UNDRR ASIA PACIFIC
COVID-19 BRIEF

RISK COMMUNICATION AND COUNTERING THE 'INFODEMIC'

25 MAY 2020

COVID-19 RESPONSE

#PreventionSavesLives

BBC

Trusted, accurate, simple, and widely shared risk information saves lives, particularly when it reaches 'the last mile' and is used by vulnerable communities. This is the case in all communities, countries and disasters, including during the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, several weeks into this global crisis, it is also clear that a 'parallel universe' of rumour and false information is also active. Its wide reach and ability to influence behaviour could increase health risks and fuel racism and hate. This 'infodemic' is a genuine threat to COVID-19 prevention and recovery.

This brief, developed by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Regional Office for Asia-Pacific, aims to highlight the challenges and opportunities for effective risk messaging. Special emphasis is placed on reaching and helping to protect vulnerable communities and deploying tactics to counter misinformation and disinformation which threaten the public health responses and increase societal tensions.

The brief reflects the interventions and feedback from the UNDRR Asia-Pacific webinar on 30 April 2020, titled Risk communication to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19: Countering the 'Infodemic'. The webinar was co-organized with World Health Organization.

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OVERVIEW

Effective risk communication has emerged as a cornerstone of early and effective responses to stop the spread of COVID-19. As in other disasters, effective risk communication saves lives. Well-targeted information, with clear messages, are an essential part of all successful disaster prevention and response interventions and the current COVID-19 pandemic is no exception.

Yet, the COVID-19 disaster has been characterised by the wide dissemination of false information that risks undermining the robust efforts of health and disaster authorities to share advice on how to prevent transmission of the disease. It is having widespread reach and is encouraging – rather than reducing – risky behaviour.

What is different about misinformation surrounding COVID-19 is its scale and speed. Widespread access to mobile internet and social media, two technologies that were not common in past pandemics, have helped fuel the speed by which the misinformation fire has spread. Rumours that originate in one region, quickly appear in repackaged forms in other regions.

Moreover, the massive impact of the pandemic, from country-wide lockdowns to massive layoffs and disruptions to everyday life, have made COVID-19 the talk of everyone around the world.

According to Richard Gizbert, host of Al-Jazeera's media-centric programme, The Listening Post, "A lack of scientific consensus, heavy-handed government policies, and lockdown-induced economic woes have resulted in a wave of fear, anxiety, and powerlessness - perfect conditions for misinformation and conspiracy theories to thrive."[i]

Adding to the complexity of this misinformation is its wide scope and range. The misinformation does not just pertain to health advice and unverified home remedies, but it extends into all aspects of life including economics and geopolitics. Moreover, in some cases, misinformation has been weaponised as intentional disinformation to drive hateful rhetorical and discrimination.

In response to this growing problem, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, issued the following clarion call: "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are also fighting an 'infodemic.' This is a time for facts, not fear; for rationality, not rumours; for solidarity, not stigma."

To this end, this brief provides examples of such risk messaging in action, explains how 'the currency of trust' is integral to all approaches, and outlines the value of an ambitious and effective use of Information Communications Technology.

In response to the "infodemic", UNESCO produced a variety of content to counter disinformation, fight discrimination, and promote best practices. They are available: **Arabic** - **Chinese** - **English** - **French** - **Russian** - **Spanish**.

RESPONSE CHALLENGES

In any risk communication campaign, intended messages may not reach the target audience and even when the messages are received, they may not trigger the appropriate response. While communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic, health, disaster and other officials need to overcome a number of challenges:

1. Rise of social media and unaccountable information sources

While the majority of people in Asia-Pacific follow official announcements as their primary source of information on local outbreaks and government guidelines, subsequent discussion about the disease and outbreaks occur online.

A Nielsen Global Media study of media consumption in North-East Asia found that social media has become "the COVID-19 Conversation Channel" and that the level of social media "buzz" about the COVID-19 disease has overshadowed any other topic. The social media discussions tend to spike after major official announcements about local infections and states of emergency.[ii]

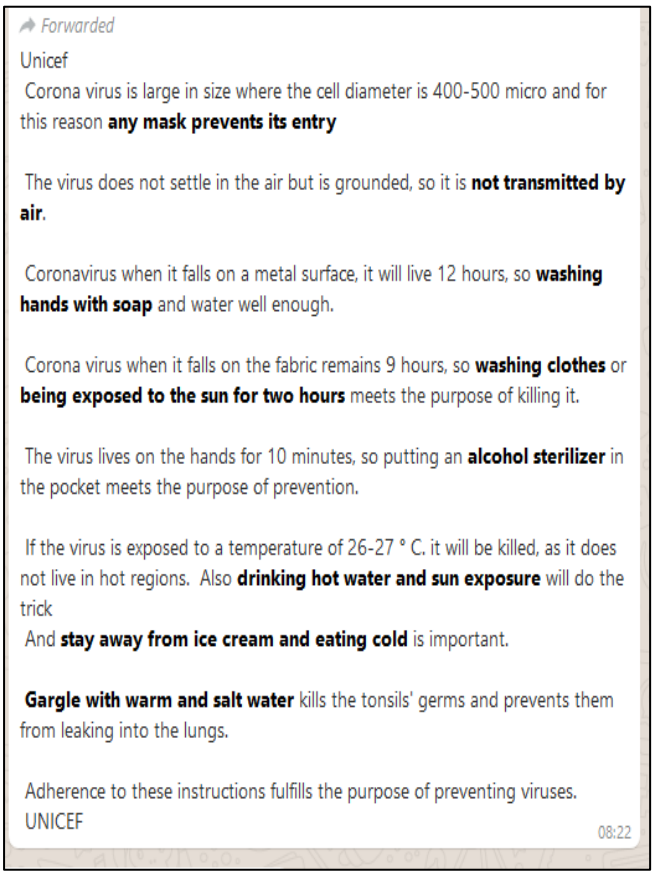
While official and reliable sources of information do exist on social media, the majority of accounts and shared content tend to be from un-official sources. These sources might offer unverified, misleading or outdated information.

2. Misinformation is difficult to prevent

Misinformation in the midst of a pandemic or disaster is not new. However, the speed by which misinformation related to COVID-19 travels is unprecedented.

During the global pandemic of H1N1 in 2009, Twitter was still in its relative infancy and group messaging apps such as WhatsApp did not exist. Wide access to smartphones and the internet has helped accelerate the speed and reach of COVID-19 misinformation and rumours.

Examples of misinformation include conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19, rumours about cures or methods of prevention, and anti-science positions. While the sharing of some of this information is a result of people's anxiety, in other cases, there is an intent to distort information and disinform.



Example of a fake message attributed to UNICEF which spread among WhatsApp users in India.

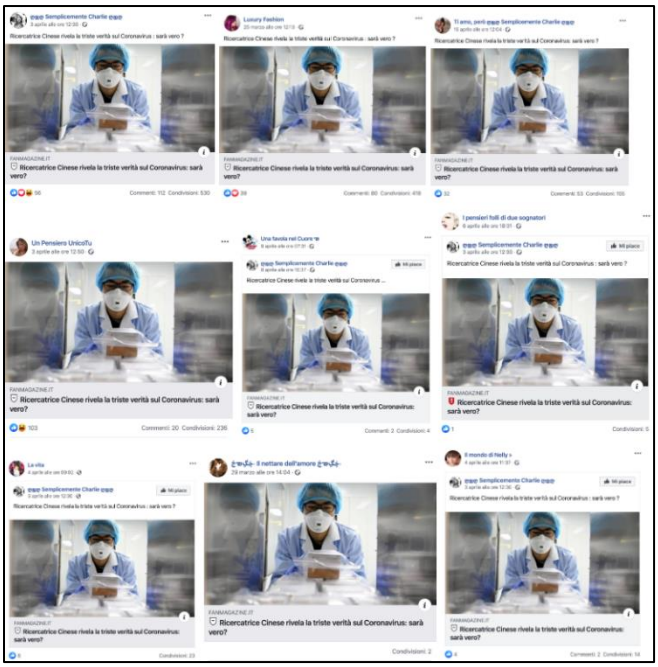
Examples of disinformation include blaming the disease on certain ethnic minorities[iii] or religious minorities[iv] to fuel hatred and discrimination.

Misinformation often originates from a few sources but spread rapidly through the reach of social media and messaging apps.

An analysis of COVID-19 hoaxes in Europe, for example, traced the majority of them to 36 Facebook pages that are "super-spreaders" of COVID-19 misinformation.[v]

In India, which is the biggest market for WhatsApp with more than 400 million users, phones are being "flooded with misinformation," from unverified home remedies to fake advisories asking people to avoid foods such as ice cream and chicken.[vi]

Another reason misinformation is difficult to prevent is that sometimes it has the support of credible voices such as community or religious leaders. In South Korea, early containment efforts were hampered by a church leader who ignored government guidelines, thus contributing to half of the initial cases of infection.[vii]



This is an example of a story falsely claiming that lemon and hot water can cure COVID-19. It was shared 61 times across nine Facebook pages from March 25 to April 26, 2020. (Source: NewsGuard)

3. One message does not fit all

Even simple messages such as "wash your hands" and "keep your distance" can be misinterpreted by some people when messaging on a wide scale.

In the initial stages of the COVID-19 response, messaging calling on people to practise "social distancing" was the norm. But it has since been emphasized "physical distancing" while maintaining "social connectedness". This change in messaging was particularly important to ensure vulnerable groups such as the elderly are not neglected during the pandemic.

In the case of the Pacific, messages around frequent hand washing needed to be modified for the local context because to some groups of people they seemed to contradict earlier messages from the government about the need to conserve water. Moreover, for communities that had different water sources for different uses, it was unclear what type of water they needed to use for handwashing.

4. Reaching the 'last mile'

Five months into the COVID-19 crisis, it has been difficult to escape the pandemic's relentless news coverage. Yet, despite the pandemic's prominence, risk communicators must not assume that everyone has heard of the disease or knows what preventive measures to take. People with specific vulnerabilities, defined by age, gender and disabilities, and those living in remote areas are made more vulnerable due to limited access to information.

Indeed, it is because of the communicable nature of this hazard, that risk communicators must go the extra mile to reach the last mile. This includes reaching out to pockets of the populations that are in extremely rural areas or live nomadic lifestyles, elderly individuals who speak "forgotten" languages, and people in abject poverty or who are homeless and lack any access to mass media or mobile technology.

5. Communicating during an evolving crisis means information may be incomplete

One of the unique challenges presented by COVID-19 which may not exist for more usual hazards is the fact that the science underpinning the health advice is still evolving.

While the central messages of COVID-19 prevention have remained consistent, there have been a number of changes or modifications to the advice given to the public since the start of the pandemic. The most notable point of confusion has been around the use of masks.[viii]

Restaurants that were allowed to operate in Thailand, for example, were unclear on how to implement distancing rules: "Information is very vague and late. Still now many colleagues are not sure of what to do to comply with the restrictions," said one veteran chef and restaurant owner.[ix]

Over time, health risk communication related to COVID-19 becomes more accurate as new evidence emerges, but in the interim, confusion could risk pushing people to ignore guidelines or to seek less credible sources of information.

POLICY GUIDANCE

Communicators need to leverage multiple tools at their disposal to reach all audiences, especially the most vulnerable. However, to influence and change behaviour, it is not enough for the message to be received- it has to trigger the appropriate actions. For this, messages must be tailored, trusted and need to rise above the sea of misinformation. Some key recommendations include:

1. Tailor the message for the audience

Content and channels of communication should be contextualized to the needs of different groups. This is important not only to ensure the message is received and understood by the target audience but also to trigger the needed response or behaviour change.

Key to triggering such a response is developing an understanding of the needs and concerns of different groups to connect at a visceral level. Moreover, the tailoring of the message ensures that each group receives the most appropriate health advice and instructions. This includes tailoring messaging for different age groups, including child-friendly material.

The use of surveys can help communicators identity priorities for different groups and thus customize messaging to appeal to these audiences. In the absence of such surveys, communicators can rely on subject matter and cultural experts. When possible, messages should be tested through focus groups prior to deployment. This is especially critical to avoid any unintended offences which could damage trust with the target audience. For example, certain symbols might be innocuous in most cultures but carry offensive meaning in other cultures.

In Mongolia children say the cutest things

Mongolia is a land-locked country which shares a large border with China. Nevertheless, it was able to keep COVID-19 from spreading through a number of early actions, including the closure of all schools in late January. This was accompanied with a move towards free and public distance education for children through television and online platforms.

In addition to delivering school lessons via television, officials began inserting child-oriented videos to raise awareness about COVID-19 preventive measures. Mongolian officials soon realized the power of children to be secondary messengers and 'influencers' within families to parents, grandparents and others.

As a result, new educational videos were created featuring 'cute' children trying to reach adults. Some of the especially cute videos became viral hits and spread even further through social media.

2. Tailor the medium to ensure no one is left behind and the 'last mile' is reached

A significant aspect of messaging is tailoring the channel or form of delivery. This is especially important to reach the 'last mile' as some poor, remote or displaced communities may not have access to traditional media, social media or telecommunication technology. Moreover, some modes of communication that have traditionally worked to reach vulnerable groups in the past, such as "door to door" campaigns, town halls, and group demonstrations would not be appropriate in light of physical distancing rules.

In these cases, communicators should seek alternative approaches by consulting with community leaders and group representatives to determine how to best reach vulnerable groups. Potential ideas include the use of public posters, loudspeaker announcements, and billboards.

In addition, in a region as diverse as the Asia-Pacific region where no one language dominates, communicators and service organizations cannot rely on publishing material in only one or two languages. It is important that risk communication products be translated and tailored for use at the community level.

Be True, Kind and Helpful

BBC Media Action is working in seven countries in Asia to develop fact-based media content to combat misinformation and stigma around COVID-19.

Their research on misinformation has shown that people have different motives for spreading misinformation. Sometimes it is deliberate; sometimes people do not know any better. Based on this, their initiative encourages people to pause, verify and consider whether it is necessary to share content. It challenges people to ponder: "Is it true, is it kind, is it helpful?"

BBC Media Action's experience has led it to champion four principles for effective risk communication:

1. **Be in touch:** Know your audience and understand how to reinforce positive behavioural change and effectively counter rumours.
2. **Be relevant and accurate:** Content has to be grounded in local culture and realities.
3. **Be credible:** People only act on information they trust. Include trusted and influential figures in your output or help them to communicate effectively with audiences.
4. **Be creative:** It is a crowded field; being engaging and even entertaining helps you cut through and reach vulnerable communities.

One example is the Thangyat traditional dance public service announcement (PSA), which was produced by BBC Media Action's Myanmar team and was viewed by millions of people on social media and television:

3. Actively counter misinformation

Misinformation and disinformation cannot be ignored. Their erosive effect on certain susceptible people and their potential to trigger harmful actions or hate crimes, have demonstrated that officials must actively refute them.

Given how fast and far misinformation can spread online through social media, it is important that officials devote considerable time and energy to countering misinformation.

In the case of the WHO, combating the spread of misinformation is seen as a core a public health function because of its potential consequences can be as harmful as the disease itself. WHO's response to misinformation has been to track down rumours and counter them with facts. It uses a combination of manual fact-checkers and artificial intelligence to identify trending misinformation.

BBC Media Action recently launched a seven-country campaign in Asia-Pacific, built around audience research to understand how to best package and deliver facts and misinformation rebuttals.[x]

On 22 May, the United Nations launched a global initiative called Verified to encourage everyone to check the advice they share. People can sign up at shareverified.com to receive verified and trusted content on a variety of COVID-19 related topics along with inspirational stories.

4. Currency of Trust: build your networks before the crisis

For the public to act on COVID-19 warnings and follow guidance, it is essential that people perceive the messenger as trustworthy. Indeed, the countries that have managed the COVID-19 crisis most effectively tend to be countries where the public holds high levels of trust in their government.[xi]

Trust-building is a long-term process and governments and development organizations must invest in the 'currency of trust' before it is needed at a time of crisis.

However, even in the midst of the crisis, it is not too late for governments to build trust by exhibiting transparency around COVID-19 and by seeking to engage with communities.

How South Korea used ICT to fight COVID

South Korea's government-led, all-of-society approach to halt the spread of COVID-19 is a global example. Extensive and effective use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) was a key aspect of the strategy which also drew upon public-private sector partnerships.

South Korea used its pre-existing cellular broadcasting service (CBS) – built to transmit emergency text alerts for all disasters – to communicate on COVID-19. To increase efficiency and agility of message dissemination, the central government has decentralized decision making to the local level. Cities and metropolitan authorities have been equipped with the required systems to issue their own public alerts. This improved the speed of message delivery by eliminating intermediary steps in the communication chain.

Many of these ICT applications were possible thanks to the use of 'big data.' A massive exercise in data collection, management and processing has informed an array of effective policy responses including early detection of patients, the isolation of close contacts of a patient, and coordinated distribution of face masks.

For governments that have a trust deficit or where the government's administrative reach is limited to certain areas of the country, it is essential that partnerships and networks with trusted intermediaries be built. These trusted intermediaries can be civil society organizations, local leaders, religious organizations, or local celebrities.

This has been the experience in the Pacific where civil society organizations have been at the forefront of 'citizen and community engagement.' Civil society organizations have been able to deliver appropriate risk information through long-standing engagement and leveraging the trust they built with the communities to manage difficult real-world dilemmas.

For example, in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, Oxfam was able to fact-check, facilitate and adapt pandemic risk messages from ministries of health to the communities via established and trusted local networks, such as traditional leaders and faith-based organizations.

5. Leverage Information Communication Technology (ICT) to its full potential

The widespread use of digital telecommunication technologies offers countries the opportunity to reach large portions of the population with ease

and to customize message delivery for different audience segments.

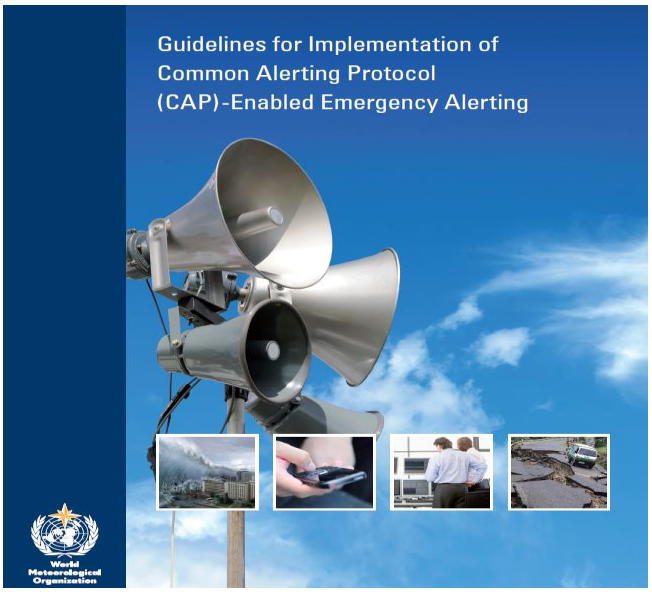
Countries should seek to leverage public control of telecommunication networks and develop partnerships with private sector media and communication firms to ensure wide dissemination of critical messages.

Disaster early warning systems such as those that use the Common Alerting Protocol to push emergency alerts can be utilized to ensure "all-media" coverage of emergency broadcasts.

South Korea, for example, used its pre-existing cellular broadcasting service, which was built to transmit emergency text alerts for all hazards, to communicate to the public on COVID-19.

Beyond general messaging, governments should seek to direct specific messages to key target audiences at the optimal times of the day. Achieving this level of sophistication depends on the level of data available on the digital media consumption habits of different age groups and demographics.

In some cases, it might be useful to contract or partner with the private sector to conduct these audience analysis studies and develop different profiles ahead of a disaster.



The Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), championed by WMO, allows governments to broadcast messages to the entire country or certain areas using "all media".

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. **Tailor the message for the audience.**
2. **Tailor the medium to ensure no one is left behind and the 'last mile' is reached.**
3. **Actively counter misinformation.**
4. **Currency of Trust: build your networks before the crisis.**
5. **Leverage Information Communication Technology to its full potential.**
6. **Develop a communication strategy around COVID-19 recovery and exit plans.**

6. Develop a communication strategy around COVID-19 recovery and exit plans

As countries transcend the peak of COVID-19 impact and move towards recovery, it is recommended that authorities formulate a communication strategy to prepare the public for the "new normal".

Among large segments of the population, there might be expectations of a quick recovery and return to pre-pandemic conditions once lockdowns are lifted. However, if recovery is months away authorities should communicate the challenges and expected timeline for recovery to the public to manage expectations.

This is particularly relevant if governments want to preserve and maintain certain physical distancing or emergency measures to limit the re-emergence of COVID-19 cases. Transparency about these plans and early communication with the public could help increase support and the cooperation of the public to ensure successful implementation.

Shoppers register before being allowed inside a re-opened mall to facilitate case tracing (Bangkok Post)

Acknowledgement

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Additional Resources

1. UNESCO Policy Brief: DISINFODEMIC: Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation
   https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf

2. BBC Media Action COVID-19 risk communication playlist
   https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLuvkxTBwQE1aCRbdc2pDXNywzsWshom8b

3. Pacific Action Plan for 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Preparedness and Response
   https://www.who.int/westernpacific/about/how-we-work/pacific-support/news/detail/21-02-2020-pacific-steps-up-preparedness-against-covid-19

4. Bangkok Principles for the implementation of the health aspects of the Sendai Framework
   https://www.preventionweb.net/files/47606_bangkokprinciplesfortheimplementati.pdf

5. Guidelines for Implementation of Common Alerting Protocol (CAP)-Enabled Emergency Alerting
   https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=14699#.XsplhjozaUk

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