



ROOTED IN TRUST LEBANON

Findings and Recommendations

February 2021

COMBATting MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

Table of Contents

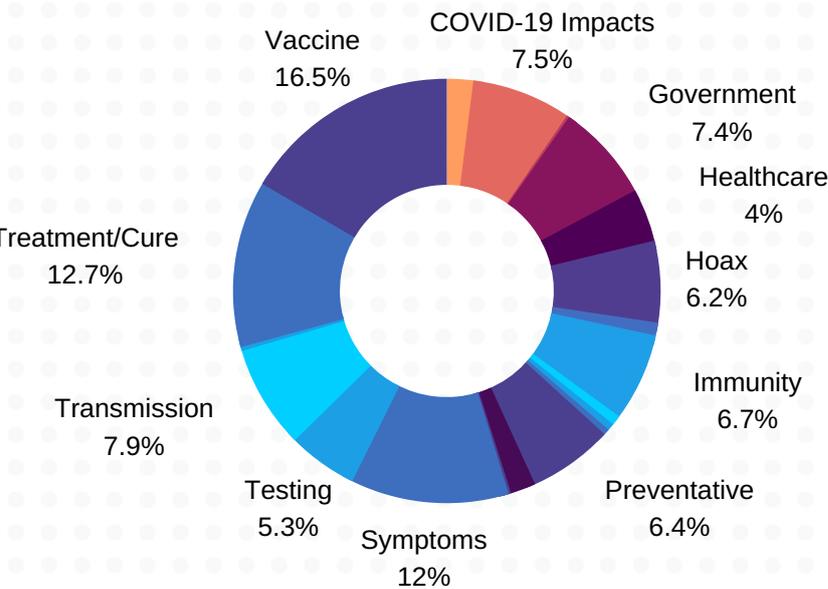
- 1. Main Findings
 - 1.1 Hot rumor trends observed during the entirety of the project
 - 1.2 Key recommendations from the Information Ecosystem Assessment focusing on Syrian refugees
 - 1.3 Key recommendations for humanitarians and media from the overall Rooted in Trust project
- 2. Overview of the project
- 3. Methodology

Since October 2020, Internews' Rooted in Trust (RiT) project team – in partnership with the Maharat Foundation – have brought you details and analysis of the rumors circulating on Lebanese social media in relation to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As our project is coming to a close in February 2021, we are sharing our key findings and recommendations for humanitarians, journalists, and communities in Lebanon who are likely to continue being impacted by misinformation in the months and years to come.

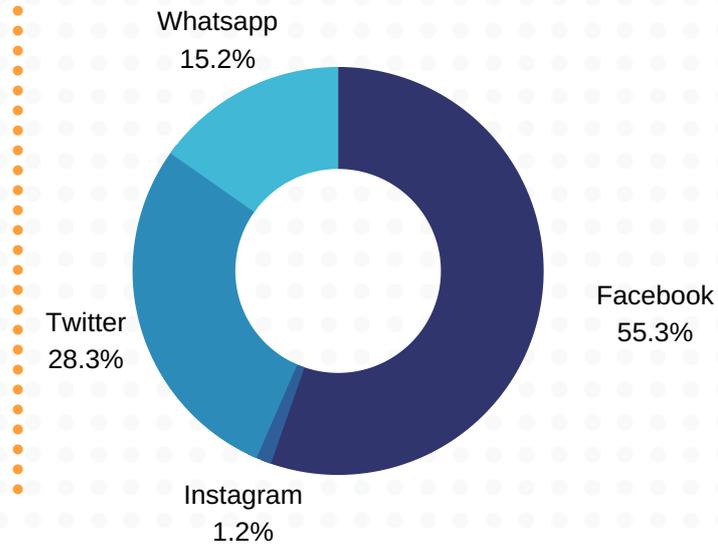
1. Main Findings:

A total of 2774 rumors were collected from 200 mapped social media platforms that focused on COVID-19 between October 2020 and February 2021.

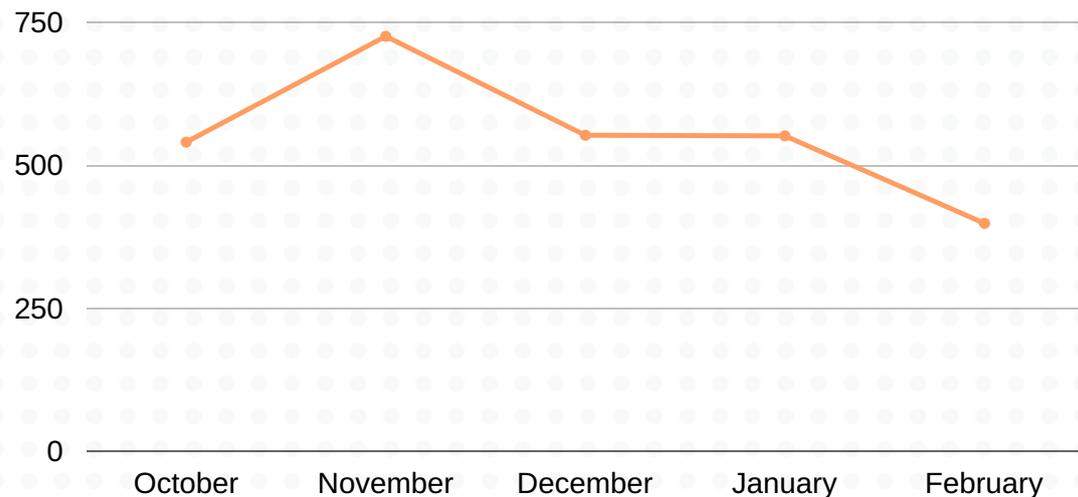
Rumors Themes:



Platforms:



Count of Rumors:



COMBATting MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

1.1 In this newsletter Internews looks back in time: what trends are visible when looking at all of the collected data?

October 2020: **Hot topics: Hoax, Preventative measures**

Even though the virus was first recorded in Lebanon back in February 2020, disbelief in COVID-19 was still prevalent in October. Social media monitoring indicated that some people did not believe in the virus itself, while others believed in different conspiracy theories around it. This could discourage people from taking preventative measures and lead to increased community transmission, posing long-lasting risks to Lebanon's already struggling health sector.

“ *Italian doctor declares COVID-19 is a plot to reduce the world's population and activate artificial intelligence.* ”
Posted on WhatsApp.

The use of home remedies to prevent COVID-19 was also common on Lebanese social media in October, with most rumors mentioning foods thought to prevent infection. Other rumors were logged less often but posed a higher risk, such as the use of diluted baby shampoo as a nasal spray or applying insect repellent on the skin to prevent COVID-19. During this time, Internews noted the possibility that people were turning to more affordable home remedies as an alternative to traditional personal protective equipment which was becoming increasingly expensive and inaccessible on the Lebanese market.

“ *Onion onions and more onions. Eating a fresh, raw, uncooked onion when eating twice a day is quite enough without taking other measures in the prevention of a respiratory infection (new coronavirus Covid 19 and influenza virus) no matter how high the exposure is.* ”
Posted on WhatsApp

November 2020: **Hot topics: Treatment/cure, Government**

Various at-home treatments for COVID-19 were discussed among social media groups last November. Communities often turn to treatments they are familiar with to feel more in control of their health. However, belief in such remedies could also deter people from seeking medically approved testing and treatment. Moreover, many posts on social media were referring to certain pharmaceutical drugs as a cure for COVID-19 such as antibiotics and antivirals. Unfortunately, alleged treatments and cures for COVID-19 continued to circulate on social media in December 2020 and February 2021. Some of these drugs, which are sometimes used to treat symptoms resulting from COVID-19 infections in severe cases, have become scarce and hard to find in pharmacies across in Lebanon.

“ *Anyone who feels the symptoms of COVID-19 infection should quarantine themselves at home and take the treatment below: Panadol, Azithromycin, vitamin C, zinc, vitamin D, Strepslis.* ”
Posted on WhatsApp.

During the strict lockdown measures enforced by the Lebanese government back in November, social media monitoring indicated a general distrust and obvious frustration with the local government. People went online to question the security forces' ability to properly enforce lockdowns and criticized authorities for not having a plan in place to support struggling individuals and institutions impacted by these measures. With the longest lockdown implemented in Lebanon during January and February 2021 as a result of a significant rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths, Lebanese and refugee communities are facing pandemic fatigue coupled with distrust in the government's ability to control the pandemic amidst a major economic crisis.

“ *I feel sad for the people who believe that the lockdown's purpose is actually for Corona.* ”
Posted on Twitter

COMBATting MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

December 2020: **Hot topics: Vaccine, COVID-19 Long- term Impacts**

Around December, rumors transitioned from those of sarcasm and disbelief in COVID-19, to those of fear of COVID-19 infection and its impacts as the situation in Lebanon worsened while case numbers continued to rise. People took to social media to express their fears and share their concerns around long-term effects of COVID-19, which ranged from impacts on physical and mental health, to consequences on economies and population demographics around the world.

As the Lebanese government announced securing doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the end of November, there was a spike in vaccine rumors with people sharing their fears and hesitations towards the rapidly developed vaccines. These were coupled by various rumors around alleged severe side effects from the vaccines, including some that would be felt years after vaccination, and conspiracy theories related to the various objectives hidden behind the creation and roll-out of the vaccine. Rumors about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine were more prevalent than rumors about other vaccines which are not yet officially available in the country.

“ Advice from Dr. Maroun Khoury, a friend of the health Minister: To all the promoters of the vaccine, enough recklessness to the minds of people and the minds of noble doctors. Any vaccine in the world would have waited 4 years to know the side effects, severity and effectiveness. ”

“ Posted on Facebook.

Infertility: Does #COVID affect men? Research has indicated negative effects of CoVID-19, most notably erectile dysfunction in men. ”

Posted on Facebook

January, February 2021: **Hot topics: Vaccine, Treatment/Cure**

Rumors around the vaccine continued to rise in January and February 2021, especially with influential Lebanese figures sharing their fears about the vaccine on social media. Monitoring also revealed that a significant chunk of Lebanon's population continued to show distrust towards the vaccine with lasting concerns about its alleged severe side effects and risks. Many were also circulating several conspiracy theories around the vaccine. Their concerns were amplified when several Lebanese doctors shared their negative opinions on the vaccine on local TV shows and social media.

False treatments and home remedies for COVID-19 also resurfaced heavily during that same period. This could be related to people's mistrust in the vaccine and reliance on treatment methods instead. Many of the medications circulating as treatment methods are becoming increasingly scarce in Lebanese pharmacies at a time when the country's economic and public health crises are taking a disproportionate toll on chronically ill patients.

“ Victims of the new vaccine: Epilepsy, limb paralysis, brain and spinal cord infections, 12 hours after receiving the vaccine. What do you want to say to those who say "vaccines are safe and sound"? ”

Posted on Facebook

COMBATTING MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

1.2 Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) Linked to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Peeling the onion: a multi-layered infodemic and its impact on trust for Syrians in Lebanon

During the RIT project, Internews conducted an Information Ecosystem Assessment which documents how information was produced, consumed, and shared by Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2020 amidst a global pandemic and other compounding crises. It identifies how Syrian refugees in different parts of Lebanon prefer to receive information, how they build trust, and how different information providers engage with them. This research is the result of interviews and focus group discussions with Syrian community members, information providers, Lebanese media, and local and international humanitarian organizations working closely with Syrian communities, as well as RIT's engagement with the COVID-19 response and the Risk Communications and Community Engagement working group.

The final report will be published in Arabic and English in March 2020. To receive the full report, subscribe to our newsletter: <https://bit.ly/3eh4cXO>

KEY IEA FINDINGS:

Information supply:

- The Lebanese government has gradually disenfranchised itself from Syrian refugees over the years while humanitarians have struggled with intermittent and incomplete funding for the refugee response. Syrians today regard these two institutions with apprehension and a pragmatic awareness of their motivations and limitations, sometimes culminating into feelings of outright distrust. These dynamics likewise push people to rely more heavily on their most immediate networks for information and support.
- Small, remote camp settlements and Syrian refugees residing in rural or isolated areas outside of humanitarian programming 'hot-spots' tend to have less access to information on COVID-19 and relevant services.
- Humanitarians and health practitioners have struggled to localize trustworthy and relevant COVID-19 informational resources since the start of the pandemic. Much of this information has been disconnected from the implications of Lebanon's economic crisis on peoples' ability to distance and stay at home. Likewise, this top-down approach has disconnected health communicators, the media, and the government from the communities they serve. This has ultimately fueled hesitations and public criticism about the pandemic response.

Information demand:

- Syrians have created a robust and effective system for information sharing in Lebanon and throughout the diaspora. Pages on Facebook and WhatsApp connect people with information and first-hand experiences about government procedures, resettlement opportunities, and humanitarian services. Due to the mutually supportive nature of these groups, respondents mentioned a high level of trust and reliance on them.
- For both Syrian and Lebanese communities, trust is built at the community and familial level. Proximity plays an important role for trust-building, especially for vulnerable or isolated Syrian communities, thus information providers in close coordination with the community tend to be more trusted than official sources of information which are harder to relate to. Examples include charities and NGOs with a physical presence among Syrian communities particularly through community workers or focal points, in addition to Syrian doctors, and networks of family and friends.

COMBATting MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

1.3 Overall Project Recommendations:

On Humanitarian Engagement:

1. Invest in local, personalized listening:
 - Understand the root causes of the rumors that are circulating;
 - Triangulate rumors and the information behind them;
 - Adapt communications materials for better effectiveness and reach;
 - Build trust, which also requires explicit follow up on activities and services in order to avoid informational gaps that can later on be filled by rumors);
 - And lastly, Brainstorm on viable solutions directly with the community and for the community.
2. Build a horizontal knowledge base of information providers from the community rather than pumping information vertically down to the community.
 - Deformalize information sharing mechanisms and adapt them to each target group accordingly for more personalized reach;
 - Use media as a community engagement tool rather than a component of external communications used to “lecture” the audience.
3. Invest in media literacy across the board: of field staff, volunteers, beneficiaries, and media partners. This should include tools to better understand misinformation and question it at the grassroots level.

On Accountability:

1. Avoid top-down engagement or programming:
 - Instead, create coordinated spaces for communication linking international (RCCE) and local humanitarian actors and media;
 - Collect feedback and concerns from these groups and connect them with trusted and informed health and humanitarian experts who can build skills rather than disseminate policy;
 - Keep in mind that humanitarian workers, journalists and even health professionals are not immune to misinformation, and encourage regular debriefings.
2. Push for accountability of health professionals in spreading rumors:
 - Through medical partners of the RCCE
 - Through the Vaccine Committee
 - Through the Syndicate of Doctors
3. Hold media partners accountable for their role in spreading rumors:
 - Offer alternatives: connect media with experts on the Vaccine Committee or have experts from this group go on TV.
 - Encourage the MoH, WHO and other high-level stakeholders in the Covid-19 response to take on a more personalized or down to earth approach and discuss directly with the wider audience through the media or national events/campaigns.

COMBATTING MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

On tackling common rumors:

Follow the three “golden rules”: (1) Be specific and consistent. (2) Engage with rumors rather than responding to them. (3) Be transparent: about aid mechanisms, and about what is not yet known about the constantly evolving Covid-19 virus.

1. Vaccine rumors:

- Tackle underlying drivers of vaccine rejection or hesitancy;
- Respond directly to the severe side effect rumors coming in from abroad and being labelled as more credible and shared widely in Lebanon, while stressing on the need to invest and trust in local medical knowledge.
- Make the vaccine hotline free or be transparent about call costs in order to avoid frustration or disappointment.
- Be specific: on frequency rates of side effects, on cases of interference documented, etc.

2. Lockdowns:

Rumors increased during lockdown periods, so make sure to ramp up communications during this time when the public’s attention is at its highest. Recognize the economic challenges of lockdown in communications and aid options in order to maintain mutual respect and trust between information disseminators and receivers.

3. Treatment and cures:

Raise awareness about the dangers of self-medication. Directly reference medicines circulating on social media as soon as possible after they present themselves. Hold pharmaceutical companies and the Syndicate of pharmacists to account when not doing enough to tackle this issue.

4. Host-refugee tensions:

Recognize and engage early on with rumors that could spark social tensions between host and refugee populations, providing clear and viable solutions. This includes rumors on vaccine preferential treatment, hospitals denying access to refugees, etc.

5. Rumors about the healthcare system:

Be transparent about funding mechanisms to the health sector.

For the media:

Recognize the magnitude of misinformation in Lebanon and the need for due diligence in selecting ‘expert perspectives.’ Recognize the potentially harmful role of some social media influencers and healthcare professionals in spreading rumors and disinformation. Cite medical sources directly involved with the COVID-19 Vaccine Committee and the broader COVID-19 response.

Find ways to reach and engage with politicized audiences and marginalized communities who may not usually have access to your reporting or seek it out. This can start by engaging on local information sharing groups and connecting with local community representatives as well as freelance journalists in rural areas who may benefit from capacity building initiatives.

For the Community:

Rumors are prevalent in Lebanon and spread quickly across social media but also by word of mouth. Fact check information you receive from WhatsApp or Facebook about COVID-19 on at least one official source on COVID-19, such as the World Health Organization or the Ministry of Public Health. Share simple tools that could support in the better understanding of misinformation and how it spreads.

COMBATting MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

2. Overview of the Project

Rooted in Trust project is a global and local humanitarian response by Internews that aims to combat the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19 in seven countries around the world. In Lebanon, Internews has partnered with the Maharat Foundation to collect, analyze, and identify risks and misinformation around COVID-19, while also supporting journalists and humanitarians to communicate more effectively about the virus.

One year into the crisis, we are still seeing new rumors emerge in response to the evolving crisis on a daily basis, distorting perceptions around every aspect of the pandemic. We have seen rumors incite violence, cause harm and bring shame even to vulnerable groups, negatively impacting overall public health messaging.

Our main goals include:

- Improving quality of engagement with vulnerable communities by humanitarians and journalists through mentorship, roundtable discussions on challenges faced and tailored communication resources.
- Producing biweekly bulletins analyzing the most common and high-risk rumors circulating in Lebanon
- Increase capacity of media to accurately and effectively report on the pandemic and respond to community information needs.

The project aims to understand the information environment in which rumors thrive and ensure community questions and concerns basically drive communication efforts. Rumors give us an idea of what the local needs are, encourage us to listen to the community, and gives us intimate insight into what the community cares about, what are their hopes, fears and concerns.

3. Rumor Tracking Methodology and Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context

Social media monitoring provides the opportunity to capture data in its raw form and gives space for the unfiltered voices of the community. A social media mapping exercise precedes the social media listening to identify the main sources of rumors across different platforms and different communities. Often the most vulnerable people are the least likely to have access to the information or assistance that may be available for them. Therefore, it is vitally important that those collecting rumors actively seek out vulnerable groups.

Data was collected via online and offline platforms from the period between October 2020 and February 2021. Online platforms included social media groups and pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Offline data was collected through focus group discussions conducted with Lebanese, refugee and migrant communities across different areas in Lebanon.

All rumor data is categorized according to **themes, clusters, age groups, gender, content creator types, community types, and risks.**

- Quality over quantity is key!
- Empower the unfiltered voices of the community to set the agenda;
- Collect as little identifiable data as possible, only collect names when absolutely necessary;
- Use different channels to collect information when possible, such as FGDs;
- Regularly check percentages of gender, age, vulnerabilities etc. in your data to question whether you are reaching of the different layers within the community

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WANT TO CHECK OUR RUMOR TRACKING BULLETINS ?



SCAN THE QR CODE

Social media mapping template:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18r14MTCSTj_sXofbwxbiikBf2AlyINbRQ0OPSCk4DuY/edit?usp=sharing

Social media monitoring template:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1EdXqUU1jvioAYxwto9DChFPOf2DCmgLJiZrNbprkR8/edit?usp=sharing>