INTRODUCTION TO ROOTED IN TRUST 2.0

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of health-related rumors and misinformation. The project was re-launched in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT 2.0), expected to run until the end of June 2023.

METHODOLOGY

In this Trends Analysis Report, Internews highlights commonly occurring rumor topics, trends, and their evolution across both online and offline platforms. This report complements our previous Trend Analysis Report which covers the time period between November 2021 and November 2022. The geographical scope of the previous report covered online rumors from all of Lebanon, collected by our previous partners Maharat Foundation and Endless Medical Advantage who led offline rumor collection in the Bekaa region focusing primarily on vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities.

For this report, data collection of rumors was done in collaboration with the Internews Team and our RiT 2.0 partner Akkarouna between 1 December 2022 and 31 May 2023. Our partner, Akkarouna, undertook online rumor collection in various communities and nationalities living across Lebanon on the one hand, and spearheaded offline rumor collection in the north while focusing primarily on vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities on the other. The geographical scope of RiT 2.0 covers all of Lebanon, but offline rumor collection since the first Trends Analysis Report has shifted away from the Bekaa region to a specific focus on North Lebanon commencing in December 2022. This change was motivated by the transition to a new partner organization and the aim to address new communities. Additionally, it allowed for an assessment of whether the same rumors persisted in different regions.

FOR ONLINE RUMORS:

Online rumors were collected by SMMs from Akkarouna between 1 December 2022 and 31 May 2023. SMMs were tasked with monitoring widely used social media platforms in Lebanon to help identify and understand hyper-local information needs surrounding COVID-19 and other health-related rumors and misinformation at the community level.

FOR OFFLINE RUMORS:

Offline rumors were collected by Akkarouna in the North and Akkar governates of Lebanon between 1 January 2023 and 31 May 2023; no offline rumors were collected during December 2022 due to the transition from our previous partner, Endless Medical Advantage to Akkarouna. Akkarouna collected rumors using a tool deployed on KoboCollect through community meetings, as well as listening groups / focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants were predominantly vulnerable Lebanese or Syrian refugees.
Between 1 December 2022 and 31 May 2023, a total of 606 online rumors were collected by SMMs. The lower number of rumors reported in December can be attributed to the transition from the SMMs of our previous partner, Maharat Foundation, to the SMMs of Akkarouna, which temporarily disrupted the rumor collection process.

**Language of online rumors collected between December 2022 and May 2023**

- **ARABIC (عربية)**: 97.3%
- **ENGLISH**: 2.5%
- **ARABIZI (3arabe)**: 0.2%

While the 164 rumors under the Other sub-theme (more than half of all rumors) were quite broad, a big portion of them (31 rumors) dealt with benefits or dangers of food products and drinks such as “Beware... Adding salt to the water when boiling pasta is very dangerous!”. Rumors relating to new scientific discoveries and studies related to health were also prominent (18 rumors). Some were rumors about new cures discovered such as “Discovery: an antibiotic for a deadly bacteria by artificial intelligence”, while most were announcing the discovery of a new diseases and viruses such as “A new epidemic is about to threaten the world, and it is equivalent to a nuclear weapon”.

**All online platforms for rumors collected in Rit2.0 between December 2022 and May 2023**

- **Twitter**: 40%
- **Facebook**: 30%
- **Instagram**: 20%
- **Whatsapp**: 10%
- **Telegram**: 0%
Our previous Trends Analysis Report showed that the COVID-19 General theme was the dominant one for online rumors between June and November of 2022 (54%). In January of 2023, the two themes of COVID-19 General and Other Health Topic had approximately the same prevalence with 41% for the former and 38% for the latter. However, starting in February 2023, the theme of Other Health Topic took the lead, surpassing the COVID-19 General theme by far. This shift can be explained in terms of several overlapping factors, including the declining trend of COVID-19, which prompted WHO to declare an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency on May 5, 2023. Additionally, Lebanon experienced a surge in other health concerns that are specific to the country’s context, further contributing to the prominence of the Other Health Topic theme.

The highest number of online rumors was collected in May 2023 (190 rumors) and January 2023 (115 rumors), with the largest proportion of rumors for each month containing notions of fear.

In January 2023, most of the online rumors were under the theme of Other Health topic (46 rumors) followed by the theme of COVID-19 General (43 rumors). The numerous Other Health Topic online rumors were under the sub-theme of Communicable Diseases (19 rumors), most of which revolved around various strains of influenza, particularly the seasonal influenza. Other rumors mentioned specific strains like H1N1 or H3N2. There were also some rumors spreading about Cholera, although the total number of such rumors declined, following the trend observed towards the end of 2022. The rise in rumors mentioning various influenza viruses that month correlates with the rise in cases of Influenza A viruses, namely H1N1 and H3N2, which tend to become more prevalent during cold and wet winter months.
It is worth noting that influenza and COVID-19 symptoms are often mistaken for each other, adding to the confusion surrounding these illnesses. Influenza and flu related online rumors include examples such as:

- "The season of “H3N2” spreads in Lebanon: it is more contagious than the H1N1 flu and causes more pathological symptom”.
- "Warning of camel flu, which may kill a third of the population of Arab countries”.
- "While eyes were focused on the outbreak of "#cholera", #influenza entered the line strongly, surpassing the #Corona virus by far, as well as cholera”.

January 2023 was the only month under study in this report to witness such a high number of online rumors under the theme COVID-19 General, where more than half of these rumors carried notions of fear. Almost one third of these rumors were under the sub-theme of Variants, which coincides with the WHO linking the increase of COVID-19 cases that month to the spread of the Omicron variant. In January 2023, the total number of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon witnessed significant growth as 5,696 cases were reported, in comparison with December 2022 (2,094 cases) and November 2022 (1,163 cases). Throughout January, there was a weekly increase in cases from 1,316 (week 4-11) to 1,660 (week 11-19), as well as an increase in the number of deaths, with 41 deaths occurring in January in contrast to the 8 deaths reported in December 2022. These factors were reflected in the rumors such as:

- "An outbreak of Corona virus in several cities in China raises global concern, in light of suspicions about the emergence of new variants, although China imposed restrictions for more than 3 weeks. According to expectations, the number of cases in China”.

In May 2023, the month during which the highest number of rumors was recorded (190 rumors), the vast majority were under the theme of Other Health Topics (130 rumors or approximately 67%). The Lebanese population’s attention was gradually shifting away from the virus and daily confirmed cases, as indicated by data collected in May. The evolving landscape of public discourse within the country was characterized by a notable transition from COVID-19-related rumors to discussions centered around other health topics. The data collected indicates that the online sub-themes with the highest number of rumors were Communicable diseases (22 rumors) and Chronic diseases (20 rumors), both falling under the overarching theme of Other Health Topic.

The rumors within the “Communicable diseases” sub-theme encompass a wide range of subjects and cannot be easily categorized under one specific category. They cover diverse topics such as the potential health benefits of moringa, the threat of measles in specific regions of Lebanon, the spread of an unknown virus causing gastrointestinal symptoms in children, the recommendation to soak vegetables in bleach before consumption, the spread of smallpox in northern Lebanon, advancements in cancer treatment, concerns about the spread of communicable diseases in nurseries and schools, the association between caffeine and body fat, the market for cancer and chronic disease medicines, and the impact of obesity on cancer risk. Out of the total of 130 online rumors under Other Health Topic, 37 carried the sentiment of fear. Such rumors included:

- "Alcohol and cancer ... a study reveals shocking results A new study revealed that people who increased the amount of alcohol they drank were more likely to develop cancer of all kinds”.
- "Children in Lebanon are currently afflicted by diarrhea, vomiting and fever, from the age of one year and over. Unknown virus infects the intestines, and is spreading”.
- "Measles... a new threat to Lebanon? There is an increase in some measles cases in certain regions, such as the Syrian camps in north Lebanon”. 
Between 1 January 2023 – 31 May 2023, a total of 321 offline rumors were collected by Akkarouna. During this time frame, all rumors were collected in both the North governate (195 rumors) and the Akkar governate (126 rumors). All offline rumors were collected through listening groups / FGDs.

The majority of offline rumors were under the Other Health Topic theme (51%), with the sub-theme of Other (30%) being the most prevalent followed by Communicable diseases (24%) and Chronic diseases (15%), which are the same top-trending theme and sub-themes prevalent in the online rumors. While the 50 rumors under the Other sub-theme were quite broad, a big portion of them (20 rumors) dealt with alternative medical treatments and self-prescription as opposed to visiting a physician, such as “A spoonful of honey on an empty stomach cures all diseases” and “I can’t go to the doctor so I take the medicine according to the experience of the neighbors”. Rumors relating the quality of medications (15 rumors) were also prevalent, mainly rumors about generic drugs such as “The generic drug has a composition that is less effective than the original medicine for that its price is lower”.

Our previous Trends Analysis Report showed that the COVID-19 Vaccine theme was dominant from June till November of 2022. However, in January of 2023, the COVID-19 General was the dominant theme in correlation with the spike of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon during that month. However, starting from February 2023 during which the total number of COVID-19 cases decreased by 71% compared to the previous month, Other Health Topic took the lead overpassing both themes of COVID-19 General and Vaccine. Similar to online rumors, this shift can be traced to both the downward trend of COVID-19, as well as the emergence of other health concerns in Lebanon.
The highest number of offline rumors was collected in March 2023 (102 rumors) followed by February 2023 (77 rumors). In February, a total of 77 offline rumors were collected, more than half (51%) of which fell under the theme of Other Health Topic. Following that, 25% of the rumors were categorized as COVID-19 Vaccine, 22% as COVID-19 General, and a small portion (2%) as Other Non-Health Non-COVID-19. Within the Other Health Topic theme, the top sub-themes were identified as Other (14 rumors) and Communicable diseases (11 rumors). The rumors falling under the Other sub-theme mostly revolved around natural home remedies, such as the use of honey or basil, for treating various diseases. Examples of such rumors include:

- "Garlic, onions and basil are a remedy for blood pressure patients".
- "A spoonful of honey on an empty stomach cures all diseases".
- "Onions cleanse the stomach and strengthen immunity".

Similar to the findings in February, the primary sub-theme within the Other Health Topic theme was labeled as Other and consisted of 16 rumors. These rumors predominantly propagated the notion that cancer can be caused by consuming contaminated food and water, as well as suggesting that “alternative medication” (mainly referring to generic drugs) can have adverse effects on health, potentially leading to death. Examples include: “Cancer has spread widely due to food spoilage and water contamination”; “After the scandals because of the fake medicine, we became afraid of alternative medicine and childhood vaccines”; “Alternative medication may lead to death”.

During February, Lebanon experienced a significant devaluation of its official currency rate, resulting in a staggering 90% devaluation. The exchange rate reached 15,000 Lebanese Pounds to the US Dollar, marking a drastic change from the fixed rate that had remained unchanged for 25 years. This devaluation has had profound socio-economic implications, exacerbating the already challenging conditions in the country.

As a consequence of the devaluation, the cost of living has skyrocketed, severely impacting people’s access to healthcare services and diminishing their purchasing power. The combination of these factors has created a dire situation in the country. The continuous deterioration of living conditions, in light of the decrease of COVID-19 cases during February and March, correlates with rumors pertaining to home remedies and alternative treatments that are either cheaper in price, or bypass seeking medical services to avoid any perceived cost associated to these services.

No High Risk rumors were collected. January 2023 saw the highest proportion of Medium Risk (24%) rumors collected relative to those tagged as Low for that month. In January this included rumors such as “Man does not need a doctor, he is a doctor for his own”. In February, one Medium Risk rumor under the sub-theme of Communicable diseases attributed the increase in diseases in Lebanon to Syrian refugees, adding to the tensions between Syrian refugees and the vulnerable Lebanese community.
CONCLUSION

This Trends Analysis Report identified and outlined the real-time changes in people’s health concerns, and more broadly, how they understand and share news about pressing health issues in Lebanon.

The online rumors collected in RIIT 2.0 from December 2022 until May 2023 were predominantly tagged under the sub-themes Other, Communicable diseases, and Chronic diseases. Within the Other sub-theme, a significant portion of the rumors focused on food product benefits or dangers and new scientific discoveries related to health, including cures and emerging diseases or viruses. Previously, COVID-19 General was the dominant theme, but from February 2023, Other Health Topic surpassed both COVID-19 General and Vaccine, possibly due to a decline in COVID-19 cases and the emergence of other health concerns in Lebanon.

The offline rumors collected during RIIT 2.0 from December 2022 until May 2023 were primarily categorized under the sub-themes of Other and Communicable diseases. Within the Other rumors, a significant portion revolved around alternative medical treatments and self-prescription. There were also common rumors about the quality of medications, particularly generic drugs. Previously, COVID-19 Vaccine was the dominant theme, but starting from February 2023, Other Health Topic surpassed both COVID-19 Vaccine, due to the same factors mentioned above for online rumors.

Rumors are not random pieces of information, but rather, as valuable insights into the realities of people’s health knowledge, and how that influences their behaviors, attitudes, practices, and the health choices that they make. Most importantly, rumors can serve as a “defense mechanism” for communities or a practice, enabling them to “protect” each other, especially among vulnerable communities, who are often overlooked in health responses and communications efforts.

HOW CAN WE USE RUMORS AS A TOOL TO HELP US REALLY REACH COMMUNITIES WHERE, HOW, AND WHEN IT MATTERS?

- **Active listening:** Rumors are a unique, often overlooked way communities share information that they do not share elsewhere about their information and service needs, as well as their most pressing concerns and fears.

- **Localization:** Rumors offer insights about the specific information needs of communities, and can be used to make communication responses more hyper-local, and more effective and relevant to these communities. Different rumor trends observed spreading online and offline acknowledge that not only communities, but their sub-communities as well, have different ways in which they share, access, and trust information.

- **Inclusivity:** Since rumors can be shared by anyone, anywhere, at any time, they are a tool allowing different communities to be inclusive.

- **Timeliness:** Rumors are dynamic and quickly influenced by real-time events of importance to communities, and by monitoring and responding to rumors in a timely manner, we can ensure that our projects are always up-to-date and relevant.

- **Accountability & Evaluation:** The nature of rumors being fast-informed by “gaps” in knowledge among communities, allows us to use rumors as a tool that identifies and evaluates communication structures—assessing what works and what does not.

- **Centering localized languages:** As reflected in this report, most online rumors were shared in Arabic, with only a small percentage of rumors in English and Arabizi. This does not mean that any one language is more important than the other when it comes to monitoring rumors online, but rather, it show-cases the variety of languages used by different communities living in Lebanon, and who is left-out from online communications and online spaces that relate to Lebanon. As evidenced by our Migrant Workers IEA report, communities tend to trust information tailored to them in their own languages and dialects.

- **Community-centered engagement:** Rumors are “organic” and bottom-up, as in they don’t follow mandates nor plans set at coordination clusters. In fact, coordination clusters could greatly benefit from regular rumor-based input and analysis.