

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report
April 25 (Weekly Brief #17 of 2022)



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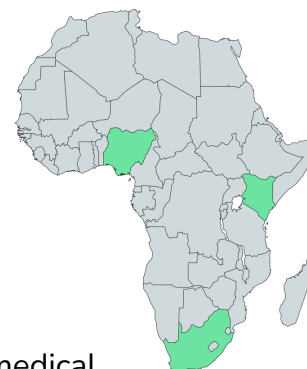
Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This report seeks to communicate operational recommendations based on social media monitoring from April 15-22, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation. Target countries include Angola (PT), Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (EN), Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, and Senegal (FR). Descriptions of “engagements” and information gathering are listed in the methodology section at the end of this report.



Medical officials are targeted as untrustworthy

CONTEXT: As COVID-19 case numbers increase in some African countries, medical officials representing governments and health organizations have expressed concerns over the future epidemiological trends for the disease.



Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa

- Responses to public warnings or expressions of concern from medical officials have revealed the public's distrust toward any individual reporting potential danger of the increase of COVID-19 cases.
- As many individuals have perceived the pandemic as over or nearing its end, government officials with pending elections have been notably less visible in promoting caution for removing all preventative safety measures that have been in place during the pandemic. However, medical officials have been more vocal and negative rhetoric has been narrowed to rebuff any statements that suggest the pandemic may be entering a new wave. [\[LINK\]](#)[\[LINK\]](#)
- Responses also underscore a belief that the reports of increasing cases in African countries have been fabricated, and that governments and public health organizations are making an effort to “re-establish control” or finally impose vaccine mandates that were unsuccessful in prior efforts.

Why is it concerning?

- Public health officials are getting backlash on social media channels that may dissuade public announcements and discourage those that promote accurate information from taking such a public stance. COVID exhaustion in both the media and in daily life has taken its toll, and continuing to express concern is becoming more unwelcome.
- Beliefs that COVID-19 cases are being falsified as they are on the rise is a dangerous precedent, specifically at a time when many are accepting that the pandemic is over or that variants are not of concern.

What can we do?

- Encourage using data and trusted and internationally recognized voices to curb local backlash of public health officials.
- Promote vigilance with preventative measures and explain how these practices can mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and the emergence of new variants.



Rising belief that vaccines are weakening immune system

CONTEXT: In a widely viewed and disseminated interview with Dr. Peter McCullough, a U.S. based cardiologist, he claims that studies are showing that single, double, and even triple vaccinated individuals are seeing an increase in numbers of cases, hospitalizations, and even deaths as compared to unvaccinated individuals.



Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa

- The interview has made a significant impact in anti-vaccination camps, as this video serves as another rallying point for individuals to feel justified in not taking the vaccine. The video has been removed from Facebook multiple times, with 10 broken links found from posts just over the last week. However, the information is still being shared at a significant rate on Telegram and has been even more prominent on WhatsApp.
- Responses to the video highlight multiple individuals claiming they no longer trust any vaccines, and some responses revealed that the confusion around the vaccine has caused hesitation for having children receive routine vaccinations.



The Vaccines Have Backfired—Weakening the Immune System—Increasing the Risk of Death

Dr. McCullough: "[Scotland statistics] are showing now for fully vaccinated, double-vaccinated, triple vaccinated, increasing numbers of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, and it really markedly outnumbers the risk in those who are unvaccinated."

Why is it concerning?

- Anti-vaccine narratives are populating at a much faster rate than pro-vaccine language as many prominent voices in the public health information space have slowed in dissemination rates. This has allowed for speculation and misinformation to go unchecked and accurate content is not keeping pace.
- The distrust in all vaccinations is concerning, and the belief that the mRNA version of vaccines causes severe immune system side effects has resurfaced.

What can we do?

- Promote accurate statistics for COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths for non-vaccinated in comparison to vaccinated to debunk these claims and reiterate the positive impacts of vaccinations for strengthening immuno-responses.



Measles outbreak in Liberia

CONTEXT: A measles outbreak has reportedly reached 14 of the 15 counties across the country of Liberia.

- A measles outbreak that has spread across the country has been slowly progressing throughout the last year. There have been reports of deaths from measles, but the number is not definite based on the lack of ability to validate that all deaths were strictly related to the disease.
- The Chief Medical Officer in Liberia also stated that the outbreak was due to a low measles vaccination rate for children as parents refrained from bringing their children in for immunization during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- If cases continue to present, the Liberian Ministry of Health will implement a nationwide vaccination campaign for measles.

Cholera outbreak in Zambia

CONTEXT: A cholera outbreak has been identified in Zambia over the last several weeks with cases primarily located in the Lusaka province.

- The cholera outbreak that has registered under 10 cases in the Chilanga and Lusaka districts is being met with an aggressive oral vaccination campaign.
- According to the Minister of Health, Sylvia T. Masebo, over 4,000 people in the Lusaka district and over 4,500 people in the Chilanga district have been vaccinated (figures may be updated by dissemination of this report).
- Criticisms raised by individuals on social media platforms claim that the “scrambling” to avoid a wider outbreak has highlighted the issues around preventative measures that still have not been put in place.
- Additional concerns were shared that efforts around the prevention of Cholera have been overlooked based on the COVID-19 pandemic and the desire to collect funding that will allegedly be misallocated by government officials rather than addressing the most impactful and pressing health issues.

Ebola outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo

CONTEXT: A single case of Ebola has been identified in the Equateur province in the city of Mbandaka.

- The Ebola case is of concern. Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, acknowledges that the case was identified after two weeks leaving the potential for exposure to other citizens in the region.



Persistent Rumors

Rumor: Vaccines don't prevent death or the virus' spread/vaccines are not effective

- Response: Vaccines provide protection against serious complications from COVID-19 and the new variants. (Viral Facts response [here](#))

Rumor: Foreign companies or governments profit from the vaccine rollout in Africa

- Response: Highlight successes in vaccine distribution, as well as new manufacturing campaigns beginning in Africa.

Rumor: Inaccurate assumptions of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects

- Response: Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects continue to be misinterpreted or overstated (Viral Facts response [here](#))

Rumor: COVID-19 no longer exists / never existed

- Response: COVID-19 cases have declined but health authorities are warning of a potential 5th wave (Viral Facts response [here](#))

Rumor: Frustration with looting and mismanagement of COVID-19 funds

- Response: Review the COVAX program and the global effort to effectively distribute vaccines via a multi-organizational campaign

Information Gaps: Do mRNA vaccines weaken the immune system?

The concern that the COVID-19 vaccine, particularly the mRNA component of the immunizations, has regained a foothold in public discourse.

The confusion around how the mRNA component is applicable is not being addressed in recent narratives, particularly in public health messaging. To key components need to be addressed:

- What is mRNA, and why is it a part of the COVID-19 vaccine and not other more well-known vaccinations?
- Does the mRNA component of the COVID-19 weaken the immune system?



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COVID-19 VFA content

- The importance of getting vaccinated [[LINK](#)]
- The pandemic is not over! [[LINK](#)]
- COVID-19 effects on sexual performance [[LINK](#)]

New Viral Facts Africa campaign to counter vaccine hesitancy

WHO in Africa has worked with the UK Government and Viral Facts Africa to create a new campaign to support Covid-19 vaccine demand across Africa. Building on the experience WHO and Viral Facts Africa have in countering the spread of health misinformation and disinformation in the African region, the UK Government has developed messaging based on insights and behavioral science expertise gained during the pandemic. These digital assets will help to build vaccine confidence by tackling the most prominent drivers of vaccine hesitancy and support Africa's recovery from the pandemic.

[Link](#) to have an overview of the produced assets / Links to download ([EN](#)/[FR](#))

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a split of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries. The social media analysis for French-speaking countries is conducted by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Guinea, the one for Lusophone speaking countries by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Angola, and the one for English speaking countries by a WHO AFRO social media officer.

The final report is a combination of the three analyses and recommendations. The shift from a social media listening monitoring conducted by only one person for the whole



African region into a combined one based on the analysis conducted by three different people may result in a less detailed and exhaustive report.

Engagements, otherwise known as interactions, **refer to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and re-shares on a post.** This is not a perfect measure of engagement:

- Some may have seen the post and chosen not to interact with it;
- Commenting on or re-sharing a post may constitute a more meaningful form of engagement than simply reacting to it;
- We are not systematically distinguishing between the types of responses that each engagement generates (e.g. while a post may contain misinformation, people may be countering/ debunking it in the comments).

We seek to mitigate these limitations by:

- Scanning comments and monitoring reactions to qualitatively evaluate responses to each post;
- Assessing the velocity of a post (i.e. how fast is it obtaining reactions, likes, shares) and the re-emergence of specific themes;
- Identifying whether the post is shared across a variety of platforms and sources (broad engagement), or simply soliciting a high level of attention within a given community/ platform (siloes engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, TweetDeck, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and WHO EARS platform.

As a result, data may be biased towards data emerging from formal news outlets/ official social media pages and does not incorporate content circulating on closed platforms (e.g. Whatsapp) or groups (e.g. private Facebook groups). We also rely on our fact-checking partners, who provide invaluable insights into relevant national and regional trends or content, as well as country-level reports, including the South Africa Social Listening Weekly Report and the Mali Social Listening Weekly Report.

In producing these summaries and recommendations, we have consulted community feedback survey reports, as well as monitoring and recommendations from AIRA partners. We also draw from WHO EPI-WIN weekly reports and UNICEF monthly reports to formulate recommendations. As we produce more content, we seek to triangulate and corroborate information across these groups to strengthen our infodemic response.



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Our commercial social listening tools include:



WHO social listening tools:



Early AI-supported Response with Social Listening