

Researchers propose 12 steps to combat COVID-19 misinformation

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a complementary "infodemic," a term coined by the World Health Organization to describe the wave of false information on the pandemic. Promotion of false information can

hinder mitigation efforts against COVID-19 and lead to the adoption of health policies that are based on misleading data. Recently, a team of international researchers published a study, proposing a new "Infodemic Response Checklist," to help fight off infodemics.

"Social [media](#) allows [information](#) to travel wide and fast, which emphasizes the need for accurate data to be corroborated swiftly," said senior author of the study Jawad Fares, MD, Northwestern University. "Misinformation and rumors on the pandemic interfere with efforts of quelling it."

The study emphasizes how the style of communication on [social media](#) can influence readers. "Empathy in communication is critical for managing public anxiety and promoting behavioral compliance with public health guidelines," Fares added. Online users generally have low engagement with posts relevant to COVID-19 from government agencies. Posts that attract more engagement are more personal.

The paper appeared in late August in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*.

A surfeit of information about the COVID-19 pandemic spread widely. Unverified sources posting on platforms played central roles in reporting incorrect numbers of cases and inaccurate guidelines, and advertising unapproved treatments and remedies as antiviral cures. This led to public anxiety, chaos, fraudulent schemes, financial abuse, hoarding of equipment, and fear.

"During dire times, the public searches for information and guidance to help them understand and react in a manner that limits viral transmission," said lead author Nour Mheidly, Lebanese University. "Media, in its various forms, becomes the primary source of information."

Although misinformation has been known to spread across history, social media and technological advances in communication amplify its impact. To help fight off misinformation on social media, the researchers propose a new health communication strategy. "The 12-item Infodemic Response Checklist is a comprehensive tool that helps public health officials overcome challenges posed by infodemics," Mheidly added.

The Checklist highlights the need to:

1. Provide more exposure and airtime for [medical professionals](#), scientists, and public health personnel to provide authentic, useful, and transparent information for the public.
2. Promote websites of public health organizations via search engines.
3. Verify the accounts of public health personnel on popular social media platforms.
4. Promote the posts of public health and medical professionals.
5. Monitor engagement on social media platforms to control the messages being delivered.
6. Establish programs that help people cope with stress and address their mental health concerns.
7. Adopt an empathic style of communication to grab public attention and address health concerns.
8. Promote dialog to understand people's perceptions and the motives behind their practices.
9. Share [personal experiences](#) on social media to combat misinformation.
10. Direct health communication strategies towards minority populations and people of different classes, races, and ethnicities.
11. Develop educational material and speed the share of evidence-based science to address existing wrong perceptions, correct behaviors, and promote healthy practices.
12. Increase investment in the research and development of [health](#)

[communication](#) to explore and understand strategic ways of targeting different populations.

More information: Nour Mheidly et al. Leveraging media and health communication strategies to overcome the COVID-19 infodemic, *Journal of Public Health Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1057/s41271-020-00247-w](#)

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