

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

14-20 April 2023

(Weekly brief #68)

Top trends

[Disinformation about malaria vaccine gains traction on social media](#)

Following the announcement that the R21/Matrix-M (R21) malaria vaccine received regulatory clearance in Ghana, online users shared conspiracy theories and disinformation about the clearance of the vaccine.

[Persisting trends](#)

Disinformation persists amid measles outbreak in South Africa.

Lack of access to safe water persists amid cholera outbreaks.

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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 14-20 in Africa.

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Disinformation about malaria vaccine gains traction on social media

CONTEXT: The R21/Matrix-M (R21) malaria vaccine developed by [Oxford University](#) received regulatory clearance in Ghana by the Ghana Food and Drugs Authority. For Ghana, the vaccine could further reduce child illness and death from malaria particularly among children and pregnant women accounting for 18% inpatient cases due to malaria in [Ghana](#) in 2020. Oxford researchers and their partners reported following trials in 2021 that R21/Matrix-M demonstrated high-level efficacy of [77%](#).

Engagement: 20 posts, 5.5k likes, 1.4k comments

- Following [news](#) about the approval of Ghana's Food and Drugs Authority of a new malaria vaccine, called R21/Matrix-M, multiple local and regional news agencies (including broadcast media) have amplified the development on social media platforms.
- United Television Ghana, a 24-hour local broadcasting network, drove significant engagement from its 2M+ social media followers on a Facebook [post](#). Conspiracy theories and disinformation that target global western pharmaceutical companies were promoted alongside claims of orchestrated efforts to use Ghanians as test subjects to experiment the new vaccine. Users called for a vaccine developed in Africa instead of relying on western expertise.
- Below is a snapshot of some of the users' comments:

Eih!, So Ghana has turned into a test transmission nation.
Oh Ama Ghana!!! 😞

They succeeded in killing business in Ghana now they want to kill us all, I'm out

First country to approve ? So we are going to be used to test the vaccine 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄

When will Ghana ever do something?
We only know how to approve other's works that tend to give them millions of dollars

Common sense should work here, the vaccine was produced in Oxford why don't they start using it before we Ghanians, But useless government has approved it for usage. We have a long way to Go 🇬🇭

Now we turn rat 🐭 and rabbit 🐰 because of money 💰🇬🇭 eiii

- Google Trends show an increasing interest in “malaria” since April 12th with higher interest, most notably in the Volta region of Ghana. “Anopheles stephensi” and “symptoms of stomach ulcer” were breakout searches on Google Trends. This trend followed the recent [identification](#) of a mosquito vector of malaria and of [cases](#) of buruli ulcer in upper Manya Krobo in Eastern Ghana.
- In Nigeria [[LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#)], online users also commented on Facebook posts about the announcement of the new malaria vaccine in Ghana. The most prevalent narratives question the trial of new vaccines in Africa and the importation of vaccines from Western countries instead of relying on the local production of vaccines. The comments below show some of the users’ reactions:

Please Nigeria wait and see the outcome in Ghana before we go for it .we can't use our country children for experimental drugs or vaccines.

Why can't Africans develop their own vaccines instead of importing everything?

Using Ghana as test ground ghanians be wise

This is dangerous & worrisome.
Nothing good will come Africa from the western world.

We want Nigerians to be use now for experimental vaccines ? Nigeria is trying in some area that need to be celebrated few months ago

Mehn, what a break through. So good but unfortunately, it is produced by non Africans for Africans. What a shame.

And here in Nigeria, with all the professors and PhD holders we have in this country they've not added any value to our society.

- Nigeria has also [granted](#) provisional approval to Oxford University's R21 malaria vaccine shortly after the announcement by Ghana Health Services. According to the [2021](#) World Malaria Report, Nigeria had the highest number of global malaria cases (27 % of global malaria cases) and the highest number of deaths (27 % of global malaria deaths) in 2020.
- In South Sudan [[LINK](#)], online users congratulated Ghana on the acceptance of the malaria vaccine and asked when South Sudan will have access to it.
- In South Africa [[LINK](#)], some online users have expressed their mistrust of Western pharmaceutical companies and academic institutions, including “Oxford University,” where the vaccine was developed.

- Six days after the announcement of the newly-approved malaria vaccine, Ghana Health Service published a [press release](#) on Twitter on April 15th about the detection of a newly-detected malaria-transmitting mosquito, Anopheles stephensi in the Greater Accra region. In 2019, [WHO](#) issued an alert identifying the spread of Anopheles stephensi as a significant threat to malaria control and elimination. It is widespread in numerous countries including certain countries in South-East Asia and large parts of the Arabian Peninsula.
- The [tweet](#) garnered 42.2K views. Online users who questioned the coincidence of both announcements endorsed misinformed views. These competing narratives branched into public mistrust. On one hand, users claimed the Ghanaian authorities created the newly detected mosquito to profit from the vaccine, and on the other hand, users claimed further mistrust in global pharmaceutical companies that planned both events as part of an “agenda.”



Why is it concerning?

- Conspiracy theories and disinformation continue to illustrate an audience still receptive to this type of rhetoric, particularly regarding vaccines developed by Western countries.
- It is concerning that reactions from Nigerian and South African online users have also contributed to disinformation narratives across Africa about the newly-approved R21 vaccine in Ghana.
- If disinformation narratives about the new malaria vaccine affects public opinion, this could also negatively impact other routine vaccinations including the upcoming polio vaccination campaign in May, including in Nigeria.
- The general audience might pose questions about the efficacy of the first malaria vaccine RTS/S to fight malaria and the credibility of medical research institutions in developing high quality vaccines.
- News of the detection of a new malaria transmitting mosquito *Anopheles Stephensi* coinciding with reports of the clearance of the malaria vaccine may drive confusion and the development of misinformation.

What can we do?

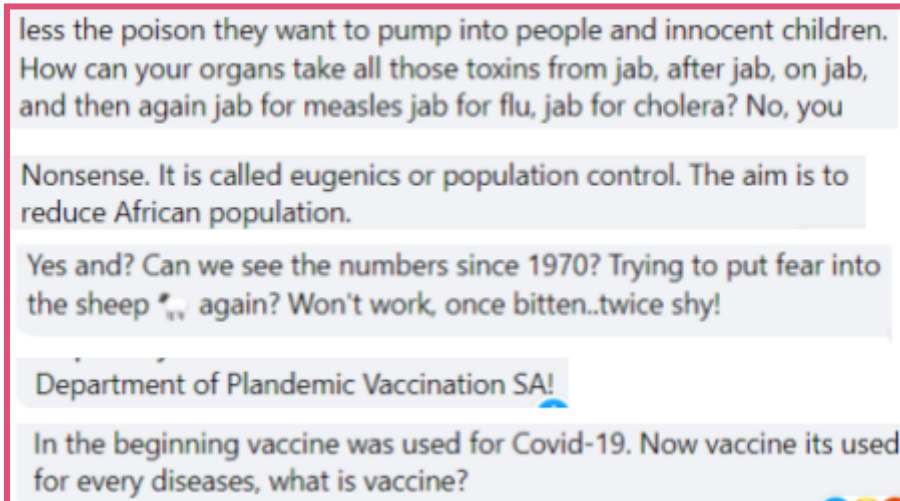
- Continue to monitor the conversation ahead of World Malaria day on April 25th to address potential concerns, questions of individuals around malaria, its cause, transmission, preventive measure, treatment and vaccines available. It is also important to work closely with journalists, community leaders and fact checkers to avoid the circulation of dis-misinformation.
- Similarly, it is important to work with relevant media outlets to clearly communicate the separate and distinct natures of the two coinciding events and to provide accurate information about malaria prevention and control strategies and communication about how the mosquito *Anopheles stephensi* appeared and spread across Africa [[WHO](#)].

Persisting trends

Disinformation persists amid measles outbreak in South Africa

- Persistent disinformation regained traction amid the measles outbreak in South Africa following a [post](#) by the National Department of Health on the continuous increase of measles cases in the country.

- Multiple online users who commented on the same [post](#) have reintroduced conspiracy theories about inoculating the population with vaccines as the sole objective of the outbreak. Anti-vaccination and disinformation narratives resurfaced as well, including theories of population control and injecting poison into “innocent children.” Below are some comments shared by online users:



- References to the COVID-19 pandemic have also been monitored in the comments, along with sentiments of mistrust in the COVID-19 vaccine and concerns about the current status of the pandemic.

Lack of access to safe water persists amid cholera outbreaks in South Africa and Mozambique

- Social media coverage in South Africa and Mozambique revealed concerns over the unavailability of safe water and poor sanitation measures amid cholera outbreaks affecting both countries.
- The Facebook page of the city of Tshwane, in Gauteng, South Africa [posted](#) about preventive measures that mitigate the spread of cholera in the country, including steps to follow when buying food from street vendors. Online users raised concerns about electricity load shedding which can exacerbate the spread of cholera by disrupting water treatment facilities, causing food spoilage, and leading to poor sanitation.
- Similarly, according to a Facebook [post](#) by Midia Rovuma, an online news agency based in Maputo with more than 88k followers, online users commented about the uncleanliness of bathrooms at Jose Macamo General Hospital, a public hospital located in Maputo.



- Concerns from online users depict a perception of poor hospital management which can lead to a lack of trust in the hospital's ability to provide high-quality care and to respond effectively to the cholera outbreak.
- Following a [post](#) by Justiça Nacional, a Mozambican news and media website, more concerns were raised about the lack of access to sanitation and hygiene measures in Maputo.

The lack of hygiene and medium sanitation in most of the peripheral neighborhoods and rural areas of Mozambique, by the population and some fault of the government and the edis, contribute significantly to the proliferation of the cholera bacteria "dirty hands disease", that's the truth hurts those who hurt.
And, to me, this MISAU data on cholera, in terms of infected and deaths is, roundly false, maybe 3 or 5 times higher.

Trends to watch

Pertussis epidemic in Guinea

- In a Facebook [post](#), WHO Guinea confirmed a pertussis outbreak in the village of Gbè, in the sub-prefecture of Nzoo, on the Guinea-Ivory Coast border. The video features the head of the NZoo Health Center, who gives more details about the first cases detected in a primary school.
- Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory infection and spreads easily from person to person mainly through droplets produced by coughing or sneezing. The disease is most dangerous in infants and is a significant cause of death in this age group. [\[WHO\]](#)

Suspected cholera cases in Mukuuni High school in Kenya

- Citizen Digital Kenya, the largest TV station in Kenya with more than 65k followers on Facebook, shared an [article](#) about suspected cholera cases at Muukuni Boys High School in central Kenya. The school was closed on Wednesday 12 April till the next term.
- The article shared on [Facebook](#) garnered 1k likes and 211 comments from online users. Users expressed their concerns regarding “poor hygiene,” food insecurity, and reports of increased hospitalization and suspected cases in schools in Kenya.

Measles outbreak in Lesotho

- The Ministry of Health, through the Maseru District Health Management Team, [launched](#) a measles vaccination campaign on April 17 following a measles outbreak in Maseru where four children were confirmed to be infected.

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.
- Cholera outbreaks [Q&A](#) (WHO)

Malaria

- WHO [initiative](#) to stop the spread of Anopheles stephensi in Africa
- WHO malaria fact [sheet](#)
- Malaria threat [map](#)
- Malaria Social & Behavior Change Communication National [Strategies](#)

Measles

- WHO measles fact [sheet](#)
- [Social media toolkit](#) with all recent Viral Facts videos on measles: (ENG, FR).

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 (siloe 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.