Tackling the infodemic using conversational insights - Case Study of UNICEF Response in MENA

Due to numerous socio-economic and cultural factors, the infodemic surrounding COVID-19 in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) hindered efforts towards curbing the spread of the disease which ultimately could have saved lives. International organizations such as UNICEF, WHO, and the International Commission of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have all worked alongside local governments and stakeholders to ensure the public had access to accurate and reliable information about the efficacy of vaccines and public health and social measures. The case study at hand considers how conversational insights contributed to fighting the infodemic around COVID-19 in the MENA region. To this end, UNICEF MENA Regional Office is actively leveraging conversational data to combat the spread of vaccine misinformation, which ultimately helps the equitable distribution of vaccines and limits vaccine hesitancy.

Conversational data enables to establish a shared sense of reality with communities, creating a consistent and relevant narrative with all members of the ‘trust chain’ to connect, engage and navigate with others. In a nutshell, conversational data lies at the foundation of enhanced relationships with stakeholders (in this case they are multiple and varied), which ultimately enables UNICEF in MENA to be more agile and aware of the circumstances in real time.

Conversational insights gives organizations the objective reality of what the communities are concerned about vaccines, and it is anchored in the social listening approaches that UNICEF is scaling to inform the COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement response.

This document showcases practical examples of how conversational data informs decisions, including strategic partnerships with key stakeholders.
The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized by an overwhelming volume of information from a vast array of sources. Fake news about COVID-19 and vaccines has typically spread quickly, where a simple rumor or inaccurate data point holds the potential to result in paranoia, fear, and stigmatization among the most vulnerable members of society and ultimately put lives at risk.

The WHO defines an infodemic as “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health.”

Therefore, it is critical for organizations that are working to promote vaccines to the public to understand population groups and their concerns and react in a timely, targeted manner.

Even more so, documenting and reporting such efforts lays the groundwork needed for organizations to combat future pandemics. Whether it is risk analysis, measuring impact, or connecting social data to on-the-ground efforts, this case study showcases the efforts and lessons learned from the MENA region stakeholders combating misinformation.

Read on to learn more about what the role conversation plays in combating the spread of misinformation.

Disclaimer: The authors of this case study would like to underline the importance of vaccination in the combat against diseases and hope to inspire all marketers and communications and behavioral change experts reading this to engage their community and play their role in promoting vaccine safety and efficacy.

**Shaping the narrative; saving lives**

A year after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March, 2020, more than a billion doses of vaccines have been administered by various organizations and governments around the world. The rate at which vaccines are being administered is influenced by a series of socio-political and economic factors.

For example, people might be reluctant to take a specific vaccine because it received bad publicity or because it was manufactured by a specific country.

The issue at hand is multifaceted and complex. A critical factor that exacerbated the situation was a lack of a reliable source of truth that offered a transparent and straightforward narrative around the development and efficacy of vaccines. This particular issue was apparent among both content creators and people alike.

This led to parts of the population in the Middle East and North Africa region questioning the efficacy of vaccines, with trust wavering in the systems which deliver vaccines, the governments procuring them, and the companies developing and manufacturing them. For some, the trust chain was disrupted by pre-existing notions and conspiracy mindsets.

Due to the above, UNICEF MENARO and other COVID-19 response actors sought to mobilize and shift their strategies to fight the rising anti-vaccine sentiment and anti-science narrative.
Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) in MENA

The pandemic has evolved from being a health crisis to become one of the largest information and socio-economic crises the world has ever seen. The multifaceted repercussions are anticipated to drive an estimated 70-100 million people around the world into extreme poverty according to data from the World Bank.

While vaccines remain the most powerful tool to prevent the spread of the virus, they are only as good as people’s behavior and compliance with health guidelines. The communal sense of fatigue, stress, and uncertainty among the MENA population is what drove the Regional RCCE Interagency Working Group, which UNICEF co-leads with WHO and IFRC, to reimagine the regional RCCE strategy to:

• Be community-led
• Be data-driven
• Reinforce capacity and local solutions
• Be collaborative

Combating COVID-19 misinformation holistically, sustainably, and efficiently

Quantitatively speaking, there are an estimated 58 million followers of anti-vaccine-related materials online, and that number is only anticipated to rise in the case that nothing is done.

The World Health Organization (WHO) developed a series of guiding frameworks for the IHR Emergency committee. They were designed to strengthen community engagement, empower individuals, and build trust by addressing mis/disinformation and providing clear guidance, rationales, and resources for public health and social measures to be accepted and implemented. The purpose of such frameworks is not necessarily to provide a one-size-fits-all solution to the entire MENA region. Instead, it lays out key strategies on how to empower existing community systems and influence behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19, build public trust, and help societies cope with the impact of COVID-19.

Before adjusting any, UNICEF MENARO supported regular monitoring mechanisms in MENA country offices to address the following needs:

• Enhance synergy between country office plans and the broader national plans related to COVID-19.
• Strengthen proper communications and coordination frameworks among stakeholders, namely governments, media, NGOs, and public health bodies.
• Reinforce localized real-time behavioral data to support effective decision-making processes.
• Augment the pandemic’s behavioral dimensions in RCCE and vaccine demand strategies
• Systemize and scale-up dynamic listening and rumor management
• Expand community engagement efforts beyond face-to-face communications channels

Within the scope of efforts being led by UNICEF in MENA to combat the spread of COVID-19, combating misinformation became a top priority given its ability to impact all efforts related to vaccination and mitigation.

UNICEF MENARO had a clear objective to combat misinformation surrounding COVID-19 to ensure more people are taking the precautions needed to mitigate the spread of the virus, as well as reduce vaccine hesitancy.
Tracking misinformation

“The conversational intelligence platform Talkwalker was key in tracking mentions of misinformation keywords alongside mentions of COVID-19 in online conversations in the MENA region to see how prevalent disinformation was, and which topics needed to be countered. The spike in mentions was in December 2020, (along the same time COVID-19 vaccines started to be rolled out).

Since, there has been a persistent stable flow of misinformation. Common narratives for this included:

1. The western made vaccine was being tested in the region.
2. The vaccine was not halal.
3. The vaccine could alter your DNA.

Talkwalker tracked mentions of misinformation keywords alongside mentions of COVID-19 in online conversations in the MENA region.

UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC and other partners supported MENA countries to fight rumors and misinformation. By providing a reliable source of information and communicating about the pandemic, they promoted recommended public health and social measures.

The narrative around COVID-19 in the MENA region varied in scope, size, and correlation. Conversation Clusters demonstrates the shape of conversations around related topics, and how those conversations connect. Conversations around the distribution of the vaccine was most prominent around this period, making up 16% of detected topics. The conversations occurred between November 1, 2021 and June 6, 2021.
What is vaccine hesitancy/acceptance?

The World Health Organization defines vaccine hesitancy as a "...delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite availability of vaccine services. Vaccine hesitancy is complex and context specific, varying across time, place, and vaccines." It is caused by complex, context specific factors that vary across time, place, and different vaccines, and is influenced by issues such as complacency, convenience, confidence, and sociodemographic contexts. One cannot characterize any group as uniformly as vaccine-hesitant or pro-vaccine.

“A broad range of socio-psychological determinants of vaccine hesitancy has been identified. These may range from attitudes, past experiences and cognitive biases, to trust, social norms and even moral values and worldview.”

-The vaccine misinformation management field guide

The point is that vaccine hesitancy and misinformation surrounding it are complex, especially as anti-vaccine groups have been maximizing any thread of misinformation to spread doubt. These groups do not need to convince people that they are right, they just need to convince people that no one is.

Talkwalker helped analyze these conversations, and with sentiment analysis, helped understand whether the vaccine was seen positively or negatively. Sentiment analysis is used to provide an overall sentiment around a topic, based on AI-enabled natural language processing. Generally, its net sentiment was low, highlighting there were various vaccine hesitancies.

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<tr>
<th>SENTIMENT</th>
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<td>11.5% POSITIVE</td>
<td>-26.1% NEGATIVE</td>
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The net sentiment around vaccines from December 2020 – April 2021 demonstrated the overall negative view of vaccines.

Responding to online data

RCCE actors in MENA, including UNICEF, strategic objective is to proactively address all those reasons that are driving people away from taking the vaccine.

The one thing to consider was the growing actions of social media pages that were focused on sharing vaccine misinformation. As an example of the size of the issue, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) report covering Arabic COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Online, saw 18 conspiracy and misinformation-focused Facebook pages grow by 42% between September 2020 and March 2021. As of 1 March, these Facebook pages had a combined 2437318 likes.

To combat vaccine misinformation, RCCE strategies had to be integrated and localized to each country’s needs. For example, UNICEF Jordan Country Office enlisted volunteers to go to remote communities to answer their questions and educate them on the importance of inoculation. In terms of engaging the communities, UNICEF MENA country offices established a direct and honest dialogue with communities, to provide a safe space for people to voice their concerns, identify problems, and come up with solutions.
To shift the sentiment around vaccines, UNICEF in MENA leveraged social proof and the power of word of mouth. The primary focus was on the efforts of community members who already believed in the efficacy of vaccines and therefore activated their voices to become beacons of truth to surrounding communities. One UN-led initiative engaged local community influencers online and made them take a ‘pledge to only share accurate information’.

Another example is when UNICEF Jordan Country Office collaborated with 12 women-focused community-based organizations (CBOs) that empower women facing economic hardships amid the pandemic. By directly enabling mothers to produce hand-made face masks, they turned them from bystanders into active advocates for vaccines.

**Videos for impact: Beyond the views and clicks**

UNICEF’s communications ethos is straightforward: honesty and transparency are the way to go.

The communication strategy adopted by UNICEF MENARO is directly integrated with what's happening on the ground. They have been communicating a solid and data-driven narrative by leveraging strategic partnerships, influencer marketing, and real-life testimonies to reach as many people as possible with the right message: “Vaccines are a safe tool to protect from disease.”

Keep in mind that the communication department did not stop any of their messaging around child protection issues and other diseases like malaria.

To fight against the anti-vax narrative, UNICEF MENARO continually provided the communities with credible information across all their platforms and channels. Since the start of the pandemic, UNICEF MENARO’s website had seen a threefold increase in website visitors, underlining the need for a single source of the truth. Media outlets were among those relying on UNICEF MENA’s continuous situation reports and the real-time updates on the vaccine rollout.
In terms of communication channels, it prioritized short-form videos that grabbed people’s attention and encouraged shareability. For example, UNICEF MENARO launched its video-based #MaskUp campaign (before Joe Biden got elected as the US president) and received over 136K mentions over the 13 months from April 2020 to May 2021.

Also, at TikTok’s request, UNICEF MENARO partnered with them to produce and distribute fun videos related to vaccine safety and hygiene. The partnership with TikTok was particularly successful in reaching MENA’s Gen Z users on a scale. Another strategic partnership revolving around video was with Zain Group during Ramadan. The 3-minute music video calls on adults to take the vaccine for the sake of children and has received over 8M views since its publication on April 12th.

The video was positively received by the audience especially as it featured Saudi child star Rama Rubat who has wide reach and influence in the region.

Another way that UNICEF MENARO leveraged video to combat misinformation was by going live on Facebook with an Arabic-speaking health expert from Georgetown University. The discussion addressed some of the main concerns that vaccine-hesitant people had by directly answering their questions in simple and clear terms, rather than relying on a strictly scientific narrative.

A successful use of video is exemplified by the #TakeCareBeforeYouShare campaign.
The hashtag for the campaign is emotionally evocative and gave a reason for digital users to pause and read, with the short videos positively received due to their diverse voices and angles. Also, most of those videos were done in Arabic – something that’s lacking when it comes to educational and awareness content.

The hashtag received over **155K engagements** globally across multiple channels and reached a vast segment of the population. What's more significant is that the campaign raised awareness of the importance of accurate information around COVID-19, contributing to a discussion that might have otherwise remained on the sidelines.

![Top Influencers Table]

Global influencers who have engaged with #TakeCareBeforeYouShare or #ْنتبهُ_قبل_مشاركة over **13 months**

While these metrics are impressive, their impact goes beyond viewership and engagement rates. Videos are far better at making information more accessible for everyone. More particularly, by providing an easy-to-digest visual proof, UNICEF MENARO could incorporate multiple voices and perspectives from various parts of the region.

Two main visuals struck a chord. Seeing government officials such as the king of Saudi Arabia and the prime minister of the UAE get vaccinated, as well as seeing vaccine batches being unloaded at each airport as part of the COVAX program, correlated with an improved sentiment around vaccine efficacy in MENA.
Talkwalker’s sentiment analysis gave insight that videos of government officials taking the vaccine could shift the narrative. These posts correlated with an increase of 122.4% in net sentiment around ‘vaccine hesitancy’ in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, UNICEF MENARO’s social media posts continuously posted on-the-ground updates related to the ongoing COVAX program in UNICEF MENARO. Particularly, the posts gave people the peace of mind that the vaccines were being transported safely and that they come from trusted sources. Regional online social listening reports in MENA indicate an increased rate of vaccine registrations rate of vaccine registrations particularly around the time that they land in the country.

Communicating about health-related issues is a particularly sensitive matter because it relates to people’s lives. Instead of fearmongering tactics, UNICEF MENARO’s communication embraced empathic messaging and realized early on that a one-size-fits-all is not effective compared to localization, simplification, and accessibility.

**WhatsApp: It’s for everyone**

Online users in the MENA region have increased their time spent time on social media because of the pandemic. According to a recent study by PwC, 71% of Middle East respondents reported that their daily use of WhatsApp had increased dramatically. That number is substantially more than the global average of 52%.

These figures, among several others, have inspired organizations working to combat the infodemic to embrace social media as a key channel to communicate directly with audiences. In May of 2020, UNICEF MENARO set up a COVID-19 WhatsApp alert in Arabic and English to provide ‘advice on staying safe, frequently asked questions, tips for protecting yourself and others.’

Also, at the global level, the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, and UNDP directly partnered with WhatsApp to launch the ‘WhatsApp Coronavirus Information Hub.’
The ease of access provided by WhatsApp ensures the message is distributed efficiently, amongst communities residing in the MENA region who might not have access to a constant source of information.

Sending out real-time alerts and announcements is an effective way to provide reliable information to a geographically dispersed group of users. On the other hand, WhatsApp also enabled people to receive information from unreliable sources, which might contribute to forming false narratives around the vaccine.

UNICEF MENARO leveraged WhatsApp to create a community of over 500 media personnel and organizations working to educate the public on the importance of vaccinations. They broadcast updates, press releases, and data that act as the source of truth.

One of the positive (unintended) results of utilizing WhatsApp is that some unreported migrants who might have been hesitant to seek medical attention to receive the vaccine found reliable information through forwarded messages on WhatsApp.

**Ongoing issues**

The pandemic is not over. And neither is the infodemic. UNICEF continues to play a pivotal role in monitoring the topic and reacting to new forms of misinformation. Remaining a key source of COVID-19 news within the MENA region.

News stories relating to the rise of new variants, such as Delta variant and C.1.2. lineage; the possibility of a third dose; and the CDC official approval for the Pfizer vaccine, can all impact people’s understanding and uptake of vaccines. So, each topic needs to be handled decisively, and quickly, to stop the rise of new disinformation.

At the global level, UNICEF has also teamed up with the PGP (The Public Good Projects), and Yale Institute for Global Health, to launch the Vaccination Demand Observatory. To help develop tools, training, technical support, and research to equip in-country teams to mitigate the impact of misinformation and mistrust on all vaccines.
Conclusion
Telling a better story goes a long way

In an unexpected year of crisis, society turned to the media and entertainment. Combating misinformation is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to track. By showcasing how UNICEF in combating misinformation in MENA, it is clear that social listening and social media monitoring data must be accompanied by a robust plan that is holistic and data-driven.

This case study also highlights the importance of putting empathy at the core of your strategy. Listening to people’s needs and understanding their concerns enables teams to resonate with the public’s sentiment.

“The fight against the infodemic is likely to continue well into the future. We at UNICEF MENARO will continue listening to our audiences of whom we massively care about, and innovatively use all the tools at our disposal to counter the spread of rumors and false information and communicate to people the importance of trusting only credible sources.”

While the effects of COVID-19 continue to affect the lives of millions of people around the world, organizations like UNICEF are now well prepared and aware of the dangers of false information.

In preparation for the next infodemic, organizations and individuals must prioritize:

- **Communication:** Government communication has proven to be conflicting and confusing at times. Also, the scientific community has faced a massive challenge trying to relay accurate information around vaccines and the virus. Scientists and government officials must work together to simplify messages rather than intimidate the public and cause panic. Scientific communication must acknowledge uncertainty and account for the public’s concerns. More importantly, the educational system must incorporate digital media literacy to empower communities at a granular level and in a hyper-personalized manner.

- **Collaboration:** Organizations must align strategies and goals – to unify the message and amplify the narrative of “vaccines work”.

- **Technology:** Instead of simply enforcing broad confinement rules, technology must be utilized to ensure better compliance and a feasible application - the positive impact of online media and technology has become increasingly apparent (contact-tracing apps, creating connections, and spreading awareness).
**Bonus:**

**Key steps towards fighting misinformation**

The final section of this case study acts as a practical guide for individuals and organizations aiming to limit the spread of misinformation, especially around public health issues like COVID-19 vaccines:

- **Think twice before sharing any news:** Read, question, and fact check
- **Promote media and information literacy:** Educate and provide reliable resources for stakeholders to navigate the increasingly complex online media landscape
- **See something, say something:** Reporting misinformation and disinformation goes a long way and is easy to do with current social media platforms
- **Know your audience’s needs and behaviors:** Understand which channels are most trusted and conduct research on what’s driving misinformation (sources)
- **Connect with the community to know their information needs:** Establishing direct communication channels with the community will help you create content that is impactful and accessible
- **Create a mechanism to track rumors, listen to the community, and monitor the media**
- **Amplify the voice of experts and scientists, as well as enter into conversations with the audience (dialogue)**
- **Partner with the right organizations, influencers, and public personalities**

**Appendix**

**Additional resources on COVID-19**

- Why are fully-vaccinated people still catching COVID-19?
- Soaring cases and little vaccination: A COVID-19 Middle East snapshot
- We Can Prevent the Bankruptcy of the Sacred – Dare we Try?
- Op-Ed: As a doctor in a COVID unit, I’m running out of compassion for the unvaccinated. Get the shot
- COVID-19 Behavioural Indicators - Collective Service for Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) (rcce-collective.net)
- Vaccine Acceptance - Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (jhu.edu)
- COVID-19 — The Vaccine Confidence Project
About Talkwalker

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By uniting award-winning technology with industry-leading customer support, our AI-powered platform connects the dots between what customers think, say, and do. We enable customer-centric companies to drive revenue, increase retention, and reduce costs.

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About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world’s toughest places, to reach the world’s most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

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The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this case study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF and its partners and they accept no responsibility for errors.

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