



## Communication and Cultural Interferences

### Social Media and the COVID-19 Disinfodemic in the Digital Space: Disempowering the Public and Threatening Public Health

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**Abstract:** Social media have become one of the fastest platforms in terms of providing the public with timely news coverage on disasters and many other things. However, little is known about the nature and direction of the influence of the explosion of disinfodemic in the digital space. This article seeks to establish the extent of COVID-19 disinfodemic in the cyber sphere, with particular reference to the African context. A purposive (judgemental) sampling of archival data was done, followed by a thematic content analysis. The findings of the study indicated misconceptions about the origins of the virus, as well as the diagnosis, treatment, prevention and cure of the COVID-19. False and misleading statistics about the COVID-19 disease were also noted. This article is valuable as it does not only bring together the role of social media during the COVID-19 in the African continent, but it also calls for the reconceptualisation of social media and advocates for the dissemination of information in a responsible way.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; disinfodemic; social media; media ethics; Africa

## 1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Although information disorder is not a new phenomenon, there has been an explosion of disinfodemic in the digital space. Information disorder is a collective term, which refers to misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. On the other hand, disinfodemic is a new term coined by United Nations Educational

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Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to refer to the excessive dimensions of falsehoods driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020). The proliferation of internet usage and social media platforms in the digital era has brought fundamental changes to the way information is produced, communicated and consumed. Today, social media have become the fastest platforms in terms of providing the public with timely news coverage on disasters and many other things (Acquaye & Ofosu-Boateng, 2021). The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, is a case in point where social media are at the forefront in terms of information dissemination. The COVID-19 disease has become a worldwide rampant such that no one is immune to it, and as a result, has become a global concern as demonstrated by emergent media coverage and public interests (Liu, Kuo & Shih, 2020). However, the lack of early disclosure of the origins of COVID-19 has seen history repeating itself in terms of information disorder about the pandemic (liu, et al. 2020).

Furthermore, in the midst of all the efforts aimed at ending the spread of the virus, some individuals and organisations are misrepresenting the facts about the virus-spreading false information about COVID-19, thanks to the ubiquity of the enabling devices, as well as social media platforms.

Several governments made efforts to dispel falsehoods about COVID-19, in various ways and on different platforms accessible by their citizens. For instance, the Namibian Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology criminalised the spread of disinfodemic under the amended state of emergency regulations, dated 17 April 2020 (Menges, 2020). However, at the time of writing this paper, there is no documented literature pointing to anyone in Namibia being charged for contravening the above regulation, in spite of sufficient evidence of many socialites and news outlets breaching this regulation. One may wonder whether this regulation is a mere toothless bulldog or not, as it remains difficult to assess its application since its promulgation in April 2020.

Similarly, the Zimbabwean government implemented radical measures to address the explosion of disinfodemic by criminalising acts of producing and sharing falsehoods about the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This saw a 36-year-old Zimbabwean man being arrested under the Criminal Law, Codification and Reform Act Chapter 9:23, Section 31 (a) (see Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2021).

There has also been a proactive takedown intervention by *WhatsApp* Company to complement governments' efforts to curb disinfodemic. Until recently, *WhatsApp*

Company embarked on an exercise to limit message forwarding in a bid to curtail the spread of information disorder (Hern & Safi, 2019). This development allows *WhatsApp* users around the world to forward to a limit of 5 charts or less at once, as applicable to viral messages. Again, a new application called *WhatsApp Monitor* was developed to allow researchers to scrutinise the type of content widely share on *WhatsApp* groups at any given time (Hern & Safi, 2019). The United Nations Educational Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) also complements these efforts by supporting media institutions in African countries: by earmarking funding for Media and Information Literacy, which attempts to combat the disinfodemic through educational support on children, young adults and senior citizens, respectively (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022).

However, even though, the African governments have made effort to criminalise the spread of disinfodemic during the pandemic, such interventions in most cases were not effective. Worryingly, several studies have been done in the context of the information disorder (see Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022) but there is a dearth of scholarly work exploring the gravity of COVID-19 disinfodemic in the digital spaces, particularly the numerous conspiracy theories which complicate the management of the virus and undermine the efforts towards mitigating the effects of the virus. While some studies have acknowledged the COVID-19 disinfodemic and its effect on a range of behaviours in the developed world, literature is still sketchy in the African region.

Therefore, this article seeks to explore COVID-19 disinfodemic in the digital space and its role in disempowering the public and threatening public health in the African region. This article is important as it does not only bring together the extent of disinfodemic in the digital space, but it also suggests possible measures to inform the use of liquid communications.

## **2. Theoretical Frameworks**

This study is underpinned by two theories which help to appreciate how media usage and users should be studied in the context of the history and lived realities of the society. The theories are expounded below.

### **2.1. Media System Dependency Theory**

The media system dependency theory (MSDT) posits that the more users depend on media to meet their needs, the more they become subjects to media effects (Baran & Davis, 2015; Ball-Rokeach, 2008).

The theory is thus, useful in explaining the existence of three types of relationships, which are: first, the relationship between the media and society. Within this relationship, media access and availability are considered important antecedents to an individual's experience with the media (Ball-Rokeach, 2008). The nature of media dependence on societal systems varies across cultural, social, political and economic systems. Second, the relationship between the media and the audience, which is the key variable in this theory because it affects how users might use a mass medium (Baran & Davis, 2015). For Loveless (2008, p. 162), when societies are in states of crisis or pandemics, "citizens are more reliant on mass media for information and as such are more susceptible to their effects". This relationship also varies across media systems. The more salient the information needs, the stronger is the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on the medium. In result, the likelihood for the media to affect audiences becomes greater. Third, the relationship between the society and the audience. Societies influence consumers' needs and motives for media use, and thus provide norms, values, knowledge and laws for their members (Baran & Davis, 2015). Social system can function as alternatives to the media by offering similar services of the media.

In the context of this article, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to exist within us, "citizens are more likely to turn to media as a source of reassurance and information" (Loveless, 2008, p.162). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the heavy reliance on digital media amid the COVID-19 pandemic influences acts of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms. This makes the MSDT theory relevant for this study.

### **2.2. Social Responsibility Theory**

In order to account for the concept of social responsibility in using social media among media practitioners, the social responsibility theory (SRT) was employed. It informs the study in terms of redefining the role of the press, as articulated by Siebert et al (1956) that the media are expected to cultivate self-regulatory procedures of responsibility by embracing journalism standards and codes of conduct in response

to the demands from the public. Moyo, Mare and Mabweazara (2019) concur that the social responsibility theory “accentuates an accountability framework that journalists are expected to adhere to with respect to their professional practice and ethical conduct” (p. 4). Media freedom is fundamental, but not necessarily absolute, meaning that the media should be allowed to be free, but are also expected to observe the code of ethics and exercise self-regulation (McQuail, Golding & Bens, 2005).

The SRT is particularly relevant for this article, which revolves around the concept and era of disinfodemic, where information disorder on social media has become the order of the day. Some media organisations and citizen journalists have become perpetrators for spreading falsehoods about the COVID-19 on various digital platforms, without following proper verification and gatekeeping procedures as envisioned by the theory.

Furthermore, the SRT emphasises aspects of professionalism in reporting news, i.e. providing credible and accurate information. These principles have proven difficult to adhere to, in today’s society which is marred by information disorder (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Thus, the theory emphasise the need for every journalist to express their opinions, but cautions that this must be done responsibly, without damaging important social interests, as what is currently happening during the COVID-19 era.

## **2.3 Literature Review**

### ***2.3.1. Disinfodemic during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The unprecedented circulation of disinfodemic during the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the politicisation, misnaming the virus and classifying the disease on racial grounds (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020). Posetti and Bontcheva (2020) assert that the politicisation and misnaming of the virus is often associated with racism. An instance is whereby the former United States of America President Donald Trump was among the frontrunners on social media, labelling the virus the ‘*Chinese virus*’ (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020). Even though Trump is not an African political figure, what is concerning is that his tweets had a global impact. Since social media turn out to be the major source of information (in this digital age) for people, irrespective of geographical boundaries, it has become ever more precarious and challenging for African countries and the world at large, to curtail disinfodemic. Posetti and Bontcheva (2020) further note that disinfodemic about the diagnosis,

treatment, prevention and cure for COVID-19 is critical as it threatens medical science practices in their effort to contain the virus.

Misleading statistics about the COVID-19 have also caused a lot of hearsay among citizens of different nationalities. In Tanzania, the government has been heavily criticised by citizens for providing rare updates on COVID-19 active and fatality cases (Ashly, 2020). There has been a lot of suspicions owing to the government's failure to timeously inform the public on the extent of the disease outbreak and the alleged covering up of correct figures of mortalities. Some Tanzanians who were anonymously interviewed by *Al Jazeera* revealed their lack of trust in the COVID-19 statistics from their government, on the basis of suspected cases of people who died of COVID-19 and were buried by suspected government undertakers in full protective equipment, but this was not publicised (Ashly, 2020).

### 3. Methodological Approach

For this study, we employed the qualitative approach. Judgemental sampling was used to recruit texts from the archives of various social media platforms of individuals and government agents. In this case, we purposively retrieved 16 texts that fell within the scrutiny of the study and its interest, i.e. online posts related to the COVID-19 disinfodemic in Africa from the period of January 2020 to May 2022. A qualitative content analysis sheet was devised to code and label themes emanating from the sampled texts. This enabled us to collect robust qualitative data of expressions which reflect the unprecedented circulation of disinfodemic in the African digital mediascape. Ethical considerations were observed where applicable.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Misconceptions about the Origins of COVID-19

In April 2020, a *Facebook* post linking to a *YouTube* video interview with an Indian osteopath, Dr. Rashid Buttar by a bogus online news outlet, circulated broadly in South Africa. The osteopath is a well-known discredited practitioner who orchestrates disinfodemic in the name of 'health guidelines' on various social media platforms (see *Huffpost*, 2020). In one of his *YouTube* videos, he claims that:

*"The coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that causes Covid-19 was artificially created. The outbreak is a "false flag" (Huffpost, 2020).*

Since that time, the *YouTube* page of the self-styled medical ‘expert’ scooped more than 40,000 subscribers and close to a million views. His alleged disinfodemic videos also discouraged audiences from getting vaccination once made available. This was more pronounced in the comment section where many audiences concurred with such ‘health guidelines’ and replied as follows:

*“It’s crystal clear this [virus] is the biggest hoax in history,”*

*“Tell us what we can do to protect our homes ... What about our bodies...?”*  
(*Huffpost*, 2020).

Thus, the above simply connote the relationship between the media and the audience amid the COVID-19 pandemic whereby, “citizens are more likely to turn to media as a source of reassurance and information” (Loveless, 2008, p.162). The media systems dependency theory rightly posits that in a time of pandemic or crisis, audiences’ appetite for information can be voracious (Loveless, 2008). Those desperate for remedies are particularly susceptible to manipulation by conspiracy theorists who fear-monger for traffic and likes on digital platforms. After thorough scientific investigations on the possibility that the coronavirus was artificially made, it has been widely debunked that “it is improbable that SARS-CoV-2 emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus.” (Andersen, Rambaut & Lipkin, 2020, p. 450).

In South Africa, a former African National Congress (ANC) legislator, Vytjie Mentor, actively shared disinformation about the origins of COVID-19 on her *Facebook* page, where she claimed that United States of America business mogul and philanthropist, Bill Gates invented the virus. Her post reads:

*“Is it not amazing that Bill Gates owns the patent of coronavirus and owns the vaccines. He is also a partner in the lab in Wuhan China”* (*GroundUp*, 2020)

The claim that certain persons own the patent for COVID-19 and that Gates is a partner in the laboratory in Wuhan, China has been widely debunked by *BBC Africa Reality Check* and a British fact-checking organisation way back in January 2020, before the above post went viral on social media in South Africa (*Full Fact*, 2020). From a social responsibility perspective, there is no doubt that the BBC exercised professionalism in investigative reporting to debunk disinfodemic - something which is not evident in today’s social mediascape, which is marred by disinfodemic. The social responsibility framework further highlights the need for every citizen to

express their opinions, but cautions that this must be done responsibly, without damaging important social interests.

By the same token, a Hong Kong Public Health University Virologist, Dr. Li-Meng Yan posted conspiracy theory about the origins of COVID-19 under the banner of an Angolan government *Facebook* page. In her post, she claimed that the coronavirus was created in a Chinese military lab and accused China for covering up the initial outbreak in Wuhan. The post reads:

*“The reason I came to the U.S. is because I deliver the message of the truth of Covid. If I tell it in Hong Kong, the moment I start to tell it I will be disappeared and killed. (The Sun, 2020)*

Li-Meng Yan disclosed that she was among the first scientists asked to investigate a small number of cases in Wuhan. On 31 December 2020, she claims to have conducted a supervised “secret” investigation into a new SARS-like virus. After she took her findings to the supervisor, she claims that:

*“He warned me..., 'don't touch the red line'. We will get in trouble and we'll be disappeared. I have to hide because I know how they treat whistle blowers, and as a whistle blower here I want to tell the truth of Covid-19 and the origin of the SARS-2 Covid virus”*

*“I know how they treat whistleblowers. They want to keep people silent if they want to reveal the truth, not only about COVID-19, but also for the other things happening in China. I am waiting to tell all the things I know, provide all the evidence to the US Government. We have to chase the true evidence and get the real evidence because this is a key part to stop this pandemic. We don't have much time” (The Sun, 2020).*

At the time of sharing the post, the Virologist and whistle blower announced that she was hiding in an undisclosed location for the safety of her life after fleeing from Hong Kong. Subsequently, Hong Kong University distanced itself from the supposedly findings of COVID-19 origins and issued a media statement, which reads:

*“Dr. Li-Meng Yan, ever conducted any research on human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus at HKU during December 2019 and January 2020, her central assertion of the said interview.*



*We further observe that what she might have emphasised in the reported interview has no scientific basis but resembles hearsay*". (HKU media statement, 2020).

Furthermore, scientific researches repeatedly dismissed unsupported claim that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 originated from the laboratory of any sort (Andersen et al, 2020).

#### **4.2. Politicisation of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Zimbabwean Minister of Defence, Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri dis-informed the Zimbabwean people at a political rally held in Chinhoyi, Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe saying:

*"The COVID-19 is a curse from God to punish countries that imposed sanctions to Zimbabwe over human rights abuse (Times Live, 2020).*

Ironically, Muchinguri- Kashiri appeared in public to celebrate the spread of COVID-19 through European countries and United States of America because that time Zimbabwe had not officially registered a COVID-19 case. It is worrisome to note that leaders of governments who are expected to take a leading role in sensitising the public with correct information about the pandemic are the ones orchestrating the proliferation of disinfodemic.

Another case of disinfodemic circulating on social media is that global powers are releasing new COVID-19 variants to protract the pandemic. A post that has been shared widely on *Instagram* since July 2021, shows a chart of supposedly "planned" COVID-19 variants and when their discoveries would reach the media (*Africa Defense Forum*). The chart, which features World Health Organization (WHO) and World Economic Forum (WEF) logos, claims that the final coronavirus variant will be publicised in February 2023, by which time the disease will have killed 7 billion people (*ADF*, 2022).

The post, which had more than one thousand likes at the time reads as follows:

*"These are planned COVID-19 variants, just look at the dates when they will be released to the media. Don't be stupid, you are being played and manipulated"* (*ADF*, 2022).

After thorough investigations by the Africa Defense Forum, an African based fact-checking organisation, it emerged that the chart does not represent the work of WHO and WEF (*ADF*, 2022). Instead, the WHO has warned since the beginning of the

pandemic, that viruses mutate unpredictably and highly transmissible variants were likely to emerge, causing new waves of infections.

An unofficial online article (cited in *BBC- Africa Reality Check*, 2020) that made false claims on Tanzania's Minister of Health Ummu Mwalimu having tested positive for COVID-19. The article reveals that these false claims were also shared on Twitter by a prominent journalist whose name was not disclosed. It reads:

*"It is unfortunate that I have tested positive for coronavirus. But I will continue to serve my nation remotely as if I was on the frontline until things get better"* (*British Broadcasting Corporation- Africa Reality Check*, 2020).

The origin of the story was a screenshot of a tweet, which the writer purported was posted by the minister on her Twitter account. After thorough investigation into the matter, it emerged that the tweet did not appear in the Minister's Twitter feed. The country's Ministry of Health refuted the claim as false (see *BBC Africa Reality Check*, 2020). The *BBC's* consistency in fact-checking and debunking disinformation provides insights into what is expected of the news media, as far as credibility and vanguard against information disorder are concerned. Leaning on the lenses of the social responsibility theory, it "accentuates an accountability framework that media organisations are expected to adhere to, with respect to their professional practice and ethical conduct" (Moyo, Mare & Mabweazara, 2019, p.4).

### **4.3. Manipulation of the COVID-19 Statistics**

South Africa has been at the forefront over concerns related to the counting of the COVID-19 fatalities. The announcement of "first COVID-19 case on March 5, 2020" in South Africa, was accompanied by reports of several children and learners having tested positive for the virus, but whose demises were not necessarily caused by the COVID-19 (Sekyre et al, 2020, p.1). This was the case of a premature two-day-old baby whose mother tested positive for the virus. Even though the fact that the mother could have transmitted the virus to her unborn baby is scientifically noteworthy, however, medical findings indicated that the child did not die because of the COVID-19 related complications (Mybroadband, 2020). Findings of the study in question (Sekyre et al, 2020) were revealed by a Professor of Vaccinology, Shabir Madhi who said:

*"It is very misleading to indicate that five children have died from COVID-19, when it's really only two, and even those two cases were children with comorbidities. The*

*absolute manner in which to make a definite diagnosis as to whether a case is due to COVID or not is to do post-mortem biopsies, or a post-mortem. Unfortunately, that is not really done in South Africa. Often, we need to use our clinical judgement in terms of whether there is a biological association between the clinical illness that the person dies from and the presence of the virus. (Mybroadband, 2020).*

It emerged that the cause of the death was hyaline membrane disease and the claim that the child tested positive for the COVID-19 was purely accidental.

In May 2020, several political opposition leaders and activists in Tanzania accused President John Magufuli's administration of failing to inform the public on the extent of the COVID-19 outbreak (*Al Jazeera*, 2020). It is alleged that the correct statistical information about COVID-19 cases and fatalities were swept under the carpet. Although the Tanzanian government denied such allegations, the majority of Tanzanians who were anonymously interviewed by *Al Jazeera* revealed that they did not trust the government's data. One of them had this to say:

*"The health system of the country is completely overwhelmed. The situation is not very good and the government has completely controlled the data so we haven't been able to access independent information on what's really going on."* (In *Aljazeera*, 2020).

According to government records, there were 509 COVID-19 active cases and 21 fatalities as of May 2020. However, these official numbers, which were provided in sporadic updates, were being considered with great mistrust by the Tanzanians. As this theme is mostly associated with the reported incidences of mortality rates, it is alleged that the Tanzanian government has been at the forefront in denying citizens alternative sources of independently verified data. One respondent said:

*"So many people are dying (of COVID-19) in Dar e Salaam, Arusha, Dodoma and many other places in Tanzania. We are not sure of the number of deaths on a daily basis, but there are many..., no less than 30 or 40". We need to know the real numbers and how badly this disease is impacting this country"*. (In *Aljazeera*, 2020).

Although the above claim was not independently verified, it emerged that the estimate was based on citizens' testimonies and attempts at counting the number of bodies being buried by the government. The findings presented here indicate that many citizens do not trust their governments when it comes to the COVID-19 related statistics-infections, active cases, fatalities, etc. The reason why some governments tend to withdraw such information is, from their view perhaps, such that they do not

cause panic and fear among the citizens. Unfortunately, by so doing, they are creating a breeding ground for falsehoods to manifest. Many governments have not been honest, coherent, reliable and consistent to provide accurate information about infections and deaths, while some health officials also struggled or delayed to present their findings to the world.

At the same time, the professional journalists are also struggling to access accurate information from the relevant officials, in some cases the environment in which they operate is hostile to their profession-restrictive laws. When journalists do not get official information, they speculate, which often triggers falsehoods as people try to make sense of the little information that would have been provided by the journalists. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet (cited by UN, 2020), voiced against some governments that restrict independent media by creating a hostile environment threatening, arresting and intimidating journalists.

In doing so, it compromise their safety and ability to effectively perform their duties. Bachelet argues that the free flow of information is imperative in the fight against the pandemic:

*“Some States have used the outbreak of the new coronavirus as a pretext to restrict information and stifle criticism...A free media is always essential, but we have never depended on it more than we do during this pandemic... Credible, accurate reporting is a lifeline for all of us” (UN, 2020)*

In the face of this, the role of journalism becomes more critical- to objectively inform the public. But, how can the journalists provide information when it is not being availed to them- some governments perceive journalists as aimed at further dividing the society when they report accurate information regarding the pandemic. In emphasising the critical role of journalists during such a crisis, Berger (cited in UN News, 2020) urges governments:

*“...not to impose restrictions on freedom of expression that can harm the essential role of an independent press, but to recognise journalism as a power against disinformation even when it publicises verified information and informed opinion that annoys those in power... the media deserves to be recognised and supported by governments as an essential service at this time...We are underlining that governments, in order to counter rumours, should be more transparent, and proactively disclose more data, in line with right to information laws and policies. Access to information from official sources is very important for credibility in this crisis...However, this is not a substitute for information supplied by the news media,*

*so we are also intensifying our efforts to persuade authorities to see free and professional journalism as an ally in the fight against disinformation, especially because the news media works openly in the public sphere, whereas much disinformation is under-the-radar, on social messaging apps” (UN News Interview, 2020).*

The point being emphasised by Berger is the need for the media to provide truthful information and meet the needs of the society that is so information hungry and anxious during the pandemic. In this view, considering the extant of news regarding the pandemic, it is also time that newsrooms bring on board reporters who are well-trained in public health reporting- not just focusing on “breaking the news” and disregard in-depth coverage. More than ever, professional journalism, as well as reliable information to fight the spread of the pandemic, are imminent.

#### **4.4. The Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention of the COVID-19**

It is a fact that technology has played a double-edged role in the outbreak and sensitisation of the pandemic. On the negative side, social media proliferate an array of misinformed perceptions about the cure, treatment and prevention of COVID-19. This has seen self-styled “experts sharing all kinds of homemade remedies that supposedly can prevent or cure the infection.” (Sekyere et al, 2020: 4).

In April 2020, Mike Sonko, the Governor of Nairobi, Kenya, misinformed not only the Kenyan citizens, but the entire world, when he claimed alcohol acts as a “throat sanitise” which prevents the coronavirus from reaching the lungs. Reports indicate that the Governor donated COVID-19 care packages, including small bottles of Hennessy cognac (whisky) to the less privileged claiming that:

*“Research by the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicates that alcohol kills the virus..... We will have some small bottles of Hennessy in the food packs that we will be giving to our people” (Times Live, 2020)*

This is a misinterpretation of the use of alcohol in hand sanitisers. The WHO refuted claims of misinformation about the ‘so-called’ preventative measures. It clarifies that alcohol will not kill the coronavirus and cautioned against alcohol consumption on the basis that it may increase the risks of contracting the coronavirus and worsen chances of recovery once the virus is contracted. For Hennessy Company, it also rejected the claims and made it clear that the consumption of Hennessy and other alcoholic beverages does not protect against coronavirus.

In the same vein, a satirical video of a man's reaction to the re-imposition of an alcohol sale ban in South Africa on South Africa's *SABC News* channel went viral on *Facebook* and *WhatsApp*. The video was edited to replace a senior representative of the Liquor Traders Association of South Africa who was being interviewed by a comedian, Thandokwakhe Mseleku. He later posted the video of his television appearance on *Instagram* and *YouTube*. In the video, he says:

*“Sanitiser has got 70% alcohol, so if you are drinking alcohol, it is like you are sanitizing your inside.”*

Although this misinformation was intended as satire, it was widely shared on social media. Judging by some of the comments about the video, the majority of the audience believed the message to be true. This is a critical theme responsible for threatening medical science practices of containing the coronavirus.

From the analysis presented above, the results show that the COVID-19 and consequently, the disinfodemic that has accompanied it, have disrupted the society. What is presented here is not exhaustive, there are many falsehoods around the pandemic: that people of African origin are immune to the virus (racist and xenophobic tones), people in warm climates will not be affected by the virus as it does not thrive in hot temperatures, the anti-vaccinations campaigns, the virus can spread through radio waves and mobile networks, and many other conspiracy theories. We also realised that disinformation is being spread for various reasons, which can be political, some people promoting themselves and or attention seeking. Whatever the reason, spreading falsehoods is disinformation and disempowering, as it plays on the emotions of the citizens and prejudices public health efforts, it results in complacency and premature deaths among societies. Consistent with study findings is notion that when societies are in states of crisis or pandemics, “citizens are more reliant on mass media for information and as such are more susceptible to their effects” (Loveless, 2008, p. 162).

This means the more demanding the information needs about COVID-19, the stronger is the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on social media. Resultantly, the possibility for social media to affect audiences through the peddling of disinfodemic becomes greater. Such effects have been well expressed by Melissa Fleming, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, who reiterates that:

*“Fear, uncertainty, and the proliferation of fake news have the potential to weaken the national and global response to the virus, bolster nativist narratives and provide*

*opportunities for those who may seek to exploit this moment to deepen social divisions...All this threatens to undermine the international cooperation urgently needed to deal with the impacts of this crisis.”* (Department of Global Communication, 2020).

Commenting on the disinfodemic avalanche following COVID-19, Berger (cited in UN News, 2020) noted:

*“There seems to be barely an area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, ranging from the origin of the coronavirus, through to unproven prevention and 'cures', and encompassing responses by governments, companies, celebrities and others... in a time of high fears, uncertainties and unknowns, there is fertile ground for fabrications to flourish and grow...When disinformation is repeated and amplified, including by influential people, the grave danger is that information which is based on truth, ends up having only marginal impact”* (UN News interview, 2020).

The sentiments by Berger make it imperative that credible information about the virus be disseminated by the media and citizen journalists in the digital space. This is explicitly elevated in the assumptions of the SRT which, postulates that journalists have the responsibility to abide by certain codes of conduct such as accuracy and truthfulness as far as news production and dissemination is concerned (McQuail et al, 2005). Unfortunately, what we witness is a society that is torn apart and confused with information that cannot be trusted, both from officials and or citizen journalists who seem to have their own agendas.

## **5. Practical Implications**

Although the results of the study are clearly tentative, we believe they offer some practical implications for policy makers and practitioners. First, it is a fact that the damage has been done and disinfodemic is rampant on social media. Going forward, there is an imminent need to strengthen the public's resilience to COVID-19 disinfodemic, so as to enable them to make evidence-based decisions regarding their health. Building strategic partnerships in order to maintain accurate reporting can go a long way in fighting disinfodemic. Newsrooms ought to partner with trusted researchers who can provide scientifically rigorous and reliable information. The belief is that if the media are granted the rights to freedom of expression, and at the same time have access to accurate information, these two would go a long way in

dispelling disinformation. Doing so would enable relevant officials and the public to make evidence-based decisions about the pandemic.

Secondly, social media can be used to productively debunk disinfodemic. The misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic have revealed the dark side of social media- its role in spreading falsehoods. Notwithstanding, social media platforms can be used profitably in the fight against the pandemic. It is therefore the responsibility of such platforms and the users to use them responsibly, as expounded by the social responsibility theory.

## **6. Conclusion and Future Work**

The article makes two important contributions. First, it suggests that the theories underpinning the social media production and consumption need to make fine-grained additions and distinctions if they are to inform the journalism practice, since a lot has now changed since the proliferation of social media.

Second, by analysing the extent of COVID-19 disinfodemic in the cyber sphere and particularly in the African context, the study adds to the sparse literature in this area. The findings provide support to the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by numerous conspiracy theories which further complicated the management of the virus. However, what is of major concern in the whole disinfodemic debacle is that it is not just ordinary citizens peddling falsehoods about the virus, organised (by highly influential people) campaigns have also been actively undermining efforts towards mitigating the effects of the deadly virus.

Further research on digital media's response and advocacy would be insightful, given the fact that media houses and citizen journalists have new responsibilities thrust upon their shoulders in the digital age. Also, research on framework on how best social media platforms can be employed in a responsible way to address the disinfodemic would be useful.

In conclusion, the dependency on social media amid the pandemic has increasingly spawned an array of ethical challenges (i.e. the proliferation of fake news) that were less- existent before the uptake of social media. In that regard, this article is invaluable as it does not only bring together the extent of disinfodemic in the digital space, but it also suggests possible measures to inform the use of liquid communications.



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