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The Forum On Internet Freedom in Africa 2020 (FIFAfrica20)

## REPORT

### **OF THE SESSION OF SEPTEMBER 29, 2020 ON: COVID19 AND FAKE NEWS: BARRIERS TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ON THE INTERNET IN TIMES OF HEALTH CRISIS, DAKAR, 29 SEPTEMBER 2020**

The Session of September 29, 2020 on : COVID19 and fake news: Obstacles to freedom of expression on the Internet in times of health crisis, organized as part of The Forum On Internet Freedom in Africa 2020 (FIFAfrica20), was held this Tuesday, September 29, 2020 at the Hotel Les Résidences Mamoune in Dakar-Senegal between 14:30 and 19:00. This theme, dissected from three presentations and enriched through, on the one hand, the interventions of the audience composed of different actors including public actors, civil society organizations, journalists, lawyers, private actors and on the other hand, the Regional Coordinator of Internet sans Frontieres in West Africa, Dr. Qemal Affagnon speaking from Barcelona and the Regional Representative of the Internet Policy Program Facebook in West Africa, Ms. Balkissa Idé Siddo speaking from Dubai.

This edition, chaired by Mr. DIOP Ababacar, President of the organization JUNCTION Senegal, is organized in collaboration with partners such as PARADIGM INITIATIVE and CIPESA; the panel is moderated by Ms. DIOUF Astou, Legal Officer in charge of the Research Department within JUNCTION.

Invited to give his point of view on the Policies implemented by States to fight against fake news, Dr. AFFAGNON is of the opinion that these policies suggest that there is an awareness which is nevertheless timid in this fight against these phenomena; not without regretting that fakes news are used by political actors to discredit their opponents. As an example, Benin has adopted a digital code that is supposed to fight against the dissemination of fake news but in practice, it is more a means of framing the political game.

Moreover, on the side of Internet without borders, the fight against fake news is done through various activities including sessions, radio broadcasts, writing columns, writing and publishing



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documents and advocacy. And in this fight against these phenomena, they sometimes work with WEB companies such as Google and Facebook to ensure a better protection of users through concerted actions.

In interactions with the audience, it was suggested to Facebook to see how local content could be moderated, although the subject is delicate, in order to better fight against misinformation.

As for Ms. Balkissa Idé Siddo, she shared in her intervention the actions of Facebook in the fight against fake news, especially in this period of pandemic that has finally demonstrated the importance of connectivity on public health. Thus, Facebook has invested to better fight against viral information, allowing people to stay connected to be in contact with their colleagues, their families in times of containment for example. Their action has also included the removal of content that does not meet the standards of the facebook community, the reduction of the visibility of false information; the verification of information; the creation of a Covid information center; etc.

In this fight, Facebook has worked closely with the WHO; state governments through the Ministries of Health to whom advertising coupons have been offered.

Presentation by Ms. DIALLO Idiatou, Journalist and doctoral student in law; the first presentation "Journalism, access to information and COVID19 " was structured around four axes.

First, the impact of COVID19 on information professionals. The pandemic has had a negative impact on them. These were perceptible through the lack of equipment, adequate material for teleworking; the existence of legal restrictions to exercise because of curfews, travel restrictions; complaints, intimidation, threats, arrests under the pretext of spreading false news; physical or verbal attacks; etc. The impact of the pandemic on information professionals was also perceptible through the lack of equipment, adequate material for teleworking; the existence of legal restrictions to exercise because of curfews, travel restrictions; complaints, intimidation, threats, arrests under the pretext of spreading false news; physical or verbal attacks; etc. In Niger, for example, a journalist was arrested on the pretext that he had broadcast false news.

Second, threats to the public's right to access information, which has been strongly affected by the closure of media outlets; obstruction in the collection of, and access to, information; and Internet cuts noted in Ethiopia and Egypt, for example, even though access to information is a fundamental right.

Also, the contribution of the media in the fight against the pandemic, perceptible through publications, awareness, building a sense of patriotism around state authorities.



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Finally, initiatives to support journalists in the fight against COVID19 , whose most visible actions at this level range from the issuance of travel permits, financial support to advocacy to end intimidation of journalists.

The second presentation on COVID19 and fake news: What mechanism for verifying disinformation? is developed by Mr. DIOKH Emmanuel Maurice, Africtivist, Digital Lawyer and Internet Without Borders Senegal Manager.

In his presentation, he defines fake news as false news, infox or misleading information; misleading information disseminated with the aim of manipulating or deceiving the public.

Then, he returned to the fundamental reasons that justify the fight against these false news. These include the importance of information, especially in the context of a pandemic, which can be vital.

In addition to this, the panelist shared some good practices that can significantly contribute to the fight against infox. These include: checking information (source, date of publication, consulting links); visiting institutional pages or sites; etc.

And, considering that the Internet is a community space, he invited everyone to share these good practices in order to make the Internet safer and more reliable.

Finally, the third presentation on COVID19 , between the fight against fakes news and the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression, presented by Mr. NDIAYE Djibril, PhD student in private law at UCAD, lecturer at the Higher Institute of Management, was an opportunity to return to certain worrying aspects, particularly the consequences of the lack of legal definition of legal concepts or expressions. This is the case of the notion of false news, whose non-existence of definition in the legal texts in force could be a Pandora's box, a path to police abuses. It is also the case of the powers granted to the investigating judge to withdraw an illicit or manifestly illicit content even though these notions are not defined in the texts. This deficiency can also serve as a pretext for the violation of citizens' fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression.

Following the interventions of the panellists, several questions were asked, to which appropriate answers were brought as well by the communicators as by Quémal Affagnon and Balkissa Idé Sidde.

At the end of the session, Mr. Ababacar Diop, as President of Junction, thanked CIPESA and Paradigm Initiative for their funding. He also made a point of thanking Dr. Quemal AFFAGNON speaking from Barcelona and Mrs. Balkissa Ide Sidde speaking from Dubai,



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whose contributions were of great importance for the participants. Finally, he thanked the participants who kindly responded to the invitation of Junction.

**Done in Dakar on September 29, 2020**  
**Report presented by Mr. DIÉMÉ Simon**