



COVID-19 Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This report seeks to communicate **operational recommendations** based on social media monitoring from December 25-31, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation.

Target countries include **Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (ENG), Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, Mauritius, and Niger (FR)**. We have outlined what we mean by “engagements” and how we gather information in the methodology section at the end of this report.


CONCERNING TRENDS

- [Continued growth of anti-vaccine rhetoric](#)
- [Belief the pandemic is over](#)

POSITIVE TRENDS

- [Positive response to Africa’s leadership in Omicron wave](#)

TOPICS OF INTEREST

- Reports of a **new surge in COVID-19 cases** in the Democratic Republic of Congo claim that the healthcare system is under pressure with the spike in hospitalizations.
 - The Democratic Republic of Congo is still registered as the least vaccinated country in the world, and the new wave is quickly turning into a high-risk situation. [\[LINK\]](#)
- **Over one million doses of AstraZeneca’s COVID-19 vaccine were destroyed in Nigeria.** The doses were originally donated to Nigeria with little shelf life left before expiration, and this has led to the head of Nigeria’s National Primary Health Care Development Agency, Faisal Shuaib, to declare that Nigeria would no longer accept these types of donations of vaccines with a shelf life that makes it very difficult to distribute before expiration. [\[LINK\]](#)
- More than 800,00 doses of Pfizer vaccines were donated to Angola by the U.S. government last week. The vaccines were sent through the COVAX program and arrived in Luanda on Christmas day.
 - **Fantastic gift on Christmas Day for Angola!**
@UNICEFAngola, @YeroviH, @1atulkumar More than 800 thousand doses of Pfizer vaccine  have arrived this afternoon in Luanda as a part of the donation from the United States Government through #COVAX facility.
[\[LINK\]](#)



POTENTIAL INFORMATION VOIDS (KEY QUESTIONS)

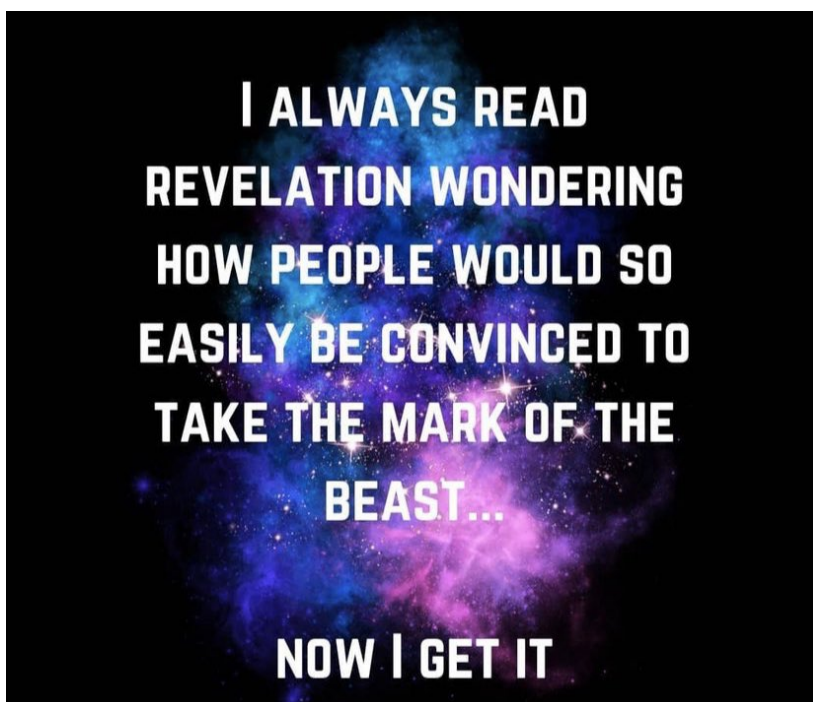
- While anti-vaccine rhetoric has increased, there has also been an increase in calls for free testing. Potential recipients express confusion on where testing may be available and what the cost is for receiving a COVID-19 test. While many resources have been produced to try to address this gap, constant recirculation of this type of material should be beneficial. The continuous promotion of this content will, in time, cross particular feeds and grow in visibility, specifically to connect to social media users stating that they do not have any information on COVID-19 testing.

TRENDS and TOPICS TO WATCH

- The majority of the new misinformation or anti-vaccination content that was circulated in monitored social media channels is *not originating in Africa*. The challenge is that the content is rapidly popping up in European and U.S. accounts and creating enough of a viral surge that it is quickly showing up in African social media channels. Creating counterinformation that is able to have as wide of a reach at that rate is difficult, however, in-country content addressing top misinformation issues is still very effective. The current trend will likely fade in the upcoming weeks as they are cyclical in nature, and there will be an opportunity for clear and concise counterinformation to find prominence in the lull of content.

Continued growth of anti-vaccine rhetoric

- **Nigeria**
 - Over the last week, there was an increase in anti-vaccine rhetoric in monitored social media channels. The largest spike came from Nigerian accounts, but it is notable that most of the content is not originating in Nigeria, rather it is shared and widely circulated by Nigerian accounts. Two primary narratives emerged in the last week that drove the increase.
 - First, taking the COVID-19 vaccine is resigning to receive the **“mark of the beast.”** Though this is not a new stance, it underscores the deep-rooted belief which is a difficult obstacle to overcome.



- The second prominent narrative was a call to **ignore new mandates and no longer listen to the “science” that is presented**. The initial threads were again created by European and U.S. social media users, but they have found significant amplification in Nigerian channels. Examples such as this [one](#) highlight the overall exhaustion being caused by the “infodemic” and that is resonating with some Nigerian social media users.
- **Guinea**
 - In a recently deleted tweet that had received over 300 shares and 1,900 likes, there was pushback against the vaccine in Guinea as well.
 - **“Straight from the Horses mouth! A mass Global 🌍 Experiment & we’re the Guinea Pigs! Horrific! Lock him up...lock them *all* up! #Fauci #FauciLiedMillionsDied #Biden #Trump #Johnson #Sturgeon #Drakeford #Covid19UK #KeepTheBan #Pfizer #JJ #Moderna #StopTheShot #Booster #Omicron”**
 - This has not been a prominent trendline through November and December, but the pace at which this statement went viral in Guinean social media channels before it was removed suggests there is also a significant group of individuals in the country that are anti-vaccine that have not been particularly vocal in social media.

What can we do?



Continued efforts to show transparency around vaccines. Additional education on how vaccines are made, specifically how vaccines developed early in the pandemic can still be effective against a new variant of COVID-19.

- Produce content explaining **why vaccines are considered safe and effective**

↪ Viral Facts example [here](#)

Viral Facts Africa video on **side effects**

- September 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- August 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- June 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- Clarify **indicators of potential side effects** for people to watch out for and **how to respond**
↪ Viral facts example [here](#) and [here](#)
- Viral Facts video explaining why **vaccinated people can test positive** [here](#) and [here](#)
- Viral Facts video explaining that **vaccinated people don't shed the virus** [here](#)
- A greater level of vaccine success stories. **Trusted figures that have taken the vaccine need a greater media presence.** Surrounding the confusion regarding the severity of Omicron, there has continued to be a decline in prominent influencers in the media space continuing to address the need for vaccinations and the positive impact it has had in their lives.

Belief the pandemic is over

- **South Africa**
 - Following the reports of South Africa being beyond the peak of Omicron cases, there has been an emerging trend of claims that not only is the “4th wave” over, but the mild nature of Omicron cases means that the pandemic has likely come to end. [\[LINK\]](#)
 - Threads with what is being perceived as “coerced language” from European and U.S. sources have been widely shared in South African media. [\[LINK\]](#)

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread with the following tweets:

- Mark D. Levine** (@MarkLevineNYC) · 17h: Like so many of my fellow NYers, I have just **tested positive** for covid. My **symptoms** are **mild**. Since I have thankfully been vax'd and boosted I am confident I will be fine. I am grateful to everyone who has made that extraordinary thing possible. Be safe out there folks. (1K replies, 420 retweets, 3.9K likes)
- Mitzie Hunter** (@MitzieHunter) · 21 Dec: Following a PCR test over the past weekend, I have **tested positive** for **#COVID19**. Thankfully, my **symptoms** have been **mild**, and I feel fine. I will continue to self-isolate and follow Public Health Guidelines. I am grateful for being fully vaccinated. (216 replies, 105 retweets, 1.5K likes)
- UN GA President** (@UN_PGA) · 22 Dec: I have **tested positive** for COVID19 today. I am isolating at home with **mild symptoms**. (80 replies, 150 retweets, 465 likes)
- Elizabeth Warren** (@SenWarren) · 19 Dec: I regularly test for COVID & while I **tested negative** earlier this week, today I **tested positive** with a breakthrough case. Thankfully, I am only experiencing **mild symptoms** & am grateful for the protection provided against serious illness that comes from being vaccinated & boosted.
- Rep. Jason Crow** (@RepJasonCrow) · 20 Dec: I just returned from an official congressional delegation visit to Ukraine and **tested positive** for a breakthrough COVID infection. I'm thankful to be fully vaccinated and boosted and experiencing only **mild symptoms** (the vaccine is safe and effective).
- Sen. Cory Booker** (@SenBooker) · 20 Dec: I learned today that I **tested positive** for COVID-19 after first feeling **symptoms** on Saturday. My **symptoms** are relatively **mild**. I'm beyond grateful to have received two doses of vaccine and, more recently, a booster – I'm certain that without them I would be doing much worse.
- State Rep. Carl O. Sherman** (@CarliOShermanTX) · 20 Dec: Today, I received the news that I **tested positive** for COVID-19. I am thankful that my **symptoms** are **mild**. I ask that everyone please stay vigilant because this pandemic is not over. I encourage each of you to take the Omicron variant seriously and get vaccinated.
- Abdulla Shahid** (@abdulla_shahid) · 22 Dec: I have **tested positive** for COVID19 today. I am isolating at home with **mild symptoms**. I was privileged to have been fully vaccinated including a booster. My prayers are with the millions suffering from Covid and the billions without access to vaccine! I Stand for **#VaccineEquity**



● **Burkina Faso**

- Prominent social media accounts in Burkina Faso are identifying bot accounts spreading warnings about the harmful effect of COVID-19. The effect of this messaging will distract from the desired messaging (COVID-19 is a serious threat) and decrease trust in authentic public health communications by drawing attention to undesirable, untrustworthy messengers.. Highlighting the thread during the delta variant wave, social media users are comparing the previous rhetoric to the Omicron wave as “proof” that the pandemic’s continuance is fear-mongering.
 - “Repeating a lie over and over will not make it a truth! Spread the word ! ^^ # COVID19” [[LINK](#)]



What can we do?

Be clear and straightforward in messaging about the status of the Omicron variant in terms of knowledge and spread and use verified, high-trust messengers. Tensions will likely get higher in the next two weeks and be proactive rather than reactive in addressing the usefulness of PHSMs may have a good place in this conversation.

Share Viral Facts Africa videos on Omicron:

- Viral Facts Africa Video Week 50 ([Twitter EN](#), [Twitter FR](#), [Facebook EN](#), [Facebook FR](#))
- Viral Facts Africa Video Week 49 ([Twitter EN](#), [Twitter FR](#), [Facebook EN](#), [Facebook FR](#))
- Viral Facts Africa Video Week 48 ([Twitter EN](#), [Twitter FR](#), [Facebook EN](#), [Facebook FR](#))



Positive response to Africa's leadership in Omicron wave

- **South Africa**

- As Omicron COVID-19 cases begin to trend down in some countries in Africa, there is a developing trend of international praise and gratitude for South Africa's leadership in identifying the variant and serving as the ground zero for a large share of scientific discovery regarding Omicron. [[LINK](#)]
 - "I am eternally grateful to South Africa for alerting the world abt omicron. We all should be. Their decision to come forward, even at risk of being penalized for doing so, saved lives.
 - "This Xmas I'm very thankful to the South African scientists who let us into their world in order to manage the weeks to come. We shouldn't forget what they've done for us in the past month ; After much scepticism of SA data, indicative of "unless we say so", appears that scientists and Governments from high income countries have come around that Omicron causes less severe illness, despite being the most antibody evasive variant. Experience seems to be tracking SA."
 - "READ] Piers Morgan: "Omicron is Not a 'South African variant', it's a Variant Spotted & Reported by Brilliant South African Scientists"

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What can we do?

Highlight these successes

- Promote partners' campaigns, and highlight when they make progress across platforms.
- These stories are going to be useful in working to counteract the very stubborn rumor of "African's being guinea pigs" during this pandemic. Promotion of African successes are of high value.

PERSISTING ONLINE TRENDS

* bolded trends appear to circulate more this week

- **Debates on plurality of vaccines**
- Frustration with double standards around health and safety measures (e.g. politicians not wearing masks)
- **Frustration with slowness or mismanagement of vaccine rollout**
- **Vaccines don't prevent death or the virus' spread / vaccines are not effective**
- COVID-19 palliatives are being hidden/ denied to citizens
- Lockdowns are not an effective way of controlling COVID-19



- Clinical trials were rushed
- **Africans are lab rats or being used to test vaccines (Viral Facts response [here](#))**
- New pandemic waves/ COVID-19 are caused by vaccines
- **Other issues and/or diseases are more important than vaccination**
- **Vaccines won't stop the need for protective measures, why bother (Viral Facts response [here](#))**
- COVID-19 case numbers/ mortality rates are exaggerated
- **Foreign companies or governments profit from the vaccine rollout in Africa**
- **Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects**
- COVID-19 does not exist (Viral Facts response [here](#))
- Effectiveness of herbal remedies (Viral Facts response [here](#))
- Effectiveness of ivermectin and alternative remedies (particularly in South Africa) (Viral Facts response [here](#))
- Frustration with looting and mismanagement of COVID-19 funds
- Moderna vaccination pause in Finland ([here](#))
- The upcoming seasonal flu campaigns at global level ([LINK](#)), that may develop into potential discussions to be anticipated ([LINK](#))
- China's coronavirus patients subject to abuse and bullying as new outbreaks emerge ([LINK](#))
- A map of Africa's vaccine [progress to date](#) illustrates alarmingly low vaccination rates on the continent
- **Concerns emerge as COVID-19 mutates in HIV positive people [here](#) and [here](#), complicating the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic**
- Hospital data in South Africa demonstrates that COVID-19 deaths [primarily](#) occur in unvaccinated individuals
- Claim that the NCDC Vaccination Department director [stated AstraZeneca](#) could be administered as a [second dose](#) for those who received the Sputnik V vaccine
- Claim that India plans to begin exporting vaccines again in October
- Amnesty International states that [COVID-19 vaccine firms are fuelling a human rights crisis](#) by refusing to waive intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccine technology

Methodology

AIRA has implemented a temporary new social media listening set-up to fill the gap left by the departure of the AIRA Social Data Analyst until a new full-time person is recruited.

The new temporary social media listening set-up 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 (siloe 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.

Our commercial social listening tools include:



**Africa Infodemic
Response Alliance**
A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK

Weekly Brief – January 3rd, 2021

WHO

social listening tools:



Talkwalker



TweetDeck



**Early AI-supported Response
with Social Listening**

COVID-19 Infodemic Insight Report