Life Sciences

Science Communication

Battle the Infodemic

In the spring of 2020, the UN and WHO began to speak of an “infodemic,” the presence of too much false and misleading information, as a major barrier to effective responses to COVID-19. It is now clear that belief can be a particularly toxic mix causing people to reject health interventions like vaccines; disregard health guidance, as has been seen with Ebola; or try unproven and dangerous therapies like ingesting ivermectin to prevent COVID-19.

The multidisciplinary field of “infodemiology” should be employed to better understand and design interventions to help mitigate the impacts of infodemics. The extent to which offline behavior is influenced by online behavior (and vice versa) should be researched.

Coordinated education campaigns should be used to counter misinformation across platforms and through communities using traditional means, like media advertisements and schools, in conjunction with newer social media channels.

Connect to the Public Through Authentic Storytelling

We should employ stories with characters who create empathy and connection. And leverage shared values. Most people do not respond to data or numbers. It is important to tap into the public with emotion by using stories of hope, inspiration, and lessons learned. The WHO has engaged with artists and professional storytellers across media: TV, radio, print, social media, and beyond—to share authentic messages from health care workers, doctors, nurses, scientists, and family members.

Foster Scientific Literacy

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Understand Human Behavior and the Role of Culture

Understanding human behavior, and the role of culture in shaping it, can help us to address trust and health issues more effectively. By investing in studies of behavioral change and cultural context, we could potentially reduce the impact of infodemics.

Verify True, Reliable Information

Much like the “blue check mark” used by social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, verifiable methods of verifying true, reliable public health and scientific information should be incorporated in systems that cut across physical and language barriers by validating, differentiated, and prepared for dissemination.

Engage and Empower Communities to Build Trust

True community champions should be trained, supported, and funded to help build trusted social and trusted informational exchanges. As recognized by the WHO, there is an urgent need to empower community networks to harness and build resilient communities through co-designed interventions. Community resilience and shared local contexts should be disseminated and leveraged for information validation and diffusion; the idea of a trusted community should rally around these sources of information when communicating with the public and can help promote and disseminate false news or misleading narratives.

Verify True, Reliable Information

An active network of scientists could be established who would work together to share information on how best to communicate and verify scientific claims, and leverage techniques to assess scientific(ally) validated information.

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