

Advancing Infodemic Management in Côte d'Ivoire: *An overview of the national rumor management system*

BACKGROUND

Major global public health events in recent years – from the West African Ebola Virus Disease outbreak to the COVID-19 pandemic – have highlighted the critical role that public perception plays in the ultimate success or failure of disease control efforts. Rumors and misinformation undermine communities' trust in public health systems during emergencies; combating them in real time is essential to supporting individuals' and communities' adoption of lifesaving prevention and mitigation behaviors. However, this effort is challenged by the rapid flow of unsubstantiated information surrounding outbreaks in both the online and offline environment – passing quickly from one person to the next much in the way that a viral epidemic does. This phenomenon is now referred to by the World Health Organization as the “infodemic.” Infodemics contribute to flourishing mis- or disinformation and represent a major challenge in managing outbreaks in the digital age.

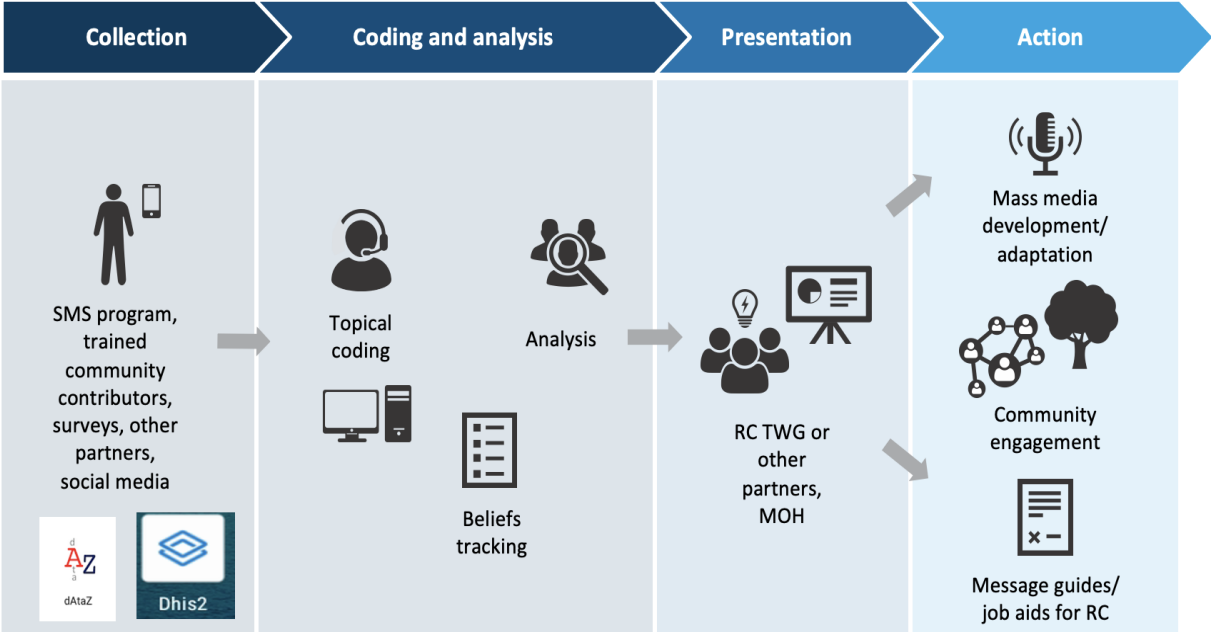
BUILDING A NATIONAL RUMOR MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

In 2019, prior to COVID-19, Breakthrough ACTION and the government of Côte d'Ivoire, through its Risk Communication Technical Working Group (RC TWG), envisioned a set of processes and people that would address the need to track and respond to rumors during public health events, integrating feedback from strategic rumor sources continually, undergirded by research activities to allow for depth and data triangulation. This system, supported by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding initially through the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA), was launched in Abidjan and Bouaké on March 1, 2020. It began with a cohort of 20 trained community key informants and national hotline operators, and a plan to systematically collect, document, analyze, synthesize, and report out to partners on public health-related rumors. While the system was developed before COVID-19, it was rapidly repurposed at the pandemic's onset just weeks later. Over time, the project trained 130 key informants, with 113 key informants currently covering 113 districts; and added software-assisted social listening on Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms. This set of processes became collectively known as the rumor management system (RMS) - and alternatively, as the online social listening functions of the system expanded, as the infodemic management system.

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ELEMENTS OF THE SYSTEM

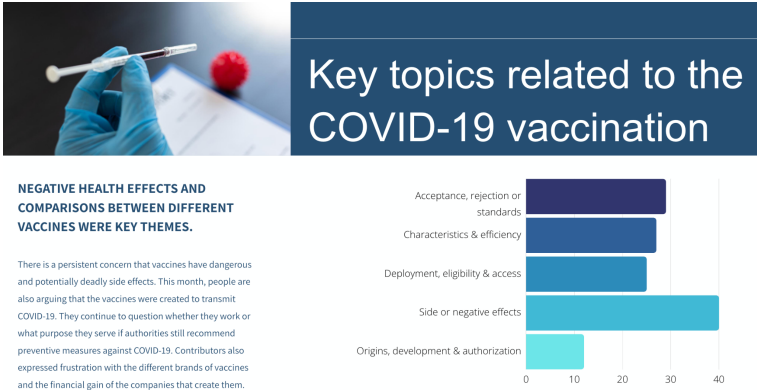
Cote d'Ivoire's RMS design dictates the specific (online and offline) processes and stakeholders involved in collection; analysis, presentation of rumor data as well as in planning and documenting the communication actions that emerge from that data. Social listening, key informant, survey, hotline, and SMS data are aggregated to offer a varied sampling of circulating rumors; these are analyzed and synthesized thematically, and then, the RC TWG ensures the dissemination of rumor analysis briefs to partners to ensure that findings shape ongoing public messaging. The figure below captures key functions and information flows. The collection, analysis and presentation phases are each associated with a set of templates, resources and tools developed with Breakthrough ACTION support to standardize and systematize the approach, such as rumor identification guidance, a rumor database, DHIS2 coding processes and dashboards, and rumor brief templates.



RMS Overview

RESULTS TO DATE

From its origins in 2020 through August 2023, the RMS collected and analyzed a total of **19,461 rumors** from the hotline and key informants and the RC TWG disseminated **20 rumor briefs** summarizing key persistent and emerging perceptions for RCCE stakeholders and providing specific recommendations. These briefs are discussed during regular quarterly meetings of the RC TWG. The team used the RMS data to inform other research briefs on COVID-19 vaccination for pregnant women as well as dengue.



Example of a monthly rumor brief highlighting trends in reported rumors

Additionally, an estimated 5.5 million people were reached by COVID-19 and Ebola materials informed by RMS data. Further, Breakthrough ACTION Côte d'Ivoire has facilitated 11 peer exchanges and technical orientation sessions, conducted numerous external and conference presentations, published several journal articles, and developed a book chapter with the RC TWG to share the country's infodemic management experience with other countries and stakeholders to learn from their experiences in setting up their own processes. As the system continued to mature, the government designated an official focal point to support effective assumption of all RMS processes.

LESSONS LEARNED

The design and implementation of the RMS has served as a learning opportunity for Cote d'Ivoire's RCCE stakeholders over the past three years. Some important lessons learned include:

- **A community listening approach**, while challenging to sustain and requiring resources and planning, provides rich and timely routine data and cannot fully be replaced by online or digital-only approaches.
- **Layering data sources** (key informants, hotline, and social listening) allows for rapid identification and prevents data gaps.
- **Periodic use of traditional research methods** (KAP studies, qualitative research) allows the government to track the evolution of known rumors over time or investigate why certain misinformation lingers and how communities propose addressing deeply held beliefs.
- **A systems-building orientation is key**: As with all dimensions of pandemic preparedness capacity, it is important to begin with an orientation of building a unified country approach, rather than simply pursuing pilot projects that may be difficult to scale or maintain over a longer time horizon. To this end, establishing an effective entity with government leadership to manage RMS functions is important, even if substantial support is provided by partners. For Côte d'Ivoire, this entity was the official RC TWG, alongside existing national public health hotlines. Breakthrough ACTION worked closely with the TWG on the design, setup and ongoing implementation of the RMS systems and processes and has carefully planned coaching and support to permit the group to take leadership – an ongoing process.

THE FUTURE OF THE SYSTEM

Breakthrough ACTION continues to support the RC TWG and Cote d'Ivoire's RMS in its routine functioning and operations, and the system continues to collect rumors not only on COVID-19 but on other outbreaks or diseases of concern (for example, it has collected rumors related to rabies, dengue, avian influenza among other topics). As the world transitions out of the COVID-19 state of emergency and as countries capitalize on lessons learned to strengthen readiness for the next outbreak, Cote d'Ivoire's RMS is a national resource to capture, understand and manage public perceptions in real time - one which the country can leverage for the next crisis.

For more information regarding Breakthrough ACTION Cote d'Ivoire, the IMS, and or the COVID-19 and Global Health Security (GHS) projects, please contact Protais Ndabamenye, Chief of Party: pndabam1@jhu.edu.