



## Infodemic Misinformation about Covid-19

The Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled the rampant global dissemination of fake information about Covid-19 an 'infodemic'. People who forward untrue social media messages, either negligently or unwittingly, are participants in the perpetuation of ever lengthening chains of false information.

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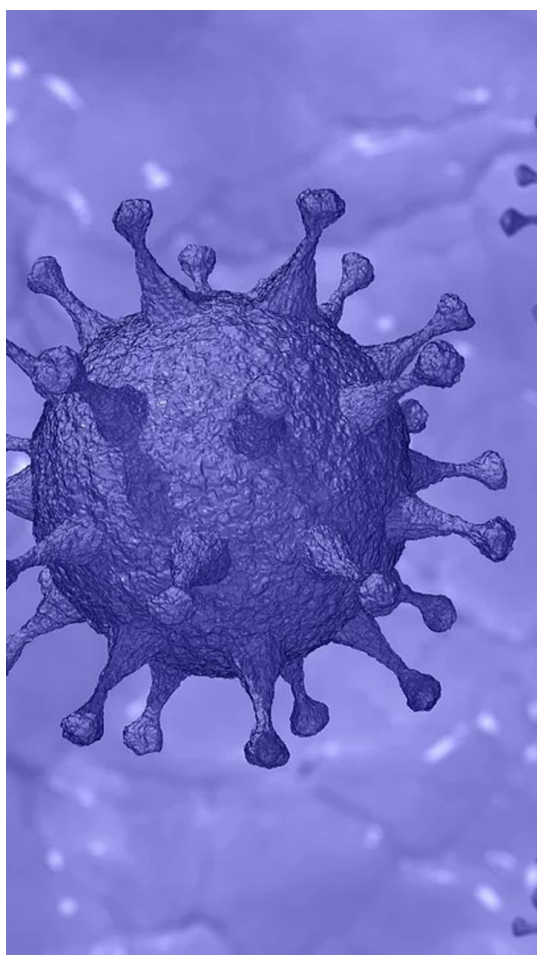
**In this edition:**

This 'Covid-19 pandemic edition' addresses the crisis of misinformation hampering efforts worldwide to get on top of the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Infodemic: Misinformation about Covid-19**

## Infodemic

### Misinformation about Covid-19



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Fake news, misinformation and hyperbole about Covid-19 are being originated on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube by hucksters, scammers, and conspiracy theorists (Reader, 2020). These messages may contain useless, incorrect or even harmful information and advice,

which can hamper the public health response and add to social disorder and division. Some fake news also contains a mixture of correct information, which makes it difficult to spot what is true and accurate. Fake news may also be shared by trusted friends and family, including those who are doctors and nurses. They might not have read the full story before sharing or just glanced over it. (Vanderslott, 2020). Anyone who spreads misinformation about Covid-19 is part of the problem and not the solution.

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*“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”.*

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Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,  
Director General – World Health Organisation

In the short time that the Covid-19 pandemic has been part of our lives, myths and untruths have flooded social media. Some are plainly false while others are more subtle. Some are reshaped old untruths modified to fit the Covid-19 pandemic. **These are some examples of false information offered as truth:**

- **[FAKE]** COVID-19 is caused by 5G. In videos posted on YouTube, an anonymous narrator with an English accent (supposedly Vodafone’s former CEO), explains that 5G is poisoning our cells and our cells respond by trying to expel that “toxicity.” (Reader 2020)
- **[FAKE]** Apply Silver Solution Gels which have been shown to kill other strains of coronavirus in 12 hours. And, drink boiling tea with cayenne pepper to burn the virus or take a hot shower with lemon juice. (Visram, 2020)
- **[FAKE]** Eating alkaline foods will stave off the novel coronavirus, which has a pH level of 5.5 to 8.5 • Drinking alcoholic beverages can prevent coronavirus. • Put a small pea-sized amount of antibiotic ointment like mupirocin inside your nostrils. The ointment will kill any infectious germs



when you breathe and should kill the coronavirus before it gets to your lungs. • Israel has had no deaths from coronavirus because people in the country have been cured by drinking hot water with lemon and bicarbonate of soda at night. • Wear a medical mask with the coloured side on the outside if you are sick and with the white side out if you're not sick. (Dupuy, Lajka and Seitz, 2020)

- **[FAKE]** Keep your throat moist to avoid contracting Covid 19 • Sip water every fifteen minutes to prevent infection • Hold your breath as a simple 'self-check' whether you have Coronavirus • Use a home made Tito's Vodka hand sanitizer to avoid infection • Use a cattle vaccine to fight Covid-19 • Breath hot air from a hair-dryer to cure Covid-19 • Gargle with salt water to eliminate Covid-19 • Avoid taking Ibuprofen medicines (Snopes, 2020)
- More fake information in the form of conspiracy theories and predictions: **[FAKE]** Author Dean Koontz as far back as 1981 published a novel about a "biological weapon" called "Wuhan-400" • The "blood genetic composition" of Africans, and black skin, can "resist" coronavirus (AfricaCheck.org, 2020)

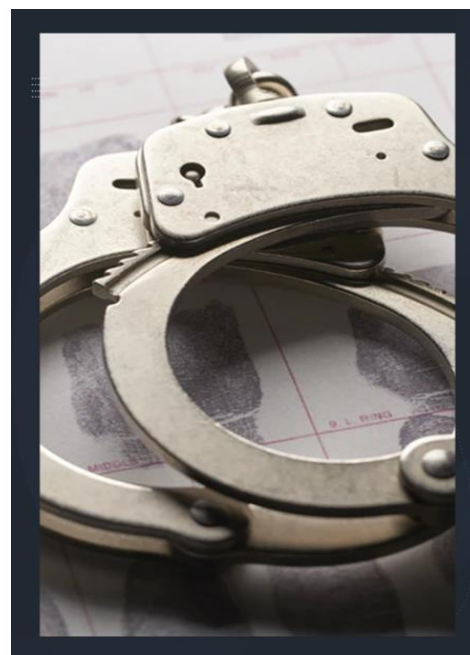
Hackers are also taking advantage of people's desire for information on the pandemic: When opened, scam emails from numerous hackers offering a fully functioning replica of the Johns Hopkins interactive map, malware is installed on the user's computer which steals passwords, credit card numbers, and other sensitive information. The Johns Hopkins map scam is just one of the ways hackers have been leveraging the coronavirus to steal data. Chinese hackers ("Vicious Panda" virus) have sent emails offering a fake coronavirus document from the Mongolian Health Ministry. When victims download the document, a piece of malware gains access to their computer or smartphone. (Sullivan, 2020)

It is hard to understand why people other than outright fraudsters forward misinformation. An article in India Today gives possible motives of those who

without hesitation forward whatever lands in their social media accounts. Two such motives are: (1) a feeling of duty to share breaking news just in case it is true and could affect those in their networks. (2) a sense of duty to democratise access to information – everyone should be able to know everything. (Faisal, 2020)

**Whatever reasons lead people to forward fake Covid-19 information, it is now time to stop.** When you think about forwarding a message, consider the following:

- You may be committing a criminal offence subject to a fine and or imprisonment. Regulation 11(5) (a) of the Regulations issued on 18 March 2020 (GG43107) in terms of Section 27(2)(1) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 states. "Any person who publishes any statement, through any medium, including social media, with the intention to deceive any other person about – COVID-19;... commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months, or both such fine and imprisonment." The law and government pronouncements leave no doubt about the government's disapproval and intention to act against of transmission of Covid-19 misinformation.



Social media misinformation – A criminal offence  
Picture: Bill Oxford – Unsplash.com



- You may play a part in harming fellow humans. (See the news stories in the text box below.) Fake news can kindle mob hysteria and violence may follow.

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*“We must stop spreading fake news that either ridicules the efforts of the health workers or that frightens people... We need those communities to be well-informed so that they do not panic in the wrong way and end up causing more problems for ourselves.”*

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Zweli Mkhize SA Health Minister

- Crises always generate levels of high uncertainty, which in turn breeds anxiety. This leads people to find ways of resolving uncertainty and reducing their anxiety by seeking information about the threat. They're doing what humans always do – trying to make sense of a confusing situation. (Naughton, 2020) When misinformation obscures the truth and readers don't know what to trust (Snopes, 2020), anxiety remains unresolved.

Three reported news stories illustrate the harm that fake information spread on social media can cause:

- (1) In Ukraine violent clashes broke out between police and villagers whose fears about Covid-19, fanned by social media misinformation, led them to try and physically bar citizens evacuated from China being housed in a village sanatorium. (Naughton, 2020)
- (2) In Limpopo, South Africa there was public outrage when government announced that 121 South African evacuees from Wuhan, China, would be quarantined at the Ranch Resort in Polokwane. Despite comprehensive measures by government to protect the community from any risks of 'contamination', threats to block the accommodation of the evacuees were rife. In the end they did not

materialise. Police and SANDF forces were deployed to prevent communities taking the law into their own hands. In the incident social media was influential with the

- #LimpopolsNotADumpingSite trending.
- (3) In Iran, nearly 300 people are reported to have been killed and more than 1,000 have become ill after ingesting toxic methanol across Iran following the spread across social media of fake remedies for coronavirus, where people remain deeply suspicious of the government after it downplayed the crisis for days before it overwhelmed the country. (Skoulding, 2020)

By applying the following seven checks, every user of social media can help stop the 'infodemic'.

1. When you receive fresh advice via social media rather than immediately forwarding to your family and friends, simply **stop and think**. If you have any doubts, pause, and check it out further. (Carmichael and Spring, 2020).
2. **Be sceptical about the scientific claims** of the message. Good science writers endeavour to give you the most accurate representation of which way the evidence is swaying but would caution against making statements such as “scientific evidence proves that...”. Check whether there is a reference or link to the original research in the story. Check whether it's also being reported in other media outlets. Chances are that if it really is a “breakthrough” discovery then many other outlets will be reporting the same thing. If it's a lone WhatsApp message with a certain claim with no evidence, it is dubious. Be wary of scientists in unrelated disciplines being elevated to positions of authority. (Hazelton, 2020)
3. **Question the source using online fact checking services.** Unsubstantiated references to fake “Taiwanese experts” or “Japanese doctors” or “Stanford University” have been made during the Covid-19



outbreak. (Vanderslott, 2020) It should not take much deep thinking to deduce that “*Victor, whose daughter is a Pharmacist (M.Sc.) at Pfizer Pharmaceuticals in Italy*” does not have a different and lifesaving set of regulations and rules to avoid getting Covid-19. Yet a WhatsApp message with this introduction went viral. Use online fact checking services to reveal dishonest messages, for example [apnews.com/APFactCheck](https://apnews.com/APFactCheck); [Snopes.com](https://snopes.com); [Africacheck.org](https://africacheck.org); and [factcheck.afp.com/afp-south-africa](https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-south-africa). For the best advice on dealing with the health ramifications of Covid-19 one should rely on authoritative sources including National Government Health Departments, WHO, NICD, CDC and verified scientific research by credible institutions.

#### 4. Examine the grammar and general presentation of the message.

Spelling and grammatical errors or sections in capital letters are a warning sign. Watch for over-encouragement to share such as “*please share this email far and wide with every South African parent*”, which presses you to share – this is how viral messaging works. (Vanderslott, 2020)

#### 5. Avoid being unduly influenced by confirmation bias. **Just because you agree with it, doesn't make it true.** (Carmichael and Spring, 2020)

#### 6. **Don't be persuaded by one known truth in a list of advice.** Make sure you are not forwarding a long list of advice because you know for certain that one of the tips (say, about hand washing) is true. (Carmichael and Spring, 2020)

#### 7. **Only forward content you know to be true.** Don't forward things on “just in case” they might be true. Be aware that content which you may have contextualised by a comment such as “this looks dicey, but I thought you should read it”, might later be stripped out. (Carmichael and Spring, 2020)

### 7 Checks: Spotting a fake message

1. Stop and think
2. Be sceptical about scientific claims
3. Question the source using online fact checking services
4. Examine the grammar and general presentation of the message
5. Just because you agree with it, doesn't make it true
6. Don't be persuaded by one known truth in a list of advice
7. Only forward content you know to be true

Employers also have a role to play in stopping the infodemic. Top of the list is communication to employees. A message which covers the topics of this note: fake information awareness • understanding of consequences of spreading fake news, and • steps which employees can implement to ensure they do not spread Covid-19 misinformation, should be widely circulated.



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## Regulation

1. Regulations issued on 18 March 2020 (GG43107) in terms of Section 27(2)(1) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002

- The contents of Human Resources Notes do not constitute legal advice. For specific professional assistance tailored to your needs consult our experts.
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**the most  
valuable of all  
capital is that  
which is  
invested in  
human beings**

- Alfred Marshall