

Case Study

A Guide to Misinformation and Disinformation:

Digital Training Delivered Via WhatsApp in Sudan in
2022

Context

Misinformation and Disinformation are rife in Sudan, a fragile state with a fractured media sector able to do little to counter it. Years of press censorship and self-censorship, media house closures and the rise of partisan websites have also adversely affected public trust in any media, allowing rumours to proliferate. Mis/disinformation operates on many levels. In 2021 researchers alerted Facebook to a campaign which originated in Russia pushing out fake videos and news and almost 1000 accounts were subsequently taken down, but there are still reports of foreign disinformation activity. At the other end of the spectrum the increasing reliance on social media as a news source encourages sharing of content which is unverified and can fuel tensions.



The Challenge

We needed to design the intervention to work in a territory where few have access to conventional laptops, where there are frequent power cuts, where data downloads are expensive and require more broadband width than most have access to. We delivered our first open access digital learning course both on a conventional web platform and, for the first time via mobile on WhatsApp, as a fast response to Covid-19 education for the media and beyond. Our learnings from that course – which reached 1700 participants – lead us to concentrate on mobile only WhatsApp delivery, with text and imagery but no video (and thus no huge data downloads).

The Course


The course is aimed both at the media and at wider civil society – in short anyone who might click on share without thinking. It is deliberately pitched at entry level, and designed to be as accessible as possible, accessed by clicking on a link in WhatsApp.

It is framed in five chapters with a series of hypothetical scenarios, with each question requiring the user to engage before progressing. When they click on their response, the explanation and next piece of content downloads, so it is very much active rather than passive learning.

It is self- paced so can be picked up and put down and does not require the learner to be online.

But, done in one session takes between 60-90 minutes which is not overly arduous. It is highly localised, in Sudanese Arabic, with Sudanese case studies and examples.

Those who complete and pass a straightforward final test of their knowledge can download a digital certificate.

A black smartphone is shown at an angle, displaying text on its screen. The text is white and matches the content of the other blocks in the image. The phone's camera and earpiece are visible at the top.

It is designed to be a primer on fake news and give users the tools to play their part and do something to counter false information.

It's framed in five chapters:

Chapter 1 covers what false information is, how it spreads and the problems it can cause

Chapter 2 looks at spotting false information and gives tips on verification

Chapter 3 puts the spotlight on social media and the internet

Chapter 4 concentrates on fake pictures and video and reverse image searching

Chapter 5 suggests first steps in countering false information at work and in everyday life

The Numbers

10,687 enrolments

Of these,

7837 (73%) explored its content

3275 (31%) completed more than half

2540 (24%) completed the course successfully passed the final test and registered to receive a certificate

79 completed the course but did not pass the test

2860 (27%) registered but did not go further



A 24% completion rate is high compared to a median completion rate of 15% for online courses <https://elitecontentmarketer.com/online-education-stats/>

Going Viral

The course was launched in August, and promoted through Thomson Foundation, The British Council and the British Embassy's channels across social media and civil society. The launch created a buzz with many posting their results on social media helping the course to go viral.



The speed and scale of enrolments was higher than expected or experienced with previous programmes. Within a month, more than ten thousand people had enrolled in the course peaking at **10,687** in September.

Who completed the course?

Those who completed the course were required to pass a short test made up of five questions and complete a survey asking them about their profession and their location in order to receive their certificate.

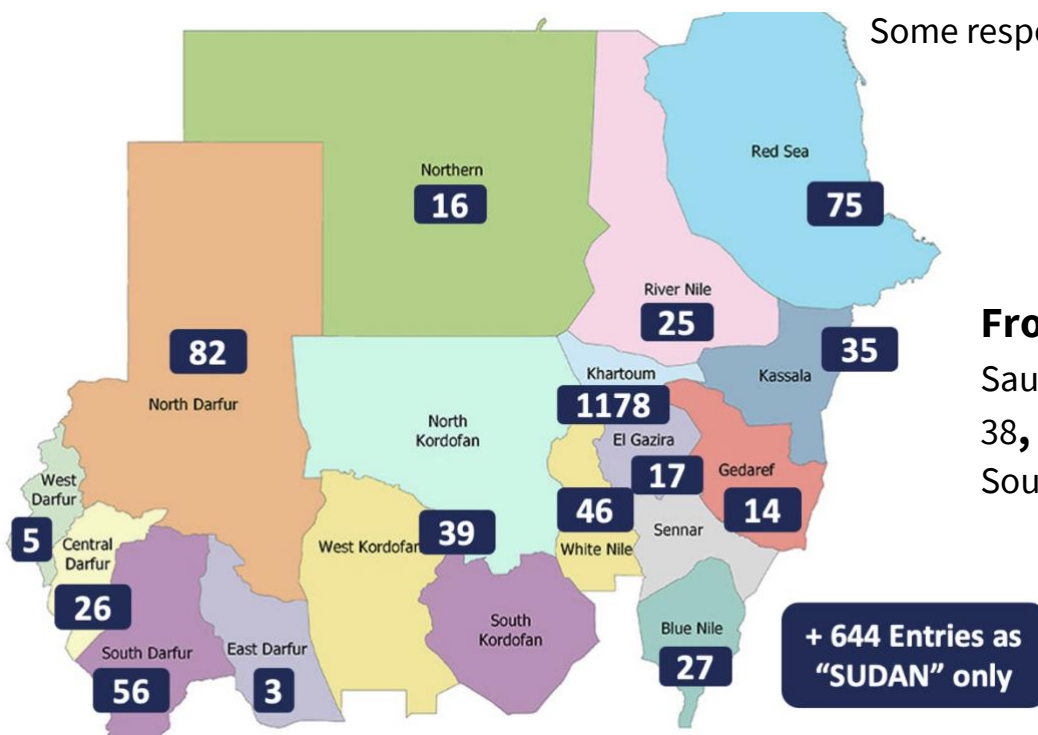
More than **2600** users completed the survey of whom:

- 928** said they worked in civil society
- 804** identified themselves as a journalist / media practitioner
- 183** as managers or heads
- 103** as students
- 74** identified as activists

Travel across Sudan is currently challenging making delivering face to face interventions and building capacity outside Khartoum difficult. This course spread to difficult-to-reach places such as the conflict areas in Darfur, Kordofan and The East, and to a number of cohorts inside IDP camps.

Geographically, **2292** said they were based in Sudan
238 from other countries

Some responses were not clear



From the Diaspora:

Saudi Arabia 111, UAE 38, Egypt 14, Qatar 19, South Sudan 8

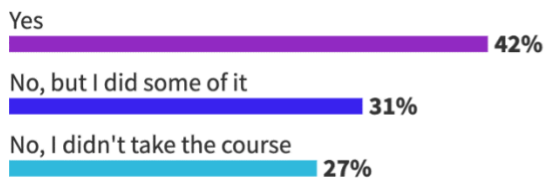
Follow up Survey

A second survey was sent via WhatsApp to 6000 of the 10796 users who enrolled in the course. **1580** engaged with the survey, and **1089** completed it.

We asked four quantitative questions, and two qualitative where they were asked to give an example to illustrate their answer:

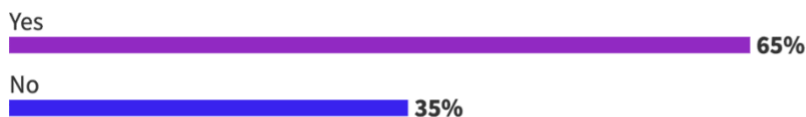
Did you complete this training course?

(1580 responses)



Have you used reverse picture searching to check out photos and videos?

(1401 responses)



Have you spotted any fake news?

(1376 responses)



If you have spotted any fake news, could you tell us about it or give us an example?

(1222 responses)

In the area that I live in there were some tribal conflicts, but it settled down and things were calm until some fake news emerged on social media about the renewal of that conflict. But I managed to double check and discover that it was fake news and I corrected it and shared it so that peace is still ongoing, and the community is fine. That is proof of how we learned from this training.

There was a screen shot for posts from two different politicians quarrelling about an a issue related to one of their families, but I checked their official pages and those posts didn't exist

There was a story about a demonstration supporting a previous regime that was accused of corruption. The story said that the demonstration was huge and had pictures stating that millions participated. But in reality, only hundreds participated, so I called different sources and checked the authenticity of the pictures (using different tools) to discover that it was photoshopped.

There was a picture about fights in the Blue Nile but when I reverse searched the picture it turned out that it is not from Sudan but a neighbouring country

There was news about the economic shortage in Sudan and the lack of bread attached with a picture. But after researching the picture, I found that it has nothing to do with the news. The picture was of one of the processions in the streets of Khartoum denouncing the military rule.

Old pictures of the civil war republished under the pretence that it is happening now. But by comparing these pictures to the current appearance of the area, it was clear that they were old

There was a picture of a woman killed in the Blue Nile district and the picture shows her little son crying over her body. Reverse search showed that the picture is an old one from Rwanda

Finally, can you give us an example about how the training has changed the way you approach the issue of misinformation?

(1104 responses)

The training changed my approach to trending news and I started to doubt any news that is not sourced. In addition to that it introduced me to the tools that help me verify pictures including the reverse search and how to find the actual date and differentiate between true pictures and modified ones ✓

Before the training I used to believe everything I read on social media and never check its accuracy. Now I try to verify everything I read and if it is fake, I write that in the comments hoping that it will be dealt with ✓

After the training, I don't believe everything posted on social media before checking the available sources. If I didn't find any sources then I wouldn't share. Also I can recognise questionable information which aims to affect the public opinion ✓

The training helped me to be able to verify the source of the news and spot fake social media pages/ fake sites and I learned about reverse search for photos and videos ✓

The training increased my capability to verify any doubtful information and it introduced me to many tools that I can use to verify news and stop the spread of fake that might lead to disasters and harm. I learned how important accurate news is. ✓

Further Analytics

The digital nature of the course and the interactions of the users creates a record of how each participant answered every question. This makes it possible to identify the questions or topics which the participants find most difficult. For example, based on user responses, we can conclude that the majority of participants struggled the most with the topics of chapter 3, *Spotting Suspicious Websites and Social Media Accounts*. Below are the questions with the highest percentage of wrong answers:

Q15 Which of these people is sharing false information which could be harmful?

Choose from the list

- 1- Someone tells you to spend all your money right away, because the SDG is to be replaced next week by a new currency
- 2- Someone who says chai costs 140 SDG at the local stall, when in fact it costs 150 SDG
- 3- Someone who says you shouldn't take cholera vaccine, because it contains human tissue

Only 43% of respondents got this question right.

Q37 When you look at websites and Facebook pages, it's not always easy to know who is behind them. Should you be suspicious about what they say? Choose the option or options you think are right.

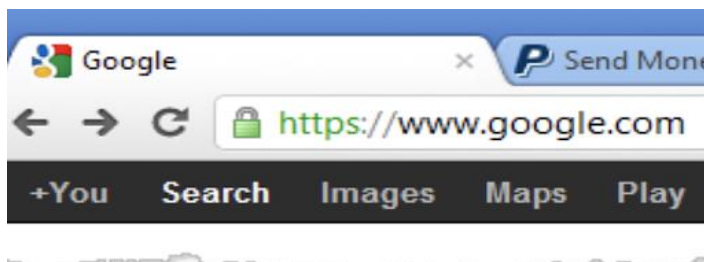
- 1- No, it's OK if people want to keep their name private – it doesn't affect their trustworthiness
- 2- Yes, if someone is hiding their identity I don't know whether to trust them
- 3- Yes, I can't tell whether the poster is even a real person! Or where the account is based.

50% of respondents got this question right.

Q34 I've often seen a picture of a padlock in an internet address like the one below - what does that mean? Choose the answer you think is right:

- 1- It means the site is likely to be more secure and trustworthy than a site without a padlock
- 2- It means that only the site owner can post comments or share material

50% of respondents got this question right.



The analytics confirmed what we knew anecdotally – that the base level of knowledge on misinformation/disinformation and internet safety is fairly low in Sudan. Those who did answer incorrectly were given an explanation and information so there was learning at every stage of the course, and those who completed the course were tested again before receiving their certificate.

A community to engage with?

The levels of engagement with the course and the follow up survey as well as the higher-than-average completion rates show an appetite for content via WhatsApp. In fact, the more than 90% of those who completed the survey indicated that they would be happy for us to offer them more courses.

As a result of this course and previous programmes in Sudan, using the WhatsApp course delivery platform, it is possible to deliver new courses directly to this audience of 10k plus participants as well as the thousands who have engaged with previous courses on COVID-19 and communications. These are a mixture of media professionals and civil society spread around Sudan.

Would you like to be informed if we launch any new courses?

(1089 responses)

Yes



No

4%

Conclusion

- Engaging, active learning which is accessible and delivered via mobile can attract a big audience
- Localised content which speaks to daily lives works
- Viral spread can penetrate traditionally difficult to reach places and communities
- Accessible digital learning outside the classroom provides value for money
- It can kickstart behavioural change which can then be built on

We believe the content and approach can be localised and rolled out across other territories, in appropriate languages. WhatsApp is the platform of choice in Sudan, but we have delivered via Telegram in other countries.

Mis/disinformation is on the increase and knowledge across the population is vital in emerging democracies. This course is entry level, but provides a platform for more advanced work, whether face to face or digital, with targeted groups or mass audiences. Engagement with the course, during and afterwards has built a community hungry to learn, and the analytics show signs of positive behaviour change with the promise of more.

Acknowledgements

This work was delivered as part of the project Strengthening Sudan's media in understanding and communicating reform during Transition, March 2022 – 23, in partnership with British Council, Sudan and was funded by UKAid.

Hosam El Nagar, Director of Innovation and Learning

Hosame@thomsonfoundation.org

Helen Scott, Director, TF Sudan Projects

helens@thomsonfoundation.org

Thomson Foundation, 6 Greenland Place, London, NW1 0AP

www.thomsonfoundation.org