Strategies to support the COVID-19 response in LMICs
A virtual seminar series
Misinformation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Anti-lockdown protestors and anti-vaxxers: one and the same?

• At the height of mortality due to COVID-19 in the US, anti-lockdown protestors have been at state capitols urging political leaders to end stay-at-home orders and re-open businesses

• Arguments and perspectives same as those documented among anti-vaxxers
What do we mean by vaccine hesitancy?

Continuum of Vaccine Acceptance

- refuse all
- refuse but unsure
- delay/refuse some
- accept but unsure
- accept all

Image: https://www.being-health.com/viewpoints/how-communications-can-combat-vaccines-hesitancy
What is driving vaccine hesitancy now?

- Tyranny = government is over-reaching
- Authorities do not know best; science is now just another voice in the room
- Many individuals are susceptible to conspiracy theories due to uncertainty
- These are rooted in/spread through misinformation

Image: https://source.colostate.edu/information-misinformation-disinformation-symposium-sorts-morgan-library/
Misinformation and disinformation

Dictionary.com’s 2018 Word of the Year: *Misinformation*

- When people spread **misinformation**, they often believe the information they are sharing. **Disinformation** is crafted and disseminated with the intent to mislead others.

- **Example:** If a political leader claims that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu, despite knowing otherwise, that is **disinformation**. When an individual hears this, believes it, and then shares it, that is **misinformation**.
Breakdown:

Is this a wind up

BREAKING NEWS
Russia unleashed more than 500 lions on its streets to ensure that people are staying indoors during this pandemic outbreak.

13:17
VLADIMIR PUTIN RELEASED AROUND 500 LIONS TO MAKE PEOPLE STAY INDOORS

12:53 PM - Mar 22, 2020 - Twitter for Android

8.6K Retweets 38.4K Likes
 DXN Way of Health, Wealth & Happiness Nuwakot

#For Public Info about #CoronaVirus

#Good news, Wuhan's corona virus can be cured by one bowl of freshly boiled garlic water.

Old Chinese doctor has proven it's efficacy. Many patients has also proven this to be effective. Eight (8) cloves of chopped garlies add seven (7) cups of water and bring to boil. Eat and drink the boiled garlic water, overnight improvement and healing.

Above all else, PRAY! #share please! #More

FALSE
Viruses cannot travel on radio waves/mobile networks. COVID-19 is spreading in many countries that do not have 5G mobile networks. COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or speaks. People can also be infected by touching a contaminated surface and then their eyes, mouth or nose.

FACT: 5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19
Impact of misinformation on public health

• Misinformation can have fatal consequences: use of chloroquine for COVID-19

• Distinguishing misinformation from good information is a moving target


What misinformation have you seen?
Why are we seeing more misinformation and disinformation?

- Participatory nature of social media enables information exchange, but also increases possibility of rapid dissemination of inaccurate information
- Natural search for explanation in times of uncertainty leads people to find “answers” in misinformation and conspiracy theories
- Rooted in anti-science and supposed vested interests

What is the responsibility of social networks?

Misinformation ecosystem

Credibility
- Built on an element of truth
- From a respectable source
- Consistent with one’s worldview

Homogeneity of sources ("echo chamber")
- Convenience, habitual, and less effortful
- Eliminates need to engage cognitively

Shared experience
- Part of a community: belonging
- Exclusive access to information, membership

Normative mechanisms
- Descriptive norms: what groups think is “correct” is decided by the group
- Injunctive norms: threats of punishment for deviations from the group
“Inform, educate, empower” in an epidemic

- **Trust**: Communicate to **build**, **maintain**, and **restore** trust between public and those managing outbreak. Without trust, public will not believe or act on health information.

- **Announce early**: Proactive communication, even with incomplete information, is crucial in alerting those affected, minimizing threats, and preventing rumors.

- **Transparency**: Maintaining public trust requires ongoing transparency including timely and complete information.

- **Listening**: Understanding public **risk perceptions**, **views**, and **concerns** is critical to effective communication.

“New York City orders mandatory measles vaccines for some”. Al Jazeera, 9 April 2019

World Health Organization Outbreak Communication Planning Guide. 2008
What can we as individuals do to address misinformation?

Don’t correct misperceptions: The instinctive response to vaccine-related misinformation is to provide correct information, but this can backfire – called the boomerang effect.

Focus on the disease: Pivot the conversation to the disease itself

Use nudges/defaults: apply presumptive communication


What can public health do to address misinformation?

• Focus on **trust** through transparency and timeliness of information.

• Innovate - how is the public getting information? (eg, WhatsApp).

• Misinformation as contagion - use public health and outbreak response approaches we know work!
  
    • Describe causal pathway.
    • Develop surveillance system (eg, AI, NLP, rumors surveillance).
    • Activate response activities
Inoculation theory (pre-bunking)

• Based on work of McGuire (1961)

• Expose people to a weakened dose of opposing information, or methods used to deceive through disinformation, to increase resistance to subsequent attempts to influence.

• Proactively acknowledging existence of disinformation, its sources, and methods used helps prevent spread - herd immunity!
Thank you!

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