

# RUMOR BULLETIN #4

## FOR HUMANITARIANS | 19 DECEMBER 2020



In this bulletin, Internews digs deeper into rumors related to the COVID-19 vaccine, collected from Lebanese social media between November 23 to December 9. 56 rumors about the vaccine were recorded among 350 rumors collected in the past two weeks.

### HOW WE DO IT:

Our social media mapping exercise underpins a qualitative approach to social listening by pinpointing where discussions about COVID-19 are happening and highlighting key influencers of information. This regular collection of community insights aims to provide humanitarian and public health agencies ideas for integrating and aligning their risk communication activities with community perspectives and needs.

Feedback highlighted in this bulletin is selected based on a risk assessment matrix that accounts for the frequency the point was shared, level of engagement, and its potential impact on individuals, the community, and pandemic-response services.

### Information Ecosystem Assessment

An Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) underpins our analysis by identifying how COVID-19 rumors are impacted by other aspects of the information ecosystem in Lebanon.

Initial findings of the IEA show that most communities are well-informed on COVID-19 but are unable to afford personal protective equipment (PPEs) such as masks and sanitizers and find it difficult to abide by lockdown measures due to financial constraints. The IEA also indicates that Facebook and WhatsApp groups are among the most used sources of information within the refugee community.

The following visualisations highlight 56 vaccine-related rumors collected by Internews and Maharat Foundation between 23 November and 9 December.

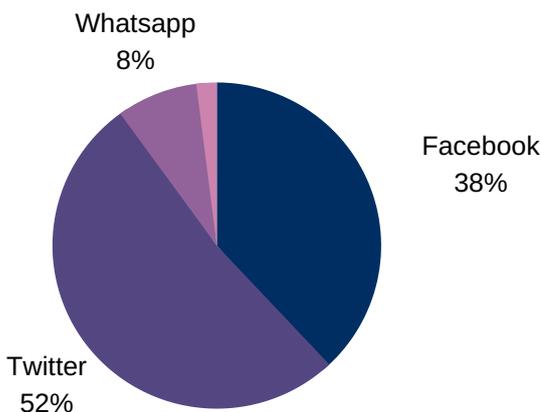


Figure 1: Distribution of vaccine related rumors by platform

### Internews

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19.

In Lebanon, Internews works with Maharat Foundation to collect and analyze rumors and misinformation related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease.

For more information, or to submit rumors, please contact Internews' Project Coordinator Haley McCain, [hmccoin@internews.org](mailto:hmccoin@internews.org)

### COVID-19 SITUATION IN LEBANON

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Lebanon has 150,993 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 1,234 deaths as of December 17(1). The Minister of Health Hamad Hassan declared in a statement on November 23 that Lebanon has secured enough doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to cover 15 percent of the Lebanese population. He also stated that the first shipment will be reaching Lebanon in February 2021 and distributed to high risk individuals such as frontline healthcare workers and adults with chronic illnesses(2).

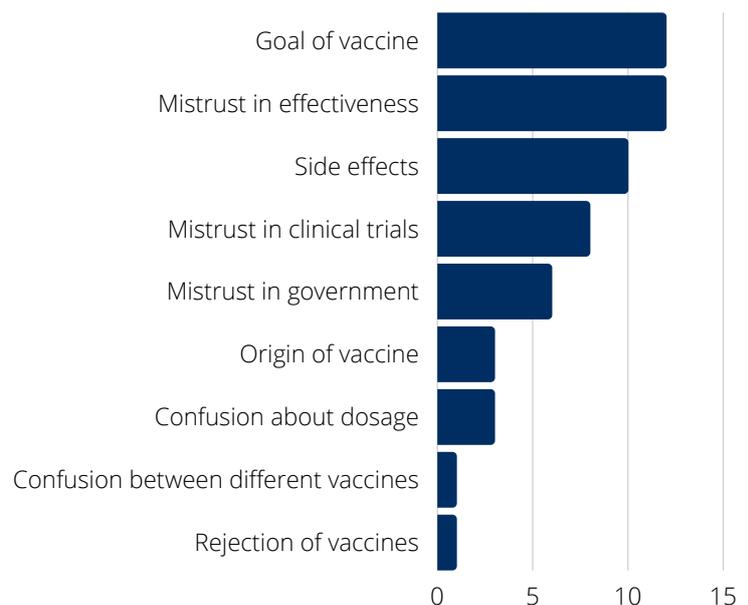


Figure 2: Categorisation of vaccine fears and reservations



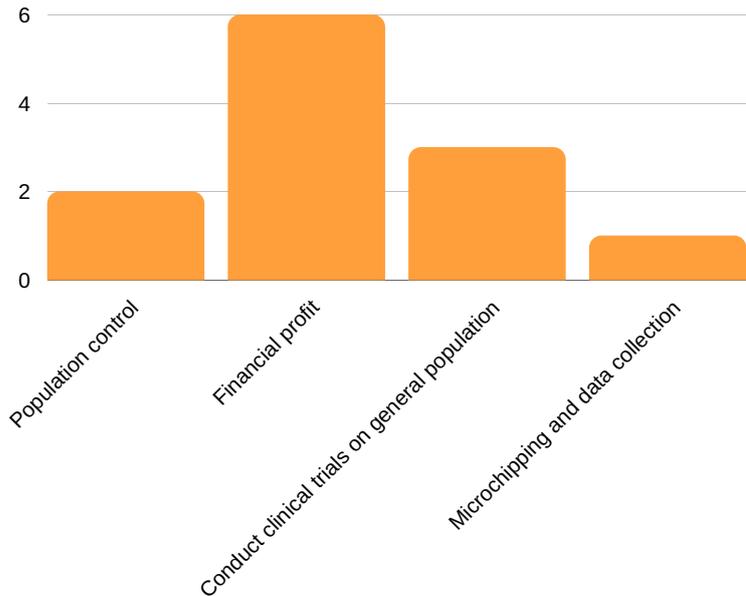
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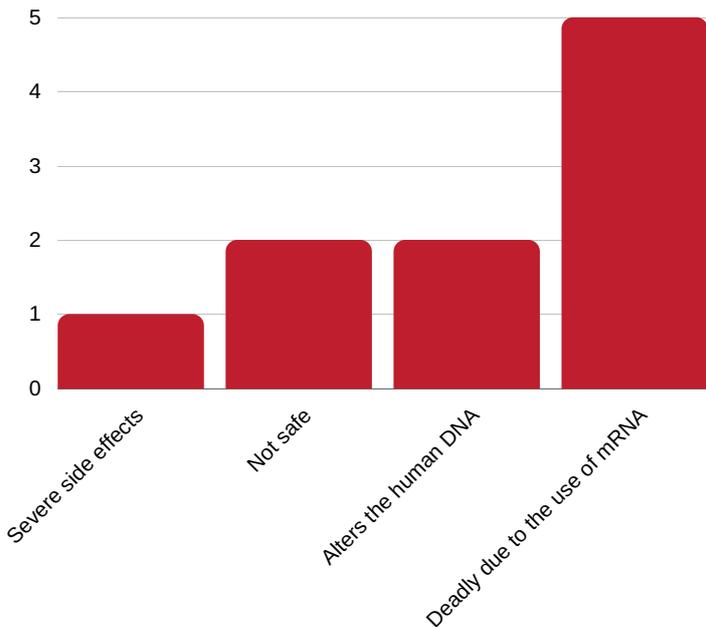
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The following chart shows people's perceptions around the creation of the vaccine, which was called into question often on Lebanese social media, particularly in relation to the timeframe for vaccine development and approval. Among these rumors, six people mentioned that the vaccine was created for the financial profit of pharmaceutical companies and for the governments distributing and selling them. Three of these six rumors claims were triggered by the Lebanese government stating that Lebanon would likely receive more than one type of vaccine.

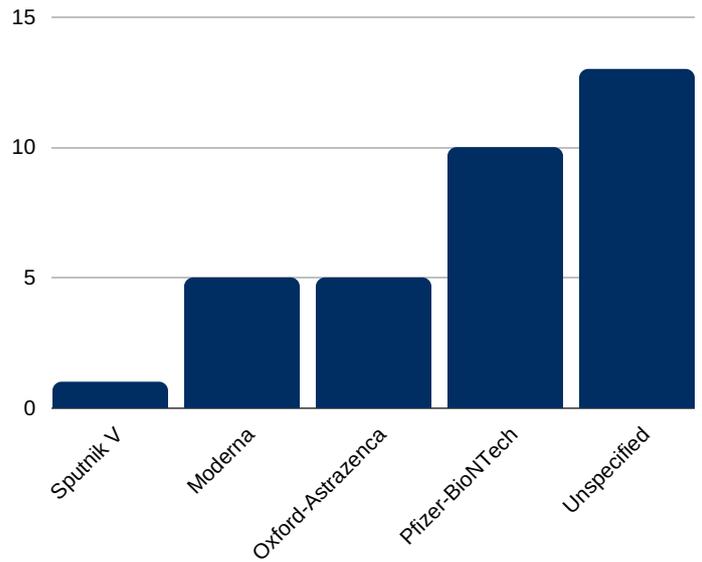


**Figure 3:** Rumors about the goal of the vaccine



**Figure 5:** Rumors about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine

**Figure 4:** Number of rumors per vaccine type



Rumors about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine were more prevalent than rumors about other vaccines in Lebanon in recent weeks, perhaps because Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will be the first distributed in Lebanon and people still have concerns around it.

## PFIZER-BIONTECH RUMOR EXAMPLES

"Watch the video, Corona vaccine is fatal! Focus on the use of mRNA!"

**Rumor risk level: Medium**

Platform: WhatsApp Group Members: 100

"This vaccine they want to give us is ineffective! It is also very unsafe, and may cause side effects in the human body"

**Rumor risk level: Medium**

Platform: WhatsApp Group Members: 100

"Which vaccines will be tested on us? The terrifying vaccine is the one that has mRNA [i.e Pfizer-BioNTech]. Will injecting a person with RNA of the virus affect the DNA of a human cell? Are there artificial embryos inside the vaccine that would cause a new mutation in humans?!"

**Rumor risk level: Medium**

Platform: Facebook Reactions: 109  
Comments: 16 Shares: 15

## WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING?

### VACCINE RUMORS

"Which vaccines will be tested on us? The terrifying vaccine is the one that has mRNA [i.e Pfizer-BioNTech]. Will injecting a person with RNA of the virus affect the DNA of a human cell? Are there artificial embryos inside the vaccine that would cause a new mutation in humans?!"

Rumor risk level: **Medium**  
Platform: Facebook Reactions: 109  
Comments: 16 Shares: 15

"COVID-19 vaccine side effects: Death, paralysis, acute carditis, blood clots, stroke, inflammation of the brain, meningitis and spinal cord, coma, joint pain and inflammation, immune diseases. Just like that! Nothing to worry about!"

Rumor risk level: **Medium**  
Platform: Facebook Reactions: 172  
Comments: 46 Shares: 86

"The Pfizer vaccine is 90 percent effective in treating Covid-19, which means that it is fatal 10 percent of the time.

Rumor risk level: **Medium**  
Platform: Facebook Reactions: 780  
Shares: 263

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The period before the vaccine is rolled out in Lebanon serves as an opportunity to address rumors and concerns about vaccination and establish effective and transparent communication about the immunization process. This will help increase acceptance of the vaccine, and combat rumors and theories before they arise.

As the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will be rolled out first, it is important to look at the rumors specific to that vaccine (Figure 5). The rumor data suggests some people still mistrust the vaccine, are worried about its side effects, or doubt its effectiveness. If these concerns go unanswered or unaddressed, they may pose additional challenges as Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines are rolled out in February 2021.

Such concerns could also merge with other aspects of the vaccination distribution process down the line, such as the reasons for some communities being targeted for early vaccination. With only 15 percent of the population in Lebanon receiving the vaccine from the so-far reserved doses of Pfizer-BioNTech, frontline workers and health care workers must be prepared to communicate about the phased vaccination approach in a timely and transparent manner to build trust within the communities.

## Listening Group Findings

Maharat Foundation and Internews conducted several listening groups in early December with groups including Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and Egyptian workers. 19 of the 32 people involved said they would take the vaccine only if it were administered by a physician. Other attendees expressed concerns that the vaccine was created in such a short time which made them worry it would not be effective and would have side effects. Connecting people with health experts and doctors who can explain the purpose and process for vaccination can help people establish trust in the vaccine and its purposes.

Within the listening group discussions, it was also clear that many people anticipate the vaccine will reach the general population in Lebanon by February 2021. Anger and frustration can be anticipated in the early months of 2021 as people come to realise that the process for vaccination in Lebanon will be gradual and take place across the entire year.

## HOW CAN HUMANITARIAN ACTORS HELP?

- It is important to acknowledge the underlying fears and uncertainty around the vaccine, its potential impacts, and its origins in communications between humanitarians and beneficiaries. Such communications can also engage trusted leaders and community members who are respected and trusted locally.
- As indicated in the listening groups conducted by Maharat and Internews, people consider healthcare workers as trusted sources on the vaccination. Conducting awareness sessions with trusted health professionals involved can increase acceptance of the vaccine.
- It is important to specify for beneficiaries which details of the vaccination process are still being decided, and to directly acknowledge the questions humanitarians don't yet have answers to. If some issues go unaddressed, people will be pushed to resort to other less reliable sources of information.



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## READ INTERNEWS' FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ) DOCUMENT ABOUT THE VACCINE IN LEBANON:

FAQ-style commentary on vaccine-related rumors and misinformation circulating in recent weeks on Lebanese social media. Internews conducted desk research and interviewed public health professionals to answer some of the most pressing questions posed online. This document primarily focuses on the Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine since it is expected to be the first vaccine to arrive in Lebanon in 2021.

## WANT TO CHECK MORE BULLETINS ABOUT OTHER RUMORS?

Bulletin #1 discusses rumors around the PCR test, treatments, testing requirements, and hoax conspiracies.

Bulletin #2 discusses rumors around prevention methods, long term impacts, and hoax conspiracies.

Bulletin #3 discusses rumors around the lockdown, reinfection, and treatments.



SCAN THE QR CODE

## \*\*HOW DO WE DEFINE RISK AT INTERNEWS?

Risk is measured by Rooted In Trust Data Analysts, Information Managers, and Social Media Monitors based on a range of factors including: a) cultural relevancy, b) timing, c) online engagement, d) the believability of a rumor, and most importantly, e) the potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health, well-being, and safety of local communities or service providers.

**HIGH RISK:** A rumour that is very likely be believed among the larger community with potentially severe impacts resulting in serious harm to an individual or group such as inciting violence or creating widespread fear or panic. High risk rumours may encourage avoidance of testing and treatment, or harm towards health workers and other service providers.

**MEDIUM RISK:** A rumor that has the potential to be believed among the larger community which poses moderate negative impacts to a community or an individual's health, well-being, or safety. Medium risk rumors may have a moderate impact on health-seeking behaviors.

**LOW RISK:** A rumor that is either unlikely to be believed among the community or which would cause minimal negative

## SOURCES

- (1) WHO COVID-19 Dashboard Lebanon, <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/lb>
- (2) Ministry of Public Health, Hasan: Pfizer Vaccine will Arrive in Lebanon by mid-February, 23 November 2020, <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Media/view/42948/1/hasan-pfizer-vaccine-will-arrive-in-lebanon-by-mid-february>