


## Managing Infodemics and Conspiracy Theories

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hot topics in practice [www.wa.gov/ehp](http://www.wa.gov/ehp)

**Northwest Center**  
FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE

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### 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)

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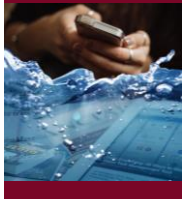


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<h3>Rise of the Infodemic</h3> 	<h3>An Age of Conspiracy Theories</h3> 	<h3>Strategies for Fighting Misinformation</h3> 
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**What Is An 'Infodemic'?**

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/what-is-an-infodemic>

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**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




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### 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: Hagler RH, Vogel RI, Gallus SE, Rothman AJ, Fowler ES, Yarr MC. (2020) Public perceptions of conflicting information surrounding COVID-19: Results from a nationally representative survey of US adults. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.03.10.20010726>

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### 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>

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### 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.**

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### 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.

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### An Age of Conspiracy Theories



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### 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.



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Public Health Pushing Back

**1 Counter misinformation**

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

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Public Health Pushing Back

**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.

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Public Health Pushing Back

**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.

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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/m/item/078934003514>

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Strategy 2: Radical Transparency



- 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**.

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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.




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### 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

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### A Chat with Lauren Jenks



Allene Mares



Lauren Jenks

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### QUESTIONS?



To ask a question, please click the  icon in the Zoom toolbar to open your Q&A Pod.

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Resources

- **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-people/>
- **World Health Organization**  
Infodemic Management Resources  
<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management>
- **1<sup>st</sup> 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/>

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