COVID-19 RUMOUR BULLETIN #6

Final Edition

Internews is working with Translators without Borders, Standby Task Force, BBC Media Action and Vishvas News to collect and analyse rumours and misinformation related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease.

Since March 2020, we have collected more than **4,700 rumours** found on social media platforms in **nine languages**.

This final edition of the bulletin brings together trends of rumours collected between May 1st and June 19, 2020. We highlight rumour data collected in six languages: Bahasa Indonesia, Khmer, Hindi, Bangla, Urdu and Tagalog.

You can access previous editions of the Rumour Bulletin and communication resources designed to help local journalists respond to key questions on the Internews COVID-19 site, including translations of the bulletin in Tagalog, Hindi, Vietnamese, Thai, Bahasa Indonesia and Simplified Chinese.

We are open to questions, collaborations and feedback. Data exports are also available to support risk communication efforts.

These rumours, in the form of questions, concerns and complaints, reflect the anxiety and uncertainty many communities feel during this pandemic. They may point to information gaps, confusion over public health messages or prejudice towards vulnerable groups.

Using rumour tracking methodologies developed by Internews over a number of humanitarian and health crises, this information supports local media in the region. By starting with listening to your community, you can better respond with verified information that directly meets community concerns.
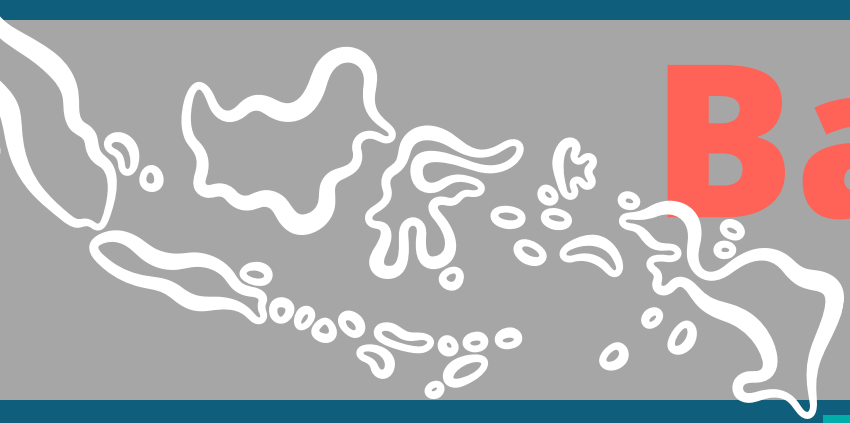
During this pandemic, trusted and familiar local media outlets should be a key element in risk communication efforts. They use the languages their community prefers and translate complex health information to fit local context and culture.

Local media are also a valuable communication channel for communities to provide feedback and ensure their voices are heard.

To find out more, please contact covid-19@internews.org

Internews

Bahasa Indonesia

This analysis is based on 575 rumours collected between 1st May and 18th June 2020.
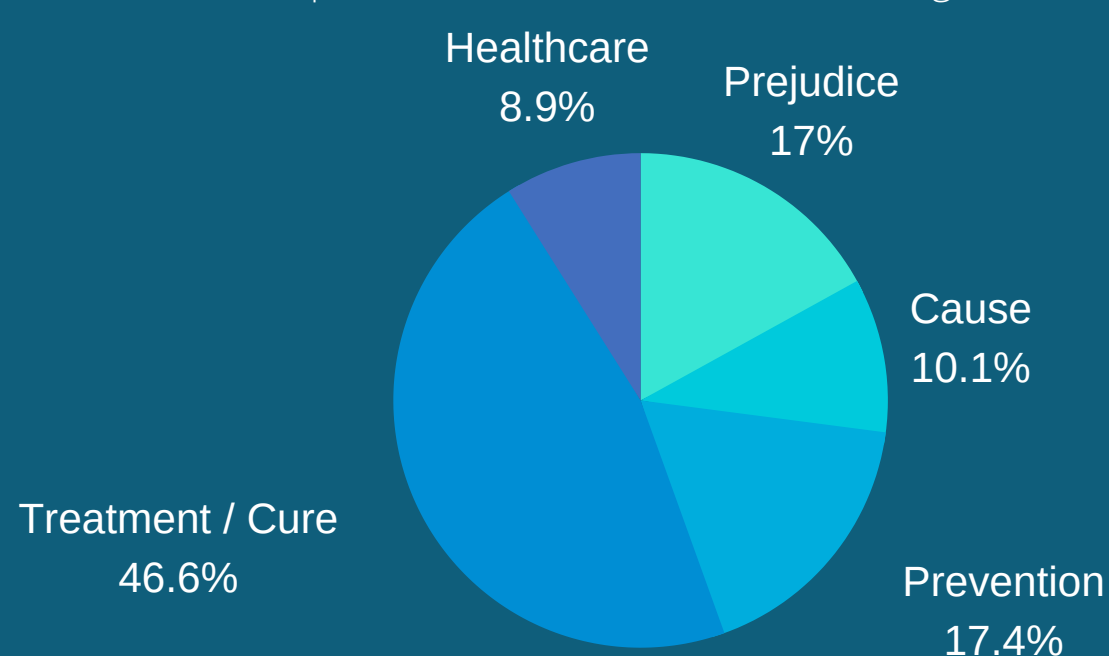
COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Indonesia has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia. As of 21 June 2020, there have been 45,029 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 2,429 deaths. From 1 May - 21 June there were 34,478 new cases and 1,913 deaths. Despite a continued daily increase, physical distancing measures have been partially lifted, with the gradual reopening of shopping centres, offices, public transport, and places of worship.

There are also fears the true number of cases could be significantly higher due to insufficient testing. At the start of June, Indonesia had one of the lowest rates of testing around the world, testing just 1,253 tests per million people or 1.2 — compared with 20 in Malaysia, 49 in Singapore and 72 in Australia.
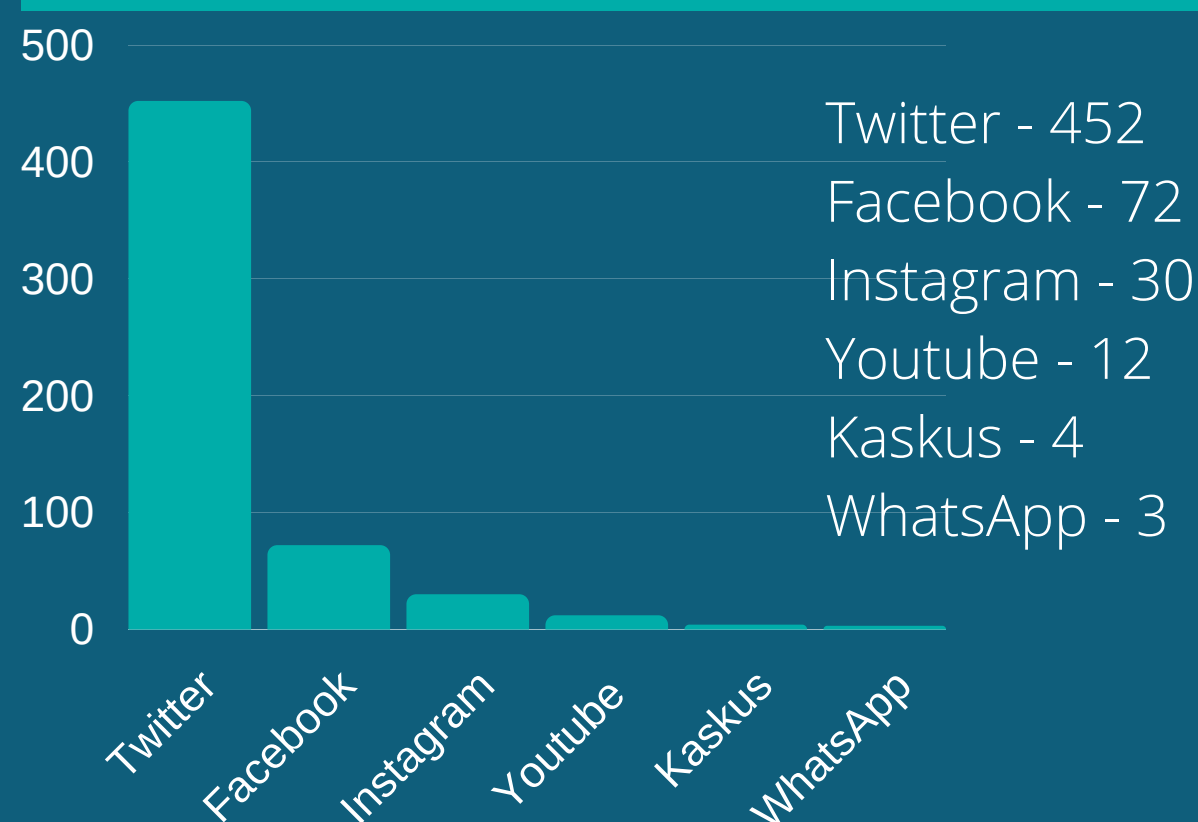
In June, we saw a twelvefold increase in rumours related to mistrust of the medical community. Users questioned whether the official figures were being inflated to attract donor funds, and there was general anxiety around testing and treatment, including the treatment of deceased patients.

THEMES

A closer look at the rumour allows us to categorise them in different, broad, themes. The five most prevalent rumour themes in the region were:

Healthcare 8.9%
Prejudice 17%
Cause 10.1%
Prevention 17.4%
Treatment / Cure 46.6%

PLATFORM

Twitter - 452
Facebook - 72
Instagram - 30
Youtube - 12
Kaskus - 4
WhatsApp - 3

Treatment / Cure (203 rumours)

Indonesia has seen a significant amount of rumours about treatments or cures for COVID-19. The majority of these rumours point to natural remedies such as cajuput oil (this went viral after the Rector of Hasanuddin University in Makassar claimed he cured his coronavirus by inhaling vapours) and Nigella seeds (they're mentioned as a cure by Prophet Mohammed). In May and June there was also a lot of discussion about the claim from Airlangga University that they had discovered a combination of drugs that could cure COVID-19.

Example Rumour:
"Don't be afraid to self-treat yourself at home when you're infected by corona. Just consume phlegm laxative drugs and you'll recover in 3 days."- Twitter

Prevention (76 rumours)

Rumours related to preventing infection were a combination of advertising for 'immunity boosting' products (such as a herbal supplement called 'Soman') or anecdotal accounts of herbal or natural cures which would increase immunity such as 'empon-empon', a homemade traditional herbal drink made from ginger, turmeric, curcumin, and lemongrass. While in many countries, the use of herbal ingredients is a traditional method of boosting immunity for coughs and colds, the Indonesian President has openly encouraged the drinking of these 'jamu' (herbal drinks) for protection during the pandemic.

Example Rumour:
"Currently there are news everywhere that gargling with Betadine can prevent COVID. People, don't bulk buy that product! Just take it slow, please. Just buy according to your needs so that everyone can get their hands on it and the price won't skyrocket"- Twitter

Prejudice (74 rumours)

Rumours that fuelled prejudice were mostly targeted towards Chinese people, and a fear that the pandemic will have a greater impact on Muslim countries. As in the example below, many of these posts point to a general distrust in the healthcare system and the healthcare supplies received as aid from China.

Example Rumour:
"Behind corona, there's Chinese people taking the benefit to destroy Muslims. Healthy people were forced to be admitted to the hospital and injected with coronavirus, after that they tested those people and declared them positive. This is why our own doctors are prohibited to do the testing because they are scared their plan would be revealed."- Facebook

Cause (44 rumours)

The cause of the outbreak continues to fuel rumours on social media. As shown in the post below, many rumours about the cause of the virus come from a general lack of understanding of the emerging science.

Example Rumour:
"Is it true that based on a research conducted in Italy on coronavirus patients that it's discovered that the cause isn't virus but bacteria? And to treat the disease we can use Aspirin, antibiotics, and paracetamol."- Twitter

Healthcare (39 rumours)

In May and June, we saw an increase in rumours questioning the quality of healthcare in Indonesia. A popular rumour claims that the bodies of those who have died due to the virus had their organs harvested illegally and sold by doctors. This was debunked by Indonesian news portal Tempo.co which found that the image in the rumour being circulated was from a video of the autopsy of a murder victim. Another common rumour suggests that hospitals are over-reporting COVID-19 deaths to attract more funding. The rumour is also widely shared as 'proof' that COVID-19 doesn't exist.

Example Rumour:
"There are people who died not because of COVID but the medical team offered some millions of Rupiah to change the status into COVID victim. It's crazy, I don't know if it's true. It's mind blowing if it's true, it's messed up"- Twitter

HIGH RISK

We recorded 29 'High Risk' rumours, the majority, related to rumours about the treatment of dead bodies. These rumours generate high community anxiety, risk increased stigma towards healthcare workers or may encourage people to avoid seeking treatment in healthcare centers and hospitals.

One user on Instagram posted *"This is information from where I live, Banjarmasin. When the corpse was about to be buried by those guys in astronaut suits, residents forcefully took the corpse and found out that the heart organ was gone"*
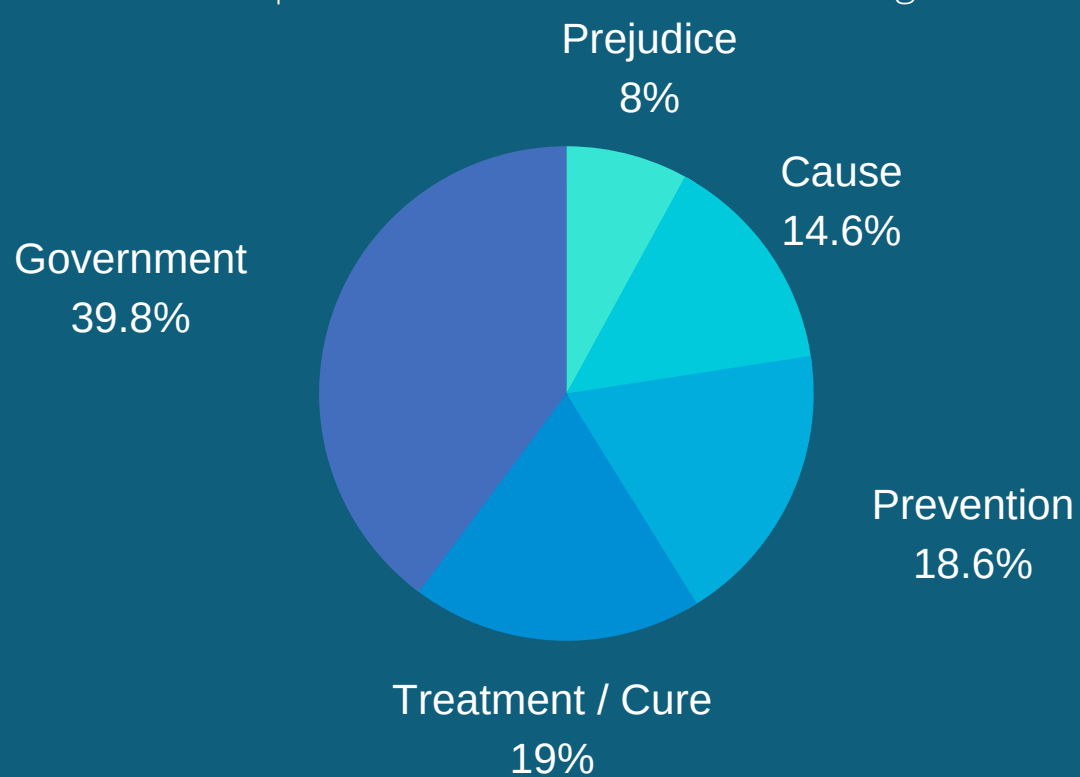
Khmer

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

With only 129 cases and 0 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, Cambodia appears to have successfully contained the virus. There have been 7 cases confirmed in the May/June period. However, there have also been questions raised around the number of tests being conducted. In March, the Ministry of Health announced they had completed just 5,768 tests - equivalent to .03% of the population.
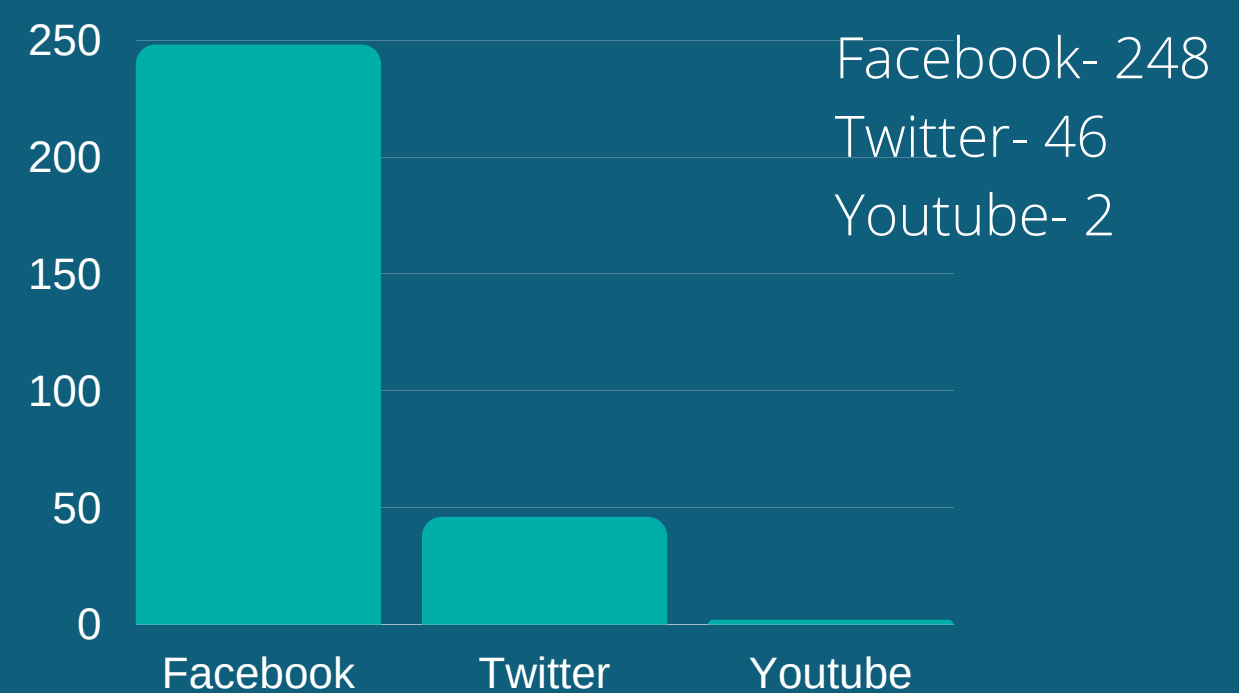
With the threat of the virus seemingly passed, rumours on social media have turned towards intense criticism of government spending (and the announcement of a 50% cut to the national budget in June), Prime Minister Hun Sen's perceived closeness to China, and crackdowns on Opposition political leaders. In a statement released on 17th June, Human Rights Watch called on Sen to free wrongfully detained activists and political leaders. According to HRW, Cambodia has detained 15 people on charges of conspiracy and incitement since January.

THEMES

A closer look at the rumour allows us to categorise them in different, broad, themes. The five most prevalent rumour themes in the region were:

Prejudice 8%
Cause 14.6%
Government 39.8%
Prevention 18.6%
Treatment / Cure 19%

PLATFORM

Facebook- 248
Twitter- 46
Youtube- 2

(Bar chart: Facebook ~248, Twitter ~46, Youtube ~2)

Government (90 rumours)

Social media posts criticising the government more than doubled from May to June.Most rumours in this category focus on criticism about the close relationship between China and Cambodia and allegations that international aid money has not been spent on the country's COVID-19 response.

Example Rumour:
"We will see the disappearance of people, but there are no COVID-19 patients. Where are the tons of gold going? There are billions of dollars reserved for the COVID-19 pandemic, or was all that money stolen?"- Facebook

Treatment / Cure (43 rumours)

Treatment rumours in Khmer have been fueled by excitement and hope following each announcement of a new "breakthrough" drug. While early in the crisis there were regular posts about natural "cures", harsh penalties for spreading this kind of misinformation saw these reduce.

Example Rumour:
"Taking hydroxychloroquine immediately after contact with a COVID-19 infected person will prevent you from contracting the virus"- Facebook

Prevention (42 rumours)

A recurring rumour in Khmer language data surrounds the link between heat, malaria and Hemoglobin as reasons that Cambodia has seen very few COVID-19 cases. This rumour has been fuelled by statements from senior government officials.

Example Rumour:
"Given the possible pathological link between malaria and COVID-19, it's worth asking whether Hemoglobin E, which protects the populations of SE Asia and NE India against the worst kinds of malaria, is also protecting them against the most severe forms of COVID-19."- Twitter

Cause (33 rumours)

Rumours about the cause of the outbreak were varied from questions about which animals might be the cause or have contributed towards the outbreak, or theories that the virus is a man-made bioweapon.

Example Rumour:
"The Netherlands suspects that badgers are the origin of Coronavirus spreading to humans."- Facebook

Prejudice (18 rumours)

Rumours that fuelled prejudice were mostly targeted towards Chinese citizens in Cambodia, with a smaller number of posts making prejudicial statements about religious groups such as Muslims.

Example Rumour:
"Two passengers, who were infected with COVID-19 from Indonesia, what religion are they? Indonesia is following Muslims like Malaysia. I suspect the two infected passengers are Khmer Muslim again."- Facebook

HIGH RISK

Through May and June, we classified 15 rumours as 'High Risk.' As there is regular travel between tCambodia and China, most of the high-risk rumours expressed anxiety about Chinese visitors in Cambodia. These posts were considered high risk because they encouraged prejudice or violence towards Chinese citizens in the country.

One user on Facebook wrote *"Chinese are flocking to Cambodia but they are not coming for investments. 2,000 Chinese are coming and bringing Corona –COVID-19, as a gift for Cambodians. China is the best friend of PM Hun Sen who we cannot trust."*

Tagalog

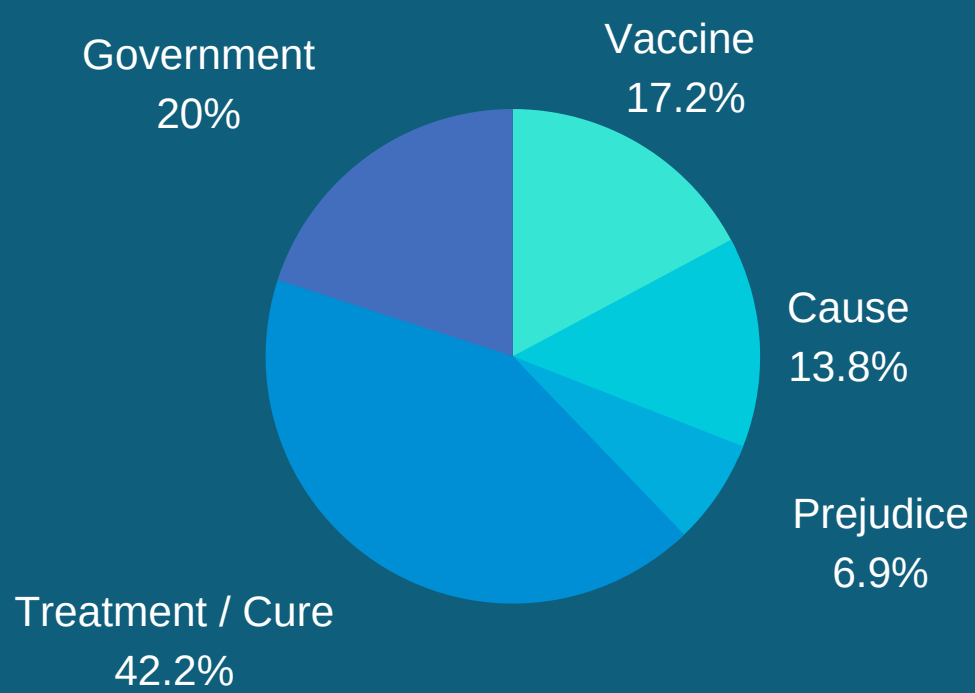This analysis is based on 522 rumours collected between 1st May and 17th June 2020.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

This week the Philippines set a new milestone, recording their 30,000th case. As of 22 June, there have been 30,052 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,150 deaths. From 1 May - 21 June there were 21,912 new cases and 582 deaths. In June, the Philippines was still seeing daily increases in both confirmed cases and deaths. In recent months, social media rumour discussions have been dominated by speculations about the Fabunan antiviral injection, developed by a Philippine doctor. Despite warnings from the health ministry, we continue to see increases in users discussing access and speculations about the effectiveness of the injection.
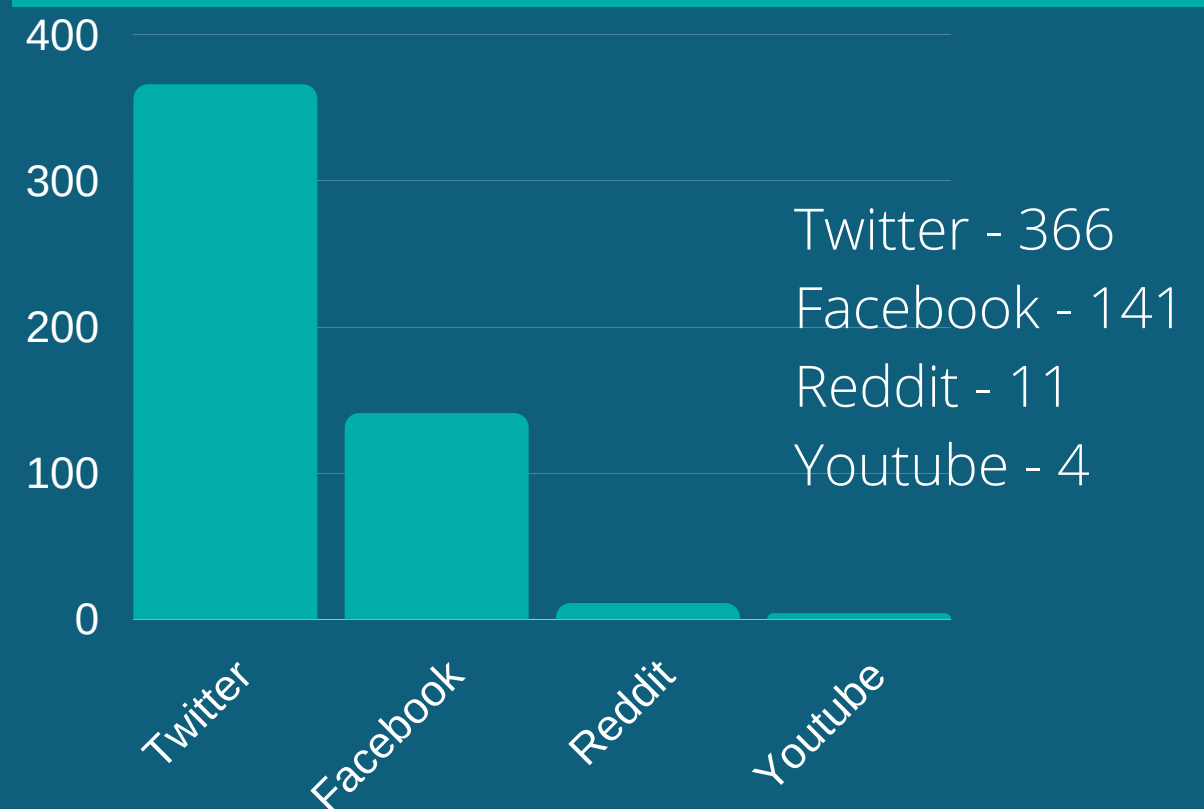
June also saw an increase in prejudice towards China and Chinese nationals. Since the beginning of the crisis, China has provided medical staff and equipment to support the Filipino government response. The two countries have long maintained a close relationship, however many social media users suggested that the relationship may have slowed the government's response to the pandemic.

THEMES

A closer look at the rumour allows us to categorise them in different, broad, themes. The five most prevalent rumour themes in the region were:

Government 20%
Vaccine 17.2%
Cause 13.8%
Prejudice 6.9%
Treatment / Cure 42.2%

PLATFORM

Twitter - 366
Facebook - 141
Reddit - 11
Youtube - 4

Treatment / Cure (135 rumours)

Rumours continue to circulate about the Fabunan injection. It is likely that we will continue to see increases with new research showing that the anti-inflammatory drug dexamethasone (reportedly a component of the Fabunan injection) could be an effective treatment for very severe forms of COVID-19.

Example Rumour:
"There's a Fabunan drug that turns to alcohol when injected into the body, which will kill COVID-19. Unfortunately, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) didn't approve it. Fucking FDA. I think it was deliberate."- Facebook

Government (64 rumours)

Government rumours predominantly focused on criticisms towards the government and government officials for taking steps to block the Fabunan injection. Other prevalent rumours suggest that the Government was intentionally slow to respond in order to increase sales of medical equipment that are commonly imported from China.

Example Rumour:
"Until now the government is still planning how to fight COVID-19! They still do not have any concrete plans right now! And they want to implement martial law so they can just maybe shoot down positive patients since that is considered invasion!"- Twitter

Vaccine (55 rumours)

Rumours about vaccines were often fuelled by concerns about the availability or access to a vaccine when/if it is developed. Many posts showed a low level of understanding of how vaccines are developed and the role they play in prevention, rather than treatment. Other rumours were fuelled by prejudice or distrust of the Chinese government, and suggestions that they are withholding the cure, others were versions of the global rumours about the involvement of Bill Gates in the vaccine development process.

Example Rumour:
"COVID-19 patients here in China have fast recovery. They administer some kind of vaccine and there's recovery in just a few days. Perhaps they already have the vaccine for a long time now. Even recurring patients—they just admit them then after a few days, they are released."- Twitter

Cause (44 rumours)

There continue to be rumours circulating about the cause of the pandemic. While some distrust that the virus could have come from animals originally, rumours continue to circulate suggesting that the virus is a kind of biological weapon created to profit from the sale of a vaccine.

Example Rumour:
"Kim Jong-un faked his death to fool the whole world. Then the Americans will blame the Chinese for causing COVID-19, although the American elites led by Bill Gates are the real culprit. I can smell... WORLD WAR 3!!!"- Twitter

Prejudice (22 rumours)

Rumour fuelling prejudice in Tagalog were almost exclusively directed towards China and Chinese nationals living in the Philippines. Chinese migration to the Philippines has long been a divisive topic and this pandemic has added to feelings of distrust and anger.
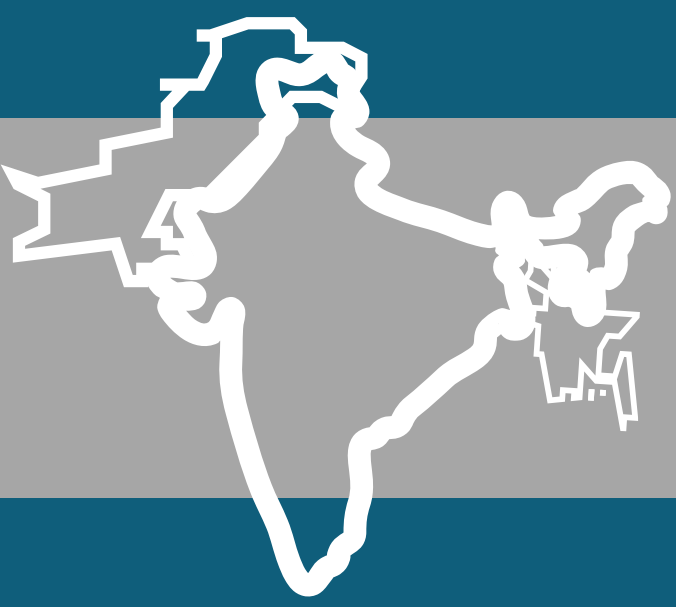
Example Rumour:
"The very first step that should be taken to stop the spread of COVID-19 is: Ban the Chinese in the Philippines. As long as these COVID-19 virus-riddled Chinese are going around the Philippines, the government will never have a successful program and we will not be able to contain COVID-19. All those who protect the Chinese should be put on an old ship and let it drift in the West Philippine Sea on the way to China where they should stay!"- Facebook

HIGH RISK

Through May and June, we classified 111 rumours as 'High Risk'. The majority of posts were considered high risk because they encouraged people to avoid testing and treatment, and anti-vaccination beliefs. News that Chinese premier Xi Jinping had promised the Philippines priority vaccine delivery once a cure for COVID-19 is developed unearthed anxiety from the high profile

'Dengvaxia' vaccine scandal in 2017 which resulted in the deaths of several children and fuelled strong anti-vaccination beliefs.

"Be careful! Do not undergo testing and do not accept vaccination because we do not know what they are going to administer to you. It could be virus, too, and when you are tested, the result will come out as positive. Instead of being healthy or just a simple fever, they will make things complicated. So do not undergo testing and vaccination." - Facebook

Hindi, Bangla & Urdu

This analysis is based on 219 rumours collected between 1st May and 17th June 2020.

REGION OVERVIEW

Forming one of the most populous regions of the world, South Asia has been particularly hard-hit by COVID-19. Rumour data in this region has been collected in three commonly spoken languages from the region- Hindi, Urdu, and Bangla- which span the countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. All three countries continued to see significant increases in the May/June reporting period, and all three also saw a decline in testing over that time.
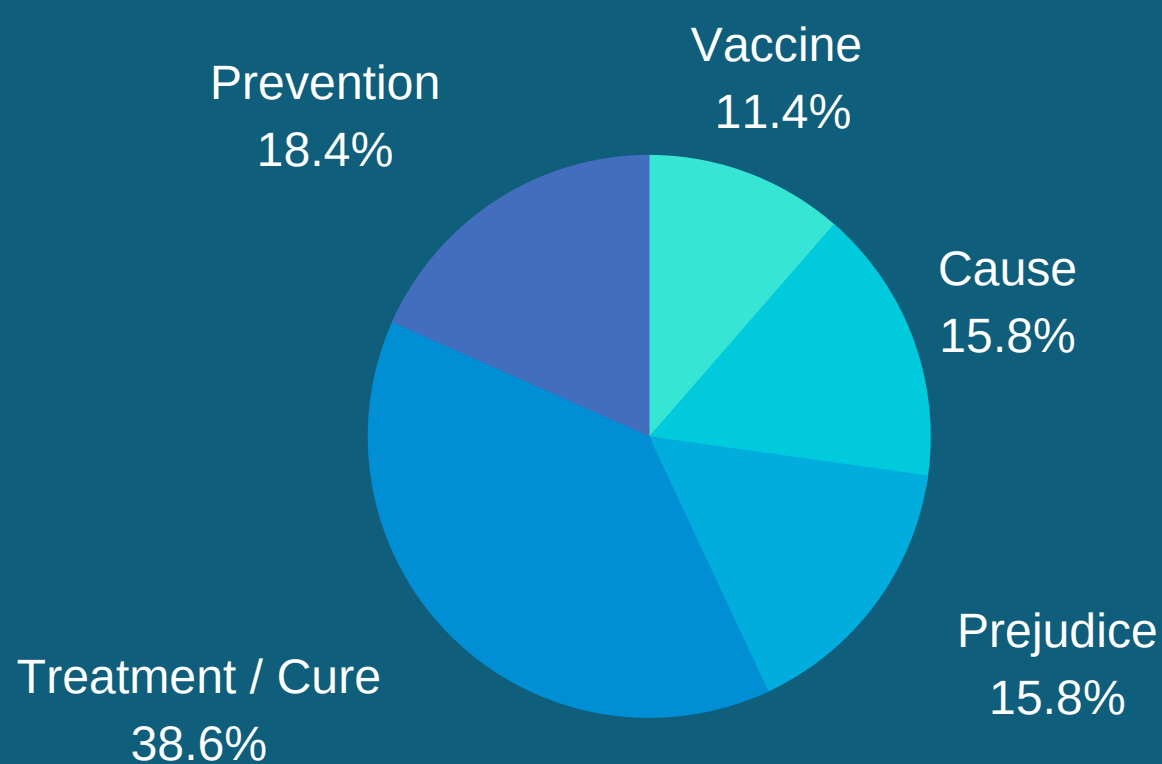
In Pakistan, from Feb 26 to 22 June 2020, there have been 181,088 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 163,477 new cases and 3,184 deaths in the May - June 22 period. In May/June, we saw the daily number of tests decline from an average or 8-9,000 per day at the beginning of May to 4-5,500 per day by mid June.

In India, from Jan 30 to 22 June 2020, there have been 425,282 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 13,699 deaths. From May 1 to June 22, there were 390,239 new cases and 12,552 deaths. In May/June, we saw the daily number of tests decline from an average or 30-31,000 per day at the beginning of May to 12-13,000 per day by mid June.
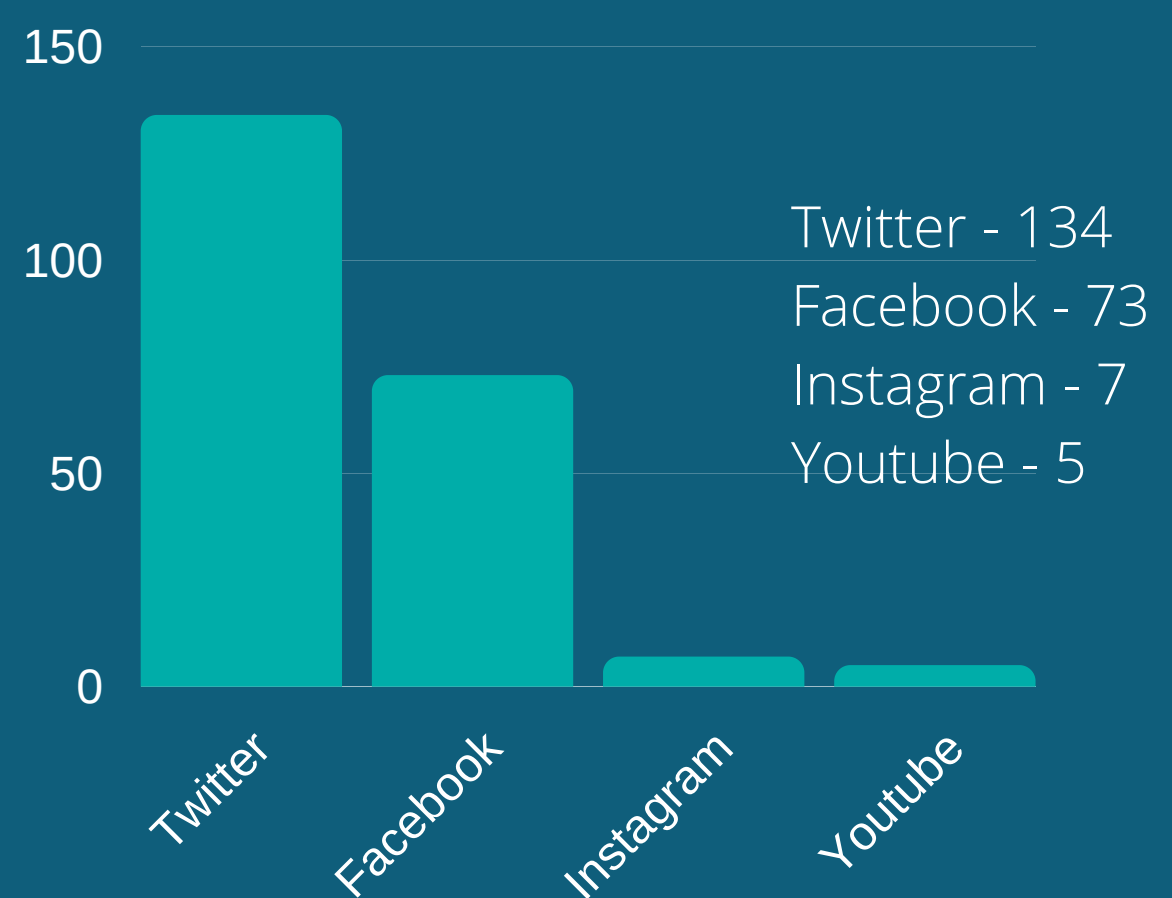
In Bangladesh, from Mar 8 to 22 June 2020, there have been 112,306 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,464 deaths. From May 1 to June 22, there were 104,068 new cases and 1,294 deaths. In May/June, we saw the daily number of tests decline from an average or 8-9,000 per day at the beginning of May to 4-5,000 per day by mid June.

THEMES

A closer look at the rumour allows us to categorise them in different, broad, themes. The five most prevalent rumour themes in the region were:

Vaccine 11.4%
Prevention 18.4%
Cause 15.8%
Treatment / Cure 38.6%
Prejudice 15.8%

PLATFORM

Twitter - 134
Facebook - 73
Instagram - 7
Youtube - 5

Treatment / Cure (61 rumours)

The most dominant theme across the three languages has been the promotion of regional or herbal cures. Remedies such as ginger, honey and Nigella Seed were common across all the language groups we monitored in the region and often stem from a belief that COVID-19 is similar to the common cold or influenza.

Example Rumour:
"Homemade foods such as ginger,green tea, raw tea can cure coronavirus"- Bangla, Facebook

Prevention (29 rumours)

Rumours about how to prevent catching the virus were more likely to point to natural and homemade remedies rather than store-bought products. Common preventative measures included advising the consumption of a tisane brewed with herbs such as Tulsi and Neem.

Example Rumour:
"It seems that coronavirus clings to the walls of blood vessels, and damages the body. Drinking plenty of olive oil and vinegar can help."- Urdu, Twitter

Prejudice (25 rumours)

Fear and anxiety surrounding the virus contributed to an increase in discrimination and prejudice towards vulnerable groups, both in person and online. India, in particular, had extensive rumours in this category. Nearly a quarter of rumours logged from India were prejudicial in nature, with Muslim communities being commonly targeted in the posts.

Example Rumour:
"It will be remembered in history that the people of the same ideology as ISIS tried to spread Corona in India. Political parties like Congress, SP and BSP have given their full strength to save and support them!"- India, Twitter

Cause (25 rumours)

In rumours relating to the cause of the pandemic, it was interesting to note how geo-political allyship formed the base for the type of rumours spread. In Pakistan, which has close ties with China, there were a number of rumours disputing the origin of the virus.

Meanwhile, India and China saw a geo-political conflict over a disputed border between the two countries erupt in May and June. Consequently, most rumours about cause in Hindi alleged that the virus was a bio-weapon which had leaked from a lab in China. It received particular attention when an Indian Union Minister repeated this claim in an interview.

Example Rumour:
"The coronavirus did not first spread from China, but from European countries. But where? In France."- Twitter, Urdu

Example Rumour:
"Corona virus was produced in Wuhan lab in China, where it spread due to explosion. This incident happened in October itself. China hid this and WHO was also silenced. A German newspaper wrote that Xi Jinping personally called the WHO president and that is why the WHO continued to save China."- Hindi, Twitter

Vaccine (18 rumours)

News reports about vaccine development were keenly discussed in the region. Hope for a vaccine to be developed and made available quickly also allowed a platform for many dubious claims. As in all the languages we monitored, we commonly saw posts from users who confused the role of vaccines, treatments and cures.

Example Rumour:
"The good news is the UAE government has announced that it has developed the coronavirus vaccine. From this vaccine coronavirus can be cured. It came in the media. Around 73 patients who were in an emergency, were on a ventilator and had pneumonia were given this vaccine and they recovered. It can be a game-changer. It is Stem Cell."- Urdu, Facebook

HIGH RISK

In so much as rumours are a window into community anxiety, our data showed that most of the 41 'High Risk' rumours collected in the region originated from India and were Islamophobic in nature. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has been accused of trying to push India into becoming a majoritarian Hindu state in the wake of a controversial citizenship law being introduced which sought to determine citizenship on the basis of religion.

As India instituted a harsh, economically crippling, countrywide lockdown, many Indians were left wanting for basic resources. This in turn spawned rumours that sought to establish that refugees from nearby Bangladesh and Myanmar would be an economic drain on the country.

A popular rumour in Hindi said "The nation can't support #5_Crore illegal Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugees. After the #Corona_Crisis the nation will be economically weak. The first right to #resources is to the #Hindustanis not #Jihadis."

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TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

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UK aid from the British people

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