

# 'INFODEMIC'- SPREAD, PREVENTION AND CONTROL

## ABSTRACT

Infodemics is an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. As COVID spreads havoc in the country, misinformation flows much faster than the virus from social media and other unfiltered networks, resulting in declining public faith in the health system and a perplexing sense of fear and anxiety. This review article revisits how an infodemic spreads and provides insights to prevention and management of misinformation in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic.

**Keywords :** Infodemic, COVID-19, misinformation, prevention.

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. What is 'infodemics' all about?

Infodemics, coined in 2003, is a term that combine the words information and epidemics, referring to an excessive amount of information about a problem that is typically unreliable, spreads rapidly, and makes a solution more difficult to achieve, a state of information overload. As stated by the Pan American Health Organization, Infodemics is 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<sup>1,2</sup>.

### The current 'Infodemic'

Sadly, it is true that accompanying the current pandemic is a frightening Infodemic, which makes it even more difficult to control. As COVID-19 spreads havoc in the country, misinformation flows at a much faster rate than the virus from social media and private unfiltered networks like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, etc. Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 epidemic is going through an 'infodemic' of misinformation<sup>3</sup>. On March 28, in line with WHO, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of United Nation, tweeted on his personal Twitter account that "Our common enemy is COVID-19, our enemy is also an 'infodemic' of misinformation"<sup>8</sup>. Compounding this information vortex is the fact that governments rarely make policy decisions solely on the basis of empirical evidence; political interest is the key, and the two are frequently at odds. Governments want to be perceived as being in control and are too quick to provide false reassurances. Such miscommunication is not helped by mass media, which are often guilty of favouring quick, sensationalistic reporting rather than carefully worded scientific messages with a balanced interpretation<sup>4,5</sup>.

### 2. How does the Infodemic spread?

An infodemic is an overabundance of information which may be online or offline.

With advancements in technology and social media, information is available at fingertips and this allows us to share news with one another with just a tap on the screen. This quick information exchange has increased the quality of life as people are able to access a vast source of information on any topic they need to know about. This ensures that everybody has access to information but the problem arises when the contents of these articles are questionable or misinterpreted.

### 3. Consequences

Misinformation confuses by diluting the pool of legitimate information. As this continues, it leads to a deterioration of public trust and fuels helplessness. It often results in confusion, panic attacks, and anxiety amongst citizens. This situation is extremely concerning because it undermines trust in health care programs. It is worthwhile to ponder who benefits from this misinformation. An editorial in the Lancet identifies financial gain, political gain, and experimental manipulation as potential beneficiaries of this lethal Infodemic<sup>5</sup>.

### 4. An ounce of Prevention- Let's flatten the Infodemic curve.

The key to limiting the Infodemic curve also lies in adoption of healthy behaviours at an individual level. The World Health Organization has suggested several tips to stem the flow of misinformation as depicted in fig 1 & 2.

According to WHO, the following steps can be employed to check the authenticity of a news<sup>6,7</sup>.

#### 1. Assess the source.

Check the source of the news. Only accept news from official and trustworthy sources.

#### 2. Go beyond the headlines.

Headlines can be misleading as they are meant to catch the reader's attention. So it is important to read through the whole article to understand its message.

#### 3. Identify the author.

Ensure that the author is qualified in the field to be making a comment on the topic.

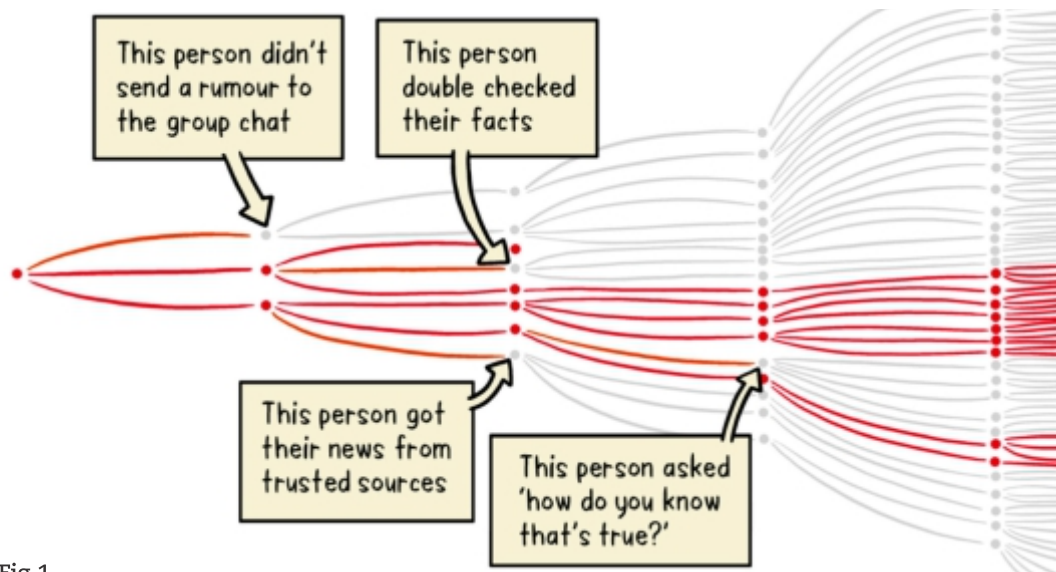


Fig.1  
<https://www.who.int><sup>6</sup>

### Top tips for navigating the infodemic



**1. Assess the source:**  
 Who shared the information with you and where did they get it from? Even if it is friends or family, you still need to vet their source.



**2. Go beyond headlines:**  
 Headlines may be intentionally sensational or provocative.



**3. Identify the author:**  
 Search the author's name online to see if they are real or credible.



**4. Check the date:**  
 Is it up to date and relevant to current events? Has a headline, image or statistic been used out of context?



**5. Examine the supporting evidence:**  
 Credible stories back up their claims with facts.



**6. Check your biases:**  
 Think about whether your own biases could affect your judgment on what is or is not trustworthy.



**7. Turn to fact-checkers:**  
 Consult trusted fact-checking organizations, such as the International Fact-Checking Network and global news outlets focused on debunking misinformation.

Fig.2  
<https://www.who.int><sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Check the date

Sometimes we receive the same messages repeatedly. Once some news enters the vicious cycle of forwarded messages it keeps popping up time and time again. So, we must always check the date to ensure the validity of the news in the present scenario.

#### 5. Examine the supporting evidence.

Make sure that the conclusions of the article is based on evidence based studies and not based on speculations.

#### 6. Check your bases.

This means that you have to put in a bit of your own effort to study into the matter and make your own understanding about it.

#### 7. Use trusted fact checkers.

Many of the official sites for COVID-19 related news has myth busters against fake news for reference. There are also multiple fact checking sites available online such as the Google fact check tool, Snopes. There exists an International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)

comprising over 92 fact checking organizations which can be utilized for checking the accuracy of information. With the sheer amount of information that is being spewed out, it is no surprise that the fact checking tools fail to process data expeditiously. In a scenario where speed is vital, this is not insignificant. Hence, more advancements are required in this field<sup>8</sup>.

If you come across online content that you believe to be false or misleading, it can be brought to the attention of the hosting social media platform such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, by reporting the content<sup>9</sup>.

In India, the Union Health Ministry and respective State Health Authorities have employed various platforms to create awareness about COVID-19, publishing advisories, attempting to curb the dissemination of misinformation, conducting press briefings to keep the media updated<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the role played by the government, Healthcare professionals can also partake in containing a spread of misinformation. Healthcare professionals, being exposed to research findings along with their medical expertise, are perceived by the public as reliable resources and thus they can help in thwarting the spread of unfounded information by correcting false statements found on the social media platforms.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is critical that each of us fact check the information we receive and make sure that we do not partake in sharing fake news. Just as the combined human resolve will help us tide over this terrible pandemic, let us be wary to not fall prey to the accompanying infodemic.

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