

# International Perspectives and Initiatives

## Abstract

The virus, commonly known as COVID-19 which emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has spread in 213 countries, areas or territories around the globe, with nearly 144 683 deaths worldwide on 18 April 2020. In the wake of this pandemic, we have witnessed a massive infodemic with the public being bombarded with vast quantities of information, much of which is not scientifically correct. Fighting fake news is now the new front in the COVID-19 battle. This regular feature comments on the role of health sciences librarians and information professionals in combating the COVID-19 infodemic. To support their work, it draws attention to the myth busters, fact-checkers and credible sources relating to COVID-19. It also documents the guides that libraries have put together to help the general public, students and faculty recognise fake news.

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## The Covid-19 'infodemic': a new front for information professionals

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### Introduction – the making of an infodemic

*A lie can run round the world before the truth has got its boots on (Pratchett, 2013).*

An infodemic may be defined as an excessive amount of information concerning a problem such that the solution is made more difficult. The end result is that an anxious public finds it difficult to distinguish between evidence-based information and a broad range of unreliable misinformation.

As the SARS-CoV-2 virus (commonly known as COVID-19) spreads, it has been accompanied by a vast amount of medical misinformation, rumours and half-backed conspiracy theories from unfiltered channels, often disseminated through social media and other outlets. This infodemic now poses a serious problem for public health. In such a rapidly changing situation, with millions on lockdown, social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and WeChat have become major sources of information about the crisis. Research by the Bruno Kessler Foundation in Italy showed that every day in March 2020 there was an average of 46 000 new posts on Twitter linked to misleading information about the pandemic (Hollowood & Mostrous, 2020). A recent Ofcom's survey (2020) in the UK indicated that 46% of UK adults reported that they have been exposed to misleading information online about the crises. 40% adults in the UK are 'finding it hard to know what is true or false about the virus'. Similarly, a study in the United States reported that 64% of US adults faced a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events due to the spread of fake news (Barthel et al., 2016).

Most of the misinformation relates to findings of studies that, although empirical, were either preliminary or inconclusive (Lai, Shih, Ko, Tang, & Hsueh, 2020). Table 1 summaries some of the commonly spread myths (Government of Pakistan, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020a).

### Impact of the current infodemic

The abundance of information on social media frequently without any check on its authenticity makes it difficult for an individual to distinguish between what are facts, and what are opinions, propaganda or biases. There is a huge increase in stories on social media that may initially appear credible but later prove false or fabricated; however, by the time they are proven to be false, the damage may be irreversible.

**Table 1** Commonly spread myths during the COVID-19 pandemic

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- Drinking alcohol protect you against COVID-19
  - Spraying alcohol or chlorine all over your body kill the new coronavirus
  - Eating garlic helps prevent infection with the new coronavirus?
  - COVID-19 virus cannot be transmitted in areas with hot and humid climates
  - Cold weather and snow kill the new coronavirus
  - Taking a hot bath prevent the new coronavirus disease
  - The new coronavirus can be transmitted through mosquito bites.
  - Hand dryers are effective in killing the new coronavirus
  - Ultraviolet disinfection lamps kill the new coronavirus
  - Mosquito bites can transmit the virus
  - Chloroquine is a proven cure
  - 5G caused the pandemic
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The WHO is leading the efforts to curtail both the spread of the disease and the related infodemic. At the Munich Security Conference on February 15 (World Health Organization, 2020b, Feb 15), the WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said: 'We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic'. Likewise, Sylvie Briand, (Director of Infectious Hazards Management at WHO's Health Emergencies Programme and Architect of WHO's strategy to counter the infodemic risk), told *The Lancet*:

*We know that every outbreak will be accompanied by a kind of tsunami of information, but also within this information you always have misinformation, rumours, etc. We know that even in the Middle Ages there was this phenomenon. But the difference now with social media is that this phenomenon is amplified, it goes faster and further, like the viruses that travel with people and go faster and further. So it is a new challenge, and the challenge is the [timing] because you need to be faster if you want to fill the void. . .What is at stake during an outbreak is making sure people will do the right thing to control the disease or to mitigate its impact. So it is not only information to make sure people are informed;*

*it is also making sure people are informed to act appropriately (Zarocostas, 2020)*

### Efforts to combat the infodemic

Fighting this infodemic is the new front in the COVID-19 battle (Child, 2020). In the 'post-truth' era, audiences are likely to believe information that appeals to their emotions and personal beliefs, as opposed to information that is regarded as factual and or objective (Maoret, 2017). This poses a major global risk and a threat to public health. Thus, it becomes vital to educate people generally, and youth in particular, about the nature of fake news and negative outcomes of sharing such news. The UNESCO is making efforts to counter misinformation and promote the facts about the COVID-19 disease. The agency is using the hashtags #ThinkBeforeClicking, #ThinkBeforeSharing and #ShareKnowledge, and promoting the view that the rights to freedom of expression and access to information are the best ways of combating the dangers of disinformation (UN News, 2020).

The Massachusetts Governor, Charlie Baker, asserted that: 'Everybody needs to get their news from legitimate places, not from their friend's friend's friend's friend'. The World Economic Forum (2020) published a three steps guideline on 'how to read the news like a scientist and avoid the COVID-19 'infodemic''. It includes (i) embracing uncertainty – responsibly, (ii) asking where's the information coming from? (iii) determining who's backing up the claim.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) presented a useful framework to understand the difference between the types of mis- and dis-information (Table 2).

### The role of health sciences librarians in the current pandemic

Health Sciences Librarians (HSLs) have the knowledge, skills and experience to play an important role in the fight against fake news. It is worth bearing in mind that since the 1980s they have played a leading role in educating people (through information literacy programmes) about how to evaluate facts and how to check the authenticity of information (Banks, 2016; Dempsey, 2017).

**Table 2** Types of mis- and dis-information (source: Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Types of Mis- and Dis-information
<b>Misleading Content:</b> Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual
<b>Satire or Parody:</b> No intention to cause harm but potential to fool
<b>Fabricated Content:</b> News content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm
<b>Imposter Content:</b> When genuine sources are impersonated
<b>Manipulated Content:</b> When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive
<b>False Context:</b> When genuine content is shared with false contextual information
<b>False Connection:</b> When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content

There is a need now for HSLs to promote dialogue amongst themselves about how best to develop mechanisms to prevent and counteract the spread of fake news. The main weapon must be training and education, drawing on the many information literacy programmes to alert the public on how to identify fake news. The next section of this article catalogues some of the tools HSLs can draw upon.

### Guides to identify fake news in the COVID-19 infodemic

Libraries have put together guides to help students, staff, faculty and the general public to recognise what is fake news (Hernandez, 2018; Stein-Smith, 2017). The International Federation for the Library Association (IFLA, 2016) developed an 8-step guideline to identify fake news. These steps include (i) consider the source, (ii) check the author, (iii) check the date, (iv) check your biases, (v) read beyond, (vi) seek supporting sources, (vii) ask 'is it a joke?' and (viii) ask the experts see (Figure 1).

Another useful checklist for determining the reliability of the information source is CRAAP (currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose) created by the Meriam Library, California State University & Chico, 2010 <https://library.csuchico.edu/help/source-or-information-good>. There are many other information literacy guidelines that can help the general public to recognise and avoid fake news. HSLs should be

knowledgeable about these resources and publicise them to their users.

### Information literacy guidelines and frameworks

1. ACRL Information Literacy Framework <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
2. Fairleigh Dickinson University Guideline on How to Recognize Fake News) <https://fdu.libguides.com/fakenews>
3. Fake News and Information Literacy Guidelines by University of Oregon <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/fakenews>
4. How to Identify a Fake News, Library Guide – University of Washington <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/news/fake-news>
5. Indiana's university fake news library guides <https://iue.libguides.com/fakenews>
6. International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) guideline in eight simple steps on "how to spot fake news" <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>
7. UNESCO 'MIL CLICKS' campaign (Media & Information Literacy (MIL), Critical Thinking and Creativity, Literacy, Intercultural, Citizenship, Knowledge, Sustainability (CLICKS) <https://en.unesco.org/MILCLICKS>
8. University of Michigan Library's one-credit course, called "Fake News, Lies, and Propaganda: How to Sort Fact from Fiction," <https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/library-fake-news/home>



Figure 1 How to stop fake news (IFLA, 2020)

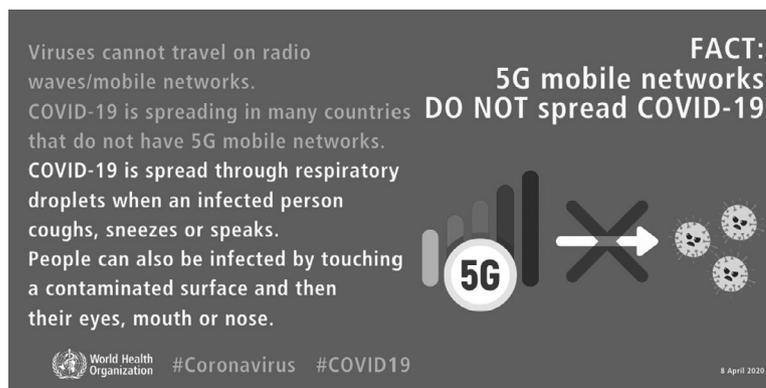


Figure 2 World Health Organization's Myth Buster, Screenshot

### Other useful news literacy resources

- News Literacy Resources <https://www.commonsense.org/education/articles/news-literacy-resources-for-classrooms>
- UNESCO and Athabasca University Media and Information Literacy Course <http://elab.lms.athabascau.ca/>

### Global initiatives to prevent the spread of fake news in the pandemic

This section gives details of the myth busters, fact-checkers and credible sources relating to COVID-19. These sources have played a pivotal role in the control of coronavirus.

#### *Mis- and dis-information/Myth-busting pages*

The WHO has recently launched a Myth buster to respond to the misinformation and myths relating to COVID-19 disease (Figure 2).

Several countries have also developed similar types of websites. These websites help people to determine the authenticity of the facts presented by any news or information sites, pinpointing any misinformation or myths which are indigenously induced and viral within a country through social networks. Here are five such examples:

1. Corona Virus Misinformation Watch-Canada <https://covid19misinfo.org/>
2. Media Bias/Fact Check rates various news organisations of 'factual reporting' <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>
3. National Command and Control Centre of Pakistan <http://covid.gov.pk/>
4. NewsGuard Corona Virus Misinformation Tracking Center <https://www.newsguardtech.com/>
5. The WHO 'Myth Busters' page exposing COVID-19 misinformation <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

### Credible sources of information for COVID-19

The efforts of the WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN), which used a series of filters to share tailored information, have proved quite fruitful. Now, if we search 'coronavirus' or 'COVID-19' or similar terms on Google, Twitter or

Facebook, no matter where we live, our searches lead us to a reliable source: either to the ministry of health, national health institutes or the WHO website.

The following are credible sources for information relating to COVID-19.

- A list of reliable science journalists from Yale epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves <https://twitter.com/gregggonsalves/status/1245647736910704642?s=20/>
- A reliable site which focuses on health coverage <https://www.statnews.com/>
- Center for Disease Control & Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html/>
- COVID-19 resources for patients and the Public made available by Medical Library Association <https://www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=1717>
- Global research on COVID-19 cited in the WHO COVID-19 database <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>
- Johns Hopkins University & Medicine: Coronavirus Resource Center <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- National Command and Control Centre for COVID-19 in Pakistan <http://covid.gov.pk/> This provides a real-time Pakistan and Worldwide COVID-19 update
- UK Official Website <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
- World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

### COVID-19 resources for health science librarians & other information professionals

- International Federation for Library Association (IFLA)- COVID-19 Key Resources for Libraries <https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries>
- Resources for Medical Librarians made available by the Medical Library Association (MLA) <https://www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=1712>
- The University of Vermont Libraries Research Guide: Free Medical Resources to Support Clinical Care <https://researchguides.uvm.edu/freeresources>

- Yale Library, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library's COVID-19 Resources for Clinicians <https://guides.library.yale.edu/covid-19>

### COVID-19 literature searches initiatives

Several organisations (in particular library associations) are collecting expert searches and strategies on a range of COVID-19 topics and developing a COVID-19 search bank. Any of these searches can be used as the basis for regular email alerts which will provide recent research articles in that area. Most of the articles on COVID-19 are open access and freely available.

- Austrian Library & Information Association COVID-19 Live Literature Searches Initiative <https://www.alia.org.au/groups/HLA/covid-19-live-literature-searches>
- COVID-19 Literature Searches Initiative by Medical Library Association (MLA) <https://www.mlanet.org/page/covid-19-literature-searching>
- NHS COVID-19 Search Bank <https://kfh.libservices.nhs.uk/covid-19-coronavirus/for-lks-staff/literature-searches/>

### Fact-checking websites

There are a range of fact-checking agencies and websites that can help verify the reality of news or information. Several of these fact-checking sites continually update details of the news, myths or information that is fake. The following are the lists of widely used fact-checkers. These can be useful to determine the authenticity of news or information during the pandemic.

1. A project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center <https://www.factcheck.org/>
2. A Website Seeking Truth & Exposing Fiction since 1999 <https://www.truthorfiction.com/>
3. Addressing the Challenge of Fake News through Artificial Intelligence <http://www.fakenewschallenge.org/>
4. AFP Fact Check <https://factcheck.afp.com/> Pakistan AFP Fact Check <https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-pakistan> AFP Factual <https://factual.afp.com/>
5. BBC News Reality Check [https://www.bbc.com/news/reality\\_check](https://www.bbc.com/news/reality_check)

6. Boom: COVID-19 News, Fact Checks on Fake and Viral News <https://www.boomlive.in/>
7. Colombia Fact Check for Covid-19 <https://colombiacheck.com/>
8. Fact Checker <https://www.liberation.fr/cheeknews,100893>
9. Fact Checking Website <https://www.altnews.in/>
10. <https://apnews.com/NotRealNews> (AP NEWS Website Reports Fake News)
11. IFCN Fact Checking Organizations on WhatsApp <https://faq.whatsapp.com/126787958113983> COVID-19: Poynter Resources and Fact Check <https://www.poynter.org/>
12. International Fact-Checking Network on Twitter <https://twitter.com/factchecknet>
13. Official Twitter Handle of Government of Pakistan for Exposing Fake News [https://twitter.com/fakenews\\_buster?lang=en](https://twitter.com/fakenews_buster?lang=en)
14. Snopes is the Internet's Definitive Fact-Checking Resource <https://www.snopes.com/>
15. The Poynter Institute Fact Check Website <https://www.politifact.com/>
16. The UK's Independent Fact Checking Charity <https://fullfact.org/>

### Conclusion

Health science librarians have the knowledge and skills to provide guidance to the general public on how to find credible and reliable information in the age of post-truth, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic. HSLs should share resources and collaborate to help people become more critical of what is being presented to them as facts through social media and other outlets. Using the many tools at their disposal, the goal of information professionals must be to enable the public to distinguish between facts and fake information.

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