## COVID-19 Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This report seeks to communicate **operational recommendations** based on social media monitoring from September 6-10, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation.

Target countries include Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (ENG), Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Niger (FR). We have outlined what we mean by “engagements” and how we gather information in the methodology section at the end of this report.

**CONCERNING TRENDS**

* Ongoing concerns around vaccine safety and side effects
* Conversations about forced vaccinations

**Ongoing concerns around vaccine safety and side effects**

**Where have we observed this trend?**

* Nigeria
  + Post alleging that pharmaceutical companies’ lack of liability for any harmful vaccine effects undermines its safety; combined with skepticism about the vaccine’s utility if one can still catch COVID [here](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1231244100654657) (Facebook)
* South Africa
  + Picture with post claiming that vaccine damaged the skin around a grandmother’s arm [here](https://www.facebook.com/100063452184556/posts/249354160522988) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/110820310534585/posts/375310327418914) (Facebook, circulating in multiple groups)
  + Posts about the relationship between Guillain-Barre syndrome and AstraZeneca generated widespread concern about side effects in the comments [here](https://www.facebook.com/160836574053016/posts/2436097996526851) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/168892509821961/posts/4692925400751960); ongoing concerns over myocarditis after vaccination in comments [here](https://www.facebook.com/10227041841/posts/10159966311526842) (Facebook)
  + News of South Africa participating in global children’s vaccine trial solicited widespread backlash and concern in the comments [here](https://www.facebook.com/160836574053016/posts/2436383946498256) (Facebook)
  + The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) falsely stated that ivermectin is safe whereas vaccines are not [here](https://www.facebook.com/379138726819/posts/10158060512346820) (Facebook)
  + PANDA (this account regularly posts mis/disinformation) claims that vaccines affect periods [here](https://www.facebook.com/112123760487193/posts/385466166486283) (Facebook)
* Kenya
  + Fact-check confirming that a BCC journalist died of a COVID vaccine complication [here](https://www.facebook.com/224865787558662/posts/4705255192853010) generated concern about the vaccine’s safety in the comments (Facebook)
  + Claim that vaccine deaths are attributed to other underlying health conditions while COVID deaths are logged as such [here](https://twitter.com/JalokaJnr/status/1436521118647701506) (Twitter)
  + Claim that manufacturers should not have an issue being held liable if vaccines are safe, and that people should be able to wait for longer clinical trials [here](https://twitter.com/kishnjoro/status/1436208418214273025) (Twitter)
* Circulating in anglophone target countries
  + Opera News published two false articles, stating that the first J&J vaccine drive was a mass trial, and that the Pfizer vaccine killed a breastfeeding baby. Thanks to our colleagues at UNICEF ESAR, both posts have since been taken down (Facebook)
* Benin
  + Post alleging that people die hours or days after vaccination [here](https://www.facebook.com/183934062023866/posts/1299839030433358) (Facebook)
  + Concern that COVID vaccines could be used to kill political opponents [here](https://www.facebook.com/284094542922769/posts/559300975402123) (Facebook)
* DRC
  + Ongoing conversation about the president’s stance on AstraZeneca generate widespread skepticism about the vaccine’s safety in comments [here](https://www.facebook.com/528455063970713/posts/2071522292997308) (Facebook)
  + Posts stating that there is not proof of the U.S. donating J&J vaccines to the country because they want to get rid of their supplies [here](https://www.facebook.com/528455063970713/posts/2069806069835597) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/528455063970713/posts/2071519219664282) (Facebook) generated mixed reactions, with some people stating that it is best to remain careful or that there is no vaccine demand
* Senegal
  + Statement about Senegal receiving doses that Belgians did not use [here](https://www.facebook.com/129527447101546/posts/4382560785131503) (News)

↪ The post itself does not adopt a negative tone, but feeds into a larger conversations about the safety of vaccines donated by Western countries

* Cameroon
  + News that the ministerial head wants to make vaccination mandatory for all his staff and their families [here](https://www.facebook.com/1780395675321901/posts/4800400926654679) (Facebook)
* Mauritius
  + Mother claims that her young son died after taking the vaccine [here](https://ionnews.mu/deces-dun-jeune-de-20-ans-sa-mere-pointe-du-doigt-le-vaccin/) (News)
* Circulating in francophone target countries
  + Post about arm pain and fatigue post-vaccine [here](https://www.facebook.com/435332340155799/posts/1465001103855579) (Facebook)

**Why is it concerning?**

* Concerns over safety and side effects drive vaccine hesitancy & refusal in the region
* In some countries (Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa) some data suggests populations are less likely to get the vaccine in March-April than they were in November 2020; respondents cite uncertainty about vaccine effectiveness as the top

hesitancy driver, followed by **AEFIs and lack of knowledge/awareness on vaccine access, safety and efficacy** (UNICEF Data 4 Action June Report)

* Reports of serious adverse side effects are associated with several vaccines (e.g. AstraZeneca and blood clots)
* Comments on these and other posts in the region illustrate increasingly prevalent links between news on side effects and vaccine hesitancy & refusal
* Reports of blood clots and side effects are particularly associated with AZ and J&J; AZ is the most widely used vaccine in Africa

**What can we do?**

* Enhance factual information sharing by encouraging people to **pause before sharing** social media content

↪ UN [Pledge to Pause](https://pledgetopause.org/) campaign, Viral Facts example [here](https://assets.fathm.co/s/PdwFmEgEXH1kGvoj/fi)

* Create clear, consistent messaging about vaccine developments and communicate often about what is known and unknown (from US-CDC J&J Rapid Report)
* Emphasize [**hopeful messages**](https://theconversation.com/covid-19-public-health-messages-have-been-all-over-the-place-but-researchers-know-how-to-do-better-150584) highlighting vaccines are crucial ending the pandemic
* Share solidarity messages around protective measure and safe behaviours, such as the ones circulated by the [UN’s Zwakala “I do it for you” campaign](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/wb35cr1df5oihtg/AABW2exDPExGngRxemaY66aca?dl=0)
* Expand content related to cases of myocarditis/ pericarditis after vaccination. Include information about the conditions, their seriousness, signs and symptoms, when to seek medical care, and what is known about who might be at increased risk (US-CDC SoVC Special Report Recommendation)
* Produce content explaining **why vaccines are considered safe and effective**

↪ Viral Facts example [here](https://twitter.com/WHOAFRO/status/1380085301641682945)

* Consider emphasizing that **rollout pauses are precautionary measures**. The fact that health institutions are transparent and implement them show that they are thorough. This could help reinforce rather than undermine trust

↪ Viral Facts example [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1393079891533484033)

* Consider providing **country-specific vaccine safety information** based on the vaccine being disseminated nationally, particularly in relation to the AZ vaccine
* Produce video content **outlining ongoing monitoring and risk management processes** (*WHO EPI-WIN report recommendation)*

↪ Viral Facts example [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1393178071876911105)

* Clarify **indicators of potential side effects** for people to watch out for and **how to respond**(*WHO EPI-WIN report recommendation)*

↪ Viral facts example [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1369297394605654018)

* Produce content for journalists on Adverse Events Following Immunization (AEFI) reporting and best practices, including using non-scientific language that is clear and understandable
* Communicate clearly around the relationship between vaccines and changes in the menstrual cycle - include answers that address this misinformation in FAQ documents, call center scripts, and help chat-bots made available to the public

↪ Viral Facts example [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1399266913142857731)

* **Continue to manage expectations around possible side effects**, underlining the safety profile of different vaccines and providing information on the systems public health practitioners use to investigate AEFIs (*UNICEF ESARO Feb recommendation)*
* Continue to advocate for trusted public figures and politicians to take the vaccine and provide correct information on vaccines safety, efficacy and rollouts
* Continue to encourage community engagement to address concerns as they arise, and continue to mobilize the healthcare worker community
* Ensure any of the above content is widely circulated and shared on **Facebook** and/or on any trusted communication channels. **Choose accepted and trusted organizations and messengers** to share the content, including **local** sources and unofficial channels

**Ongoing conversations about forced vaccinations**

* South Africa
  + [This week’s South Africa Social Listening Report](https://sacoronavirus.co.za/category/academic-articles/) refers to widespread conversations about the “right to choose” not to vaccinate, at times adopting language from the abortion rights movements (e.g. my body, my choice)
  + Widespread debate about compulsory vaccinations in the media [here](https://www.facebook.com/379138726819/posts/10158063869396820), [here](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=263417362269662), [here](https://www.facebook.com/817419378298114/posts/6416477798392216), [here](https://www.facebook.com/295342903925145/posts/4137074769751920), [here](https://www.facebook.com/122121361542/posts/10159712062611543) (Facebook)
  + Conversations about Zimbabwe’s “no jab, no job” policy [here](https://www.facebook.com/122121361542/posts/10159708553631543), [here](https://www.facebook.com/123971017684407/posts/4363672913714175) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/10227041841/posts/10159961896191842) (Facebook)
* Kenya
  + Question about whether vaccination should be made compulsory [here](https://twitter.com/MajimajiKenya/status/1435819213625741316) (Twitter)
* Ivory Coast
  + News that the vaccine may be made mandatory [here](https://www.facebook.com/781265195608061/posts/1444222169312357) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=217379543693358) (Facebook), with some stating that they would rather resign from their jobs than get vaccinated
  + Post about Benin’s former president wanting to make vaccines mandatory [here](https://www.facebook.com/552126702091611/posts/885133722124239) (Facebook)
* Zimbabwe
  + Similar news circulating in Zimbabwe stating that officials will be forced to vaccinate or to resign [here](https://www.facebook.com/1647627925469222/posts/3117376471827686) (Facebook)
* Benin
  + Post worrying about vaccines being mandatory and claiming that people die hours or days after vaccination [here](https://www.facebook.com/183934062023866/posts/1299839030433358) (Facebook)
  + Post questioning why an artist changed his mind from not wanting the vaccine to stating it is mandatory [here](https://www.facebook.com/508623569164415/posts/5156097367750322) (Facebook)
* Senegal
  + A professor’s statement about people who are against the vaccine being criminals was met with backlash and comments about the importance of choice and the freedom to choose whether to vaccinate [here](https://www.facebook.com/165313934112027/posts/872410470069033) (Facebook)
* Angola
  + News that vaccines will be made mandatory for those who intend to join the civil service or move abroad [here](https://angorussia.com/noticias/certificado-de-vacinacao-passa-a-ser-obrigatorio-para-os-candidatos-a-funcao-publica-e-viajantes/) (News)

* Circulating in francophone target countries
  + News about the U.S.’ requirement that federal government employees be vaccinated generated backlash [here](https://www.facebook.com/323279184682/posts/10159909234069683) (Facebook)

**Why is it concerning?**

* Concerns about mandatory vaccination can polarize and/or politicize broader conversations about the vaccine, undermining the space for dialogue, empathy and exchange needed to build vaccine confidence
* Fear of mandatory vaccination may also undermine trust in government and healthcare institutions, and be perceived as a restriction on the right to make personal medical decisions

**What can we do?**

* Disseminate and/or amplify personal stories showcasing vaccine hesitant people who have chosen to get vaccinated

↪ Viral Facts example [here](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=278704130474218)

* Encourage dialogue between communities, leaders and healthcare practitioners to ensure people can express their concerns and obtain responses to their questions
* Ensure that considerations such as paid sick leave and supervisor education regarding requirements are part of any roll-out plans for vaccine requirements (US-CDC Report #13 recommendation)

**SPECIFIC CONTENT TO CONSIDER**

* **SOUTH AFRICA**

* **Mistrust in the government and fear of side effects** are cited as the main hesitancy drivers in the country [here](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-06-mistrust-and-fear-are-the-major-drivers-of-covid-vaccine-hesitancy-says-market-research-firm/) (News)



Cartoon suggesting an evil scheme to force vaccines on Africa [here](https://www.facebook.com/286699732045962/posts/849086025807327)



PANDA (an account that regularly posts mis/disinformation) claims that children are not at risk of “long COVID” and are being deprived of their childhoods [here](https://www.facebook.com/112123760487193/posts/386217126411187)

* **NIGERIA (ENG)**
* Religious leader claims some pastors are secretly getting vaccinated, while encouraging their followers not to get the jab [here](https://dailypost.ng/2021/09/08/covid-19-some-pastors-secretly-take-vaccine-mislead-members-prophet-iginla/) (News)
* Concerns with **delays in administration of second vaccine doses** [here](https://www.facebook.com/punchnewspaper/posts/4647593701945422) (News)



Claim that vaccination does not prevent transmission, and that therefore it does not matter whether healthcare workers are vaccinated [here](https://twitter.com/DomFab1/status/1435877466921439235)

* **KENYA (ENG)**



News of men who were arrested for selling fake J&J vaccines having been arraigned [here](https://www.facebook.com/100044200850879/posts/402026411280717) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/261061365404/posts/10165984799805405); post about people having received fake COVID jabs [here](https://www.facebook.com/100044242283436/posts/399248818226524) and [here](https://twitter.com/Moha001_Onyango/status/1435821569742417921) and warning not to pay for vaccination [here](https://www.facebook.com/224865787558662/posts/4709871819058014)

* **IVORY COAST(FR)**



A post about **mixing vaccines** generated widespread questions about whether doing so is safe or effective [here](https://www.facebook.com/939329149514705/posts/4303825443065042)



A voice message claiming that disposable face masks cause cancer circulated on WhatsApp

* **MALI (FR)**



This week’s Mali Social Listening Report highlights questions about the existence of **COVID variants** in the country

* **BENIN (FR)**



Post questioning why an artist changed his mind from not wanting the vaccine to considering it mandatory [here](https://www.facebook.com/508623569164415/posts/5156097367750322)

**Outside of target countries**

* **UGANDA (FR)**

* A Ugandan MP raises concerns over the distribution of expired vaccines [here](https://capitalradio.co.ug/news/2021-09-10-mp-alleges-that-his-people-received-expired-vaccines/); the government stated it would probe the claim [here](https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/114414) (News)
* **GHANA (ENG)**
* Dubawa responded to the claim that Germany “dumped” rather than donated its AstraZeneca vaccines in Ghana, and emphasized the vaccine’s safety [here](https://ghana.dubawa.org/gifting-or-dumping-germanys-gift-of-1-5-million-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccines-to-ghana/) (News)

**PERSISTING ONLINE TRENDS**

\* bolded trends appear to circulate more this week

* **Frustration with slowness or mismanagement of vaccine rollout**
* **Vaccine deaths will be logged as COVID deaths**
* I would rather die of COVID than of the vaccine
* **Vaccines don’t prevent death or the virus’ spread / vaccines are not effective**
* COVID palliatives are being hidden/ denied to citizens
* **COVID/ the vaccine is intended to control/ reduce the African population**
  + According to the Africa CDC February Vaccine Perceptions report, almost 1 in 2 respondents believe that COVID 19 is a planned event by foreign actors
* Lockdowns are not an effective way of controlling COVID
* Frustration with double standards around health and safety measures (e.g. politicians not wearing masks)
* **Questions and concerns around forced vaccinations**
* Politicians have taken fake vaccines
* Clinical trials were rushed
* Africans are lab rats or being used to test vaccines (Viral Facts response [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1384779123302752257))
* New pandemic waves/ COVID are caused by vaccines
* **Other issues and/or diseases are more important than vaccination**
* **Vaccines won’t stop the need for protective measures, why bother (Viral Facts response** [**here**](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1377241510039683073)**)**
* **COVID case numbers/ mortality rates are exaggerated**
* Foreign companies or governments profit from the vaccine rollout in Africa
* **Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects**
* COVID does not exist (Viral Facts response [here](https://www.facebook.com/WHOAFRO/videos/1059407544571240/))
* Effectiveness of herbal remedies (Viral Facts response [here](https://twitter.com/viralfacts/status/1389878262743060483))
* Effectiveness of ivermectin and alternative remedies (particularly in South Africa) (Viral Facts response [here)](https://twitter.com/WHOAFRO/status/1394643247272706051)
* **Frustration with looting and mismanagement of COVID funds**

**TRENDS TO WATCH**

* South African children will be [enrolled in vaccine trials](https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/covid-19-vaccine-sinovac-to-start-south-african-trials-on-children-20210909), generating concern on social media (see vaccine safety section above)
* Malawi [fears it vaccines will expire](https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/malawi-fears-its-covid-vaccines-will-expire-hesitancy/6218098.html) due to hesitancy
* Vaccine [uptake increased in Ivory Coast](https://www.banquemondiale.org/fr/news/feature/2021/09/07/covid-19-vaccines-from-rejection-to-shortage-how-c-te-d-ivoire-became-a-model-for-managing-vaccine-hesitancy?cid=afw_fb_bmafrique_fr_extp) as communities and practitioners were mobilized to spread accurate information about the vaccine and increase vaccine availability
* A report highlights the [importance of empathy](https://www.news24.com/health24/medical/infectious-diseases/coronavirus/when-empathy-meets-evidence-tackling-covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-in-sa-20210906?fbclid=IwAR0R_aMmVDh92Yt0snRI7d3PVJCtBERXB4DShc6VS5kFfueTinZv5a-uCHk) in combating vaccine hesitancy

*Methodology*

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 (siloed engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, TweetDeck, Crowdtangle, UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as 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.

Our social listening tools include:







