

Media landscape and comms strategies



Adele Baleta

**Media and Communications,
Science Writer, Trainer**

a.baleta@mweb.co.za

Threads: @adelebaleta

7 November 2025

Objectives

Media landscape

Challenges

How to become social media savvy

What journalists do

What you can do

What Covid teaches us

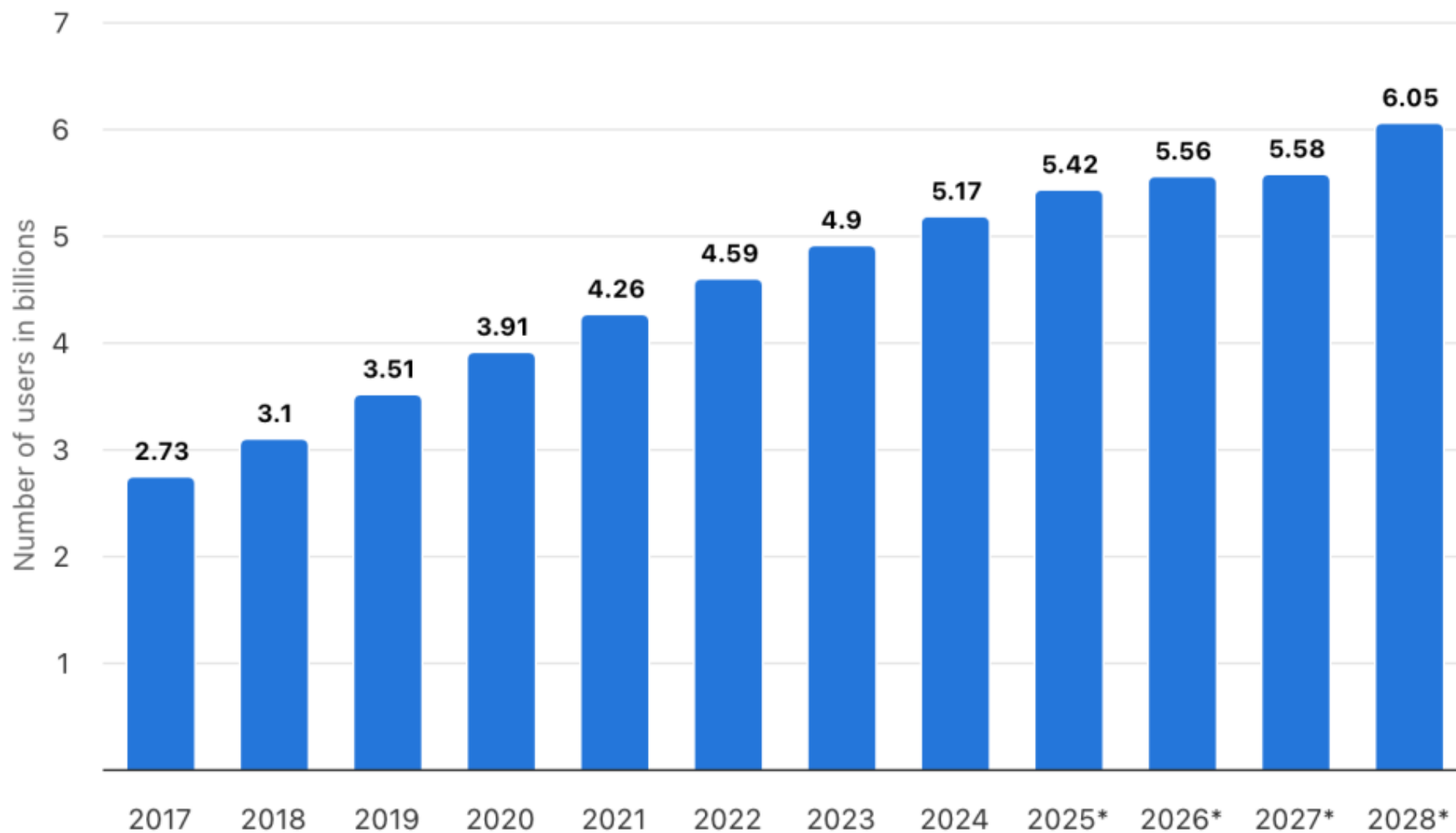
Challenges

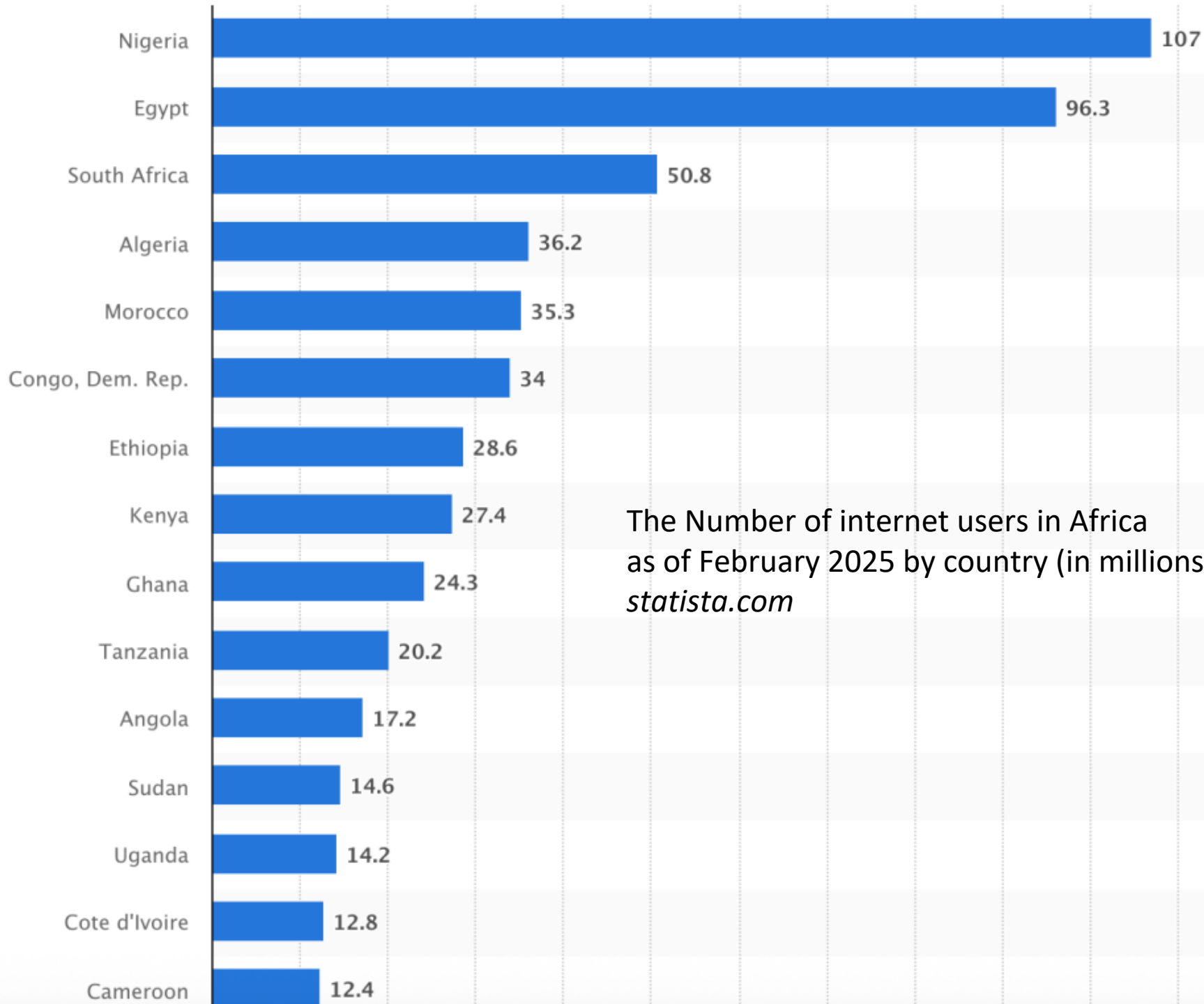
Bad News Spreads Fast

- Infodemic - There is a lot more information
- FAKE NEWS
- Distrust of evidence-based science
- Lack of trust
- Increased demand for transparency
- Unease with scientific uncertainty
- Greater attention to risk than benefits
- Lack of science literacy
- Vaccine hesitancy

Internet user growth worldwide from 2017 – 2028

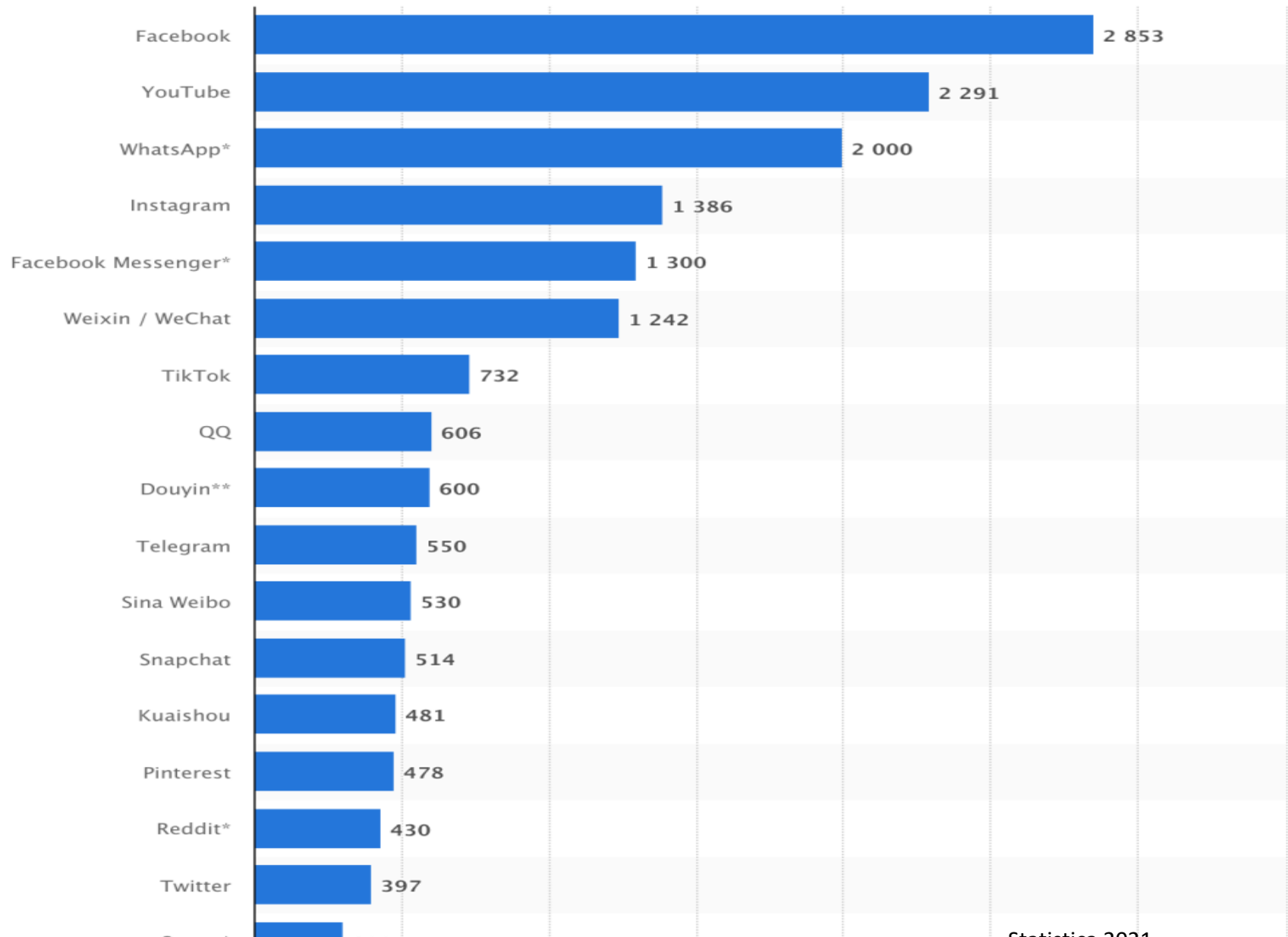
(in billions)





The Number of internet users in Africa
as of February 2025 by country (in millions)
statista.com

Most popular social networks worldwide



Internet usage

As of **January 2021**, **Southern Africa** was the region with the highest internet penetration rate in Africa, **at 66%**. By 2024, Statista reports the rate has climbed to approximately 75.9%.

In contrast, **Eastern and Central Africa** recorded the lowest rates, 24% and 26% respectively.

In 2021, 36.45 million South Africans accessed the internet through any kind of **mobile devices**. **In January 2025**, this grew to **50.8 million** users raising the penetration rate to 78.9% penetration.

Statista.com. Our world in data. Global Digital Insights

Social Media

Use Platform-Specific Strategies



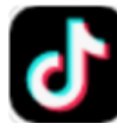
Instagram: Share visually appealing posts, stories, and reels. Use hashtags like #HPVVaccine, #Vaccinate, #PreventHPV, and #HealthyFuture.




Facebook: Create detailed posts, host live Q&A sessions with healthcare experts and share educational articles. Use Facebook groups focused on health and parenting.



(Twitter): Post quick facts, share news articles, and engage in conversations using relevant hashtags. Retweet posts from trusted health organizations.



Tik Tok: Create engaging and informative short videos targeting a younger audience. Use trending sounds and hashtags to increase visibility.



ANTI-VACCINE LIES

DM

Dr. Mikhail V.
Family.

What “Dr Mike” Varshavski learnt - Stat news


- Terrible interaction with health care providers
- Missed opportunity - need to invest in and learn about social media tools
- GAP: filled by grifters, snack oil salesmen
- Loss of trust in health systems
- We crave certainty - covid boosters - people felt tricked
- 14.4 million subscribers on youtube - content relatable, losing jargon, accurate
- Need to study algorithms, understand how different platforms work
- Make science enjoyable
- CONTENT NEEDS TO BE SEEN THROUGH A HUMAN FIRST LENS!

Uncertainty:

Dr Anthony Fauci: How Science Works!

"The people who are giving the ad hominem are saying, 'Ah, Fauci misled us. First he said no masks, then he said masks.' Well, let me give you a flash."





That's the way science works. You work with the data you have at the time. It is essential as a scientist that you evolve your opinion and your

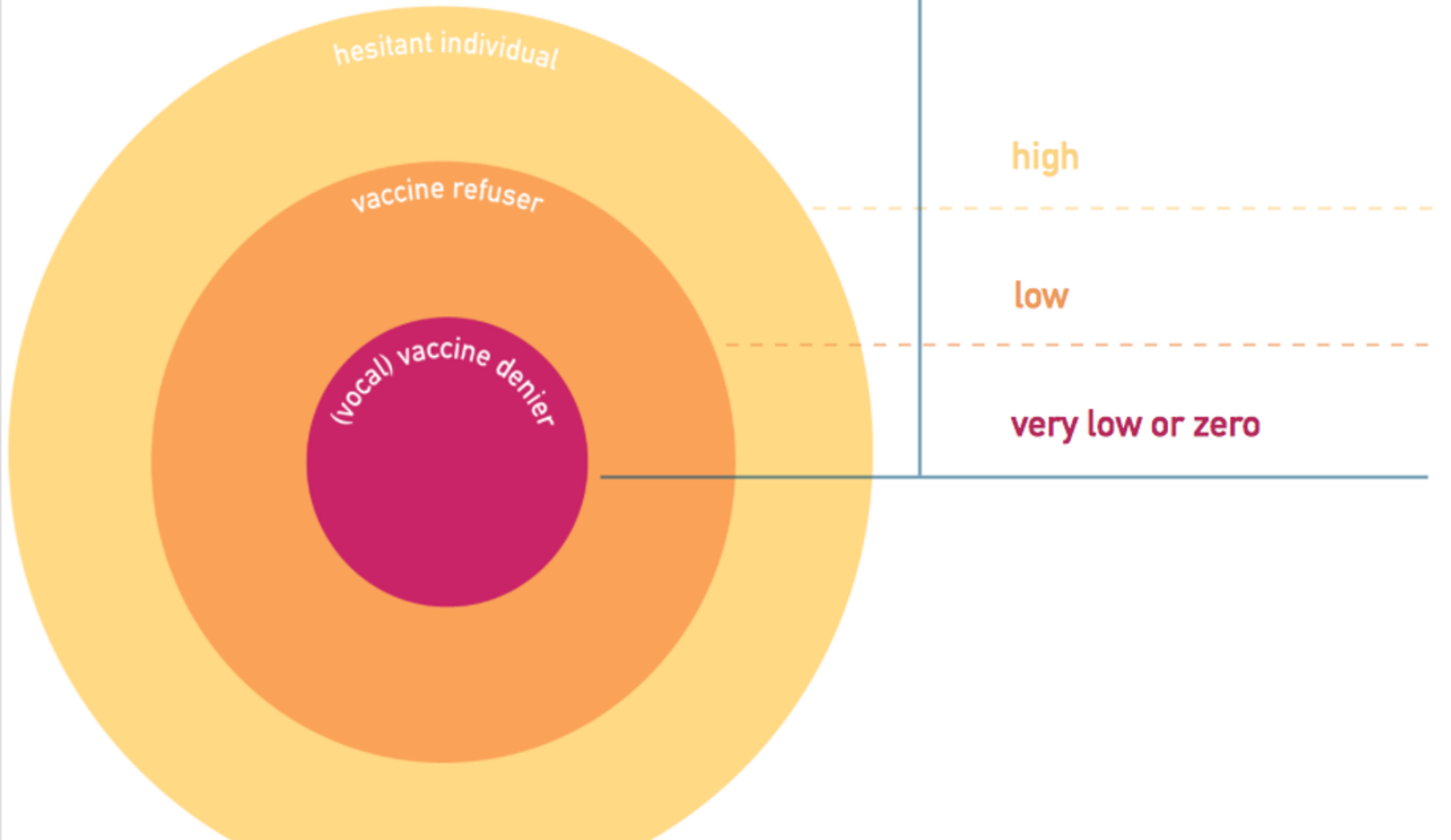
recommendations based on the data as it evolves. That is the nature of science. It is a self-correcting process. And that's the reason why I say

people who then criticize me about that are actually criticizing science. It was not a change because I felt like flip-flopping. It was a change

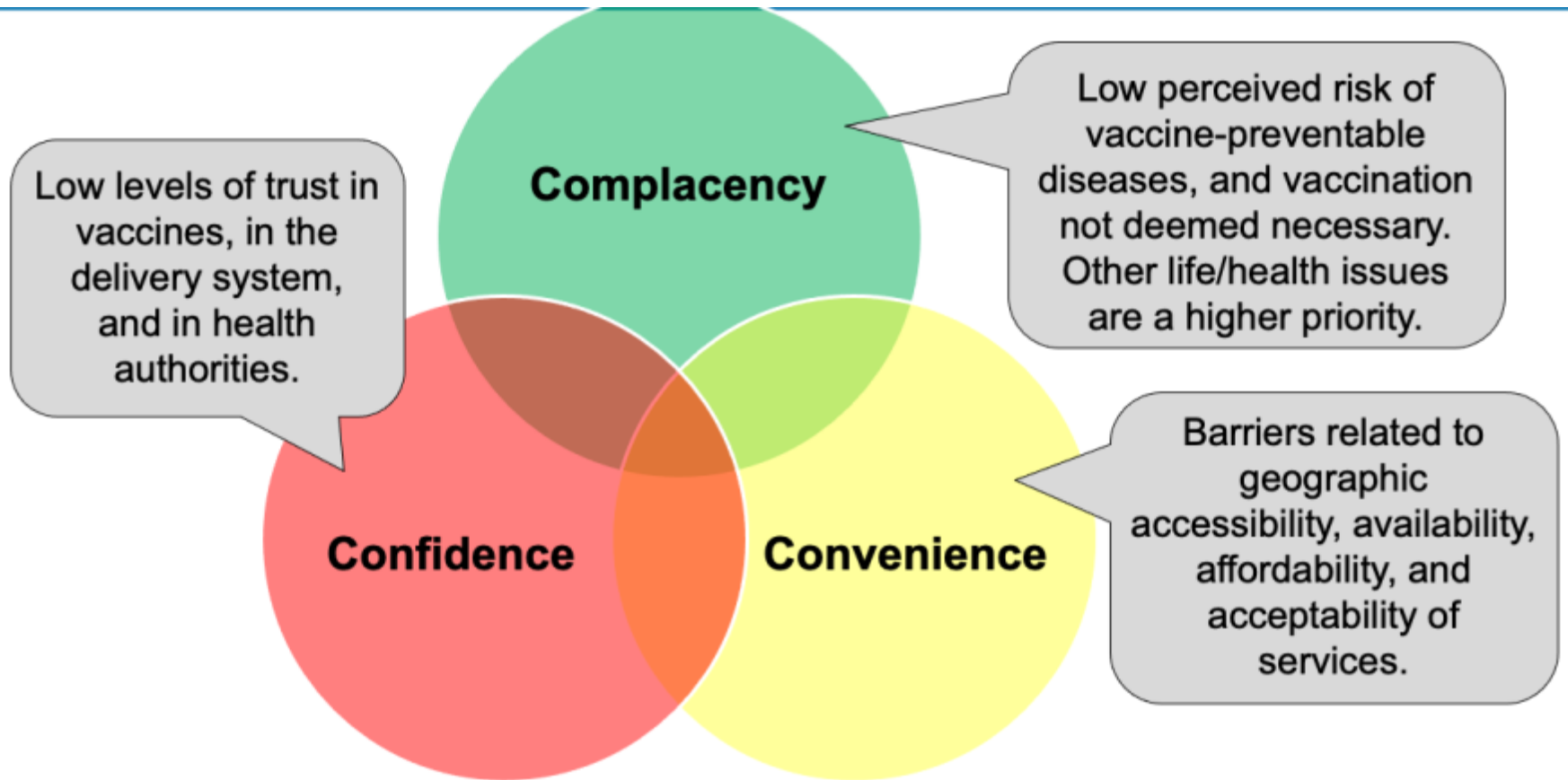
because the evidence changed, the data changed."

Your target audience!

What are the chances of changing their minds?



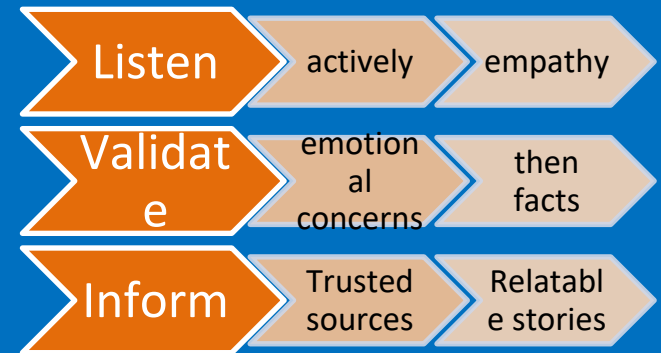
Factors adding to hesitancy



I can hear you, but I am not listening!



Image:Freepik



Every person you listen to is a brick in the bridge of trust.

Rebuilding trust takes time — but every conversation counts.

Support for health care workers

At the coal face

Burnt out

Lack information

Not updated on the latest evidence

Need support when in conversation with hesitant individuals

Need bite size digestible information on new vaccines

Need empathy and appreciation

DON'T FORGET THE ADOLESCENTS!



How to communicate with journalists



Build professional relationships with journalists you trust to maintain high standards.



Contact trusted journalists quickly if a rumour starts to circulate - before a crisis develops - so you can give them the facts.



Keep your messages simple and to the point.



Be willing to answer questions and be completely honest. Refer to someone who knows the answer if you don't.



How to communicate with journalists



Give contact information so the journalist can follow up on the story or check facts with you later.



Remain polite and professional at all times - never lose your temper, even if provoked.



Know your work and be prepared.

Remember that journalists are not interested in destroying your reputation or tricking you!

10 golden rules

- **Never lie**
- **Never say “no comment”**
- **There is never an "off the record”**
- **Be short, get to the point and always think of the audience**
- **Stay calm and confident**

10 golden rules (2)

- **Use simple language, avoiding jargon**
- **Stay in control**
- **It's OK to say "I don't know, but I'll find out"**
- **Don't speculate**
- **Cultivate good media relations**

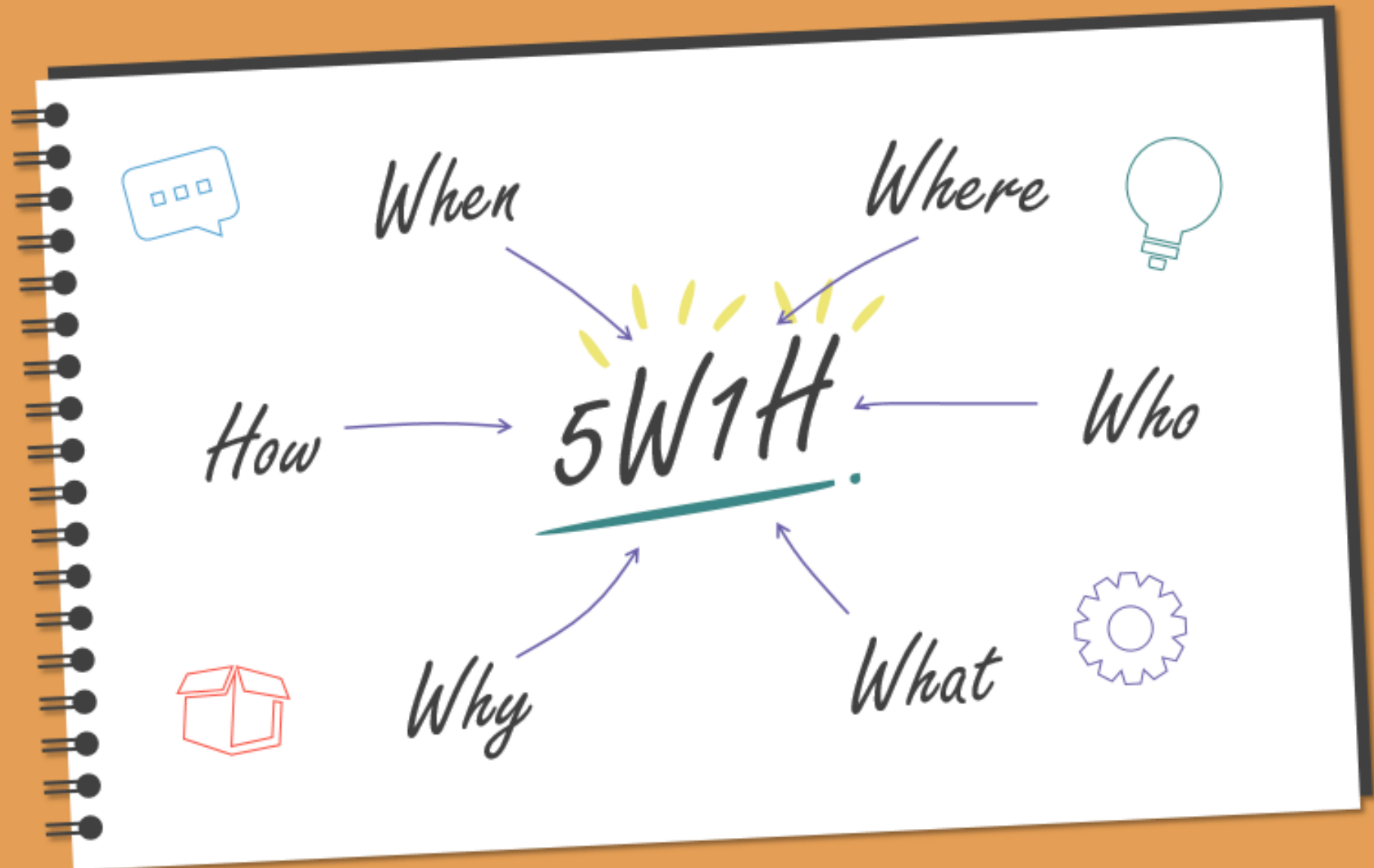
The media like...

- Accuracy and simplicity
- Statistics with explanations
- Some context or background
- Comments from the highest authority possible
- Investigating both sides of a story
- Human interest angles
- Fast responses
- People who contact them

The media do not like...

- Evasiveness
- Unavailability
- Being pushed from one person to another
- Being spoken down to
- Academic jargon or unnecessary complexity
- Dishonesty

What you will be asked



To participate or not?

Responding to an anti-vaccine stance on radio/tv provides opportunities to ...

- Deliver key messages
- Appeal to audience
- Inform undecided individuals
- Equip vaccine advocates with evidence-based messages
- Hopefully even convince the sceptics

Not participating may be interpreted as an unwillingness to discuss vaccination issues in a transparent and open manner.

This could lead to mistrust.

However ... under some circumstances, the risks outweigh the potential benefits, so carefully consider whether to participate or not.

Factors to consider when deciding to face a vocal vaccine denier...

- Are you the best person to do the interview?
- Are time and resources available for preparation of messages?
- Is it a serious format (e.g. content, format)?
- Is the audience large or strategic enough to justify participation?
- Will the discussion be sufficiently balanced and unbiased?

Truth sandwich



Truth:

Vaccines are safe and effective at preventing serious diseases, they have undergone rigorous testing and monitoring to ensure their safety.

Misinformation:

Some claim that vaccines cause serious health problems, like autism. These claims are based on debunked studies and misinformation spread through social media.

Truth:

Extensive research has shown no link between vaccines and autism or other chronic conditions. Vaccines protect against potentially life-threatening diseases, and getting vaccinated is an essential part of public health.

Find your way – prepare a message map

1. Create messages in advance
2. Illustrative – easy to remember
3. Identify gaps in your knowledge



Complex concepts – opportunity for disinformation (polarization)

Immunity

How vaccines are developed

How vaccines work

Adverse Events

NUMBERS

Key Message

Should be able to
stand alone

1

1a

1b

1c

Three
supporting
messages



What is a message map?

Key Message # 1	Key Message # 2	Key Message # 3
Supporting message 1a	Supporting message 2a	Supporting message 3a
Supporting message 1b	Supporting message 2b	Supporting message 3b
Supporting message 1c	Supporting message 2c	Supporting message 3c

Vaccinating your child

1. Vaccines are a part of a healthy life for your child.	2. Vaccines are the most effective way to protect your child from life-threatening illnesses.	3. It's your choice. Get the facts.
1a. You make decisions that impact your child's future every day.	2a. Unvaccinated children are 23 times more likely to get whooping cough than vaccinated children.	3a. More than twenty new studies show no link between autism and vaccines.
1b. The diseases that vaccines prevent still pose a real threat to your child.	2b. Measles (a vaccine preventable disease) can lead to pneumonia, brain damage and death.	3b. It is ok to be worried, but get the facts.
1c. We can now prevent more diseases with vaccines.	2c. Mumps (a vaccine preventable disease) can lead to deafness and blindness.	3c. Talk to your doctor about vaccine safety.

General recommendations for verbal communication

- Emphasize high safety instead of low risk (framing)
- Use inclusive terms (e.g. “we as parents”)
- Communicate what has been achieved
- Underline scientific consensus
- Emphasize the social benefit of vaccines
- Avoid humour

**Opportunities for
engagement?**

Opportunity knocks!

- When Anti-microbial resistance comes up
- Vaccination **campaigns**
- Introduction of **new vaccines**
- When **declining coverage** rates are reported
- When **increasing coverage** rates are reported
- When there is a “**change**” in the programme (vaccine switch, dose or schedule changes)
- Adverse reaction
- Rumours and mis/disinformation

Opportunity knocks

- National Immunisation week
- Infectious Disease days on the health calendar
- Meetings, seminars, symposia, conferences, health provider training sessions
- Community workshops and meetings
- School meetings
- Church
- Talking to Minister/s, colleagues, cleaning staff
- In the uber, on the bus.....in the shower

Attitudes, knowledge & norms

- FAILURE OF ONGOING COMMUNICATIONS FOR YEARS
- Lack of knowledge about vaccines (what illness it prevents , availability, how they work).
- Belief that risks posed by vaccines (adverse events, safety) are greater than the benefits.
- Perceived effectiveness of the vaccine.
- Beliefs about rumors/misinformation and disinformation
- The complexity of contradictory information. Why a person who has been vaccinated can still get infected.
- Vaccine hesitancy

Spreading the message

Repeat, repeat, repeat

In every interview

In every press release

In every press conference

In every brochure

In every poster

Make sure all involved stakeholders know the messages well

Partners

Health care workers/facilities

Authorities

Political decision-makers

Create your own opportunities to deliver your key messages

Do not wait to be asked

Initiate press briefings

Call journalists – use your relations with them, provide them with facts and “cases”

Initiate debates, community activities etc.

Engage in social media discussions

What has Covid taught us

- **Unprecedented need to communicate in a crisis.**
- **Build relationships with the media**
- **Lack of evidence-based messages provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories and rumours to take route and spread.**
- **Ongoing communication**



Thank you!
Questions?