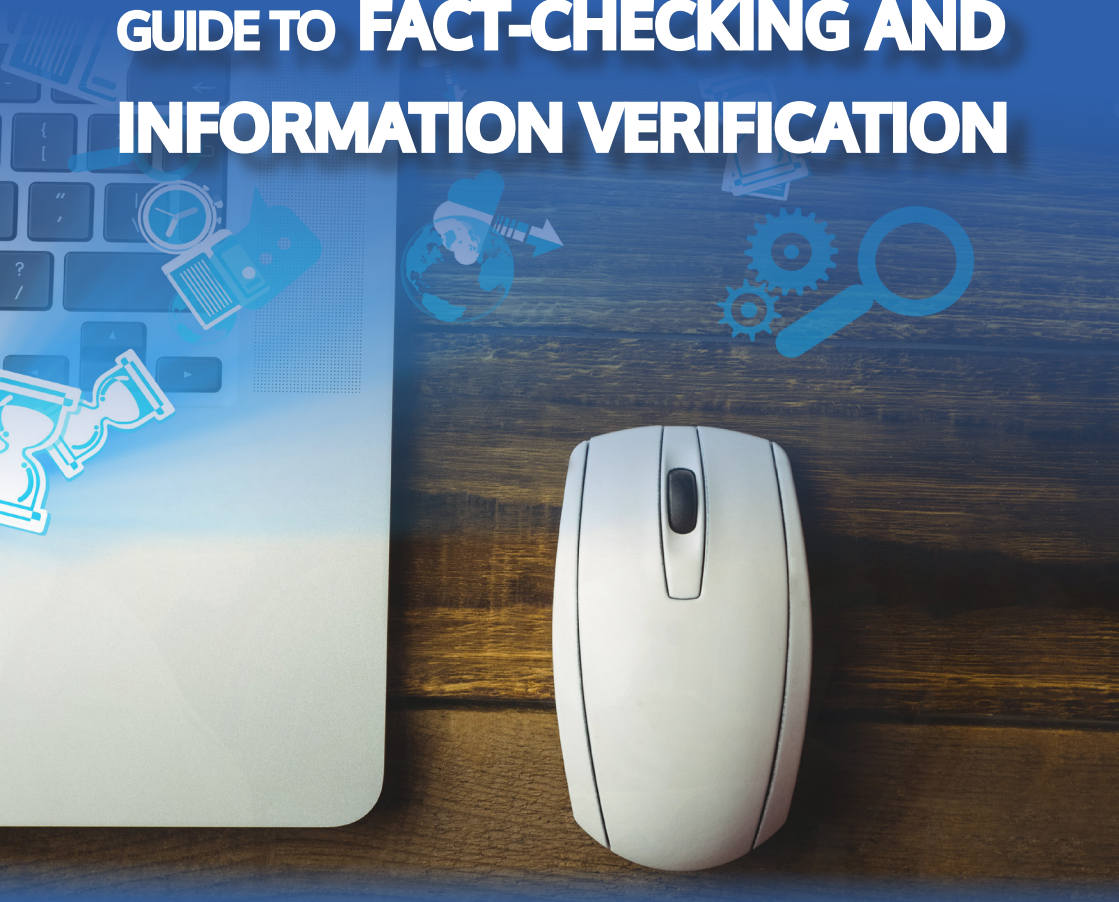
MISA ZIMBABWE

GUIDE TO FACT-CHECKING AND INFORMATION VERIFICATION



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT 3
INTRODUCTION 4
WHAT IS FACT-CHECKING 5
DYNAMICS OF FACT-CHECKING 5
WHY DO FACTS MATTER? 5
WHAT CAN BE FACT-CHECKED? 6
WHAT CAN YOU FACT-CHECK? 6
TIPS TO SPOT FAKE NEWS 7
WHY DO PEOPLE CREATE FAKE NEWS? 7
HOW DOES MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SPREAD? 8
VERIFYING IMAGES AND VIDEOS 8
WHAT IS REVERSE IMAGE VERIFICATION? 9
COMMON REVERSE IMAGE VERIFICATION TOOLS 9
OTHER VERIFICATION TOOLS 9
FINDING ACCURATE INFORMATION ONLINE AND OFFLINE 10
FINDING RELIABLE DATA ONLINE 12
FINDING RELIABLE DATA ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS 13
THINGS TO NOTE WHEN FINDING THE ACCURACY OF DATA 13
FACT-CHECKING STEPS 14
PRE-BUNKING – FACT SHEETS AND FACT GUIDES 16
CONCLUSION 16
REFERENCES 18

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

MISA Zimbabwe extends its great appreciation to ZimFact for the collaboration and partnership that made it possible to produce this Guide to Fact-Checking and Information Verification in our quest to ensure the people of Zimbabwe access accurate information for informed decisions and choices.

INTRODUCTION

This manual is a multi-purpose resource whose principal objective is to help the general public to enhance their capacity to verify media content and actively contribute to the fight against the spread of "fake news" and actively contribute in the quest for accurate information while breaking the cycles of information disorders.

With this intervention MISA Zimbabwe anticipates that, users of this guide will get equipped with knowledge and skills to contribute to the sanitisation of the information ecosystem - which is polluted by false information intentionally spread for malicious reasons and unwittingly through sharing unverified information.

In this manual we unpack the motives behind the spread of fake news and define the different forms of fake news - misinformation and disinformation.

We provide a broad definition of the concept of fact-checking and explain why it is important to fact-check information at a personal and broader level. We highlighted the dangers of the dissemination of false information and the critical role that every member of the public must play in the global battle against information disorders.

The manual offers a practical guide to the fact-checking process, firstly by focusing on what can or cannot be fact-checked and then explaining and outlining the steps to fact-checking.

It also expands the range of the users' capacity to use key tools to verify the authenticity of different content types which include pictures, videos and social media posts. A healthy number of practical examples have been included in the manual to enhance the users' understanding of the tools and the context within which they can be applied.

MISA Zimbabwe hopes members of the public will make effective use of the manual in their interaction with information and content they receive and share online.

WHAT IS FACT-CHECKING

Fact-checking is a set of practices and tools that allow you to verify information. It is the process of investigating an issue to verify the facts. A fact is something known to be true and can be proved. Any type of content can be fact-checked: photos, videos, rumours shared on social networks.

DYNAMICS OF FACT-CHECKING

Fact-checking in the newsroom

It refers to internal fact-checking during newsgathering and sub-editing before an article is published or broadcast.

Fact-checking as a practice

The focus is on verifying information that is already in the public domain. This usually focuses on verifying the accuracy of claims made by public figures, organisations and media platforms.

WHY DO FACTS MATTER?

Factual information will help news audiences effectively make decisions on pertinent issues. For example, during elections, the electorate needs accurate information to make informed decisions.

Facts help us understand a country's most complex economic and social problems.

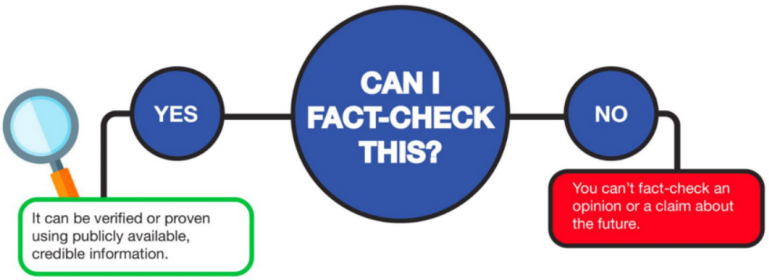
Facts have the potential to minimise the impact of information disorders. During the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists relied on facts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Ministry of Health and Child Care to preserve the lives of their audiences.

A person's credibility is tied to his or her capacity to tell the truth.

WHAT CAN BE FACT-CHECKED?

Tips to note

- Not every statement can be fact-checked.
- The first question you should ask yourself before trying to fact-check a claim is whether it is verifiable or "fact-checkable" or not.
- For a statement to be fact-checkable, you must be able to verify it by using publicly available data.



WHAT CAN YOU FACT-CHECK?

- Historical data: In 2016, gold made up 50% of Zimbabwe's exports.
- Statistics: One in five children in Zimbabwe drop out of school.
- Comparisons: The unemployment rate in South Africa is five times higher than in Zimbabwe.
- Legalities: Only people 18 years or older can legally marry in Zimbabwe.

TIPS TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Social media is now a key way of sharing information, so it is crucial to be cautious when engaging with content online. The following tips can help you spot fake news:

- If something sounds too good, shocking, or strange to be true, it probably is.
- If information makes you scared, angry, or satisfied and triggers your emotions, verify its accuracy before sharing it.
- Seeing grammatical or spelling errors? Be very suspicious.
- If you hear rumours that something is happening, for example, violent protests, etc, do a Google News search to verify it. If it is a big story, a reputable news organisation would have covered it.
- Look closely at website addresses and URLs or social media handles, some look familiar to deceive the audience.
- Check links within the story - does the story link back to the actual content or source it refers to.
- If you suspect you are receiving false information, have a look at other stories, photos and videos on the website and ask yourself if they look credible.
- Look at the “About Us” page for a disclaimer to ensure you are not looking at a satirical site.

Always be guided by the motto, If you doubt it, check it!

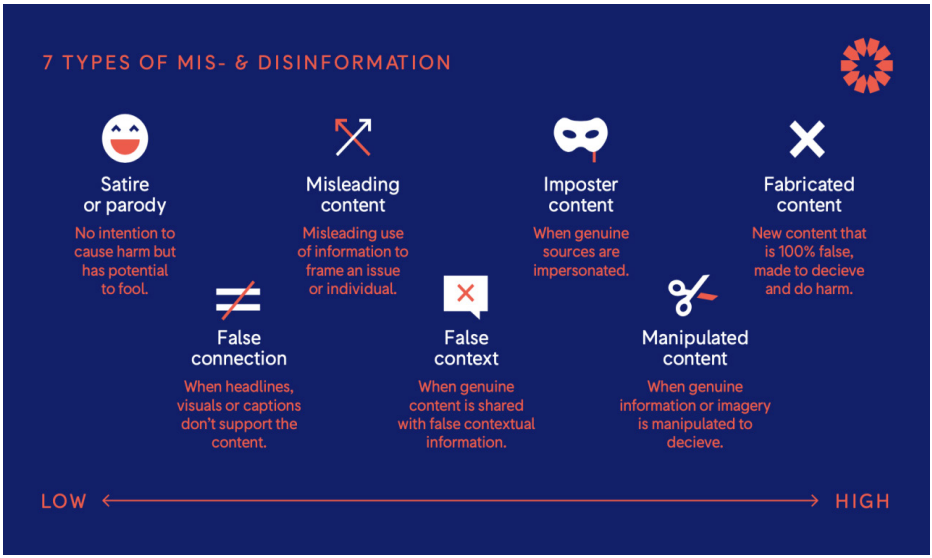
WHY DO PEOPLE CREATE FAKE NEWS?

Two common forms of false information are: Misinformation and Disinformation.

Misinformation refers to false or out-of-context information presented as fact regardless of an intent to deceive. Information whose inaccuracy is unintentional. This includes information reported in error. It happens when people fail to verify information.

Disinformation is false information that is shared with the intention to deceive or mislead. It is usually misleading or biased information, manipulated narratives and incorrect information used to push a political agenda.

TYPES OF FAKE NEWS



HOW DOES MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SPREAD?

Misinformation is everywhere online, and anyone can be vulnerable to it. While both misinformation and disinformation can deceive audiences, the distinction is that disinformation is intentionally, maliciously deceptive. Both forms often involve widespread dissemination, whether or not the person sharing is aware of the inaccuracies.

VERIFYING IMAGES AND VIDEOS

They say: “A picture is worth a thousand words” but it can also tell a thousand lies as it is prone to misinterpretation.

Due to technological advancement, particularly image and video editing software and apps (Photoshop, Inshot, Illustrator, Filmora etc), it has become easier to use images and videos to mislead people.

Questions to ask when verifying images and videos?

- When was the image taken?
- Where was it taken?
- Was it altered in any way?
- It might be difficult to answer these questions without tools that have been developed for image and video verification.

WHAT IS REVERSE IMAGE VERIFICATION?

Reverse image search is a relatively new search method that allows people to upload a picture and browse similar photos online. Search engines use image recognition technology to bring up related images. This is searching for an image and details about it online.

Uses of image verification

- Locate the source of an image.
- Find higher-resolution versions.
- Discover webpages where the image appears.
- Find the content creator.
- Get information about an image.

COMMON REVERSE IMAGE VERIFICATION TOOLS

Google Yandex TinEye

Bing Reveye InVID

Baidu 百度

OTHER VERIFICATION TOOLS

InVid verification plug in – This is a browser extension that helps in the verification of images and videos.

Claim Buster is an innovative fact-check feature that helps people quickly and easily evaluate the credibility of online news stories. It utilises advanced algorithms to scan for false claims, misleading statements, and other discrepancies in online news articles.

The feature also provides users with additional sources of information, such as other news outlets, and fact-checking websites, to help them make more informed decisions about what they are reading.

CrowdTangle is a social media analytics tool that allows you to monitor and analyse content performance across various social media platforms.

Hoaxy visualises the spread of claims and fact-checking articles on social media. It helps track the dissemination of information and identifies sources that contribute to the spread of misinformation.

FINDING ACCURATE INFORMATION ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Zimbabweans sometimes find it difficult to access accurate information from the available sources in the country. Some government institutions claim to be bound by the Official Secrets Act while sometimes one has to endure delays before accessing information. With the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, one can use this law to compel institutions to disseminate or disclose information in the public interest.

This section seeks to assist you in finding accurate information locally and online. What are your main sources of information in the country?

- **Government ministries, local authorities, parliament**
- **Civil Registry Department Zimbabwe** – Birth Records, Death Records, National ID Cards, National Passports, Emergency Travel Documents.
- **Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency** – provides key statistics – population, health, economic indicators.
- **Department of Deeds, Companies and Intellectual Property** – registration of proprietary rights in land, formal business organisations, intellectual property.

- **Salary Services Bureau** – processes government salaries.
- **National Archives of Zimbabwe** – Storehouse of Zimbabwe's documented history – perfect source for historical data.
- **Health Services Board** – health related issues –welfare of medical personnel, state of the health sector.
- **Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe** – monetary policy issues.
- **Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe** – handles public procurements.

Other government sources

- Zimbabwe Revenue Authority
- Zimbabwe National Road Administration
- Zimbabwe National Water Authority
- Zimbabwe Energy Regulation Authority
- Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority
- Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe
- Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe
- Zimbabwe Republic Police
- Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe
- Standards Association of Zimbabwe
- Chapter 12 Commissions – Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, Zimbabwe Media Commission, Zimbabwe Gender Commission, Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, National Peace and Reconciliation Commission

What are your alternative sources of information? Sometimes it is difficult to directly get information from government. Where can you find it?

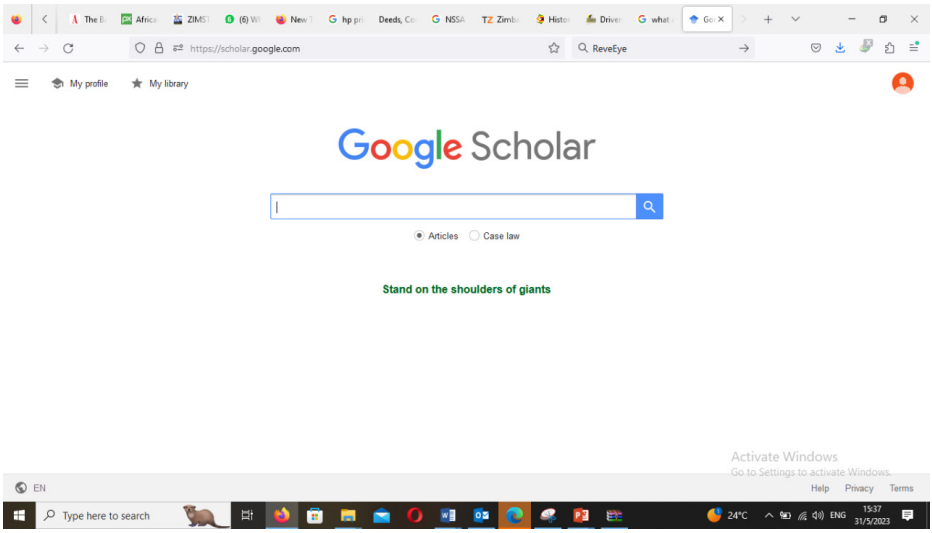
- Civil Society Organisations
- International organisations, e.g. United Nations, World Bank, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

- Local Universities – University of Zimbabwe, Midlands State University, National University of Science and Technology, Great Zimbabwe University, Lupane State University
- Technical Colleges
- Think Tanks – https://sivioinstitute.org/thinktanks/directory/
- Reputable peer-reviewed journals

FINDING RELIABLE DATA ONLINE

Not all information shared online is credible. Where do you find credible information?

1. Use academic databases such as Google Scholar.



2. Use peer-reviewed articles – These articles would have been reviewed by other experts in the same field.
3. Visit websites and verified social media platforms of international agencies – UN, UNICEF, FAO, IMF, UNDP, OCHA, UNESCO, UNWOMEN, UNAIDS, these are good for triangulation, they usually work with national statistics agencies.
4. Websites and journals commissioned by institutions of higher learning – they usually have higher standards of credibility.

FINDING RELIABLE DATA ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Can social media platforms be used as sources of information?

- There is a need to use verified accounts (although these days there are parody accounts that are verified).
- Does the source have a reputation for posting credible information?
- Before citing a social media source, it is important to know who is behind that account.
- Make sure you are not quoting a bot – how do you know? Look at post history.

THINGS TO NOTE WHEN FINDING THE ACCURACY OF DATA

Time when the data was collected

Be sure what timeframe your claim speaks to and choose the latest or newest data.

Who collected this data and how did they do this?

Find out who collected the data, what method was used, who were the respondents and how accurate are their findings.

Who funded the data research

To avoid bias, note who funded the data you want to use and if they stand to gain from the data.

How credible are the sources used?

It is important to check the credibility of the sources used. This helps to know if the data can be generalised or not.

Be more specific to what you need exactly.

Read through your data and find the exact results needed.

Read extensively all the results you find

It is important to read all findings and then narrow down to what suits your fact-check.

Find various experts

Do not rely on one expert. Contact various experts and choose the most credible.

FACT-CHECKING STEPS

Fact-checking is a systematic process, that follows logical steps to verify whether a claim is true or false.

Step 1: Verify the claim and identify the original source

Verify the correct wording of the claim – get hold of the primary source. This can be a video, audio, image or text and ask yourself the following questions:

1) Who made the claim?
2) Are they an expert in the field?
3) Is there anything that makes you doubt what they are talking about?
4) What is their motive for making the claim?
5) Could they benefit from it?

Step 2: Define the terms and concepts within the claim

Never assume you know what someone meant- ask them exactly what they were referring to. Always try to understand and explain each concept in a statement – someone working in a specific field can help in this regard.

For example, a claim can state that – children in Africa were highly affected by Covid-19

Children – which age ranges?

Africa – which countries? Africa is not a country.

Highly – how high is high? Quantify the scope of impact.

Affected – in what way?

Covid-19 – what is it and during which timeframe?

Step 3: Inspect the evidence using the latest reliable data

If the source provided you with evidence check if it applies to your country context and explore how the data was gathered and explain that to the readers.

For example, If it was a study:- What methodology was used?

When was the data gathered? – Ensure that it is still relevant. It is best to work with data from the last five years. Where there is none, use the latest available data.

Can findings be generalised? - Do they apply to everyone or a certain group of people. Try to understand the scope of the research.

Was it peer reviewed? - What do other experts say about the research?

Step 4: Contact or approach experts

There are some claims that are too technical or specialised. Seek the assistance of an expert in that particular field and get their 'expert' opinion on the matter. Ask whether the claim is correct based on their understanding of the subject area. Request for research-based evidence. Where possible first do your own research so that you get a sense of the subject on which a claim has been made.

Always remember - If you do not understand something, always ask.

Step 5: Set out the evidence

After going through the first four steps, you should be able to lay out the evidence you have compiled so that your peers can understand whether a claim is true or false.

It is not always clear that a claim is true or false, it could be misleading or there is no evidence to support the claim. What is important is that you can lay out your evidence in such a way that the next person can come to the same conclusion as you did.

When setting out the evidence, hyperlink the source of each factual statement or attribute it to an expert.

PRE-BUNKING – FACT SHEETS AND FACT GUIDES

The fight against the spread of false information now includes what is technically called pre-bunking. This is basically the production and publication or broadcast of information of public interest in the form of fact sheets or fact guides.

The fact sheets are designed to anticipate public interest in a particular issue, and to help people to understand or appreciate the real facts around that subject before it is distorted in the general information ecosystem.

The fact sheets can also be produced to help the public to understand factually an issue that may already have been distorted. The fact sheets go beyond fact-checks that seek to debunk certain facts, i.e fact-checks that simply say this is true or false. The fact sheets provide in-depth facts around a subject.

CONCLUSION

This manual is a MISA Zimbabwe contribution to enhancing media literacy on combating fake news. Fact-checking and information verification are now critical life skills that each and every person needs to possess.

The fight against misinformation and disinformation is not only for people in the media sector but one that requires everyone to be vigilant when receiving and sharing information.

It is of utmost importance for people to proactively apply themselves in the process of verifying information that they encounter especially in this era of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence in which unverified information can go viral.

The tips and pointers raised in this manual are an effort to strengthen the Zimbabwean public's first line of defence against information disorders. Due to technological advancements, new tools are being devised that can mislead the public through the generation of false information that is difficult to detect.

REFERENCES

ZIMBABWE FACT-CHECKED INFORMATION

The following are examples of some of the fact-checked information, verified for public interest consumption.

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-the-gangs-who-are-scamming-motorists-are-still-out-there/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-has-zimbabwes-new-law-banned-lobola-payments/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-did-joe-biden-sent-a-congratulatory-message-to-mnangagwa/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-has-chamisa-filed-an-election-court-challenge/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-yes-un-secretary-general-congratulated-mnangagwa/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-has-government-postponed-opening-of-schools/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-is-internet-being-throttled-during-zimbabwes-general-elections/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-did-nelson-chamisa-call-on-the-electorate-not-to-vote/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-false-recording-of-mnangagwa-conceding-defeat-to-chamisa/

https://zimfact.org/fact-check-can-they-tell-who-you-voted-for/

The following are examples of fact sheets and guides published to pre-bunk, or to further explain a subject that might already have been distorted:

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-foreign-observers-for-zimbabwe-2023-elections/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-eu-election-observers-for-zimbabwe-not-monitors/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-zimbabwe-women-presidential-candidates/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-who-can-use-zimbabwes-postal-voting-system/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-climate-change-drought-el-nino-and-impact-on-zimbabwe-agriculture/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-climate-change-and-zimbabwe-impact-of-heatwaves-on-health/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-bilharzia-hotspots-in-zimbabwe/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-when-do-you-risk-arrest-under-the-patriotic-bill/

https://zimfact.org/factsheet-covid-19-and-zimbabwes-economy/

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