Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts

'Infodemic': More Than a Public Health Crisis

By Dymples Leong

SYNOPSIS

COVID-19 demonstrates that a pandemic is more than just a public health crisis – it is also a communications emergency. With clear, effective policy planning and implementation, public messaging can be a highly effective way of mobilising citizens to tackle COVID-19 together.

COMMENTARY

COUNTRIES AROUND the world have implemented various approaches to tackle COVID-19. As the race to develop a vaccine continues, governments face various challenges in communicating public health guidelines to citizens, including information dissemination and combatting the COVID-19 infodemic – a term used to describe the spread of coronavirus-related misinformation online.

Providing accurate information to the public is key to fighting the pandemic. As misinformation threatens to undermine public health guidelines, how can practitioners utilise various strategies and tools to effectively communicate with the public?

Nebulous Flow of Information

It is vital for governments to provide accurate public information to people, particularly during times of crisis. Reliable information from governments enables the public to make informed decisions.

COVID-19 has been the subject of new discoveries and insights, and its mutable, evolving status makes it harder to convey latest developments into practical and actionable guidelines for the public.

As people attempt to seek understanding and clarity, rapidly changing information – with anxiety of physical and emotional impacts of the virus – can contribute to bewilderment. The exploitation of desire for answers and solutions provides fertile ground for susceptible audiences to engage with misinformation.

Disinformation and Misinformation

Effective disinformation is often constructed with enough familiarity to be persuasive, populated with vivid personal stories and descriptive language to invoke strong emotions, such as fear and anger. Social media algorithms drive engagement towards content with strong emotional response.

This enables disinformation to drown out official information sources. Disinformation content is often packaged professionally, distorting audiences' perception of the contents' authenticity. The conspiracy documentary, "Plandemic", for instance, garnered up to 2.5 million likes, shares and comments on Facebook, driving the documentary to mainstream attention, despite refutations from fact-checkers.

Similarly, misinformation can also undermine public health measures, even when mistakenly and unintentionally spread. It can amplify confusion, sow distrust, and inspire people to ignore public health guidelines, potentially endangering lives.

In some cases, people with ill intent can combine misinformation and disinformation to cause unrest, such as falsely attributing the cause of COVID-19 to 5G technology, resulting in physical attacks against 5G telecomm towers and workers.

Conflicting Signals

Unfortunately, official sources can add to the confusion if they provide conflicting and unclear advice. Such advice can further perpetuate the state of ambiguity. Inconsistent messaging brings about confusion, annoyance and mistrust, leading to public frustration with health directives. This could potentially result in a reduction of compliance by the public in following guidelines (e.g. mask-wearing in public).

For instance, criticism over the British government's messaging over its updated 'Stay Alert' slogan has led communication experts to decry the mixed messaging efforts. This has resulted in confusion and doubt over the guidance for different sets of circumstances.

Inconsistent messaging has also led to disastrous consequences. Mixed messaging on public health directives and social distancing guidelines from Brazilian government officials have worsened the health crisis.

In contrast, Singapore, in response to public uncertainty and confusion, the Ministry of Health clarified that face masks, and not face shields, were to be the default face covering in Singapore as the country entered the first phase of reopening.

Clear, Concise, Transparent Communication

Public messaging can be a highly effective way of mobilising citizens to tackle COVID-19 when there is effective policy planning and implementation.

Social media and messaging platforms are widely seen as essential crisis communication tools for governments and institutions. These channels have been used in countries including Singapore and India to directly disseminate crucial COVID-19 related information – broadcasting new updates and public health regulations. Messaging platforms such as Telegram channels created by governments and health authorities have gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Governments in countries like Singapore and Australia have utilised these channels to combat misinformation and disinformation. Helping users access information from verified channels makes it easier, while reducing the confusion and anxiety about unverified sources of information. By minimising the friction and effort involved in information search, the risk of potential engagement with misinformation is reduced.

When public health sources present actionable information presented in a transparent and easily accessible way, people are empowered to take actionable steps to safeguard themselves from COVID-19. For instance, websites or channels could be designed to facilitate greater user-friendly information search. Officials should also provide public briefings in clear, concise language.

Singapore's Case

Singapore adopts a multi-channel communication strategy to disseminate COVID-19 related developments. Regular press conferences by the multi-ministry task force enables citizens to be updated on latest developments. The same consistent messaging is reinforced on multiple channels of communication.

These range from traditional media such as print and television, to social media and messaging platforms WhatsApp and Telegram. Explainers illustrated in visual format break down guidelines to be easily understood and 'digestible' for the public.

A potential step to further improve communications could involve the usage of a single, central repository website or channel to answer public health announcements and guidelines. This repository can be used to consolidate and unify existing websites maintained by individual ministries and agencies.

The repository could be utilised to answer queries from the public. For example, in the Indian state of Karnataka, COVID-19 related questions are answered by a dedicated team of state administrators and public health officials, who then direct subscribers to verified sources of public health information. This helps the dissemination of accurate information and reduces the proliferation of misinformation.

New 'Normal'

Practitioners should also maintain persuasiveness in the face of shifting advice. As public-health recommendations often change due to new developments, persuading citizens to adapt to new behaviours is a continuing process.

While enforcement can contribute to greater compliance with public health guidelines, persuading 'buy-in' from citizens while being authentic, empathetic, and transparent can enable citizens to comply better during this pandemic.

Accurate and actionable information contributes value and relief in times of uncertainty and confusion, especially during a public health crisis like COVID-19. As countries tackle this societal threat, good communication has become more vital than ever.

The continued emphasis on timely dissemination of clear, transparent and accurate public health information, even as governments continue to relax restriction guidelines globally, remains a powerful way to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

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