World Health Organization

Fighting misinformation in the time of COVID-19, one click at a time

27 April 2021

The United Kingdom and WHO collaborate to manage the infodemic

Acting on the wrong information can kill. In the first 3 months of 2020, nearly 6 000 people around the globe were hospitalized because of coronavirus misinformation, recent research suggests. During this period, researchers say at least 800 people may have died due to misinformation related to COVID-19*.
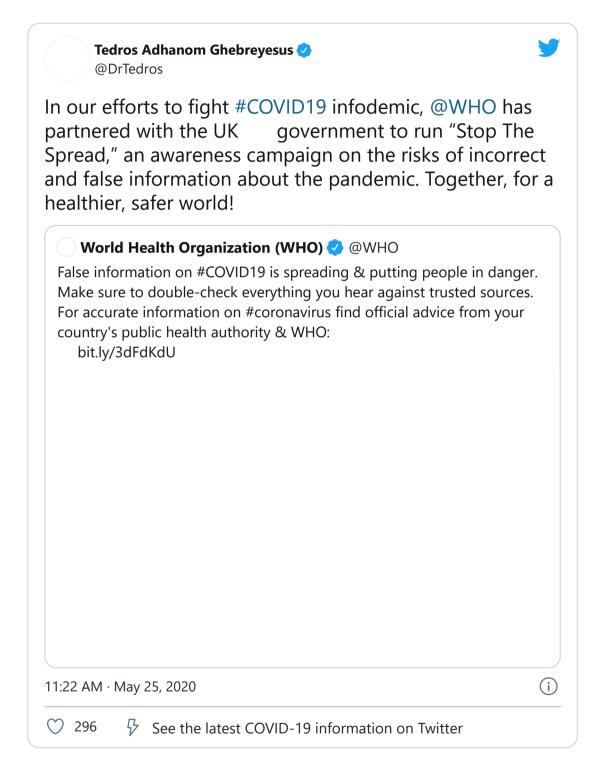
At its extreme, death can be the tragic outcome of what the World Health Organization has termed the infodemic, an overabundance of information — some accurate, some not — that spreads alongside a disease outbreak. False information runs the gamut, from discrediting the threat of COVID-19 to conspiracy theories that vaccines could alter human DNA.

Though they aren't new, in our digital age infodemics spread like wildfire. They create a breeding ground for uncertainty. Uncertainty in turn fuels skepticism and distrust, which is the perfect environment for fear, anxiety, finger-pointing, stigma, violent aggression and dismissal of proven public health measures — which can lead to loss of life.

To try to control the COVID-19 infodemic, WHO has teamed up with the United Kingdom Government to create and distribute content to combat the spread of misinformation through a series of communication campaigns. This was one of several initiatives to combat misinformation taken by WHO on its own and with partners since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Stop the Spread

'Stop the Spread' rolled out on BBC World television, website and apps during May and June 2020. It aimed to raise the public's awareness of the volume of misinformation around COVID-19 and encourage people to double check information, therefore limiting the damage and spread of false information.

> **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** ✔
> @DrTedros
>
> In our efforts to fight #COVID19 infodemic, @WHO has partnered with the UK   government to run "Stop The Spread," an awareness campaign on the risks of incorrect and false information about the pandemic. Together, for a healthier, safer world!
>
> > **World Health Organization (WHO)** ✔ @WHO
> >
> > False information on #COVID19 is spreading & putting people in danger. Make sure to double-check everything you hear against trusted sources. For accurate information on #coronavirus find official advice from your country's public health authority & WHO:
> >   bit.ly/3dFdKdU
>
> 11:22 AM · May 25, 2020   ⓘ
>
> ♡ 296   ⚡ See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

'Reporting Misinformation', launched in August, galvanized people to not only verify information but showed them how to report misinformation to various social media platforms.

Alex Aiken, Executive Director of UK Government Communications, said, "The UK and the World Health Organization have a long history of collaboration. As the pandemic hit globally and the world sought collective action on the additional threat from the infodemic, our partnership was made even stronger."

"We are incredibly proud of the joint communications work we have done to strengthen global health security and vaccine confidence. The issue of infodemics is of enormous importance and the UK will be leading a global response under our G7 Presidency this year," he added.

The Reporting Misinformation campaign reached millions of people globally and social media messages were shared in 5 international languages including English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian. At its launch it became the second most viewed COVID-19 related page on the WHO website.

In the early days of the pandemic, much of the misinformation focused on whether COVID-19 was in fact a serious disease, whether people could protect themselves with public health measures like mask-wearing, as well as erroneous treatments and cures.

Misinformation matters

A year into the pandemic, vaccines are being rolled out, and information about them — some reliable and some not — is everywhere.

"Public trust in science and evidence is essential for overcoming COVID-19," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "Therefore, finding solutions to the infodemic is as vital for saving lives from COVID-19 as public health measures, like mask-wearing and hand hygiene, to equitable access to vaccines, treatments and diagnostics."

Low rates of vaccine acceptance are a concern across the globe. Data released in January 2021 by the Johns Hopkins Centre for Communication Programs** suggest that across 23 countries, only 63 percent of respondents will accept a vaccine.

That is well below the 75 percent minimum estimate recommended by public health experts for a population to reach "herd immunity" — the point where enough of the community has been vaccinated against COVID-19 to make further spread unlikely.

The data suggest that while there is a large segment of the population anxious to be vaccinated right away and a much smaller group adamantly opposed to getting a shot, there is a larger middle portion who are undecided and can be motivated to get the vaccine.

To boost their motivation, other UK Government-WHO collaborative campaigns have included an array of social media infographics and messages across platforms to explain the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

The assets share positive messages which respond to unfounded concerns about the speed at which vaccines have been developed by explaining this is in part due to the unprecedented levels of scientific collaboration, funding and worldwide volunteers combined with capacity to ensure vaccine safety. Once vaccines are authorized through the regulatory process, including the assessment of safety and efficacy from phase III clinical trials, WHO's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) will issue vaccine-specific policy recommendations.

Spotting fake news via Go Viral!

In addition to powerful social media messages, an innovative online game called Go Viral! was created, based on previous research which has shown just one play can reduce perceived reliability of fake news by an average of 21%.

The game was developed as a partnership between Cambridge University and the UK Cabinet Office.

Exposing the most pervasive infodemic tactics, players discover how real news gets discredited by exploiting fake doctors and remedies, and how false rumours such as the notorious 5G conspiracy get shared and promoted. Players are provided with a shareable score and connected to WHO's COVID-19 'mythbusters'.

The collaboration aims to get more translations of the game online with English, German and French versions already out.

Although the infodemic cannot be stopped, it can be managed through campaigns and collaborations like these. By showing people how to recognize and report misinformation and improve their media literacy, we can turn the tide on the infodemic tsunami and save lives.

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*https://www.ajtmh.org/view/journals/tpmd/103/4/article-p1621.xml
**https://ccp.jhu.edu/2021/01/21/covid-19-vaccine-hesitant/

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