

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

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AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

7-13 April 2023

(Weekly brief #67)

Top trends

[Suspected Marburg cases in Malawi ruled out](#)

Following the suspected cases of Marburg virus in Malawi, online users have shared their fatigue and fear over the announcement of a new disease amid the current cholera outbreak and emerging concerns following damages caused by cyclone Freddy.

[Polio mis & disinformation circulating on social media](#)

Reviews of social media coverage on polio this week have revealed multiple misinformation claims that suggest unproven alternative cures for polio. Disinformation around the declaration of the circulating variant poliovirus type 2 in Burundi and the DRC remains prevalent online.

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Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from April 7-13 in Africa.

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Malawi

Suspected Marburg cases in Malawi ruled out

CONTEXT: Following the suspected cases of Marburg virus in Malawi, online users have shared their fatigue over the announcement of a new disease amid the current cholera outbreak and emerging concerns following damages caused by cyclone Freddy.

Engagement: 9 posts, 2155 likes, 865 comments

- The Ministry of Health in Malawi published a press release on [Facebook](#) that ruled out Marburg disease after clinical examination and further laboratory investigations. Reactions from online users who responded to the Facebook [post](#), however, still expressed fatigue over the continued disease concerns in Malawi, but also fear and anxiety of what will happen. Some of the comments are highlighted in the screenshot below with one comment translated from Chichewa into English.



- [Reports](#) had been previously published that five suspected cases of Marburg disease were detected in Mzuzu, the capital of Malawi's Northern Region and the third largest city by population in Malawi. The news has been shared by a digital media outlet called Zodiak Online and was published ahead of the Ministry of Health's public notice about the suspected cases.
- The number of Google searches about the "Marburg virus" was higher in Malawi on April 8th, specifically in Northern Malawi where the suspected cases were announced the day prior. "Symptom - Topic" and "blood -body fluid" were

breakout terms among the most searched topics in Malawi. “Marburg virus disease” was the most searched term in the monitored period.

Why is it concerning?

- News agencies breaking news about suspected cases ahead of the Ministry of Health (MoH) can lead to speculation or misinformation regarding the status of marburg cases in the region.
- The fear over the announcement of suspected Marburg cases can create more anxiety among online users who can start amplifying misinformation around the announcement including misinformation that has been previously shared in the cholera outbreak (the government seeking a new way to gain international funds, and the government’s inability to respond effectively to the outbreak)
- Misinformation can create distrust towards the government, and healthcare facilities in Malawi especially that samples have been sent to South Africa for results and did not get tested by local health facilities.

What can we do?

- Amplify accurate information for the audience’s knowledge about the symptoms and transmission methods of the disease. Use available Marburg communication material including VFA [videos](#) to prebunk and bolster accurate content in the information ecosystem.
- Reassure online users and enhance transparency and trust by sharing official communication updates on the social media platforms of the Ministry of Health in Malawi [[FB](#), [Twitter](#)] about the status of suspected cases of Marburg in the country.

Nigeria, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo

Polio mis & disinformation circulating on social media

CONTEXT: Social media coverage on polio has revealed multiple misinformation narratives regarding religious cures for polio. Disinformation is still prevalent following the declaration of the circulating variant poliovirus type 2 in Burundi and the DRC.

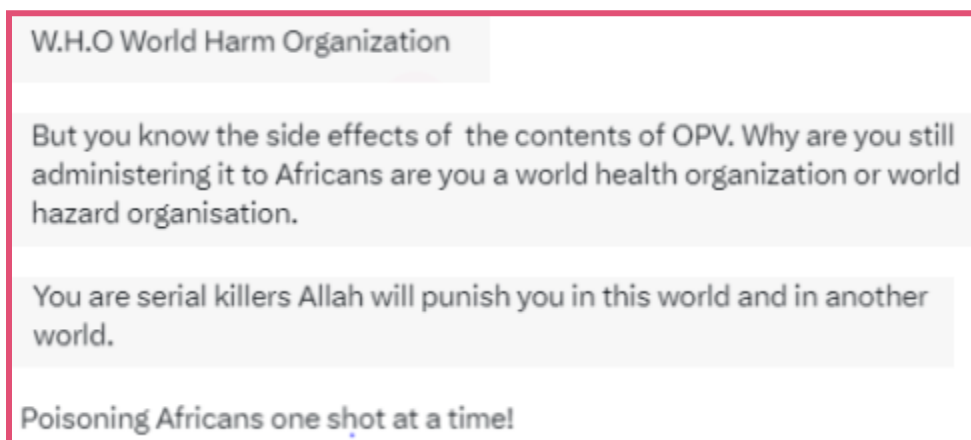
Engagement: 7 posts, 901 likes, 619 shares

- Posts by disinformation and anti-vax groups are still circulating following the [declaration](#) of an outbreak of circulating variant poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV 2) in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

- A [tweet](#) by the group “Children's Health Defense,” mainly known for anti-vaccine propaganda and identified as one of the main sources of disinformation on vaccines, reads “Gates Foundation funded the new oral polio vaccine responsible for PARALYZING children in March in Africa”.
- Comments by social media users contributed to the global conspiracy narrative about pharmaceutical companies' effort to control and depopulate Africa by using children as “guinea pigs.”



- Social media users who commented on a [tweet](#) by the World Health Organization African region shared on April 12, contributed as well to the global conspiracy narrative with mentions of the WHO as a harmful organization claiming to poison Africans through polio vaccines.



- Facebook posts shared by Nigerian religious organizations and a prophet called “Prophet Isaac Amata Prophecies” suggested individuals paralyzed by polio were cured through prayers. The accounts sharing the videos have over 542k followers and accumulated more than 1k views. [[LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#)].

Why is it concerning?

- Persistent disinformation about the vaccines against polio and conspiracy theories about the involvement of Bill Gates is persistent could lead to a decrease in vaccine uptake (due to hesitancy) and, therefore, to missed children in upcoming vaccination rounds. Anti-vax groups continue to illustrate a receptive audience in online African communities.
- While [Nigeria](#) has not recorded polio cases since 2016, it is important to continuously engage faith-based organizations in public health interventions as trusted influencers that can impact vaccine acceptance among communities.
- Since a mass polio vaccination campaign will be launched in May, including in [Nigeria](#), it's important to keep monitoring online and offline conversations and start addressing concerns, questions of individuals around polio and vaccine efficacy.
- It's also important to work closely with journalists, community leaders and fact checkers to avoid the circulation of misinformation and address harmful disinformation before and during the campaign, while evaluating the post-campaign results as well.

What can we do?

- Engage with religious leaders to emphasize that polio has no cure and that vaccination serves as a preventative measure against the virus. The [WHO](#) fact sheet on polio can be used as a reference as well as VFA [social media toolkit](#) on polio.
- As new developments and variants of poliovirus arise, continuous advocacy for vaccine acceptance is crucial following potential erosion in the public's trust of preventative measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Persisting concerns

Cholera concerns persist after cyclone Freddy

- According to the Malawi national community feedback database, data collected by the Malawi Red Cross from 23-27 March 2023 from 250 internally displaced people (IDPs) at Kapeni displacement camp in Blantyre district showed that concerns constituted 49% of the feedback collected, mostly: concerns over the inaccessibility of cooking utensils, cleaning materials (including soap, buckets), food insecurity, and housing facilities.

- Following news that 11 students at Chiwale boarding secondary tested positive for cholera, online users who commented on a Facebook [post](#) by Times 360 Malawi, raised concerns about the lack of access to sanitation and hygiene measures at school establishments.

Key resources

Cholera

- [Social media toolkit](#) with all recent Viral Facts videos on cholera: (ENG, FR).
- Global Task Force on cholera control [resources](#)
- [Social, behavioral and community dynamics related to the cholera outbreak in Malawi](#) / RCCE Collective Service in the East and Southern Africa Region.

Polio

- UNICEF Digital Community Engagement Unit [Newsletter](#)
- Global Polio Eradication Initiative communication [toolkit](#) and technical guidance in French and English
- [Video](#) about “Why is polio back in some countries”/ UNICEF Digital Community Engagement Unit
- Debunk [message](#) about Bill Gates, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the polio program (to be adapted upon country needs)

Marburg

- [Social media toolkit](#) with all recent Viral Facts Videos on Marburg (ENG, FR, SP).
- Marburg Virus Disease in Tanzania - Rapid Response [Video](#)

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a combination 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, and 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 (siloeed engagement).

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