

Risk communication & countering misinformation

Preventing and controlling transmission of COVID 19 infection

Background

- Risk communication is important in managing any infectious disease outbreak, and is essential in an epidemic or pandemic
- An integral component of public health risk management, focused on dialogue with those affected and concerned
- The fundamental goal of risk communication is to provide meaningful, relevant and accurate information, in clear and understandable terms targeted to a specific audience.
- The purpose is to enable people-at-risk take informed decisions to protect themselves and their loved ones from public health threats.

What is Risk communication (RC)?

- Risk communication is an exchange of information or advice about risks or hazards, between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being
- Aim is to encourage informed decision making, positive behaviour change and the maintenance of trust .
- RC requires a good understanding of people's perceptions, concerns and beliefs as well as their knowledge and practices.
- It also requires the early identification and management of rumours, misinformation and other challenges.

Risk communication strategies

- Risk communication is a part of everyday life, it's ongoing and often taken for granted
- To communicate risk effectively, there's need to understand who the target audiences are, what they care about, their situation and the challenges they are likely to face in assessing the risk and acting on it,
- This means that different audiences require different types of messaging, as well as different distribution channels, to inform them about the risks and prevention means
- Risk communication strategies are customized to meet the specific interests, concerns, and habits of the target audiences.

Risk Communication Strategy



Medium of communication

- RC uses many communication techniques – print, mass & social media mass communications eg internet, SMS and community engagement.
- Develop consistent messages: Based on problem you want to consider the following
 - The Concern – what is the risk
 - The Evidence – effects of potential risk
 - Your Audience – Who, which group
 - The Messages – what to do, how to do it, how to respond in case of the event
 - Channels of communication – traditional, modern, trending
 - Communication Materials – Link messages and actions to desired behaviours
- Adjust along the way, scale up what works as appropriate, identify lessons learned & refine communication plans for the future

Concept of risk perception

- PH risk is something that is (or likely to be) hazardous to health or could contribute to a disease/infectious condition in humans. This includes activities, animals and substances.
- Risk perception among affected populations often differs from that of experts and authorities; same as perceived risk and the actual probability of a particular threat from a particular threat occurring
- Risk perception is based on a combination of : Facts, Feelings & Fear
- Effective RCCE can help bridge that gap by determining what people know, how they feel and what they do in response to disease outbreaks, as well as what they ought to know and do to protect themselves, prevent transmission & bring the outbreak under control

Risk Communication & Community Engagement (RCCE)

- Regular and proactive communication and engagement with the public and at-risk populations can help alleviate confusion and avoid misunderstandings
- Establish a system for listening to public perceptions as well as for finding out about rumours and misinformation,
 - Eg: monitoring media and social media, gathering feedback from HCWs and hotlines;
 - Then establish systems for responding to rumours, misinformation & FAQs.
- Keep in mind to always establish dialogue in any implemented activity in order to systematically collect and provide answer to all questions coming from the public

How do you engage the community?

- Research what the target audience perceives and believes. Awareness of Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices and Beliefs will enable the communication team to tailor messages and information.
- Create preparedness messages based on the research of attitudes and knowledge. In all cases, messages must be clear, concise, consistent and call to action.
- Facilitate formal and informal dialogue with the community to monitor what they need and want, and inform: town hall meetings, panel discussions, meetings with key community influencers, leaders, social groups etc

Flow & Management of Information



Community engagement

- Maintain 2-way communication with affected audiences to understand and respond to their concerns, attitudes, beliefs, and barriers to following health guidance
- Monitor those who are affected to ensure that they follow health guidance, and identify barriers to engaging in protective behaviours.
- Engage with trusted influencers, esp HCWs, to communicate with affected populations, especially those who are hard to reach.
- Establish consistent feedback between communities and the response team, and provide actionable guidance for emergency responders to better meet the health protection needs of communities

Effective risk communication

- Understanding the audiences (class, age, risk, communication style) and tailoring the message to reach them. This might mean using platforms like social media to impart facts and resources.
- Communicating uncertainty clearly—saying that not all information is available is more effective than speculating or making claims.
- Not over- or under-reassuring, but simply laying out risk and potential consequences with the appropriate tone.
- Providing numbers, context, history, and changes to procedure in a timely and straightforward fashion, which can help bolster trust.
- Telling people what they can do and how they can act to keep themselves and others safe.

Role of RCCE

- Helps at-risk populations make informed decisions
- Encourages protective behaviors
- Complements existing surveillance systems
- Helps prevent infodemics & builds the trust required to prepare for, respond to and recover from serious public health threats
- Uses community engagement strategies to involve communities & increases the probability that health advice will be followed
- Can minimize social & economic disruption. Therefore, in addition to protecting health, it can protect jobs, tourism and the economy

Misinformation & Disinformation

The Problem

- The amount & nature of information available to the public is changing and evolving constantly with streams of info immediately available today around key issues such as public health risks.
- Availability of broad array of traditional, alternative, and digital platforms & competing opinions, makes it increasingly difficult to communicate risk in a controlled and coordinated way;
- These channels may not be filtered for accuracy, or put into proper context for recipients
- Therefore, critical facts to guide decision-making may be missed, or people may take wrong actions based on misinformation, ultimately leading to unwanted outcomes.

Challenges with COVID-19 & RC

- COVID-19 is unlike previous medical crises, 1st because of our collective access to communication technologies.
- 2nd, it is the first pandemic of its kind in the age of social media
- With COVID-19 there is a flood of information, both reliable and unreliable, which is overwhelming & has only served to make effective communication harder. misinformation about the pandemic presents a serious risk to public health and public action
- WHO christened the problem an “infodemic”. Infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem that makes it difficult to identify the correct solution(s)

COVID-19 & RC

- PH communication operates on the principles of transparency, reliability, and trust. Damage to any of the principles, has potentially devastating consequences
- With COVID-19, many do not understand the reason for social distancing is to prevent disease spread *even if* the disease will be mild in their case or if their relative risk is low.
- Challenges with COVID-19 & RC
- With COVID we need more information that focuses on:
 - the spread of the virus – how it is transmitted
 - the risks associated with contracting it
 - why people should comply with the recommendations even if the number of cases are low

Difference between Mis- & Dis-information

- Misinformation stems from knowledge gaps: and therefore often based on speculation not based on full factual analysis
- Misinformation draws conclusions from wrong or impartial information while disinformation is deliberately spreading falsehoods to further an agenda about COVID-19.
- Disinformation is more insidious, with certain groups trying to deliberately spread false content meant to sow seeds of distrust towards institutions or governments.
- Spreading false or misleading information as truth will leave memory traces in an audience, even when the information is later proven to be false.

Mis- & Dis-information

- Misinformation comes in many different forms, from many different sources, and makes many different claims.
- It frequently reconfigures existing or true content rather than fabricating it wholesale, and where it is manipulated, is edited with simple tools.
- Disinformation is knowingly spreading false content meant to deceive.
- Both distort public communication, and are particularly powerful, misleading and posing lasting problems for society at large, with consequences for health, social harmony, and political life
- It's essential therefore for professionals to steer the people they serve around infodemics that exist to find credible sources of information.
- If left undisputed, they can undermine the acceptance and adoption of evidence-based PH efforts from and exacerbate the spread of the epidemic itself

Study on >225 messages – Reuters Institute

Figure 2: Reconfigured vs fabricated misinformation

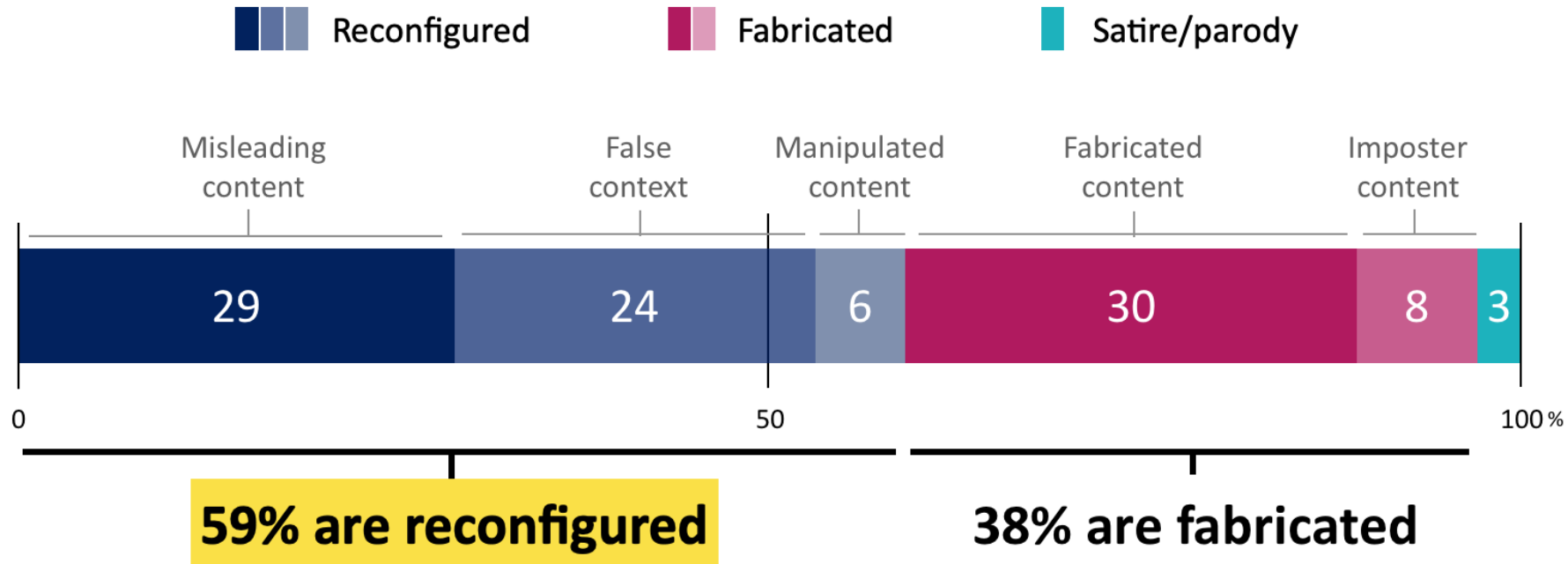


Figure 2 shows the proportion of reconfigured (N=133) and fabricated (N=86) misinformation in the sample (N=225) and the types of misinformation that constitute both reconfigured and fabricated misinformation.

Addressing uncertainty and perceptions and managing misinformation

- Establish regular feedback, capture common questions, misunderstandings and misinformation through health hotlines, HCWs and communities.
- Ensure that results of monitoring traditional and social media are assessed rapidly through the team set up for this purpose.
- Engage with influencers to capture people's perceptions through their feedback.
- Prepare guidance according to people's perceptions and concerns, and repeat guidance through various information channels.

Evaluation of Information

- Different criteria are used to evaluate information. Misinformation is “explicitly false” information according to what is considered to be incorrect by expert consensus
- Common evaluation criteria include:
 - identifying the purpose and intended audience,
 - authority and credibility
 - accuracy and reliability
 - currency and timeliness
 - objectivity or bias.
- Use the CARS model: **C**redibility, **A**ccuracy, **R**easonableness & **S**upport

Managing Misinformation

- Communicate what is known and what is not known: explain the degree to which uncertainty exists.
- Make sure messages are consistent across sectors and levels, share information regularly
- Provide regular, transparent communication through the channels that the targeted audiences use. e.g. traditional media, the Internet, social media, hotlines and SMS as appropriate
- Activate rumour monitoring and response mechanisms, and try to determine what issues might be causing rumours.
- Monitor community concerns, and continually apply feedback into the adapted RCCE strategy

How to counter misinformation

Two types of recommended corrective-information strategies:

- By factual elaboration, which places “emphasis on facts” – reinforcing the correct facts by avoiding repetition of the misinformation; rather you reinforce the correct facts
- By simple, brief rebuttal – using fewer arguments in refuting the myth of information thereby fostering healthy skepticism about the misinformation

Final words – Your role

- Mis/Disinformation is **false** information, which is “both deliberately promoted and accidentally shared” while misperceptions are “false beliefs”
- It is important to aggressively fight inaccurate information, if left undisputed, misinformation could undermine individuals’ adoption of protective actions and exacerbate the spread of the epidemic
- “When you see something you doubt, hold off before you forward it. Wait for a day. That is in your hands—you are a link in that chain. You can break that link” - Dr. Viswanath, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
- Social distancing prevents the spread of the disease. In the same way, distancing from misinformation and disinformation prevents the spread of falsehoods.

Resources and Questions??

- WHO - who.int/infodemics 2020
- PAHO - www.paho.org/riskcomm
- <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ecpe/effective-risk-communication-strategies/>
- <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>
- WHO/2019-nCoV/RCCE/v2020.2
- Southwell et al., 2018
- JS Brennann et al Reuters Institute