

Editorial

Combatting an Infodemic Amidst the Pandemic

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The accelerating number of Covid-19 cases has turned the world upside down. It is neither the first pandemic the world has seen nor will it be the last, but it is the first pandemic in history where technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, productive, and connected. Presently, we all are drowned in an overabundance of information about Covid-19, both online and offline - an infodemic - amidst a pandemic. A huge amount of misinformation and fabricated facts have surfaced across the web. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals. This propaganda has led to the development of paranoia and can even compel a layman to experiment with something dangerous in an attempt to protect against or get rid of the virus. Misinformation is disseminated among people for political or financial gain. The campaign against Covid-19 vaccination is a notable example in this regard - the wellness and nutritional supplement companies are advocates of, and directly profit from, antivaccination campaigns.

Infodemic in the form of mis- or disinformation can have far-reaching consequences. It can be harmful to people's physical and mental health or could cost someone's life; threaten precious health gains; increase stigmatization; and lead to poor observance of public health measures, thus reducing their effectiveness and endangering nations'

ability to stop the pandemic. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive. Incoherent government messaging and reversals in recommendations, based on newly emerging evidence, can be misconstrued as incompetence. This situation is extremely concerning because it undermines trust in health institutions and programs. The outcome is the erosion of public trust and a sense of helplessness, the perfect conditions for the spread of harmful misinformation that begins a vicious circle.

Combatting the infodemic, effectively and promptly, is a critical part of controlling the uncertainty and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. A coordinated approach among governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society is vital in this regard. All the nations need to disseminate timely and reliable COVID-19 information, based on science and evidence, to all communities, particularly the high-risk groups and take measures to counter misinformation by leveraging digital technologies accordingly. They also need to empower local communities to develop solutions and resilience against mis- and disinformation.

Immediate, coordinated action is needed from the global political and scientific community to maintain the integrity and credibility of professional expertise and rebuild public trust. Scientific journals should consider actively countering misinformation about themselves and the work that they publish. The research community, all over the world, has also come together to combat the infodemic by making the latest scientific data on Covid-19 readily available and almost all emerging research on COVID-2019 has been made open access.

We can slow down the spread of misinformation and disinformation, at an individual level, by practicing some information hygiene. Measures like assessing the source of information; going beyond the headlines to look at the entire story; identifying the credibility of the author; checking the date of publishing (recent/relevant or up-to-date); examining the supporting evidence; checking one's own biases and making use of fact-checkers focused on debunking misinformation, can help us navigate this tide of infodemic and decide who and what to trust.

One needs to remember that panic takes us nowhere; it is always the awareness that helps. Until a brighter day dawns over this infodemic; wash your hands, wear a mask, and maintain social distancing.

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