

2.5 Tackling the global infodemic

The word blend “infodemic” (information plus epidemic) reflects the outsized effect that new information technologies have had on contemporary health communication. Although the word blend is relatively new, the association between epidemics and misinformation is not. Accordingly, from the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 has been a clear target of false or poorly backgrounded or incomplete public information, contributing to considerable confusion among policy-makers and the public alike.

To tackle the infodemic crisis, WHO-AFR conducted trainings for 20 communications professionals in 10 countries, with a multiplier effect, and eight countries were set up with infodemic management systems. On the academic front, WHO-AFR conducted two qualitative studies, in partnership with two universities in Southern and East Africa, designed to measure the impact of specific infodemic content.

WHO-AFR measured key words and other indicators via media and social media monitoring tools to inform a wider strategy for improving information quality on key COVID-19 related issues: vaccine side effects, use of face masks, and use of non-approved medications, among others. On a similar note, Viral Facts, a public-facing brand launched in March, dedicated to positive reinforcement of virus and response-related information, conducts a weekly report based on a triage of, and response to misinformation. This interactive activity, which stems from the December 2020 Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA), relies on input from a once-a-week social listening trends report, also started in March. To ensure partner engagement and relevance, a periodic satisfaction survey of this weekly report found that 85% of respondents rated the report between 8 and 10 points, with 10 being the highest possible grade.

FIGURE 8: Number of people reached and engaged through social media platforms with COVID-19 messages targeting disinformation

