

IIMHL & IIDL Leadership Briefing XXXIII

Misinformation & COVID-19: Accurate information saves lives

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“Conspiracy theories cause real harm to people, to their health, and also to their physical safety. They amplify and legitimize misconceptions about the pandemic, and reinforce stereotypes which can fuel violence and violent extremist ideologies.”¹

“Infodemics have already happened in one way or another in past epidemics, but what’s happening right now is something of a global scale, where people are connected through different means and share information more quickly,” Nguyen said. “This has created a new situation where we are rethinking and reshaping our approach to managing infodemics in emergencies.”²

Introduction

In 2020 we not only have a “pandemic”, we also have an “infodemic” which is undermining health solutions and practices across countries.

Misinformation about COVID-19 provides a real threat to public health and public action for all nations. As a global, shared health problem, COVID-19 appears to have been a catalyst for misinformation among all.

How would we know if we have successfully mitigated/slowed down an infodemic? The World Health Organisation says “when communities and individuals are empowered to be resilient against misinformation, and have the skills and self-efficacy to recognize low-quality information and enact healthy behaviors. We will be successful when behaviors at all levels—individual, community, society, health system, government, and so on—have shifted to resist misinformation and act on and propagate accurate health guidance to flatten the epidemic curve”.

In this Leadership Briefing we outline some of the issues of concern and the solutions proposed by international organisations; for example: The World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations; and also, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Commission who have worked together to combat misinformation.

¹ UNESCO <https://en.unesco.org/news/new-resources-counter-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-through-critical-thinking-and-empathy>

² United Nations <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/immunizing-the-public-against-misinformation/>

We hope that the practical resources in this document and the concepts behind them are helpful for IIMHL and IIDL leaders in their own quest for accurate information about COVID-19.

As IIMHL and IIDL, our aim is to continue to be an international organisation in which people can trust, and that the information we provide is reliable and from reputable sources.³

World Health Organisation 2020

As the world responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO has highlighted the fact that we face the challenge of an overabundance of information related to the virus. Some of this information may be false and potentially harmful. The WHO has a communications process based on six principles (see Appendix 1).

A short video is also available: “Facts matter” #strongertogether

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1252859179695398924>

They have also produced a video about infodemics called “How to protect yourself in the infodemic” 2.08 seconds – this suggests practical ways to help beat infodemics.

<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management#>

Inaccurate information spreads widely and at speed, making it more difficult for the public to identify verified facts and advice from trusted sources, such as their local health authority or WHO. However, everyone can help to stop the spread. If you see content online that you believe to be false or misleading, you can report it to the hosting social media platform.

“It’s important to protect yourself and others by reporting false information”

Several ways to report false information across social media channels are given by WHO – three examples are given here:

Facebook:

https://www.facebook.com/help/572838089565953?helpref=search&sr=2&query=reporting%20false%20claims&search_session_id=f886d969d0ffdf65b717d0567986859f

YouTube

<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802027>

WhatsApp

<https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/security-and-privacy/staying-safe-on-whatsapp/>

³ Steve Appleton, IIMHL email communication August 2020

The following link enables you to report misinformation to the WHO

<https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online>

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: MythBusters

You can learn more about inaccurate information on the **WHO myth busters pages**. Each issue outlined below is discussed and a poster and brief video about each is shown with the accurate/correct information.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5G Mobile networks• Alcohol• Antibiotics• Bleach• Cold weather, snow• Drugs• Garlic• Hand dryers• Holding your breath• Viruses, bacteria, antibiotics• Mosquitos	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hot and humid climates• Hot baths• Hot peppers• Houseflies• Hydroxychloroquine• Masks, CO2 intoxication• Masks, exercise• Medicines• Methanol, ethanol	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Older people, younger people• Pneumonia vaccines• Recovery• Saline• Shoes• Sunny and hot weather• Thermal scanners• Ultra-violet (UV) lamps
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A range of videos is also available on the WHO website:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9S6xGsoqIBU2V6AZYGIJwZRAFJ3YDreb>

Below are rolling posters explaining the WHO campaign against misinformation.

<https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/misinformation-campaign/stop-misinformation.gif>

WHO and Infodemics 2020

The WHO has stated that the global fight against the COVID-19 infodemic should be treated as a scientific discipline on par with understanding the spread of the disease itself, since behavior change is critical to every pandemic response. During an epidemic, health authorities lean on the science of epidemiology to inform management and response activities: monitoring and outbreak response and implementing epidemic management interventions. Health authorities urgently need evidence-based infodemic management tools and interventions, informed by cross-disciplinary infodemiology research.

Visit their **infodemiology pages** to familiarize yourself with this emerging field of science.

Infodemic: overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that occurs during an epidemic. It can lead to confusion and ultimately mistrust in governments and public health response.

Infodemic management: applying evidence-based interventions that bring understandable, localized evidence-based information to citizens and drive positive health-seeking behavior.

Here you can also learn more about [cyber security](#)

Hackers and cyber scammers are taking advantage of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic by sending fraudulent email and WhatsApp messages that attempt to trick you into clicking on malicious links or opening attachments.

<https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/misinformation-campaign/stop-misinformation.gif>

WHO & the Government of the United Kingdom (UK): “Stop the Spread” campaign

May 2020

In the context of the strategic partnership with the Government of the United Kingdom, WHO joined forces with its communications teams to raise awareness of misinformation around COVID-19 and encourage individuals to report false or misleading content online.

This cooperation started with the joint **Stop the Spread** campaign in May-June 2020, which encouraged the use of trusted sources such as WHO and national health authorities for accurate COVID-19 information. The new phase of the joint campaign focuses on proactively identifying and reporting potentially wrong or misleading information, as part of WHO's efforts to address the spread of inaccurate and harmful information during the pandemic.

BBC World News and BBC.com featured the campaign.

'Stop the Spread' sought to reach audiences across Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East and Latin America. The UK government offered a toolkit of the campaign assets to partner governments to translate and use in their countries to ensure a unified message across borders.

<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/countering-misinformation-about-covid-19#:~:text=%E2%80%9CStop%20The%20Spread%E2%80%9D,and%20national%20health%20authorities.>

30 sec video “Stop the Spread”

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1263016778231414784>

Four posters are available from this UK campaign:

<https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/misinformation-campaign/stop-misinformation.gif>

Not everything
you hear about
COVID-19 is true



<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/countering-misinformation-about-covid-19>

United Nations

21st May 2020

“Verified” Campaign (Marked by a double tick)

The Secretary General of UN António Guterres explained the concept of “Verified” a UN initiative to encourage us all to check the advice we share, as the world can only contain the coronavirus if every person has access to accurate, reliable information.

“As [#COVID19](#) spreads, a tsunami of misinformation, hate, scapegoating and scare-mongering has been unleashed. That is why we are launching ‘Verified’ - an initiative to share science-based, factual advice and stories celebrating the best of humanity.”

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

By promoting and sharing Verified content – marked by a double tick – everyday people can play a crucial role by giving reliable information about COVID-19 to their friends, families and social networks, with the goal of saving lives and countering misinformation.

Organisations, businesses, civil society and media platforms can partner with Verified to spread information that helps protect people, communities and forges connections across the planet.

Verified’s team of communicators, creatives and researchers produce content based on the latest information and guidance from the UN, WHO and other UN agencies. The team works with leading experts on misinformation.

You can watch the Secretary General of UN António Guterres explain “Verified” in this video via Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1263501443786575872>

European Commission and UNESCO

2020

UNESCO has its own “Five laws of media and information literacy” (see Appendix 2)

The coronavirus pandemic has seen a rise in harmful and misleading conspiracy theories, mostly spreading online. To address this trend, the European Commission and UNESCO, Twitter, and the World Jewish Congress have published a set of ten educational infographics helping citizens identify, debunk and counter conspiracy theories.

[#thinkbeforesharing#factsmatter](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rise in harmful and misleading conspiracy theories. It may be difficult to recognise them or know how best to deal with them.

The two organisations have developed helpful graphics to explain each of the ten areas.

1. [What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish?](#)
2. [Is this a conspiracy theory? Check before sharing](#)
3. [Conspiracy theories: What about my own beliefs?](#)
4. [Conspiracy theories can be dangerous](#)
5. [Conspiracy theories: The link to antisemitism](#)
6. [Prebunking and debunking conspiracy theories](#)
7. [How to talk to somebody who firmly believes in conspiracy theories](#)
8. [Conspiracy theories: The link to COVID-19](#)
9. [Concrete counter actions against conspiracy theories](#)
10. [How can journalists report on conspiracy theories](#)

For example with number one above, there is an accompanying graphic (see Appendix 3)

https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish

Twitter posters #thinkbeforesharing are also available– an example is shown in Appendix 4.

UNESCO

2020

In addition to the above, UNESCO is also involved in UNESCO “**Media and Information Literacy: Critical-thinking, Creativity, Literacy, Intercultural, Citizenship, Knowledge and Sustainability (MIL CLICKS)**”

<https://en.unesco.org/news/new-resources-counter-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-through-critical-thinking-and-empathy>

Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

UNESCO has partnered with Sweden, the European Commission and the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations among others to undertake this campaign. A helpful video outlines the MIL CLICKS strategy.

“Through capacity-building resources, such as curricula development, policy guidelines and articulation, and assessment framework, UNESCO supports the development of MIL competencies among people. Free and open online courses are available for self-paced learning about MIL. Through media and information technologies, the Organisation facilitates networking and research through the Global Alliance for Partnerships on MIL (GAPMIL) and MIL University Network. The

recently-launched MIL CLICKS social media initiative is also part of UNESCO's strategy to enable media and information literate societies".
MIL CLICKS) website: <https://en.unesco.org/milclicks>

This short video explains MIL: <https://youtu.be/7JyoihAuuKq>

Twitter Cat Video: *"Cool cats think before sharing information online. Be a cool cat."*

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1256493629465640960>

Annual Global MIL week

The annual Global MIL Week is celebrated every year from 24 to 31 October. Global MIL Week 2020 **Feature Conference** and **Youth Agenda Forum** will be hosted by the Republic of Korea. Official website is coming soon.

<https://en.unesco.org/milclicks>

Appendix 1: WHO principles for effective communications

This Framework supports the broad range of communication activities occurring across all parts and levels of WHO.

It is organized according to six principles to ensure WHO communications are:

1. Accessible to decisions-makers
2. Actionable by decisions-makers
3. Credible and trusted as perceived by decisions-makers
4. Relevant to decisions-makers
5. Timely to enable decision-making
6. Understandable to decision-makers



<https://www.who.int/about/communications/principles>

Appendix 2

UNESCO's Five Laws of Media and Information Literacy

**FIVE LAWS
OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION
LITERACY (MIL)**

LAW 1
Information, communication, libraries, media, technology, the Internet as well as other forms of information providers are for use in critical civic engagement and sustainable development. They are equal in stature and none is more relevant than the other or should be ever treated as such.

LAW 2
Every citizen is a creator of information/knowledge and has a message. They must be empowered to access new information/knowledge and to express themselves. MIL is for all - women and men equally - and a nexus of human rights.

LAW 3
Information, knowledge, and messages are not always value neutral, or always independent of biases. Any conceptualization, use and application of MIL should make this truth transparent and understandable to all citizens.

LAW 4
Every citizen wants to know and understand new information, knowledge and messages as well as to communicate, even if she/he is not aware, admits or expresses that he/she does. Her/his rights must however never be compromised.

LAW 5
Media and information literacy is not acquired at once. It is a lived and dynamic experience and process. It is complete when it includes knowledge, skills and attitudes, when it covers access, evaluation/assessment, use, production and communication of information, media and technology content.

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Alton Grizzle and Jagtar Singh

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/mil_five_laws_english.png

Appendix 3

#ThinkBeforeSharing

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Is this one? Check before sharing

BE WARNED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SEEN A RISE IN HARMFUL AND MISLEADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES. IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE THEM OR KNOW HOW BEST TO DEAL WITH THEM.

Check the author – who is writing this and why?

UNLIKELY

- The author has recognized qualifications and credentials in the topic
- The author uses verifiable facts and evidence from scientific or academic research

YES

LIKELY

- The author is a self-proclaimed expert and not attached to a reputable organization or institution
- The author claims to have credentials but they don't withstand scrutiny or are suspended

NO

Check the source – Is it reliable and reputable?

UNLIKELY

- The source has been quoted by several reputable media outlets
- The information is backed by many scientists/academics
- Independent fact-checking websites support the source and related claims

YES

LIKELY

- The source of information is not clear
- The information is shared only by self-proclaimed experts
- Independent fact-checking websites do not support the source and have refuted related claims

NO

Check the tone and style – Is it balanced and fair or sensationalist and one-dimensional?

UNLIKELY

- The author does not shy away from exploring complexity, including different perspectives
- The author is prepared to acknowledge limits to their knowledge
- The tone is objective, factual

YES

LIKELY

- The author presents their information as the only valid truth
- The author raises questions instead of providing answers
- The author demonizes whoever they assume is behind the alleged secret plot
- The tone is subjective, emotionally charged
- Emotional images or anecdotes are used to illustrate the message

NO



OK TO SHARE



DON'T SHARE

What is a real conspiracy?

Real conspiracies large and small DO exist. They are more often centred on single, self-contained events or an individual like an assassination or a coup d'état. They are unearthed by whistle-blowers and the media, using verifiable facts and evidence.

Looking for A REAL CONSPIRACY?



In 2006, the U.S. District Court in Washington DC (USA) ruled that major cigarette companies were guilty of conspiracy. For decades, they had hidden evidence of health risks attached to smoking to promote higher sales.
—LA Times, 2006

With thanks to Michael Butter, co-author of the *COMPACT Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, and John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of *The Debunking Handbook* and *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.



CHECK YOUR SOURCES.
WHEN IN DOUBT, DON'T SHARE.
STOP THE SPREAD.



European Commission

https://twitter.com/teddy_wilkin/status/1294229605893787648/photo/1

Appendix 4 Twitter posters



https://twitter.com/search?q=%23ThinkBeforeSharing&src=typeahead_click

Conversely the information below is usually right:



<https://en.unesco.org/news/new-resources-counter-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-through-critical-thinking-and-empathy>