

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

26 February - 4 March 2024

Weekly brief #109

Top concerns

[At total of seven fatalities succumb to cerebrospinal meningitis outbreak in Potsikum, Nigeria](#)

Confirmed by Daily Post Nigeria, Yobe State Ministry of Health reports seven fatalities in Potiskum town due to cerebrospinal meningitis.

[Disinformation about RTS,S malaria vaccination campaign in Burkina Faso](#)

Known disinformation figures with a radical pan-Africanist agenda continue to propagate disinformation about the RTS,S malaria vaccine.

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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 February 26 - March 4 in Africa.

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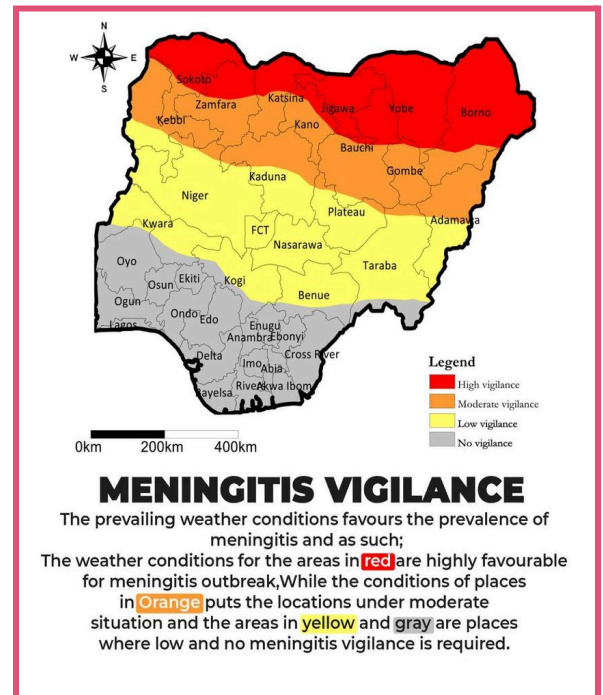
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Nigeria

At total of seven fatalities succumb to cerebrospinal meningitis outbreak in Potiskum, Nigeria

Engagement: **15 posts, 1925 likes, 106 comments**

- The Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet) conveyed through a Facebook post dated 28 February that [the current weather conditions indicate a heightened risk of meningitis](#) in the areas highlighted in red, as these regions are particularly conducive to an outbreak.
- The Yobe State Ministry of Health and Human Services reported seven fatalities of cerebrospinal meningitis in Potiskum town in a Facebook [post](#) by Daily Post. More suspected cases are being investigated, but no confirmation of more deaths attributed to meningitis was done by local or national health authorities.
- The scientific journal Nature, a highly respected and peer-reviewed scientific journal, reported on [rumours of a “mysterious illness”](#) responsible for 30 deaths in Gombe state, but after laboratory investigation, WHO only confirmed three deaths caused by meningitis. When analysing the causes of the confusion around this mysterious illness, political analyst Sílvia Majó-Vázquez states that “the void created by limiting or not giving the necessary fact-checked information can be filled by mis- or disinformation or rumours”.



Why is it concerning?

- There is an elevated concern regarding students being disproportionately affected by the suspected meningitis outbreak. In this context, schools contribute significantly to the spread and are considered key environments for disease transmission due to the close proximity of students and their frequent interactions. The outbreak may also induce fear and anxiety among parents,

teachers, and other students who may be grappling with concerns about their own health.

- Ramadan festivities begin on the evening of 10 March, bringing an increased risk of transmission during large gatherings. [Muslims in Nigeria are predominantly concentrated in the Northern half of the country, while a substantial muslim minority reside in the southern part.](#)
- The occurrence of two outbreaks in Nigeria, Lassa fever and meningitis, gives rise to a complex and challenging public health scenario especially in Northern Nigeria. If the meningitis outbreak extends, the potential overlap in symptoms, such as fever, headaches, vomiting, and nausea, might pose a significant challenge for individuals and health care workers in [Bauchi and Yobe states](#) to recognize the disease affecting them.
- The convergence of climate change, multiple diseases outbreaks and [violent conflicts](#) in Northern Nigeria places a considerable burden on the local populations, giving rise to heightened levels of anxiety and fear.

What can we do?

- Disseminate comprehensive communication materials focusing on meningitis awareness for schools in Northern Nigeria, taking into account the impact of climate change on diseases in the region. Ensure that the materials (digital and offline) provide insights into how changing climate patterns may influence disease dynamics, emphasising preventive measures, early detection, and the importance of adaptive health practices.
- Facilitate community-driven health education programs that empower local populations with knowledge about climate-sensitive diseases, preventive measures, and adaptive health practices.
- Advocate for the integration of climate adaptation strategies into national and regional health policies, ensuring a comprehensive approach to address emerging health challenges exacerbated by climate change.
- Mobilise faith leaders to disseminate information about meningitis and promote public health safety measures to be adopted during Ramadan.

Burkina Faso

Disinformation about RTS,S malaria vaccination campaign in Burkina Faso

Engagement: 7 posts, 2479 likes, 330 comments (comments on Twitter have been omitted by the author of the posts)

- In January 2024, AIRA released [a comprehensive report addressing disinformation and misinformation concerning the RTS,S malaria vaccine in Cameroon](#). Our subsequent analysis will draw upon this report to underscore recurrent strategies and arguments used by prominent disinformation sources online in Burkina Faso.
- The main themes of disinformation identified this week were: vaccine sovereignty, origins of the vaccine, vaccine efficacy, depopulation conspiracies, role of the vaccine in malaria prevention strategies.
- A total of four Facebook posts [[LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#)] have been monitored, accumulating 330 comments, primarily characterised by support towards the known disinformation figures.

Below are some examples: (Google translate from French to English)

Let the Burkinabè State verify these vaccines with other reliable structures because trust does not exclude control. If necessary, let's produce our vaccines elsewhere where we are sure that the result would be what we expected.

There are also the dangers of vaccines to sterilize Africans.

Thanks to the fight, the people understand, the less they will make mistakes. Anyone who can edify us in simple language, because the great mass only suffers

Why is it concerning?

- The current geopolitical situation in Burkina Faso makes it more vulnerable to disinformation, as described by past journalistic investigations ([LINK](#), [LINK](#))
- There is a heightened probability of encountering online disinformation related to the RTS,S malaria vaccine as it is launched across various African countries.
- There are still many questions raised about the vaccine development, safety, involvement of africans researchers, but the existing messages from health agencies do not seem to have enough visibility on social media platforms to counter the disinformation groups.

What can we do?

- Regular social listening of online and offline data to evaluate the impacts of disinformation campaigns on people's vaccine acceptance.

- Engaging with African scientific experts in malaria and the malaria vaccines to amplify accurate messaging and debunk mis/disinformation can be beneficial. Local fact checkers with scientific backgrounds can also spread accurate information to their networks. An example is [Faso check](#), a fact checking agency based in Burkina Faso. This can reinforce the credibility of the message surrounding the RTS,S vaccine.
- Influencers can also disseminate Viral Fact Africa videos on the malaria vaccine through their social media accounts to share accurate information. [[LINK](#)]
- With the introduction of the malaria vaccine in many African countries, prebunking and inoculation strategies are essential to counteract and prepare for response to any potential dis/misinformation. Uncovering tactics used by known disinformation groups and individuals can contribute to warn the population against disinformation and limit its spread. This also enhances public acceptance of the vaccine.
Some tools include: [Cranky uncle](#), “a game developed by University of Melbourne scientist John Cook to combat misinformation.” [First draft](#) “Stay one step ahead of those spreading conspiracies and false claims about vaccines with our free learning course”.

Persistent trend

Dengue in Mauritius

Engagement: 14 posts, 4048 likes, 170 comments

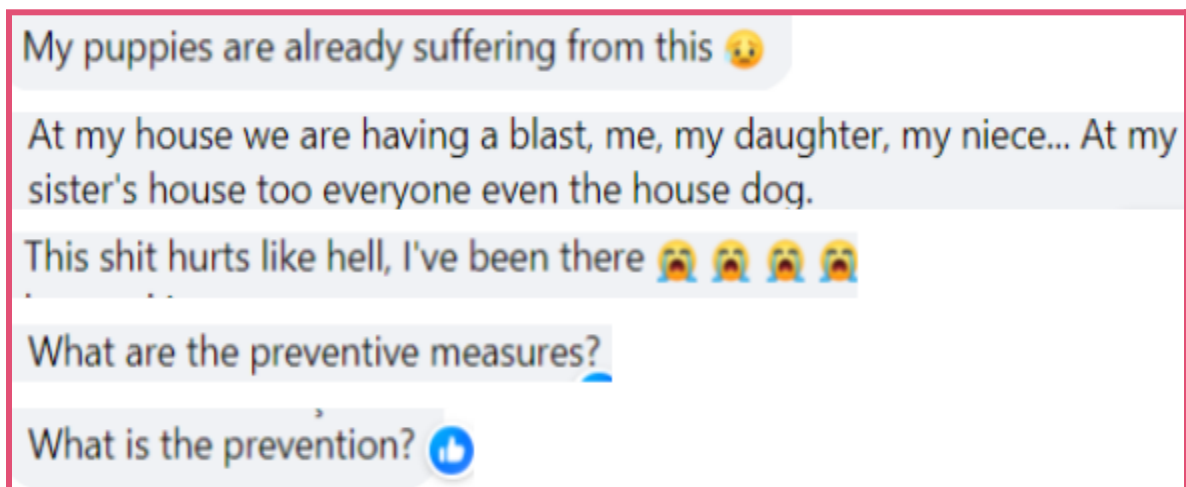
- On 28 February, Defimedia.info, the lead multimedia news provider in Mauritius, shared on Facebook that, following the flooding caused by cyclone Belal on 15 January, “debris and rocks have obstructed watercourses at Pont Labourdonnais in Port-Louis and Rue Diore in Plaine-Verte”. This has led to [stagnant water, fostering the breeding of mosquitoes, particularly concerning amidst the ongoing prevalence of dengue fever](#). An appeal has been directed towards the authorities to promptly evacuate the water and clear the debris obstructing the drains. The appeal is substantiated by a video posted by an internet user, emphasising the immediate need for necessary actions to address this critical situation.

Trends to watch

Cases of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis in Angola

Engagement: **13 posts, 7227 likes, 823 comments**

- On 28 February, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Angola posted on Facebook, [acknowledging reports of hemorrhagic or epidemic conjunctivitis cases](#) and disseminating recommended preventive measures.
- The National Director of Public Health, Quinhas Fernandes, [reported an outbreak in Nampula province](#), with 1,326 cases recorded from 10 to 24 February. According to UNHCR, the humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, has led to the displacement of families seeking refuge in Nampula Province. [Nampula province hosts “around 8,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in the Maratane Refugee Settlement.”](#)
- Online users commenting on a post by Banzeline, an Angolan entertainment website, expressed concern about the disease, citing the impact on numerous family members. Four online users sought information regarding recommended preventive measures to adopt. Below are some comments translated from Portuguese:



Conversation between supporters of COVID-19 jab and anti-vaxxers over post on hypothetical future pandemic, "Disease X"

- While disease X hasn't gained significant attention online in African countries, our monitoring detected a post from IOL News - originally written by AFP - titled [“American conspiracy theorists monetise over disease X misinformation”](#).

- IOL, short for Independent Online, serves as the digital platform for various independent newspapers in South Africa, such as The Star, Cape Argus, The Mercury, among others.
- Interestingly, the discussion beneath this post unfolds as a dialogue between COVID-19 anti-vaxxers and proponents of the COVID-19 vaccine. Each side presents their arguments:
- Some false statements from anti-vaxxers, include:
 1. claiming that [all fact-checkers are paid by big pharma](#)
 2. Referencing pseudo-scientific conspiracy sources such as [rumble.com](#) and [bitchute.com](#) as examples of [peer-reviewed studies](#). An example is [mRNA COVID vaccines form spike protein in heart cells](#).
- Supporters of COVID-19 vaccination back their stance by sharing fact-checked articles from sources like [AFP](#) and [Reuters](#). Additionally, they employ [mediabiasfactcheck.com](#), a tool that provides detailed reasoning, bias ratings, and assessments of factual reporting for the cited media sources.

International HPV awareness day unveils disinformation, misinformation and information gaps in South Africa

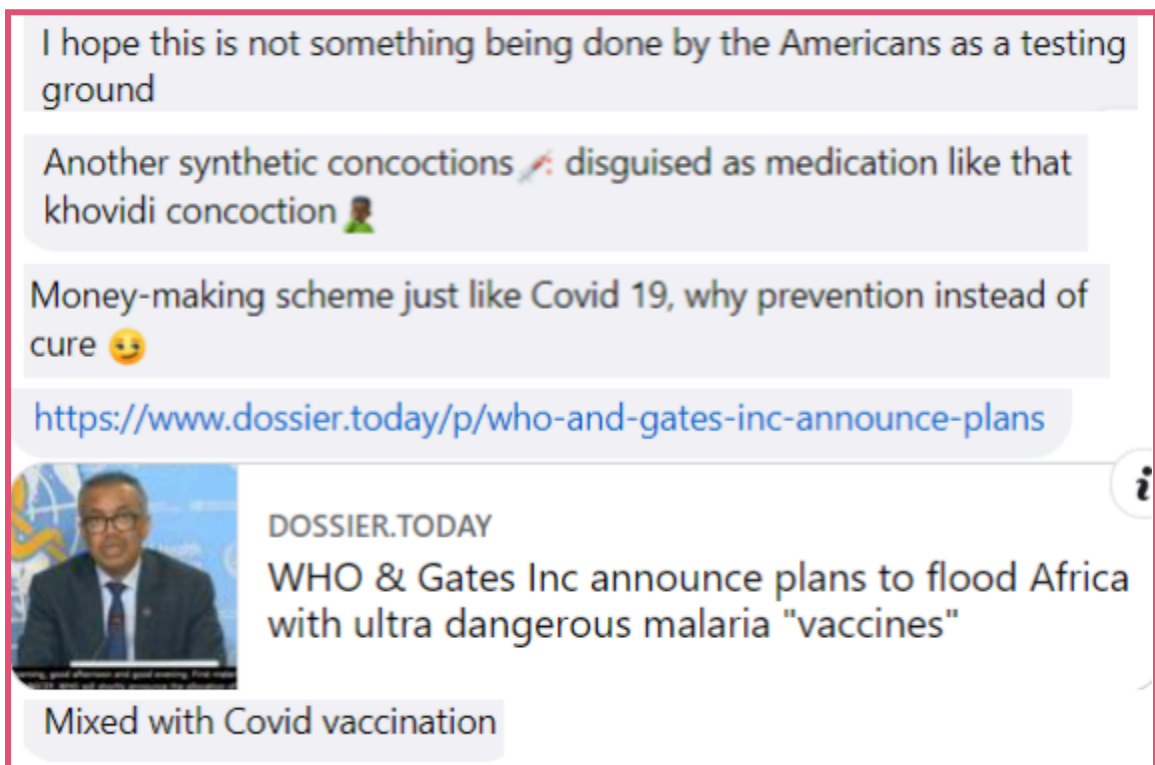
- In our monitoring of International HPV Awareness Day on 4 March, a total of 13 posts were identified, aimed at raising awareness about HPV vaccine.
- A post from the [National Institute for Communicable Diseases](#) in South Africa generated 10 comments, with inquiries ranging from the nature of the vaccine to queries about the meaning of HPV and why access to the vaccine seems to be limited to girls.
- According to a Times LIVE article published on 4 March, [a single-dose papillomavirus vaccination has received approval for use in South Africa](#). The WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) had already shared conclusions that a [“single-dose Human Papillomavirus \(HPV\) vaccine delivers solid protection against HPV, the virus that causes cervical cancer, that is comparable to 2-dose schedules”](#).
- A South African private user, known for sharing political misinformation, commented on the Facebook post, suggesting that papillomavirus cancer is [“the same cancer that is coming from genetically modified organisms from farms.”](#)
- Another South African user claimed that ["lots of wrong vaccines"](#) with side effects are being injected into people's blood.

- The post from the [National Department of Health in South Africa](#) dated February 27 is fraught with various themes of mis/disinformation. These include depopulation theories, questioning vaccine safety and efficacy, comparisons with COVID-19, referencing pseudoscientific sources posted on controversial platforms like [Bitchute](#).

Disinformation in fight against HIV in South Africa and Kenya

Engagement: **3 posts, 2199 likes, 554 comments**

- [Tuko.co.ke](#) shared a Facebook post highlighting that the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) has secured KSh 7 billion in funding from USAID for the pursuit of an HIV vaccine.
- [SABC News](#) in South Africa announced on Facebook the availability of a new HIV prevention injection accessible to select South Africans as part of a pilot project.
- However, both news have triggered a spike of disinformation on online platforms. Below are some examples shared on SABC. The main themes include conspiracy theory, financial corruption, mentions of COVID-19 vaccine and disinformation against WHO and Bill Gates.



- Below are some examples shared on Tuko.co.ke. The main themes include financial corruption, vaccine rejection and depopulation theory.

Vaccin not for me my boday my choice miti ni dawa Black oil can heal the Aids

This 'wazungus' want to creat stronger strain virus to trim population,they thought covid would have wiped Africans more quickly than HIV

Free scandal allegedly planned

The bible said there will be diseases that will have no cure in the last days 🤔🤔🤔
Just eat the 7 billion

They have been doing this so called "research"..since HIV started,eating the funds,and don't get the vaccine!

Key resources

Meningitis

- [WHO](#) : Meningitis fact sheets
- [WHO](#): SOP for surveillance, preparedness, and response to meningitis epidemics in Africa

Malaria

- [WHO](#), Q&A on malaria vaccines (RTS,S and R21) (English and French)
- [WHO Infographic](#): the RTS,S Malaria Vaccine (English)
- [WHO Infographic](#): the RTS,S Malaria Vaccine (French)
- [WHO](#), annual world malaria report 2023
- [VFA](#), malaria social media toolkit
- [Gavi](#), briefing on start of routine malaria vaccinations in Africa 19 January
- [WHO](#), Malaria: The malaria vaccine implementation programme (MVIP)

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a combination of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries.

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 (siloes 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.