Social Media Monitoring: Democratic Republic of the Congo
Rumours and Allegations Featured on Social Media

12 June 2020
Bulletin 7

This week: Latest rumours and allegations circulating on social media as locals in Équateur and other provinces react to the news of the new Ebola outbreak in northwestern DRC.

Misinformation and Threats Targeting International Humanitarian Organisations
Ebola reemergence in Mbandaka is smokescreen for COVID-19 vaccine testing.

- Reactions to the news of a new Ebola outbreak in Équateur province show that skepticism about the existence of the virus runs deep among locals. Clearly influenced by rampant misinformation about Europeans and American governments seeking to trial COVID-19 vaccines on Africans, some locals believe that the outbreak is a cover for COVID-19 vaccination testing.

  Claims were also made that Ebola is being artificially induced in Équateur by local and international health organisations to receive funding.

  These claims underline the perception widely shared on social media that aid organisations are willing to sacrifice locals for their own interests, whether for vaccination trials or for financial gain. This perception is at times expressed explicitly, with some social media users expressing their concern that the WHO and other organisations "have now gone to kill in Équateur".

The "release" of another coronavirus disease by China.

- A social media post shared hundreds of times within hours of being published features renowned French microbiologist Didier Raoult claiming that the Chinese government has just released a new coronavirus disease three times more potent than its predecessor.

  Such misinformation underlines the perception that COVID-19 has been artificially created by foreigners. However, it is relatively unusual that China is targeted with such disinformation. Most of the time, such actions are attributed to Europeans or Americans.

Locals in Beni believe that the newly set up INGO COVID-19 centre is intended to spread the virus in North Kivu.

- Such mistrust in the intentions of health INGOs highlights the communication challenges frontline NGOs face. There are risks of attacks on COVID-19 treatment centres, as occurring frequently during the ongoing Ebola pandemic.

Insecurity Insight

Africans seeking to visit Europe are obliged to be vaccinated.

- Misinformation is being widely circulated on social media that presidents Macron and Trump want to make COVID-19 vaccination obligatory for Africans travelling to Europe and the US or "otherwise [face] a massacre at the airport".

  These claims were followed by disinformation featuring Russian president Putin allegedly rejecting the need for that Africans to be vaccinated, arguing that vaccination campaigns are a European "conspiracy" to have people die - as ostensibly exemplified by the WHO's "rejection" of Madagascar's much-touted COVID Organics remedy.

  This misinformation builds upon a narrative currently at play among locals within the DRC that Europeans and Americans want to use Africans as "guinea pigs" for COVID-19 vaccination trials. This narrative was further accentuated by the misinformation surrounding the public dispute between the Malagasy government and the WHO over the endorsement of COVID Organics, an Artemisia-based herbal tea claimed to prevent and cure COVID-19 and which has been exported by Madagascar to a number of African countries.

  Preliminary research indicates that such disinformation, while quite likely written and produced by Congolese, may originate and be promoted from outside the DRC.

Want to know more about the group behind the circulation of fake news and about President Macron's statements regarding COVID-19 vaccines?

Read **this** latest analysis by Novetta.

Find this extra information useful? **Get in touch**

Social Media Analysis of "Tu vois Les Retombées" Facebook Page

- The Facebook group "Tu vois Les Retombées" (which translates roughly to "You Can Note the Consequences" in English) is run by admins who report their location as South Africa, yet the majority of posts are concerned with the Democratic Republic of Congo, the majority of followers are Congolese, and all monitored posts are in French. The group is following several other groups, the majority of which are interested in culture, sports, and politics in DRC. *"Tu vois Les Retombées"* is also following a FB group concerning football in Benin, suggesting that one of the admins may be Beninese or have relations/business in Benin.

- *Key Takeaway: The group's origins are unclear. The administrators are apparently located in South Africa, but likes by the unknown group administrators suggests a relation to Benin. However, the intimate knowledge of DRC and of local French dialect indicates origins in DRC. The writing and analytical style of these posts resembles that of a ring of DRC teenagers who managed "fake news" pages.*

- The highlighted status from June 10, 2020 alleges that President Vladimir Putin of Russia "contradicted [French President] Emmanuel Macron" and rejected using Africa as a testing-ground for vaccination testing, as well as WHO policy in Africa. The post continues to claim that "this has been a [WHO] conspiracy from the beginning." The post also implies that Russian President Putin accepts COVID-Organics, an herbal remedy touted by Madagascar President Andry Rajoelina.

- *Key Takeaway: The post combines several popular disinformation narratives, including anti-WHO sentiment, accusations of European treatment of Africans as "guinea pigs", as well as support for COVID-Organics. The post's popularity suggests the group followers are receptive and/or supportive to these disinformation narratives.*

- The highlighted post appears to be the most popular in the Facebook group's history, since it's inception in March 2020. The group's admins also made the status and image of President Putin the group's profile picture on June 10, highlighting the narrative's importance to the group. The post received 1.5k shares, which suggests that the post was viewed and amplified by 9.0% of the group's 16.6k followers (who account for a not insignificant 0.75% of all Facebook users in DRC as of 2019[2]

- This narrative nor attributions of these statements to President Putin did not appear widely in traditional or social media outside of this page. This suggests that this narrative may originate within these pages.

- Users commenting on this post were highly critical of French President Macron. Negative sentiment to France was higher than explicitly positive discussion of Russian President Putin. Users commenting on this post commonly used strong and violent language to denounce French President Macron and his alleged plans to test vaccinations in Africa. Facebook users commenting employed language like "massacre", and "slaughter" to describe President Macron's alleged plans. Users also promised to defend Africa and DRC from the French.

- *Key Takeaway: The malleability and interconnectedness of seemingly popular disinformation narratives suggests that a new disinformation narrative could be employed to channel the violent language geared against French President Macron in Facebook users' response to this post, against aid workers and health workers in DRC.*

At time of reporting, this post on "Tu vois Les Retombées ?" FB page received 200 likes, 560 reactions (the majority of which were positive), and 1.5k shares.[1]