

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

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AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

18- 25 May 2023

(Weekly brief #73)

Top trends

[Diphtheria cases in South Africa](#)

Reviews of social media coverage in South Africa revealed information gaps about diphtheria and concerns about a “potential new pandemic” amid the outbreak.

[Nigerian online users misinterpret report of “new pathogen deadlier than COVID-19”](#)

The WHO Director-General's Report to Member States at the 76th World Health Assembly on 22 May 2023 was open to misinterpretation by Nigerian online news channels.

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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 May 18-25 in Africa.

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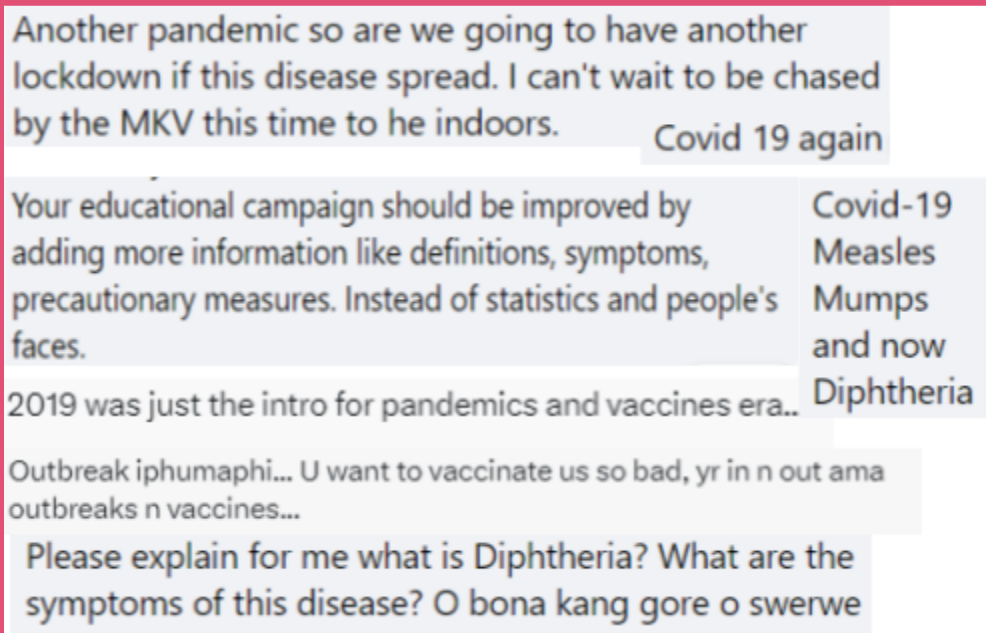
South Africa

Diphtheria cases in South Africa

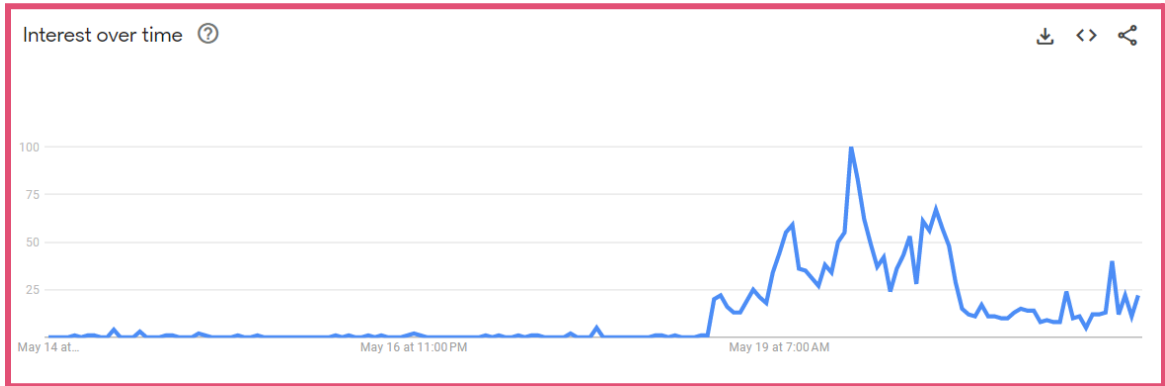
CONTEXT: Reviews of social media coverage in South Africa revealed information gaps about diphtheria and concerns about a “potential new pandemic” amid the outbreak.

Engagement: 20 posts, 1.5k likes, 779 comments

- After the Ministry of Health in South Africa [reported](#) two cases of diphtheria in Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal on May 18th, various online reactions emerged.
- There have been concerns regarding the [porosity](#) of the borders between South Africa and its neighboring countries, which increases the potential for diseases to spread easily across these borders. People demanded more information about diphtheria, including its [definition](#), [symptoms](#), and precautionary measures. Fatigue was evident regarding disease announcements, including previous reports on cholera, [mumps](#), and COVID-19 from online news agencies. Discussions regarding vaccines were also monitored, with speculations that local authorities will request vaccination against diphtheria at a later stage.
- Below are some comments from online users:



- Google Trends shows an increasing interest in “diphtheria” since May 18th with higher interest in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal where the cases are located. “Disease outbreak” and “wit seer keel”, which means diphtheria in Afrikaans language, were breakout searches on Google Trends.



Why is it concerning?

- Cases of diphtheria in South Africa serve as a reminder that a decline in vaccine coverage, potentially influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, can result in an increase in disease spread. It also highlights the possibility of undetected circulation of the disease in other provinces where routine immunization was hampered by the pandemic. General awareness of diphtheria may have also been hindered since the last outbreak in South Africa occurred in [2018](#).
- There have been ongoing discussions regarding several diseases that have previously and currently occurring in South Africa, such as measles and mumps and cholera, as well as speculations surrounding upcoming vaccination campaigns. These discussions may indicate a growing sense of fatigue towards numerous disease announcements.
- During the beginning of an outbreak, people tend to seek information actively, thereby increasing their exposure to accurate information needed at this stage of the response. In addition, fear and uncertainty might impact people's ability to analyze information objectively.

What can we do?

- While diphtheria antitoxin is in [short supply globally](#), preventive measures are essential to mitigate the spread of the disease.
- Sharing accurate information is also needed to optimize the information stream with information on the nature, symptoms and treatments of the disease.

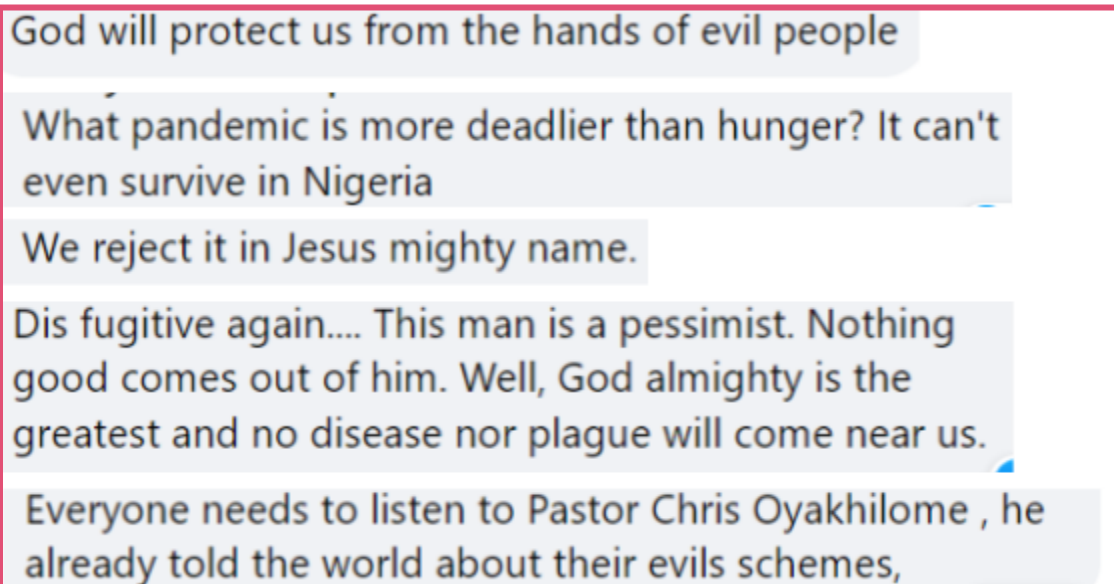
Nigeria

Nigerian online users misinterpret report of a “new pathogen deadlier than COVID-19”

CONTEXT: The WHO Director-General's [Report](#) to Member States at the 76th World Health Assembly on 22 May 2023 was open to misinterpretation by Nigerian online users.

Engagement: 10 posts, 1k likes, 910 comments

- The headline of a Facebook [post](#) by Nigerian Channels Television reads: “The World Health Organization is calling on the world to be ready for the emergence of a pathogen deadlier than the novel COVID-19.” This was subject to misinterpretation by online users who commented on the post.
- In fact, online users rejected the news and encouraged other users to heed the words of Nigerian pastors and pray to God for the protection of “evil people”, insinuating global health practitioners. Some users questioned whether poverty in Nigeria posed a greater threat to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Below are some comments:



- The content of the article quoted that Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus “did not mention the name of the “expected” disease but urged all to be ready to answer decisively.” The language used by the Nigerian channel can be subject to misinterpretation as well.

- In fact, some users who commented on another [post](#) by Channels Television expressed doubts about the WHO's awareness of the new disease and suggested its involvement in the creation.

Is it that they're still manufacturing the virus in the lab?.How come he's aware ahead of breakout of the pandemic?

How did you people know about it if you aren't the ones responsible for it

If you guys is now warning us against a new pandemic deadly than covid, that means you guys new about it, if you are warning us against it then what is your duty as WHO why are you there at the first place, is it to prevent and protect the people from it,what are you doing about, warning us means you guys is part of the game

Why is it concerning?

- Distrust towards the WHO, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, may have contributed to the misinterpretation of the Director General's report by online news agencies and users.
- Limited comprehension of pandemic preparedness beyond the realm of public health professionals can pose challenges in effectively reporting on and influencing the public perception of professionals' role in safeguarding public health.

What can we do?

- As the emergency phase of COVID-19 has come to a close, rebuilding trust between the WHO and global audiences becomes paramount. Rebuilding trust can prevent individuals from easily misinterpreting or succumbing to misinformation and disinformation regarding the WHO's work.
- Regular briefings, press conferences, and interviews can help journalists better comprehend and communicate pandemic preparedness measures.
- VFA videos [[ENG](#), [FR](#)] on reading beyond headlines can be disseminated to ensure readers comprehend the importance of reading an article beyond its headlines.

Persistent trends

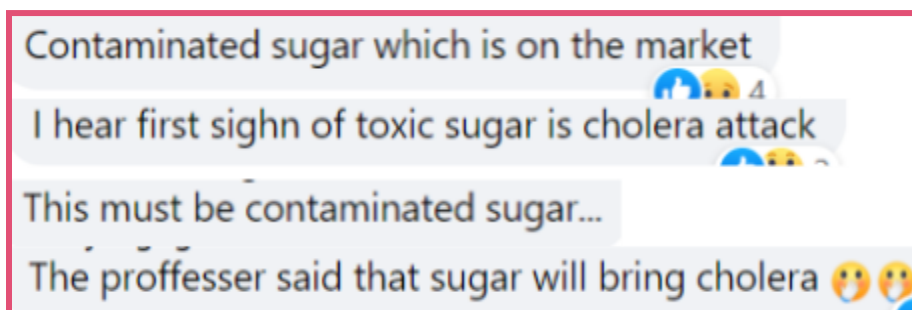
Cholera outbreaks detected in various counties in Kenya

Kirinyaga county

- Kenyan online news agencies such as [NTV Kenya](#), [The Star, Kenya](#) and [Standard Kenya](#) have recently covered the news of a cholera outbreak in Kirinyaga county in the course of the month.
- The county executive committee members intensified campaigns against the spread of the disease which includes sensitization of the residents through public barazas (meetings), health education in schools and the use of public address systems in urban centers and villages.
- The relatively low engagement of online Kenyan users regarding the news about cholera in Kirinyaga county could be attributed to the perception of cholera outbreaks as relatively common or without any importance. As a result, they might not consider it as an urgent issue, leading to less engagement.

Juja county

- [Citizen TV](#), [NTV Kenya](#) and [Malema TV](#) reported a cholera outbreak in Juja county after eight people have been admitted to Gatundu Level 5 hospital in Kiambu county.
- The outbreak struck Juja area, as a result of the consumption of contaminated water. The water is allegedly contaminated as a result of leakages on an ongoing project to expand the sewer lines in the area.
- Users who commented on the Facebook [post](#) by Malema TV, which describes itself as "an Authoritative TV channel that shares quality and classified information from within and outside world," have linked the outbreak to the [suspension](#) of expired sugar into the Kenyan market.
- The Kenya Bureau of Standards had declared the sugar as unfit for human consumption and was set for destruction through conversion to industrial ethanol.



Homa Bay county

- [NTV Kenya](#) reported about a cholera outbreak in Homa Bay county on 21st May with 37 infections and one death with patients exhibiting symptoms ranging between mild and severe dehydration.
- Online users who commented on the Facebook [post](#) of the Governor of Homa Bay Gladys Wanga, [NTV Kenya](#) and [Radio 47](#) revealed concerns over the unavailability of safe water and poor sanitation measures by residents.
- Below are some comments from social media users that were translated from Swahili into English.

Several slums without even toilets Governor Gladys Wanga.Despite being near the lake,it still lacks proper water circulation in the residence

Cholera outbreak means homabay county has not hygienically safe dirty and health wise not in good condition clean no clean water, no good sanitation you

Public health department should be on the look out, let the public cooperate.

People are getting satisfied with dirty water in Homabay.

Because of poor sanitation most beaches in the said county have very few latrines most people use bushes and fishermen wanapupu kwa lake

Cholera outbreak in Gauteng, South Africa

- The National Department of Health [announced](#) on 22nd of May 29 confirmed cases of Cholera in Hammanskraal, a province in north Gauteng including 15 deaths. The Director-General of the Department of Water and Sanitation confirmed in an [interview](#) with eNCA that the cholera outbreak in Hammanskraal is a result of malfunctioning and inadequate wastewater treatment works.
- Over 40 posts shared by broadcast media outlets, in both Afrikaans and English, garnered significant engagement from South African online users

Local authorities are blamed

- Online users commenting on the Ministry of Health's Facebook post attributed the introduction of cholera into South Africa to local authorities. This narrative is the most prevalent on all social media posts. Users expressed their frustration due to issues such as electricity load shedding, untreated sewage flows and pollution.

ANC has failed us, in every which way, 😞😞 The whole country's infrastructure has fallen, making every citizen to suffer and some dying. They don't care about us. They

Well done ANC to bring Cholera in the country..... THEY are fooling us as a nation. We must voted them out of the government. THIEVES AND TOO MUCH LIES

Well this is all to blame on goverment and its poor management!!! They all want a piece of the pie well surprise Anc there is no more pie left

All the fingers are pointing to local and central government. They are responceible to clean and disinfect the tap water that they are supplying to their comunidades.

Lack of access to safe water

- On a Facebook [post](#) by Mortele Community Radio, a community radio station with 54k followers on Facebook, online users are commenting about the lack of access to safe water in Hammanskraal, and are requesting the prompt support from the local authorities.

Who still drinks tap water in Hammanskraal in this era of ANC incompetence and who still trusts Jubilee Hospital "abattoir"?

People of Hammanskraal have been complaining about water crisis for long now. This government has done absolutely nothing to solve the crisis. Look at what's happening today??? All they focused is motion of no confidence to DA as if bona they are better mxm.....

Trends to watch

Crimean Congo Hemorrhagic fever in Namibia

- Health authorities in Namibia issued a [public notice](#) on May 24 on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Health stating the symptoms, mode of transmission, and preventive measures to be adopted to mitigate the spread of the disease.
- The Ministry's Facebook post has garnered comments from users expressing their concerns regarding the measures implemented to curb the spread of the disease, such as the potential for a lockdown and the upcoming vaccination plan for the population. Additionally, there is a prevailing fear among some individuals that healthcare workers may already be infected. Below are some comments:

There they start, next think you hear is, lockdowns and vaccinations...

Can't even load the pages in the correct order. We will have lockdown if these clowns are in charge.

No, those preventive measure are still less, you forgotten to tell people to stay away from Doctors, Nurses, Social Workers, Vets, and Animals handlers. Those people are probably already infected.

Lock down loading

- According to the [World Health Organization](#), Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever (CCHF) causes severe viral haemorrhagic fever outbreaks. CCHF is endemic in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and Asia, in countries below the 50th parallel north, the geographical limit of the main vector species, a tick.
- Users who engaged with The Namibian Sun's [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) posts, which boast a substantial digital following of over 445k, shared comments that highlighted a lack of information regarding the symptoms of the disease. Furthermore, there were expressions of concern suggesting the possibility of CCHF being even more perilous than COVID-19. Below are some of the users' comments:

I want to know, what are the symptoms???

Oh, let it not kill the same way Corona did, it wasn't easy

Another dangerous disease please God help us recover from this, COVID on the other side 🙏

From Corona to hemorrhagic fever.....let's stay safe

Prepare for a disease even deadlier than Covid, WHO chief warns

Key resources

Diphtheria

- [Diphtheria](#) - an update by NICD South Africa
- [WHO](#), Q&A diphtheria

Cholera

- Cholera [social kit](#) VFA
- SPRP [link](#)
- World Health Assembly: [Q&A cholera](#)
- [Call](#) for urgent and collective action to fight cholera
- Cholera emergency [page](#)
- Global Task Force on Cholera Control Cholera [roadmap](#)

Crimean-Congo

- Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever [WHO](#) fact sheet

COVID-19

- [WHO](#), What's the difference between Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and pandemic?
- [Social media toolkit](#) with all recent Viral Facts videos on COVID-19 (ENG, FR).
- [WHO](#), 2023-2025 COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan.
- [WHO](#), Preparedness and Resilience for emerging threats.
- [Q&A](#) on ending COVID-19 as a global health emergency
- [WHO's Science in 5](#) : Public Health Emergency of International Concern
- [WHO](#), What's a public health emergency of international concern?

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.