

South Africa ranks 2nd as country with most reliable Covid-19 news

By [Leigh Crymble](#)

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As we all try to make sense of the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, the prevalence of fake news has come under the spotlight more than ever before. You may have seen the now de-bunked stories of dolphins and swans returning to Venice's canals or elephants lounging in rice paddies in Yunnan, China where they hadn't been seen for years. More ominously, you've likely been sent one of the many Covid conspiracy theories that have spread globally - as quickly as the infection pandemic itself.



Image credit: Kaboompics.com on [Pexels](#).

Welcome to the post-truth era

We are living in a time where anyone and everyone with a laptop or smartphone can offer their opinion instantly, often with either inadvertent misinformation or malicious intent.

While some fake news may seem harmless, like the forged letter from the deputy minister of tourism proclaiming the Easter bunny as "essential services", other cases have the potential to cause immense harm, such as the viral WhatsApp video claiming our local test kits are contaminated.

This has resulted in what the World Health Organisation (WHO) now refers to as an "infodemic" – an over-abundance of information that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable health guidance when we need it most.

Fast-moving crises fuel faster-moving rumours

Italian scientist Manlio De Domenico recognised the risk of misinformation early on in his country's fight against the virus. As part of the Bruno Kessler Foundation's Centre for Information and Communication Technology, he developed a screening tool to identify how much of public messaging, in each country, is in fact reliable.

Using machine learning techniques, over 120 million geolocated tweets and 22 million webpages were analysed. 88 countries have since been included in order to track online speculation as well as track bots spreading fake news.

So, how did South Africa do?

A few shameful videos aside, South Africa is proving to be one of the most reliable countries in the world when it comes to Covid-19 news. After Singapore, who take top honours, we have the lowest infodemic risk percentage – which means low exposure to fake information.

The infodemic risk index takes into account the average amount of content posted each day, the truth reliability of native news and the truth reliability of bot-generated content.

SA overview:

- Average of 19,574 Covid-related tweets daily in SA.
- We're 2nd in the world when it comes to reliable news.
- 77.8% of all our Twitter Covid content is reliable.
- SA's "infodemic" risk is 0.005%.

Top Countries Infodemic Summary					
Rank	Country	Avg. tweets/day	Risk index	Native reliability	Unv. bot pollution
1	Singapore	4210.9	0.005	90.33%	40.52%
2	South Africa	19574.1	0.005	77.88%	38.35%
3	France	75464.0	0.023	73.94%	41.74%
4	Ireland	8034.3	0.026	84.04%	38.84%
5	Hong Kong S.A.R.	8642.9	0.034	85.21%	40.33%

Source: [Covid19 Infodemics Observatory](#).

To better understand this, we can compare ourselves to other countries. The UK currently has a 27x higher risk of misinformation than we do, and in the USA, you have a 56x higher risk of being exposed to fake news than here in SA.

When asked about our news reliability, lead researcher De Domenico said “Congratulations, South Africa is a very reliable news country”.

With fake news proving to be a real threat to our health, it's important for us all to keep our news reliable by practising digital hygiene in the same way we do physical hygiene.

Digital hygiene tips:

Source

Check to see if the news is also being reported on mainstream sites (like this one). If the source is “a friend of a friend”, treat it as a rumour and discard it. The government site <https://sacoronavirus.co.za> > News & Updates is a good place to check for reliable information.

Content quality

Credible news sites are less likely to have typos, spell things incorrectly or use poor grammar. Text in colour, capital letters and the overuse of exclamation marks should also make you suspicious.

Encouraging you to share

Fake news thrives when it's shared. If the message asks you to forward it to your network, be wary. Remember – fake news can only spread if we spread it.

Report fake news

Fake news about Covid-19 is now a criminal offence in South Africa. If you receive information that you suspect to be fake news, take a screenshot or copy the link and report it to fakenewsalert@dtps.gov.za or WhatsApp 067 966 4015.

Visit the [Covid19 Infodemics Observatory](#) to view real-time stats on news reliability around the world.

ABOUT LEIGH CRYMBLE

Leigh Crymble is a behavioural linguist and language practitioner and founded BreadCrumbs in 2019 - South Africa's first Behavioural Linguistics firm that is rooted in behavioural theory and combines sociolinguistics, psychology and marketing principles to create personalised and persuasive communication.

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