan, for example, only very few could access the media (both traditional and digital) and whatever those with access to the media obtained, they quickly spread it on the ground to those without access. In both South Sudan and Nigeria, the lack of access to the right sources of information and the misuse of the media by the few who had access contributed to the growing circulation of fake news, misinformation and hate speech. The influence of mobile technology, especially mobile phones with the internet, was also described as problematic. This created the situation where anyone could create information at random and then disseminate it to people who are ignorant but have capacity to spread such information within the shortest period of time, without double-checking the facts. Beyond that, there were youths with limited access to social gatherings where health-care workers or other entities could promote mass awareness. Since most of the people in this category did not get access to first-hand information, they constituted a channel of misinformation and fake news.

## LOW LITERACY LEVEL

To the vulnerable women and the elderly who cannot read and write in both South Sudan and Nigeria, it was difficult for them to get first-hand information about Covid-19. When Covid-19 arrived, the information about it was disseminated in English but there were many local people who did not read or understand the language. It took a while for the Covid-19 information

---

<sup>42</sup> Mama Hauwa Adam, acting chairperson for YECONT women's association, South Sudan, Zoom communication, 27 October 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Nura Ahmad Muhammad, Kano, in-depth interview, 4 November 2020.

to be translated into local dialects, but such information was preceded by fake news and misinformation at village level and grassroots level. The low level of literacy also made many susceptible to unusual practices. Some, in the hope that the information came from trusted sources, went to the extent of believing that taking hot tea or hot water or tea without sugar would make them immune to Covid-19.

At one point in South Sudan, a number of people were moving around with sachets of alcohol, spreading the notion that it was a medicine for Covid-19, and once consumed, people would not be affected. The idea was contrary to medical and scientific evidence. Consuming alcohol will not destroy the virus; in fact, its consumption is likely to increase health risks if a person becomes infected with the virus. This is because alcohol (at a concentration of at least 60 percent by volume) works as a disinfectant on the skin, but it has no such effect when ingested.<sup>44</sup> Such evidence of low literacy manifested as the prime reason why most people believed in fake news. For example, in Kajo Keji, where at some point there was no radio station nor mobile phone service networks.<sup>45</sup>

## Basic Misconceptions Regarding Covid-19 in South Sudan and Nigeria

---

How did local community members perceive Covid-19? What was the general understanding of people about Covid-19? In relation to misinformation and fake news in South Sudan, when Covid-19 started, many people did not believe in it. Others said it was a “white” man’s pandemic or virus. They looked at the black man and said this man, his skin and body’s immune system are very strong and that Covid-19 cannot affect a black man (or woman). Other fake news that came as a result of Covid-19 was that Cameroon, South Sudan and Nigeria are generally hot countries and Covid-19 does not exist in hot climates.

In South Sudan, there was a rumour that a child was born who told the people that the medicine for Covid-19 was taking tea without sugar.<sup>46</sup> Within a short time, people in Yei started taking tea without sugar, thinking it would give them immunity against Covid-19; people soon realized that it was fake news. There was also a popular believe in Nigeria that drinking locally made bitter herbs provided protection from Covid-19. Experiences from South Sudan and Nigeria are not so different from other climes, where the media reported deaths following the ingestion of alcoholic products, based on a mistaken belief that they will offer protection against the virus.<sup>47</sup>

Some even argued that if people take hot water with concentrated salt everyday early in the morning, they would free from Covid-19 or that Covid-19 would not attack them. In South Sudan, a girl child advocate recounted that some schoolgirls were erroneously informed by mischievous persons that if they did not get pregnant during this pandemic, they would no longer be fertile or able to get pregnant in the future. Such misconception and fake news circulated in rural communities across South Sudan. It took many interventions from trained civil society members to counter such misinformation by going on the radio to address different communities. Overall, across Nigeria and South Sudan, the misunderstandings and misperception of people regarding Covid-19 can be classified into the following eight categories:

---

<sup>44</sup> Kandola, A. 19 May 2020. Alcohol Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Medical News Today. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/alcohol-and-covid-19#immune-system>

<sup>45</sup> Gonda Keffa, SS, Zoom communication, 28 October 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Gonda Keffa, SS, Zoom communication, 28 October 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Alcohol and COVID-19: What You Need to Know. 2020. WHO. [https://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/437608/Alcohol-and-COVID-19-what-you-need-to-know.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/437608/Alcohol-and-COVID-19-what-you-need-to-know.pdf)

## 1. COVID-19 AS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED BY THE ELITE

A number of people erroneously believed Covid-19 is a politically motivated pandemic. In South Sudan, because the arrival of the virus coincided with delay in the formation of the government, many people simply concluded that Covid-19 was brought by government to delay the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) or truncate the fragile peace in the country.

## 2. COVID-19 AS DELIBERATE DISTRACTION BY THE WEST

Africans have always had pessimism for anything pro-West. Hence, some people believe that Covid-19 is a disease created by the West to confuse people in other parts of the world. In fact, many South Sudanese people questioned why Covid-19 arrived when their country was achieving a degree of stability. Many wrongly assumed the purpose of Covid-19 was to confuse the community, thereby forcing a lockdown to dissuade them from thinking about the peace process.

## 3. COVID-19 AS MONEY-MAKING VENTURE

The reality of Covid-19 was doubted by many who concluded it was merely a venture to make money for some people within their country. As the news of funds allocated by different agencies reached people who could not see any direct benefit for themselves, it was difficult to convince them that the Covid-19 was not a ploy to enrich a few privileged individuals and government officials. There were many scandals relating to Covid-19 palliative care in Nigeria that people began to loot warehouses and shops. At some people concluded that the more money that a state government needed, the more the increase in COVID-19 everyday cases in such state.

## 4. COVID-19 AS "WHITE PEOPLES" DISEASE THAT CANNOT SURVIVE IN HOT TROPICAL REGIONS

With the first wave of the virus not producing high fatality levels in Africa, there was an immediate perception that COVID 19 only affects "white people". People maintained; "it does not kill our people. It does not affect our own skin here in Africa. It is for the Europeans and Americans. Let them just continue to deal with it". This was how Asiki Forbet from South Sudan described people's perception in his country.<sup>48</sup> Such thinking was common across Africa before health-care workers truly understood Covid-19. A health-care worker in Kano explained that many of her colleagues were overly confident that the virus could not survive in higher temperatures such as those in northern Nigeria. The people in such environment adopted the slogan "babu corona" (no corona) telling themselves that if you live in northern Nigeria, you have low or no risk of even getting infected.

---

<sup>48</sup> Asiki Forbet, clinical officer, SS, Zoom communication, 24 October 2020.

## 5. COVID-19 ONLY KILLS THE RICH

The earliest victims of Covid-19 in South Sudan were travellers and high-class individuals, so it was quite easy for the average person to conclude that the sickness is for rich people and for those in the government and not for people who are poor.<sup>49</sup> They felt they were merely hearing figures from the media about government people. Since they did not see for themselves a friend, colleague or relative with Covid-19, or someone who had died as a result of the virus, it looked abstract and unreal to them.<sup>50</sup>

## 6. COVID-19 AS OLDER PEOPLE'S SICKNESS

A high percentage of people dying of the disease were older people. So for countries with a youthful population, many people had the perception that the disease only affected and killed older people. Most of the youth initially concluded that they could not die from this disease. This disease is not ours, they said.

## 7. COVID-19 IS NORMAL FLU, WHICH ANYONE CAN HAVE AND SURVIVE

As the publicity surrounding Covid-19 as well as the experience of people who have had the disease have shown, there are similarities with the common cold, flu and malaria that people are used to in Africa. Many people could not differentiate the disease from regular flu or malaria. Hence, they felt anybody could suffer from flu and recover from it. This made people take it very lightly and wonder why would a government would escalate issues regarding Covid-19 when it was just flu that could affect anybody.

## 8. COVID-19 IS LABORATORY-GENERATED DISEASE TO ELIMINATE CERTAIN POPULATIONS OF THE WORLD

The effect of fake news was to promote the view that the white man intentionally created Covid-19 in a laboratory just to kill people in the world. The perception that “these white people just want to kill us, the just made this disease so they will just kill us” was how Daniel Friday described the feeling among the people.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Mama Hauwa Adam, acting chairperson for YECONT women's association, SS, Zoom communication, 27 October 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Ladu Anthony Galadiho, SS, Zoom communication, 23 October 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Friday, SS, Zoom communication, 22 October 2020.

## Some Community Level Efforts to Prevent and Address Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech

From the larger East African community, four ways that community efforts played a role to prevent and address fake news, misinformation and hate speech were identified.

- Promotion of counter speech to tackle the hate speech. Concentrating social media with positive messages may dilute the misinformation and hate content that has been put online. Influencers stream positive messaging on any topic deemed to have been subject to misinformation, fake news or hate speech. The public is also encouraged to post positive messages.
- Campaigns to sensitize the public to check the facts in a message before forwarding or posting it on their social media handle. The Ministry of Health (Kenya) and the WHO are reliable fact-checking sources before a message is shared.<sup>52</sup>
- Campaigns to widely share how and where reports/complaints of any fake news and hate speech are to be lodged. In the Kenyan context, such a report/complaint should be made to the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, a government Commission that deals with hate speech management.
- Holding hate speech perpetrators, and their facilitators (such as WhatsApp group administrators) accountable for perpetuating or promoting hate speech.

There were also talks led by community groups about behavioural change programmes, such as the drama programmes, to educate people to be safe or reduce chances of infection. Covid-19 highlighted the need for more education and awareness about the pandemic. Some NGOs such as Yamora in Yei River county ran education programmes on peace-building and hate speech for youth and local leaders who had very little information on Covid-19.<sup>53</sup>

At the local level, health-care workers went on radio stations and talked about issues relating to Covid-19. Some groups also set up social mobilization teams who used social media platforms to talk about the pandemic, its spread and what people should do to prevent being infected or treatment in case of an infection. At some point, too, the religious organizations were trained on how to enlighten their members on the danger that Covid-19 poses to the community as a whole. By the virtue of the training, some religious leaders became advocates, passing basic information about Covid-19 to their followers.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> One can follow the five guidelines provided at <https://africacheck.org/factsheets/five-steps-to-fight-fake-news-and-false-information-on-whatsapp/>

<sup>53</sup> Justoson Victor Yuasa, SS, Zoom communication, 20 October 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Asiki Forbet, clinical officer, SS, Zoom communication, 24 October 2020.

## **Roles Associated with Women in Addressing and Preventing Misinformation, Fake News or Hate-Related Speech Associated with Covid-19**

Social media has revolutionized the role of women in the society. In no little measure, social media has proven potential for mobilizing attention on and providing accountability for women's rights, challenging discrimination and stereotypes.<sup>55</sup> While traditionally women were seen as playing a lesser role in reporting, social media has offered space to anyone who wants to engage with society to have a platforms. It was therefore not surprising from the research that women played an equal role to men in generating and spreading misinformation, as well as countering it.<sup>56</sup> In South Sudan, the discovery was that young women did not use social media in a proactive way to counter misinformation or fake news. Women focused more on issues which have to do with social affairs and love stories, without intentionally using social media to counter fake news and misinformation.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, a few women remained active especially on radio and at community levels to counter misinformation and fake news by having discussions on the radio and other forums organized to target fellow women. There was also a carryover of women's activism in tackling fake news and misinformation in churches, religious forums and market squares.<sup>58</sup> The involvement of women was made easy through the support of international organizations and their local partners where they engaged groups of women in basic preventive measures against Covid-19 and enlightened them on the processes through which the virus can spread. In no little time, women with children at home started ensuring that their children always maintained social distances and other protocols.<sup>59</sup> In the long run, women in South Sudan were useful in raising awareness of Coronavirus. Some did this by travelling through different villages on bicycles using megaphones with recorded messages about Coronavirus.<sup>60</sup>

## **The Direct and Indirect Victims and At-Risk Population of Covid-19-Related Fake News, Misinformation and Hate Speech**

In any giving situation where pandemic or election fake news, misinformation and hate speech fester, everyone is at risk. Regrettably, based on this research, it is apparent that the youth think they are not necessarily at any risk of getting the Coronavirus. Rather, they think the older people are at higher risk of getting Coronavirus because the youth believed immune systems of the elderly to be very weak and as such cannot fight the virus. While that appears to be true, it does not reflect the realities about the at-risk population. The youth due to their mobility are mostly at risk and they serve as vectors for the virus.

---

<sup>55</sup> Can Social Media Effectively Include Women's Voices in Decision-Making Processes?. 2015. OECD. [https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/DEV\\_socialmedia-issuespaper-March2015.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/DEV_socialmedia-issuespaper-March2015.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Mohammed, J. Chair, Kenya National Committee on the Prevention of Genocide, KNC personal communication, 24 November 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Friday, SS, Zoom communication, 22 October 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Hauwa Adam, acting chairperson for YECONT women's association, SS, Zoom communication, 27 October 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Gonda Keffa, SS, Zoom communication, 28 October 2020

<sup>60</sup> Ladu Galadiho, SS, Zoom communication, 23 October 2020

Overall, the community that lacks information about Coronavirus, especially the people who are not educated, is at a higher risk. A cursory look at South Sudan shows that the country has the lowest literacy rate in the world. Only 27 percent of the adult population can read and write.<sup>61</sup> South Sudan has approximately 2.8 million out-of-school children and more than 70 percent of the population above the age of 15 years is illiterate, with the majority of them being women.<sup>62</sup> Nigeria, meanwhile, has an illiteracy burden of around 40 percent as at 2018 (62.02 percent literacy rate). Irrespective of the literacy levels in both countries, it was observed that once misinformation is spread, it is like throwing a bomb in the air; it travels very fast without any verification.

An explanation was canvassed by Asiki Forbet<sup>63</sup> that people accessing the internet and social media are all at risk of receiving fake news, misinformation and hate speech about Covid-19. A population exposed to a lot of information on the social media is already endangered. An attempt to understand South Sudan's internet and social media landscape indicates there were 907,000 internet users in South Sudan as of January 2021. The internet penetration in the country stood at 8 percent, with close to 450,000 social media users. This suggests that the number of social media users in South Sudan was equivalent to 4 percent of the total population while the number of mobile connections in South Sudan in January 2021 was equivalent to 23.1 percent of the total population.<sup>64</sup> In all of these statistics, according to UNICEF, only about 8 percent of South Sudanese have access to the internet.<sup>65</sup> For Nigeria, there were 104.4 million internet users in the country as of January 2021, with internet penetration at 50 percent. Nigeria is believed to have 33 million social media users, equivalent to 15.8 percent of the total population. The number of mobile connections in Nigeria as of January 2021 was equivalent to 90 percent of the total population.<sup>66</sup>

Such access to the internet and social media allows people to seek information from unverifiable sources, thereby increasing the propagation of fake news and misinformation. If you do not follow the right websites, particularly websites such as WHO/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Africa or CDC America, it becomes a big challenge to get good information. People who follow the wrong sites are therefore at high risk of getting fake news and also sharing it.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> South Sudan Promoting Adult Literacy to Maintain Peace, 8 November 2019. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/south-sudan-promoting-adult-literacy-maintain-peace>

<sup>62</sup> South Sudan commemorates International Literacy Day (ILD). <https://en.unesco.org/news/south-sudan-commemorates-international-literacy-day-ild>

<sup>63</sup> Asiki Forbet clinical officer, SS, Zoom communication, 24 October 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Digital 2021: South Sudan. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-south-sudan>

<sup>65</sup> South Sudan's Social Media Landscape. December 2020. <https://defyhatenow.org/south-sudans-social-media-landscape-december-2020/>

<sup>66</sup> Digital 2021: Nigeria. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-nigeria>

<sup>67</sup> Asiki Forbet, clinical officer, SS, Zoom communication, 24 October 2020.

## Areas of Capacity Development Suitable for Addressing Pandemic-Triggered Atrocity Crimes

There is a pointer from both South Sudan and Nigeria that capacity building needs to start at the grassroots level largely because people at the grassroots lack information and knowledge.<sup>68</sup> There are also issues relating to lack of institutional mechanisms or regulatory institutions in relation to atrocities committed against civilians. Currently, South Sudan has some institutions, such as Ministry of Peace Building, Commission for Truth, Healing and Reconciliation, which are all active at the national level, but less effective at the grassroots. The replication of these mechanisms and institutions at state and then county or local government levels are areas to address for capacity building and development.<sup>69</sup>

From both Nigeria and South Sudan, the desire to tackle rumour control came out prominently in favour of capacity building. Indeed, if the community can be informed or trained on how to control or manage rumours, fake news and misinformation can be reduced. After all, most fake news comes from rumours. In order to prevent fake news and hate speech, we need to have a provision where somebody can verify information. Selected community members should be trained to go on radio stations or different platforms to clarify some of this misinformation and rumours, thereby giving people opportunity to questions and get clarification in a language they can understand, rather than just depending on English.<sup>70</sup>

For effective strengthening of systems to counter fake news and misinformation in Nigeria and South Sudan, the issue of insecurity must also be tackled. As insecurity persisted in South Sudan for instance, partners only circulate themselves within one region, neglecting the other areas, leaving people more vulnerable to fake news and misinformation.

Fighting misinformation or hate speech requires collective responsibilities. This also means that policy frameworks to prevent and punish fake news, misinformation and hate speech need to be developed by each country. Once somebody is propagating hate speech or misleading rumours and misinformation, such people need to be questioned and held accountable through a court of law.

It was against such a backdrop that Zainab Ahmad in Kano, Nigeria, stated that propagators of fake news and misinformation need to be punished. In Zainab's words, "without retribution, it would be very hard in Nigeria for policy makers to go on with countering hate speech. There is that need for a punitive measure to be developed so that it becomes a working tool for any person who commit a crime related hate speech. By doing that, we would see something different but without putting this in place, it would be very hard."<sup>71</sup>

While Africa continues to reel from unprecedented Covid-19 challenges, another area that needed support to counter fake news, misinformation and hate speech was the area of social mobilization. How do we improve the way that accurate information gets to the community? What kind of messages do we pass to the community?

<sup>68</sup> Ladu Anthony Galadiho, SS, Zoom communication, 23 October 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Friday, SS, Zoom communication, 22 October 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Justoson Victor Yuasa, SS, Zoom communication, 20 October 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Zainab Naseer Ahmad, Kano, in-depth interview, 4 November 2020.

As to the challenges in addressing misinformation, fake news or hate-related speech associated with Covid-19,<sup>72</sup> the following were mentioned:

- Lack of requisite technological advancement and expertise to identify, track and counter hate speech particularly through artificial intelligence.
- Lack of clear policies and legislations addressing fake news and hate speech, particularly drawing the line between free speech and hate speech.
- Limited judicial precedents in common law that countries can learn from.
- Fluid identity of online users. Some users call themselves by pseudonyms.

The international nature of social media and the differences in jurisdictions. It can be accessed by people from anywhere in the world. A post can be written in the US for instance to wreak havoc in Kenya. While it may be considered hate speech in Kenya, it may not be considered so in the US. Also, if hate speech is committed on Twitter, which is a US registered company, Kenyan authorities may not have leverage over a post that may not have contravened Twitter's guidelines but may well be fake news or even hate speech.

## **Conclusion**

Covid-19 supplied the opportunity for different actors with a range of motivations and goals to produce a variety of types of misinformation, fake news and hate speech. The study data and analysis indicated that misinformation about Covid-19 comes in many forms, from many sources and makes many claims. Like in South Sudan and Nigeria, everyone in Africa can be said to be at risk of pandemic-related fake news and hate speech. As such addressing the spread of misinformation, fake news and hate speech in relation to a pandemic requires sustained and coordinated efforts that must take into consideration the media, communities, grassroots, youth and women's groups, as well as telecommunication companies and public authorities.

Such an holistic approach will not only help the public to understand the pandemic but would ultimately go a long way to mitigate the risk of atrocity crimes. Continental, regional and national policymakers should therefore factor into their atrocity-prevention strategies the multiple and progressive roles that local and community-based grassroots actors can play. This must be done without forgetting the influential role of women and social media. Peace promotion, media education and inter-religious dialogue were some of the social initiatives that provided opportunities to engage with the grassroots.

Such research as this is only a starting point, with subsequent follow-up research needed, both on the legal and policy implications of fake news, misinformation and hate speech, and the need to punish violators.

---

<sup>72</sup> J. Mohammed, Chair, Kenya National Committee on the Prevention of Genocide, KNC personal communication, 24 November 2020.

# LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 
- In order to tackle fake news, misinformation and hate-related speech, non-regulatory options that emphasize the importance of stakeholders' outreach and collaboration must be prioritized. To make significant progress in tackling fake news, misinformation and hate-related speech will be contingent upon forming strategic partnerships and alliances, and working collaboratively. There would be the need to leverage the existing mandates, capabilities and resources of government institutions, independent agencies and civil society.
  - Encourage people to speak up against fake news, misinformation and hate-related speech. Government officials and religious leaders, for example, must make conscious efforts to use different platforms to canvass against fake news and highlight its consequences, which, in turn, can help to mobilize a public response.
  - The important takeaway from this research on Covid-19 was the need for governments across Africa to build trust in their citizens and learn to provide timely and accurate information that dispels myths and misconceptions, thereby reducing the people's vulnerability to atrocity risks.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M.** 2017. Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2): 211–236.

**Amazeen, M. & Bucy, E.** 2019. Conferring Resistance to Digital Disinformation: The Inoculating Influence of Procedural News Knowledge. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 63(3): 415–432.

**CARE.** *South Sudan Peacebuilding Manual*. [https://www.carenederland.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CARE-Peacebuilding-manual-v0.2\\_Final.pdf](https://www.carenederland.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CARE-Peacebuilding-manual-v0.2_Final.pdf)

**CDD.** 2018b. How Fake News Threatens Our Democracy. Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Abuja, Nigeria. <http://www.cddwestafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Democracy-and-Disinformation.pdf>

**Ibrahim, A. M., & Pate, U. A.** 2019. In a Democratized Media Context What ` Hoax Can Do, a Misinformation Can Do Even Worse: Influences of Fake News on Democratic Processes in Nigeria. *New Media and Mass Communication*, 79: 10–17.

**ISS.** Sustaining Peace. Harnessing the Power of South Sudanese Women, East Africa Report, November 2019, p. 12.

**Jimoh, A.** 7 August 2018. Fake News Can Lead to Civil War – Lai Mohammed. *Daily Trust*. <https://dailytrust.com/2019-fake-news-can-lead-to-civil-war-lai-mohammed-264677>

**Kazeem, Y.** 29 November 2018. Nigerian Media Houses Are Forming a Coalition to Combat Fake News Ahead of Next Year's Elections. *Quartz Africa*. <http://qz.com/africa/1478737/fake-news-mediacollaborate-ahead-of-nigeria-2019election/>

**SecDev Foundation.** 2017. Women, Technology & Partnerships – Countering Internet Usage By Terrorists. Ottawa, Canada <https://preventviolentextremism.info/sites/default/files/women-technology-partnership-countering-internet-usage-by-terrorists.pdf>

**Smidt, J. L., Lewis, C. & Schmidt, R.** 2017. Here's a Running List of Misinformation About Hurricane Irma. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/janelytvynenko/irma-misinfo/>.

UNHMM Hate Speech and Group Targeted Violence [http://www.genocide-watch.com/images/OutsideResearch\\_Hate\\_Speech\\_and\\_Group-Targeted\\_Violence.pdf](http://www.genocide-watch.com/images/OutsideResearch_Hate_Speech_and_Group-Targeted_Violence.pdf)

**United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.** 25 October 2016. South Sudan: Dangerous Rise in Ethnic Hate Speech Must Be Reined in – Zeid. <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20757&LangID=E>



**GAAMAC**

**GAAMAC Support Office**  
C/o Centre Jean-Jacques Gautier  
10 route de Ferney  
1202 Genève (Suisse)

 **+41 (0)22 552 11 42**

 **contact@gaamac.org**

 **@GAAMAC\_org**

 **Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC)**