Fears, Falsehoods and Facts: Do You Know How to Combat the COVID-19 Infodemic?

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous.”
-Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization

What is an infodemic?
While the COVID-19 pandemic continues, a parallel ‘infodemic’ is raging alongside it. An infodemic is an abundance of information of questionable accuracy that can undermine public trust in scientific facts, as well as generally trusted sources of information. It often includes misinformation (i.e. inaccurate information) and disinformation (i.e. inaccurate information intended to mislead). The spread of such misleading information can undermine population health and social cohesion while often stoking political dissatisfaction. This phenomenon is occurring both online, through social media such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, and offline, through traditional media platforms and word-of-mouth. While governments around the world continue efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare to roll out national COVID vaccination programs, the level of false information across all platforms is ramping up. This is a critical challenge for political leadership.

How to battle an infodemic?
It is virtually impossible to eliminate an infodemic, but it is possible to manage its effects. It is essential that continued COVID prevention and management efforts include a proactive public information campaign. Below are 3 key actions that governments can take:

1) Monitor false information, identify common narratives, and detect the sources and methods by which misinformation is being promoted;
2) Develop a proactive information campaign by communicating information that translates the science (behind prevention, treatment, and vaccines) while routinely factchecking false information; and
3) Mobilize trusted voices in society (recognizing that government leaders may not always be the most publicly trusted sources of information) and build societal resilience to false information.

Table 1 provides an overview of infodemic management with greater detail about specific steps Ministers can take to achieve each of the above key actions.

2 https://www.who.int/news/item/11-12-2020-call-for-action-managing-the-infodemic
Table 1: Harvard Ministerial Overview of Infodemic Management

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<tr>
<th>Key action</th>
<th>Specific steps</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<td><strong>1) Monitor false information, identify common narratives, and detect the sources and methods by which misinformation is being promoted</strong></td>
<td>- Pay attention to what communities are saying online and offline (i.e. monitor WhatsApp forwards &amp; Facebook groups, follow journalists on social media with an ear to the ground, use social listening AI to data mine online conversations)&lt;br&gt;- Try and understand ‘why’ certain information might be spreading</td>
<td>“I don’t know anyone with COVID. The government is lying to us as usual.” → Lack of trust in government, need different messengers&lt;br&gt;“Western countries don’t care about Africa. We have been lied to so many times. Why should we trust their vaccines?” → Painful historical experiences, need to explain the science behind the vaccine&lt;br&gt;“Will I be forced to take the vaccine to keep my job?” → Fear of lack of choice, need to empower people</td>
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<td><strong>2) Develop a proactive information campaign by communicating information that translates science while routinely factchecking false information</strong></td>
<td>- WHEN: Reach people with true information before they hear false information &amp; warn people to be on the lookout about specific false information and why it is false before it has spread&lt;br&gt;- WHAT: Address root causes of fear, translate science to clear language, highlight people’s ability to choose for themselves, share ‘quick wins’&lt;br&gt;- HOW: Avoid acronyms, translate abstract terms, be empathetic &amp; transparent, use stories &amp; evoke positive emotions, comply with your message&lt;br&gt;- WHERE: On radio, tv, newspapers, SMS, and social media; Meet people where they are if needed</td>
<td>“I am the President and someone in my own family got COVID. I don’t want this to happen to your family – we must take this seriously together and wear masks.”&lt;br&gt;“The vaccine has been tested on thousands of people to make sure it is safe for you and your families.”&lt;br&gt;“You have the power to keep your community safe if you choose to take the vaccine.”&lt;br&gt;“Because our country is strong and we care for each other, we are seeing hospitalizations decrease. Together we are making a difference.”</td>
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<td><strong>3) Mobilize trusted voices in society and build societal resilience to false information</strong></td>
<td>- Let trusted voices spread messages &amp; show their compliance – most trusted voices are usually within the community (i.e. not politicians)&lt;br&gt;- Educate people about how they can stop the spread of false information and promote true information</td>
<td>“As a community elder, I am proud to be the first in my village to take the vaccine. I trust that it is and I am happy to do this to keep my community safe.”&lt;br&gt;“You have the power to stop the spread of misinformation! Check the source and the date of anything that gets forwarded to you.”</td>
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1) Monitor false information, identify common narratives, and detect the sources and methods by which misinformation is being promoted: The infodemic is happening in plain sight – assign information officers in the Ministry of Health or government communication services to monitor social media and other platforms for sources of false information and to report on the substance of factually misleading and deliberately false communications. As Minister, if you choose, you can monitor WhatsApp forwards you receive (voice memos are often used amongst low literacy populations), regularly check active Facebook pages and groups, and follow journalists on social media whom you know have an ‘ear to the ground’. At a more official level, digital social listening campaigns can be valuable to data mine online, radio, or other conversations to understand citizens’ concerns. 3,4 Figure 1 shows an example of what this analysis can look like. Regardless of method, try and understand ‘why’ certain information might be spreading – is it rooted in particular cultural beliefs, mistrust of government, fear of stigma, or past experience of exploitation? 5 Empathizing with people’s fears and understanding the root cause of why certain false information resonates can help develop effective counter-messages.

2) Develop a proactive information campaign by communicating information that translates the science (behind prevention, treatment, and vaccines) while routinely factchecking false information: Psychological studies show that even after false information is corrected, erroneous beliefs or bias can still persist. 6 Proactively communicating factual information in a sustained way using multiple platforms and trusted channels of communication is of paramount importance. Additionally, regularly factchecking false information as it is identified (i.e. debunking falsehoods) can be effective in warning people not to be misled by specific false information but it is even more effective to warn people to be on the lookout about specific false information and why it is false before it has spread (i.e. “prebunking”). 7

Effective messaging should evoke positive emotions like hope, pride, and the desire to protect other people. Messages focused on fear or behavior shaming can be counterproductive. 8 Use clear language featuring regular people and stories, avoid acronyms, and translate abstract

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5 https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/the-principles/relationships/
7 https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/03/controlling-misinformation
8 https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/the-principles/emotions/
terms. For example, rather than saying “a vaccine trial is in phase 3”, explain that “the vaccine has been tested on X thousand people.” Communication needs to be empathetic, transparent, acknowledge people’s ability to choose for themselves, and address the root causes of fear identified in listening campaigns. Share people’s personal experiences with COVID, address valid fears about vaccine hesitancy, explain the motivation behind requests for compliance with COVID guidelines, own up to things that may have gone wrong in pandemic management thus far, etc. This is a time to connect on a personal level. Recognize government leaders may not be best equipped to connect with citizens. Harness trusted voices across communities, religious leaders, as well as popular personalities, celebrities, and social media ‘influencers’. As the pandemic continues and vaccine rollout begins, it is important to communicate ‘quick wins’ (e.g. reduction in infection rates and hospitalization) to reward compliance and reinforce that public health measures are working.

When people receive new information, they use five criteria to decide whether it is true: i) compatibility with other known information, ii) credibility of the source, iii) whether others believe it, iv) whether the information is internally consistent, v) and whether there is supporting evidence. Thus, ensure your guidance is evidence-based, disseminated by trusted sources, and consistent. It may be necessary to contextualize messages to different groups to respond to their topmost concerns, but ensure the underlying guidance is consistent. And most importantly, comply with your own messaging. Guidance about the importance of face masks, for example, is undermined if elected officials do not comply themselves – be ambassadors of your own message to build trust and compliance amongst citizens. Figure 2 shows an example of positive message of compliance from a trusted official. Again, remember that government leaders may not always be perceived as the most credible advocates for particular behaviors like vaccinations. For example, it may be far more impactful with certain populations to see the local Imam or equivalent high-profile religious and community leaders getting vaccinated.

It is important to be strategic about which channels are used to spread true information. In addition to radio, TV, newspapers, SMS, and social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.), there is an opportunity to think outside the box and meet people where they are. For example, plans in the Democratic Republic of Congo are to train COVID-19 vaccinators on risk communication and provide them with aides to answers questions. If certain groups like the elderly are particularly susceptible to false information, think about where they congregate (e.g. like church meetings, community halls, village markets) and devise strategies to reach them there. Similarly, young

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9 https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/the-principles/narratives/
10 Ibid.
11 https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4311513
people are more risk averse and inclined to ignore public health warnings so targeted messaging and relevant influencers are key to appeal to them.

3) Mobilize trusted voices in society (recognizing that government leaders may not always be the most publicly trusted sources of information) and build societal resilience to false information: Who gives a message is equally important as the message itself. A survey of over 40,000 citizens across 34 African countries found that citizens trust religious leaders, the army, traditional leaders, and the president more than the members of the ruling party.\(^\text{12}\) It is necessary to use data like this to strategically enable trusted voices to both deliver the desired messages and to demonstrate compliance. The Head of State and national Minister of Health have roles to play in driving the government’s overarching message while regional leaders can speak more specifically to local concerns. But rising distrust and politicization means that overwhelmingly, the most effective messengers are trusted people from within one’s geographical or digital community.\(^\text{13}\) Such influencers are well placed to listen, craft localized messages, and disseminate these messages in their communities.

It is possible to go beyond just giving people factual information by educating people about their role in curbing the spread of false information and promoting true information. This ‘everyone has a role to play’ approach empowers ordinary citizens to be mindful information consumers and strengthens societal resilience to false information. Graphics like those depicted Figure 3 can give people the tools they need to identify false information and show them their individual power to curb further dissemination.

\(^{12}\) Afrobarometer (R7 2016/2018) https://afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online
\(^{13}\) https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/the-principles/messengers/
Further Resources

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

https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/let-s-flatten-the-infodemic-curve

https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/

Tools
Social listening tool: https://whoinfodemic.citibeats.com/?highlight=COD,SEN,ZAF,AGO,KEN


Online misinformation reporting platform: https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online

Additional Harvard Ministerial Resources

February 17, 2021 Harvard Ministerial Webinar on Preparing for Vaccine Delivery in Africa: https://youtu.be/UGrY6iDnv34
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