**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper**

**University of Oxford**

# THE FACT-CHECKING PREFERENCES OF AFRICACHECK.ORG'S AUDIENCES IN NIGERIA, KENYA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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# Acknowledgments

# 1. Introduction: What's in a like?

External fact-checking – the practice where specialised organisations evaluate claims made by public sources such as politicians or the media[1] – is a fast-growing field.

When the Duke Reporters' Lab started counting in 2014, they found 44 fact-checking organisations around the world[2]. Five years later, the number has quadrupled to 188 in more than 60 countries[3].

Africa Check, the continent's first independent fact-checking organisation of which I was chief editor until July 2019, has itself expanded exponentially.

## 1.1. Africa Check's rising

Our organisation – a non-profit mainly funded by large foundations – launched in 2012 in South Africa with a junior researcher and part-time editor. Africa Check then opened a second office on the continent in Dakar, Senegal, in October 2015. Here the team runs a French-language version of the website to serve West African audiences. The English-language team branched out to Lagos, Nigeria, in November 2016 with Nairobi in Kenya following in January 2017.

By mid-2019, the organisation employed 24 full-time and four part-time people across the continent.

Besides publishing fact-checking reports on our website, Africa Check syndicates its content to other news organisation to republish free of charge, provided proper attribution is given. The team also regularly discusses its findings on radio and television to reach offline audiences, since internet penetration is still comparatively low in most of Africa[4].

Like other fact-checking organisations, politics are a mainstay of Africa Check's work. However, we also place a priority on correcting media errors, social media hoaxes and health misinformation.

The latter is due to Africa Check's origin. Founder Peter Cunliffe-Jones worked as a journalist in Nigeria in 2003 when the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Health Organisation launched a polio vaccination campaign to finally rid West Africa of the disease[5]. The drive failed, however, after Nigerian religious leaders falsely claimed that the polio vaccine would make children sterile. These allegations went unchecked by journalists – and polio cases surged.

## 1.2. Between rudimentary and editorial analytics

To track the impact of our work, Africa Check has dedicated increasing resources to monitor and evaluate our output. Initially, the editorial team mainly kept track of unique visits to the website and the number of times other media groups had republished our fact-check reports.

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[1] Lucas Graves & Michelle A. Amazeen (2019), "Fact-Checking as Idea and Practice in Journalism", Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, Oxford.
[2] Mark Stencel & Riley Griffin (2018), "Fact-checking triples over four years": https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking-triples-over-four-years.
[3] Mark Stencel (2019), "Number of fact-checking outlets surges to 188 in more than 60 countries": https://reporterslab.org/number-of-fact-checking-outlets-surges-to-188-in-more-than-60-countries.
[4] "ITU releases 2018 global and regional ICT estimates": https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR40.aspx.
[5] Peter Cunliffe-Jones (2019), "Fighting falsehood, reducing harm? Lessons from Africa's complex countries": https://africacheck.org/2019/05/31/comment-fighting-falsehood-reducing-harm-lessons-from-africas-complex-countries.

Website visits increased from an average of 3,000 unique users per month at launch in 2012 to 140,000 in 2018.

| Africa Check's monthly average unique users* | |
| --- | --- |
| 2012 | 3,000 |
| 2013 | 29,000 |
| 2014 | 55,000 |
| 2015 | 76,000 |
| 2016 | 101,000 |
| 2017 | 120,000 |
| 2018 | 140,000 |

*Rounded to nearest 1,000*

As more donors came onboard, they requested a wider range of website metrics be reported to them. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation requires the average time on page for each fact-check as well as the share of external referrals to the website. Nevertheless, most donors still prioritise unique visitors as a "catch-all" metric for reach, according to Africa Check's impact manager Nicola Theunissen.

Africa Check appointed a full-time impact researcher in May 2019 to join forces with Theunissen. However, we still do not know enough about what influences audience interest in our reports, particularly across the different countries Africa Check serves.

As I see it, Africa Check practices generic analytics, a description coined by Federica Cherubini and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen in a 2016 Reuters Institute report[6]. A step up from rudimentary analytics, generic analytics refer to the use of data "more for short-term optimisation than to underpin longer term editorial and organisational priorities".

Africa Check should strive to employ editorial analytics, which encompasses the development of a process "where quantitative evidence supplements more qualitative editorial expertise and enables continuous evaluation of performance and experiments to improve workflows and results".

Yet Africa Check's situation is fully understandable, since we have a small editorial team and a budget too tight to easily justify the cost of custom or high-end analytics tools to better track audiences. In a study on the use of editorial metrics, researchers from the University of Johannesburg and the Namibia University of Science and Technology found this situation to be the case in newsrooms across South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya[7]. All 14 fact-checking organisations that responded to a poll on the International Fact-Checking Network's mailing list indicated that they also relied on Google Analytics to track website visits. Only one had access to the proprietary tool ChartBeat.

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[6] Federica Cherubini & Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2016), "Editorial Analytics: How News Media Are Developing and Using Audience Data and Metrics": https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Editorial%2520analytics%2520-%2520how%2520news%2520media%2520are%2520developing%2520and%2520using%2520audience%2520data%2520and%2520metrics.pdf.

[7] Dumisani Moyo, Admire Mare & Trust Matsilele (2019), "Analytics-Driven Journalism? Editorial Metrics and the Reconfiguration of Online News Production Practices in African Newsrooms": 10.1080/21670811.2018.1533788.

Reflecting BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti's observation that there is no "God metric" for journalism[8], the 14 fact-checking organisations tracked a variety of web metrics. The one most commonly monitored was time on page, followed by returning visitors.

## 1.3. Audience interest: What we know

While I was at the Reuters Institute, Africa Check polled visitors to its website between February and June 2019. The goal was to learn more about our audience's demographics, their perception, awareness and use of Africa Check's work as well as their content needs.

A total of 364 people responded to the poll – 264 in English and 99 in French – with half the respondents indicating that they lived in South Africa[9]. The top three preferred topics overlapped for both language groups:

- Politics (60% for English readers, 61% for French readers),
- Governance (43% for English readers, 61% for French readers)
- Economy (42% for English readers, 65% for French readers)

Both language groups preferred to receive Africa Check content via the website itself, but the poll didn't represent a "definite trend in format preference", Theunissen deduced:

> *We can only make basic assumptions about respondents' preferred format from these responses. Respondents have the need for a balance between long and short articles. This is further emphasised by the even distribution of answers related to the multiple-choice question about shorter 200 to 300-word pieces and longer articles. However, it is also clear from the open-ended question that English-speaking respondents do prefer longform fact-checks (and that they do take time to read in-depth pieces), specifically on the website.*

The poll's drawback is that it isn't representative of Africa Check's entire online audience and we therefore cannot draw generalisations from it.

This paper is an attempt to tease out which kind of articles are most successful with readers, especially in helping Africa Check reach its goals. First, I list the research questions that guided this project and then describe the methodology I employed to conduct the research. Then observations gleaned from the data is presented, followed by a discussion of the observations before I conclude with recommendations.

# 2. Research questions

Africa Check's foremost goal is to promote accurate public debate by ensuring that policymakers and the public retain a more accurate understanding of key matters.

But just how do you measure the progress towards this goal, especially when you are relying on web metrics? In many cases, the number of individual users accessing a piece of content, or "unique hits", are what most excites a newsroom. I too have sat mesmerised in front of a computer, watching our web traffic's peaks, troughs and sudden spikes pulsing on my screen. In an area where

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[8] Felix Salmon (2014), "BuzzFeed's Jonah Peretti Goes Long": https://medium.com/matter/buzzfeeds-jonah-peretti-goes-long-e98cf13160e7.

[9] Internal Africa Check presentation.

impact is hard-gained and long coming, it is hard to wean yourself off the instant gratification of seeing clicks skyrocket.

Yet a visit by itself does not mean that someone has retained, never mind read, the page's content, which brings us to social media engagement. It is tempting to think that someone will only press "like" or share an article they have read and found insightful enough to indicate that to their online social circle.

Yet we have all been carried away by a headline before and shared a story without clicking through to read it first, something that is borne out by research conducted by the French National Research Institute for Computer Science and Applied Mathematics, Microsoft Research and Columbia University[10].

To delve into the quality of visits to Africa Check's website, the following research questions formed my departure point:

1) Which Africa Check reports generated the greatest engagement on social media?
2) Which of these reports were most likely to have been clicked on and read?
3) What are the common attributes of these reports, if any?

The limitations to this study are numerous, with the most significant being that it only captures some of Africa Check's online activity. However, I believe it will help the team reflect on and refine the methods employed to reach the organisation's goals.

Next, I will detail the methodology followed to carry out this project.


## 3. Project design

I used two online tools to collect data, Buzzsumo and Google Analytics. Buzzsumo captures engagement on several social media sites while Google Analytics is the tracking tool Africa Check employs to record visits to its website. (*Note: Buzzsumo was the tool which Craig Silverman, a BuzzFeed founding editor, used to reveal that the best-performing "fake news" stories about the 2016 U.S. elections garnered more engagement on Facebook than those from 19 leading news organisations combined[11].*)

Using Buzzsumo, I pulled the ten Africa Check reports with the highest engagement on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Pinterest during 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. It is not possible to search more than five years ago in Buzzsumo and therefore I could not study the social media engagement that had occurred earlier in Africa Check's existence.

Since engagement on Reddit and Pinterest was negligible, I did not analyse these sites separately. Engagement on Facebook is described as "a sum of likes, comments, and shares attributed to an

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[10] M Gabielkov, A Ramachandran, A Chaintreau & A Legout (2016), "Social clicks: what and who gets read on Twitter?" Paper presented at: ACM Sigmetrics; 14 June 2016; Antibes Juan-les-Pins, France.

[11] Craig Silverman (2016), "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook": https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook.

article"[12], while Buzzsumo counts the number of times a URL is tweeted to determine a Twitter engagement count.

I excluded "fr.africacheck.org" so that only Africa Check's English articles would show up. I also decided to exclude factsheets from the analysis, as these pieces are meant to have a long shelf life and carry no verdicts, which would have hampered comparisons.

I focused on calendar years so that seasonal variations in traffic would not skew the data. For this reason, I did not include 2019 data. (*Note: A second reason I left out 2019 data is that Africa Check started its third-party fact-checking for Facebook in earnest in January, leading to a completely different traffic pattern compared to previous years.*)

I had planned to separate engagement by country to better differentiate between the tastes of our audiences in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, but then discovered it was not possible in Buzzsumo.

As a workaround, I assumed that the audiences in the three different countries would engage with content relevant to their country. I therefore repeated the search in Buzzsumo but included the word "Nigeria" and then "Kenya". (*Note: At Africa Check, we nearly always include the country the fact-check is concerned with in the headline. This helps someone following us on social media know at a glance which country the article is about*.)

Since Africa Check only opened its Nigeria and Kenya offices in 2017, I did not break down the 2015 and 2016 data by country. I compared the Nigeria and Kenya lists for 2017 and 2018 with my master list and added seven articles that had fallen through the cracks:

1. "Uhuru Kenyatta's 2018 State of The Nation Address fact-checked"
2. "Buhari's 2018 Democracy Day speech: 7 main claims under scrutiny"
3. "Buhari & APC's campaign promises: Appraising 9 pledges 2 years on"
4. "The Jubilee Party manifesto: 5 claims fact-checked"
5. "Is Nairobi's governor right that the city 'never had' a development plan before him?"
6. "Nairobi's water supply: 2 claims about losses & high prices in slums evaluated"
7. "Is oil-rich Rivers state safer than Lagos, Kano & 3 others as its governor claimed?"

In the two cases where an article concerned two countries, it did not lead to double entries since those fact-checks did not feature in the top 10 of South Africa-focused articles:

1. "No data shows that 800,000 Nigerians live in South Africa" (#10 on the Nigeria's 2017 list)
2. "Does SA invest three times more in education than Kenya?" (#7 on Kenya's 2018 list)

From Google Analytics I then pulled the following data for each report:

- Total page views
- Top source and medium of traffic
- Average time spent on each page
- The country from which most visitors were

I also categorised each report by:

- Type of headline (such as question, answer, combination or statement)

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[12] Alexis Lee (2019), "What is a 'Facebook Engagement'?": https://help.buzzsumo.com/articles/1964658-what-is-a-facebook-engagement.

- Overarching topic (health or the economy, for example)
- Subject of the fact-check (these included politicians, public figures, the media and so forth)
- Verdict (Africa Check has seven possible verdicts, ranging from correct to incorrect)

From the backend of Africa Check's website, I copied each article's readability score calculated by the Yoast SEO plugin and based on the Flesch reading ease test. This test considers the average length of sentences and the average number of syllables per word, expressed as a score between 0 and 100. The higher the score, the easier it is supposed to be to read your copy[13].

Lastly, I calculated the time it should take someone to read an article using the article word count provided by Buzzsumo and dividing it by 238. (*Note: This was found in a meta-analysis to be the average silent reading rate per minute for adults reading non-fiction English text.*[14]) I then subtracted the duration from the average time on page metric as a makeshift indication of whether someone had read the article in its entirety.

| Top 10 reports by engagement in 2018 for all countries | words | time on page | time to read | diff. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Do half of men and a third of women in South Africa smoke? | 1106 | 02:42 | 4:39 | 01:57 |
| Did the DA-led Western Cape create '75% of all jobs' in SA last year? | 959 | 03:50 | 4:02 | 00:12 |
| Are 60% of South Africa's vocational colleges dysfunctional? | 1614 | 03:14 | 6:47 | 03:33 |
| SA finance minister hoped illegal electricity connections were fake – they're not | 549 | 03:49 | 2:18 | 01:31 |
| Fact-checked: Pres Cyril Ramaphosa's first-ever State of the Nation Address | 1949 | 04:19 | 8:11 | 03:52 |
| Do 80% of Nigerians lack safe drinking water? It's worse than that | 851 | 03:47 | 3:35 | 00:12 |
| 11 million undocumented migrants in SA? | 530 | 03:16 | 2:14 | 01:02 |
| Nigeria losing about a dozen doctors to the UK every week | 468 | 03:12 | 1:58 | 01:14 |
| '65% of females' in Kenyan slum traded sex for sanitary pads? | 1070 | 03:54 | 4:30 | 00:36 |
| Yes, South Africa spends as much on VIP protection & security as on land reform | 973 | 04:04 | 4:05 | 00:01 |

By considering the time someone would have taken to read an article, I wanted to approximate whether social media users had engaged with an Africa Check article after having read it first.

In the section to follow, I will discuss the trends in engagement on Africa Check's website that I observed from the dataset collected, offering likely explanations where possible.

# 4. Observations

I will now summarise the main takeaways gleaned from the database I pulled together. It represents only a specific slice of engagement on Africa Check's website and a wider analysis may contradict some findings. The intention is to spark a conversation and test the results further in future.

## 4.1. Social media's contribution

a) The data shows that in each year there were a few "blockbuster" articles after which engagement tailed off. Engagement on social media site Facebook comprised the overwhelming

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[13] "How to improve your text's readability using the Flesch reading ease score": https://yoast.com/academy/seo-copywriting-training/flesch-reading-ease.

[14] Marc Brysbaert (2019), "How many words do we read per minute? A review and meta-analysis of reading rate": 10.31234/osf.io/xynwg.

majority of likes and shares of Africa Check content with Twitter trailing far behind. As mentioned before, engagement on Reddit and Pinterest was negligible and I therefore did not analyse these sites separately.



### Top 10 fact-checks in 2018 by number of engagements

- Yes, South Africa spends as much on VIP protection & security…
- '65% of females' in Kenyan slum traded sex for sanitary pads?…
- Nigeria losing about a dozen doctors to the UK every week
- 11 million undocumented migrants in SA? Police…
- Do 80% of Nigerians lack safe drinking water? It's worse than…
- Fact-checked: Pres Cyril Ramaphosa's first-ever State of the…
- SA finance minister hoped illegal electricity connections were…
- Are 60% of South Africa's vocational colleges dysfunctional?
- Did the DA-led Western Cape create '75% of all jobs' in SA last…
- Do half of men and a third of women in South Africa smoke?

b)  Facebook has become less and less important in driving traffic to Africa Check's website. For all but one article in the top 10 lists of 2015 and 2016, most views came from Facebook; it dropped to two in 2017 and three in 2018. Buzzsumo found in an analysis of more than 100 million posts published in 2017[15] that this has been the case for major brands and publishers all over the world. A follow-up analysis of 777 million Facebook posts in 2018 confirmed the downward trend[16].



### Top 10 fact-checks with most traffic from Facebook

| Year | Value |
|------|-------|
| 2015 | 9 |
| 2016 | 9 |
| 2017 | 2 |
| 2018 | 3 |
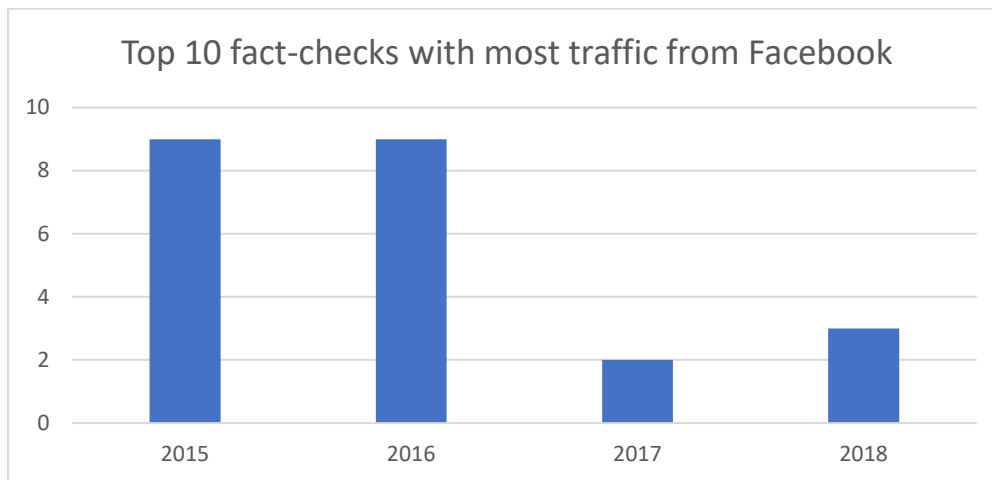
c)  In most cases where Twitter was the biggest source of traffic, the average time users spent on the page was higher than the time it should theoretically take to read the piece.

d)  Content engagement showed a major jump from 2015 to 2016, reflecting the rapid growth of Africa Check in that year. However, it has since decreased year on year, likely on the back of Facebook's decline in importance as a traffic driver.

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[15] Steve Rayson (2018), "Content Trends 2018: BuzzSumo Research Report": https://buzzsumo.com/blog/content-trends-2018.

[16] Susan Moeller (2019), "The 2019 Ultimate Guide to Facebook Engagement": https://buzzsumo.com/blog/facebook-engagement-guide.

## 4.2. Engagement versus views

e) Between 2015 and 2018, the average number of page views in this content set had increased. Overall, however, the ten articles with the most engagement were not the most viewed. Only for Kenyan content in 2017 did the three reports with highest engagement and views more or less match up.

f) In 2016 and especially in 2017, the articles with the highest engagement had lower views than likes and shares, suggesting that people engaged with the social media post without necessarily clicking through to read it. In almost all these cases, the articles had been boosted on Facebook. (*Note: A boost is when a post on Africa Check's Facebook page appears in a targeted person's News Feed as an ad[17] – for a fee, of course*.)

g) If the verdict of the fact-check is clear from the social media card – which shows an image, the headline and a description of 160 characters in a clickable format – people reached by it could still learn the main take-away. But the cards concerned here mostly contained only a teaser of the conclusion, as can be seen in this example:



## 4.3. Verdicts and topics

h) Incorrect verdicts and spot-checks carried the engagement day. (*Note: Africa Check's spot-checks are short pieces focused on claims that we have fact-checked before and they are not assigned a verdict.*)

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[17] "The difference between boosted posts and Facebook ads" (2019): https://www.facebook.com/business/help/317083072148603.

i) As for preference by overarching topic, health articles attracted the most engagement in Nigeria and economic ones in Kenya. The finding reflects both national preoccupations and newsroom priorities, since Africa Check was founded to help stamp out health misinformation, especially in Nigeria. (*Note: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave this work a major funding boost and impetus with a multi-year grant announced in February 2018[18].*)

## 4.4. Google News's role

j) Google News started featuring as a top driver of traffic to Africa Check's website in 2018 after the company made their "fact-check" label available globally in April 2017[19]. In almost all the cases where Google News was the largest source of traffic to the site, most visitors came from outside the continent. There were two exceptions:

- "China owns 21.3% of Kenya's external debt - not 70% as reported". In this case, traffic from Kenya generated 41% of the page views, with the US a close second at 36%.
- "Are 60% of South Africa's vocational colleges dysfunctional?" Here 53% of the traffic came from South Africa.

k) The watershed where the origin of traffic tips to non-African countries seems to be when Google News drives 40% or more of the report's traffic. When and on which country version of its News product Google features Africa Check content continues to be a mystery, though we tag all our content as fact-checks using the ClaimReview mark-up[20]. In answer to my question about this, Google News Lab's Head of Partnerships & Training, Matt Cooke, said in an email he was "not familiar with geo-restrictions on this feature other than this being limited to a couple of initial pilot countries prior to 2017".

l) Google News was a significant traffic driver to Kenyan content with the most engagement in 2018, forming half of the top 10.

| Kenya's top 10 fact-checks in 2018 by engagement | Source |
|---|---|
| '65% of females' in Kenyan slum traded sex for sanitary pads? | Google News referral |
| Uhuru Kenyatta's 2018 State of The Nation Address fact-checked | Facebook referral |
| White giraffes? Yes, this rare type lives in a conservancy in north-eastern Kenya | Facebook referral |
| China owns 21.3% of Kenya's external debt - not 70% as reported | Google News referral |
| Do 8,300 super-rich Kenyans own more than the rest? | Google News referral |
| Little evidence that 10,000 children abused by sex tourism in Kenyan town | Google News referral |
| Does SA invest three times more in education than Kenya? | Facebook referral |
| Yes, Kenya's executive takes the lion's share of funds - but not 95% | Facebook referral |
| Yes, China is Kenya's biggest trading partner - but it's not a balanced trade | Google News referral |
| Nairobi's water supply: 2 claims about losses & high prices in slums evaluated | google / organic |

In Nigeria's case, Google News did not feature in top 10 of 2018 at all. Instead, organic Google searches played a large role in driving traffic to the Nigerian reports that enjoyed the most

[18] David Ajikobi (2018), "Injecting a larger dose of health fact-checking in Nigeria":
https://africacheck.org/2018/02/02/comment-injecting-larger-dose-health-fact-checking-nigeria.
[19] Justin Kosslyn & Cong Yu (2017), "Fact Check now available in Google Search and News around the world":
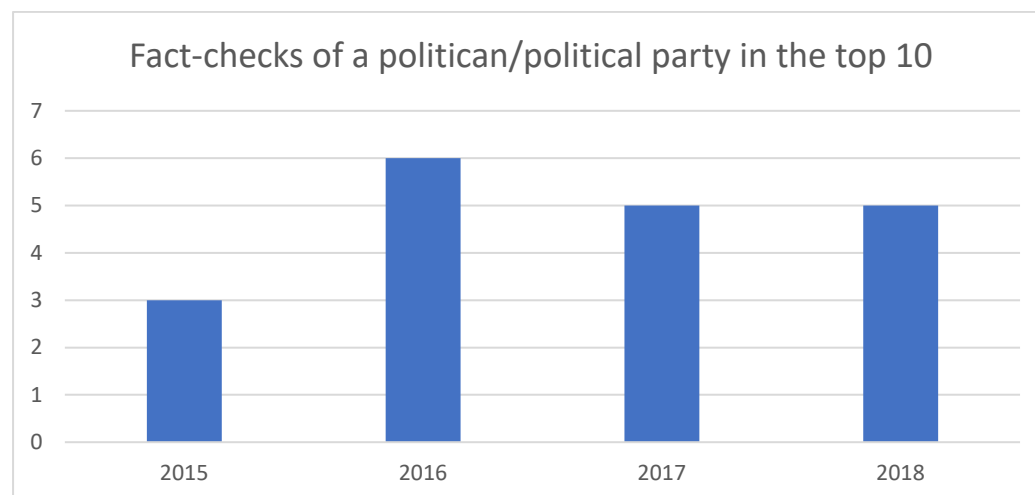https://www.blog.google/products/search/fact-check-now-available-google-search-and-news-around-world.
[20] "ClaimReview": https://schema.org/ClaimReview.

engagement. A possible explanation for the low-key role of Google News in Nigeria lies in research Africa Check commissioned from Dr Theresa Amobi from the University of Lagos and her team of researchers in 2018. Of the respondents who knew about Africa Check and the work we were doing in Nigeria, most respondents (59%) got to know about Africa Check through interpersonal sources. The report states that the fact that personal interaction played the biggest role in creating awareness about Africa Check is possibly due to "the complex Nigerian media environment".

m) In most cases where Google News was the top driver of traffic to an article, average time on page was lower than the time it should theoretically take to read an article.

## 4.5. Political content

n) High profile speeches by politicians made the top 10 in 2015, 2017 and 2018, but not in 2016. Still, these pieces received far more views than engagement, suggesting it is a worthy investment of newsroom resources.

o) The gap between time on page and expected read time is large for multiclaim reports focused on politics. This is to be expected, since readers may be interested in or search for information about only one claim. Reports are also "marketed" claim by claim on social media.

p) In each year, a politician or political party was the most frequent subject of the top 10 fact-checks by engagement. This finding lines up with an internal analysis of the type of speakers Africa Check fact-checked between January and September 2017. A full 69% of our fact-checks during that time focused on a politician or political party[21].

Fact-checks of a politican/political party in the top 10

| Year | Value |
|------|-------|
| 2015 | 3 |
| 2016 | 6 |
| 2017 | 5 |
| 2018 | 5 |

## 4.6. Readability

q) Overall, the average Flesch reading ease score for the top 10 in each year and country ranged from 44 to 56 out of 100. A score of between 60 and 70 is considered "acceptable" for web copy as 13 to 15-year olds would be able to understand it, search-optimization firm Yoast explains in a

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[21] Internal Africa Check Activity & Impact Report for 2012-2017

post[22]. When the score dips below 30, copy is considered "best understood by university graduates".

r) The article with the best Flesch reading ease score (70.4 out of 100) was a 2018 South African report about job-creation in the country's Western Cape province.

| Country | Year | Fact-check | Score |
|---|---|---|---|
| South Africa | 2018 | Did the DA-led Western Cape create '75% of all jobs' in SA last year? 'Confusing' claim correct | 70.4 |
| Nigeria | 2018 | HOAX-ALERT: Nigerian bomber didn't infect Cadbury's chocolate with HIV! | 59.5 |
| Kenya | 2018 | Yes, China is Kenya's biggest trading partner - but it's not a balanced trade | 63.9 |
| South Africa | 2017 | No evidence for SA government's 'truly amazing' house delivery rate | 59.4 |
| Nigeria | 2017 | Do Nigeria's Yoruba people have the world's highest twin birth rate? (And are yams to blame?) | 54.2 |
| Kenya | 2017 | Fact-checked: 5 claims in Kenya Nasa opposition manifesto | 61.8 |
| All | 2016 | Does Nigeria have the lowest health budget in Africa? | 58.3 |
| All | 2015 | Story of 'gutsy bravehearts' who fought off Boko Haram is a hoax | 58.9 |

s) Only two articles scored below 30 on the Flesch reading ease test, both on South African topics:
- "SABC's Hlaudi Motsoeneng wrong - former public protector did investigate white people" (score of 30)
- "Yes, Van Rooyen is the most (academically) qualified of Zuma's finance ministers" (score of 26.9)

However, with some rewriting and swapping the surnames Motsoeneng and Madonsela with Smith and Jones, I increased the first report's score to 43.8. This demonstrates the limit of using a tool such as the Flesch reading ease test – it is only a rough indication of readability.

t) There was no clear correlation between an article's Flesch reading ease score and expected read time.

## 4.7. Country differences

u) On average, Kenyan copy was the easiest to read, followed closely by South African content and with Nigerian articles trailing behind.

v) Whereas content about Nigeria and South Africa was represented equally in the top 10 between 2015 and 2017, South African-related content pulled ahead in 2018 with seven pieces on the top 10 list.

w) Based on the data from 2017 and 2018, people interested in South African content seemed to prefer sharing headlines conveying the verdict of the fact-check. For Nigeria and Kenya, there was no discernible pattern. This corresponds to preliminary findings by the Center of Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, carried out in conjunction with Facebook[23].

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[22] "How to improve your text's readability using the Flesch reading ease score": https://yoast.com/academy/seo-copywriting-training/flesch-reading-ease.
[23] Jessica Collier & Joanna Sterling (2019), "Impact of fact-checks on reader understanding in the real world" Presented at: Global Fact-Checking Summit; 19 June 2019; Cape Town, South Africa.

Jessica Collier and Joanna Sterling tested the impact of headline formats on click ratios on the social media site. In Africa Check's case, refutations of a claim garnered the highest click-through ratios, but by a tiny margin. Overall, the researchers noted that "click-through rate[s] do not seem to vary based on the type of fact-check [headline]".

In the next section, I will discuss the possible implications of my observations and conclude with some recommendations.

# 5. Discussion

To recap: Africa Check exists to promote accurate public debate by ensuring that policymakers and the public retain a more accurate understanding of key matters.

With this in mind, by which metrics should we judge whether a visit has helped Africa Check achieve this goal? Some of my findings show that traditional indicators of success may run counter to achieving knowledge retention:

- Posts that enjoy high engagement on Facebook, and especially those which are boosted, are not necessarily read.
- Articles featured on Google News mostly attract foreign audiences and are unlikely to be read in their entirety.

A session at the International Journalism Festival in Perugia, Italy, in April 2019 reinforced my unease with traditional success metrics. A seminar room in the Hotel Brufani was packed for a talk called "Journalism Was Trapped In A Click Bubble. It's Finally Bursting"[24] by the CEO and co-founder of the audience engagement platform Readefined.

Mario Vasilescu walked us through the genesis of the current bubble, centred on the value of attention on the internet. He argued that attention was never properly defined and this led to "extremely questionable ways" of quantifying it.

> *We started by saying the standard measure of this value is going to be clicks and views. So, what you're doing is you're setting up a simplistic attention marketplace. Once you do that, the only way to measure it is through quantity. Quality is irrelevant at that point.*

He said engagement is the current "vague" buzzword and will become the new click if people do not intentionally define it.

> *When it has superficial meaning, it will be easy to game – especially as, in many cases, the word engagement is actually being used to describe only slightly filtered versions of those same old, simple measures. Conversely, if it is well defined [and] measured across many factors, and even tied with verified user profiles, it becomes nearly impossible to game. Click farm-style strategies exploit simplicity.[25]*

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[24] Mario Vasilescu (2019), "Journalism Was Trapped In A Click Bubble. It's Finally Bursting": https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2019/journalism-was-trapped-in-a-click-bubble-its-finally-bursting.
[25] Follow-up email

Cherubini and Nielsen too cautioned that using analytics in an effective way depends on having "clearly articulated strategic objectives for their use". To achieve this, media organisation such as Africa Check need to:

1. Carefully define and periodically redefine their editorial priorities and organisational goals,
2. Identify the metrics most useful to achieve this, and
3. Develop a culture and structure, complemented by the right tools, that facilitates strategic short- and long-term decisions.

In deciding which web metrics Africa Check should focus on to achieve its goal that policymakers and the public retain a more accurate understanding of key matters, first prize seems to be when audience members read a report in its entirety. Alternatively, given the summary Africa Check provides at the top of a fact-check and the conclusion at the end, one could administer a test to check whether someone has retained the information, even though the visit was brief.

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## Poster fact-checks?

Among the content I analysed, two reports from 2018 displayed some of the characteristics Africa Check might actively strive for in future.

### "SA finance minister hoped illegal electricity connections were fake – they're not"

South Africa's minister of finance tweeted a picture of what appeared to be illegal electricity connections in mid-December 2018, saying he hoped that it was not actually the case. Within hours, Africa Check had determined the location of the substation in the picture, even making use of a "fact-checker on the ground" to take fresh photos[26].

In addition to the quick turn-around, what elevated this spot-check was the step-by-step explanation of our fact-checking process, showing readers how to do so themselves in future.

Most of the visitors came from South Africa (84%) and visited via Twitter (72%).

Until 31 December 2018, when the period I reviewed ended, users spent an average of 90 seconds longer than it would likely take to read the story. At 549 words, the piece was relatively short for Africa Check content, which may also explain why people lingered longer.

### "Nigeria losing about a dozen doctors to the UK every week"

Verifying the number of Nigerian doctors that a former Commonwealth secretary-general said were registered to work in the UK took our researcher a week[27].

As with the previous report, the audience spent much longer on the page than what it should have taken them to read the piece. Nearly half were located in Nigeria and 45% of the traffic originated from Twitter.

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[26] Cayley Clifford & Kate Wilkinson (2018), "SA finance minister hoped illegal electricity connections were fake – they're not": https://africacheck.org/spot-check/sa-finance-minister-hoped-illegal-electricity-connections-were-fake-theyre-not.
[27] Allwell Okpi (2018), "Nigeria losing about a dozen doctors to the UK every week": https://africacheck.org/spot-check/nigeria-losing-about-a-dozen-doctors-to-the-uk-every-week.

This fact-check too was relatively short (at 468 words) and written in the spot-check format – a brief report that does not carry an explicit verdict.

# 6. Recommendations

In addition to carefully defining the kind of attention that Africa Check wants to strive for I recommend that the English-language team carry out the following, based on this research project:

## 6.1. Continue prioritising major speeches

Given my finding that major political speeches received high engagement and even higher views, plus the fact that politicians or political parties formed the most frequent subject of the top 10 fact-checks by engagement, investing newsroom resources to verify these speeches appears worth the effort. (The fact that politics was the most preferred topic of English readers who were polled further strengthens this recommendation.)

## 6.2. Adjust Facebook boosting

In their current format, boosting Facebook posts represents "empty calories" as they receive more likes and shares than clickthroughs. To help convey accurate information, the verdict should be made clear from the image and excerpt. Alternatively, Africa Check could more carefully target people who don't typically engage with news content through sponsored posts. This practice was found to have made a significance difference in the reach of Comprova, a collaborative fact-checking project that took place during the 2018 Brazilian presidential election[28].

## 6.3. Measure attention more accurately

Africa Check should explore better measurement tools to help judge which fact-checks truly captures readers' attention. A starting point is to measure how far down a web page a visitor has scrolled using the native scroll depth trigger tool that Google Tag Manager offers[29]. Another consideration would be to add the Audience Explorer analytics dashboard that was created for the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University[30]. This dashboard aims to serve small and medium-sized publishers and is free to use. Its main feature is breaking down Google Analytics data into three user categories, which helps publishers move "Casual Visitors" down a funnel to become "Prospective Loyalists" and eventually "Brand Lovers".

## 6.4. Serve existing needs better

Rather than "publish and pray" a fact-check reaches users truly interested in the claim, Africa Check should better capitalise on existing mass interest. My finding that visitors from Nigeria often locate

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[28] Guilherme Conter & Nic Dias (2019), "Who did Comprova reach, and what impact did it have on its audience?": https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Comprova-Full-Report-Final.pdf.

[29] "Scroll Depth trigger": https://support.google.com/tagmanager/answer/7679218?hl=en.

[30] Ned Berke (2019), "Introducing the Audience Explorer analytics dashboard for small and medium-size news publishers": https://medium.com/centerforcooperativemedia/introducing-the-audience-explorer-dashboard-for-small-publishers-9fbff748c47.

our content through organic searches presents an opportunity that Africa Check can purposefully tap into. One way could be by following The Sun's example. The UK tabloid employs a team to gauge what the public wants to know, as judged by online searches revealed through Google Trends. The journalists then either update existing content or write a report from scratch. Another is to periodically compile a list of the big questions in each country and attempt to answer them rather than being constantly led by the news cycle.

## 6.5. Introduce quizzes

Africa Check has already floated the idea of adding a basic web quiz to fact-checks to test whether the report has helped make visitors' understanding about the topic at hand more accurate. This should be pursued with urgency. A free off-the-shelf solution, developed by the Center for Media Engagement of the University of Texas at Austin, is available. As the Center's researchers explained: "Online polls present many benefits: they're enjoyable, they help people to learn, they help people to connect their knowledge with their levels of confidence, and they yield more time on a webpage."[31]

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[31] Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud, Joshua Scacco & Ashley Muddiman (2013), "The Engaging News Project: Online Polls & Quizzes": https://mediaengagement.org/research/online-polls-and-quizzes.