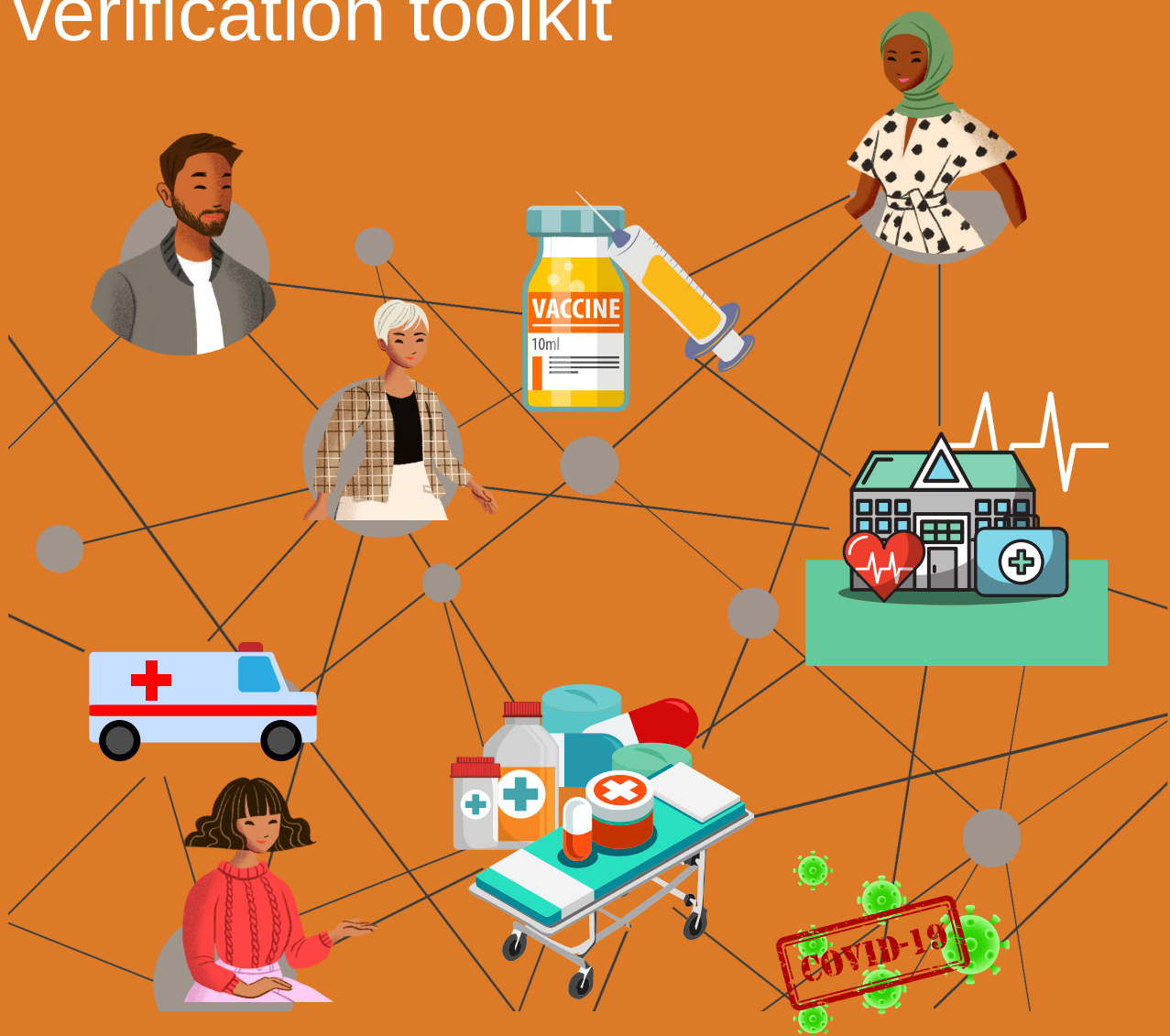


FIGHTING THE SPREAD OF FALSE INFORMATION

A fact-checking and verification toolkit



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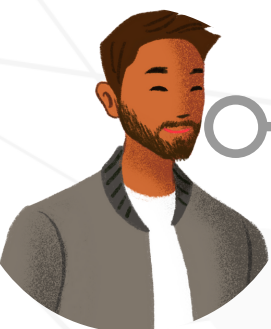
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Introduction

Message from the executive director of Africa Check



People make decisions, big and small, that impact their lives in various ways. To do this they have to rely on the best publicly available information, but often the only information available is partial, misleading or just plain wrong. The role of the media in society has never been as crucial as it is now.

Africa Check was founded on the belief that people need reliable, quality information to make decisions that impact their lives. Our work promotes accuracy and honesty in public debate and the media in Africa and we work very hard to enable others in the media and civil society, and the wider public, to check the accuracy of claims themselves. We seek to reduce the spread and impact of misinformation and promote accurate, evidence-based understanding.

As part of our efforts in the fight against misinformation, we place significant focus on training and mentoring those in the media to carry out non-partisan fact-checking themselves. It is important that fact-checking is not confined to specialist organisations such as ours, particularly at a time when misinformation and false claims seem to be pervasive.

We believe all journalists play a key role in ensuring that the public is well-informed and protected from misinformation, which can cause real harm. The media, in general, has a responsibility to the public to ensure information that is published and broadcast is factual and of high quality. This is why this partnership with Fojo Media Institute is vital at this time and will empower more journalists with the tools and skills to build and sustain public trust.

Noko Makgato

About this toolkit

This fact-checking and verification toolkit was developed by Africa Check for African journalists. It aims to equip journalists with the knowledge and practical tips to stop the spread of false information. This toolkit, which was developed as the world was in the midst of its battle against the Covid-19 pandemic, provides an easily understandable overview of fact-checking with a focus on health information.

For further information, as well as the latest fact-checking reports, visit our website at africacheck.org.



Identifying false information

Fact-checking and why facts matter

False information is not new – it's just easier to spread in today's fast-paced digital world. False health information can be dangerous and even life-threatening, as seen in the negative effects on the containment of measles, polio and now Covid-19.

Example 1

In April 2020, [a photo showed that some food packages distributed by Mike Sonko, then governor of Nairobi, Kenya, included bottles of cognac¹](#). Sonko later explained: "I think from the research which has been conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and various health organisations it has been revealed that alcohol plays a very major role in killing the coronavirus or any sort of virus." In a video that circulated on WhatsApp, he claimed that due to its high alcohol content, the cognac should act as a throat sanitiser and will kill the virus. According to the WHO, alcohol (at a concentration of at least 60% by volume) works as a disinfectant on skin, but it has no such effect within one's system when ingested. "Consuming alcohol will not destroy the virus, and its consumption is likely to increase health risks if a person becomes infected with the virus."

Example 2

A report by a British doctor in a medical journal in the late 1990s claiming a link between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and the development of autism in children has contributed to measles outbreaks around the world. [The report has since been found invalid²](#) but it caused such a wave of panic that some parents are still refusing to get their children vaccinated.



Example 3

In mid-2003 polio was on the verge of being eradicated in Nigeria, when religious and political leaders in northern Nigeria advised their followers against having their children vaccinated and claimed the vaccine would make them infertile. Although tests showed the claims were baseless, [the media reported on it without checking³](#). By the time the reports were withdrawn, the damage had been done and polio surged in northern Nigeria and spread to other countries.

¹ Africa Check: Nairobi governor Sonko puts families at risk with 'coronavirus-busting' alcohol in food packs, africacheck.org/fact-checks/spotchecks/nairobi-governor-sonko-puts-families-risk-coronavirus-busting-alcohol-food

² Africa Check: Big data study confirms: Vaccines do not cause autism, africacheck.org/fbcheck/vaccines-do-not-cause-autism

³ Africa Check: Why fact-checking matters, africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/why-fact-checking-matters



Fact-checking and why facts matter

Journalists are arguably under more pressure than ever before and are competing against non-traditional “reporters” too. Anyone with access to a mobile phone and the internet can share information, images and videos without checking the veracity of the content. Unverified information can quickly find its way onto social media platforms and WhatsApp messages, potentially adding to a flood of false information.

Misinformation often spreads faster than factual information. If you’re a journalist or fact-checker, you have a responsibility to be extra careful and verify claims. If you don’t, you’re adding to the information disorder.

Social media encourages the sharing of videos and images. Unverified, dodgy and outright fake images and videos can quickly go viral. Fact-checking methodology teaches us to spend time verifying the origin of images and videos and establishing the context in which they should be used to ensure we don’t become part of a chain of misinformation.

Uncertain about the accuracy of information? Keep this in mind:

- Use your common sense. If something sounds too good, shocking or strange to be true, it probably is.
- Always be critical. Ask yourself why someone would have created the content you’re looking at.
- Another dead giveaway that information might be false is grammatical and spelling errors.
- If you hear rumours that something is happening, for example a violent protest, and you’re not sure it is accurate, do a Google News search (news.google.com). If it’s a big story and it has happened, it’s likely that a reputable news organisation has started covering it already.
- Have a close look at the addresses (URLs) of websites or the handles of social media pages. Websites containing false information or fake social media accounts often have a URL or social media handle that looks similar to that of a credible news source to deceive their audiences.
- Check links within the story. Does the story link back to the actual content or source that it’s referring to?
- If you suspect you’re looking at false information, have a look at other stories, photos and videos on the website. Do they seem credible? Do a search for other content produced by the same person to see if it seems legit.
- Look at the “About us” page for a disclaimer to make sure you’re not looking at a satirical site.



Tips for sharing (or not sharing) posts on social media an

First:

- Think twice before you (re)tweet, (re)post, or share a message via WhatsApp.
- When citing social media sources, always keep a record, e.g. screenshots.

Second, verify the source of the content:

- Check the social media handle and verify that the account exists.
- Look at the user's history on social media and see who they have interacted with in the past, the kind of content or material they post and if it seems legit. Find out how long the user has been on social media to rule out that the account was created for a specific purpose.
- See if you can triangulate their social media posts through checking other user-generated content sites. Are they on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and/or LinkedIn and do the accounts and content match up?

Third, verify the content:

- Find the original post – never rely on links, retweets, screenshots or reposts.
- Cross-check the information against other independent sources.
- Always verify images before reposting.
- Before sharing a video or image you see on social media, read the replies or comments to see if there are questions about its authenticity.
- Check the time, date and location of posts, and see that these match up to the user/content's description.
- When you see a quote attributed to someone, do a comprehensive Google search to make sure it was said by that person.



When looking at an image or video, ask yourself:

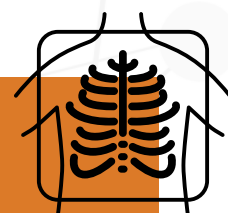
- Was it taken at the mentioned time and location? Look closely at the following:
 - a. Any form of writing, signage or language (for example on billboards)
 - b. Flags
 - c. What vehicle licence/number plates look like
 - d. The side of the road people drive on
 - e. Geographical and architectural landmarks (such as skyscrapers, bridges and mountains)
 - f. Weather
- What languages are spoken in a video?
- Do you see time-specific advertising campaigns or does the style of clothing give anything away?
- Can you see whether the photo or video material has been altered in any way to exclude information? Does it look enhanced in any way? Look for blurry lines, differences in visual quality and colours that fade out, etc.
- Cross-check visuals with other imagery or footage of the same event or location – do they appear similar?



Fact-checking and verification tools

Social media encourages the sharing of images and videos, and a photograph is much more likely to spread than a longer text article. Fact-checking methodology teaches us to spend time checking the content of images and videos, treating them as sources on their own, to ensure we don't become part of a chain of misinformation.

Many images and videos are shared and re-shared online so many times that their original context and information are lost. Remember that verifying images and videos is not necessarily about whether the content was tampered with or altered in some way. It's often about finding out if the image has appeared before and, if so, when and in what context.



Online tools for verifying images

Google reverse image search

This is similar to an ordinary Google search, but instead of searching for words or phrases, you search for an image.

- Save or download the image you want to check, or copy the web address (URL) and go to images.google.com.
- Click on the camera icon in the search bar to give you the option of pasting the URL or uploading the image to be searched. You can also drag and drop the image into the search bar.

Your results should give you an idea of how long the image has been shared online and will often give you other data like location and context.

TinEye

Go to tinEye.com and follow the same steps as with a Google reverse image search. TinEye gives you the option of sorting your search results. Should you choose to sort them according to "oldest" or "newest" you will easily get an idea of when, where and in what context an image was uploaded on the internet. When you sort your results according to "most changed" you might discover that the image you're looking for has been manipulated.

RevEye

[RevEye Reverse Image Search](#) is an extension you can add to the Chrome browser on your computer for verifying images you've found online. Once you've installed it, right-click on a picture and choose the "all search engines" option to do a search on multiple image search engines at once.



Online tools for verifying videos

Reverse image search

Use a screenshot or thumbnail from a video and do a reverse image search to find the video online.

Amnesty International's YouTube DataViewer

Go to citizenevidence.amnestyusa.org and paste the web address (URL) of a YouTube video into the search bar. Your results should include the first time the video was uploaded, as well as the original description, if any. It will also provide you with thumbnails from the video.

InVID Verification Plugin

This plugin is an all-in-one tool for video and image verification you can download (invid-project.eu/tools-and-services/invid-verification-plugin) if you use Chrome or Firefox as browser.

Verifying Twitter accounts

- If there's a blue tick next to the Twitter name, the account has been verified.
- Use [Foller.me](https://foller.me) to inspect a Twitter account's history.
- Determine whether an account is likely to be a bot with Botometer (botometer.osome.iu.edu).
- Advanced Twitter Search (twitter.com/search-advanced) lets you search for people, subjects and images on Twitter.

Verifying location

- Do a Google search for images (images.google.com) to get an idea of what a location, city or town looks like.
- Google Earth (google.com/earth) and Google Maps (google.com/maps), especially the Street View function, are easy to use and valuable to establish what a certain location looks like.

Determining possible crowd size

This is an online resource to help you check the number of people at a crowd by estimating the capacity of the location. Next time a politician claims a certain number of people attended a rally, go to mapchecking.com, search for and outline the location (a square or public park, for example) and establish the maximum crowd density and size.



The fact-checking process

Finding credible data online

These sources can serve as a good starting point for trying to find the best data. Keep in mind, however, that you can't merely take any statement and assume it's the best and latest data about a topic. Get in touch with the source to find out if you are looking at the latest research results, cross-check the information against other sources, or contact an expert who can help you put the data into perspective.

Sources of information

- Statistical agencies
- International organisations, e.g. United Nations and the World Bank
- Leading universities and research institutions
- Governments
- Professional bodies
- Reputable peer-reviewed journals
- Experts
- Fact-checking organisations like Africa Check

International sources of health data

- Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (healthdata.org)
- World Health Organization (who.int)
- World Bank (worldbank.org)
- Unicef (unicef.org)

Sources of Covid-19 data

- World Health Organization (who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019)
- National ministries or departments of health
- Poynter's CoronaVirusFacts database (poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/)

Africa Check's Info Finder Tool

- On Africa Check's website, you'll find factsheets and guides (africacheck.org/how-to-fact-check/factsheets-and-guides) on how to understand, research and report on health and other topics.
- Info Finder (africacheck.org/infofinder), a repository of data sources and facts from Africa, now also includes a section that focuses on Covid-19 information.



Fact vs opinion: what can be fact-checked?

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 not⁴.

What can be fact-checked?	What can't be fact-checked?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A claim that can be verified with evidence and proof	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opinions• Promises or predictions about what's going to happen in future



Fact vs opinion

Proof and evidence are the cornerstones of facts. A **fact** can be checked and backed up with evidence.

Opinions are based on beliefs or points of view, which often display bias as they fit our worldview and own experience. Thinking something is true because we agree with it, doesn't make it a fact. Two people might be in the same room, one saying it's hot and the other that it's cold. These opinions can't be fact-checked. What can be fact-checked, however, is the exact temperature in the room.

A **prediction**, which can also not be fact-checked, is a statement predicting or promising that something will happen in the future. A fact-checker can, however, take note of what a politician promises or a medical expert predicts will happen in the future and then at a later stage fact-check whether these promises were kept or the predictions were accurate. Fact-checking organisations, such as Africa Check, often do this by using a promise-tracker tool⁵.



Fact-checkable or not?

For a statement to be fact-checkable, you have to be able to verify it by using publicly available data. Look at the examples below:

Statement:	No Ethiopian will have a reason to go outside of the country for medical treatment.
Can I fact-check it?	No, it's a prediction (and someone's opinion).
Statement:	The World Health Organization is doing the best it can in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.
Can I fact-check it?	No, it's someone's opinion and different people will have different perceptions of “the best it can do”.
Statement:	Covid-19 is caused by a strain of the coronavirus.
Can I fact-check it?	Yes, it can be verified using publicly available scientific evidence.

⁴ Africa Check: youtube.com/watch?v=o6DPFh0Fvi8&ab_channel=AfricaCheck

⁵ Africa Check: africheck.org/promise-trackers



Africa Check's five-step fact-checking process



1. Verify the claim and identify the original source

The first step in Africa Check's fact-checking process is to verify the exact wording of the claim. People are often incorrectly quoted, although this is sometimes just a handy excuse. If the claim was reported in a newspaper or online publication, try to get hold of an audio or video recording of the event.

Tips for finding a recording:

- Contact a colleague or journalist who attended the event and ask whether they recorded it and if they would share it with you.
- Check if there is a video of the event on YouTube or an official social media account.
- Radio stations often package their shows as podcasts, or you can contact the producer for a clip.



If you are unable to locate a recording, make it clear in the fact-check that the claim “was reported to” have been made. Also ask the person or organisation whether they were quoted correctly and for the evidence on which the claim was based. You have to find the original study or survey that was conducted.

To reach a public figure or organisation, liaise with their official spokesperson. Try to find this person's contact details on an official website, or a fellow journalist may have the number. Twitter, LinkedIn or searching for the CV of the person may also yield a phone number or email address.

2. Define the terms and concepts within the claim

Never assume you know what someone meant – ask them exactly what they were referring to. Make sure you define and understand each term and concept in a statement.

Think of the term “literacy”. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “the ability to read and write”, but it can be defined and measured in different ways. One way is to use school attendance, say up to grade 3, as a stand-in. Another is to give people a sentence to read. Some surveyors merely ask people whether they can read without testing them.

Tips for staying on the right track:

- Consult Africa Check's archive. There's a good chance we've written about the topic before or compiled a factsheet.
- Ask experts. Someone working in the field will be able to tell you how a concept is defined in their area of expertise. Remember different standards or definitions may apply to different countries.



3. Inspect the evidence using the latest reliable data

If the person or organisation provided you with evidence for their claim, first check that it applies to the country, area or group they are referring to and, if so, if it is based on representative data. Sometimes data from other places, especially the United States or Europe, is transposed to African countries as though the context is the same.

Check whether the evidence has been updated. Claims tend to live on long after their sell-by date due to mindless repetition.

Carefully go through the report or study, or at least the sections relevant to your fact-check. Check out every footnote as well as the metadata. You need to understand how the data was gathered to explain it to readers. This is also necessary to ask experts sensible questions.

4. Approach experts



Show the claim to experts in the field and ask them which databases and studies are the best to use to judge it. Ask: Is the claim correct based on the studies you referred me to? If an expert provides a database or study you need to go through it in detail so you can explain to your audience how it was put together. If you don't understand something, always ask. Cast your net wide from the beginning. Deciding which comment to cut is much better than having to pressurise people at the last minute to get back to you.



Tips for finding the best available experts:

- A university's media desk or personnel pages is a useful first stop.
- When speaking to an expert, ask if they can refer you to someone else, especially someone they respect but who may disagree with them.
- A useful Google trick is to search for professor + [specific subject area] + .ac or .edu.

5. Set out the evidence

Explain how you went about fact-checking the claim in as much detail as possible. Someone should be able to follow the evidence you set out and reach the same conclusion. For this reason, fact-checkers hyperlink to the source of each factual statement in a written report or attribute it to an expert. Upload any documents you obtained to the internet so that others may refer to them in future.

Transparency builds trust and so does fairness. Therefore, if you find that the claim is incorrect, first present your finding to the person or organisation who made it and offer them the opportunity to comment before publishing.



Fact-checking health information

Questions to ask when fact-checking a health claim

1) Who is making the claim and what is known about them?

- Who made the claim?
- Do they have real medical expertise? Many people use the title “doctor” while having no medical expertise.
- Is there anything that makes you doubt that they know what they are talking about?
- What is their motive for making the claim and could they benefit from it in any way?



2) Has it been covered by mainstream media?

Many claims circulating on social media never make it into mainstream media – for good reason. In 2017, for example, there were several reports in Senegal about a doctor in the Philippines who claimed to have discovered a vaccine for diabetes. Of course, if he had actually discovered a vaccine for diabetes five years earlier as claimed, it would have made news headlines somewhere (and he might even have won the Nobel Prize). No major media house covered it, however, because it wasn't true. Africa Check did a [fact-checking report on this \(French\)](#)⁶.



3) Has it been reviewed in a medical journal? If so, is the journal legit?

Whether or not it has been reported in mainstream media, has the supposed cure been assessed in peer-reviewed scientific journals?

These two guides help shed light on when scientific reviews are suspect, which they often are:

- [Guide: 7 steps to detect someone is talking science nonsense](#)⁷
- [Guide: How to spot predatory academic journals in the wild](#)⁸

4) Does the evidence supporting the claim consist of anecdotes or personal testimonies, and not studies?

Fake cures often come with “personal testimonies” that may be false, or may be genuine but misleading. Personal testimonies can be very persuasive on social media but if the claim relies on these testimonies and not on scientific evidence, it is suspect.

⁶ Africa Check: Non, il n'y a pas encore de vaccin contre le diabète, fr.africacheck.org/reports/non-ny-a-de-vaccin-contre-diabete

⁷ Africa Check: 7 steps to detect someone is talking science nonsense africacheck.org/factsheets/guide-7-steps-detect-someone-talking-science-nonsense

⁸ Africa Check: How to spot predatory academic journals in the wild, africacheck.org/factsheets/guide-how-to-spot-predatory-academic-journals-in-the-wild

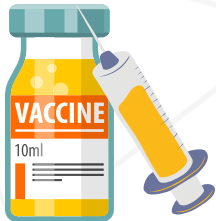


5) If there was a study, how was it done?



If a health claim is backed up by a study, you need to ask several questions about the research that was done, for example:

- **When** was the data gathered? (Make sure it's still applicable.)
- **How** was the data collected? (Was it a properly controlled test?)
- Can the findings be **generalised**? (How many people formed part of the study and can the findings be applicable to an entire country, for example, or was it only conducted in a certain state or region?)



6) Is anyone making money from a claimed cure? If so, who?

Lastly, if anyone claims they have a cure for something, find out if they are making money out of it. If they are, it's another reason to be extremely sceptical about the claim.



Examples of health-related fact-checking reports:

- Do one in four women in Africa suffer from depression? We checked africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/do-one-four-women-africa-suffer-depression-we-checked
- Fact-checking Tanzanian president John Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19 africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/fact-checking-tanzanian-president-john-magufuli-inhaling-steam-treat-covid-19
- Yes, cardiovascular disease is second leading cause of death in South Africa africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/yes-cardiovascular-disease-second-leading-cause-death-south-africa
- #EndSARS protests: Comparing Nigeria's health and education spending to cost of lawmaker upkeep africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/endsars-protests-comparing-nigerias-health-and-education-spending-cost-lawmaker

No, malaria doesn't kill 300,000 people in Nigeria a year, as insurance seller claimed

africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/no-malaria-doesnt-kill-300000-people-nigeria-year-insurance-seller-claimed

- All Africa Check's coronavirus fact-checks in one place africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-one-place





About Africa Check

Africa Check was launched in Johannesburg in 2012 as the continent's first independent fact-checking organisation. Today the organisation fact-checks hundreds of claims in English and French each year, not only from Johannesburg but also from our offices in Dakar, Nairobi and Lagos. Our researchers work round-the-clock sorting fact from fiction in order to encourage honest, fact-based debate and hold public figures accountable for what they say. The organisation is independent, non-partisan, and financed through public grants. Up to date we've offered fact-checking and verification training to more than 5,100 people, most of them journalists.

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