

Improved risk communication during infectious disease crises

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As cases of the Ebola disease emerge in Europe, the crisis is gaining increasing levels of media coverage. Certain types of coverage can foster fear and stigmatisation which leads to harmful consequences for the individuals, communities and countries involved. Therefore communication strategies that maximise opportunities and minimise risks are vital. That's why the TELL ME ('Transparent communication in Epidemics: Learning Lessons from experience, delivering effective Messages, providing Evidence') project is working to develop models for improved risk communication during infectious disease crises.

In the case of Ebola, the stigma of being perceived to be connected with the outbreak in the affected countries is intense and may make

individuals hesitant to come forward with suspected symptoms. It may also impact the larger African community in Europe, including those who may have been established here for many years. The TELL ME team is mindful that effective [communication](#) can make a crucial difference in this situation.

TELL ME is drawing on a range of disciplines (from public health to law and ethics) to develop original [communication strategies](#) regarding complicated messages as well as advice based on uncertainties. The aim is to develop a way of communicating that influences behaviours, reduces the spread of disease and avoids panic. The team is particularly keen to explore the huge potential of the information society in terms of evidence-based and participatory communication.

Stigmatisation as a result of poor communication affects not only individuals and families but entire countries. Paul Quinn of the TELL ME project notes the harmful consequences that he is seeing as a result of stigmatisation during this Ebola outbreak. He says, 'This sense of fear and stigma also affects the way in which foreigners are willing to deal with the countries in question. European airlines have for instance had to cancel flights to affected countries, often under pressure from the union representation of their employees who fear a risk of contamination. This has created not only economic problems for the countries involved but also major logistical headaches for international public health authorities attempting to manage an emergency [public health](#) response.'

The consequences, he continues, go beyond health: 'The effects that such events are able to create demonstrate that they carry serious risks not only in terms of human health and economic costs, but also in terms of serious social harms that can be felt both at the epicentre of the outbreak and beyond.'

Naturally, concerns and fear on disease outbreaks are aired extensively

on social media channels. As a TELL ME press release notes, 'Social media are a fertile ground for [feelings of concern and fears], as well as for the circulation of information, be they correct, distorted or totally wrong.' A TELL ME analysis report on the Ebola crisis which focused on Twitter over seven days in September showed that 632 712 tweets had been published and 17 023 hashtags using #ebola had been used.

The Ebola situation is pertinent for the research questions that TELL ME is exploring, in particular: 'What are the most appropriate communication methods to deal with complexity, uncertainty, ignorance, information asymmetries, overwhelming information, biased information, misinformation and malicious information?'

The project will come to an end at the beginning of 2015. Two of the main deliverables will be an integrated, evidence based, communication work package (TELL ME Communication Kit) for outbreak communication and a prototype of a computational method for simulating the actions and interactions of autonomous decision-making entities within a virtual environment during an epidemic outbreak.

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