In the Coronavirus 'Infodemic,' Here's How to Avoid Bad Information

Misleading information about Covid-19 spreads through texts and emails—but you can protect yourself from dubious claims and reports

By Nicole Nguyen
March 22, 2020

The same coronavirus post kept popping up on my Facebook feed last week. People in my network—a friend's mom, a college classmate and another "friend," who I'm not sure I've even met in person—had somehow obtained identical symptom and treatment guidance from Stanford University.

There were details about an at-home testing technique involving breath holding, as well as something truly dubious about sipping water every 15 minutes. On March 12, the university said the text was "not from Stanford."

Overnight, the viral post disappeared from the social network.

Then, last weekend, an urgent message circulated through group chats. The text falsely suggested people stock up before a soon-to-be-announced national quarantine. Please share with your networks, the message pleaded. On Sunday night, the National Security Council shot down the speculation on Twitter. "Text message rumors of a national #quarantine are FAKE. There is no national lockdown."

Many people spreading these fraudulent posts have good intentions. Everyone's trying to keep up with an ever-shifting situation. (Remember last week? That feels like years ago.) And they want to help each other. But the current regularity of forwarded falsehoods is revealing: Any absence of good information leaves room for a lot of terrible information.

The World Health Organization recently described this moment as an "infodemic." We're getting virus news through a fire hose—push notifications, TV, social media, hearsay through our networks. There's misleading or inaccurate information at every turn, despite companies' efforts to remove it. And as social networks crack down on misinformation, it's growing in grass-roots channels, like text and email.

Many people, confused by all the noise, are still searching for answers. So, how do we wade through the onslaught? I called some experts for help.

POLITIFACT
The Poynter Institute

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All Fact-checks for Coronavirus

Marco Rubio
stated on March 19, 2020 in a tweet

For coronavirus cases "In the U.S. 38% of those hospitalized are under 35."

MOSTLY FALSE
POLITIFACT
TRUTH-O-METER

By Amy Sherman • March 20, 2020

Chain message
stated on March 19, 2020 in a text

The federal government is "preparing to mobilize the national guard," "dispatch them across the US with military" and "announce a nationwide 1 week quarantine for all citizens."

FALSE
POLITIFACT
TRUTH-O-METER

By Daniel Funke • March 20, 2020

Greg Murphy
stated on March 16, 2020 in a tweet

"Sunlight actually can kill the (novel coronavirus.)"

FALSE
POLITIFACT
TRUTH-O-METER

By Paul Specht • March 20, 2020

PolitiFact, the Poynter Institute's nonprofit fact-checking organization, has a website dedicated to confirming and debunking coronavirus information spread by government officials, text messages and social media.

Focus on factual information from official channels. "I would strongly urge people to get their information from sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or highly respected news organizations. Everything else should be regarded as suspect," said Angie Drobnic Holan, editor in chief of the Poynter Institute's nonprofit fact-checking site PolitiFact.

In other words, focus more on facts from official sources, and less on chasing down every shred that might be true, says Claire Wardle, a research fellow at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center and co-founder of First Draft, a nonprofit dedicated to studying misinformation.

The more people are exposed to a falsehood, the more likely they are to accept it as true—what Dr. Wardle refers to as the "familiarity backfire effect."

In that vein, my WSJ colleagues are regularly updating a guide to what scientists and health officials know about coronavirus, as well as answering readers' most pressing questions.

World Health Org... ✅

This chat is with the official business account of "World Health Organization". Tap for more info.

hi 11:13 AM ✓✓

Welcome to the World Health Organization

Get information and guidance from WHO regarding the current outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

What would you like to know about coronavirus?

Reply with a number (or emoji) at any time to get the latest information on the topic:

1. Latest numbers 🔢
2. Protect yourself 👍
3. Your questions answered ❓
4. Mythbusters 🛑
5. Travel advice 🗺️
6. News & Press 📰
7. Share ⏩
8. Donate now 🥰

11:13 AM

Focus on facts directly from official channels: The World Health Organization recently launched a WhatsApp messaging service bringing updates on the outbreak and information about myths right to your phone.

The primary sources that reporters rely on include the World Health Organization and U.S.-based CDC. Both agencies provide virus outbreak updates and guidance on how to stay healthy from public officials. The CDC mobile app serves this information right to your phone. Pro tip: Turn on the app's filter for "Coronavirus Disease 2019." The WHO launched a WhatsApp messaging service that provides situation reports in real time, as well as information on coronavirus myths. (If you are on your phone, this link takes you right to the app to sign up.)

Many state and local authorities are also excellent resources, Ms. Holan said. The CDC website includes links to every accredited state and health department across the U.S.

The most-shared misinformation seems plausible. The most recent wave of misinformation reads more like rumors that could be true or are close to the truth rather than outright falsehoods, according to Dr. Wardle. Fraudulent messages are often attributed to "a friend of my friend who works in the government" or other authoritative entities.

"A lot of this stuff is not malicious. It's people trying to help each other, but it's false," she said.

Misinformation is moving from public to private channels. The internet's largest social networks are aggressively moderating coronavirus content. On March 16, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter and YouTube sent a joint statement: "We are … jointly combating fraud and misinformation about the virus [and] elevating authoritative content on our platforms."

The crackdown has unintended consequences. "People started moving into spaces where they can't be tracked. The only thing holding things together is people holding other people accountable," said Dr. Wardle.

Encrypted messaging services, like WhatsApp, have struggled to police misinformation sent through their systems. To maintain users' privacy, the messages stay encrypted end to end, with no server in the middle being able to read their contents. To mitigate misinformation, moderators must be able to see the message's contents. On Wednesday, WhatsApp launched a coronavirus website, asking users to not forward a message if they aren't sure it's true.

Apple's iMessage is end-to-end encrypted in a similar way, so the company can't see the contents of a message to identify whether it is misinformation or spam.

Pause before you share. "Misinformation tends to play on people's fears," said Ms. Holan. In other words, if you're feeling strongly—either you're scared or feel like there's an urgent need to take action—that might be a sign that the information is dubious.

If people stopped sharing entirely and just relied on official sources, we'd likely be better off, Dr. Wardle said. "It's like washing our hands. We have to get into new habits about sharing only what we know," she said.

Look up which outlets covered the news. As mentioned previously, focus on the facts. But if you want to do your own homework, here's how.

Before sharing information, do a quick search to see if other outlets have reported the same thing, advised Jon Keegan, an adjunct assistant professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism. He is currently an investigative data journalist at The Markup. (He's also a former Wall Street Journal visual correspondent.)

Mr. Keegan suggested GroundNews, an app and website that shows you how many outlets have covered top stories at a glance. The more widely a story is covered, the more credible it likely is.

Most important, Mr. Keegan noted, look at the source named in those outlets' reporting. If multiple reports link to the same questionable story, instead of citing primary sources, be skeptical. Ideally, the reporting would come from an official channel or independently confirmed by multiple publications.

Still, the experts all agree: Verifying information yourself isn't necessarily useful. Independent fact-checking websites do the digging for you. PolitiFact's dedicated coronavirus hub is updated with the most-shared information on the web. Each fact-check is graded on its level of truthfulness and includes the sources PolitiFact's reporters used to determine its veracity. The Federal Communications Commission has a Covid-19 consumer warning website that includes samples of robocall and text messages scams.

If someone does send you false information, be gentle. When confronting That Person (you know who I'm talking about) in your group chat, don't harshly correct them. "People shut down when you do that or get angry," said Ms. Holan. She advised meeting them where they are: "People are most sympathetic to outlets they like and what they perceive to be their team."

Try sending someone corrective information from an outlet they trust. If that's not available, there are always official sources like the CDC. Google's advanced search can help with this. You can narrow results for a query to a particular domain, like "cdc.gov."

If you're stressed by the digital deluge, turn it off. If you want to stay connected with official updates, there's a great alternative to Twitter and TV: Sign up for your city's Covid-19 text alerts where available. San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle and New York are among those that have a system in place.

Yep, you can mute it all—the group texts, Twitter accounts, Facebook friends, email and Slack. (Just don't ignore your boss!) There is a lot of fear and uncertainty in this moment. Please take care of yourself in all the ways you need, even if that means virtually shutting up your uncle.