Using social data in the information landscape

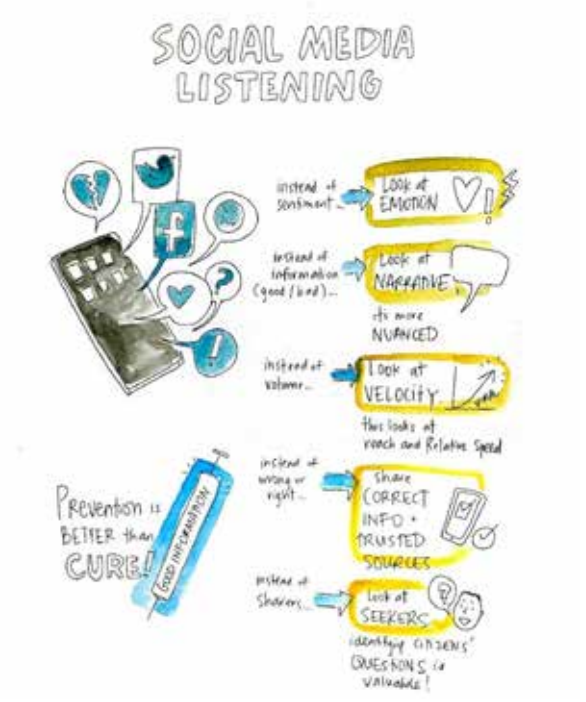
Amy Wright and Paolo Vacca highlight the role that social data plays to inform frontline health workers and policymakers in Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented situation where one single topic has unequivocally dominated conversations in the digital space at a global level. In the first half of 2020, COVID-19 permeated online conversations in Africa to the point where the word 'virus' was the 15th most used word in all public English-language social media posts from users based on the African continent, generating 3.2 million mentions, with the words 'coronavirus' and 'pandemic' generating over 2.6 million and 2.2 million respectively.

In such an over-saturated information landscape, the task of reaching relevant audiences with trustworthy and timely information becomes challenging – but also more important than ever. The COVID-19 information ecosystem has proved to be very sensitive to new 'conversation inputs', i.e. news stories, influential statements, or new research findings. These inputs encourage the ecosystem to grow and develop in unpredictable ways, while simultaneously increasing public demand for clear information. Any gaps in meeting this demand leave fertile ground for the spread of inaccurate information.

Since March 2020, the WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) has been collaborating with research partners to monitor the global English and French language conversation on COVID-19. This is done with the goal of detecting early signals of growing interest and public engagement with constantly emerging narratives around COVID-19 – regardless of whether they stem from trusted or unreliable sources. This research is conducted using a standardised taxonomy to focus the analysis on COVID-19-related topics which have a public health context, making the research more efficient and actionable.

The methodology focuses not only on the topics that have generated the highest volumes of digital content, but also on the topics that have been gaining velocity compared to previous weeks. Analysis of this growth in interest, together with the assessment of emotional language used in the relevant content, can provide health workers and policymakers with insights into areas that are of growing concern to citizens, including indicators of the types of reliable information that need to be disseminated. Linguistic markers are also used to detect questions about COVID-19 that digitally active citizens ask online.



Shifting paradigms in social media listening, by Tim Zechin, Media Measurement; drawing by Sam Bradd

This methodology, while originally designed to deliver data at a global level, can provide valuable insights at a more localised level, as proven when it was recently applied to the analysis of digital content produced in Uganda. Thanks to the knowledge acquired in the fight against the 'infodemic' at a global level, the shift to a local focus has facilitated the identification of the flow of information across social, political and geographical borders, to make a distinction between global and local trends, and to deconstruct potentially harmful narratives, which often come from abroad, but have great impact on African countries.

The report (based on data from 17–23 August 2020) found that the growing topics of concern for Ugandan social media users during that period included inequality and the potential for new lockdown measures. Further, mirroring concerns seen worldwide, Ugandan social media users expressed concerns around government reporting of COVID-19 cases, with a number of users accusing the government of providing false information, suggesting a broader sense of mistrust in official

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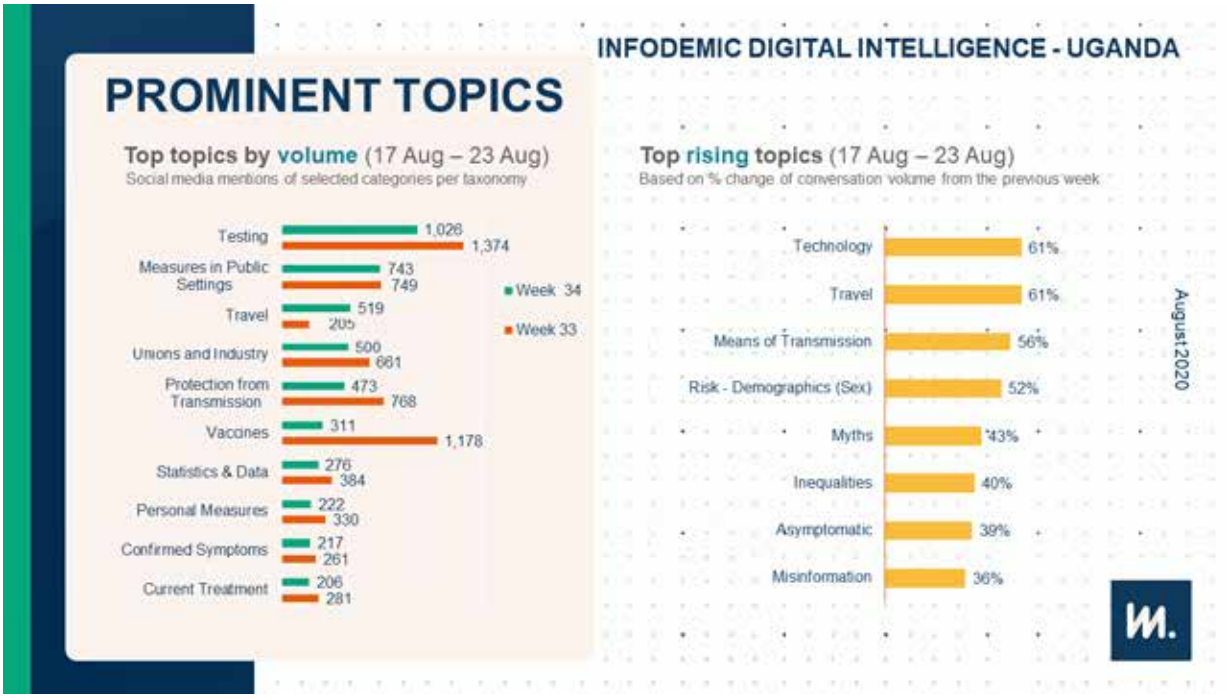

organisations. Reviewing the key topics of concern for Ugandan digital citizens during this period, it is clear that they are interlinked, and overwhelmingly relate to access – i.e. access to information, to technology, to equipment and to treatment.

The online discussion on inequality was driven by digital citizens discussing unequal access to technology, with the level of conversation on this topic rising by 61% compared to the previous week. In particular, focus was the context of online working and learning, with users questioning why the government and private sector in Uganda is not investing more in digital solutions, connectivity, and energy availability in rural areas, when online learning is the only option for continuing education during the pandemic. In addition, users shared a recent study that highlighted the fact that only one in every 26 jobs can be done at home, and many in the country have limited internet access to do these jobs.

Other topics of interest around inequality included unequal access to vaccinations, as well as inequalities faced by women and the LGBTI community.

Social media conversation during the analysis period on the topic of lockdown centred around reporting of the Ugandan government's warning (17 August) that they may be required to enforce lockdown measures and suspend public transport due to citizens and transport operators not adhering to guidelines. This led to the conversation on the topic of travel increasing by 61% compared to the previous week. Linguistic markers related to anger and sadness were found in this content, which linked back to citizens' fears around their personal financial situations.

Throughout the period of analysis, Ugandan commentators expressed adverse sentiments towards the Ministry of Health and the government in general. Users felt confused when the ministry reported an increased number of cases and deaths, as they felt that they did not receive an explanation on what had prompted the increase. Citizens also criticised the government for not distributing the promised amount of face masks and the ministry for reporting statistics according to their own agenda. There was also fear that lockdown would be implemented again.

Rigorous data and analysis

The insight delivered in this type of reporting provides clear information, based on rigorously analysed data, that can be used by frontline health workers and policymakers in Africa to measure the heat of public conversations on the virus and its impact on society, and to use such measurements to tailor communication strategies around vital information that keeps the public safe. Question data – as well as online search data – enables public health authorities to be up to date with not only current information gaps experienced by the public but also to identify cases of existing messaging that has not reached specific audiences, i.e. users asking questions that have already been answered.

Such structured analysis also facilitates the unpacking of digital networks that either consciously or unconsciously propagate false information. What are the clusters of the misinformation spreaders, what are their motives and how do they operate? Who are the key influencers? This type of information enables public health authorities to either actively fight back or to join the debate by bringing in verified information.

This type of regular monitoring ensures that the communication and action of public health intervention is timely and relevant against citizens' current concerns and better prepares stakeholders to the response of the public to communication and measures based on patterns observed over a long period of time.