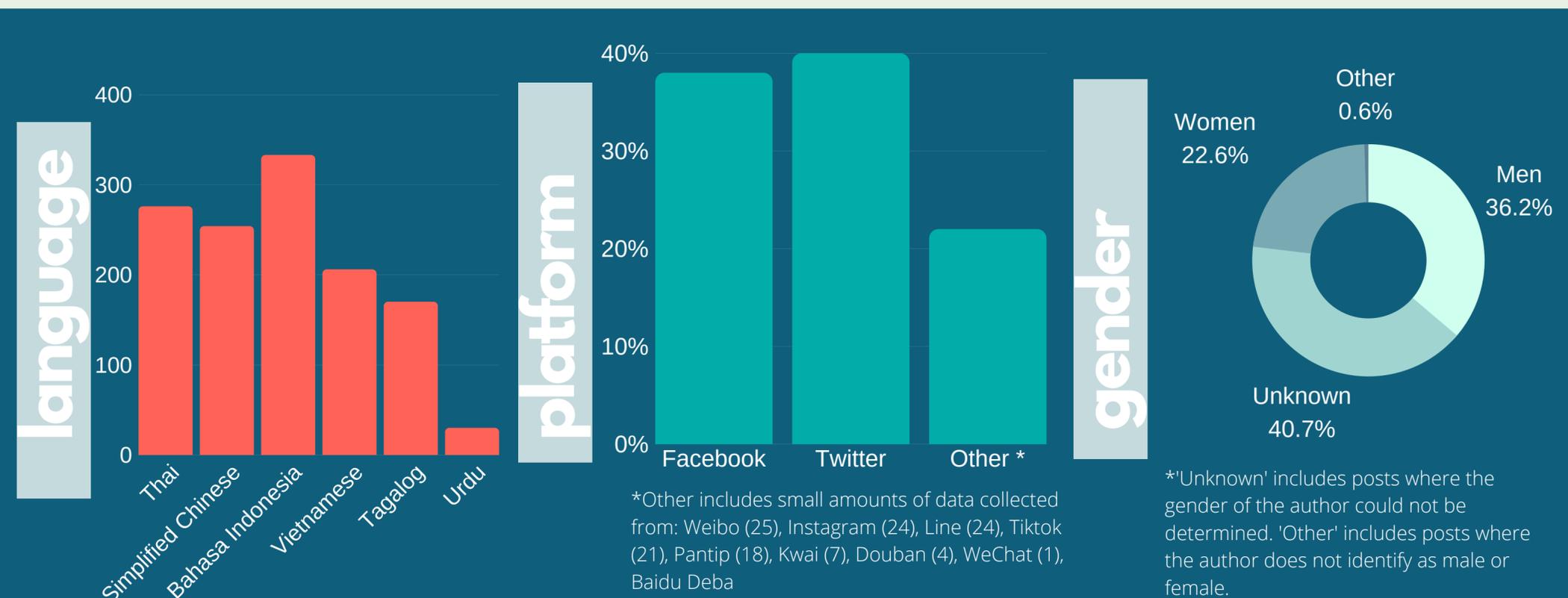


# COVID-19 RUMOUR BULLETIN #2



Internews is working with Translators without Borders and Standby Task Force to collect and analyze rumours and misinformation related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease. Data is being collected in six languages from social media posts. This analysis is based on 1,599 rumours collected between January 23, 2020, and April 24, 2020, in Thai, Urdu, Indonesian, Simplified Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. This is the first bulletin to feature Urdu data. Internews has also begun collecting rumours in Khmer language, future bulletins will include this language in the analysis.



## Droplets and aerosols Rumours related to airborne transmission

We have documented rumours related to a fear that coronavirus is 'airborne'. Rumours about airborne transmission were split relatively equally across languages. While there are a number of common viruses that are considered 'airborne' (the common cold and tuberculosis for example), most posts indicate a **lack of trust in authorities** (suggestions that this information is being covered up).

A rumour posted to Facebook in Tagalog on April 6 cited Philippines President Duterte in claiming that coronavirus is 'in the air'. The poster of this rumour has over 200,000 followers, and the post received over 2,100 reactions, 1,500 shares, and 404 comments.

Another post stated that coronavirus particles can float in the air for "up to three years", and claimed that singing and shouting can spread the virus further. This post may be in reaction to a cluster of infections in the US that appear to have been spread between choir members during a rehearsal.

Based on the current recommendations from the WHO, the virus is not considered to be airborne, but airborne transmission may occur through aerosol-generating healthcare treatments of coronavirus patients, for example using nebulisers or mechanical ventilation. This is just one reason why it is so important for healthcare workers to wear masks.

### Examples:

"I think if they announced this from the beginning in Wuhan that this virus can be airborne, the world would have never been like this. It's not difficult to check how the virus is transmitted. I don't understand why they had to conceal this information? And I just knew that the director of WHO is not even a doctor, wondering how he could be in the highest position in the medical world."  
-Thai, Pantip

### Reporting Tip:

Risk communication in relation to this issue can be challenging as the notion of an 'airborne' virus can be very frightening. It (mistakenly) triggers images of a virus being in the air 'everywhere' and may contribute to anxiety and a feeling of hopelessness. Helping your audience to understand the difference between 'droplets' (liquid larger than 5-micrometers in diameter), aerosols (liquid suspended in gas smaller than 5-micrometers in diameter) and their behaviour is crucial.

To help you report on this challenging scientific question and address community fears and confusion, we have created [this guide for reporters](#).



# Facts and face masks

## April saw an increase in rumours related to face masks

Interest in face masks continues to surge worldwide, with web searches including the term peaking during the week of April 5 - 11, according to [Google Trends](#). In line with this interest, we have seen an increase of rumours related to the wearing, purchasing and efficacy of face masks over time. **Rumours about masks overall increased 20% in April.** Over one quarter of these posts related to the use of masks as a prevention measure, but they were often entangled with confusion about the effectiveness of different kinds of masks and possibilities for alternatives.

We documented several rumours that China, which produces a large amount of the world's healthcare supplies and personal protective equipment like face masks, could benefit economically from coronavirus. One tweet written in Chinese speculated that if the Chinese Government deliberately released coronavirus upon the world, they may have planned to hoard medical supplies to sell them at an increased profit to Western countries. A post on Facebook in Tagalog expressed a similar sentiment — that China's economy, including its mask production — stands to gain from coronavirus, so spreading coronavirus may have been deliberate. There is [no evidence to suggest](#) that the virus was manufactured by any government or lab, and the outbreak has also taken an [enormous toll](#) on the Chinese economy.

**We also recorded rumours about potential dangers and risks of mask-wearing.** A rumour in Thai claimed that wearing masks for an extended length of time can cause a person to breathe in too much carbon dioxide, even causing death. While it is possible that a wearer may inhale a small amount of carbon dioxide (i.e. breath in their own exhalation) while wearing a mask, we found no evidence to suggest that there would be any noticeable impact. However, as the virus can live on surfaces for some time, masks should regularly be changed, washed and handled sparingly to ensure they remain safe for use. WHO guidelines on the use of masks advises that single-use masks be disposed of immediately after use, and fabric masks should be washed thoroughly in soapy water and dried before they are used again.

One rumour speculated that cotton masks **infused with copper** can kill the virus. Copper has broad anti-microbial properties and has already been installed in some hospitals around the world to stop the spread of antibiotic-resistant superbugs. There is preliminary evidence that the virus survives for less time on copper than some other surfaces. While some companies do produce face masks infused with copper that have proven effective on other viruses, there is yet to be rigorous testing on the use of copper face masks for SARS-CoV-2.

Posts in Indonesian expressed uncertainty about the usefulness of different types of masks in preventing contraction of the virus. The sentiment behind these posts was confusion after hearing contradicting reports about who should wear masks, and when. Other posts speculated about the efficacy of alternatives to masks, such as **wet wipes, salt face masks** and a "*nano ozone vapor device used by hunters*". Wet wipes are not recommended as a safe alternative to medical or cloth face masks and scientific evidence about the effectiveness of masks in preventing the spread of viruses is generally limited to medical masks.

An interesting rumour that related to masks was the claim that the Chinese Communist Party intentionally sold the Netherlands fake, or ineffective, masks in an effort to further infect people with coronavirus. This accusation likely refers to an incident at the end of March in which the Netherlands recalled an entire shipment of masks purchased from China after they failed to protect the face or effectively filter particles.

**The World Health Organization (WHO) says** that while wearing a medical mask does limit the spread of certain respiratory viral diseases, including COVID-19, they [continue to recommend](#) that medical masks be worn by individuals who are sick or those caring for them and that other measures such as physical distancing and hand hygiene should also be adopted. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) [recommends](#) only wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies), as well as offering [guidelines](#) for users to make their own homemade cloth masks.

As governments increasingly recommend and/or mandate that everyone cover their faces in public, it is likely that we will continue to see rumours on social media about masks. **We will continue to document new and evolving rumours. If you are seeing unique rumours in your context about face masks we'd love to hear about them: [covid-19@internews.org](mailto:covid-19@internews.org)**

## Examples:

"Wearing a mask for a long time can cause acidosis because the body receives carbon dioxide. We breathe in too little oxygen. Here are the symptoms that can occur. 1. Muscle and body aches 2. Headache 3. Feel like you have a fever. 4. If a mask is worn regularly without breaks, it can be deadly. The suggestion is N95 masks, wear no more than 1 hour, rest for 30 minutes. Normal mask, wear 2 hours, rest for 30 minutes. Cloth masks, wear 4 hours, rest for 30 minutes." - Thai, Line

"The Chinese side argued that the mask manufacturer of the Communist Party of China meant that the Netherlands was stupid and bought the wrong mask. This explanation only confirms the suspicion that the Communist Party is spreading the virus. The virus is exported first, then the fake aid, and the fake mask. Tell you when you find yourself cheated: You are too stupid, give me a chance to spread the virus to you! The Chinese Communist Party is killing all humans with viruses !!! The world should wake up !!!!!!"  
- Chinese, Twitter, 8,594 followers

"I also think that's the reason why we currently have a global pandemic. Alibaba is in China, and behind its suppliers are the very manufacturers that cater worldwide. When everyone gets sick, they have the machines capable of 'mass production' and the whole world will be at their mercy for supplies. For medical supplies, for example, PPEs, facemasks, surgical gloves, alcohol, etc., the largest manufacturer, where everyone in the world hit by COVID-19 buys from, belongs to them." - Tagalog, Facebook,

## Reporting Tip:

Community comments and questions about the use of facemasks generally point to confusion or misinformation circulating about the topic. Your reporting should work to fill these information gaps with credible, trustworthy information. Here are some ideas to get you started:

**Vulnerable groups:** How do vulnerable groups access this important commodity when it is in short supply? Are there any government or charity programs to deliver masks to communities in need? What can your community do to ensure these groups also have access to protective equipment?

**Production:** Where do the majority of masks in your country come from? Are they produced locally, or imported from overseas? Are there local businesses that can explain the production process to you? What kinds of masks do you see for sale in your local market?

**Use:** What is the correct way to wear, clean or dispose of a mask? Which masks should the general public wear and which should be reserved for healthcare workers? Speak to a local doctor who can explain the process in the language and format your audience prefers.

# The search for a cure:

# Rumours about the use of hydroxychloroquine

**Ten percent of all our rumours** related to treatments or cures reference chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine. These drugs, used primarily for the treatment of arthritis, malaria, and lupus — have been promoted by the US President Donald Trump and some media as a likely effective treatment for coronavirus.

Rumours about these drugs were most prevalent in Simplified Chinese, and Tagalog with just these two languages accounting for two thirds of reports. The remaining rumours were split between Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese. While some posts expressed confusion about the differences between hydroxychloroquine, chloroquine, chloroquine phosphate, and azithromycin, the majority of rumours (92%) related to the use of the drug as a treatment or cure for coronavirus.

In April, we saw a trend in rumours suggesting that injecting chloroquine into the water supply and spraying it out of planes and helicopters would cure coronavirus. There were even pleas to entrepreneur Elon Musk to send planes to diffuse the drug.

**Rumours that we labelled as particularly high risk**, spoke about access to over-the-counter chloroquine and dosage suggestions. Other risky posts claimed that hydroxychloroquine had already been proven to cure the disease or that the drug had already been approved by official drug agencies such as the US The Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Many of the rumours cited fabricated endorsements from other U.S. officials and Western authorities.

The WHO states that there are currently no approved medications for the treatment of COVID-19 and recently issued this alert for falsified chloroquine products that have been found circulating in the WHO region of Africa. Hydroxychloroquine is not approved by the FDA for use in treating coronavirus, although there have been several trials in numerous countries, with controversial and mixed preliminary results.

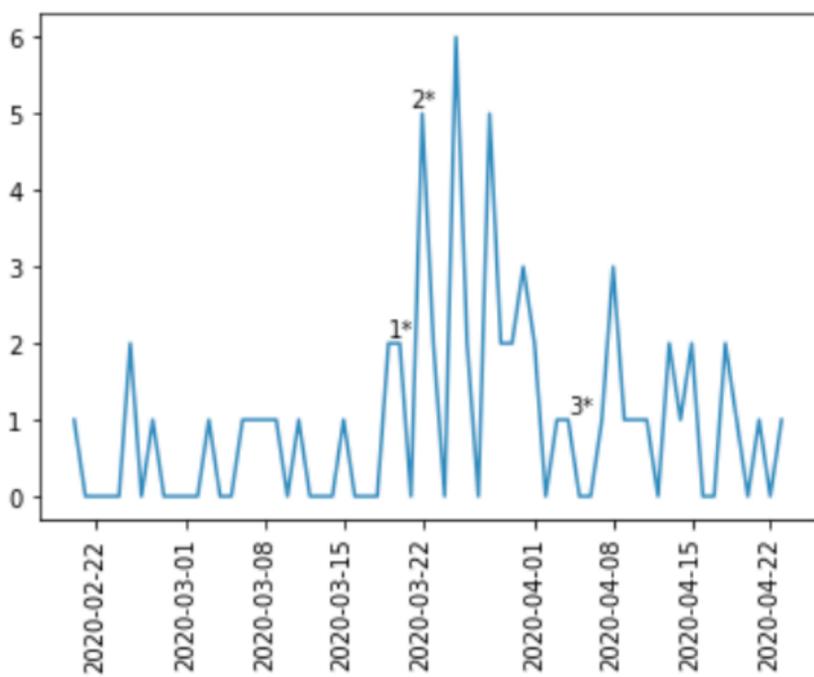
See this guide to the scientific studies on the drug so far. On April 24, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) noted that the drug can cause dangerous abnormalities in heart rhythms and issued a warning on the use of hydroxychloroquine in the treatment of coronavirus outside of a trial or hospital.

## Examples:

"The drug in the U.S. that can cure coronavirus is hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug. Its counterpart in the Philippines is chloroquine. Are they one and the same?"  
- Tagalog, Facebook

"DRUG TO TREAT VIRUS CORONA IS OFFICIALLY APPROVED! Chloroquine and Azithromycin are approved by the US to treat corona patients, thank God! The good news is, the chloroquine medication, we actually deployed in the state of New York resources to be able to be administered to the people"  
- Vietnamese, Facebook, 71 comments 567 shares

## Hydroxychloroquine: Mentions over time



This is a truly global pandemic, and that is reflected in social media data as well. One example is the link between promotions of the drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine by leaders in the United States, and their mentions across social media in our target language groups.

### Key:

**1: March 19, 2020** - Trump says he is pushing the Food and Drug Administration to approve treatments for coronavirus patients and calls chloroquine a "game changer"

**2: March 21, 2020** - Trump tweets that hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, taken together, "have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine"

**3: April 4, 2020** - In a press briefing, Trump announces that the U.S. government has begun distributing stockpiled hydroxychloroquine to labs and hospitals across the country. "What do you have to lose?" he said.

## Online Extra!

**Check out our website** to see the most popular words used in COVID-19 rumours in each language group and a **special blog from our data analyst** explaining how she maps and analyses word use in our social media data.

## Reporting Tip:

These rumours are likely fuelled by community anxiety about the spread of the virus and a hope that a cure or treatment for COVID-19 has been discovered. However the focus on the medication by the US President (and some major US media outlets) has also made a significant contribution. As such, it is important to ensure any risk communication acknowledges both the community's 'wishes' for a cure as well as the immense risk of self medication.

To help you to understand what hydroxychloroquine is, and how to report on it responsibly, we have created this guide for journalists.

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 newsrooms across Asia with the tools they need, in the languages they prefer, to combat rumour and misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis.

For more information, contact: [covid-19@internews.org](mailto:covid-19@internews.org)

