Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK

AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

24 October - 7 November 2023

(Weekly brief #95)

Top concerns

Polio vaccination campaigns follow World Polio Day

Despite misinformed views on posts about polio vaccination campaigns, African online users exhibit positive reactions too.

Nigerian health experts debunk fears over HPV vaccine

Misinformation that HPV vaccine causes infertility, promotes promiscuity, causes neurological problems has been shared by Nigerian online users this week.

Confusion between dengue and malaria amidst dengue outbreak in Burkina Faso

The term "palu dengue" in French lumps both malaria and dengue into one ailment which could potentially lead to negative health consequences.

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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 October 24 - November 7 in Africa.

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Cameroon, Zambia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, DRC, Chad

Polio vaccination campaigns follow World Polio Day

Engagement: 40 posts, 41K likes, 669 comments

Social media commentary and situation at a glance

- ☐ Throughout the monitored period, we observed a surge in online user engagement about polio vaccination campaigns in the African region. These interactions surpassed the levels observed on World Polio Day (October 24th).
- ☐ Out of monitored posts, roughly 35% were shared by UN agencies, including WHO and UNICEF, while about 42% were from ministries of health and public health institutes, all centred on previous or ongoing polio vaccination campaigns.
- ☐ Positive responses to polio vaccination were observed from online users in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Mali.
- ☐ In Cameroon, a Facebook post from the national Immunisation Programme ("Plan Elargi de Vaccination") generated a variety of misinformed views on polio, such as: the polio vaccine increases infertility rates, vaccines weaken the body, vaccines lead to paralysis, that older generations were healthy without vaccines, all of which contributed to raising questions about the necessity of vaccination.

Why is it concerning?

- ☐ There were no harmful narratives on posts pertaining to World Polio Day in the African region.
- ☐ The misinformation shared and user's reactions about the Cameroon's Immunization Programme post illustrate a concerning erosion of trust among Cameroonian online users compared to other posts from the same organisation.

What can we do?

- ☐ Health promotion campaigns and debunks to address specific polio misinformation emphasise the danger of polio outbreaks and the benefits of vaccination. Collaboration with fact-checkers, journalists, influencers and community leaders can be an effective way to amplify accurate information and reach the targeted audience.
- ☐ Engaging with parents, teachers, and healthcare workers during community-based sessions may help address the concerns about polio vaccination.

- [ ] Continue to emphasise that polio has no cure and that vaccination is a way to protect against the disease. WHO VFA social media toolkit on polio can be a reference, as well as resources from the GPEI about fighting polio misinformation online.

Nigeria

Nigerian health experts debunk fears over the HPV vaccine

Engagement: 36 posts, 20K likes, 1292 comments

Social media commentary and situation at a glance

- [ ] A total of four articles published by Punch Newspaper, the most widely read newspaper [4.4M followers] in Nigeria, debunked fears over HPV vaccine causing infertility or promoting promiscuity, fears that the vaccine causes neurological problems and fears about a causal association between the HPV vaccines and blood clots. An article debunked claims that the HPV vaccine reduces the populations of Nigeria.
- [ ] Comments on Facebook posts featuring health influencer Aproko doctor [695K followers], actor Ali Nunu Mohammed [3.4M followers] revealed misinformed perspectives on vaccine efficacy including a statement that "colloidal silver is more effective than the vaccine, with no side effects, unlike the vaccine damaging the natural immune system of the child". Commentators asked whether it's possible to administer the vaccine to girls above 14 years old and if the vaccine can be given to sexually active adult females who haven't contracted the virus yet. Lastly, there were accusations that influencers receive compensation from the World Health Organization to share the video for business motives.
- [ ] Commentators shared conspiracies on a post by the WHO Director General, Dr. Tedros Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the introduction of the HPV vaccine in Nigeria.

Why is it concerning?

- [ ] International users commenting on Dr. Tedros' posts fuel global conspiracy theories involving allegations that pharmaceutical companies are poisoning, controlling, and depopulating Africa. These comments may impact both international and African users and further disseminate conspiracy theories within the region, with disinformation gaining momentum from international user participation.

- ☐ According to WHO, “Nigeria introduced the human papillomavirus vaccine into its routine immunisation system, aiming to reach 7.7 million girls – the largest number in a single round of HPV vaccination in the African region”. Online users may still be digesting a lot of information about the HPV vaccine and general updates from health authorities leading to information gaps identified on social media platforms.

What can we do?

- ☐ Examine the use of inoculation messages[1] to confer resistance to persuasive messages challenging the efficacy and safety of the HPV vaccine.
- ☐ Listening to parents’ concerns about the HPV vaccine and addressing them early can improve vaccine confidence amongst parents/caregivers. This can be done in health care facilities, through focus groups discussions, religious gatherings.
- ☐ The HPV social media toolkit produced by Viral Facts Africa can be shared in waiting areas in health facilities and can serve as a resource that covers questions and information gaps that might arise from parents.
- ☐ Debunking misconceptions with fertility, gynaecology or vaccine experts such as Dr. Ajenifuja Kayode Olusegun, a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital in Nigeria who debunked misinformation about the HPV vaccine, can also answer parents’ misconceptions about the topic.
- ☐ There are many constraints that influence women's ability to exercise the right to information. Understanding the challenges that women in Nigeria might face in accessing the right information and promoting gender equity can be used to improve women’s right of access to information.

Burkina Faso

Confusion between dengue and malaria amidst dengue outbreak in Burkina Faso

Engagement: 15 posts, 9K likes, 609 comments

Social media commentary and situation at a glance

- ☐ Radio Omega, a radio station based in Burkina Faso, brought to light the concern and anxiety prevalent among the residents of Bobo Dioulasso, the

[1] Park E, Kim S, Cameron GT. Immunize the HPV Vaccine Rumors: Effects of Inoculation Messages and Tone of Voice on Parental Intention to Vaccinate Their Children. J Community Health. 2022 Oct;47(5):790-799. doi: 10.1007/s10900-022-01100-9. Epub 2022 Jun 21. PMID: 35727435; PMCID: PMC9210795.

epicentre of a dengue outbreak. This is because there's no specific treatment for dengue, with available options mainly focusing on alleviating its associated symptoms and pain.

- ☐ Individuals are therefore resorting to untested remedies including drinking papaya leaves. According to a debunk by Dr Abdallah, a clinician and web comedian, the consequences of drinking untested remedies may increase the risks of renal and liver failure.
- ☐ As per information provided by a local infodemic manager, a YouTube video featuring Dr. Aka Felix, a naturotherapist, has been circulating within a healthcare workers' forum. In this video, he conflates malaria and dengue, and categorises them as a single disease, using the term "palu dengue" in French.

Why is it concerning?

- ☐ The confusion between malaria and dengue can lead to negative health consequences. Dengue caused by a virus transmitted by infected female mosquitoes, primarily the Aedes aegypti mosquito, has no curative treatment, only symptomatic. Malaria caused by Plasmodium parasite species and transmitted by infected female Anopheles mosquitoes, can be fatal without a curative treatment.
- ☐ While the practice of herbal remedies in Africa has many benefits, it is important to recognize that there can be potential consequences associated with it. That includes the lack of standardisation in terms of dosage, quality, and preparation, and the delay in seeking medical care mentioned by nephrologist Dr.Pascal Sanou.

What can we do?

- ☐ It is important to engage with patients and health workers at the point of service and community levels to communicate about the risks of using unproven treatments on one's health. Debunks by clinicians and leaflets can feed the information ecosystem accurate information especially when patients are waiting in healthcare facilities.
- ☐ Share further communication resources such as the Viral Facts Africa social media toolkit on dengue and malaria to highlight the difference between both diseases. Simplifying the distinction between these two diseases, using everyday language rather than complex medical terminology, can be beneficial.

Persistent trends

Anthrax in Zambia

Engagement: 17 posts, 9K likes, 2873 comments

- ☐ On November 1st, the Ministry of Health in Zambia issued a statement on Anthrax. Cumulatively, there are a total of 335 reported cases and 4 fatalities across six provinces in the country.
- ☐ The public response on the Ministry's Facebook post was marked by a surge of anxiety and sadness. Many online users expressed their concern about the situation, urging authorities to take immediate action, including the closure of all butcheries and the application of control measures on the movement of livestock between locations. Online users are actively engaging with a wealth of information regarding anthrax, and their apprehension regarding its transmission, especially in relation to the safety of the food supply, is palpable.
- ☐ Online users have asked numerous questions on posts by the Ministry of Health. They inquired about the treatment of anthrax, its transmission method, preventive measures, its symptoms and whether there is an available vaccine.
- ☐ Online news agencies including Diamond TV Zambia[732K followers] and Zambia Reports [1.6M followers] alerted their audiences about the infection of a baby in Livingstone, after consuming buffalo meat. This triggered anxiety among online users. There are questions about the type of meat to avoid, the adoption of sensitization measures in rural areas. Additionally, online users expressed their fear if an anthrax vaccine were to be administered and lockdown measures with analogy to COVID-19 lockdown measures.
- ☐ In an interview by Diamond TV Zambia, a local journalist reported that wildlife animals including hippos have been affected by anthrax in the game management areas. Individuals are scavenging the carcasses of hippos in Lumezi and Lundazi districts bordering Malawi. Farmers are concerned with anthrax, and requested that vaccines be available to vaccinate their animals against the disease.

- [ ] In a series of interviews by Diamond TV Zambia, reporters interview residents from various districts in Zambia to ask about sensitization measures of anthrax. Specio Mulazi, Munyama Ward councillor in Siavonga district encouraged restaurant owners to stop preparing meat at the main harbour of Siavonga district, 300Km away from Sinazongwe, the first district affected by the disease.

Cholera in Malawi

- [ ] Malawian online news media agencies have reported during the monitored period new cases of cholera in Nsanje and Chikawa, two southern regions, Lilongwe and Mchinji, two central regions.
- [ ] According to WHO, Chikwawa, located along the border with Mozambique, encounters a high number of cross-border cases, which, in turn, plays a significant role in the emergence of numerous cholera hotspots. Similarly, Nsanje is identified as another cholera hotspot district.
- [ ] As per the Malawi government's 2023-2024 seasonal climate outlook, "October to April marks the main rainfall season in Malawi". During November, it is forecasted that many areas in the northern and southern parts of Malawi will experience a normal to below-normal rainfall situation, while the central areas are likely to receive normal to above-normal rainfall. This might potentially exacerbate the number of cases.

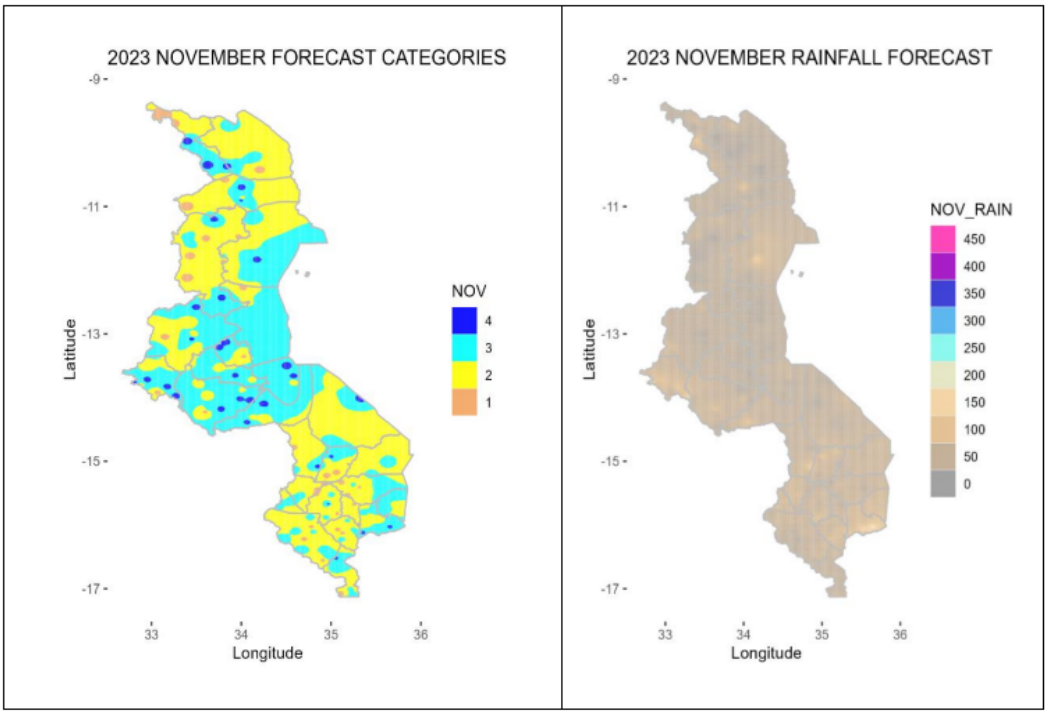

Figure 3.2 November forecast categories (left) and November forecast rainfall amounts (right)

Source: Malawi government's 2023-2024 seasonal climate outlook

- ☐ Social listening reveals complaints about the lack of potable water, a sense of tiredness of recurrent cholera outbreaks, and a sentiment of apprehension regarding the cholera situation as the rainy season begins.

Trend to watch

Measles in Malawi

- ☐ On November 6, the Ministry of Health officially confirmed an outbreak of measles, locally referred to as "chikuku," in the 36th area of Lilongwe district. As of November 3, there have been a total of 32 suspected cases, with 9 of these cases having been positively confirmed as measles.
- ☐ The majority of those affected by this outbreak are children under the age of 15 who have not received measles vaccinations. The reasons included religious and cultural beliefs.

Trend update

- ☐ Agence France Press (AFP) fact checked claims by US cardiologist Peter McCullough, known for spreading health disinformation, at an event organised by “a small number of European lawmakers” in September 2023.

- [ ] In the video circulated on social media platforms, McCullough discusses the adverse side effects of the mRNA vaccine including cardiovascular, neurological and immunological side effects.

Key resources

Dengue

- [ ] WHO, dengue fact sheet
- [ ] WHO, dengue Q&A
- [ ] VFA, social media toolkit on dengue fever

Cholera

- [ ] WHO, multi-country outbreak of cholera, external situation report #5
- [ ] WHO, cholera outbreaks, Q&A
- [ ] UNICEF Zimbabwe, cholera awareness mini-series
- [ ] VFA, cholera social media toolkit
- [ ] Social Science in epidemics: cholera lessons learned
- [ ] Global Task Force on Cholera Control, clarifying rumours and community concerns.

HPV

- [ ] VFA, HPV social media toolkit
- [ ] WHO, Cervical cancer fact sheet
- [ ] PAHO, HPV Explainer

Polio

- [ ] WHO, Polio fact sheet
- [ ] Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Polio-Eradication-Strategy-2022-2026
- [ ] VFA polio social media toolkit
- [ ] Global Polio Eradication Initiative communication toolkit and technical guidance in French and English
- [ ] UNICEF, Digital community engagement polio newsletter, prebunking messages on polio [ENG, FR]
- [ ] Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Fighting polio vaccine misinformation.

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 (siloed 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.