

Final Report: “What’s on WhatsApp?”

By Africa Check and Volume with the support of the International Fact-Checking Network

Assessment and evaluation

“What’s Crap on WhatsApp?” started off as an experiment. Could a fact-checking organisation distribute a podcast as a voice-note on WhatsApp? The idea was untested but the basics were in place. Did it work? Absolutely.

We now have a better understanding of the types of misinformation being circulated on WhatsApp in South Africa. Through the WhatsApp line, Africa Check was able to solicit and catalogue submissions. These were fact-checked by our researchers, using our standard methodology.

We also now know that there is a market - and huge demand - for a WhatsApp-based audio show. Volume’s innovative approach to podcasting allowed the show to be sent directly to subscribers on WhatsApp. There was no need to download a podcasting app or visit a website to check for the latest episode.

Key Performance Indicators

A number of key performance indicators were set at the beginning of the grant period. All the indicators were met, and in some cases surpassed. They are evaluated below:

- Increase subscribers to between 3,000 and 5,000

In July 2019 (the first month of the Fact Forward grant) the show had 1,414 subscribers. As of the end of June 2020, the number had increased to 5,413.

The largest factor that drove subscriber numbers was the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of subscribers increased from 1,718 at the end of January 2020 to 5,413 at the end of June 2020. During that period the show was largely focused on fact-checking Covid-19 misinformation on WhatsApp. There was a clear demand for accurate information on WhatsApp during this time.

The show was also distributed as a traditional podcast. It was downloaded 7,135 times between August 2019 and June 2020.

- Release a minimum of 12 episodes in 12 months.

Over a 12-month period, a total of 19 shows were sent to subscribers. A list of the shows, air dates and topics fact-checked can be found in the appendix.

The initial plan was to distribute one episode of the show every month. This was done from July to December 2019. However, it became apparent that this schedule was not frequent enough for people to remember the show and submit content to fact-check.

In the beginning of 2020, we increased the number of shows to two per month. This allowed us to respond to submissions quicker and keep the project in subscribers' minds.

- Fact-check 48 pieces of WhatsApp crap

Fifty-five WhatsApp messages were fact-checked during the 12 month period. Of these, 47 were incorrect (85.5%) and eight were correct (15.4%).

- Produce a case study and trend analysis

A case study of starting "What's Crap on WhatsApp?", including a trend analysis, was produced.

- Produce a manual on how to set up a WhatsApp voice-note fact-checking show

A step-by-step manual was produced in English, French and Spanish.

Supplemental Information

An archive of episodes can be found here: <https://www.whatscrap.africa>

- **Selected news coverage**

[News24: Africa Check wins \\$50K for its 'What's Crap on WhatsApp?' service](#) (5 June 2019)

[Media Online: South Africa: The WhatsApp 'news' sharing nation](#) (18 June 2019)

[The Economist: How WhatsApp is used and misused in Africa](#) (18 July 2019)

[NPR: New Podcast Targets The 'Crap' On WhatsApp](#) (26 January 2020)

[American Press Institute: Need to Know](#) (1 June 2020)

- **Presentation at conferences and workshops**

[Radio Days: The largest radio conference in Africa](#) (5 July 2019)

[JamLab: How to make WhatsApp work for media](#) (16 July 2019)

[South African Media Innovation Program: Publishing for WhatsApp? Here are three great ways to do it](#) (21 May 2020)

[The Evolution of Fact-Checking on WhatsApp](#) (June 2020)

- **Response from subscribers**

From episode four we began asking subscribers to send an emoji if they enjoyed the show. This boosted engagement and became a popular aspect of the show.

Responses from "What's Crap on WhatsApp?" subscribers

Emoji	Episode number	Number received
❤️	4	30
💩	5	28
🐍	6	29
🚗	7	25
✈️	8	31
🌿	9	35
👤	11	32
📺	12	24
❤️ or 🐾	13	42
🐾 or 🍷	14	35
Any emoji	15	70
🛒	16	68
😬	17	69
🐾	20	50

In episode 15, we asked 4,000 subscribers what they thought of the show. We received 70 responses. Below is a selection:

- “This has been very helpful thanks, I am an admin on a couple of groups and it is very useful to know the correct steps. Much appreciated”
- “Thanx so much for all of the valuable info u guys research and post”
- “Thank you for answering fake questions so well. 5 for you today. Thank goodness I didn't repost any of these. I have become quite circumspect when it comes to reposting stuff. Have a great weekend.”
- “Your service is fantastic. It's my impression that you find your info from reliable sources, so I tend to trust what you say (although I still like to double check myself). Yours is a voice of sanity in a wilderness of wild allegations.”
- “Thank you so much for thoroughly investigating viral fake news & that has stopped my WhatsApp group members from sending unverified [info]”
- “Great stuff team, this helped our company and employees so much”
- “Having a lot of fun with this show. I hope you[r] subscribers grow”
- “Thank you VERY much for your service!!! Some people believe each and every bit of BS coming their way and it is sometimes difficult to find credible info refuting their outrageous, unscientific crap. Thanks from a very happy Izelle. Keep healthy and safe, all people at WCoW!”

- “Your messages are very helpful, I wish you were able to get out a lot more because we are inundated”
- “You are doing an amazing and important job. Very grateful”
- “Thought as much. Thanks so much for doing the research. Appreciated.”
- “Thanks and noted, appreciate the civil engagement you’ve tasked yourselves with to ensure only accurate information is shared”
- “I really appreciate the valuable work that you're doing. I especially find the sound bytes useful since I only have WhatsApp data and I'm struggling to get online for anything else.”

In the 18th episode, we asked subscribers to rate the show. We received 23 responses: 20 hearts (♥), 2 thumbs-up (👍) and one thumbs down (👎).

Next Steps

The show currently has over 5,400 subscribers. Due to this it is becoming incredibly difficult to manage. Everything about the show is done manually. There is no automation and no chat bot. It is only a matter of time until it is not feasible to add more subscribers and manage their submissions.

The existing subscribers will continue to receive the show via WhatsApp. However, we are considering shifting the show’s promotion to encourage people to listen via a traditional podcasting app. Users will still be able to submit content through WhatsApp however. Exploring a partnership with a radio station who could broadcast the show is also an option.

Funding has been secured until the end of December 2020. Funding opportunities for 2021 are being explored.

Appendix

Date aired	Messages fact-checked
5 July 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No, Vodacom representatives are not scamming people at shopping centres. 2. Is a brand of juices called Evolution poisonous? 3. Using syringes of pool acid to blind drivers at robots is a hoax. 4. No, criminals are not putting magnets on car brake disks in an attempt to hijack people.
2 August 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. WhatsApp is not going to be shut down. 2. No, those who worked between 1990 and 2019 do not have a right to “withdraw R30,000”. 3. Yes, takeaway delivery men are being robbed, but only in a specific area.
4 September 2019	<p>[LINK] Four viral images falsely linked to xenophobic violence in South Africa</p>
6 September 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No, criminals are not handing people cards laced with drugs to smell in parking lots. 2. Are deadly drinks being handed out at robots? 3. Criminals are not egging car windscreens so that the driver’s vision is blurred. 4. HOAX: Crying children are being used to lure unsuspecting victims to criminals.
20 September 2019	<p>[VIDEO] A viral WhatsApp message warned South African parents that children are being tricked into drinking Coke mixed with cough medicine. But police dismissed this as a hoax.</p>
4 October 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A fake message saying criminals are robbing homes, disguised as home affairs officials. 2. A WhatsApp virus called WhatsApp Gold (true) and a video called Martinelli (false).

	<p>3. Is the world's smallest poisonous snake found in bell peppers?</p> <p>4. No, South African police stations are not closing at 6pm to avoid criminals.</p>
1 November 2019	<p>1. No, apricot seeds do not kill cancer cells.</p> <p>2. Is the easiest way to do a pregnancy test with salt or white toothpaste?</p> <p>3. No, criminals aren't marking houses with red tape to indicate a planned break-in.</p> <p>4. A hijacking hoax that involves car number plates.</p>
6 December 2019	<p>1. No, a full tank of petrol will not explode in hot weather.</p> <p>2. Does South African Airways employ 55,000 people?</p> <p>3. School kids will not get condoms with their back to school stationery next year</p> <p>4. Will pressing 'cancel' twice before inserting your card in an ATM protect your pin?</p>
3 January 2020	Recap of 2019.
24 January 2020	<p>1. Can spiders in your kettle kill you?</p> <p>2. Is WhatsApp shutting down?</p>
7 February 2020	<p>1. Can Dettol kill the new coronavirus?</p> <p>2. Has the University in Ghana created a vaccine for the new coronavirus?</p> <p>3. Drinking bleach is dangerous and does not cure coronavirus.</p>
21 February 2020	<p>1. Does entering your PIN number backwards at an ATM alert the police?</p> <p>2. Are human-traffickers tying your windscreen wipers together with a cable tie?</p>
6 March 2020	1. Does China want to kill 20,000 infected people infected with

	<p>coronavirus?</p> <p>2. Are there really 1.5 million coronavirus victims worldwide?</p> <p>3. Are white bubbles in meat being linked to tuberculosis?</p>
20 March 2020	<p>1. Is garlic an effective cure for the latest strain of the coronavirus?</p> <p>2. Can pets catch the virus?</p> <p>3. Did Bill Gates predict the pandemic back in 2015?</p>
3 April 2020	<p>1. Is Interferon alpha-2b a vaccine for the new coronavirus?</p> <p>2. Are second-hand clothes from Covid-19 victims being sold in Africa?</p> <p>3. Do you need to carry a signed form when you move around during the lockdown in South Africa?</p>
17 April 2020	<p>1. Is it illegal to share information about Covid-19 on WhatsApp?</p> <p>2. Does South Africa have only 800 ICU beds?</p> <p>3. Should you disinfect your groceries in a “strong solution” of salt water & bleach?</p>
1 May 2020	<p>1. Is the new coronavirus caused by 5G?</p> <p>2. Does a video show street violence in South Africa during the Covid-19 lockdown?</p> <p>3. Can cloth masks help slow the spread of coronavirus?</p>
15 May 2020	<p>1. Can WhatsApp group admins be held liable for false information shared in their groups?</p> <p>2. Is wearing a mask dangerous for your health?</p> <p>3. Did South African police confiscate 200 food parcels donated to a community of white people?</p>
29 May 2020	<p>1. Are Shoprite and Checkers in South Africa facing food</p>

	<p>shortages?</p> <p>2. Does coronavirus have its own special pH level?</p> <p>3. Can the police issue hefty fines to smokers caught with a pack of cigarettes?</p>
12 June 2020	<p>1. Is Checkers stealing from customers for South Africa's Solidarity Fund?</p> <p>2. Did SA politicians tell the public to plant chicken, fish and meat?</p> <p>3. Did monkeys in India steal Covid-19 blood samples?</p>
26 June 2020	<p>1. Are South African thieves making bombs using Jeyes Fluid?</p> <p>2. Is South Africa about to be hit by storm "Dineo"?</p> <p>3. Can hand sanitiser left in a hot car explode and start a fire?</p>