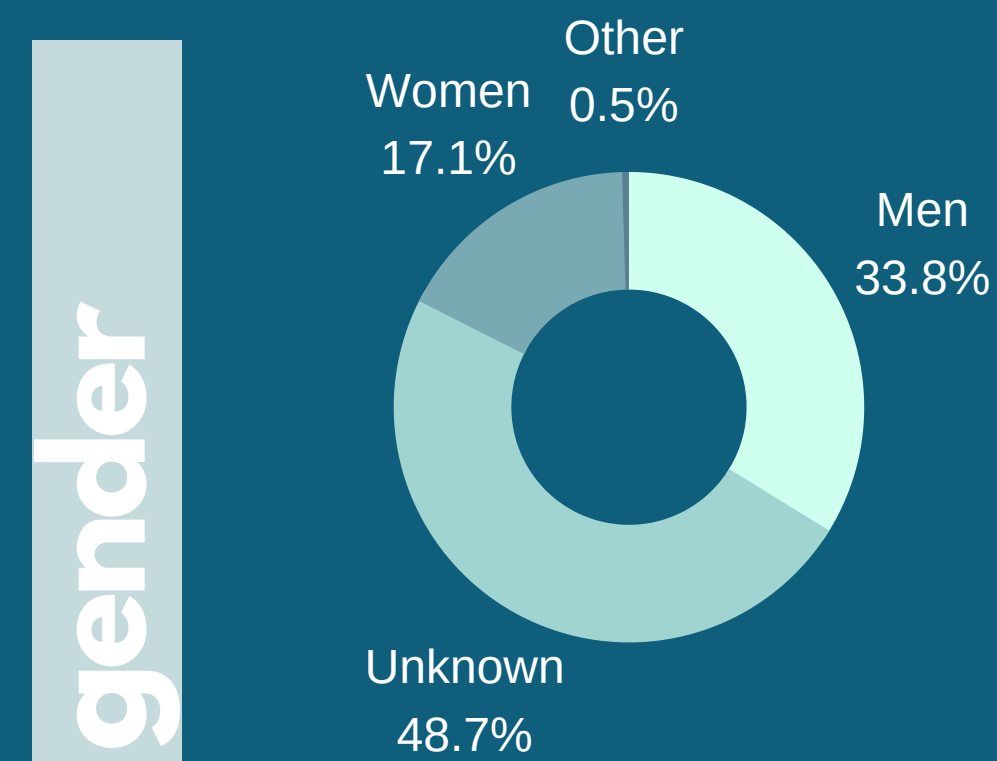
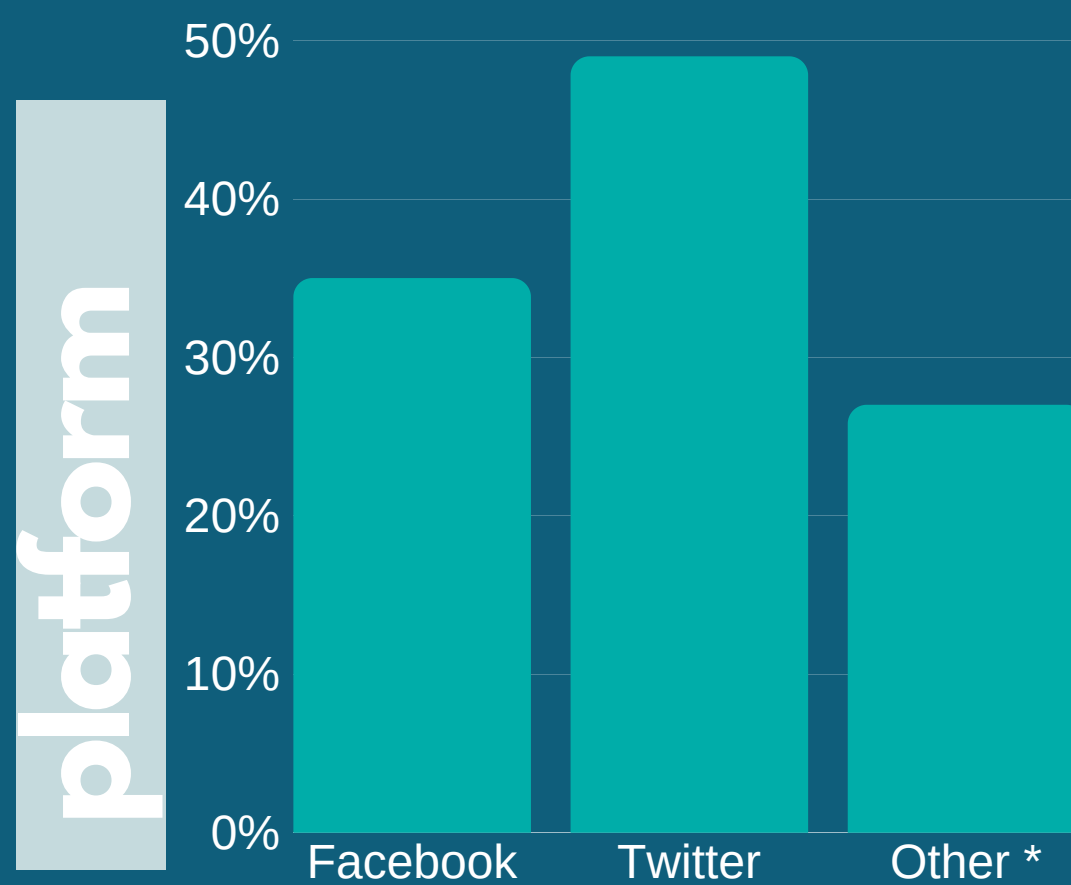
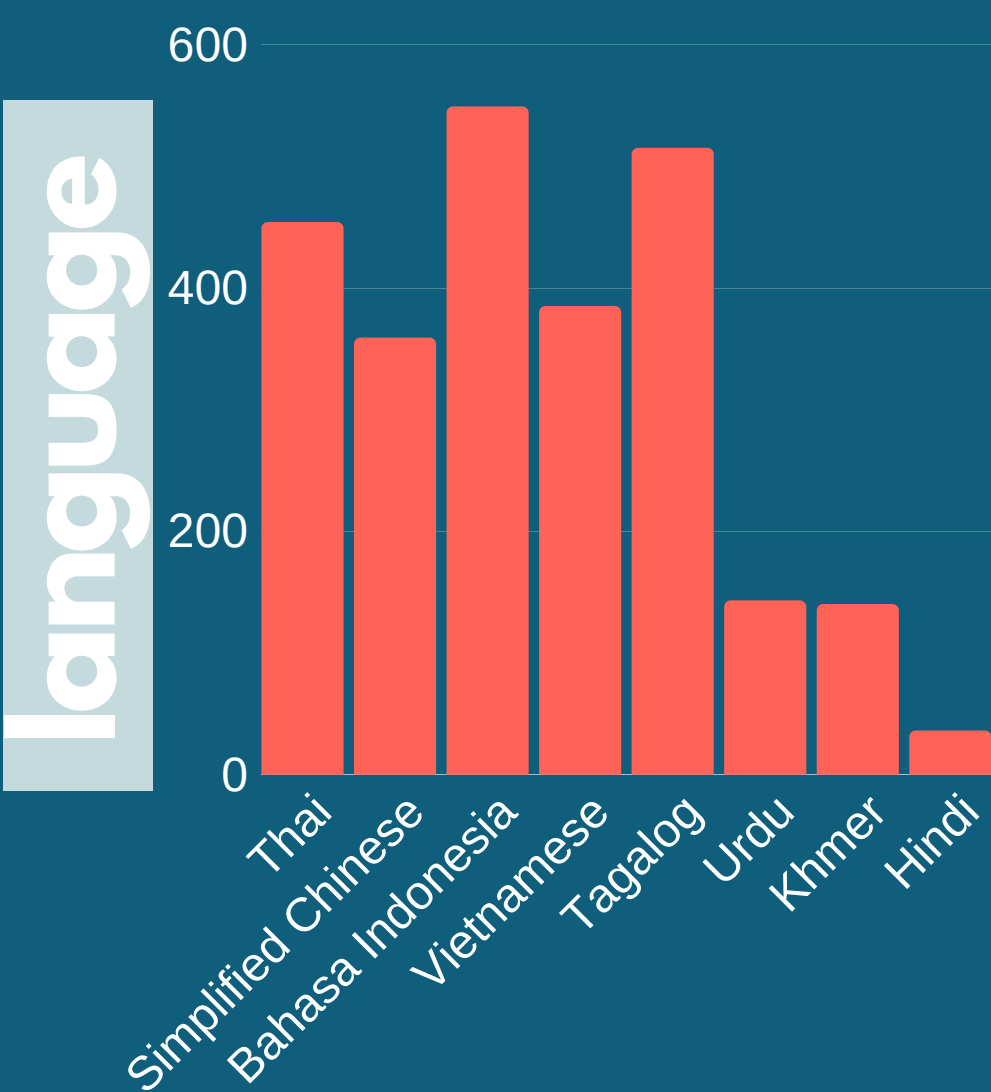


COVID-19 RUMOUR BULLETIN #4



Internews is working with Translators without Borders, Standby Task Force and BBC Media Action to collect and analyse rumours and misinformation related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease. Data is being collected in eight languages across Asia. This analysis is based on **2,812 rumours** collected between January 23, 2020, and May 22, 2020, in Thai, Khmer, Urdu, Bahasa Indonesia, Simplified Chinese, Tagalog, Hindi and Vietnamese.



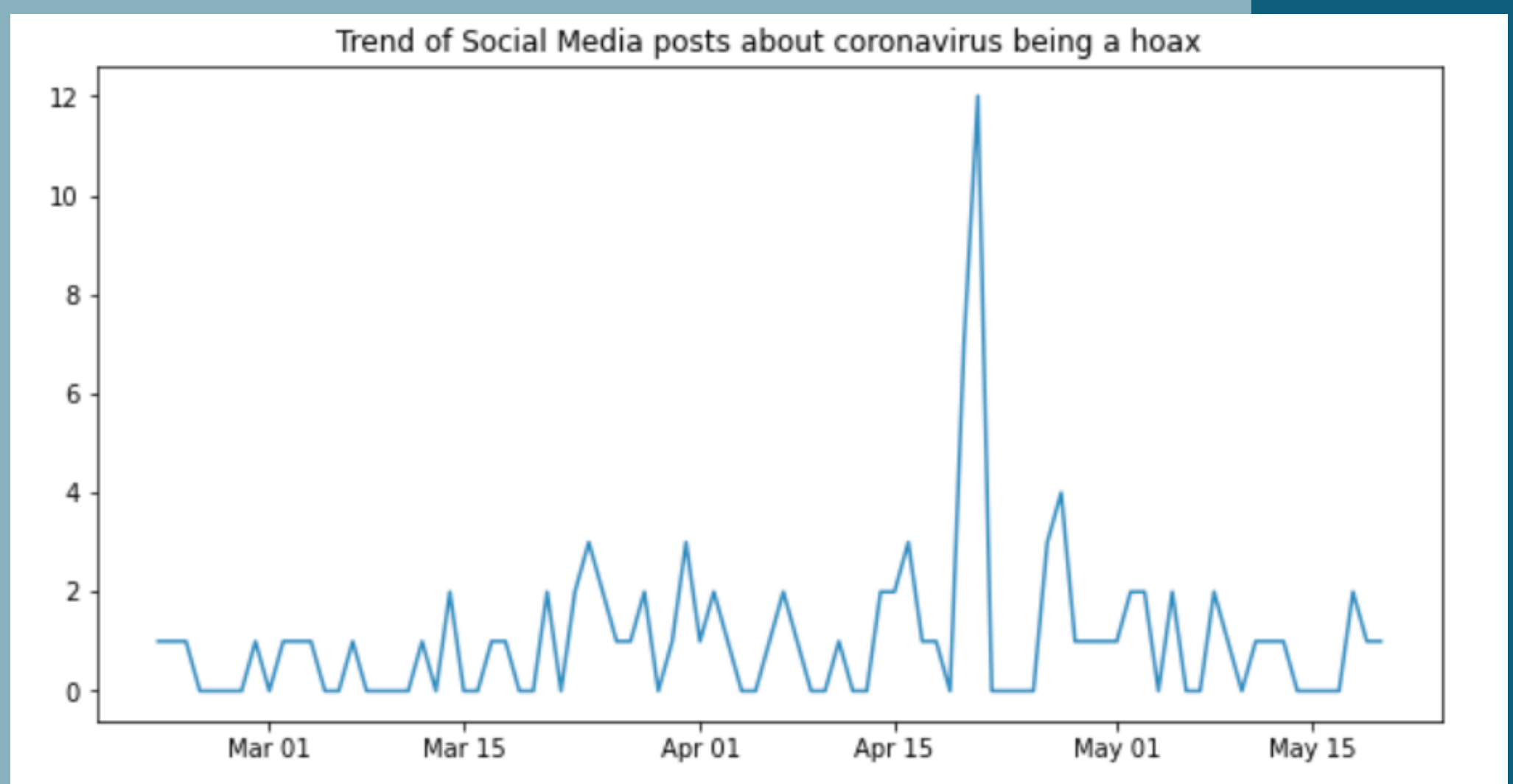
*Other includes small amounts of data collected from: YouTube, Weibo, Instagram, Line, Tiktok, Pantip, Kwai, Douban, WeChat, Baidu Tieba

*'Unknown' includes posts where the gender of the author could not be determined. 'Other' includes posts where the author does not identify as male or female.

Uncertainty: Rumours that it's all a hoax

April saw countries and leaders engage in a diplomatic tiff about the origin and severity of the virus. Our data consequently showed a sharp increase in rumours related to the virus being 'fake' or a 'hoax' or a 'conspiracy'.

The spike in these rumours in the middle of April coincided with rumours about the possibility of the virus being a bio-weapon created in a lab being publicly mentioned by members of the US Government. Another spike, seen towards the end of the month of April, coincided with China's Xinhua news agency posting a short animated video which mocked the United States response to the virus.





Pandemic prejudice:

Social Media driving anti-Chinese sentiment

We have documented double the number of rumours containing prejudice so far in May, compared to April.

- Anti-Chinese sentiment continues to be the most common type of prejudice: over 50% of the total prejudice rumours in May, compared to 40% of prejudice rumours collected in April.
- Almost all anti-Chinese rumours in May were written in Vietnamese and a smaller amount in Hindi. Anti-Chinese rumours in previous months were more evenly distributed among language groups.

Recent social posts in Vietnamese included demands to remove all Chinese people from the country, and calls to boycott all Chinese products because of coronavirus. The sentiment that the Chinese government intentionally created coronavirus has been consistently perpetuated in Vietnamese as well.

Some posts in Vietnamese additionally called for the country of China to be destroyed altogether. Some rumours that we documented in Simplified Chinese also contained prejudice against Chinese people. For example, one post blamed Chinese people who eat bats, and another stated that Chinese people owe the world an apology.

We have also documented prejudicial rumours about other groups of people. Some social media posts in Simplified Chinese blamed Americans for the virus. Back in March, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry fuelled a conspiracy theory that coronavirus had something to do with the United States military when he said that it might have been them that brought the virus to China. This comment, along with a video by a Center for Disease Control (CDC) representative that said that some deaths in the United States that were originally thought to be caused by the flu could be due to coronavirus, [went viral](#), and were likely the source of these rumours.

In Hindi, there are a concerning number of posts about Muslims in India. A tweet in Hindi claimed that Muslims in India have tried to wage a 'Corona Jihad' by purposefully spreading the disease. This kind of prejudice is not uncommon in India, where a Muslim missionary movement called Tablighi the Jamaat has been villainised and accused of spreading coronavirus — [including by the Indian Government](#). (This is the first week we've included rumours posted in Hindi and from India.)

A different theme is the idea that **some groups of people are more susceptible to catching coronavirus**. These posts did not usually contain outwardly negative or discriminatory views about the people that they posted about. Some were based on poor science, while others but may still point to an underlying bias from the author. Groups of people that were speculated about as being especially vulnerable included caucasians, Italians and the LGBTQ community.

Another subset of related rumours are those that propagated the myth that **people living in South-Asia are 'more immune' to the virus** by pointing to the higher death rate in countries such as Italy, the United States, and Spain as a sign of greater vulnerability. Along similar lines, Chinese social media showed a recurring rumour which pointed to a medical study as evidence that people with the 'O' blood type are naturally immune to the virus and can go about their daily routine as normal.

Example:

"The world needs to destroy China urgently, otherwise it will run the risk of warfare".
(Vietnamese, Facebook)

"The whole world should boycott China. Without China, the world will become more peaceful".
(Vietnamese, Youtube)

"There is already evidence to show that the new coronavirus comes from the United States, so it should be called "American pneumonia". (Chinese, Baidu Tieba)

"Caucasians seem to be more susceptible to infections and higher mortality than yellow races. Looking at Italy, the United States, and Spain, it seems that whites are more likely to be infected with the new coronavirus than yellows. The mortality rate is higher."
(Chinese, Baidu Tieba)

We want to know what you think

Have you found this bulletin or our tools for journalists useful? Are there aspects of reporting on this crisis that you are finding challenging? We want to help!

Contact us!  covid-19@internews.org  [@Internews_COVID](https://twitter.com/Internews_COVID)  [@InternewsCovid19](https://www.facebook.com/InternewsCovid19)

You can find more tools and resources [on our website](#).



Close connections during COVID-19: Rumours about sexual transmission and cures

In May, we saw an increase in posts claiming that semen could be used as a cure for coronavirus. Most of the rumours that we collected about semen cited a viral Youtube video from Filipino doctor Anacleto Belleza Millendez posted on April 21. In the video, he advocates for drinking what he calls “uncontaminated semen”, and to use it for cleaning and sanitising.

Since the probable original source for these rumours is the Philippine YouTuber, it is not particularly surprising that 70% of rumours about semen as a cure for coronavirus were in Tagalog. The remaining rumours are split among Indonesian, Khmer, and Thai, however, showing that the rumour has moved throughout the region.

While some of the posts suggested that people use semen as hand sanitiser, the majority of posts in Tagalog appeared to share the information as a joke or to highlight the claim as ridiculous or unbelievable.

We categorised this as a high risk post because of its high level of engagement (The original video has now been removed from the platform, not before being viewed more than 120,000 times and being shared on a number of other pages and groups) and because it encourages behaviour that could lead to the spread of other conditions that are sexually transmitted. Bacterial infections, like gonorrhoea and chlamydia, can affect the throat and there is a small risk of HIV transmission if the person has cuts or wounds in the mouth.

Fact Checking organisation, and Internews partner, [VeraFiles debunked the claim saying there was no credible scientific evidence to suggest that semen could cure COVID-19.](#)

Questions over whether COVID-19 is sexually transmitted have been circulating since the beginning of the crisis. As some other viruses, including Zika and Ebola are sexually transmissible, a handful of scientific trials have been launched to answer the question with mixed results.

The WHO says there is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through semen or vaginal fluids. However, it can be passed on through kissing and close contact. If you have a medical condition that puts you at greater risk of getting severe COVID-19, then you should be careful with all types of physical contact.

Example:

“Researchers have found COVID-19 in sperm, worried it may transmit through sexual contact. Need to study this as soon as possible.” (Thai, Line)

“There is a scientific study proving that semen, containing spermine, is an excellent ingredient, an amino acid that can kill germs, especially those caused by viruses. I have studied this for a long time. Many researches were done in different journals. And I believe we can start informing our government that we can kill the dreaded coronavirus using this in simple ways. Uncontaminated semen from men can be used as hand sanitizer. It can be drunk. Just make sure that it is not contaminated.” (Tagalog, Youtube)

“China found COVID-19 in patients’ semen. There is a concern that this virus can be transmitted through sex.” (Khmer, Facebook)

Reporting Tip:

When you can't have something you often want it more, especially when you're at home with a lot of time on your hands so it's natural that your audience may have questions about sex and COVID-19.

While this discussion may be uncomfortable for some in your audience, it's important to treat the topic with professionalism and to work with medical contacts to answer the questions your audience is asking.

There are some key questions you might want to consider in your reporting:

- Are there particular age groups who may need this information more than others (don't assume only young people have active sex lives! Speak to a family planning expert to find out which age groups are most at risk of an active sex life or a lower understanding of sexual health issues).
- Are there other groups in the community who need tailored advice? (for example people sex workers, people living with HIV)
- Where can people go for more specific guidance? Are there local organisations that can provide advice, answer questions and provide resources for people who are concerned about this question? Do they provide info in a number of languages and formats?

To help you with this question we have reviewed the current scientific evidence to create [this guide](#). As with all health information, it is important to read this information and localise the information to ensure it is culturally appropriate in your context.

Speedy Science: fuelling drug rumours

In **Edition 2 of this rumour bulletin**, we looked at the trends in rumours about hydroxychloroquine — an antimalarial drug regularly promoted by US President Donald Trump to prevent COVID-19. There are a number of trials investigating the issue, as we explore in [this guidance](#).

Hydroxychloroquine is far from the only drug about which we have seen a great deal of speculation on social media.

In Tagalog, we documented rumours posted (primarily on Facebook and Twitter) throughout April and May about an antiviral injection called Fabunan. Mentions of Fabunan were unique to Tagalog and were not recorded in other languages.

The drug was created and promoted by Ruben Fabunan, a physician now based in the US, and his three brothers, who are all doctors. This appears to be a classic case of misinformation, where the information has been shared to attract patients to the brothers clinic for personal gain.

The Philippine Health Department has issued a cease-and-desist order against the use of the injection. And the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is reportedly building a case against the manufacturers.

Another drug is receiving significant attention in the region online. Avigan, also known by its generic name Favipiravir, is an antiviral drug that is used to treat the flu. We noted several rumours about this drug as a COVID-19 cure. Japan's prime minister has pushed the drug as a solution publicly and even offered to supply it to some countries. There is no evidence that it is effective against COVID-19 it may have unfortunate side effects such as birth defects. Several of the rumours about the drug on social media, cite Japan's use of the drug as evidence of its legitimacy.

Cannabis and cannabis oil were also promoted as cures of the virus, almost exclusively in Indonesian and Thai in the rumours we collected. We also documented several rumours about illegal drugs like Cocaine and Methamphetamine, also known as meth. There is absolutely no scientific evidence that Methamphetamines or other illegal drugs can prevent or cure COVID-19.

In the midst of unprecedented efforts across the world to discover not only a vaccine for coronavirus, but even treatments that could lessen the impacts of the virus, rumours continue to abound about which vaccine candidates and drugs are effective.

Example:

“People are flocking to visit Dr. Fabunan on his farm. You can get an injection for ₱1,000.00.” (Tagalog, Facebook)

“Maybe they are threatened by the effectiveness of the Fabunan antiviral injection. Ah, because it's not government-funded, and it'll come out that the government will not benefit from it.” (Tagalog, Twitter)

“Research found methamphetamine cures covid-19. What should we do? It will be hoarded. Government will not easily pay 5,000 to support but if you come to me, I will give you methamphetamine to cure COVID-19. Contact me anytime until 7-11 is closed.” (Thai, Facebook)

Reporting Tip:

When working in a pandemic, with a new virus spreading quickly, doctors are sometimes forced to try to treat the illness with drugs designed for other conditions. Until medicine specifically designed to prevent or treat COVID-19 goes through the relevant approval processes, you may hear the names of a number of different prescription medications being mentioned on social media. It is your role as a journalist to be able to carefully report on this community concern without fuelling hope towards untested, or potentially dangerous, treatments.

There are key questions you must always ask when deciding whether to report on a new drug.

- Do I need to? Am I confident there is enough evidence to support that reporting on this drug is in the public interest (not just interesting to the public). Could it fuel misinformation, misplaced hope and risky behaviour in the community?
- Is this research trustworthy? How big is the sample size in this research, has it been peer reviewed? Can you access the full research or just a press release?
- Who funded this research? Some research activities may be funded by the same (or subsidiaries of) the companies that will benefit from its sale
- Are there groups in my community for which this drug will be dangerous? For example Favipiravir can cause birth deformities if taken by pregnant women.

You will find more useful tips on how to report on rumours related to new drugs and cures in our [latest guidance document for journalists here](#).

This bulletin is produced with generous support from the H2H Network. The network and its fund are supported by UK aid from the UK government. This project focuses on equipping journalists and communicators across Asia with the tools they need, in the languages they prefer, to combat rumours and misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis.

For more information, contact: covid-19@internews.org

