SUSTAINING COUNTRY-SPECIFIC FACT-CHECKING REMEDIES: THE SIERRA LEONE EXPERIENCE

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In Summer 2022, the author traveled to Africa on a Fulbright Foundation Specialist grant to develop fact-checking capacity and media information literacy in Sierra Leone.[1] Like many countries, Sierra Leone has been contending with social disruption caused by political disinformation and misinformation in legacy media and on social media platforms such as WhatsApp.[2] In recent years, fake news stories falsely alleging political corruption and inadequate COVID vaccine effectiveness have led to violence and loss of life.[3]

1. Press Release, Fulbright, Michael Epstein Receives Fulbright Specialist Award to Sierra Leone at the Initiative for Media Development (June 7, 2022) (on file with author); Press Release, Sw. L. Sch., Prof. Epstein Named Fulbright Specialist to Sierra Leone, https://www.swlaw.edu/swlawblog/prof-Epstein-earns-Fulbright (last visited May 30, 2023); see also The Biederman Institute at Sw. L. Sch., *A Conversation With . . . Dr. Michael Epstein* SPOTIFY FOR PODCASTERS (Nov. 29, 2022), https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/bemli/episodes/A-Conversation-With---Dr--Michael-Epstein-e1r62qd, to hear Dr. Epstein share about his work and experiences in Sierra Leone via the Biederman Institute podcast.

2. *See generally* Epstein, *infra* note 14.

3. *See* Neia Prata Menezes et al., *What Is Driving COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy in Sub-Saharan Africa?*, WORLD BANK BLOGS (Aug. 11, 2021), https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/what-driving-covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-sub-saharan-africa; Press Release, Gov't of Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Unsubstantiated Claims Made About the Chinese-Manufactured COVID-19 Vaccine by Two Newspapers in Sierra Leone (June 28, 2021), https://covidlawlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Press-Release-Baseless-reports-about-Chinese-COVID-19-vaccine-28062021-1.pdf; Awareness Times Newspaper, *ACC Apologizes to the National Petroleum (SL-Ltd)*, FACEBOOK (Sept. 3, 2020), https://www.facebook.com/awarenesstimes/posts/over-4-billion-false-allegationacc-apologizes-to-the-national-petroleum-sl-ltdby/10158398391526343/.

The objective of this Fulbright project was to assist two Sierra Leone-based non-governmental organizations, Initiatives for Media Development ("IMdev")[4] and Media Matters for Women ("MMW"),[5] in building the capacity and reach of Salone Fact-Checker ("SFC").[6] SFC is a fact-checking operation developed on a trial basis by IMdev in 2020 but has since become inactive.[7] The timing for this project was set so that IMdev and MMW would be able to rollout a reconstituted SFC in advance of Sierra Leone's general elections in June 2023.[8] Sierra Leone's democracy remains fragile in the two decades since the end of its calamitous civil war, and there is concern that disinformation and misinformation, left unchecked, could cause significant unrest, extremism, and even violence in the run-up to future elections.[9]

The fact-checking project was predicated on two mandates articulated by IMdev and MMW: capacity building and content outreach. The first mandate was to develop capacity building strategies for SFC.[10] Central to this mandate was to increase SFC's staffing and training, both in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital and principal urban area, and in its twenty-three provinces, which are less economically developed.[11] The second mandate focused less on the internal workings of SFC and more on increasing its audience to make it more effective.[12] This essentially was a media information literacy initiative that focused on strategies to make fact-checking content broadly

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4. *What We Do*, INITIATIVES FOR MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/ (last visited May 31, 2023).

5. *Who We Are*, MEDIA MATTERS FOR WOMEN, https://mediamattersforwomen.org/our-work/ (last visited June 2, 2023).

6. *Salone Fact-Checker*, INITIATIVES FOR MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/ (last visited May 31, 2023).

7. *The Fulbright Specialist Project*, FULBRIGHT, https://fulbrightspecialist. worldlearning.org/the-fulbright-specialist-program (last visited June 2, 2023).

8. *See* Funding Solicitation, Initiatives for Media Development, Funding Solicitation for SFC Project Next Steps (2022) (on file with author).

9. *See* Epstein, *infra* note 14, at 1–2 (explaining the background of media and democracy in Sierra Leone), (construing Brian Ganson & Herbert M'cleod, *Private Sector Development and the Persistence of Fragility in Sierra Leone*, CAMBRIDGE UNIV. PRESS 602, 603 (2019); IBRAHIM BANGURA, BBC MEDIA ACTION, THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR PRIVATE-SECTOR INVESTMENT ¶ 3 (2022) (noting unchecked past acts of violence against media actors in Sierra Leone suggests an ongoing threat).

10. *See* Funding Solicitation, *supra* note 8.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

accessible to Sierra Leoneans, including those challenged by illiteracy and lack of infrastructure in rural "last mile" villages.[13]

One year out, the SFC project had born some promising results, though not necessarily as predicted. In a paper presented at the University of Paris Dauphine in June 2022, the author outlined the SFC project, broadly divided into initiatives intended to build the fact-checking operation's internal capabilities and increase public access to its fact-checking content.[14] Central to the project were initiatives conceived to meet the specific socio-economic realities and cultural understandings of the Sierra Leonean populace.[15] This paper will examine what aspects of the project worked—and did not work—as a result of the author's visit to Sierra Leone. In assessing the project's long-term impact, it is important to note that, as of this writing, the culturally syncretic SFC remains inactive. In its place, however, is a journalist-run Sierra Leone iteration of iVerify, a UN-funded initiative operated by some of the same stakeholders involved in the SFC project.

A.   THE SFC FULBRIGHT PROJECT: WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DID NOT WORK

On April 26, 2022, the author met via Zoom with representatives from IMdev and MMW. The parties discussed how best to devise a country-specific program to train fact-checking professionals and use media information literacy principles to increase accessibility and impact of fact-checked

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13. *See* Epstein, *infra* note 14, at 9 (construing *About Us*, INITIATIVES OF MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/about/ (last visited May 31, 2023)); Olusegun Abolaji Ogundeji, *Sierra Leone Grapples with Acute Digital Divide,* NETWORK WORLD (Apr. 10, 2008), https://www.networkworld.com/article/2277939/sierra-leone-grapples-with-acute-digital-divide.html; Jutta Haider & Olof Sundin, *Responsibility and the Crisis of Information, in* PARADOXES OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY: THE CRISIS OF INFORMATION, 26, 26–45 (1st ed. 2022); *see also* Reaching the Last Mile: Challenges and Opportunities, GLOBAL WASH. (Mar. 4, 2016), https://globalwa.org/issue-brief/last-mile-delivery (explaining "last mile" is an international development term used to describe "often isolated . . . villages without paved roads, [and] with little access to communication and poor infrastructure").

14. Michael M. Epstein, *Fact-Checking Remedies in the Developing World: The Fight Against Misinformation and Disinformation in Sierra Leone*, CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS (forthcoming 2023) [hereinafter 2022 Paris Paper].

15. *Id.* at 11 (discussing the proposed build-up program designed to increase internal capacity of the Salone Fact-Checker designed with Sierra Leonean media realities and cultural sensitivities in mind) (citing NATASHA MACK ET AL., QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS: A DATA COLLECTOR'S FIELD GUIDE 8 (2005)) ("Whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being or research participants must be our top priority.").

content among illiterate, predominantly rural, populations. Entitled "Fact-Checking in the Fight Against Fake News and Disinformation in Sierra Leone," the Fulbright project solicitation was led by Yeama Sarah Thompson, the founder and director of IMdev, and Florence Sesay, the founder and CEO of MMW.[16] Both women are highly accomplished media advocates who parlayed their success as journalists to found public interest organizations committed to increasing media information literacy and empowering people in poverty, especially women and children living in rural areas.[17]

At the project solicitation meeting, Thompson and Sesay emphasized the need for SFC capacity-building to be part of a comprehensive media information literacy program that would deliver content to historically underserved rural areas, including "last mile" villages.[18] Such a program would build upon the strengths of IMdev, who sponsors training seminars for media professionals and is a distributor of media campaigns throughout Sierra Leone, as well as the more tightly focused mission of MMW, which developed a network for dispensing healthcare information to women in underdeveloped rural communities.[19]

Without an operational budget, the program would need to be budget neutral, or at least not add to the existing budget, to sustain its initiatives after the initial project period. Both IMdev and MMW are principally grant-funded organizations, with little or no opportunity to generate revenue to self-fund their

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16. Virtual Meeting, Author with Yeama Thompson, Florence Sesay, Lisa Sebree & Ellen Marshall (Apr. 26, 2022) [hereinafter Zoom Meeting] (on file with author).

17. See *Yeama Thompson*, DIGIT. EARTH AFRICA, https://www.digitalearthafrica.org/about-us/governance/technical-advisory- committee/yeama-thompson (last visited May 31, 2023), for Yeama Thompson's biography and contribution to IMdev; see *Who We Are*, MEDIA MATTERS FOR WOMEN, https://mediamattersforwomen.org/about-us/who-we-are/ (last visited May 31, 2023), for Florence Sesay's biography and community involvement; *see also* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 7–8 and accompanying notes (highlighting further the proposed development and implementation of the Salone Fact-Checker to fight fake news in Sierra Leone by building on the success of IMdev and MMW and their women leaders).

18. *See* Zoom Meeting, *supra* note 16 (recorded in author's meeting notes).

19. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 7–9 (discussing the role IMdev and MMW played in combating mis-dis prior to the 2018 Sierra Leone Presidential Election); *About Us*, INITIATIVES OF MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/about/ (last visited May 31, 2023) (for IMdev's Mission Statement, Challenges, and Objectives); *Our Impact*, MEDIA MATTERS FOR WOMEN, https://mediamattersforwomen.org/our-work/our-impact/ (last visited May 31, 2023) (highlighting MMW's role in advocating for women and girls in Sierra Leone).

activities.[20] SFC itself was initially funded in 2020 by the U.S. Embassy in Sierra Leone, and embassy funds were used in part to underwrite the Fulbright project in 2022. This funding, perhaps augmented by other funding sources, enabled IMdev to hire a team of six freelance journalists, with various experience, to staff SFC and post fact-checked stories on the IMdev website and its Facebook page.

The author's proposal for the project, summarized at the April solicitation meeting and elaborated upon in his June 2022 Paris Paper, was tailored to address the country-specific needs of IMdev and MMW.[21] At the core of the project proposal was a fact-checker training curriculum,[22] and a budget-neutral internship program in partnership with Sierra Leone universities that would train journalism students as fact-checker interns, in exchange for academic or professional credit.[23] With trained externs, SFC would be able to expand its operation with round-the-clock review of social media disinformation and misinformation, an important feature in Sierra Leone since fake news postings can spread virally on chat groups if not debunked quickly.[24]

To make SFC's fact-checked content more accessible to more people, the project proposed a text-based push notification

20. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 10–13 (Part B "Build-Up" Program Components); *Get Involved*, INITIATIVES FOR MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/ (last visited May 31, 2023) ("[d]onate, [w]ork with us, [v]olunteer, [s]pread the [w]ord"); *Donate*, MEDIA MATTERS FOR WOMEN, https://mediamattersforwomen.org/donate/ (last visited May 31, 2023) (to make a tax-deductible donation to MMW).

21. *See generally* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14.

22. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 10 (explaining that training materials would be aligned with best practices of other leading news organizations in identifying and analyzing mis-dis) (citing LUCAS GRAVES & FEDERICA CHERUBINI, REUTERS INSTITUTE, THE RISE OF FACT-CHECKING SITES IN EUROPE 1, 33 (2016), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/The%2520Rise%2520of%2520Fact-Checking%2520Sites%2520in%2520Europe.pdf), (explaining the history and evolution of fact-checking landscape outlets in Europe); *see also* Work-Product, Michael M. Epstein, Fighting "Fake News" in Sierra Leone: An IMdev Training Curriculum, FSP-P007690 Project Work-Product (Aug. 2, 2022) (on file with author).

23. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 12–13.

24. *See* 2022 Paris Paper *supra* note 14, at 10–11 (first citing LUCAS GRAVES & FEDERICA CHERUBINI, REUTERS INSTITUTE, THE RISE OF FACT-CHECKING SITES IN EUROPE 1, 12-13 (2016) (discussing how recent school curricula programs in European countries have been effective debunking disinformation and misinformation); and then citing CHERILYN IRETON & JULIE POSETTI, UNESCO, JOURNALISM, 'FAKE NEWS' AND DISINFORMATION: A HANDBOOK FOR JOURNALISM EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 30 (2018), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552).

system[25] that would be an available feature on Sierra Leone's two dominant mobile telephone carriers, Orange and Africell.[26] Fact-checked content would also be distributed to women's health clinics and other familiar locations in the provinces, using MMW's established healthcare advisory networks.[27] A second, activity-based learning curriculum would also be made available to teach media information literacy to the greater Sierra Leonean population, including those challenged by illiteracy.[28]

The June 2022 Paris Paper was essentially a forward-looking document that envisioned collaborations with journalists, policymakers, academics, and media companies, based on extensive research into the media landscape and socio-political culture of Sierra Leone.[29] The planning helped the project move quickly during what would amount to about a month in the country. During that month, many of the initiatives outlined in the paper began to take different shapes, evolving into concrete initiatives that were more narrowly tailored to the reality of life in Sierra Leone.[30]

Even with these changes, the principal objectives of the project remained intact: building SFC capacity through training and budget-neutral staffing solutions and increasing access to SFC's content through media information literacy and media collaborations. In Sierra Leone, the author met with government ministers, university faculty and students, and leading journalists to get a better understanding of ordinary Sierra Leonean perspectives on media, politics, and, in particular, fake news.[31] The author also conducted interviews in makeshift

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25. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 14 and accompanying notes 128-31.

26. *Id.*; *see also* ORANGE, https://www.orange.sl/ (last visited June 1, 2023); *About Us*, AFRICELL, https://www.africell.sl/about-us/ (last visited June 1, 2023) (for more information on Sierra Leone telephone carriers Orange and Africell).

27. *See* 2022 Paris Paper *supra* note 14, at 15 (citing IMdev's *About Us*, INITIATIVES FOR MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/about/ (last visited June 1, 2023)).

28. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 14–15 (citing Nina Sakhini & Dabaleena Chattopadhyay, *A Review of Smartphones Fact-Checking Apps and their (Non) Use Among Older Adults,* ASS'N FOR COMPUTING MACH. 2022, at 1 (discussing the idea of creating a Salone Fact-Checker app and exploring ideas to create engaging content to promote it)); *see also* Work-Product, Michael M. Epstein, Say "Kusheh" to Media Information Literacy!—An Interactive Experience for Sierra Leone, FSP-P007690 Project Work-Product (Aug. 2, 2022) (on file with author).

29. *See generally* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14.

30. Final Report, Michael M. Epstein, Fact-Checking in the Fight on Fake News and Disinformation, FSP-FR009708 (Aug. 31, 2022) (on file with author).

31. Project Itinerary, Michael M. Epstein, Itinerary FSP-P007690, Initiatives for Media Development, Sierra Leone (May 26, 2022) (on file with author).

teahouses known as Ataya Bases,[32] bus shelters, and other working class gathering places in Freetown and the provincial cities of Makeni and Bo.[33]

Within a few days of arrival in Sierra Leone, it became clear that mobile telephony was more advanced than the research had indicated. People of all income levels, including many living in urban poverty had 4G smartphones through Africell and Orange.[34] Data plans are cheap enough to be affordable for most people to use, and both Africell and Orange have invested heavily in cell towers throughout the country, including in provincial cities and along rural highways between cities.[35] Many tether laptops and home computers to mobile hotspots in professional settings like offices and hotels, as Wi-Fi service can be unreliable or unavailable.

Elites like journalists and government officials are active on Twitter and social media, but so are non-elites.[36] When asked how many men and women had smartphones in working class spaces like Ataya Bases or bus shelters, nearly everyone waved

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32. Brima Gegbe et al., *Motivational Reasons of Consumers Behind Green Tea (Ataya) Consumption in Sierra Leone*, 22 INT'L J. OF SCI.: BASIC AND APPLIED RES., 367, 367–68 (2015), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/249334526.pdf ("Ataya bases are centres where people converge to drink a Chinese product call [sic] Green Tea. . . . The official name of this product is Green Tea but in Africa we call it ataya." As of 2015, there are over 1,500 Ataya Bases in Sierra Leone which are common congregation places for Sierra Leonean youth and adults alike, and many Sierra Leoneans support their families through ataya businesses).

33. *See Freetown*, ENCYC. BRITANNICA (2019), https://www.britannica.com /place/Freetown (explaining Freetown is Sierra Leon's capital, largest city, and chief port situated on a rocky peninsula at the seaward tip of wooded hills known as the "Lion Mountains"); see also *Sierra Leone Provinces and Districts,* MAPPR, https://www.mappr.co/counties/sierra-leone-provinces/ (last visited June 2, 2023), for more information on Sierra Leon's province structure and community make up; *see also* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 11 (citing NATASHA MACK ET AL., QUALITATIVE RES. METHODS: A DATA COLLECTOR'S FIELD GUIDE 8 (2005)) (describing proposed training modules to increase effectiveness of fact-checking through community outreach and trust building).

34. *See Mobile Communications and Internet in Sierra Leone*, WORLDDATA.INFO, https://www.worlddata.info/59frica/sierra-leone/telecommunication.php (last visited June 2, 2023); 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 5 (highlighting author's previous research suggested most mobile telephony in Sierra Leone currently operated as 3G).

35. *See* Dustan Matekenya et al., *Using Mobile Data to Understand Urban Mobility Patterns in Freetown, Sierra Leone* 5 (The World Bank Grp., Working Paper No. 9519, 2021), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/82fca6e3-afdf-5ee6-a2b6-0c5f48e2477f/content.

36. 2022 Paris Paper *supra* note 14, at 5 (citing Simon Kemp, *Digital 2022: Sierra Leone*, DATA REPORTAL (Feb. 16, 2022), https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-sierra-leone) (explaining Sierra Leone had 927,088 social media users in 2022, comprising 11.3% of its population).

phones to signal confirmation. The few who did not have a smartphone indicated that they had access to someone else's phone. Roughly 90% of smartphones are Android, with 10% using more expensive Apple iPhones.[37]

It very quickly became clear that the alphanumerical text notification system for fact-checking, previously dubbed "truth-texting," was not the best way to disseminate SFC content. For one thing, the text-for-truth concept as originally proposed required buy-in from Africell and Orange, or at least from one of the companies. These companies would have to agree to give users an option or embed as a default a system that would allow SFC to distribute its fact-finding to phone customers. Although IMdev and MMW offered to arrange meetings to discuss text-for-truth with the phone companies, no meetings materialized.[38] It did not look like either company had an interest in partnering with SFC.

Without phone company participation, texting would not work. But texting would not have been the most effective way forward anyway. Given the widespread adoption of smartphones in the population, it became easy to see that a smartphone app would work better than texting.[39] A free Android app costs $25 to post on Google Play and there are upfront costs of developing the app's software, but the benefits are significant.[40] For one, an app does not require a collaboration with a reluctant phone company; it can be offered for free in Google Play to subscribers who would receive content, including optional push notifications, from SFC

37. *See Mobile Vendor Market Share Sierra Leone*, STATCOUNTER GLOBAL STATS, https://gs.statcounter.com/vendor-market-share/mobile/sierra-leone (last visited June 3, 2023).

38. *See* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31.

39. *See* 2022 Paris Paper *supra* note 14, at 5 (citing Simon Kemp, *Digital 2022: Sierra Leone*, DATA PORTAL, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-sierra-leone (last visited June 3, 2023)), (explaining Sierra Leon has an apparent 9.3 million mobile connections, and internet users grew 12.5% from 2021 to 2022).

40. *See How to Use Play Console*, GOOGLE, https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/ (search "Register for a Google Play Developer Account"; then select "Read More") (last visited June 4, 2023); *App Development Cost*, BUS. OF APPS, https://www.businessofapps.com/app-developers/research/app-development-cost/ (estimating the price of apps range from $16,000 for a simple development to over $100,000 annually for more complex models); *Nonprofits*, DEV. FOR GOOD, developforgood.org/for-nonprofits (last visited June 3, 2023), to learn more about the Develop for Good company that provides affordable app development and other web related services to non-profit organizations by connecting them with university students.

directly.[41] An app interface, unlike alphanumeric text, can also present content with more impact. Graphics, animation, and sound can be used to create narratives that are memorable and entertaining.

Thus, the "text-for-truth" initiative evolved into the "Salone Fact-Checker Smartphone App."[42] The app was designed to address the lack of reach for SFC's content. In its initial 2020 incarnation, SFC posted text-based summaries of fact-checked news stories, sometimes with an accompanying photo. The posts were uploaded onto a low-traffic webpage that was not search-optimized and thus hard to find. The content, while journalistically strong, was not distributed to readers with potential interest. The website offered a static reading experience. Users of the site would have to know to look for specific content or spend time scrolling through an array of content arranged by date. The site's static, text-based interface meant that users with low or no literacy skills would not benefit from it. Literate Sierra Leoneans with a casual interest in factual accuracy would likely not use a site that required them to scroll through content, even if they were able to find the website.

To address these challenges, the app was devised to create an image-based fact-checking notification system that would be distributed directly to users as a "push." Users of the app, which would be available for free for Android phones, would receive notifications through an animation known as the "Salone Fact-Chicken." [43] The chicken character was designed as a social media-friendly meme that would use audio and visual cues to denote whether a news story was true, false, or inconclusive. The app would push thirty to forty-five second clips that would depict the Salone Fact-Chicken starting to lay an egg. The animation would be accompanied by a voice-over summarizing the news story being investigated. At the conclusion of the clip, the chicken would lay a gray-brown rotten egg for fake news, a shiny golden egg for truth, or a white egg for indeterminate or more information needed.[44] The laying of the egg would coincide with a

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41. *Set Up Your App's Prices*, GOOGLE, https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/ (search "Set Up Your App's Prices"; then select "Read More") (last visited June 3, 2023).

42. *See* Final Report, *supra* note 30.

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

voiced pronouncement of the story as fake news, truth or indeterminate.

The animation itself would be basic; users need not be wowed by production quality—according to interviews conducted as part of the SFC Project, a sketched cartoon chicken would be sufficient to entertain most Sierra Leoneans. The timing of the voiced conclusory pronouncement to coincide with the appearance of the laid egg was conceived as a way to build up suspense. While the narrator summarizes the story, the chicken appears to be in the throes of labor. The chicken is meant to be comical in its appearance and actions, but the voice-over would be unembellished and factually accurate. Moreover, the voice-over would be in Krio, the indigenous patois spoken by more than 90% of Sierra Leoneans, and predominate especially among non-elites and the illiterate.[45] Literate users would have the option to click a link that would take them to the full text summary on SFC's website.

The app would also feature a "Contact SLC" button that would invite users to inquire about a fact-checked story. Additionally, users could use this button to flag possible fake news stories for SLC to investigate. This interactivity may help SFC identify stories that need to be fact-checked, especially in remote communities outside of Freetown. The "Contact SLC" button would also be marketed as a resource for legacy journalists who do not have the time or means to investigate a putative news story. Working with the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists ("SLAJ") and the Independent Radio Network ("IRN"), the SFC would encourage reporters and other media professionals to use the app to verify or debunk a story before it is published.[46] Reporters would be free to cite to SFC to verify or debunk the investigated content in their articles.

IRN, which distributes content to a large network of commercial radio stations in Freetown and throughout the provinces, would be a key player in broadening the appeal and

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45. *The World Factbook*, Cent. Intel. Agency, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sierra-leone/ (Dec. 12, 2023) ("Krio (English-based Creole, spoken by the descendants of freed Jamaican slaves who were settled in the Freetown area, a lingua franca and a first language for 10% of the population but understood by 95%.").

46. Meeting, Author with Ahmed Nasrallah, SLAJ President, and Ransford Wright, Coordinator Independent Radio Network (July 13, 2022) (on file with author); *see also* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31.

reach of the SFC Smartphone App. IRN would help in two ways. First, it would be the primary source for marketing the app. SFC would partner with IRN and local radio stations to create and air public service announcements inviting listeners to download the app for free from Google Play. These ads would describe the app as a tool to fight fake news and would also allude to the entertainment value of the Salone Fact-Chicken. Using radio for this is especially important, since radio is the dominant form of media in Sierra Leone, with coverage that includes nearly the entire country.[47] Radio also reaches audiences who cannot read or who have low literacy, which makes it an effective marketing venue for an app that seeks to reach people challenged by literacy.

IRN would also be an appropriate means for augmenting the Salone Fact-Chicken clips themselves. At a meeting with the head of IRN, the idea of a weekly Salone Fact-Chicken program was discussed. The half-hour show, in its simplest form, could repeat the clips distributed that week on the app, perhaps with some additional commentary drawn from the full-text summaries on the SFC website.[48] Another option would be to create an in-depth spotlight on the most important fake news story debunked that week, with independent reporting impelled by SFC's work. At a minimum, IRN could run the thirty to forty-five second voice-over animations as audio spots, like public service announcements, in between programs or during commercial breaks. Since the voice-over contains all of the fact-checking content, it would provide listeners with the information they need. It would also be possible to rerecord the content to make audio reference to the chicken's labor and egg laying.[49]

Repackaging the clips as audio-only not only makes the content more accessible to radio audiences, but it also may help get the content to last mile villages in rural areas where there is

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47. Annabelle Wittels & Nick Maybanks, *Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analysis of Media and Mobile Audiences*, BBC MEDIA ACTION, 1, 3 (May 2016), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0896040f0b6497400004a/mobile-media-landscape-sierra-leone-report.pdf, *noted in* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 3 (explaining that radio's accessibility, portability, and affordability allow many Sierra Leoneans the opportunity to tune in, and because it does not require literacy like other forms of media such as newspapers, it can be an effective means of reaching a wider audience to fight fake news and disinformation).

48. *See* Meeting, *supra* note 46 (recorded in author's meeting notes).

49. *Id.*

little media infrastructure and literacy. MMW, one of the NGOs involved in the SFC Project, has developed a series of rotating Bluetooth-based podcasts that it plays at places where women gather in the provinces as part of its core mission to empower women throughout Sierra Leone.

At St. Joseph's Physio Center, a health clinic in the provincial city of Makeni that treats mostly rural women, an MMW representative will play short podcasts describing medical diagnoses and treatments for fistula, sexually transmitted diseases, breast cancer, and other women's health issues in the facility's waiting room. The audio plays in rotation over several days and is supplemented frequently with new and updated information. Women who would not otherwise gain access to this information not only receive it directly, but they bring it back to other women in their remote villages, which may be a day's walk from the clinic.

With MMW's support, the audio-only content of the SFC Smartphone App (or the repackaged radio version) would simply be added at the end of a podcast, making it accessible to the women waiting in the clinic and, through repetition, to women and presumably men back in the villages. Unlike the health information, the appended audio clips would be replaced with newly updated content as quickly as new fact-checked content becomes available. SFC would need to be selective in the clips it provides to MMW, since, as ancillary content, it may only be possible to incorporate two or three audio clips into the healthcare podcast. Still, this is a powerful way to get the content out to information-starved rural communities since the clinics and other MMW venues are sites that the women trust, and the information available at these sites would be seen as trustworthy.[50]

To the extent that MMW staff or associated providers travel to remote villages to provide basic healthcare, the podcasts, along with the SFC clips, could be played for villagers waiting to be seen by a healthcare provider. In an open-air setting such as a village, an alternative podcast featuring only SFC content,

    50. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 17 (discussing the importance of determining local community standards in building trust for fact-checking within the community) (citing UNDERSTANDING MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY (MIL) IN THE DIGITAL AGE, UNESCO, at 15 (Ulla Carlsson, ed., 2019), https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/gmw2019_understanding_mil_ulla_carlsson.pdf).

similar to the IRN weekly program discussed above, could be made available in a secondary location, allowing villagers to choose to listen to the SFC podcast in addition to, or in lieu of, the MMW health podcast.[51]

The clips available as push notifications on the Salone Fact-Checker Smartphone App would also be available for download and redistribution by users. This is an essential feature in the fight against social media disinformation in Sierra Leone since fake news stories are now commonly uploaded on social media chat sites like WhatsApp or Facebook. Often the fake content is reposted by users who find the original posting funny—no thought is given to gatekeeping the content for accuracy or to the possible consequences of its posting.

If users of the SFC app download the chicken clips and repost them on social media, it would provide a corrective to the fake news stories already present on the site by providing funny, meme-worthy content that also happens to have the benefit of being accurate. In some cases, social media users can post the SFC clips in reply to a fake news posting to debunk the inaccuracy before it spreads virally. Indeed, with augmented staffing, SFC would have a team in place to post SFC clips on chat groups known for spreading disinformation. The clips themselves will have to be watermarked to prevent spoofing by disruptors seeking to associate SFC with faked content. The link to the full SFC website would also be an indicator of the clip's authenticity. To increase the ease of clip redistributions, app users would have a one-click button for forwarding the content by text message or uploading it to leading social media sites. With luck, the topicality and entertainment value of SFC clips re-uploaded to social media may make some content go viral.

As disinformation becomes more widespread, the need for a fully staffed fact-checking system is critical. With more potentially fake news stories being released online by organized disinformation groups and pranksters, it is necessary to have a large, trained staff. It is also important to have staff reviewing and investigating stories as quickly as possible since disinformation that is not debunked swiftly may spread like a virus, making it harder to debunk later. To address the number of stories and the rapid response time, the SFC project proposed

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51. *Id.*

three eight-hour shifts, seven days a week. Staff would not only be scouring social media and legacy media for disinformation and misinformation, but they would also be investigating stories, summarizing their conclusions in an article on the SFC website, and providing the voice-over script for the app. A separate group would be responsible for producing the Salone Fact-Chicken clips.

In its 2020 iteration, SFC was staffed by five or six journalists of various experience. While the exact number of staff needed is unknown, it would certainly exceed five or six journalists. The SFC Project estimated that a staff of seventy-five full-time and part-time fact-checkers would be sufficient to run a high-capacity twenty-four-hour, seven-day operation in the immediate runup to the 2023 elections. There would also need to be more standardized fact-checker and media information literacy training for new SFC staffers.

Insufficient funding for SFC has been an issue for IMdev. IMdev is a grant-supported NGO; there does not appear to be a steady income stream available to cover the costs of a dedicated professional staff of fact-checkers. While IMdev has sought public support and private partnerships to underwrite SFC, the only significant funding appears to be seed money provided by the U.S. Embassy in Freetown in 2020, and the SFC Project grant funded in 2022 by the embassy and the Fulbright Foundation.[52]

Without the ability to pay for professional SFC staff, IMdev would have to rely on unpaid workers. To address this, the 2022 Paris Paper proposed that IMdev partner with the department of communications at Fourah Bay College, the principal institution of higher education in Freetown, to bring on a cohort of student interns.[53] These students would be trained using a curriculum developed as part of the SFC Project; once trained, the students would work shifts at SFC, investigating suspected disinformation and writing summary articles for the SFC website. At the end of a semester or otherwise agreed-upon term, the student would receive academic credit and a professional credit, including a

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52. *See* Funding Solicitation, *supra* note 8.

53. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 12 and accompanying notes 119-20 (highlighting past internship opportunities for students through programs partially funded by IMdev); *see also About Us*, FOURAH BAY COLL., https://fourahbaycollege.net/# (last visited Jan. 1, 2024) (for more information on Fourah Bay College's history, mission, and curriculum).

byline for their written work product.[54] On the ground in Sierra Leone, what had been envisioned as a Freetown-based initiative grew into a national program involving students at Fourah Bay College, but also at the University of Makeni (UniMak)[55] and Njala University in the provinces. With cooperation from journalism and communication professors at these universities and administrators, IMdev inaugurated what became known as the "Accuracy Fellows" program.[56]

As part of the SFC Project, the author met with Dr. Francis Sowa at Fourah Bay College[57] and a committee of faculty and staff led at UniMak by Matthew Kanu[58] and by Thomas Songu at Njala.[59] All expressed strong support for the internship initiative. As a result, the author was permitted to recruit for Accuracy Fellows during course visitations at all three universities, including two Njala campuses.[60] Student interest was high. A description of the program was incorporated into SFC Project lectures on media information literacy and fact-checking best practices. Students were invited to send an application and statement of interest to an email account set up for that purpose. Within two weeks, about twenty students had asked to be considered. This was better than had been anticipated, as it was

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54. *See* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 12 (for author's proposed initiatives to incorporate Salone Fact-Checker into an academic setting in the effort to fight disinformation in Sierra Leone, incorporating ideas from past successes, including, when a Ukrainian Kyiv School of Journalism founded a website to counter propaganda during the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 with student volunteer fact-checkers) (citing LUCAS GRAVES & FEDERICA CHERUBINI, REUTERS INSTITUTE, THE RISE OF FACT-CHECKING SITES IN EUROPE 1, 11 (2016), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/ research/files/The%2520Rise%2520of%2520Fact-Checking%2520Sites%2520in%2520Europe.pdf).

55. *Background*, UNIV. OF MAKENI, https://unimak.edu.sl/background-2/ (last visited Jan. 1, 2024) (The University "[makes] great efforts to develop academic programmes that are rooted in the everyday reality of contemporary Africa.").

56. *See* Final Report, *supra* note 29; *see also* 2022 Paris Paper, *supra* note 14, at 11 (discussing IMdev's proposed training modules for students studying media and journalism, as well as other potential options for fact-checking training that can be incorporated into existing syllabi) (citing *Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age*, UNESCO, at 60 (Ulla Carlsson, ed., 2019), https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/gmw2019_understanding_mil_ulla_carlsson.pdf).

57. *See* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31 (Author's meeting with Dr. Francis Sowa, Fourah Bay College, July 8, 2022).

58. *See* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31 (Author's meeting with UniMak Faculty, July 15, 2022).

59. *See* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31 (Author's meeting with Njala University faculty and administrators, July 26, 2022).

60. *See* Project Itinerary, *supra* note 31 (Author's SFC Project meeting with Dr. Francis Sowa, July 8, 2022).

July and the universities were in summer session. If the response rate increased during the Fall 2022 semester, there appeared to be a real possibility that IMdev would be able to staff SFC at full capacity for a 24/7 operation in Spring 2023, including the weeks immediately before the June elections.

Despite the initial promise of the Accuracy Fellows program, it did not appear to move forward in Spring 2023 as planned. Nor did the development of the Salone Fact-Checker Smartphone App. Indeed, in the months following the SFC Project's conclusion, IMdev appears to have ended work on SFC altogether.[61] IMdev showcases a number of activities on its current website splash page, but SFC is not one of them.[62] The reasons for this are unclear. It may be that IMdev recognized that, even with a team of unpaid interns, it would not have enough money to fund SFC. During the SFC Project visit, IMdev's leadership spent significant project time working on fundraising materials for next stages of the project, including additional fact-checker training and the design costs of the smartphone app.[63]

But money might not fully explain why SFC did not go forward. With the training curriculum developed in the SFC Project and even a small number of students willing to do internships, IMdev, in theory, could have staffed a modest iteration of SFC in advance of the 2023 election, even without the app or last mile initiatives. The reality, however, was that there seemed to be a disconnect between some of the professional fact-checking journalists on the SFC staff and IMdev leadership. One editor contended that the IMdev leadership was aloof from SFC, more interested in the funding it might bring in, and less interested in its day-to-day operation. The same staffer, who was a one-on-one SFC Project trainee, complained that the NGO's leadership did not have a plan to provide adequate pay for the on-staff journalists in the reconstituted SFC and asserted that some of the hired fact-checkers were not journalists. This editor left IMdev in Fall 2022. Whether this is a case of a disgruntled

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61. E-mail from Ophaniel T. Gooding, to Author (May 9, 2023) (on file with author).

62. *Our Work*, INITIATIVES FOR MEDIA DEV., http://imdev.media/ (last visited Jan. 1, 2024) (IMdev's current activities include "increasing media capacity in Sierra Leone to monitor and oversee health care services." Although, a couple links to Salone Fact Checker articles remain on the site's existing blog, selecting to read the article leads the user to an inactive link with a page not found error.).

63. *See,* e.g., Funding Solicitation, *supra* note 8. (for project next steps).

worker who felt undervalued or something more is hard to know. Thompson, IMdev's leader, indicated in an October 2022 Zoom meeting that the editor, who was regarded as a fact-checking authority, would be replaced, but it is unclear if that happened. What is clear is that a tech-savvy journalist who had also received one-on-one SFC Project training in fact-checking best practices also left SFC.

Whatever the reason, SFC, the focus of the SFC Project, does not appear active in advance of the 2023 elections. This was confirmed in April 2023 in a WhatsApp message by Ophaniel T. Gooding, a tech-savvy journalist and former one-on-one trainee. Gooding is now working at iVerify-Sierra Leone, a different fact-checking operation based in Freetown.

iVerify-Sierra Leone, according to Gooding, is the only Sierra Leone fact-checking group operating in advance of the 2023 elections. iVerify is a fact-checking platform designed and funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).[64] The UNDP makes iVerify available to journalistic organizations in the developing world as part of a global effort to combat disinformation and misinformation.[65] Other iVerify operations are active in several African countries, including Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia, as well as in Honduras.

Through the iVerify program, UNDP provides vetted professional organizations with a "support package" that includes "digital tools, capacity building modules, partnership opportunities, and communication and outreach strategies."[66] The UNDP iVerify webpage describes an "in-depth assessment" of subscribing organizations in each country to ensure that UNDP fact-checking architecture is not used to repress press freedoms and individual rights.[67]

The iVerify program provides a template for in-country fact-checking.[68] The methodologies promote journalism best practices in fact-checking. The template focuses on distinguishing fact from non-fact-based opinion, source consultation and investigation, using three reviewers to triple fact-check, and transparency for

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64. *iVerify*, UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME, https://www.undp.org/digital/iverify (last visited June 3, 2023).
65. *Id.*
66. *Id.*
67. *Id.*
68. *Id.*

deadline-limited reporting and updates for new findings.[69] A link inviting webpage visitors to "read more" about how iVerify is implemented in a specific country does not work; the webpage does describe an "assessment mission" to each country that would incorporate a survey of the country's political, legal, and information-based landscape.[70] The site also refers generally to iVerify as a multi-stakeholder operation in each country and includes efforts to "propose partnerships" and "operational structure."[71]

In Sierra Leone, the local iteration of iVerify is run by SLAJ, the journalist group, in collaboration with IRN.[72] BBC Media Action, a Freetown-based media research and advocacy organization, is responsible for "leading on research and learning, supporting capacity building, and producing social media content."[73] Funding is provided by Canada, the EU, Ireland, and Iceland; the UNDP and UN Peacebuilding Fund; and Orange, the telecom giant.[74]

SLAJ appears to be focused on the fact-checking process. Gooding indicated in correspondence that iVerify-Sierra Leone has journalists on staff, some of which participated in the SFC Project, including SLAJ's president, Ahmad "Monk" Nasralla, and Gooding himself. Other SLAJ-affiliated journalists participated in fact-checking training during the course of the SFC Project as well. SLAJ members mostly seem to be experienced print journalists working in Freetown and other major cities. As a general matter, legacy newspapers are owned by publishing "houses" with political agendas and profit motives that can skew accuracy. SLAJ appears to work within this industry reality to bring best practices to the profession.

The iVerify-Sierra Leone website classifies fact-checked stories into five color-coded categories, four based on the degree of falsity.[75] A fifth category denotes speech deemed harmful based

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69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.*

72. *About Us*, IVERIFY SIERRA LEONE, https://sl.i-verify.org/about-us/ (last visited June 3, 2023).

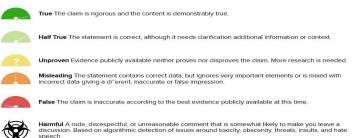73. *Id.*

74. *Id.*

75. *Methodology*, IVERIFY SIERRA LEONE, https://sl.i-verify.org/methodology/ (last visited June 3, 2023).

on "toxicity, obscenity, threats, insults, and hate speech."[76] This classification system is consistent with the mandate of the UNDP iVerify program, which encompasses not only falsity but also hate speech and misinformation that may not be provably false.[77] The classification system is the same, with minor variations, on the Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia iVerify sites.[78]

Definitions

True The claim is rigorous and the content is demonstrably true.

Half True The statement is correct, although it needs clarification additional information or context.

Unproven Evidence publicly available neither proves nor disproves the claim. More research is needed.

Misleading The statement contains correct data, but ignores very important elements or is mixed with incorrect data giving a di"erent, inaccurate or false impression.

False The claim is inaccurate according to the best evidence publicly available at this time.

Harmful A rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is somewhat likely to make you leave a discussion. Based on algorithmic detection of issues around toxicity, obscenity, threats, insults, and hate speech.

https://sl.iverify.org/methodology/

The methodology described on the Sierra Leone website is nearly identical to the four steps on the UNDP site, except that iVerify-Sierra Leone guarantees only double verification, not triple.[79] Whether that indicates funding limitations or a lack of available, trained fact-checkers is unclear. Questions emailed to Gooding about the funding and operation of iVerify in Sierra Leone have not been answered as of this writing.

What is clear is that iVerify-Sierra Leone appears to be functioning well. Between March 27, 2023, and May 30, 2023, the site has investigated and drawn conclusions on thirty-seven stories.[80] Story topics are diverse; topics include assessments of claims made about the economy, alleged statements made about or attributed to political candidates, and investigations into the authenticity of photographic or video evidence.[81] All the stories relate to content that would have a direct or indirect impact on the political climate in advance of the election.

The interface on the Sierra Leone website is user-friendly, though search capability is limited. Fact-checked stories are

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76. *Id.*

77. *See* iVerify, *supra* note 64.

78. *Where We Work*, *iVerify*, UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME, https://www.undp.org /digital/iverify (last visited June 3, 2023).

79. *Methodology*, *supra* note 75.

80. *Home*, IVERIFY SIERRA LEONE, https://sl.i-verify.org/ (last visited June 3, 2023).

81. *Id.*

arranged in successive pages in groups of twelve.[82] Pages are arranged by date, from most recent to oldest.[83] Users cannot use search terms to find a specific story, but stories can be displayed in four of the six content categories: false, misleading, true, and unproven.[84] In the period studied, prior to the June 2023 election, there were sixteen stories denoted as false, eleven as misleading, seven as true, and three as unproven.[85] Although other country-specific sites permit searches by date and subjects, the SLAJ site does not. This could be a drawback once the number of stories increases.

Clicking on a story button brings the user to a page that describes the asserted claim, the investigatory sources, and methods used to justify the assigned content classification.[86] The identity of the fact-checker is not disclosed, other than as "SLAJ-iVerify" or the "iVerify Network of Fact-Checking Desks."[87] Even so, transparency appears to be the objective, with a focus on facts known and not known, without any embellishment or political partisanship.

For example, in a story classified as "unproven" on May 30, 2023, the fact-checkers concluded that they could not confirm a high death toll in a roadside accident involving the president's motorcade.[88] The story's dedicated page details iVerify's investigation into the assertion, describing an interview with a named government press official who confirmed the accident, but with only one fatality, and a subsequent confirmation of an unidentified victim at Freetown's principal hospital morgue.[89] Curiously, in what appears to be a lack of transparency, the page identifies a second fatality by name, though it does not detail the sources and methods used to verify this claim. Also missing are the known facts of the accident itself, when it occurred and why, though an uncaptioned photo is included. The investigation

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82. *Id.*
83. *Id.*
84. *Id.*
85. *Id.*
86. *Id.*
87. *Id.*
88. IVERIFY SIERRA LEONE, https://sl.i-verify.org/no-slaj-i-verify-has-not-yet-confirmed-the-claim-that-over-seven-to-eight-individuals-died-in-the-accident-involving-the-presidential-convoy-at-mile-91-however-we-have-verified-the-involvement-of-t/   (last visited June 3, 2023).
89. *Id.*

concludes that the accident did occur, but that only the two casualties can be confirmed.[90]

The story page also describes the source of the high death toll claim in an audio message on WhatsApp.[91] This suggests that the iVerify staff may be scouring social media in search of possible disinformation and misinformation. If so, it may be that the fact-checkers are responding rapidly to verify or debunk asserted claims on social media, which reduces the impact of fake news by preventing false stories from spreading virally. This type of rapid response may be especially important in the final weeks before the next election.

Ultimately, iVerify-Sierra Leone is doing much of the work that was contemplated by the SFC Project—and that is great news. Indeed, the active stakeholders, SLAJ, IRN, and BBC Media Action all expressed interest in a revitalized SFC, and specifically the SFC Project's goal of making fact-checked content accessible throughout Sierra Leone, including those without literacy in last mile villages.

How much of the SFC Project's media information literacy mandate is present in iVerify's operation is an open question—one asked but not yet answered. BBC Media Action, apparently involved in the in-country training of iVerify's fact-checkers, is described as committed to media literacy.[92] But there is no equivalent of the graphical Salone Fact-Chicken notification system; nor is there any reference to podcasts being distributed in rural areas without media infrastructure.[93]

On the other hand, the participation of IRN, the radio network, would increase the accessibility of iVerify's fact-checking to more people, to people without digital access, and to those who cannot read. Although the operation is frequently referred to as SLAJ-iVerify, the website's splash page co-brands IRN alongside SLAJ.[94] IRN, however, does not appear to bear any responsibility for fact-checking. Its role, according to the website, is to air a weekly radio program on its member stations.[95]

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90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. BBC Media Action, https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/ (last visited June 4, 2023).

93. *Id.*

94. *Home*, *supra* note 80.

95. *About Us*, *supra* note 72; *see also About Us*, Indep. Radio Network, https://irnsierraleone.org/about-us/ (last visited June 3, 2023).

Referred to as "iVerify Radio," the IRN program is described as focused on "verified elections-related content, media literacy and electoral education."[96] The site envisioned airing the program more frequently four weeks before the June 2023 election.[97]

In the immediate run-up to the election, it was unclear if the iVerify Radio program was airing frequently. Indeed, it may not have aired at all. In Sierra Leone, plans that are far along on paper have a way of not materializing if funding is not in place. If the program was being produced, it would have been prudent to describe each week's installment with a link to the audio or to a transcript. Information on when it airs and on what stations would also help people access the content. Without specific information and links, the description of iVerify Radio looks like placeholder content—two sentences without crucial identifying detail. Still, the description used the present tense.[98] During the SFC Project, Dr. Ransford Wright, IRN's director, showed particular interest in fact-checking programming based on the chicken concept. It is quite possible that, with ongoing funding through UNDP and its partners, IRN was indeed producing a regularly scheduled show before the election.

One has to ask: why iVerify and not SFC? After all, the organizations at the helm of iVerify—SLAJ, IRN, and BBC Media Action—were also supportive of the SFC Project. The answer ultimately may have to do with funding disbursement. SFC was funded essentially by two tranches of seed money provided by the U.S. State Department in 2020 and 2022.[99] Without ongoing funding, IMdev could not sustain SFC, even with budget-neutral initiatives like the Accuracy Fellows internships. The overhead associated with running the operation, including staffing and office costs, is too high.

iVerify appears to have access to UNDP support and funding partners sufficient to sustain its fact-checking operation for the 2023 elections and a few months beyond. According to Ophaniel Gooding, iVerify received enough funding to operate for eight

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96. *About Us*, *supra* note 72.

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. *See* Media Matters for Women, https://mediamattersforwomen.org/apc-interim-chairman-appear-court-for-contempt/ (last visited June 3, 2023); *About Salone Fact-Checker,* FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/salonefactchecker/about (last visited June 3, 2023).

months.[100] New sources will be needed in Fall 2023 for operations to continue.[101] But the money is sufficient to cover current operating costs through the election and its aftermath, which appeared not to be the case with IMdev's SFC.

In many respects, iVerify addresses the same country-specific needs that the SFC Project was designed to address. The principal difference may be that the SFC Project had a much larger media information literacy focus, a reflection perhaps of the organizational missions of both IMdev and MMW. Like iVerify, the SFC Project focused on fact-checking capacity building; but it was also impelled by an anthropological inquiry to make fact-checking content more accessible to the public by making it more meaningful and digestible.[102]

The SFC Project was created to address the Sierra Leone experience in a culturally specific way. This is reflected in the chicken notification system, the rural distribution of podcast content, and in two media information literacy curricula, one for media professionals and a second for the general public. iVerify appears to be more of a top-down approach that uses an international best practices template that can be adapted to address some country-specific needs. It may not be culturally resonant as SFC would have been, but perhaps it does not need to be.

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100. WhatsApp message from Ophaniel T. Gooding, to Author (Apr. 14, 2023) (on file with author).

101. WhatsApp message from Ophaniel T. Gooding, to Author (Apr. 15, 2023) (on file with author).

102. *About Salone Fact-Checker,* FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/salonefact checkpoint/about (last visited June 3, 2023).