



Making Sense of #FakeNews and #CovidBillionaires

By Constance Smith and Jörg Wiegratz



As parts of the world begin to deal with a second wave of COVID-19 infections, it has become apparent that it is not just the virus that is not going away, but related outbreaks of “fake news” and allegations of fraudulent activity have also persisted.

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” [lamented Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#), the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), back in February. He suggested that the parallel outbreak of misinformation “spreads faster and more easily than this virus”. Since then, all manner of dubious stories about coronavirus have been circulating around the world, along with fake cures, fake testing kits, imitation drugs and rising reports of COVID-related fraudulent actions, from scams and price inflations to [bogus companies](#) and accusations of fraud [along transnational chains of medical suppliers and subcontractors](#).

Fakes, forgeries and fraud are certainly not new phenomena, and nor are they limited to the current pandemic. Fake news exists in a [wider ecosystem](#) of disinformation (deliberately intended to deceive), misinformation (false information that is mistakenly circulated), [clickbait](#) and propaganda. Though so [old that it predates the printing press](#), fake news has been of rising concern in the era of social media and since Donald Trump popularised the term by using it as a [criticism of any reporting he didn’t like](#).

As the 2020 pandemic escalated, powerful organisations, such as [WHO](#) and [Interpol](#) reported an increase in fake news and fake medical products. Though the corruption monitoring organisation Transparency International has [noted](#) the increased likelihood of fraud in the wake of the huge influx of COVID-19 donor funds, this is arguably a continuity and extension of the last three decades of rising economic trickery and fraud during the neoliberal period.

Along with other researchers, our work has shown how, rather than reducing economic malfeasance and increasing efficiency, the years of economic deregulation, privatisation and marketisation that underlie neoliberalism have actually seen an [increase](#) in instances of [fraud](#) and [fakery](#), rather than the reverse. [Observers](#) have also noted that the prevalence of fake news has increased alongside rising socio-economic inequality generated by neoliberalism, and the forms of political populism that it has sparked. Notably, this “age of fraud” has seen an accompanying emphasis on transparency, accountability and proliferating anti-fraud measures that, far from helping, [may have further contributed](#) to the fraud pandemic.

Nevertheless, coronavirus allows us to consider these long-standing concerns in new ways. In particular, as we sift through the growing pile of allegations and counter-allegations about COVID fakes, fraudsters and liars, we are interested in how COVID-related fake news might help to shed light on what anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith has called “[cultures of corruption](#)”. That is, how debates about corruption, fraud and fakes can have different meanings and effects in different socio-political contexts around the globe and what the root causes might be. Whilst recognising COVID-related fraud as a global phenomenon, including in the countries we come from and live in ([Germany](#) and the [UK](#)), here we examine cases from Kenya, where [one of us](#) has recently conducted research on “fake buildings” and other “fake debates”. We start with two stories that went viral on Kenyan social media earlier this year.

Brenda and Benson

In April, Brenda Cherotich was trending on Twitter. She was considered to be COVID-19 Patient One in Kenya, having flown back from the United States via London. After three weeks of isolation and recuperation, she was medically deemed to have recovered.

Brenda and another recovered patient who had been identified through tracing Brenda’s contacts were invited to meet President Uhuru Kenyatta, and their discussion was [broadcast on TV](#). Kenyans on Twitter quickly exploded, not so much with sympathy for Brenda, but with vilification: she was accused of being “fake news”. [Despite vigorous official denials](#), numerous stories circulated that Brenda appeared in the media as a government PR exercise, that she was an actress and not a real COVID patient, that she’d been paid by the government to share her fake case to enable Kenya to access newly available donor funds for fighting the coronavirus.

In June, a new Twitter storm broke around Benson Musungu, the National Youth Coordinator for the opposition party ODM. He [tweeted](#) from hospital to say that he had been receiving treatment for COVID-19, and had been admitted to the ICU. Musungu was widely lampooned, and his illness dismissed as fake news. He was rumoured to have received a large pay-out (some said from the opposition, some said from the government) to “go public” about his case in order to persuade Kenyans of the dangers of COVID-19, allegations which he strenuously [denied](#).

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How to make sense of these two cases? Firstly, they suggest that some Kenyans remain sceptical about the genuineness and gravity of the novel coronavirus, to the extent that the government would pay people to convince the public of its reality. That COVID-19 is a “fake” disease is one of the recurring themes of the fake news “[infodemic](#)” that has proliferated alongside the global fight against the virus.

During discussions with Nairobi residents in recent months, it has emerged that there remain at least some Kenyans who are convinced that COVID is either a fake disease or hugely inflated as an issue by the government (or related authorities), a situation also reported by [the BBC](#). And indeed it does seem that, as yet, coronavirus in [Kenya has not reached the severity](#) that many predicted back in March. This makes it a little easier to understand why some people could believe that Brenda and Benson were fake patients or government stooges. If Brenda and Benson were really paid to promote a government message about coronavirus, then they would not be the only ones: it emerged in August that the UK government, for example, [was paying reality TV stars](#) and social media influencers to endorse its public health campaigns. But beyond this, what are the circumstances that would make these stories believable enough to gain traction with a sizeable section of the Kenyan public?

One reason fake news goes viral is when it seems to offer people an explanation, particularly in times of uncertainty or anxiety. The most effective stories are not completely fictitious but are grounded in the possible: they perhaps spin off from a widely accepted narrative or recent mainstream news story. In other words, they make sense to these readers in a given context. In Kenya, as elsewhere, that context is a considerable [lack of public trust in the motives and actions of state institutions](#).

One recurring theme of the Twitter storm around Brenda and Benson was that many commenters made a link between the phenomena of fake news and alleged government dishonesty and corruption. The stories accuse the government of not only peddling fake news, but also of mishandling official funds. And yet, the denials in turn also dismissed the stories as fake news, rebuffed by the individuals involved as well as government officials.

As each side accuses the other, do we just declare an impasse? Or is there something to glean here about the particular character of popular critique in Kenya, and the interpretations of financial management and public politics that allow such narratives to take root? We suggest that by looking at the claims of COVID-related fakery, fraud and corruption and the context from which they emerge, we can go beyond the utilitarian guidelines of international anti-fraud institutions and anti-fake news initiatives, whose statements [tend to revert](#) to simplistic binaries of truth/lies, genuine/fake, accountable/corrupt. Exhortations from agencies like the United Nations to “take care before you share” do little to get to the root of why certain (mis)information goes viral and how it is embedded in particular moral and political-economic landscapes. Instead, we suggest, we should look to how such stories seek to challenge moral and political authority, revealing deeper anxieties about absence of trust, the conduct of the powerful, personal gain and what forms of misconduct a global pandemic might facilitate.

The economy of a pandemic

Since April, Kenya has been the recipient of huge sums in loans and grants from various international agencies to address the socio-economic as well as health impacts of COVID-19. This included \$739 million credit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), \$50 million from the [World Bank](#), a total of \$162 million from [the European Union \(EU\)](#), as well as further disbursements from [WHO](#). As this money flooded in, there had been growing allegations from [the media](#) and civil society organisations about procurement mismanagement, unqualified companies winning tenders,

and inflated costs of COVID-related goods and services.

Meanwhile, some Kenyans have claimed they are not seeing the benefits of these funds and that there is little to be seen on the ground. In late August, Nairobi's Uhuru Park was the location of two demonstrations. The first marked the start of a Kenyan [doctors' strike](#) over lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), non-payment of salaries and substandard working conditions in public hospitals that unions said were putting doctors at risk of contracting COVID-19. (There has been a flow of substandard PPE and [fake equipment](#) in Kenya, some of which [carry dubious safety marks or have been through mismanaged quality control procedures](#).)

The second protest was mobilised online around the hashtag #arrestcovid19thieves to protest what the organisers claimed was massive corruption and misappropriation of coronavirus funds in Kenya. "We are tired of an endless stream of news detailing how much money is being lost in the emergency response efforts. This money could be used in a better way to fight the pandemic," said organiser [Wanjeri Nderu](#).

The same week, an exposé by the *Nation* newspaper claimed that COVID-19 had "[opened the floodgates for looting](#)", which led to [investigations of misconduct and senior leadership suspensions](#) at the Kenya Medical Supplies Authority (KEMSA). As accusations of graft and misconduct escalated, many Kenyans came together behind the hashtag #covidbillionaires to share their anger and frustration. By September, there were state investigations ongoing into the "[KEMSA scandal](#)", with updates about the allegations and investigations into COVID-corruption becoming almost daily news.

Kenya is not unique in this. The UN [has acknowledged](#) that we are likely to see an increase in fraud and mismanagement in 2020, particularly because donors and governments have "relaxed safeguards by trading compliance, oversight and accountability for speed of response and achievement of rapid impact, thus leading to the creation of significant opportunities for corruption to thrive". This seems to have occurred in the UK, [where the Good Law Project has initiated proceedings alleging breaches to procurement law](#), which the government defends as emergency response.

Globally, [WHO](#) and [Interpol](#) have also reported a growing volume of fake treatments: uncertainty about the new virus and how it spreads, as well as lack of access to healthcare, has made people susceptible to supposed "cures" for coronavirus. False remedies that have been circulating in Kenya range from the relatively benign, such as [boiling onions with lemon](#), to the more risky, including a range of herbal treatments, to the downright lethal.

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The rumour that drinking bleach protects against infection has gathered strength worldwide. In Uganda, an [American pastor distributed a "miracle drink"](#) containing industrial bleach to 50,000 Ugandans, while in the US, Donald Trump has [disturbingly suggested](#) injecting disinfectant as a COVID-19 treatment.

Sometimes it is not easy to distinguish what is genuine and what is counterfeit. As the world went into lockdown, the vast global supply chain feeding the pharmaceutical industry began to unravel.

With registered companies operating at reduced capacity, supplies of raw ingredients for all kinds of medicines diminished and prices rocketed. [This led to a spike](#) in drugs where key ingredients were substituted with unapproved or illegal others, or which made false claims. For example, a drug circulating in the Democratic Republic of Congo [was allegedly manufactured in Belgium](#) by “Brown and Burk Pharmaceutical limited”. However, Brown and Burk, who are registered in the UK, said they had “nothing to do with this medicine. We don’t manufacture this drug, it’s fake”

Taking this into account, even if the particular cases of Brenda and Benson may not be accurate, the way the stories connect fake news to corruption does ring true with at least some in the Kenyan context, where a swirl of stories and rumours about fakes, counterfeits, corruption and fraud circulate and overlap. Given the emerging scandals and allegations of graft, it is perhaps less surprising that many Kenyans have little trust in official management of the pandemic. Nor does it seem so strange that some could believe that the Kenyan government might pay for good PR about patient recovery to demonstrate to donors a continued need for funds.

Addressing the symptoms, not the causes

So what next? Recognising that fake news, fraud and corruption can have serious, even deadly, effects (WHO has likened corruption around procurement of PPE to [“murder”](#)) what has been the response? Firstly, we suggest, many of the measures proposed by international agencies address only the symptoms rather than the root causes of the phenomena. Secondly, unlike the stories of Brenda and Benson, they tend to treat fake news and fraud as very separate issues, masking the ways they might be rooted in similar public concerns.

In response to the fake news infodemic, WHO has advocated the need for fact-checking and [“mythbusting”](#). Enlisting internet giants, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, as well as the news agency AFP, their project analyses search results and filters out content that they regard as unfounded medical opinion or fake news. Similarly, [BBC Africa](#) and [German state media](#) have launched fact-checking and misinformation services about COVID-19. Such initiatives have in turn been [scrutinised by other parties](#) who are sceptical about the mix of power, interests or politics that could be at play, and instead offer alternative analyses.

Rather than addressing this scepticism, powerful institutions continue to claim their impartiality: [A spokesperson from UNESCO](#) stated that their approach to fake news was to increase the supply of “truthful information”. “We are underlining that governments, in order to counter rumours, should be more transparent, and proactively disclose more data, in line with Right to Information laws and policies. Access to information from official sources is very important for credibility in this crisis.”

In a similar vein, Kenyan journalist Waihiga Mwaura, who has been writing a series of “Letters from Kenya” for BBC Africa, [has observed](#) in relation to fake news in Kenya that “more emphasis needs to be placed on answering the questions of people, and encouraging collaboration with the government in order to save lives. Once people understand the basic facts they will become the best amplifiers of the core messages within their communities”.

What these responses have in common is the emphasis on facts and information, supposing that fake news only works because the public doesn’t have enough access to [data](#). They also seem to assume that the public is unaware of political [“spin”](#), information management or even the interest of [international agencies in covertly influencing online opinion](#). The measures also assume that government involvement will lead to better health communication and that the public will circulate officially approved material.

All of this presumes a scenario in which there is a high (or at least reasonable) level of trust between

governments and the public. But what if this is not the case? What if a citizen suspects that government officials (and their favoured firms) are diverting or mishandling funds intended to provide essential healthcare? Is the citizen likely to believe the authorities' statements on what is true or not true in relation to the coronavirus?

On the global trade in counterfeit medicines, Interpol's [Operation Pangea](#), in collaboration with a mix of state agencies around the world, is developing a public information campaign on the dangers of buying pharmaceuticals from unregulated online sources. The OECD has issued [a policy brief](#) stating, "Governments need to ensure the legitimate and safe provenance of pharmaceutical products, both online and in pharmacies, so that citizens can trust the medicines they use." Similarly, a [BBC News](#) investigation into the pharmaceutical industry during the pandemic reported that "the circulation of fake and dangerous medicines would only increase unless governments around the world present a united front".

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But once again, things are more complicated than such powerhouse institutions suggest. Crucially, these public declarations again presume that there is a trustworthy state system in place for monitoring the quality of goods and products. And yet state agencies in various countries are themselves linked to allegations about unknown provenance and unenforced quality standards, including in the UK where medical supplies [contracts have been issued to dormant companies](#) that seem not to exist, as well as the German government's [implication in the VW emissions scandal](#), and their alleged failure to ensure standards were enforced.

In Kenya, the official Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) is [embroiled in accusations](#) that it is involved in fraudulent quality control testing of PPE, with claims that shadowy "cartels" are pulling the strings to gain favourable reports for their substandard products. Such claims are not new: a 2018 investigation by [the Nation newspaper](#) (since taken offline) found that KEBS had been running a counterfeiting scam of its own, faking the certification mark that authorises items for sale and making it impossible to tell which products were genuine and which were not.

On fraud and financial misconduct, the UN and Transparency International have each circulated recommendations for anti-fraud measures (AFM) for donors. These emphasise the need for [clear communication strategies, transparency initiatives and preventive safeguards in procurement](#), including [the use of technology](#) for greater accountability and more comprehensive auditing and reporting mechanisms.

Transparency International advocates [open contracting](#) as one model for increasing accountability in procurement. Their "Open Contracting for Health" model has been deployed in five countries, including Kenya, and according to the project leads, in the context of COVID-19 they are now seeing "the results of efforts to increase the transparency of emergency procurement and combat corruption. Transparency International chapters, including [Kenya](#)...are tracking financial commitments to the COVID-19 response to ensure that promises are kept, and money is actually used to tackle the pandemic".

Kenya is here held up as a best-practice example of emergency health procurement, which to some members of the public might be surprising given the current local news. It is also interesting to note

the overlap in vocabulary between measures proposed to address fake news and AFMs. The emphasis is again on clear communication, sharing transparent and accurate data, and use of technology. This language of transparency, accountability, auditing and efficiency has become familiar with the liberalisation of economies around the world, and particularly in relation to neoliberal lending and financing. Yet [research](#) suggests these approaches may be of limited value in addressing the deep-rooted challenges of fraud and corruption, and that AFMs themselves are regularly claimed to be vectors of fraud. Likewise, [anthropologists have noted](#) how, in the same era that “transparency” has become a watchword for good governance, the inner workings of authority can nevertheless remain opaque. In such circumstances, popular suspicions of power, such as conspiracy theories or fake news, can become ways of making sense of things.

Rather than reducing economic malpractice, [research suggests](#) that economic liberalisation has actually seen consistently high levels and sometimes increasing instances of fraud across various regions and sectors. The rise in AFMs in Africa and elsewhere gives the impression of industrious efforts to combat such fraudulent activities, and indeed many genuine efforts exist. But underneath, various fraud-active state and business actors continue to find ways to circumvent AFMs and thus often the problems persist.

In light of this, AFMs and their calls for greater transparency and accountability can seem more like a sticking plaster, “[masking the problem rather than addressing the root causes](#)” of fraud. This is partly because the technocratic approach favoured by AFM agencies [does not take into account](#) the fraud-conducive moral economy of neoliberal capitalism and the particular socio-historical and political terrain from which fraudulent activities (and AFMs) take shape.

In Kenya, researchers have rightly noted that graft has long history, in part going back to colonial land expropriations and other forms of dispossession that meant [the very idea of the Kenyan state was birthed from a colonial system that abused the public it was meant to serve](#). The vested interests of [public office continued during the regime of President Moi](#) and beyond. In a process Joe Kobuthi has described as the “[bureaucratisation of corruption](#)”, leaders adopted a tough anti-graft stance in public, establishing numerous anti-corruption committees, policies and taskforces, but economic deceptions persisted.

Insights from theorist [Achille Mbembe](#) are highly instructive here. In his book *On the Postcolony*, he puts forward a theory of “doubling”, arguing that the politics of structural adjustment and neoliberal reform in Africa, which since the 1990s has seen the implementation of new regimes of privatisation, audits and accountability across the continent, has in fact increased opportunities for opacity, profiteering, and the extraction of resources. He argues that while on the surface, reliance on symbols of democracy, authenticity or transparency – such as election results, quality certification marks, procurement contracts, or audit trails – has increased, in fact trust in their efficacy has been hollowed out. We are left with a situation where a surface veneer of compliance has become increasingly detached from meaningful action, leaving a space for all kinds of fraudulent and counterfeiting activities to take shape. At a practical level, this can lead to “state capture”, or the repurposing of state institutions for private gain, which some researchers suggest can [entrench corruption as indictments and prosecutions become weaponised](#).

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For many citizens, understanding this landscape is complicated, as different actors can seem to be working [beneath the surface, but always out of sight](#). In this context, debates over whether an issue is “fake news” or not can, for some, be part of wider anxieties about what is “really” going on. [As further research has explored](#), in Kenya debates about fakes are more nuanced than just detecting whether something is counterfeit or genuine. After all, consumers often choose “fake” goods [for cost or convenience](#), even if they are known to be less durable or of poorer quality. Instead, “fake” can become a term of critique and commentary, associating certain activities, products and politics with immoral action or suspect forms of wealth accumulation. In an article titled “Kenya, land of fake goods, fake leaders, fake smiles”, [Dennis Otieno](#) noted that in Kenya, “you must be very cautious, lest you pay a fake owner”. In such circumstances, everything is entangled in processes of doubling: opaque and potentially counterfeit, but nevertheless reliant on symbols of formality. Here, fake debates can be understood as some citizens’ attempts to understand more deep-seated deceptions at play in the moral and political system they live within.

In this way, anxieties about the “faked” cases of Brenda and Benson reveal public concerns not just about veracity, but more broadly about the agendas and operations of the powerful, self-enrichment and what is going on beneath the surface. In a country where [state officials repeatedly cannot account for the disappearance of significant sums](#), and where corruption is believed by many to be endemic across all levels, it becomes more understandable why some Kenyans might start to look for [#covidbillionaires](#) behind all kinds of news stories, reasoning that coronavirus is simply another façade for concealing financial malpractice.

To decry a story as fake news is not to dismiss it as unreal, but to try to identify its doubleness; that its surface claims might be enabling other kinds of actions to occur underneath. Whether or not we believe them, by bringing fake news and corruption into one frame, the stories of Brenda and Benson indicate how the moral and political climate of fraud and fakery are deeply entangled.

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