

New threat to the fight against Aids



Fighting fake news with, well, news.

PICTURE: REUTERS

Fake news is emerging as a scourge; influencing, among others, presidential elections and share prices. Over the past few days, a fake news story doing the rounds is aimed at deliberately undermining the fight against Aids. Pretending to be genuine, an image of a newspaper article with a photo of eminent scientist, Robert Gallo in his laboratory claims he created HIV, the virus that causes Aids, as "a secret weapon to wipe out the African race". While the story is, without doubt, simply nonsense and lies, it plays on the fanciful imagination of those who persist in wanting to believe conspiracy theories about the West trying to destroy Africa.

Fake news is not new – just a reincarnation of what was previously called "propaganda" or "disinformation". What is new, however, is the way the internet and social media has given these age-old enemies of the truth an opportunity to spread to every corner of the globe almost instantaneously. These platforms provide an unfettered avenue to spread lies and falsehoods without identification or consequences for the purveyors of fake news.

The role of news in society is to inform the public using facts and provide people with reliable, important information. This role is being threatened by the concept of fake

news, which by definition are articles that are not genuine in their content and are a hoax. The topic of fake news came into focus on various global media platforms last year – propaganda on the US election results and untruths about South Africa's finance minister that made sensational headlines. Of deep concern is the detrimental impact fake news on health issues can have on the well-being and lives of millions of people, particularly the poor and vulnerable in society.

Fake news is particularly dangerous when reports on HIV/Aids proliferate falsehoods about the pandemic and puts our society at greater risk. South Africa is in a particularly precarious position, given that the Thabo Mbeki era influenced sectors of the South African population to consider and, in some instances, believe outrageous conspiracies on HIV and Aids. Aids denialism and far-fetched claims of prevention and treatment for HIV/Aids have made the South African population more susceptible to misinformation about the pandemic. Indeed, misinformation starts with elected government officials and filters to fake news stories that are perpetuated through online media websites, blogs and social media platforms.

An example of inaccurate

Fake online stories undermine progress made in fighting the pandemic, write **Professor Salim Abdool Karim and Aisha Abdool Karim**

news, conveying falsehoods, was an article published in The Star in August, titled "Aids/HIV drug 'can damage liver and cause death'", on how anti-retrovirals (ARVs), drugs used to treat HIV positive people could kill patients. The story has not been contextualised and has the potential to cause grave alarm. This is worrying, given that there are over 7 million people living with HIV in South Africa, with about 3.4 million people on ARVs. Stories such as these have the power, if believed and shared, to foster an environment that endangers the lives of millions of people living with HIV.

The underlying problem here is a misunderstanding of the facts and information being misrepresented. In the above example, the article about the side effects of ARVs was based on a study that was under way by researchers at the University of Cape Town.

The study found that Efavirenz, an ARV commonly used to treat HIV in South Africa, caused liver damage in some patients. However, the article which referenced that patients "are at risk of grave liver damage and death" glossed over the fact that the side effect was uncommon. Aside from that, if patients experience any symptoms that are cause for concern, they can easily switch to an alternative drug.

With fake news stories like the one about Dr Gallo creating the Aids virus, it could have a profound impact on human lives, if believers decided to stop their medication. For those aware of the well-known fact that HIV has been shown to have existed for almost a century, long before Dr Gallo was even born, they would recognise the story as ludicrous, but to those not familiar with the scientific evidence showing that HIV emanated from



Director of the Institute of Human Virology, Dr Robert Gallo, co-discoverer of the Aids virus, poses in the Medical Biotechnology Centre in Baltimore, May 2001.

PICTURE: AP

African Green Monkeys and was being transmitted in Kinshasa in the 1920s before spreading along newly laid railway lines in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

These fake claims about the origins of HIV only serve to draw the focus away from the reality of the HIV/Aids pandemic, such as the increasing number of adolescent girls and young women being infected with HIV in South Africa. In this context, distractions with falsehoods undermine current research under way to develop an HIV vaccine and new ways to help women protect themselves from HIV.

Unfortunately, these are not the only cases where false information has been spread about topics relating to HIV/Aids. In fact, the problem is common and the Human Rights Campaign has partnered with the Prevention Access Campaign to launch an "Accuracy Watchdog". The aim of this laudable initiative is to monitor news media for any misinformation being spread about HIV/Aids, focusing on PrEP and "undetectability" of the virus.

There aren't many initiatives similar to this one, which means it is easy to publish false stories and for



"Fake news", which has gained a lot of attention for its role in swaying the 2016 presidential election, has fascinated researchers for some time.

PICTURE: AP

misinformation to go undetected by the public. While we live in a time of social media and ease of access to information online, it is important to note the downsides to such an environment. The current online landscape allows everyone a space to have their say and state their opinions, an important facet to freedom of speech and freedom of expression. However, it is important to note that an opinion should be supported by facts and is not a means through which to spread misinformation. In a time where citizen journalism is on the rise, it is the responsibility of the individual to be

circumspect and refrain from baseless content that can have serious ramifications.

It is essential for the public to filter news thoroughly and carefully assess the reliability and reputation of the source, before judging the authenticity of the news story. It is in the public's best interest to ensure they are not lured in by sensationalised and "clickbait" news on health issues. If not, they are in danger of perpetuating harmful myths about HIV.

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State remains tight-lipped over rhino poaching stats



A ranger gestures before performing a postmortem on a rhino after it was killed for its horn by poachers in the Kruger National Park. Minister of State Security, David Mahlobo, inset, was implicated in trafficking rhino horn late last year.

PICTURE: REUTERS
PICTURE: NOKUTHULA MBATHA

ADAM CRUISE

THE Minister of Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, has been tight-lipped about rhino poaching statistics for 2016, amid claims of rhino-horn trafficking within her own government.

Minister of State Security David Mahlobo, who runs the country's intelligence services, was implicated in trafficking rhino horn late last year.

The Department of Environmental Affairs has not published rhino-poaching statistics since September. By then, 702 rhino had been poached nationally.

The department has failed to provide any further statistics on the carnage continuing throughout the country. Continuous data, say conservationists, is important to the protection of the species.

Allison Thomson, founder of Outraged South African Citizens Against Rhino Poaching (Oscap), believes the department may be "stalling to let this whole Mahlobo issue die down a bit".

According to Eleanor Momborg, acting director for external communication at the environmental affairs department, the minister will be releasing the statistics for 2016 "in due course".

The department's Albi Modise last week again confirmed that no date had been set for the release of the statistics.

Although the poaching number at the Kruger National Park last year dropped by 204 compared with 2015, it's still



Minister Edna Molewa has not published rhino poaching statistics since September.

PICTURE: NTSWE MOKOENA

a significant amount of dead rhinos.

Rhino poaching has shown a dramatic increase elsewhere, notably KwaZulu-Natal, where at least 159 rhinos were killed in 2016, compared to 104 during the same period in 2015.

Provincial rhino security head Cedric Coetzee said last year: "There are influxes or displacement of poaching from Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and so forth. So the syndicates are getting to use the whole country rather than staying in a single area."

Nationally, there appears to be a downward trend in the number of rhino poached, but with the spike in poaching in KZN, this trend may be nullified.

The citizens' group, which gleans independent statistics from verified sources or from newspaper articles and social media, suggests the number of poached rhino is staggeringly high. Thomson calculates at least 1 105 were killed in 2016, a

figure not significantly different from 1 175 in 2015.

Another worrying statistic is the revelation that conviction rates are low despite an increase in arrests for the year.

The minister had claimed a successful conviction rate of 78%. But the problem lies with the minister's definition of conviction rates.

Her percentage only takes into account those cases that went to trial and where there was some form of verdict. Her evaluation does not compare the number of prosecutions with the number of arrests.

For example, in 2015 there were 317 arrests, but only 54 were prosecuted. In other words, only 17% of those arrested led to prosecutions in 2015.

In the Kruger Park, suspects are taken to Skukuza Magistrate's Court.

"A total of 25 to 30 matters is on that court roll every Wednesday," said State prosecutor Isbet Erwee. "Some days, we have more than 50 accused in the dock."

As a result, trials cannot proceed, and extra court dates have to be arranged, often with the perpetrators walking free.

Erwee is on record saying: "Arrests and convictions did not seem to scare off poachers. 'This is a crime of greed,'" she said, "kingpins pay a lot, and the business has become a fashionable one."

"Although many suspects are killed during contacts or end up losing limbs, the lure of money is stronger than the fear of death."