

infodemic

M A N A G E M E N T

AN OVERVIEW OF INFODEMIC MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

January 2020–May 2021



World Health
Organization

Infodemic management aims to ensure that people have
the right information at the right time
in the right format, so that they are informed and
empowered to adopt behavioural changes during
epidemics to protect their health and the health of their
loved ones and communities.

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Foreword



Since the dawn of civilization, the exchange of information has been fundamental to the advancement of society. With the emergence of new technologies, information flows through additional channels of communication, further filtering into people's lives.

Now, in an age when social media platforms have increased our interconnectedness and enabled people to gather beyond geographically bound communities, we have encountered a watershed moment that is determining the way people in every corner of the world think and act.

A hundred years after the Spanish flu, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that large-scale epidemics and pandemics do not belong to the past. With over 100 million confirmed cases and more than 2 million deaths reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by February 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic is the most important public health scourge of the 21st century. Like earlier epidemics and pandemics, this current crisis is accompanied by uncertainty, skepticism, distrust and fear, creating a fertile ground for infodemics. With fake news spreading faster than the virus itself and being as dangerous, in February 2020, the Director-General of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that: "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic."

An infodemic is a tsunami of information – some accurate, some not – which spreads alongside a disease outbreak. With the speed of technology and the "plugged in" nature of our world, the COVID-19 infodemic cannot be eliminated, though it can be managed. Infodemic management calls for new approaches that help people benefit from the influx of information about epidemics and pandemics, while reducing the tendency for people to get lost in the noise. With 60% of the global population having access to the Internet, particular attention must be given to developing interventions both online and offline, which take into consideration the interrelated conversations between the physical and digital worlds.

With this in mind, we must leverage digital channels to deliver information while we also navigate the challenges that can perpetuate infodemics offline. To lessen the detrimental health impacts and socioeconomic repercussions of misinformation/disinformation, we must train people in every country and community on how to encounter infodemics and overcome them with messaging and interventions that can help individuals make positive health choices.

We must come together as a society to better prepare for and respond to these types of health emergencies. For risk communication and infodemic management, this requires the development of the following key elements in the immediate future:

- a fit-for-purpose approach to address online and offline communication challenges that impact public health;
- advancing the scientific discipline of infodemiology to understand and quantify the impact of infodemics on all facets of society (e.g. family life, religion, sociology, etc.), which would further inform evidence-based recommendations to manage them;
- new tools to practise infodemic management, such as:
 - enhanced social listening platforms to better understand and meet the concerns and information needs of individuals and communities;
 - improved health, media and digital literacy to reduce vulnerability to infodemics; and
 - collaboration across stakeholder groups (health authorities, the private sector, academia, civil society and the media) to issue effective infodemic responses.

Ultimately, effective infodemic management can protect the health of people and their communities by providing the right information at the right time and in the right format, so that they can make informed decisions and take appropriate actions during epidemics and pandemics. It also protects social cohesiveness by mitigating the social divides arising from conflicting information.



S. Briand

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Preface



This overview summarizes the work done on infodemic management and risk communication and community engagement since early 2020 into the first quarter of 2021.

WHO's COVID-19 response operations encompassed close collaboration between United Nations (UN) agencies, strategic partners and the WHO information network for epidemics to engage and empower communities.

This overview is intended for WHO headquarters, regional and country offices, the WHO information network for epidemics (EPI-WIN), the UN common system, and strategic partners and donors.

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