

Fighting the Coronavirus 'Infodemic'

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February 2020

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been providing daily situation reports on its website relating to the Coronavirus outbreak.¹ In one of these reports, the WHO reported on its ongoing efforts to combat misinformation, or what they call “a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”²

Under the heading, *TECHNICAL FOCUS: Risk communication and community engagement | Managing the 2019-nCoV ‘infodemic’*, the report further detailed the WHO’s response as follows:

Due to the high demand for timely and trustworthy information about 2019-nCoV, WHO technical risk communication and social media teams have been working closely to track and respond to myths and rumours. Through its headquarters in Geneva, its six regional offices and its partners, the Organization is working 24 hours a day to identify the most prevalent rumours that can potentially harm the public’s health, such as false prevention measures or cures. These myths are then refuted with evidence-based information. WHO is making public health information and advice on the 2019-nCoV, including myth busters, available on its social media channels (including Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest) and website.³

Working with Social Media Companies

Social media manager for the WHO, Aleksandra Kuzmanovic, explained in an interview with CNN that the organization is working directly with social media companies to ensure that users are directed to trusted sources on matters relating to the coronavirus. Apparently now, when social media users on range of platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, search for "coronavirus," they are directed first to information from either the WHO, the Centers for Disease Control or their national health ministry.⁴

Google has indicated that it will provide a special notice with updates from the WHO when people search for information about the coronavirus on its search engine, and that it will promote videos from ‘credible sources’ when people search for videos about the virus on its YouTube platform.⁵

¹ Coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) situation reports. World Health Organization Website. Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

² Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13. World Health Organization Website - Coronavirus Disease (COVID-2019) Situation Reports Section. February 2, 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Duffy, Claire. “How health officials and social media are teaming up to fight the coronavirus 'infodemic'”. CNN Website. March 1, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/01/tech/coronavirus-social-media-reliable-sources/index.html>. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

⁵ Toh, Michelle. “Facebook, Google and Twitter crack down on fake coronavirus 'cures' and other misinformation”. CNN Website. February 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/31/tech/facebook-twitter-google-coronavirus-misinformation/index.html>. Accessed on February 29, 2020.

Indeed, the WHO is making efforts to provide a great deal of reliable information and guidance on the subject of the outbreak on its own website. Currently linked directly from its homepage, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak section goes well beyond providing daily situation reports, by also providing news through its Latest Updates; advice for how to Protect Yourself; a Q&A section; Travel Advice; Press Briefings; as well as technical guidance and links to global research on the coronavirus.

Unique Response or Model for Moving forward?

The response to the 'infodemic' by the WHO has been quite strong, in no small part due to strong cooperation from the behemoths of social media. But, there is some question as to whether or not this response is indicative of how organizations like the WHO and large social media companies will treat what is now often called 'fake news'.

There remains a great deal of misinformation available through online searches social media, for example, when one searches for "vaccines". There is a fairly strong anti-vaccination movement that continues to disseminate information about the 'dangers' of vaccination. And, while companies like Facebook have indicated an interest and commitment to combatting the spread of disinformation, the task of dealing with 'fake news' is both large and costly.

What is clearly different in the case of the coronavirus is the sheer scale and attention place on the issue. In other words, there is a unique reputational risk in this case for social media companies. But, this might also be seen as a model as we move forward.