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Covid-19, Knowledge Production and the (Un)Making of Truths and Fakes

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most disruptive phenomena of our time. It has threatened and destabilised the normative, it has stoked fear and anxiety, and laid bare the fragility of our systems of governance, medical science and the immanent tensions within our knowledge systems. The pandemic has provoked a fundamental collision of these systems, leaving in its wake confusion as we struggle over meaning; the production of meaning, its husbandry and political instrumentalisation as a tool for domination and resistance. This article explores the emerging reconfiguration of the certainty about what is authentic or the truth, and of the un/certainty of the fake and fakery as alternative or complementary sites of truth(s). It argues that we are now faced with a complex and layered contestation over who gets to define the truth and the fake, and under what terms. This conversation is deeply insurrectional for it invites the whole world, centres and margins alike, to confront how political, cultural, economic and social values and structures of knowledge production are implicated in the making and unmaking of the authentic, of truth as well as of the fake.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; fake news; social media; Africa; knowledge production

In March 2020, a screengrab of an alleged CCN news "report" featuring the famous news anchor Wolf Blitzer, with the chyron "alcohol kills Corona virus", was widely shared on Facebook in Kenya. The post encouraged people to tag fellow "*walevi*" (Kiswahili for drunkards) to drink alcohol as protection against the virus. In Namibia, elephant dung was touted on various social media as a cure for Coronavirus, while in South Africa, posts about free Coronavirus grants, incorrect school re-opening dates, Chinese nationals allegedly buying their way into the country and many other such fabricated stories featured under the Twitter hashtag #coronaVirusSA.

Around the world, these kinds of posts, part of what is now commonly known as "fake news", quickly gained the attention of governments as the World Health Organization (WHO) warned against the scourge of "infodemics" or the overabundance of false stories making it difficult for people to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic. For various reasons, including the alleged impact of "infodemics" but in some cases primarily

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political, countries such as South Africa, Russia, India, Turkey and China passed Covid-related legislation.

The nature of the Covid-related false stories and the manner in which they are produced, circulated and consumed point to a range of explanatory incentives: commercial, political, cultural and ideological. It is thus arguable that a focus solely on the impact of "fake news", usually singular and pre-determined, detracts from the need to also explain and understand the motivations behind and logics of the production and consumption of these stories.

Against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic in Africa, this article seeks to reflect on some of the incentives and logics that make "fake news" assume discursive significance in contemporary conversations on "truth(s)". The discussion finds particularly useful Farkas and Schou's (2018) proposition that in order to make sense of "fake news", we should be concerned about what the proliferation of "fake news" signifiers actually *signify*; "[W]hat kinds of ethico-normative struggles do they bring to the foreground?" (298).

Understanding "Fake News"

There is a disturbing generality to the many attempts to define "fake news". While it nominally refers to "fabricated information that is patently false" (Molina et al. 2021, 180), it is much more. "Fake news" may constitute "false news, polarized content, satire, and misreporting" (*ibid.*). The term was especially popularised by former US President Donald Trump, but has a much longer history – especially in the Deep South in the United States (Zeitz 2017). Fake news and its constitutive variants, misinformation and disinformation, now dominate our everyday conversations. Current challenges and anxieties, Zeitz argues, have made our world surprisingly habitable to this new regime of information (2017).

Adopting Farkas and Schou's (2018) proposition, this discussion attempts to disambiguate the generality that has attended our definition and understanding of "fake news". Of relevance perhaps is Beckett's (2017) description of "fake news" as "the canary in the digital coal mine" (1). He calls it "a symptom of a much wider systemic challenge around the value and credibility of information and the way that we – socially, politically, economically – are going to handle the threats and opportunities of new communication technologies" (Beckett 2017). While Beckett provides a useful lens with which to unpack this phenomenon of "fake news", by focusing primarily on the digital, agency is unnecessarily given to technology, which is merely facilitating its production and circulation albeit rather rapidly compared to other platforms. What is however significant in Beckett's contribution here is the notion of *value*; the right to define meaning and the discursive power of that meaning. This may very well help us understand the logics of its proliferation.

Within the context of the media, Beckett argues that the proliferation of "fake news" is "indicative of a wider shift towards a more decentralised media ecology where insurgent sources can have more impact than in the past" (2). This is an important observation for it raises questions around inclusion and exclusion in information ecologies. What drives these "insurgent sources" and what is the nature of the "insurgency"? Could it be that this insurgency speaks as well as responds to exclusion and to the desire or need to claim space in the frontiers of defining meaning or in knowledge production?

News organisations have traditionally relied on a dated typology of news values (Van Ginneken 1998) which in practice has institutionalised exclusionary newsroom practices and the development of a highly problematic assumption about what constitutes news, and therefore value. Suffice to say that news typically wears the face of structural privilege. Race/ethnicity, class and gender all matter. The Other is currently at war with this privilege and the problematic structures of domination. The Centre and the Other are both instrumentalising "fake news" politically in a hegemonic struggle over the right to define the normative. There is, as Beckett points out, "a commercial and technological context to fake news, but ultimately it is a *political issue*" (2).

Developing the idea that fake news is fundamentally a *political issue*, Farkas and Schou (2018) argue that "what fake news stands for … is something larger than the term itself: a fundamental shift in political and public attitudes to what journalism and news represent and how facts and information may be obtained in a digitalized world" (300). They argue that fake news "has become an important component in contemporary political struggles" and demonstrate how it is "utilised by different positions within the social space as means of discrediting, attacking and delegitimising political opponents" (Farkas and Schou 2018, 300). Drawing on the work of the philosopher Laclau, they argue that "fake news" "has become a 'floating signifier': a signifier lodged in-between different hegemonic projects seeking to provide an image of how society is and ought to be structured" (301).

As a floating *signifier* "fake news" is thus

> … used by fundamentally different and in many ways deeply opposing political projects as a means of constructing political identities, conflicts and antagonisms. Instilled with different meanings, "fake news" becomes part of a much larger hegemonic struggle to define the shape, purpose and modalities of contemporary politics. It becomes a key moment in a political power struggle between hegemonic projects. In this way, we argue that "fake news" has become a deeply political concept used to delegitimise political opponents and construct hegemony. (Farkas and Schou 2018)

In their article discussing fake news as "a floating signifier" Farkas and Schou find it particularly profitable to examine "fake news" "as a discursive signifier that is part of political struggles", and they look at how "different conceptions of fake news serve to produce and articulate political battlegrounds over social reality" (Farkas and Schou 2018).

The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Hierarchies of Knowledge Production

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most disruptive phenomena of our time. It has threatened and destabilised the normative, stoked fear and anxiety, and laid bare the fragility of our systems of governance, medical science and the immanent tensions within our knowledge systems. The pandemic has provoked a fundamental collision of these systems, leaving in its wake confusion as we struggle over meaning, the production of meaning, its husbandry and political instrumentalisation as a tool for both domination and resistance.

Due in part to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an emerging reconfiguration of the certainty about the authentic or truth, and of the un/certainty of the fake and fakery as alternative and or complementary sites of truth(s). We are presently confronted with a complex and layered contestation over who gets to define the truth and the fake, and

under what terms. It is a deeply insurrectional conversation for it invites the whole world, centres and margins alike, to confront how political, cultural, economic and social values, structures and infrastructures of knowledge production, are implicated in the making and unmaking of truth and the fake.

I foreground some of the struggles attending the current conversation around Covid-19 and fake news and focus on some illustrative examples as sites through which these struggles over truth, the normative and meaning are made visible. I demonstrate how information/knowledge is mobilised and instrumentalised in a hegemonic struggle over meaning, and ultimately of the right to dominate and of the resistance against being dominated.

In the news media, the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have produced a discursive regime of differentiation and or categorisation of knowledges and therefore of news and "fake news". It has reified the primacy and legitimacy of Western scientific knowledge as truth and alternatives as manifestly "not truth" and therefore, by default, fake. In Africa, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to fears of an "infodemic". Fundamentally, it is assumed this threatens faith in medical scientific knowledge, the dangers of which are said to be incalculable. Africa's relatively successful containment of the pandemic, not necessarily through any specific "scientific models", is still notably suppressed. Instead, the focus has been on the continent's vulnerability to fake news and of the need therefore to fight "infodemics" and to stress the urgency of restoring faith in the unquestionable legitimacy of Western medical scientific "truths".

But the legitimacy of medical scientific "truth", particularly within the context of Western medicine, has always been tenuous in Africa. Legacies of "epidemiological and bodily harms caused by [colonial] conquest" (Tilley 2016) remain lodged in the continent's popular consciousness. There were innumerable instances of "ethical … transgressions of colonial research and treatment campaigns" in Africa that still feed deep anxieties about Western medicine across the continent. Tilley reminds us of comments made by the University of Oxford senior physician Honor Smith, as recently as the 1950s, that Africa offers an "almost unlimited field … for clinical research that I find so enthralling … problems of the first interest abound, [and] clinical material is unlimited" (28). Smith's exuberance, she says, tells us just how Africans were treated as "unproblematic research subjects, with few topics off limits" (Tilley 2016, 28). In addition, Tilley notes that in the colonial period there were "concerted and inadvertent efforts to undermine African healing practices, which was not always commensurable with introduced medical techniques" (Tilley 2016, 28).

More recently, there have been cases of deliberate medical malpractices that have targeted black populations in the continent by rogue white doctors. In South Africa, for example, Dr Wouter Basson, nicknamed "Dr Death" in the South African press, was allegedly involved in the killing of hundreds of black people in South Africa and Namibia through a cocktail of drugs and biological agents. Basson was head of "Project Coast", South Africa's chemical and biological weapons unit under apartheid (Washington 2007). In 1995, a Scottish anaesthesiologist was accused of five murders and convicted for the deaths of two infants he injected with lethal doses of morphine in Zimbabwe. In another case in 2000, Werber Bezwoda, a cancer researcher at the University of Witwatersrand, was fired following a medical experiment involving very high doses of chemotherapy followed by bone marrow transplants on black breast cancer patients. These examples, disparate though they are, help construct and legitimise a

racialised narrative of suspicion around which local populations can easily be mobilised.

The response to WHO's advice on the need to remain faithful to science has therefore been variable. It has ranged from total acceptance of the universalised WHO-sanctioned narratives (Ogola 2020), to reluctant acceptance, to outright rejection. Importantly, however, legitimate news on the pandemic has been largely framed within the context of Western scientific "truth", in effect mobilising existing and historical anti-Western sentiment across political, commercial, cultural and social interests. The historical and structural marginalisation of particular geographies, cultures and people in the making of that which has been normalised as the legitimate "truth" has animated the creation of alternative "truths", some of which take the form of "fake news". Fuelled by a resurgent nationalism, different constituencies and interests have mobilised both political and cultural capital to construct their own "truths". Precisely because the normative remains singularly defined, these alternatives are denied legitimacy through their characterisation as "fake news".

Madagascar and Tanzania's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic stand out fundamentally for their rejection of Western scientific "truth". They are as a consequence simultaneously framed as pariah states and as brave outposts standing up to new forms of imperialism clothed in science. Under the leadership of President John Magufuli, who passed away in March 2021 from heart complications, Tanzania stopped regular testing of Covid-19 in May 2020. It was however widely rumoured that the president had died of Covid-19 with many citing the secrecy with which his ill-health was handled. Since May 2020, Magufuli's government refused to reveal any data on Covid-19 infection rates and did not shut down its economy even when neighbouring countries did so. The government instead adopted an alternative religious narrative through which to interpret and respond to the pandemic. While the coercive nature of the Magufuli-state may have demanded the adoption of this narrative, media and public reaction to this narrative was not been entirely oppositional. The government's position did have some public support, both in Tanzania and across the continent. Yet this is not necessarily a case of religious "truth" triumphing over medical science. One would argue that the public acceptance of religion as a site of alternative truth speaks to broader processes of structural exclusion from the hierarchies of knowledge production of scientific "truth". This was possibly an attempt to develop a different regime of truth in which the hierarchy of knowledge was inverted.

Magufuli tapped into a resurgent nationalism that has gripped the world over the last five years. It is a nationalism that seeks attention in many forms: politically, culturally and economically. Drawing on prevailing nationalist sentiment, Magufuli excavated anti-Western rhetoric usually justified by the resilience of the vestiges of the colonial enterprise, explained mainly through the lense of continued economic and political marginalisation of the continent. He framed his response to the pandemic as a revolutionary confrontation with neo-imperialism. As such, the WHO-sanctioned interventions, including social distancing and the wearing of masks, were framed as forms of economic, political and intellectual control, even sabotage, that had to be rejected.

This nationalism and its centrality in the struggle over meaning can however also be seen in the international race towards the discovery of a Covid-19 vaccine. AstraZeneca, Moderna, Pfizer and BioNtech, the leading companies that developed the Covid-19

vaccines, were proxies for a nationalist contest between the UK, the US, and Germany in the West, and Russia and China in the East. Being the first to come up with the vaccine was invested with significant political meaning. Meanwhile, employing patronage as public diplomacy, Russia and China offered free and discounted vaccines to the developing world as leverage to expand their influence. Only days after announcing the success of the Sputnik V vaccine, the Russian Trade Ministry, for example, claimed to have received expressions of interest from more than 20 countries for more than a billion doses of their vaccine. China on the other hand offered enticements, including a reported $1 billion loan programme to help Latin American and Caribbean countries to purchase its vaccines (Baumgaertner and McDonnell 2020).

In Madagascar, President Andry Rajoelina pleaded for the recognition of Africa's indigenous knowledge systems when he claimed that the herbal tonic Covid Organics was effective in the treatment of Covid-19. WHO however quickly warned against the use of medicines that had not undergone clinical trials. In effect the alleged success of Covid Organics was framed as a case of misinformation, part of the very dangerous scourge of the infodemic that had to be addressed. Rajoelina argued that, had this tonic been produced in a Western country, the reaction in the West would have been different. Such suspicions are not entirely invalid. In September 2020, the leading medical journal *The Lancet* had to withdraw a peer-reviewed study on the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for Covid-19. The large observational study relied on a dataset by a data analytics company that was apparently founded by one of the authors of the paper. The data used for the study varied with official government and health department data from a number of countries cited in the article. The study forced WHO to suspend temporarily the use of hydrochloroquine in the treatment of Covid-19. However, this was not regarded as a case of misinformation but rather as an unfortunate lapse in editorial gatekeeping, a privilege not extended to "knowledge" generated from the global South.

Conclusion

The discussion of "fake news", while rightly focused on impact, must not ignore what its presence and proliferation signify. Ultimately it is indicative of the contestations and struggles over the legitimacies of knowledge and meaning. Western scientific knowledge and its apparatuses of dissemination, such as the news media, have continued to reproduce hierarchies of knowledge/information, prompting a revolt manifested now most starkly in multiple narrative insurrections, some of which take the form of "fake news". The mainstreaming of "fake news" and of alternative versions of "truth" must not necessarily be seen as a triumph of a post-truth dispensation. Instead they should be understood as part of an ongoing struggle over meaning and as evidence of the contestations of the hierarchies and infrastructures of hegemonic knowledge production.

The palpable concern about the intellectual wreckage "fake news" will cause in the global South underlines the power asymmetries that shape global narratives. The focus on vulnerability and gullibility, particularly of the Southern audience, disregards their agency to reconfigure truth centred in the West and to attach to it a different value, one that responds to its local contextual contingencies. It further ignores the South's ability to construct an alternative regime of truth. For example, in Africa as in many

parts of the global South, narratives around pandemics are often quickly appropriated into popular culture where they are repurposed to perform other roles. "Fake news" can therefore be deliberately fabricated and instrumentalised to become a fulcrum around which a range of quite important political and social issues on and beyond the pandemic are discussed. This way it speaks to broader but also immediate structures of exclusion and domination, creating spaces for the development of alternative regimes of truth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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