

COVID-19 – What is true? What is False? What is Misinformation?

On 3rd February 2020 I wrote a feature for the Algarve Resident newspaper as it was clear that we were about to experience a global health crisis and that accurate communication would play a vital role. Included in the feature I said:

I said then “We are now experiencing a new Coronavirus outbreak, and whereas the focus has been on identifying how it is transmitted, containing its spread, developing a vaccine and treatment – there is an equally sinister side – misinformation and false claims. Accurate, clear and timely communication has never been as important as it is today in dealing with this crisis”

I did not need a crystal ball to foresee what was coming. I knew this first hand as a result of my work as a police officer in Hong Kong during the SARS outbreak in 2002 - and that was before Facebook and Twitter.

A year later we continue to see many examples of this, from misleading media headlines to fake news on social media.

Promulgating misinformation can potentially endanger others. Unfortunately there has developed a trend towards ‘alternative truths’ and pseudoscience that are as dangerous to the human race as this coronavirus itself.

International perspective

According to USA Today in a recent report YouTube has removed more than 500,000 videos spreading misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic since February 2020, according to a letter by YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki.

YouTube's policies prohibit misinformation about the coronavirus, including claims the virus is a hoax or promoting medically unsubstantiated cures.

Conspiracy theories are shaping people's perceptions of the vaccine, according to a survey by Acxiom of 5,000 U.S. consumers from Nov. 25 to Dec. 4. More than 44% of respondents said there's some truth to the unfounded claim that the death rate from COVID-19 has been deliberately exaggerated, and half of those, 22%, said it is "definitely true."

In October, YouTube began removing content about COVID-19 vaccines that contradicts consensus from health authorities, such as the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

TIPS TO DECIDING WHAT IS TRUE OR FALSE

What kind of information is this – are they personal opinions or facts? Are there any source references that go to places that confirm the claim?

When?

How old is the information? Is it still relevant? When was the last post or update made?

Where?

Where is the information published – on a private blog, as a post on social media, on a company website, on a media site? If the information is found on a media site – is there a responsible publisher for the site? A media site with responsible publisher has more credibility than a media site that does not have it.

Can you find the information through other sources? Information from only one source should be treated with great care.

How?

How did you get the information? Does it come from a source that is reliable and has previously provided verified information?

Who?

Who is behind the information? An authority, organization, company or researcher? Can you find the source of origin?

Why?

Why is the information available? Does anyone want to spread opinions or information, spark debate or entertain? Is anyone looking to make money by, for example, clicking on an ad link? Who benefits from spreading the information? Think about how the message may have been designed to change your thinking and actions.

Facebook and Twitter take similar measures to remove claims that vaccines intentionally cause harm or are unnecessary, as well as debunked conspiracy theories about the adverse effects of vaccines.

World Health Organisation

WHO stated in December 2020 that digital platforms have been inundated with COVID-19-related information since the pandemic began in late 2019. Information about the virus has been shared and viewed over 270 billion times online and mentioned almost 40 million times on Twitter and web-based news sites in the 47 countries of the WHO African Region between February and November 2020, according to UN Global Pulse, the United Nations' Secretary-General's initiative on big data and artificial intelligence.

A large proportion of this information is inaccurate and misleading and continues to be shared by social media users intentionally or unknowingly every day. The COVID-19 infodemic is amplified online through social media but health misinformation is also circulating offline. Some of the widely shared misinformation include conspiracies around unproven treatments, false cures and anti-vaccine messages.

"In health emergencies, misinformation can kill and ensure diseases continue to spread. People need proven, science-based facts to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing, and a glut of information – an infodemic – with misinformation in the mix makes it hard to know what is right and real.

Portugal

Portugal is not immune from this as social media does not respect national boundaries. On social media we regularly read comments from instant experts that can only have "graduated from the University of Facebook" as one of our followers put it. These include comments that are subtly subversive against the current restrictions imposed as a consequence of the State of Emergency and advocating that people should not be vaccinated. People are of course entitled to their opinions but during a health crisis such comments often using dubious and unproven "so called scientific studies" could cost lives. Where we have seen these ourselves we have reported to Facebook and extreme cases other appropriate authorities.

Very recently the GNR published on Facebook a warning to people to be aware of fake news and how to look out for this.

In Portugal, there are some Facebook groups with little or no Admin monitoring where instances of false or misinformation have already appeared, remaining for some time or indefinitely, perhaps reaching thousands of people.

In my view anyone who has a responsibility as an admin of a site, should do his/her best to monitor misinformation or fake news and report it to Facebook or delete it as soon as possible. It is appreciated however that this may be difficult with a high number of comments and replies from such posts.

We can all play a part in avoiding spread of misinformation and false news

To help people determine what may be true or false we have established a page on our Facebook page to help determine this. The checklist is reproduced in the table shown in this feature. Please use this when considering what to post or share on social media.

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President

Safe Communities Portugal

4th February 2021