

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

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AIRA Infodemic Trends Report
20-27 June 2023
(Weekly brief #77)

Top trends

[Conspiracy theories surface following Bill Gates' visit to Nigeria](#)

Following Bill Gates's visit to West Africa including Nigeria and Niger, social media users in Nigeria expressed their skepticism about the motives of his visit.

[Ugandan herbalist arrested for selling unproven HIV cure](#)

The arrest of herbalist Dr. David Ssali in Uganda has sparked a wave of support from social media users, who rallied to defend his credibility and support his work in herbal medicine.

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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 June 20-27 in Africa.

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Nigeria

Conspiracy theories surface following Bill Gates' visit to Nigeria.

CONTEXT: Following Bill Gates's visit to West Africa including Nigeria and Niger, social media users in Nigeria expressed their skepticism about the motives of his visit.

Engagement: 4 posts, 3.2k likes, 1.3k comments

- Following the [visit](#) of Bill Gates to West Africa on June 21, Nigerian social media users displayed their skepticism about the motives of his visit.
- Both a tweet by a Nigerian [user](#) and a YouTube [video](#) by TVC News, a 24-hour television news channel based in Lagos, Nigeria, garnered similar reactions from commentators.
- These included concerns about the depopulation of Nigeria's population, questions about the possibility of [organ harvesting](#), and speculations about the introduction of another vaccine in Nigeria. Here are a few examples of the comments:

I don't like Bill Gates, but you see what his foundation is doing for Nigeria and Africa, we must be grateful to him. I no wan know wetin em don do before or wetin dem dey suspect sey em do.

Gates came to hustle.
I'm sure he will be welcomed.

The goal is to ensure Nigeria remains underdeveloped.

Reducing the world population is the goal

Bill gate mission??

When he gave free polio jabs did you shout no we didn't want...

- International users discussing Bill Gates' visit include [Wittgenstein](#), an account with more than 158.6k followers on Twitter, that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic and spreads anti-vaccine content.
- Commentators raised concerns about Nigeria being the source of the [next](#) pandemic and [questioned](#) the implementation of Gates' \$7 billion commitment to support routine immunization and polio eradication in Nigeria.

- It's noteworthy that Wittgenstein shared another [tweet](#) on June 25th reminding his followers about “polio outbreaks in Africa caused by mutation of strain in the vaccine”. This theme has also been retweeted by the [Africa chapter](#) of [Children's Health Defense](#), known for spreading anti-vaccine disinformation with low engagement monitored on the tweet.
- The prevalence of sensationalist headlines regarding polio, including news concerning vaccine-derived polioviruses, holds significant relevance for international users and audiences. However, the impact of such headlines extends further, potentially affecting African communities by rendering them more vulnerable to misleading information and subsequently reinforcing polio vaccine hesitancy.

Why is it concerning?

- Skepticism and mistrust that arose during the pandemic toward global health initiatives and leaders resurface whenever international public health figures express renewed interests and collaborations in the health sector.
- Bill Gates has been the target of numerous conspiracy theories, particularly related to polio vaccines, population control, and global health agendas. His visits or engagements are now extremely tied up to existing conspiracy theories and fuel the spread of misinformation and disinformation online.
- Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, YouTube [implemented](#) policies and guidelines to curb the dissemination of medical misinformation on its platform. However, the comments on Bill Gates' visit remain relatively unmoderated, with minimal barriers to public posting.

What can we do?

- Social media platforms can acknowledge the impact of conspiratorial commenting on posts that are susceptible to misinformation. By issuing statements on such posts, platforms can highlight that engaging in conspiracy theories through comments serves to reinforce existing false narratives, undermines credible authorities, and amplifies inappropriate or misleading content.

Uganda

Ugandan herbalist arrested for selling unproven HIV cure

CONTEXT: *The arrest of herbalist Dr. David Ssali in Uganda has sparked a wave of support from social media users, who rallied to defend his credibility and support his work in herbal medicine.*

Engagement: 14 posts, 2.1k likes, 1.6k comments

- The arrest of [Dr. David Ssali](#), a herbalist based in Kampala, Uganda, has caused a flurry of posts across various social media platforms, including Facebook and TikTok. Dr. Ssali gained attention for promoting a treatment on [TikTok](#), claiming that onions could cure HIV.
- A significant number of social media users, who engaged with multiple Facebook posts shared by [Urban Television](#), a prominent Ugandan TV channel boasting over 458k followers, as well as posts by the [Daily Monitor](#), expressed a strong inclination to defend Dr. David Ssali's credibility and support for his contributions to the field of herbal medicine.
- Similar sentiments have been observed on TikTok posts by private [Ugandan users](#), where users have also expressed support for Dr. David Ssali in response to the ongoing discussions surrounding his arrest. Below are some comments:

The one person that i know is legit is him actually, this gentleman s medicine has been approved to cure AIDS just like Dr Sebi was implicated so is Dr Sali now but truth always finds its way to the dinner table

He needs to be protected not being demoralized. He's a national treasure. He's far much better than pastors who claim to heal people from their illnesses of which they fail.

This guy is good, he has cured a lot of people, why all this to him??

But actually onions are antiviral. So am sure if someone uses them for long hiv can cure.

Bt Dr ssali has been operating for many year I hav heard him for so long nw hw come he has been operating illegally for all tat time and in city center

Why is it concerning?

- Dr. Ssali is a prominent and trusted traditional herbalist in Uganda. Healthcare relies heavily on trust between patients and healthcare providers. The promotion of unproven treatments can breed skepticism toward legitimate healthcare practices, ultimately hindering the delivery of proper medical care and impeding progress in public health.
- The widespread promotion of unproven HIV cures on Ugandan social media platforms presents a significant concern. This trend can lead individuals to seek unverified or potentially harmful remedies, thereby jeopardizing their health and overall well-being. Additionally, it creates confusion regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs, which are scientifically proven to be the standard treatment for HIV.
- There is a lack of clear distinction between herbal medicine that can serve as immune system boosters and those claimed to be the sole effective treatment for communicable diseases.
- Many individuals who come to seek treatment from Dr. Ssali have likely heard firsthand testimonials of other patients who have experienced healing and positive results under his care. Such testimonials can further enhance Dr. Ssali's reputation and solidify his credibility in the eyes of potential patients.

What can we do?

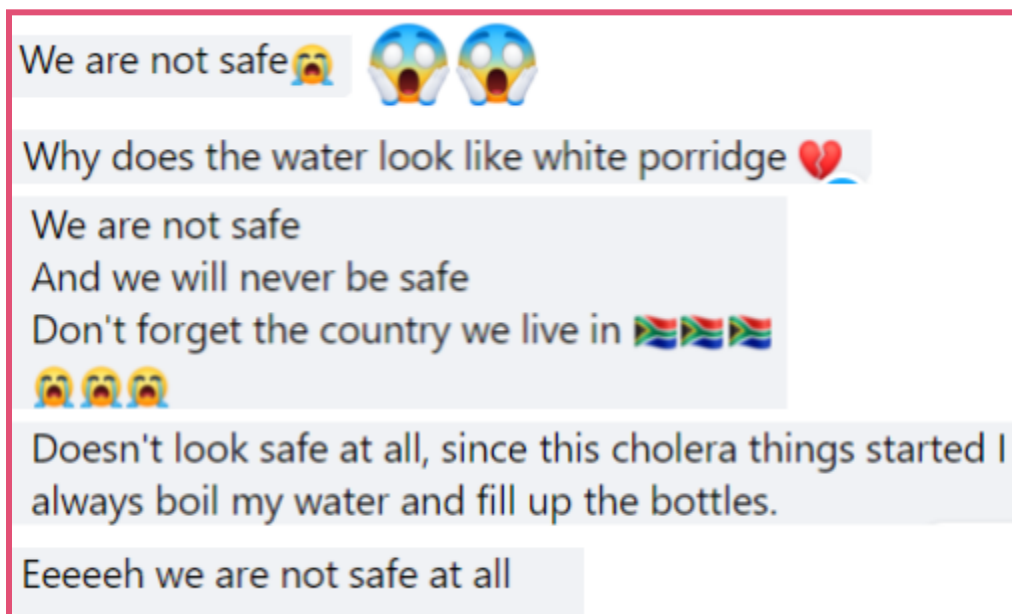
- People might have positive experiences after consulting herbal doctors and therefore trust their work. However, It's important to consult multiple healthcare professionals who can guide patients towards evidence-based treatments including treatments of communicable diseases.
- While traditional remedies have been used for centuries and may have cultural significance, it is important to remember that not all of them have been scientifically validated or proven effective.
- About [78 %](#) of people living with HIV were on antiretroviral therapy in the Region in 2021. This rate was 75% in 2020. The upward trend in treatment coverage indicates progress in expanding access to effective HIV management strategies and highlights the ongoing efforts to combat the disease at a regional level. The continuous promotion of these effective strategies remains crucial.

Persistent trends

Cholera outbreak in South Africa

Lack of access to safe water

- In a YouTube [video](#) posted by SABC News on June 21st, Dr. Sean Phillips, the Director General of the Water and Sanitation Department, has raised concerns regarding the supply of water through tankers in certain areas.
- He specifically drew attention to social media posts suggesting that some water tankers may be sourcing water from improper or unsuitable sources, potentially leading to the distribution of contaminated water. However, it has been discovered that the videos circulating on social media were not actually recorded in the Hammanskraal area.
- In response to a Facebook [post](#) by "The Voice of Tembisa FM," a radio station linked to a township in the northeastern region of Johannesburg, social media users expressed concerns about their safety and well-being. These concerns were prompted by a photo shared in the radio station's post, depicting contaminated or unclean water. Below are a few comments:



Fear of escalation of the outbreak

- Some commentators expressed their apprehension on a [post](#) by eNCA that the cholera outbreak could potentially evolve and escalate in a similar manner to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cholera death toll is slowly becoming Covid 19 and useless government will tell people mustn't panic

Our government must fix this problem faster 😞😞😞😞
this thing of cholera is coming like COVID 19 now

Another pandemic 🇰🇪

Trends to watch

High rise of HIV infections in Turkana County, Kenya

- On June 22nd, the Daily Nation, Kenya's largest newspaper shed light on the [surge](#) of HIV infections in Turkana County, in the northern region of the country.
- County Medical Services Chief Officer Gilchrist Lokoel highlighted the key factors contributing to the escalating number of new infections.
- Lokoel emphasized that the dearth of awareness, and limited availability of HIV prevention, care, and treatment services, alongside persistent stigma, have collectively hindered the success of prevention and care programs in the area.
- Lokoel emphasized that the Turkana community does not traditionally view circumcision as a customary rite of passage. However, he stressed the importance of Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision (VMMC) as a critical measure in the battle against HIV. VMMC, endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO), offers protection against HIV infection by safely removing the foreskin, which is particularly vulnerable to transmission.

Misconceptions contribute to low uptake of HPV vaccine in Kenya

- According to an [article](#) published by The Standard, one of Kenya's leading newspapers, rumors and conspiracy theories suggesting that the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine acts as a contraceptive agent have potentially played a significant role in the limited acceptance of the vaccine.
- The article highlights how these misconceptions have negatively impacted the public's perception of the vaccine and consequently contributed to its low uptake in the population.

Key resources

Cholera

- Cholera [social kit](#) VFA
- 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](#)
- [Africa Check](#): “Fact sheet, a disease nobody should die from”

Polio

- Polio [social kit](#) VFA
- [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#): Fact Sheet: Vaccine-derived poliovirus
- [GPEI](#): Animation explaining Vaccine-derived Polioviruses

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.