

“After the fact”¹

A qualitative evaluation of Africa Check (www.africacheck.org)

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¹ A phrase used by one of the interviewees.

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1. Introduction

The following interview-based evaluation of Africa Check was commissioned by the Poynter Institute. Through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Poynter Institute launched a new initiative on fact checking health and development content with the US-based fact-checking website Politifact and Africa Check in January 2016. The purpose of the grant was to act as a watchdog to those making false claims about health and development, and to “provide media and the public with context about complex issues”.²

In this context this evaluation was conducted with the purpose of assessing the awareness of Africa Check, and perceptions of its importance, usefulness, and fairness, as well as to identify if any gaps existed in its approach or coverage. Besides the interviews conducted for this evaluation, the consultant participated in Global Fact 3, the global fact-checking conference held in Buenos Aires in June 2016. This provided a global context for the analysis of Africa Check's work.

This report includes a list of interviewees, overview of Africa Check, summary of key findings, a narrative on the findings themselves, recommendations and a response to the report from Africa Check Executive Director Peter Cunliffe-Jones. The evaluation questionnaire that guided the interviews is included in the appendix. Direct quotes from the interviews are used extensively in the findings section to illustrate the sometimes complex perspectives of the interviewees and to allow Africa Check itself to distil further observations that may not be apparent to the consultant based on its working experience as fact-checkers.

This is a qualitative evaluation, and the observations are based on the perceptions of those interviewed, which at times may or not entail correct assumptions by the interviewee. Therefore the findings should be taken as indications of potential new areas of exploration for Africa Check to consider taking forward, rather than absolute statements.

2. Overview of interviewees

Research organisations (media, social and business research), the health sector (both academic and public health), media (online, print and columnists/public commentators) and the development/civil society sector are well represented in the interviews. One political party agreed to be interviewed for this evaluation, although the governing party and the Economic Freedom Fighters, a new and outspoken political party with growing support, were repeatedly approached.

The list of the interviewees are included in the table below.

Name	Organisation	Position
Mathata Tsedu	South African National Editors Forum	Executive Director
Sara Nieuwoudt	School of Public Health, Wits University, Division of Social and Behaviour Change	Lecturer
William Bird	Media Monitoring Africa	Executive Director

2 <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/jan/25/poynter-institute-announces-initiative-fact-check-/>

Mandeep Tiwana	CIVICUS	Head of Policy and Research
Helen Struthers	Anova Health Institute	Chief Operating Officer
Tristan Taylor	Earthlife Africa	Former Executive Director of, currently environmental researcher and fellow at Stellenbosch University
Sean Rogers	KnowAfrica	Chief Executive Officer
Tara Polzer Ngwato	Social Surveys	Research Director
Max du Preez	Freelancer	Columnist, public commentator, author and former editor of <i>VryeWeekblad</i>
Chris Roper	Code-for-Africa	Fellow, former Editor-in-Chief at <i>Mail & Guardian</i>
Pierre de Vos	University of Cape Town	Academic, writer, columnist and public commentator on social issues
Branko Brkic	Daily Maverick	Manager, editor
Mark Weinberg	Right2Know campaign	Activist
Lili Radloff	Women24.co.za	Editor
Souleymane Niang	West Africa Democracy Radio	Manager
Roukaya Kasenally	University of Mauritius, Social Studies & Humanities Department	Faculty member
Cayley Green	Democratic Party	Parliamentary Operations Director
Wayne Duvenage	Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (Outa)	Chairperson
Richard Jurgens	Good Governance Africa	Editor of Africa in Fact
Africa Check staff		
Peter Cunliffe-Jones	Africa Check	Executive Director – preliminary discussions, and on-going email exchanges with background data
Anim van Wyk Kate Wilkinson Vinayak Bhardwaj Gopolang Makou Nancy Chimhandamba	Africa Check (Johannesburg)	Group interview

3. Overview of Africa Check

- Africa Check was launched in 2012. It is one of more than 100 fact-checking organisations across the world.
- Africa Check defines itself as a fact-checking organisation. The organisation's staffing almost doubled in size during the course of the study, with Africa Check taking on a deputy- director, deputy-editor, health editor and community manager in Johannesburg, plus a deputy editor for the French language site in Dakar, and editors for Nigeria and Kenya in Lagos and Nairobi – most of these positions created between September 2016 and January 2017 as funding allowed. As a result, as at January 2016, it has five fact-checking staff members in Johannesburg, (out of a total of 10 staff members working in the Johannesburg offices). It also has an office in Senegal which employs an editor and a deputy-editor for its French-language website. Since November Africa Check has employed a full-time editor in Lagos, Nigeria and since January 2017 a full-time editor in Nairobi, Kenya..
- As part of its ongoing outreach strategy, Africa Check has entered into several collaborations and partnerships. Besides its relationship with Politifact, and with a South African radio station PowerFM in Johannesburg, Africa Check Senegal has a broadcast content partnership with West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR) and has a fact-checking agreement with Seneweb,³ one of the biggest online newssites in Senegal. Fact-checking collaborations with PesaCheck⁴ in Kenya, and the University of Mauritius are among those also being discussed.
- The aim of Africa Check is to “improve public debate” through fact-checking statements, reports and other public claims⁵ relating to “leading topics of public debate”. In this way it seeks to both raise the level of public debate, but also to hold public figures and institutions accountable.
- Africa Check also aims to instil a sense of self-awareness amongst the public,⁶ prominent public figures and institutions of the need to be certain about claims made before making them. In part this involves skills development, and Africa Check has offered training to media groups working in both print and broadcast, such as Eyewitness News, Caxton and the Mail & Guardian. It also holds annual 'fact-checking' awards.
- The following were provided as the most-read reports for 2015 by Africa Check:
 - #10 More claims of South Africa's ‘spectacular transformation’ fact-checked
 - #9 Is Zimbabwe's adult literacy rate the highest in Africa?
 - #8 Has South Africa lost R700 billion to corruption since '94? Why the calculation is wrong
 - #7 Zambia doesn't hold 60% of southern Africa's freshwater, but 4.5%
 - #6 No, Zimbabwe is not the world's second poorest country
 - #5 Claim that Jonathan left Nigeria with 7 trillion naira deficit does not add up
 - #4 How many barrels of oil stolen a day in Nigeria? Buhari in right ballpark with 250,000
 - #3 Taken for a ride? Kenyan county paid too much for US\$1,000 wheelbarrows
 - #2 Race, poverty and inequality: Black First Land First claims fact-checked

3 On of the country's most popular news websites: <http://www.seneweb.com/>

4 <https://pesacheck.org/?gi=ed60d0117ea6>

5 Claims made on social media are also fact-checked.

6 For instance it has run a Twitter campaign called “Think before your tweet”.

- #1 How much will it cost to go to a South African university in 2016?

Outputs per content type for 2015 were the following:⁷

	2012	2013	2014	2015
Reports				
English	10	62	60	67
French	1			7
Factsheets/Guides				
English		4	23	25
French			4	8
Blogs				
English	3	16	24	26
French				2
Spot-checks				
English		4	27	20
French				
Total	14	86	138	155

4. Summary of key findings

- Interviewees showed a practical understanding of what a fact-checking organisation does overall. However, awareness of Africa Check itself ranged from detailed knowledge of the organisation to a “vague” awareness of it as a fact-checking organisation. Somewhat surprisingly, academics working both in the sphere of public health and in media studies showed a weak awareness of Africa Check. In contrast media professionals and research organisations showed a strong awareness. There was low awareness of the training Africa Check offers, and almost no awareness of the Africa Check awards amongst interviewees. While a number of the interviewees are not necessarily the audience targeted for training and awards, this does suggest that Africa Check's branding as a fact-checking organisation engaged in different areas of work could be strengthened.
- Twitter was the most common point of contact with Africa Check's work amongst interviewees, with only some awareness of its work created through print and radio.
- All interviewees felt Africa Check played a crucial role in a context where there was a significant amount of misinformation circulating in the public domain. Most attributed this to the current weak state of the country's news media. In this context, Africa Check played an important educational role, empowering citizens to enact democracy.
- Definitions of Africa Check's work varied from “advocacy”, to “watchdog” role, to “journalism” to “public service” to “research”. There was also some scepticism about whether or not Africa Check was or could be “objective” or “neutral”. These tensions were reflected amongst Africa Check staff themselves when they self-defined their role. However, critical to all interviewees was that Africa Check was an “independent” voice – regardless of how one defined the work they did.

⁷ At the time of writing, 2016 showed a significant increase in content outputs with a total of 152 content items by the third quarter.

- Interviewees expressed a positive response to Africa Check's approach to fact-checking overall. While most said their reports were “fair”, most also agreed that objectivity was not possible for Africa Check. One interviewee who had been consulted as an expert by Africa Check said that staff were significantly more informed and prepared than journalists who frequently approached him for comment.
- Responses from interviewees who had been fact-checked were mixed, with two suggesting that Africa Check did not take the newsroom context properly into consideration when fact-checking news media content. Newsroom challenges included a lack of resources, skills and capacity. It was also felt that because journalists often worked off third-party content such as media releases, they should not be held accountable for inaccuracies in those media releases. It was argued that different news media tries to engage its audience in different ways, and that content is developed to achieve a particular affect in audiences, which needed to be taken into account by Africa Check. It was also felt that Africa Check sometimes “attacked” a position taken on statistics, rather than evaluating the veracity of the underlying statistics. In this regard, it was felt that bias was evident in some of Africa Check's work.
- There was a strong sense from several interviewees that Africa Check needed stronger media partnerships to increase its authority and power in the public sphere. This involved several interlocking and simultaneous issues. It was felt that Africa Check needed to take on more prominent and controversial issues in public debate. Several interviewees felt that Africa Check should produce fact-checking reports or commentary much faster to keep pace with public debate. The phrase “quick-turnaround” was used by at least two interviewees.
- Interviewees were divided on whether or not Africa Check had a tangible impact on public conversation. Some felt it was difficult to have an impact in a public space that lacked accountability. Two interviewees said that Africa Check had a clear impact on the way their organisations worked influencing their editorial decisions and producing a sense of caution when working with statistics. One organisation used Africa Check reports to train its junior researchers.
- Gaps in selection on what to fact-check included issues that were not on the news agenda, statements made by business, and consumer product claims made by companies.
- Training of civil society and of speech writers were suggested as new areas of work for Africa Check. It was also suggested that Africa Check should offer awards for good speech writing. There was also a need to fact check statements made by businesses, and marketing information, such as claims made by medischemes.
- Interviewees felt there was a strong interest in fact-checking amongst both the media and citizens in other parts of Africa. Africa Check had a role in ensuring accountability on the continent. There was also a need for fact-checking training of journalists, and it was felt that universities should be a core part of this strategy. A staged-approach to Africa Check's expansion on the continent was necessary. It was also argued that in some countries different measures of rigour and impact would be needed to properly assess Africa Check's value.

5. Findings from interviews

5.1. Awareness of Africa Check

All interviewees who agreed to an interview had at least some awareness of Africa Check as a project. This awareness ranged from having detailed knowledge of the project (at least two interviewees were aware of it from its inception, while at least two knew the Africa Check staff members professionally), to a tentative awareness of Africa Check. Media professionals and research organisations showed the strongest awareness of Africa Check, with a mixed sense of awareness from NGOs depending on their field of engagement. Interestingly, awareness of Africa Check amongst academics appeared to be lowest. One potential interviewee, a media studies professor who in the end could not be interviewed needed “to be reminded what Africa Check was”, while another who works as an academic on public health issues described her awareness of Africa Check as “vague”:

I am vaguely aware of it as fact-checking service of people who make claims. My sense is it is more about political claims. Not sure where that comes from, that sense. It is not something I have used necessarily a lot myself personally.

Of interest, one interviewee who was unclear of Africa Check's methodology, also wanted more detailed information on who funded the organisation. While this information is available online, it does suggest that a fact-checking organisation is likely to raise questions such as “What is its agenda? And who is behind this?” when some people first encounter it.⁸

In contrast, all interviewees could articulate clearly what a fact-checking organisation does, even though four interviewees were not aware of any fact-checking organisation in other parts of the world. Of those that were, Politifact was the most frequently mentioned, with Full Fact in the UK and a “Vietnam fact-checking” initiative also mentioned by one interviewee who had worked in Vietnam (this initiative is not part of the global fact-checking network). One media professional had received fact-checking training from *Channel 4* and *The Guardian* during elections in the United Kingdom.

While most of the interviewees are not the target audience for Africa Check training and awards, most interviewees were not aware that Africa Check offers training, while nearly all interviewees were not aware of the Africa Check awards.

The first encounter with Africa Check's work differed amongst interviewees. For example, one interviewee learned of it at a conference, another from a newspaper, another from the radio, and another through an invitation to its launch. One interviewee is a board member, and has as a result participated formally in the project. Two interviewees suggested they had participated informally in the conceptualisation of the project. Points of contact with Africa Check's work included online media (e.g. *Daily Maverick*), print media (e.g. *Mail & Guardian*), radio (e.g. *Radio 702*) and social media. One interviewee accessed Africa Check on Facebook, while several followed Africa Check in Twitter. Overall, Twitter was the most common point of contact with Africa Check's work, and the most successful form of dissemination amongst those interviewed. However, while Africa Check's overall audience grew sharply by 2016, up by 33% on the previous year to a monthly average of more than 100,000, most interviewees did not actively read Africa Check reports on a regular basis, and reports, when accessed, were read for general interest rather than contributing to their professional work.

One interviewee, who had also been approached by Africa Check as an expert, showed the most substantial engagement with the Africa Check project:

⁸ As suggested elsewhere in this report, transparency in methodology and funding is important for Africa Check's public credibility.

I go to their site sometimes, usually if something is in the news. Once or twice I have gone to their site because they are engaged with an issue that bothered me. Sometimes I go to their site because of their tweeting. I have gone to their site to ask them if they want to check on something⁹ – I have done this twice. In one case they said thanks, but didn't follow up; in the other case they did actually follow up. They partly incorporated what I suggested into something else they were doing.

As mentioned, one media studies academic approached show little awareness of Africa Check. Similarly, one potential interviewee approached – the Communications and Global Outreach Advisor for UNAIDs Regional Support Team for Eastern and Southern Africa – said she did not want to be interviewed because she had never heard of Africa Check. Further, while one interviewee was aware of Africa Check from the start, he said that there was no discussion of Africa Check in the professional editors organisation he chairs. All of these suggest a gap in awareness in spaces where one would expect awareness to be relatively high, or Africa Check's work to be mentioned from time to time.

5.2. Importance of Africa Check

Most interviewees described Africa Check's work as fact-checking statistics¹⁰ to correct information in the public domain. Several interviewees suggested that Africa Check's work was critical in the current global context where the truthfulness of public claims appeared less important than the effect those claims had (US President Donald Trump was referenced by at least three interviewees). One interviewee described Africa Check's work as “myth-breaking”, while others referred to the context in which it worked as a “post-truth” world or a “post-fact society”:

This is a post-truth world, and in that context Africa check is important. One would hope the media would be doing this, but they are not.

Two interviewees used the word “misinformation” – reflecting an understanding amongst a number of interviewees that there is a deliberate attempt to misrepresent facts amongst public commentators, and that Africa Check plays an important role in challenging these statements:

They [Africa Check] look at discrepancies in what is reported and what the actual facts are. Often statistics are misinterpreted. They give a different interpretation – generally correcting misinformation in the news.

They take issues that are in public debate, such as education or an energy issue or something about refugees in South Africa and other places, and actually try to crunch the data and come up with the best solid analysis of what's going on. It tries to cut through a lot of misinformation around the issue.

Words such as “trust”, “credibility” and “spin” were also used to describe public commentators:

We are moving in an era of great confusion – with the internet playing a role, as well as Facebook and Twitter. I'm astonished by the lack of understanding of society and the level of false information. It is a credibility problem, with a lot of people spinning everything around.

9 Africa Check receives 2-3 requests for fact-checks each day through its online request form.

10 The term “statistics” was used more frequently than “public statements”.

Radio and TV and newspapers, you can't trust them to bring us the truth. What is happening around us now? Africa Check in my view has a role to play in this.

There was generally a critical view of the current quality of journalism in South Africa, and a number of interviewees felt that Africa Check was doing the work that the news media should be doing:

Things as we know get reported badly; statistics get used for purpose. A group that watches that sort of thing is important.

There is a huge need for fact-checking, because so many claims and counter-claims are made in the public space – sometimes to do with very important things. Because the media profession is under-staffed and under-prepared, using junior reporters that are less skilled, there is a need for someone to help journalists to do their job. So I am a big fan of this. It's important for making democracy flourish.

Most attributed the news media climate to a lack of resources and experience in the newsrooms:

It's not possible to have a fact-checking department in newsrooms because of budgets. Only experience identifies problems with statistics in a newsroom – mostly they start with accepting something as true, unless someone in the chain doubts the statistics. But because that level of experience is diminishing in the newsroom, the ability of the newsroom to identify problems becomes less and less. So, there will be more and more errors creeping. This will be the case until news organisations become profitable.

In the emerging media environment it is critical that you have some kind of a service like this – which doesn't excuse traditional media houses from not doing their job. Given the resource challenges the mainstream media faces, it means that their ability to properly verify things is compromised. They are not in competition, but should be seen as [added-value] research.

In this context, interviewees felt that Africa Check has a role to play in educating citizens:

I think South Africans are still very naïve when it comes to consuming media and will believe anything. This is dangerous as it allows for harmful propaganda. I think if Africa Check can educate SA consumers to trust only reputable sources and to take what they read with a pinch of salt, it will help greatly in the bigger scheme of things – from fear-mongering politics to illegitimate financial schemes and snake-oil health-care solutions.

Africa Check takes important and controversial public claims and checks them against available evidence. They become important or controversial either due to content (e.g. crime) or subject or by virtue of the person making the claim. They check the veracity of the claim in order to help ordinary citizens decide for themselves.

I do think a watchdog body that does this is really important. People who read the media often don't have the skills to do it on their own. People don't have the skills to understand bad statistics.

Through awareness, citizens will be empowered to enact their own citizenship and strengthen democracy:

They are not journalists per se. I think it is a “service” that allows other people who are engaged in the space – academics, journalists, politicians – to allow them to do their job

better. Africa Check is a tool that empowers others in the democratic space to enact their democracy.

5.3. Defining what Africa Check does

While interviewees showed a practical understanding of what Africa Check does, there were differing perspectives on how to define their work.

Africa Check staff suggested that how they define the work they do is largely pragmatic. While on the Africa Check website they are described as “researchers”, staff felt it was not useful to present themselves as researchers to people they were fact-checking. This would sometimes lead to conflict and confusion with the subject not realising that the Africa Check report would be published publicly, or believing that what they were being asked was “not important”. Staff have found that it is much more effective to introduce themselves as “journalists”. However, they do not feel they have a watchdog role in line with the normative role of journalism. At the same time, staff have found that when approaching funders it is useful to describe their work as a “public service”.

These different perspectives – and even a sense of ambivalence or uncertainty – were reflected in the interviewee responses. These ranged from defining Africa Check as “journalism as it should be done”, to “a public service” to a “watchdog organisation” to an “advocacy organisation”:

What they seem to do is basically good journalism. They ask people who may have the answers, and check against answers and evidence – it is a sceptical analysis of available resources.

I think of these things as public services, with the understanding that they are meant to be neutral. To me they are like Right2Know, that is set up to watch government, or a consumer organisation. I come from America, and they have a lot of those kind of things.

Most interviewees were sceptical of notions of Africa Check being “objective”, but accepted that the transparency in its methodology means it can be “seen to be fair”. A number of interviewees saw Africa Check as serving a distinct advocacy function:

I see them as activist but not partisan – it is a civil society response. It is a response to a public that is controlled by messages – whether industry or politicians. Our public space or idea of knowledge is very much dictated by who owns the media, and that is not a neutral space, so it takes activists to show it is not neutral. A lot of time people who claim facts don't get challenged, so it is a form of activism because you are challenging people in a position of power and authority.

Their reason for being is to produce clarity and honesty and advocacy of a sort. There is an element of advocacy: if look at their stuff on Steve Hoffmeyer, they have pertinently taken on his racism. Once you make this choice, then it is an advocacy of sorts.

Regardless of how their work is defined – or how Africa Check staff self-define their work – the “independence” of Africa Check was critical for all interviewees:

Most public commentators who make statements globally – they are often claims made using numbers that are off the wall. So looking at this is important. [Africa Check] is very useful in

a sense of being a succinct and reputable independent voice.

5.4. Africa Check's approach to fact-checking

Africa Check staff described the following process in developing their fact-checking report:

- Each day staff will scan government press releases and speeches, watch the news on TV and listen to news radio shows to “get a sense of what the discussion is.” They would also read social media to check which things people are sharing “because they believe it is true”. Specific preparation would be done for big events, such as an international AIDs conference or elections, and staff would keep a watch on what people are saying about these.
- Daily editorial meetings take place at 10am, where staff discuss possible issues to fact-check and pitch ideas to the editor, who would make a decision on the viability of the idea. prescribed process.
- When a decision is made on what to fact-check, staff follow a set process: 1. They approach the person making the claim for clarity on their claim 2. They make use of multiple public sources, such as journals and the research outputs from research units to determine the veracity of the claim and 3. They test their understanding by consulting experts. Staff do not interpret the facts, but allow the expert to give context to the fact-checking.
- Depending on the issue, reports can take 20 minutes, to two hours to a month to produce.

Interviewees expressed a positive response to Africa Check's methodology overall, although in at least one instance their methodology needed to be clarified for the respondent:

I like their approach. It may have something to do with my academic background, but multiple stats makes sense to me. It gives the work validity to people who may not have an academic background; so giving sources is important. I find in our own work one of the most difficult things to do is to present data in a way that is meaningful – often data is used to obscure.

Its very good. They look at several sources, and write in an easy language for the general public. They've got the ballpark right.

I think its admirable what they do: It appears to be sound and appears, and authoritative.

Almost all interviewees felt that Africa Checks reports were “fair”, even though most were sceptical that a fact-checking organisation could be objective or neutral:

They are not objective, but are fair: Because they set out with a deliberate attempt to say this is valid or not valid. They are analytical and critical and fair, but is that objective? No it isn't; but that is the role of the media in my view.

While Africa Check staff do not self-identify as an advocacy organisation, they shared this perspective. While they tried to be objective in their work, they remained sceptical about the possibility of neutrality, even in selecting what to fact-check:

Selection is not that neutral, but we try. We want to involve readers more in our selection process and ask them to vote on what to fact-check, but at this stage we often don't have the capacity. Neutrality is a futile objective, but we do try appear fair. For instance, we fact-checked the top three parties [for the local elections].

Staff said selection of what to fact-check was based on the question: “What will the impact be if we don't fact-check” a particular statement or report. The importance of the selection process was echoed by one interviewee:

The question is: what are the questions that need to be fact checked? What is a threat to public good? And what is just trying to shame someone or call them a dummy? For me that is the important thing. Sometimes someone is just obfuscating, sometimes a politician doesn't understand the facts, and someone even in my own field might not know – so for me what is important is: What is the purpose of asking the question?

Some interviewees reflected the inevitable bias in the selection of what needed to be fact-checked:

[The question of whether or not their conclusions are fair] is a loaded question. I think they probably have a quasi-progressive bias, but that might be a bias shown in what they look at; for example, education and textbooks, rather than trade figures or the sale of durable goods. But that is not a horrible bias; I think it is just what they do. And it is also determined by what society talks about. If you follow news cycles you might miss out on other stuff, but following the news cycle is what Africa Check is designed to do.

One interviewee suggested that while the methodology for compiling each report was the same, an inevitable bias crept in depending on the particular staff member researching and writing the report:

Whether this process is positive or negative varies a lot in terms of how it is implemented in terms of writing style and that each staff member's approach is quite different. If each author was asked to fact-check the same issue, there might be three quite different reports because of writing style. This is not necessarily bad, but it is interesting to know that there is a personality behind the writing comes through. Broadly this is a good thing – unless you say this is a service, then I should get the same kind of report no matter the author.

One interviewee said he did not always agree with the findings in Africa Check reports, suggesting that statistics or data themselves are not so easily demystified:

I do not always agree with their findings – they fact-checked data prices, and when I read it I thought “maybe, maybe not”. The thing is they used old data from old reports, so I did not agree with them.

One interviewee had been consulted by Africa Check as an expert, and said he found the process thorough in comparison to his experiences when approached by journalists:

I found them thorough. I engage a lot with journalists. Many journalists ask questions from profound ignorance. They have not prepared. When they approached me they had done the background reading, and prepared for the questions.

5.5. Reactions from interviewees fact-checked by Africa Check

Positive responses to Africa Check's work include evidence of false claims being withdrawn from

public statements, political parties publicly admitting their mistakes, and corrections in the media.¹¹ Negative responses or “push backs” to Africa Check’s work fall into two broad categories: Firstly, people or institutions that accept that an Africa Check correction is right, but say that the evidence presented is beside the point; secondly, accusations that Africa Check is biased.

Four interviewees had been fact-checked by Africa Check, with three of them critical of the fact-checking process. Of these, one felt that Africa Check puts the onus on them to “do the research”. The interviewee preferred to respond in email to the questions, and the insistence of bias, subjectivity, and that Africa Check imposed a “burden” on the organisation is worth quoting in full:

** They ask us to do the research for them*

** They place an over emphasis on us having to prove our facts rather than them trying to prove us wrong.*

** Their framing is sometimes misleading if their findings are inconclusive*

** They don’t approach fact checking from a neutral basis – they actively look to catch you out so that they can get a newsworthy angle for an article*

** They ask repeated rounds of questions, putting a huge burden on the organisation under scrutiny and set unreasonable deadlines.*

** There is an implicit onus on you to meet their deadlines and answer all their questions, regardless of capacity etc.*

Of interest in the above response is the suggestion that the source of facts quoted in the public domain are not that readily available, and that the organisation interviewed needed to do additional research to substantiate what is stated publicly. When asked how Africa Check could improve its work and if there are gaps in what Africa Check fact-checks, the interviewee restated the prior points in a slightly rephrased way, making it difficult not to notice an underlying sense of resentment of Africa Check’s work (in itself suggesting a positive impact of Africa Check’s work):

2. *How can Africa Check improve the work it does?*

** Do more of the research themselves.*

** AfricaCheck should operate from a neutral basis and should not be focused around media hits. They should focus on the facts and if an organisation is correct then they should credit them for that.*

3. *Are there gaps in their work? Are there areas that they should fact-check that they are not?*

** They themselves can be misleading when they are scrutinising a subjective fact. If their reasoning differs from yours then they frame your reasoning as incorrect or misleading when in actual fact both can be correct given the nature of subjectivity.*

While it is easy to see the defensiveness in the above responses, it is important to note that one interviewee who had not been fact-checked by Africa Check, but did use Africa Check reports for his work, reflected a similar position in terms of criticising Africa Check for “attacking” a position, rather than evaluating the evidence in support of the position:

I looked at their report on farm attacks, and compared their figures to AfriForum’s. This is a good example of why fact-checking can be more ambiguous than it appears at first. The

11 Data on these impacts compiled by Africa Check mostly pre-dates the start of the health and development intervention.

journalistic reflex is everyone has an agenda. People are people. I had to cross-check the statistics independently against a policy report. First those figures are subject to political manipulation, but I did find that Africa Check's response to AfriForum claims on farm violence was rhetorically slanted. It lacked a sense of balance, with the effect that it was against a point of view rather than simply an evaluation of facts.

Two interviewees that has been fact-checked suggested in different ways that Africa Check's approach to fact-checking news media content did not properly take into account the context in which news media operated:

While the reports are fair, I think they might be unfair on other people, because they don't seem to understand the stresses that media houses go through, and don't understand a story doesn't have to be academically defensible but editorially defensible. They want to make everything objective as possible, but in modern journalism objectivity is a different beast.

It was suggested that Africa Check needed to take into account different media audiences when fact-checking specific content, as well as what a particular media title was trying to achieve in this regard:

Different titles have different media audiences. If it's Daily Maverick, your job is to ridicule government in order to make readers feel more secure. That is how it works with all publications; you make business decisions to make editorial decisions – business comes before editorial decisions. You need to abide by ethical rigour, but it is not as simple as saying “we know what is going on” and the readers should like it or lump it.

An example of an audience-driven content initiative focusing on the annual budget speech by the Minister of Finance was given to illustrate this perspective. This initiative had been fact-checked by Africa Check:

For example, we built a budget a “tax clock” where you could work out how much tax to pay and asked readers: “Do you think the minister is correct to spend this much on education and put up tax on this etc. There were a series of questions. We then mailed off the suggestions to the treasury. Africa Check was quite vocal on Twitter on how these questions were not complete. But [our] point was to get people interested, and then send their opinions to treasury. Africa Check did not tell the whole story correctly. The journalism role was to tell the story to get people thinking. You can either view data as sacrosanct and holistic, or as elements that you can draw out to create your own narrative with an end-purpose.

The second interviewee – also a content producer – echoed something of this perspective. She found the process of being approached by Africa Check “rather startling”, and in this instance felt it did not take into account that the news media outlet was working of secondary sources:

I felt that they were unnecessarily hostile. We had run a press release from an NGO about sexual violence and their communication made me feel like we committed some sort of moral/journalistic crime by doing that.

The interviewee's argument was that, like Africa Check, its own commitment to provide accurate information to readers was important:

Did I agree with their findings? Since they had done research which dispelled the research presented to us (by the press release and numerous online resources) yes, I did. We're not in the habit of ignoring new information or facts.

However, the fourth interviewee did not express the same reservations, welcoming Africa Check's commentary on his error, and pointing out how dependent writers are on the newsmedia:

I saw it in City Press and [Africa Check] saw it a few days later in my column. I think that is important. I also write books – we rely on newspapers. Every page has a mistake in RW Johnson's work. There is potential for columnists to be fact-checkers ourselves, to point out lies and truth.

5.6. Working with the media

Amongst the news content providers interviewed there was an ambivalent sense of the usefulness of Africa Check content to their own daily content needs and outputs. One described the relationship with Africa Check in the past as a “partnership with no formal agreement”, with Africa Check content appearing in print (“once or twice”) and on its website “when appropriate”. The arrangement for the news media site was pragmatic:

We try fill websites every day. We do need lot of content, but good content, and this is very expensive content in terms of how long it takes to produce, and in terms of what the engagement and the readership is.

However, there was a sense of these relationships being short-lived, with one interviewee suggesting that there was much more scope for Africa Check to reach a larger readership:

It feels like there are surges in visibility when someone picks up on a story, but it fades away again soon. I often think they are missing a trick when it comes to partnering with large media houses to reach a bigger audience.

One current affairs commentary website, which used to run Africa Check content, was supportive of Africa Check as a whole. However, the interviewee felt that the way Africa Check worked was no longer useful to the deadlines his newssite faced, or to its content-planning needs:

They kind of drop the press release onto the media unaware; it doesn't work with my rhythm. By the time I managed to see it, others would have published it. When you communicate with media partners through a mail that dumps in their inbox, it is very difficult to plan. Some media houses just reprint; it's okay with them, but I would love to know a day or two in advance and be prepared for it. It is difficult. Some people have the production cycles set on breaking news – so it doesn't work out for our market.

The interviewee felt that a “small number of credible partners” was useful to their website. He did not feel that being in a position to influence Africa Check's editorial (“what to fact-check”) would be useful, saying this would be “intrusive”.¹² However, he nevertheless suggested that a clearer, “closer” and more strategic relationship was necessary for Africa Check to increase its reach through different media outlets:

My feeling is that “spread-shooting” your press release and your story, and hoping it will stick, doesn't work as a sound strategy. I would prefer to have a smaller number of credible partners and give a proper space to them. When you know what's coming you can give it a prominent

12 This contrasted with a another interviewee who suggested a close editorial relationship would be useful.

position. If you spread-shoot you hope something is going to stick. I don't see that as a good option. It will be used as any wire story or press release.

It was suggested that part of the challenge in developing a media strategy was that it needed to be appropriate to the social and political context, and the needs of that context:

*You lose impact in a society that is not accountable – if you do not fact-check people, and just end up shooting emails to other person, they get lost. You need a proper media strategy on what to do and what to produce. My sense is, again, lets **see** what is crucial to this country right now.*

One interviewee felt that Africa Check needed a much quicker turnaround time in producing fact-checking reports to remain relevant:

I would like their core function to remain. I am currently writing a book on land ownership, with the cabinet minister making completely false claims on land. I go to Africa Check; that is their core function, the big information. For example, what is the real story on the number of white CEOs. Those discussions are valuable. I would like them for my own purposes. I do feel they should do quick turnaround information. This week the state-owned enterprises attacked the Minister of Finance. Daily reporters reflect on differences of opinion, but they don't tell us who is right. African Check should not wait, because old falsehoods stick in mind.

5.7. Gaps in what needs to be fact-checked

While most interviewees felt Africa Check's reports were fair, a number felt that there were gaps in the selection of what needed to be fact-checked. A number of interviewees felt that Africa Check should proactively fact-check issues that are not in the news or part of the public conversation but that are of public importance (migrants, gay men, and sex workers in Africa were mentioned as examples). Three interviewees felt that Africa Check should fact-check statements made by business (for example on corruption and unemployment), and that there was also a need to fact-check consumer information (e.g. the information put out by medischemes or claims made about environmental impact). Two interviewees (both from the health sector) felt that Africa Check could at times make a better selection of what it chooses to fact-check, and that some discrepancies in reported facts that Africa Check highlighted were not significant from a scientific perspective.

Common to a number of the perspectives on gaps in selection, was that Africa Check needed to be more “ambitious” in what it chose to fact-check. This was phrased as a need to focus on “the big things”, on “controversial claims” or “highly politicized claims”:

I occasionally think they are pushing it a bit. I come from a mathematical background, and sometimes they are making a mountain out of a molehill – the conclusions they reach are not that different. For example, if someone says 10% of people are HIV positive, and they say it is 11%, I don't feel this is material. They need to take up the big things, and leave the little things. This would be a more effective use of time.

However, one interviewee disagreed with this perspective:

10% and 11% is important I think. Africa Check brings information, and turns it [the statement] around to say that is not the right. The value between 10-11% is a value to the public. The

medical industry should try shape the conversation in some way.

On interviewee felt that Africa Check could enter more directly into public debate by focusing on more politically controversial claims:

To be brutally honest, I sometimes feel that they don't always check the most controversial claims. Sometimes they check things that are easy to verify. Some facts are more difficult to check than others. The politically highly controversial questions will take more time and effort and money – they don't always go there. For example, in the political space, if the president says, well, I paid for my Nkandla home, they don't go say, “is this true?” So there are highly politicized claims where there might have been available facts.

Similarly, two interviewees felt that Africa Check should more directly take on people or organisations in positions of power:

I think Africa Check is doing very important work. But I do feel that they don't go for the big, really dangerous guns. Government, police, big business etc. Instead they focus on fact-checking NGOs working to drive awareness about issues like sexual abuse and menstruation. While I don't think anyone should use incorrect statistics, it does feel as if Africa Check is chasing weak targets who can little afford the negative press, while ignoring the dangerous folk who are causing actual harm with calculated disinformation.

I think they should look more at government themselves – at issues like the nuclear deal and its affordability.

5.8. Perceptions of impact

All interviewees agreed that there is a need for an organisation like Africa Check, with some feeling that its impact was self-evident:

The impact of Africa Check gives clarity to issues, particularly politicians claims. It takes the wind out of some heated situations, especially how loud and noisy things are.

However a number of interviewees were unsure whether Africa Check was having a tangible impact on public conversation. Questions were raised, such as “but does the newspaper correct the fact?” or the “so what?” factor”. For the second, the interviewee meant that the public culture does not encourage accountability, and this environment weakens the potential impact of Africa Check's work. Some interviewees also felt that Africa Check reached an urban, educated “elite” (or a middle-class readership) and spoke to their concerns, rather than poorer people, or those living outside of the main urban centres in the country:

I think it has a very important public purpose. Politicians are used to twisting the facts. But I am not sure about impact on the ground; where there is certainly an impact is on a literate and aware audience.

I think it has an impact on a more educated readership, because it is statistically orientated, and fact-based. Does the Daily Sun cover their reports? I don't think they do. Does it have an impact on politicians' actual decision-making? Say it is getting to something resembling “the truth”, is the power of that truth in South African society greater than the power of the propaganda of the

state?

At least two other interviewees felt similarly that it was difficult to have impact when the public culture did not recognise the importance of facts:

Our public sphere of media accuracy discussion and debate, within that sphere, yes they have impact. Are they able to impact national discourse? I don't think so. I can't think of instance where as a result of their exposure something changed [at this level]. This is not a failure on their part, but a bigger problem in society. The president is revealed to lie, and nothing happens. That for me is the potentially their biggest challenge: The so what factor?

One interviewee felt that Africa Check currently fact-checked “low-hanging fruit” and that “something much more aggressive and much more meaningful” was needed. He suggested that this related to the timeliness of the reports, and entailed fact-checking public statements ‘in the moment’ – that is, having a quick “turnaround time”. It was also felt that the subjects of the fact-checking should be more personalised (“people” should be fact-checked) because this was more effective in achieving public accountability:

My sense is that Africa Check should have been the way that Politifact is in America. You fact-check people in public positions – you fact-check them to catch them in a lie. Before Africa Check was launched, I had the same idea. I wanted to make sure when people start telling lies we make sure that people understand that are making lies. I wish it could go more along the lines of holding people responsible for what they say.

The need for a quicker turnaround time on fact-checks was echoed by a second interviewee:

The problem with their thing is it tends to be reactive, which means they tend to be behind the curve on things – to that extent they pick cool subject and cool issues, but usually after the fact. I think they should try anticipate what's coming.

It was also suggested that Africa Check needed to focus more strongly on dissemination to increase its impact:

Africa Check is important, ideally vitally important, but they should be given a lot more funding to disseminate work, impact lot less than could be. It basically requires much better partnerships with media houses – ones which gives Africa Check power. Then you need to start talking about revenue sharing and production schedules; and this might require compromise, because content would need to be produced based on revenue – but they need to be on bigger platforms.

Amongst the positive statements on Africa Check's impact, one interviewee suggested that Africa Check acts as a preventative mechanism before people misrepresent facts publicly:

Yes, there is impact, especially with the Donald Trump hyperbole going on. When you have something like that, and then the correction is publicised widely that that claim was wrong, the debate gets better. The bigger benefit is that for each one of those that would be outed, a lot of people who would generally claim things, now know to be careful. They think: “This 'bloody' org. We can't even lie anymore”.

This was – in effect – verified by an interviewee who offered an interesting story of compromise, *inter alia* reflecting something of the perception of Africa Check's current middle-class audience:

I have a story of impact: I am dyslexic, so I made a data mistake in a pamphlet that was only picked up later. One board member said: “We must destroy these pamphlets because Africa Check will burn us”. So that is impact. We went ahead anyway with the distribution, and thought: “it is unlikely Africa Check is going to read a pamphlet distributed in the township”.

A second interviewee also suggested that Africa Check had influenced the way it works:

Has the fact that a fact-checking organization may scrutinize articles that we publish changed the way we work in any way? It has. My writers now know they have to verify facts before publishing from credible sources. I think the product is better for everyone when people are kept on their toes.

One interviewee said they use Africa Check reports to train the junior researchers in their organisation:

We gives the reports to junior researchers, as a a training method, as a way to see transparency of data.

5.9. Potential new areas of work

At least two interviewees felt that Africa Check could extend its training to the civil society sector. It was felt that there was an important need to upskill NGOs to understand and use facts in a more balanced way:

Maybe they should expand training to other areas, for example with NGOs? We put out a lot of factual things, dense reports and some stuff can be a worth a lot of money; for example our advocacy on SASOL cost them R9-billion rand. So NGOs need training to look at facts and to be objective when looking at facts. Organisations could benefit from training. A lot of shoddy research comes out of NGOs; sometimes its ideology, sometimes it is that they do not know how to use facts, or work with these different databases containing statistics.

One interviewee felt that Africa Check should offer training to speech-writers and even offer awards to speech-writers who stand out for the accuracy in their reports:

They should fact-check speeches, then issue a report and go and engage the speechwriter.. Sometimes they might need training. They could also do awards to speechwriters or parliamentary researchers working behind the scenes.

One interviewee – who works in the civil society sector -- felt that training should be more generalised, and involved “media literacy training”:

I think it is fine. One would think in the civil society sector anyone doing research and writing has a degree of some sort, so they would be familiar with research methodologies. I think what is needed more is media literacy training. The thing is: sometimes facts are used deliberately for opportunism in the civil society sector.

As mentioned, three interviewees felt that Africa Check should fact-check statements made by business as well as consumer information. One interviewee felt this was a potential revenue model

for the project:

They could fact check insurance brokers. There are wild claims; how companies use business-type information, reporting sales for example. Also the corruption in the business sector – the way different businesses use information in their publications. The payment for this is my only concern – so they would have to be careful how they are hired by a company to fact-check business.

They could fact-check claims made by companies. A company might say it has green credentials, to create public support - but these claims might not be true.

5.10. Working in other regions in Africa

Although not the primary focus of this study, Africa Check's move into other regions in Africa is worth considering. One of the questions raised is whether or not some of the perspectives shared above are likely to hold true in other countries on the continent.

Similar to the findings above, interviewees felt that accountability in other countries on the continent was a key problem facing democracy. For example, the methodology and “values” (the word “transparency” was used) employed by Africa Check in Senegal was the same as the parent organisation in Johannesburg. Staff in Africa Check Senegal also define their work in similar terms to Johannesburg staff, however, perhaps more readily identifying with a watchdog role:

Some people call us an “accuracy-watchdog” – this is partly true. We can say we are a “fact-teller”: we stick to facts, and we don't comment.

The West Africa media environment was described as “very vibrant environment characterised by diversity online and diversity on radio”, yet with a “common problem” of reporting on facts. Similar to the South African context, a key challenge in the region was accountability:

We are struggling to achieve accountability in Senegal. We are trying to implement a culture of accountability, but there are cultural obstacles. Politicians don't want to be said to be lying when they lie. We need time, but we do need accountability using fact-checking. Africa Check is an important tool to start encouraging accountability.

Decisions on what to fact-check involve a sense of an issue's importance, and an element of “surprise” or “disbelief” when a public claim was made:

If the claim is “surprising”, if doesn't make sense to us or the readers, if it is “unbelievable” then it is worth checking.

Reactions to reports produced by Africa Check Senegal have been “generally positive, much more than negative”, with a strong sense of public and media interest in their work:

If we judge by media interest and the impact of Africa Check, I am optimistic. The last story published yesterday on politicians quoting statistics was used by 10 websites and one newspaper. So we are having impact on the media landscape. Some of our stories are visited

*more 200,000 times on Facebook, and we have thousands of impression on Twitter.*¹³

A challenge around accountability was echoed by one of Africa Check Senegal's content partners, West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR). Based in Dakar, WADR is a funded station that “promotes democracy, peace and conciliation”. It has a strong interest in social conditions in the region. It produces content for some 86 stations in West Africa, and broadcasts to Dakar where it has a 20% listenership. It co-produces a bi-weekly programme on fact-checking with Africa Check Senegal. Its station manager felt that West Africa needed a radio station “to give the floor to the cities and to inform people of democratic process”. Like South Africa, the link between a weak media and the need for fact-checking was also made by the station's manager, Souleymane Niang:

Accountability is definitely one of the main challenges the political space face. Politicians, public figures, they tend to abuse the platforms they are given to talk to citizens. They promise everything at the end of the day. The fact is that the media are not playing their role in terms of reminding citizens of promises; there is no memory. Some civil society organisations may try play this role – but if they don't have the support of the media, then there is no public debate. Fact-checking will help in the process of keeping track of what people have said and what people promise to do when they get a position – we need that memory, and media needs to be reminded of their role and then follow these promises and hold them accountable. That is my dream: that this programme will at the end of the day have enough memory to say XYZ promised to do this now they have been elected, lets go challenge them on these promises.

Initial topics for the content partnership included one on “urine therapy” and one on the “high-speed train in Nigeria”:

I was a bit taken aback on the choice of issue [on urine therapy], but it turned out to be something interesting. At the end of the day I was happy we could separate the real facts from the rumours and I hope that those that listened to the programme could too.

Although WADR has not yet been able to gauge the impact of its fact-checking programmes, he felt that this was a promising start, and said that these “not very controversial” topics were an attempt to test the Africa Check methodology and audience interest before more politically controversial issues were tackled:

Our expectation as a radio is to use this methodology and the tools of fact-checking to make policy makers be accountable, that is our dream, that's what we want. But it starts with just checking facts that are not so controversial, because we need to master these tools we are learning from Africa Check. They are very supportive in helping us understand the process of fact-checking.

Roukaya Kasenally, from the University of Mauritius, agreed that there was a need to “instill a fact-checking culture” amongst the public and media on the continent:

A fundamental element of Africa Check is instilling a fact-checking culture, and getting citizens engagement to understand that fact-checking is important in telling the news. We are talking about a new African narrative, of engaging in much more truthful and evidence-based

13 The maximum number of visits for a report published on the Africa Check Senegal site is 1400 There is more visibility on social media than the website, with Facebook being much more successful in Senegal than Twitter. This is an interesting contrast to South Africa, where Twitter is a useful outreach platform. This points to the need to country-specific dissemination strategies for Africa Check.

journalism.

Part of this involved “getting journalists to understand that basic and professional values they cannot let go of, good ethical sense”. This was important given the control many governments in Africa had over the media:

There is a need for a more robust form of journalism, for new forms of journalism. [African media] is increasingly trying to find its own feet.

But although the media needs and context were similar, one interviewee who had experience working in Kenya felt that new challenges regarding censorship and authority would present themselves, and that different measures of impact would be necessary for countries outside of South Africa:

We have PesaCheck in Kenya, which is a very different beast to Africa Check, and written for a different kind of audience. There is a whole different dynamic in the newsroom. We've had stories pulled because we have fact-checked things government ministers have said. So they will find it different – “rigour” means something different in different territories. Whether or not it is viable depends on what the measurable impact Africa Check will want to have.

It was necessary to build capacity for fact-checking, and to do this partnerships at university level important:

It would be great have a few more master classes to understand the basics of fact-checking, bringing journalists and ordinary citizens on board to understand why facts are important. Whether we are journalists or scholars we are trying to push an agenda that is hidden, and there are so many agendas that are out there – so it is important to get people to get much more informed... We need responsible and engaged citizens that understand statistics. The baseline mandate is to get facts right and people to understand that fact-checking is part of journalistic culture. So I think what the continent needs is training – this is an important issue across Africa. Journalists need to understand why facts are important and sacred and why they need to get facts right.

A “staged-approach” was necessary for Africa Check to have impact on the continent:

It is important the Africa Check does not spread too thinly. If Africa Check can become credible and authentic in terms of facts, this will allow other stakeholders to use it as a scoreboard. But they need to keep their focus, even when it comes to thematic content, what they chose to fact-check. The strategy should be around a staged approach, and getting universities on board [to build capacity] is a core part of this.

6. Recommendations

Focus of fact checking reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consideration could be given to the process of selecting what to fact-check. There is a potential need to more aggressively fact-check issues of immediate public importance so as to more vigorously enter into public debate.• Consider defining more clearly when a fact or public claim
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	<p>is likely to have a tangible impact on public awareness, knowledge or the enactment of citizenship. Public claims that are unlikely to have a tangible impact on the rights of citizens could be disregarded in favour of more controversial and relevant public claims.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carefully consider the distinction between being critical of a position taken on facts, and the evaluation of the underlying facts. To avoid bias, Africa Check should try focus on evaluating the underlying facts, and avoid being overly critical on matters of interpretation of the facts. • Consider the possibility of fact-checking issues that are not on the media agenda to force them onto the media agenda. • There is a need to fact-check business content, including product claims.
Awareness and dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for stronger outreach and more public awareness of Africa Check as fact-checking organisation amongst stakeholders who might take a direct interest in their work. This includes raising awareness of Africa Check training and its awards. Consider holding a global fact-checking conference in South Africa and inviting local stakeholders. • There is the potential need to strengthen media partners, including aligning Africa Check's work with the media needs of those partnerships. This may entail developing editorial relationships with media partners, and considering revenue-sharing models. • There is a need to create quick turnaround fact-checking on issues of immediate public relevance. • Twitter is a successful dissemination tool for Africa Check reports in South Africa and its usefulness as an awareness-raising tool could be further considered. Country-specific dissemination strategies need to be developed for other countries in Africa.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider offering fact-checking training to civil society organisations • There is a need for training in fact-checking in other regions in Africa • Fact checking business content.

7. Response to report from Peter Cunliffe-Jones, Executive Director at Africa Check

This excellent report is, and will over coming months be, very useful to the Africa Check team, providing valuable ideas and input as we work to develop our organisation and activities from 2017 on.

I am happy to confirm that, while this study was being undertaken, we took on half-a-dozen new staff

in a few months including a deputy director, a community manager, and a deputy editor in South Africa. Along with new staff in Nigeria and Kenya, these new staff, almost doubling the size of our team, mean that we are today much better placed to tackle some of the areas identified in the report; notably: (a) doing more work from 2017 onwards in outreach and communication about our work, holding meetings and reaching out to strategically useful organisations, and communicating more via both planned partnerships with major traditional media and via our stepped-up social media activities and (b) adding a stronger focus on fast turnaround reports, as has been the case in recent months, and on reports on economic and business claims. These are all things we have been starting to do with our new staff aboard, and this report provides more reason to do that.

Specifically, in terms of the point made about awareness among interviewees about our training and awards programmes, we will of course seek to increase awareness of these important activities and the advice is welcomed. At the same time, I would note that the group of interviewees selected for this study were not, of course, typical of the groups we have approached about our training, as we decided to start out initially focusing on media itself, and our communication about our awards programme was targeted at active journalists across the continent as a whole rather than media leaders, academics and others in South Africa. This approach appears to have worked well to date, as we received entries from 130 journalists from 22 countries in 2016, more than twice the number in 2015, and we will be working to extend awareness further in 2017, reaching out to leading journalism schools across the continent about our awards, notably with the creation of a new category of awards honouring the best fact-checking carried out by student journalists.

I was delighted to see that “all interviewees” believed that Africa Check plays a crucial role in the fight against misinformation in Africa, with “an important educational role, empowering citizens to enact democracy.” I think there could be few stronger arguments for our work than to say we are seen to provide a much-needed “reputable, independent voice” in public debate, helping “ordinary citizens” decide on the accuracy of claims for themselves and that: “Africa Check is a tool that empowers others in the democratic space to enact their democracy.”

It is also very encouraging to see people consulted as an expert by Africa Check say that our staff were significantly more informed and prepared than most journalists who approached them for comment and that, while we can debate the possibility of total objectivity, the transparency in our methodology means that Africa Check is “seen to be fair” and that our work appears “sound” and “authoritative”.

On some particular matters raised:

- I am pleased to say that, under the leadership of our new Deputy Director we are looking at our range of media partnerships to tackle the issues one interviewee raised, and the way we release reports; some to all parties, and others selected partners initially and only later to a wider group. This is a complex issue, as we want to ensure that our work reaches the widest possible audiences, including marginalised communities, hence we have established a number of partnerships already – with radio stations in South Africa and Senegal, with the Facebook FreeBasics programme, as well as traditional print media and major websites. But we will certainly be establishing more. And we are also working on our relationship with major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, through our role in the global International Fact-Checking Network.
- Having more editorial staff will also enable us to tackle more issues, both hot topics, and a wider range, including more claims in the business and economic field. Our new deputy editor in Johannesburg has been identified for this role.

- I was pleased to see interviewees refer to the impact our work had had on their own organisations, including one that uses Africa Check reports to train its staff. I also noted that one interviewee questioned Africa Check’s impact, asking “Does the Daily Sun cover their reports?” adding: “I don't think they do.”. In fact, the Daily Sun, the biggest selling paper in South Africa does cover our reports, corrected one of their reports after we pointed out a serious error, and agreed to carry out a joint investigation with us. We also have evidence of our work impacting on the way some politicians communicate and claim achievements.
- I think the suggestion about extending our training in fact-checking skills beyond media houses to NGOs and other organisations is valid, and it is indeed an area we are looking to develop. This is a skillset that we wish to spread much more widely, including extending wider media literacy and verification skills to young people too. I would also like to explore the idea of adding an award for well-presented data or accuracy along with our existing awards for fact-checking. That is an idea to consider.
- We are also, along with other allied organisations in the International Fact-Checking Network, working on ways of defining more clearly the metrics used for selecting claims to check, based on their potential impact on the public if left unchecked.
- Lastly, I am pleased to say that we do indeed plan to hold a conference on fact-checking in South Africa later this year. The intention is to invite relevant speakers and organisations from around Africa, and to use this event as an occasion to raise both the profile of fact-checking in media and civil society around Africa and to provide practical training and mentoring to new fact-checking initiatives. We have also, tentatively agreed to stage the planned fifth annual gathering of the International Fact-Checking Network, Global Fact 5, in Johannesburg in 2018.

Many thanks again to Alan and the interviewees who took time to speak to him for a very valuable report and ideas for us as we develop our organisation and activities in 2017 and beyond.

8. Appendix

Although the interviews conducted for this evaluation were open-ended, the following questions guided the conversations:

- Have they heard of Africa Check? If so, how, and is their awareness of Africa Check's work growing?
- Can they say what they think Africa Check does?
- Do they tend to agree with Africa Check's conclusions? (When do they/don't they?)
- What do they think of the way Africa Check works (i.e. of their methodology?)
- Do they think Africa Check is fair?
- Are they aware of other fact-checking organizations around the world and how they work?
- Are they aware of the work Africa Check does besides issuing reports, such as training and awards?
- Have they or their organization been fact-checked? What was fact-checked? Has it happened often?
- Did they agree with Africa Check's conclusions on fact-checks about them?
- Has the fact that a fact-checking organization may scrutinize claims they make changed the way they work in any way?
- If a media house, are they doing fact-checking work themselves?
- Are there things Africa Check is doing that it should not, or not doing that it should?
- Do they think Africa Check is actually having an impact on society, and if so where?
- Similarly, what do you think the impact and importance of fact-checking is more broadly?