

# Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

**March 28, 2022**



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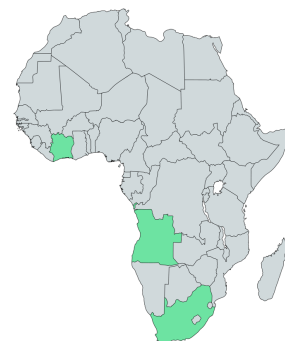
## Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This report seeks to communicate operational recommendations based on social media monitoring from March 19 - 25, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation. Target countries include Angola (PT), Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (EN), Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, and Senegal (FR). Descriptions of “engagements” and information gathering are listed in the methodology section at the end of this report.



## “The 5th wave is just the flu”

*CONTEXT: African leadership giving warnings of a fifth wave of COVID developing in the next two months is based on the uptick of disease cases in winter months and a widespread surge in cases in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia.*



### Angola, Ivory Coast, South Africa

Coverage: **25k+ engagements, 8k+ comments, 2.1k+ shares**

- **South Africa:** President Cyril Ramaphosa has lifted COVID restrictions in South Africa but experts quickly warned of the Deltacron variant driving a fifth wave in April and May. However, many social media users are pointing to the more common winter flu in South Africa as a misattributed “5th wave” rather than another wave of COVID-19 that will bring on new or reimposed public health and safety measures just after they have been lifted. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)
- **Ivory Coast:** Following the removal of mandatory [mask-wearing](#) in certain situations in Ivory Coast some thanked Russian President Vladimir Putin for being the “universal covid vaccine” highlighting the declining concern for COVID-19 in parallel with the media shift of focus to the Ukraine and Russia conflict. Additionally, there were claims in social messaging apps that “As long as the war continues, there will be no need for a fifth wave. The flu can be the flu.”
- **Angola:** Statements made regarding the outbreak in provinces of China and mentions of a 5th wave are often met with statements of “it still does not exist here” or “not real” on social media pages of official public health groups.

Angola and Ivory Coast social media users are also pushing back on the heightened fears around COVID-19 and claim Malaria outbreaks should be of much greater concern. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)



### Why is it concerning?

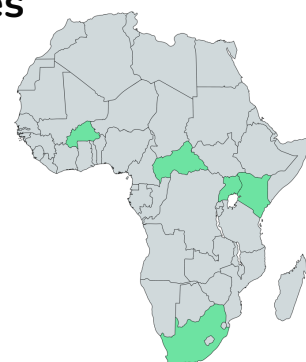
- A strong belief in influenza being more prominent than a wave of COVID-19 that is currently very strong in Europe and Southeast Asia may lead to unidentified COVID-19 cases through the winter months as citizens may perceive COVID-19 symptoms as indicators of influenza.
- This also highlights the deepening belief that the new waves developing globally do not pose any threat. The relaxation of preventative measures as the threat of the new wave remains also may create a difficult scenario should measures need to be reimposed.

### What can we do?

- Illustrate the differences between influenza and COVID-19. Understanding how COVID-19 can pose a more significant risk if it is not contained to a level of adequate management similar to influenza can help to avoid normalizing COVID-19 before the significant danger has fully passed.
- Continuing to provide accurate information as a resource for individuals that may come across misinformation is crucial for not losing momentum in vaccine uptake as the perception of the pandemic being over will increase with diminishing COVID-19 public health and safety measures implemented across Africa.

## “Ukraine bio-labs have released new strains of diseases”

**Context:** *An article claimed the Russian Federation has discovered evidence that Ukraine biolabs have been producing and have accidentally released uncontrolled strains of diphtheria, measles, polio, rubella, swine flu, and tuberculosis.* [\[LINK\]](#)



**Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda**

- Telegram channels in multiple countries and multiple regions of Africa have shared the article alleging the Russian Federation has claimed to have identified U.S. funded programs for gain of function research in biolabs in Ukraine. This rapid sharing of the article garnered over 100k views in a single day in South



Africa and has continued to draw an additional 5-10k views per day across all monitored Telegram channels.

### **Why is it concerning?**

- There is strong support for the Russian Federation across African social media channels and it is especially evident in anti-U.S or anti- E.U. rhetoric. This was prevalent on social media channels in francophone countries following a suggestive [cartoon](#) shared by the Russian Ambassador to France. The disease and vaccine-related content have led to conversations suggesting the U.S. and E.U. have purposely let diseases get released in Ukraine.
- This trend underscores a potential uptick in a belief that waves of these common diseases may in fact be fabricated and could impact vaccine uptake for endemic diseases that could lose traction in suppressing larger outbreaks.

### **What can we do?**

- As the infodemic issues transfer to other diseases and other geopolitical situations, public health validation is crucial as propaganda and disinformation are being produced to damage public trust. Highlight facts about COVID-19 cases and other disease outbreaks to give clarity in response to these claims.



## Persistent Rumors

### **Rumor: Vaccines don't prevent death or the virus' spread/vaccines are not effective**

- Response: Vaccines provide protection against serious complications from COVID-19 and the new variants. (Viral Facts response [here](#))

### **Rumor: Foreign companies or governments profit from the vaccine rollout in Africa**

- Response: Highlight successes in vaccine distribution, as well as new manufacturing campaigns beginning in Africa.

### **Rumor: Inaccurate assumptions of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects**

- Response: Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects continue to be misinterpreted or overstated (Viral Facts response [here](#))

### **Rumor: COVID-19 no longer exists / never existed**

- Response: COVID-19 cases have declined but health authorities are warning of a potential 5th wave (Viral Facts response [here](#))

### **Rumor: Frustration with looting and mismanagement of COVID-19 funds**

- Response: Review the COVAX program and the global effort to effectively distribute vaccines via a multi-organizational campaign

## Information Gaps: Is COVID still dangerous?

Differing messaging and the relaxation of many preventative measures globally has driven confusion around the newly emerging waves of COVID-19. Warnings are being shared by African leadership and medical officials around the world that this new potential wave that will hit Africa will be highly contagious. However, high fatality rates are not perceived to be a concern which has allowed for the question to arise: **Is COVID-19 dangerous?** The next waves need to be addressed in the appropriate context of the status of preventive measures around the world. Increased pushback against any form of public health and safety measures will grow if there is no clarity around the new variants.



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## COVID-19 VFA content

### **The importance of getting vaccinated**

As many countries are starting to ease COVID-19 restrictions, some believe the pandemic is over. COVID-19 isn't over and vaccination still serves as the best chance against severe illness, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19 infection. [\[LINK\]](#)

### **The pandemic is not over!**

People are still becoming sick, hospitalized and dying of #COVID19.

👉 Declining attention to the pandemic doesn't mean the pandemic is over. [\[LINK\]](#)

### **COVID-19 effects on sexual performance**

FACT: There's no evidence that the COVID-19 #vaccine affects fertility or sexual performance in men or women ✅ [\[LINK\]](#)

## Polio VFA Content

**Dr. Janet Kayita**, a WHO Malawi Country Representative answers the most pressing questions around **polio in Malawi** for **ViralFacts**.

- Is the polio vaccine related to the COVID-19 vaccine? [\[LINK\]](#)
- Why do we need a polio vaccine campaign? [\[LINK\]](#)
- How is COVID-19 impacting the fight against polio in Malawi and other African countries? [\[LINK\]](#)
- Why is it important for children to be vaccinated against polio? [\[LINK\]](#)
- Is wild polio virus really back in Africa? [\[LINK\]](#)



## Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a split of social media analysis 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, 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, TweetDeck, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and 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.

**Our commercial social listening tools include:**



**WHO social listening tools:**



**Early AI-supported Response  
with Social Listening**