Letter to the Editor

COMBATING FAKE NEWS ON COVID-19 IN AFRICA: IS PUNITIVE MEASURE THE BEST STRATEGY?

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Dear Editor,

Fake news, which is also called hoax news or junk news, is a form of news which consists of deliberate misinformation or deceptions (hoaxes) that spread through the news or social media.[1,2] The objective behind the publication and dissemination of fake news is to: mislead the public so as to tarnish the reputation of a person or group of persons, place, race, agency, or entity; and/or gain selfish political, financial or other benefits.[1-4]

Propagation of fake news is a global problem in Africa that is posing continuous threat to Africa's public health.[5] It is so concerning that most of the fake news propagated in Africa are spread via social media.[5] To make it worse, the prevention of the creation and spread of fake news in Africa is a very difficult task to achieve, due to existing technologies and legal framework.[6,7]

The African continent has recorded several infectious disease outbreaks in history, including the recent and famous Ebola outbreak.[8] In fact, the continent is currently plagued by a viral communicable respiratory disease called COVID-19.[9] Historically, COVID-19 originated from an animal wet market in Wuhan City, China, Asia, in December, 2019.[10] From Wuhan, the disease has spread to every other continents of the world, including Africa.[9] The index COVID-19 case in Africa was imported to Egypt in February 2020.[11] Since then, other African countries have also reported their index cases. However, as at May 3, 2020, a total of 53 African countries have collectively recorded 42,769 COVID-19 confirmed cases with 1,759 deaths.[9]

Africa is a developing continent with about 1.6 billion people, of which at least 61% of them are users of online social media.[12] Based on experience, the social media are often used to misinform the public during disease outbreak periods.[5] As a result of such misinformation, some people had naively killed themselves or suffered huge socio-economic losses and as well health-related problems as a result of their reactions to that fake news in question.[5]

In order to effectively curb the propagation of COVID-19-associated fake news on the social media, in Africa, should the enactment of Draconian laws against indiscriminate use of social media, such as fake news creation and propagation, be the only major strategy to adopt? The answer is a capital "NO". In fact, in recent times, the governments in some African countries had attempted the use of laws to punish offenders of "indiscriminate" use of social media (such as propagation of hate speech, fake news, etcetera), but such initiatives were vehemently opposed by the citizens of such African countries due to public fears about the possibility of the use of such laws by ruling politicians to "punish" opposition groups.[6,7] Such kind of laws have been considered in some arenas to violate various national and international declarations and conventions on human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the African Charter of Peoples Rights.[7] Overall, this shows that the use of a

"Draconian Law" to punish spreaders of fake news is not the best workable strategy for Africa. Also, the use of such laws is a punitive measure to deter the propagation of fake news. However, punitive measure alone is not sufficient to bring a sustainable change; rather, a measure that promotes patriotism is the major bail out.

Hence, in solving the problem of COVID-19-associated fake news, as well as all other health-related fake news propagated on social media, it is highly recommended that the governments of all African countries should strictly adopt the use of public orientation strategies to educate their public about fake news. Through the adoption of these strategies, the public can be made to: consider the propagation of fake news as a socially unacceptable act; resist external influences toward spreading fake news; know how to verify the reliability and validity of a news; realize the socio-economic, political, security, and health hazards associated with fake news; and also develop patriotic mind set toward their country.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
Authors have none to declare.

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