

# DEFUSING THE RUMOUR MILL, DIGITALLY

The text-messaging technology that's helping quash misinformation and save lives in Kenya

POSTED BY BRIAN OWENS ON FEBRUARY 16, 2016

In southeastern Kenya's remote Tana River Delta, bad information can be deadly. For six months starting in the summer of 2012, violent clashes between two of the region's main ethnic groups, Pokomo farmers and Orma herders, killed about 170 people and displaced as many as 40,000.

Much of the violence was driven by rumours, as people heard about attacks or planned attacks and retaliated or launched pre-emptive attacks of their own. But most of the rumours were false or exaggerated, either growing organically from a misunderstanding, or started deliberately to stir up trouble.

So in 2013, with support from the International Development Research Centre, [The Sentinel Project](#), a Toronto-based NGO that works to prevent genocide, began studying how the rumours spread and how to counter them.

Christopher Tuckwood, The Sentinel Project's executive director, notes the lack of any local media in the area is a major driver of rumours. "People have no reliable source of information, so they rely on word of mouth, which is often unreliable," he says.

To help fill that gap, the Sentinel Project created [Una Hakika](#) (Swahili for *Are you sure?*), a service that uses mobile phone text-messages, voice calls and Facebook to verify or debunk rumours and provide accurate information about the local situation. When subscribers hear a worrying rumour — that a neighbouring village is stockpiling weapons for an attack, for example — they can send it to Una Hakika to be checked out. John Green Otunga, the project's local coordinator, then investigates the rumour with the help of local police and community volunteers, and reports back to the subscriber and others in the area on its veracity.

In January 2016, for example, a young Pokomo man went to the mainly Orma village of Kipao to work for the day, but did not return home that night. The next morning, rumours began to spread that he had been murdered. Otunga investigated and discovered that the man had reappeared unharmed later that morning — he'd been delayed on his way home, and had decided to camp out in a tree for the night. By getting the word out with Una Hakika, Otunga was able to prevent pointless violence. "That morning, some young men were planning a revenge attack," he says.

Una Hakika is careful about how it sends out information. For example, the service won't send out a message debunking a rumour to an area where that rumour hasn't been spreading. "We don't want to spread rumours inadvertently," says Tuckwood. And if a report of violence turns out



Una Hakika community ambassadors in the town of Kipini, Kenya, in June 2014. (Photo: Adrian Gregorich)

to be true, the reply will often be delayed to give people a chance to calm down.

The most important aspect of the project has been building trust between Una Hakika and the local communities, so that they see it as a reliable source of information, says Otunga. That involved meeting with the elders and chiefs of the villages, and getting members of the community involved in the project (Una Hakika has about 200 volunteer community "ambassadors" who help with investigations, pass on information and organize meetings). Gaining that trust was a challenge, and took the better part of a year. "The first reaction was that people thought the organization had its own agenda," says Kode Komora, one of the ambassadors. "But with time, they started to trust us as they saw the information was good."

That trust-building has paid off. Over the past two years, phase one of the Una Hakika project in the Tana Delta has gained more than 1,500 subscribers in 17 villages, and reaches an estimated 45,000 people. There has been an "explosive improvement" in the quality of information available to people in the Tana Delta with the arrival of Una Hakika, says Komora.

The next step is to expand the project to cover more of the country in time for the August 2017 elections, when politically motivated misinformation is expected to raise tensions. The political parties tend to divide along ethnic lines and often play up the conflicts between groups to drum up support, and that can boil over into violence, as it did during the 2007 elections when more than 1,000 people were killed. The hope is that Una Hakika can defuse some of those tensions this time around.

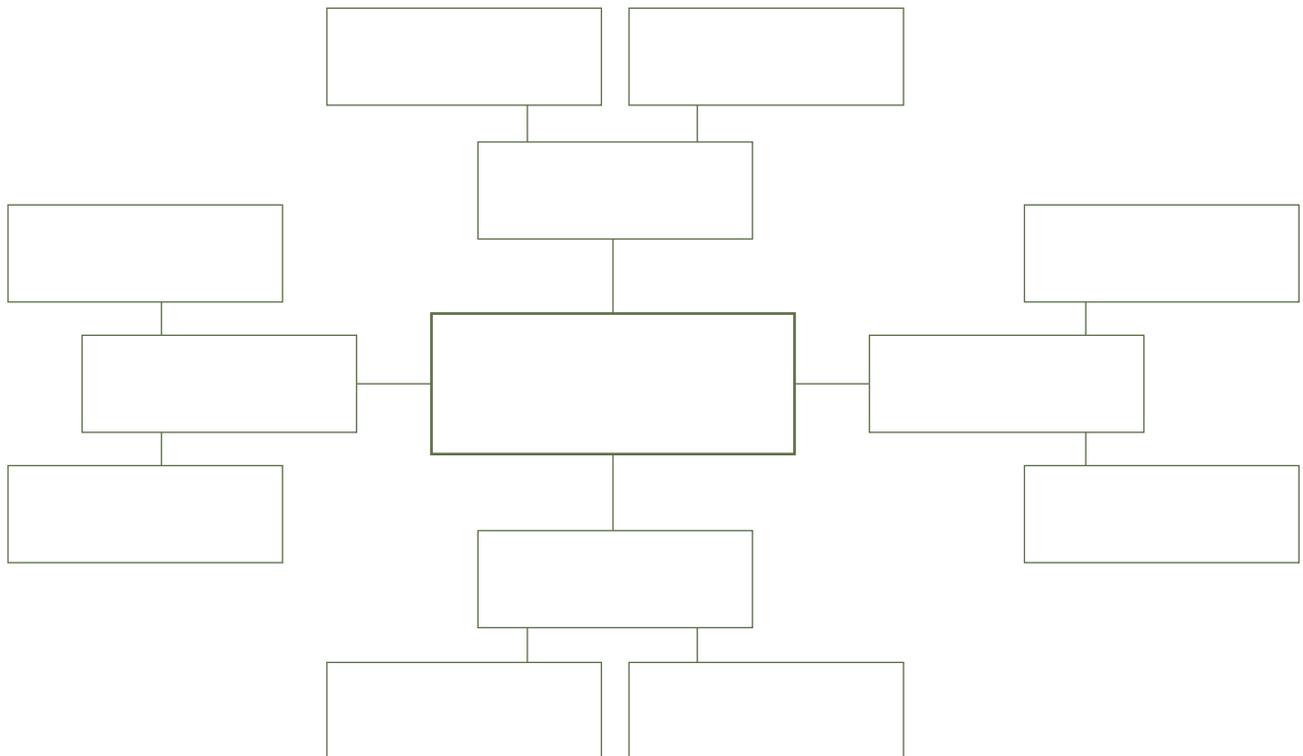
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## READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. A mind map begins with a main idea. From this idea, branches are formed that clearly show important details. Additional sub-branches are drawn to further demonstrate understanding. Using the map below as an example, formulate a combination of pictures and words to create a mind map that shows your understanding of:
  - a) The main idea of the article
  - b) Important details
  - c) Questions that you have from your reading
  - d) Connections between content in the article and your own life



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2. Reflect on circumstances in your own life that have been affected by rumours. Compare the similarities and differences between how rumours are spread in your community and in the Tana River Delta. Consider the following:
  - How rumours are spread
  - How quickly misinformation spreads
  - How people react to rumours
  - Geographical features that influence the spread of rumours
  - Cultural factors that influence the spread of rumours



3. The article states that the most important aspect of the project has been building trust between Una Hakika and the local communities. What conclusions can we draw from this?

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4. Create an insightful question that you would include in this booklet for students to answer.

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5. Using data from the article, judge whether the Una Hakika service is saving lives in Kenya.

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6. Evaluate the importance of questioning information that you hear.

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7. The article states that Una Hakika is careful about how it sends out information. Take the role of John Green Otunga, the Sentinel Project's local coordinator. Create a sample text message that could be used to debunk a rumour. The text message should:

- Provide accurate information
- Be respectful and build trust

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8. Should expanding the project to cover more communities in Kenya before the 2017 elections be the next step? Explain your reasoning.

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9. What's going on in the picture? Be sure to notice the details.

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### Think-Pair-Share

10. *Think* For the Pokomo famers and Orma herders, technology is saving lives by debunking rumours. It is helping to uphold basic human rights and prevent violence.

- a) Reflect on the use of technology in your own life. What are some ways that it hinders the spread of rumours at school? What are some ways that it contributes to the spread of rumours?

HOW TECHNOLOGY CONTRIBUTES TO RUMOURS	HOW TECHNOLOGY HINDERS RUMOURS

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- b) The Sentinel Project saw a problem that needed a solution in the region, and came up with a way to help. Identify a need in your school and come up with an innovative way that technology could help solve the problem.

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*Pair* In a small group, share your idea on how you think technology could help solve a problem in your school. As a group, choose one of the ideas and rework it so that it is ready to be discussed with your class.

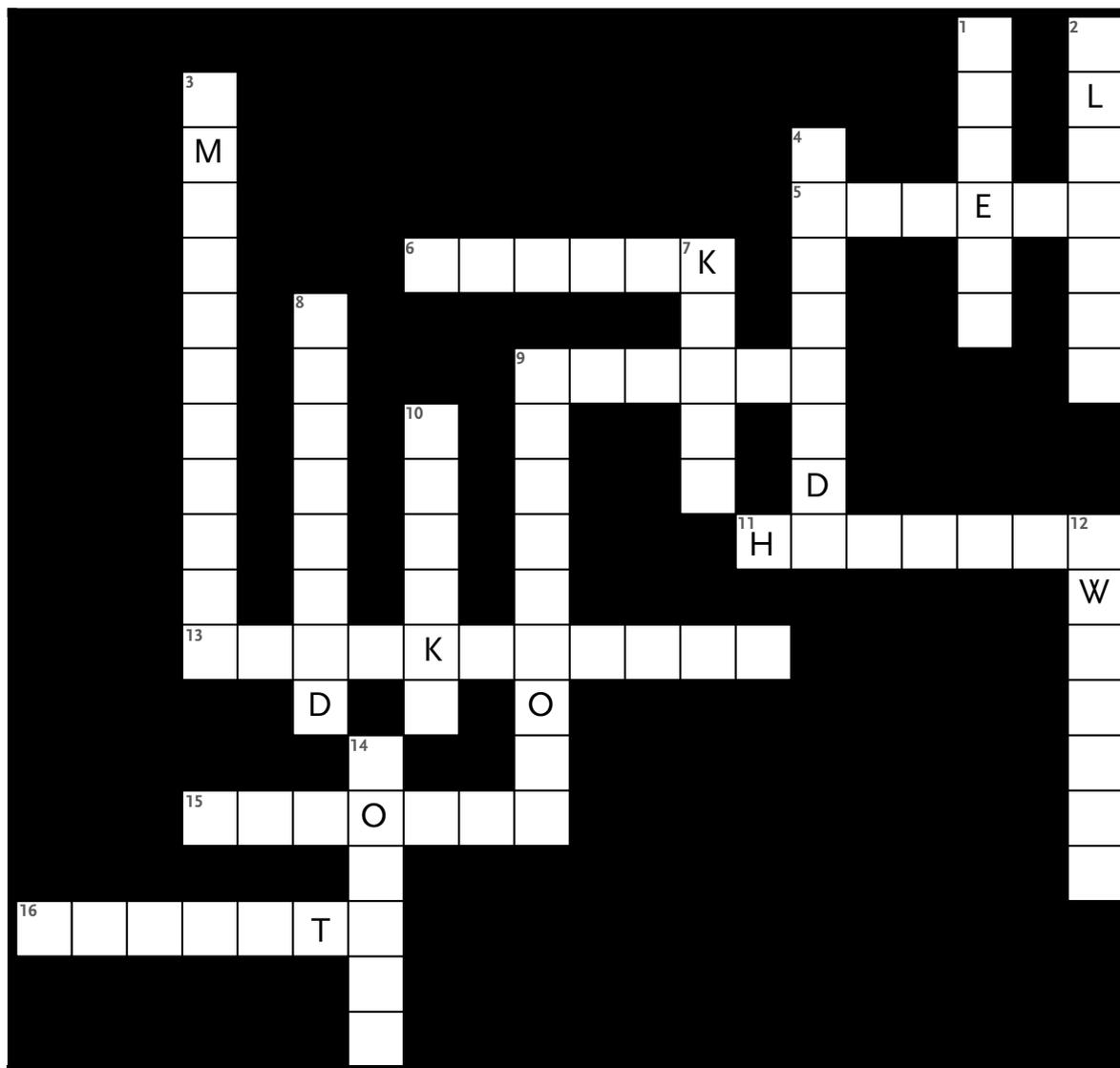
*Share* As a class, share and discuss your ideas.

## ONLINE

- Visit the following pages to learn more about the [Sentinel Project](#):
  - [Report: Una Hakika Phase 1 Results](#)
  - [WikiRumours](#) was created to help stop the spread of misinformation. Visit the [Una Hakika](#) page to view how the technology works. Locate the section on recent rumours.
  - Discover what makes [ThreatWiki](#) significant.
  - Watch the video [Sentinel Focus - Christine Mutisya of Una Hakika](#).
  - Watch the video [Sentinel Focus – John Otunga of Una Hakika](#).
  - Watch the video [Una Hakika Ambassador](#).
  - Listen to the podcast [Atrocity Prevention Monthly - a podcast by the Sentinel Project, Episode #2](#).
- Learn about the [Swahili language](#).
- Compare the [Human Development Index](#) of Canada and Kenya.
- Explore the following on [Google Maps](#):
  - Locate Tana River County, Kenya.
  - In which direction is Nairobi from this region?
  - Which country borders Kenya to the east?
  - Locate two towns in this region.
  - What ocean is Kenya's coast on?
- Find out more about the [International Development Research Centre](#).

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## CROSSWORD:

### Across

5. Older influential members of a group
6. Showing that a rumour is untrue
9. A group sharing a common culture
11. People who take care of domestic wandering animals
13. Gathering a large supply of items
15. Gossip
16. Where the Sentinel Project is based

### Down

1. Leaders of villages
2. Violent conflict between the two ethnic groups
3. Community members volunteering to help with investigations
4. The Sentinel Project tries to prevent this
7. A country of east-central Africa
8. The Sentinel Project's executive director
9. Voting a person into political office
10. Una \_\_\_\_\_
12. A widely used language in East Africa
14. Farmers in the Tana River Delta