

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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APC would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their support for Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022.

Published by APC

2022

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Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022 web and e-book

ISBN 978-92-95113-52-7

APC-202211-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-342

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CONGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF

FACT CHECKING TO AVOID INTERNET SHUTDOWNS: LESSONS FROM THE DRC



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Introduction

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by false information¹ that has made efforts to control the disease's spread difficult. As a result of this, the health measures taken and announced by the Congolese authorities to combat the spread of COVID-19 have not been respected by a significant number of people in the country. Social media has been the main platform for the propagation of the false information, presenting a real challenge for Congolese authorities.

In the past, when there was such a strong spread of false information, Congolese authorities immediately resorted to internet and SMS shutdowns.² This practice has always been denounced by human rights advocates.

In this report I am going to talk about how the COVID-19 pandemic has somehow changed the behaviour of Congolese authorities in the fight against false information. I discuss how Congo Check,³ a Congolese fact-checking organisation, and Internews, an international media development NGO, have shown that educating the population about media content and producing good information is more effective in the fight against false information than internet shutdowns.

False information on COVID-19 in the DRC

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in the DRC on 10 March 2020 by the Congolese Minister of Health Dr. Eteni Longondo.⁴ Nine days later, the government announced measures to fight the spread of the pandemic, among which all gatherings and

meetings were prohibited, and schools, universities, discotheques, bars, cafés and restaurants closed. Later on, measures were taken to quarantine certain communes and neighbourhoods in the capital city of Kinshasa and in other cities of the country such as Goma and Bukavu.

All these responses to the pandemic triggered many forms of resistance in the country. This resistance was often directed against the containment measures and other restrictions on people's freedom of movement. The resistance also showed a distrust of the government. This was particularly felt in the eastern part of the DRC, where, in the face of growing insecurity due to the activism of armed groups, the population feels abandoned, is fighting for its survival and has little confidence in the authorities.

Some people believe that the authorities took these measures simply to get money from donors. Despite the increasing number of deaths from COVID-19, many say that the pandemic is only a "financial matter" which benefits the authorities in view of the significant resources mobilised by the government as well as by bilateral and multilateral cooperation organisations to fight this disease. This belief is reinforced by suspicions of the misappropriation and mismanagement of resources regularly reported in the media. These suspicions were not helped by rumours that people who did not die from COVID-19 were formally counted as victims of the pandemic in exchange for USD 5,000 per corpse, in order to amplify the pandemic's gravity.⁵

False information about the pandemic was circulated mostly on social media, and came in different forms, sometimes as a result of media reporting. One rumour that made it into the media even considered the office of the president as being at the epicentre of the first deaths reported at the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, while cases and deaths from COVID-19 were recorded, the most publicised were those of well-known political, academic or religious leaders over 50 years old. This meant that most of the population thought and still thinks that COVID-19 is a disease that only affects the wealthy and elderly, and not young people who come from less

1 This report uses the term "false information" to refer to misinformation and disinformation.

2 Tungali, A. (2017, 31 March). The Evolution of Internet Shutdowns in DR Congo. *CIPESA*. <https://cipesa.org/2017/03/the-evolution-of-internet-shutdowns-in-dr-congo>

3 <https://congocheck.net/a-propos>

4 Crisis24. (2020, 11 March). DRC: First coronavirus case confirmed March 10. https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2020/03/drc-first-coronavirus-case-confirmed-march-10?origin=fr_riskalert

5 Ekoko, J., & Ibaï, M. (2020, 9 September). Les rumeurs à la base du déni de Covid-19 : un obstacle à la lutte contre cette pandémie en République Démocratique du Congo. *CCSC*. <https://www.ccsc-rdc.net/blog-single2.php?idart=679>

affluent families – the latter representing the largest part of the Congolese population.

While social media was flooded by these sorts of misconceptions, rumours and false information, instead of internet shutdowns, which it had relied on in the past, the government took a different approach: it relied on the efforts of civil society organisations and international NGOs to produce and disseminate good information about the pandemic through the same social media.

Civil society organisation committed to fighting false information

“Our greatest enemy right now is not the virus itself. It’s fear, rumours and stigma. And our greatest assets are facts, reason and solidarity.”⁶ These were the words of Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization. As in the rest of the world, false information in the DRC is about the spreading of unsourced messages through social media. These messages not only increased fear and uncertainty in the population but also fuelled the public’s contestation of measures taken by government authorities to combat the pandemic, and increased the mistrust of information disseminated by the country’s health and political authorities.

This situation has been a great challenge for the Congolese authorities. On the one hand, there was the need to push back against false information, and on the other hand, there was a need to enforce the health measures they had taken to fight against the spread of COVID-19.

While some feared internet shutdowns, they were surprised when the government instead relied on two independent organisations, Congo Check and Internews, for help.

Congo Check is a media outlet specialising in fact checking in the DRC. Created in 2018 in the context of the electoral process – often a time of much manipulation, including the manipulation of data and people in the DRC – its main purpose is to dispel misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, fact-based information. Congo Check monitors information posted online, including through messaging apps such as WhatsApp – its journalists are members of some 30 to 40 WhatsApp groups.

Congo Check took up the fight against the spread of false information about COVID-19 by producing and disseminating verified and sourced information.

The organisation has created a special section on its website – Fact Check COVID-19⁷ – where it publishes news and information to deconstruct false information about the virus. Because false information is sometimes accompanied by doctored images, Congo Check also verifies images by using different tools such as Google’s image search, InVID and TinEye. Congo Check does not receive any financial support from the government or any of the Congolese authorities. However, within the framework of COVID-19, the Ministries of Health and Communication have relied heavily on its work. This has included providing Congo Check with correct information on the pandemic and official information on government decisions and policies. Congo Check then uses this information to write the content of its articles and posts, which it publishes on its own website and social media pages.

From this perspective, Congo Check is a strategic partner for the Congolese authorities in the fight against the propagation of false information. As Rodriguez Katsuva, an editor at Congo Check, put it: “Every time there is a rumour, whether it’s about the pandemic, whether it’s about the government, whether it’s about the actions of politicians, we do our job and in a concrete way we help the government.”⁸

In addition to the work of Congo Check, the Congolese government has also relied on the work of international organisations such as Internews.⁹ Internews is a global non-profit media training organisation that works with the media in the DRC, and has set up a project called COVID-19 Rapid Response in the Great Lakes Region. Under this project, Internews set up a desk that was responsible for dismantling false information about COVID-19 by referencing reliable information disseminated by political and health authorities and humanitarian workers. The desk offered a specialised service of fact checkers made up of senior journalists and computer scientists responsible for finding false information on social media and publicly exposing and correcting it using the same channels of dissemination, mainly Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

Fact checking rather than internet shutdowns

There is no exact explanation to justify the change of attitude of the Congolese authorities when they did not resort to an internet shutdown. Possibly it was because there was a need to simultaneously

6 World Health Organization. (2020, 28 February). WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 28 February 2020. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---28-february-2020>

7 <https://congocheck.net/category/actus/fact-check/factcheck-covid/>

8 Interview with Rodriguez Katsuva, editor at Congo Check, via a WhatsApp call on 27 January 2022.

9 <https://internews.cd/qui-sommes-nous-2/>

communicate with the public, as much as there was a need to limit false information circulating on the internet. The change of regime in the country could also be one of the reasons – potentially the main reason for the change in approach. Since 2019, just before the pandemic erupted, the DRC has had a new president, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo.¹⁰ There is reason to believe that this former opponent of the outgoing regime, himself several times a victim of internet shutdowns that he never ceased to denounce, wants to break with the bad practices of his predecessor. At the same time, the new government has announced that it wants to ratify the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection,¹¹ known as the Malabo Convention – a move that could restrict any unilateral decision on internet shutdowns under the guise of national security.

The repeated internet shutdowns that the DRC has experienced during certain political demonstrations would be in contravention of the international responsibility of the government if specific provisions of international treaties on freedom of expression are not respected.

International commitments have been used before to oppose government action on internet shutdowns. During one of the previous shutdowns, NGOs threatened to file a human rights complaint related to freedom of expression against telecommunications companies that obeyed the government's orders before the OECD bodies in which their international headquarters are located.¹² This follows from the interpretation of Article 215 of the DRC constitution, which places international treaties and agreements ratified by the DRC above national laws.

Another reason could be related to the financial cost of internet shutdowns. In the DRC, telecommunications companies are the main internet service providers.¹³ It is these companies that receive a government order to shut down internet services and SMS throughout the country,¹⁴ resulting in a loss of revenue for them, as well as for the government

itself.¹⁵ As Mr. Katsuva surmises: “I think they have also realised that the internet shutdown is more harmful than beneficial in fighting rumours or any other situation.”¹⁶

In addition to all of the above, it is also important to note that in general, the false information about COVID-19 was not specifically directed at the Congolese authorities, or about the specific situation in the DRC, as it originated largely outside the country. According to Serge Bisimwa, chief editor of the fact-checking desk at Internews DRC, this means that neither the Congolese government nor the power of the Congolese authorities was threatened. “The laboratories where the rumours about COVID-19 were made were not in the DRC, but outside the country, and the government did not feel in danger from these rumours,” he said.¹⁷

Conclusion

The arrival of COVID-19 in DRC suggests there is another way to combat false information effectively without resorting to restricting citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, such as using internet shutdowns. The experience of the organisations Congo Check and Internews in monitoring the internet, and producing and spreading verified information via the same channels used to circulate false information, is worth building on. If security reasons have often been invoked by government authorities to justify internet shutdowns, it must be recognised that the security of citizens has never been as threatened as during COVID-19.¹⁸ Yet it was exactly then that the government turned to fact checking as a tool to educate rather than repress a dissident population. The DRC experience shows that the production and dissemination of verified information has, beyond the fight against false information, contributed to securing the lives of citizens. “It is important to know that fact checking saves lives, because in DRC disinformation literally kills people,” said Katsuva.¹⁹

However, despite what can now be described as a positive experience in the fight against misinformation and disinformation, nothing indicates that in the coming days the Congolese authorities will

10 Busari, S. (2019, 24 January). Felix Tshisekedi sworn in as Congo's President in dramatic ceremony. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/24/africa/drc-president-sworn-in-intl/index.html>

11 https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/29560-treaty-0048_-_african_union_convention_on_cyber_security_and_personal_data_protection_e.pdf

12 Kalonji, T. (2018, 13 November). Le cyberdroit en RDC : où en est-on ? *Overblog*. <http://tresorkalonji.pro/2018/11/le-cyberdroit-en-rdc-ou-en-est-on.html>

13 <https://www.broadbandspeedchecker.co.uk/isp-directory/Congo.html>

14 Purdon, L. (2015, 19 February). Network Shutdowns in the DRC: ICT Companies Need Clear Rules. *Institute for Human Rights and Business*. <https://www.ihrb.org/focus-areas/information-communication-technology/network-shutdowns-in-the-drc-ict-companies-need-clear-rules>

15 CIPESA. (2017). *A Framework for Calculating the Economic Impact of Internet Disruptions in Sub-Saharan Africa*. https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=252

16 Interview with Rodriguez Katsuva, editor at Congo Check, via a WhatsApp call on 27 January 2022.

17 Interview with Serge Bisimwa, chief editor of the Internews DRC fact-checking desk, on 3 February 2022.

18 Slugocki, W. L., & Sowa, B. (2021). Disinformation as a threat to national security on the example of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 35(3), 63-74. <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/138876>

19 Interview with Rodriguez Katsuva, editor at Congo Check, via a WhatsApp call on 27 January 2022.

not once again resort to an internet shutdown. The DRC is expected to hold general elections in 2023, and it is during this period that there is always an intensification of the spread of false information that can pose a serious threat to the authorities – which suggests that they would not hesitate to cut off the internet. This fear is not unfounded, and can be explained by several indicators.

First, the political and security climate that now prevails is bleak in all provinces and especially in the capital city Kinshasa.²⁰ Second, no legal or political mechanisms have been put in place to discourage the initiators and creators of the false information that is beginning to be seen against one or other political camp or individuals.

Finally, no law has been adopted to compensate people who are victims of false information on social media, or any other platform. The only related legislation is the Penal Code,²¹ which prohibits an individual from knowingly spreading false information that is likely to alarm the public, worry them, or to provoke them against the established powers. However, it is not clear how to determine what is considered false information.

As a result of these legal deficiencies, the Congolese authorities could use existing laws, like the Penal Code, if they want to justify internet shutdowns. “The only weapon left in the hands of the government will be the internet shutdown, which is a violation of the freedom of the press, expression and information rights,” Bisimwa said.²²

Action steps

To encourage the government’s reliance on producing verified and sourced content as the main method of fighting false information, Congo Check and other civil society organisations in the DRC should do the following:

- Produce impact studies that can serve as evidence that the circulation of verified information is effective in the fight against rumours and false information.
- Initiate discussions with the governmental authorities in order to obtain formal guarantees that they will not resort to an internet shutdown and will instead commit to promoting the production and dissemination of correct and verified information as the best method to fight against rumours and false information.
- Advocate for people’s representatives to pass laws penalising the creators of false information.
- Advocate for the government and national assembly to ratify the African Union convention on cybercrime.

20 Sabbe, B. (2022, 1 February). Grievances, Governance and Gold in the Eastern DRC. *IPIS*. <https://ipisresearch.be/weekly-briefing/ipis-briefing-december-2021-january-2022-grievances-governance-and-gold-in-the-eastern-drc>

21 <https://wipo.lex.wipo.int/en/text/194348>

22 Interview with Serge Bisimwa, chief editor of the Internews DRC fact-checking desk, on 3 February 2022.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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