



Managing Infodemics and Conspiracy Theories



Lauren Jenks, MPH, CHES

Assistant Secretary
Environmental Public Health Division
Washington State Department of Health



Question for the Viewers



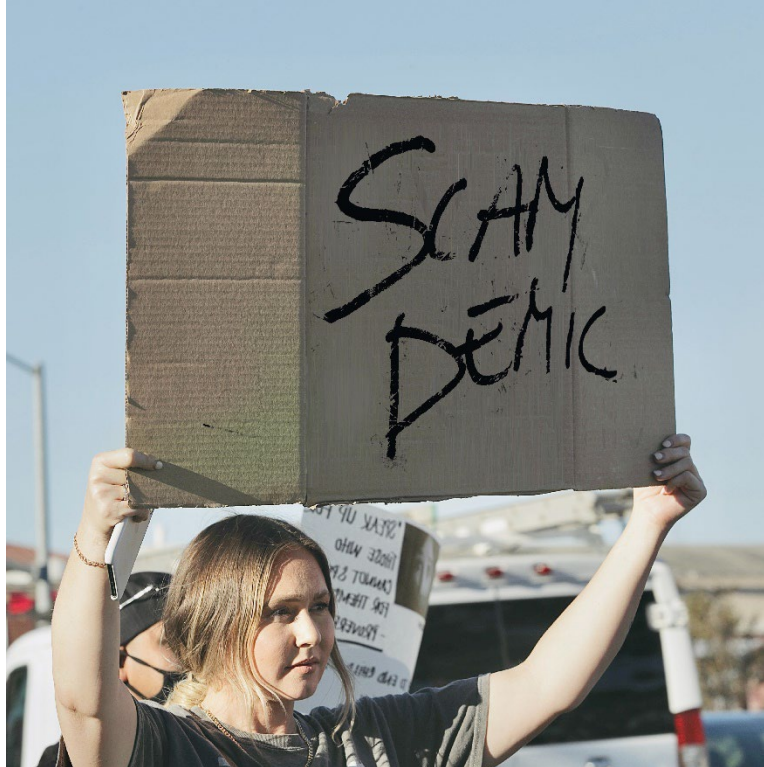
How would you rate the level of public health misinformation in your community?

- A. High
- B. Moderate
- C. Low
- D. Other (please type in chat)

Rise of the Infodemic



An Age of Conspiracy Theories



Strategies for Fighting Misinformation



Rise of the Infodemic

The World Health Organization has declared the outbreak of the new coronavirus outbreak a global health emergency. It seemed clear for some time.

General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the number of cases



What Is An 'Infodemic'?

According to the **World Health Organization**,

an '**infodemic**' is an overabundance of information, both online and offline.

Misinformation and disinformation can have a harmful affect on the public's health.



Source: Sam Bradd via the World Health Organization:
<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/immunizing-the-public-against-misinformation>

Persistent Myths: COVID-19

According to the November 2020 edition of *Scientific American*, certain COVID-related myths persist, such as:

- The virus was engineered in a laboratory in China
- COVID-19 is no worse than the flu
- You don't need to wear a mask
- Hydroxychloroquine is an effective treatment
- Increases in cases are related to increased testing
- Herd immunity will protect the population
- A vaccine will be unsafe

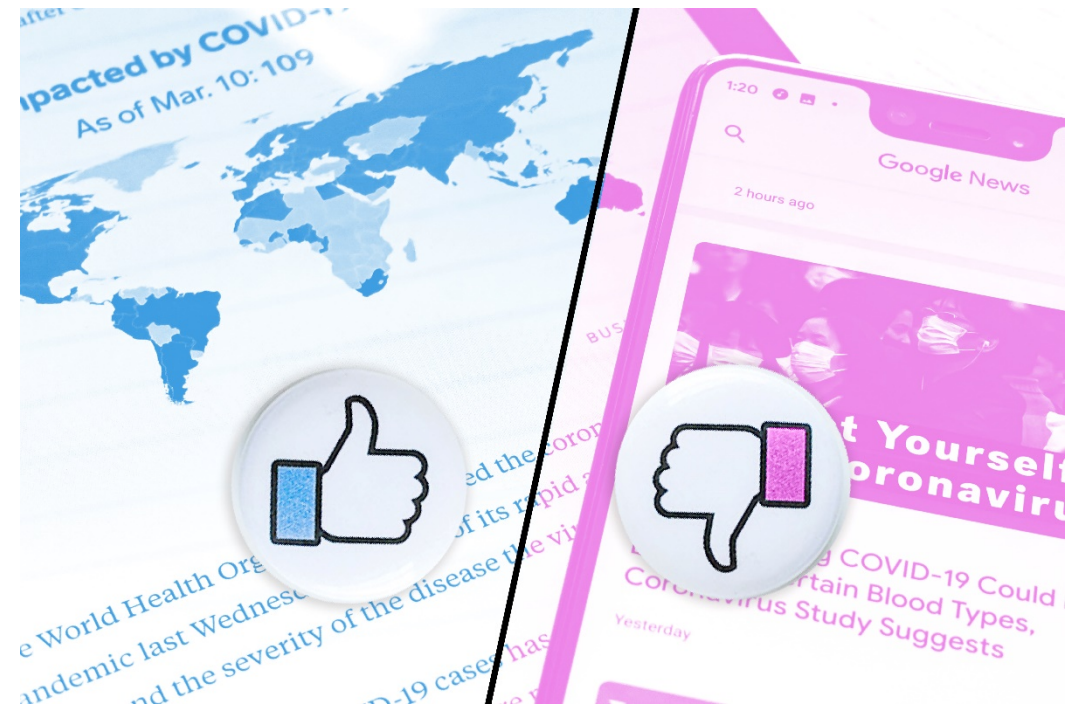


The Role of Uncertainty

The science of uncertainty is evolving.

However, recent research has shown:

- **Over 70% of adults** have reported hearing some or a lot of disagreement among health experts about COVID-19
- **Changes in public health recommendations** have been interpreted as disagreement on the nature of COVID-19
- **Disagreement** may lead to decreasing trust in public health recommendations (for example, social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing)



Data Source: Nagler RH, Vogel RI, Gollust SE, Rothman AJ, Fowler EF, Yzer MC (2020) Public perceptions of conflicting information surrounding COVID-19: Results from a nationally representative survey of US adults <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240776>

The Role of Mistrust

Many communities have reason to mistrust science and government—particularly communities of color.

Skepticism towards authority is warranted—and what the scientific method is all about!



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – The Tuskegee Timeline
<https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>

What Does Credibility Look Like?




Credibility looks different for different people depending on their backgrounds and experiences.

However, it is important to ask **who the “experts” are.**

Information is Social



People are social learners, and our **information networks are highly social**.
Filtering misinformation depends on **who is included in those information networks**.

A woman with long brown hair is holding a large, rectangular cardboard sign high above her head with both hands. The sign has the words "SCAM" and "DEMIC" written in large, bold, black marker. The background shows a blurred outdoor setting with other people and signs, suggesting a protest or rally. A green graphic overlay is on the right side of the image.

SCAM
DEMIC

An Age of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiratorial Thinking

Conspiratorial thinking can be related to feelings of anxiousness and a loss of control.

In an article for *Psychological Science*, Lewandowsky (2013) showed that:

- Climate deniers shared a belief in other “**conspiracies**” where bad actors were in control, such as the moon landing

NOTE: After Lewandowsky published this research, conspiracy theories began spreading about him on social media.



1

Counter misinformation

- Use data-informed strategies to regain the public's trust.

1

Counter misinformation

- Use data-informed strategies to regain the public's trust.

2

Think hard about the interaction between science and policy

- Be careful on disagreement about policies vs. facts.

1

Counter misinformation

- Use data-informed strategies to regain the public's trust.

2

Think hard about the interaction between science and policy

- Be careful on disagreement about policies vs. facts.

3

Engage scientific literacy effectively

- You want people to join the conversation—engage them using the science.

Question for the Viewers



*Do you agree with the following statement?
“In my agency, we have identified specific
strategies or resources for combating misinformation”*

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. I'm not sure

NOTE: If you answered “**Yes**”, please share your strategies or resources in the chat box.

Strategies for Fighting Misinformation



Strategy 1: WHO Framework for Fighting Infodemics



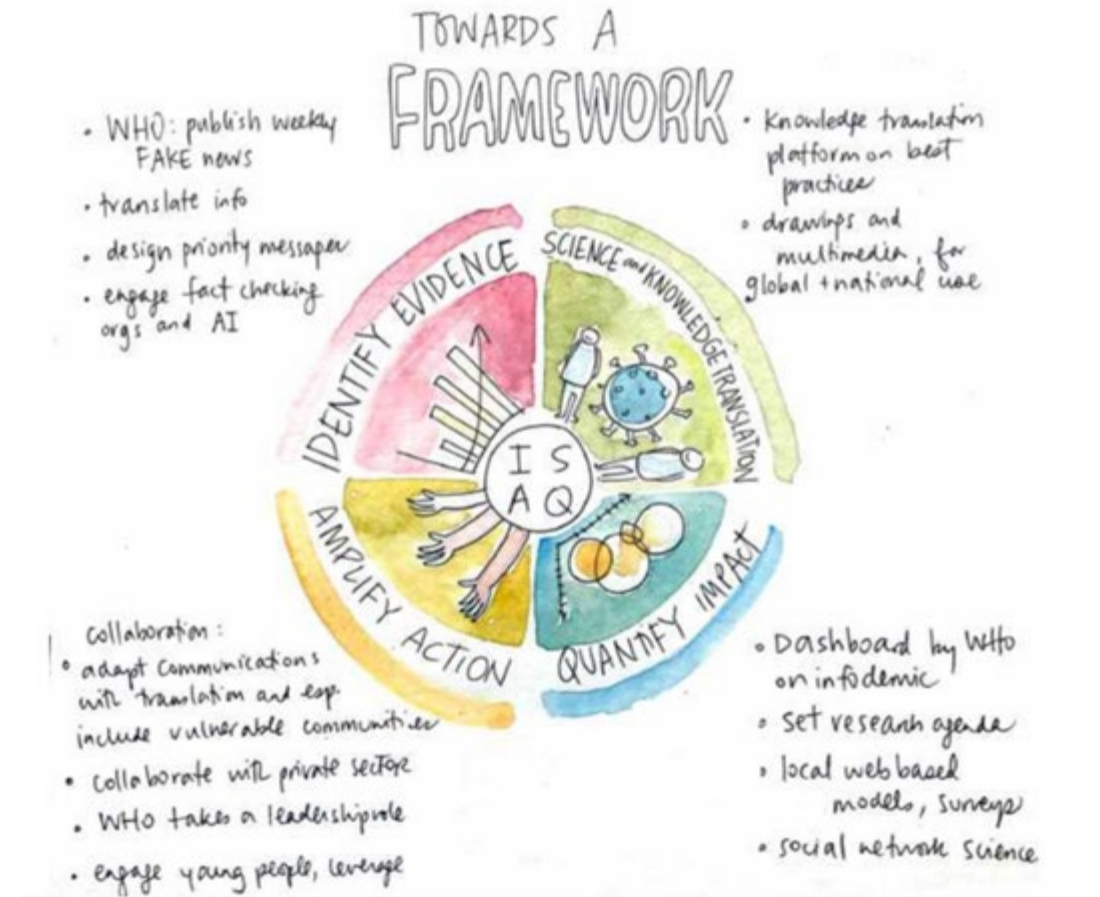
Source: Sam Bradd via the World Health Organization:

<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management/3rd-virtual-global-who-infodemic-management-conference>

The World Health Organization has existing resources, handbooks, and web-based conferences and trainings on the topic of infodemic management.

Strategy 1: WHO Framework for Fighting Infodemics

1. **Identify** Evidence
2. **Translate** into actionable, culturally appropriate behaviors
3. **Work with** communities and social media networks to amplify the messages
4. **Make sure** you are having an impact



Source: An ad hoc WHO technical consultation managing the COVID-19 infodemic: call for action [publication]

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240010314>

Strategy 2: Radical Transparency

Protect yourself and others from COVID-19

COVID-19 is spreading in your community, stay safe by taking some simple precautions: wear a mask, avoid crowds, cleaning your hands, and use hand sanitizer and soap. Do it all!

What you can do to keep yourself and others safe from COVID-19

Keep a 1-metre distance between yourself and others. If you are in a crowded area, keep an even greater distance between yourself and others. Wear a face mask. Wearing a face mask is a normal part of being around other people.

Steps of how to wear a mask:

Wash your hands before you put your mask on, as well as after you take it off. Make sure the mask covers both your nose, mouth and chin.

Choose what type of mask to wear. Cloth masks, disposable surgical masks, and respirators.

Wear a mask unless you're in a particular risk group. This is especially true in crowded and poorly ventilated indoor settings.

- The public has **valid fears and concerns**.
- Public health must focus on how we can avoid the mistakes of the past but **acknowledge what we know now that works**.
- This involves acting honestly, and **acknowledging the reality of uncertainty**.

Strategy 3: Empathy

We can't just share information to win over skeptics—they need to know that we are part of the same community and that our interests intersect.

Public health must use empathy to expand the public's information networks.



Key Takeaways

Public health has an active role to play in countering misinformation.

Practitioners should:



Use existing, data-informed resources (such as the WHO's) to manage the spread of infodemics



Be radically transparent in your presentation of information and act honestly



Lead with empathy—don't just present the facts, show the public why it matters to them

A Chat with Lauren Jenks



Allene Mares



Lauren Jenks

QUESTIONS?

To ask a question, please click the



icon in the Zoom toolbar to open your Q&A Pod.

- **NASA Faked the Moon Landing – Therefore, (Climate) Science Is a Hoax: An Anatomy of the Motivated Rejection of Science**
Article by Stephan Lewandowsky, Klaus Oberauer, Gilles E. Gignac
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797612457686>
- **Scientific American: COVID Misinformation Is Killing People**
Article by Amir Bagherpour
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-misinformation-is-killing-people1/>
- **World Health Organization**
Infodemic Management Resources
<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management>
- **1st WHO Infodemic Management Training**
<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management/1st-who-training-in-infodemic-management>
- **Public Health Communications Collaborative**
Communications Resources for Public Health Professionals
<https://publichealthcollaborative.org/>