

Search...



HOME

LIFESTYLE

BUSINESS

LAW

HEALTH

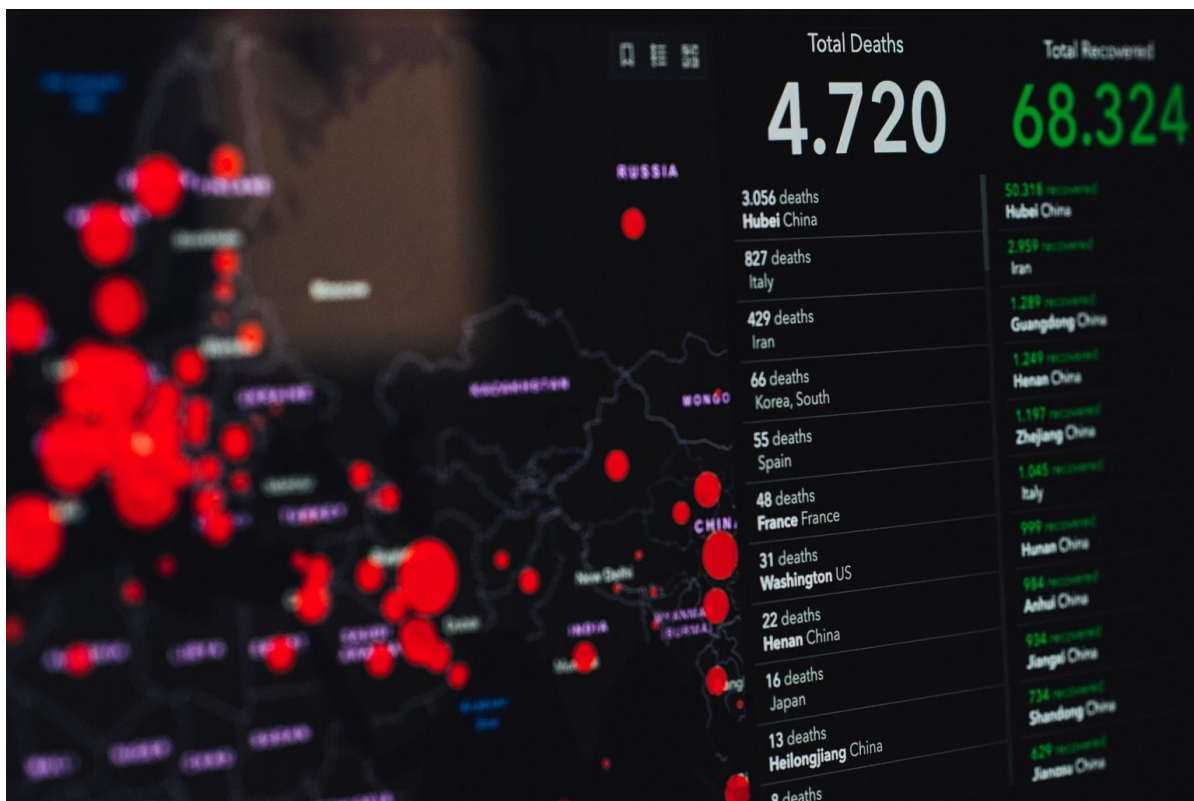
GOOD NEWS

FEATURED STORIES

Journalism and COVID-19: What's the Cost of Fighting Misinformation?

AUGUST 28, 2020 BY KEVIN LATORRE

0 0



Since it broke the globe earlier this year, COVID-19 has created an information paradox. Experts, politicians and citizens have plenty to say. And yet what we feel we know shrinks all the time. Why? COVID-19 misinformation.

With the [Refresh the Press](#) series, we examine the factors that impact 21st-century journalism. [Social media misinformation](#) has already commanded lots of ink. But for journalism, COVID-19 misinformation has had an even faster, stronger grip.

Health Misinformation Preexisted COVID-19

To start, let's define health misinformation. We've already defined misinformation as falsehoods spread unintentionally, where the speaker or writer believes they've said the truth. But health misinformation concerns (you guessed it) health topics. That can mean personal health, medical advice, nutrition, and more.

Image courtesy of *Dr. Jen Gunter*.

Tips for the best exercises, best foods, best superfoods, and best self-care options are impossible to miss online. Plenty of treatments contested by health experts have spread there, as products promising to cure any number of ailments. But put pseudo-science claims aside: some forms of health misinformation can bring direct harm.

The anti-vaxxer movement, which claims that vaccinating your kids will harm their health, has long survived online. And its own harm happens front and center: in 2019, the World Health Organization [classified](#) the movement as a global health threat.

[Bridget Barrett](#), a PhD researcher at UNC – Chapel Hill, named anti-vaxxer conspiracies as health misinformation which “spread like wildfire and did legitimate damage.” However, her [joint research](#) of how social media companies handle falsehoods found that health misinformation often faced scrutiny. “There’s a bit more of a playbook for health issues,” she said. Social media companies can more easily turn to health authorities to flag misleading or false health statements.

But then came COVID-19.

That Health Misinformation Worsened with COVID-19

Barrett explained that social media companies tried to clamp down on the online COVID-19 falsehoods. “[COVID-19] policies are much stricter,” she said. “These platforms are much more willing to take down content related to COVID-19.” She added that the virus’s urgency introduced new rules. “It matters more, it’s a public emergency.” The [removal](#) of the viral “Plandemic” video (which spouted anti-vaxxer conspiracies) from Facebook and Twitter gives one example.

But those emergency measures proved ineffective. “It didn’t work,” Barrett said. “All the misinformation is still rampant.” Why? She pointed to COVID-19 misinformation spread in spaces other than social media – including from elected officials.

Coverage of the hydroxychloroquine debate. Image courtesy of *Docwire News*.

Remember the word “[hydroxychloroquine](#)”? The malaria-treatment drug became a sticking point after President Trump [touted it](#) as crucial for treating COVID-19. Dr. Fauci and [the FDA](#) have both discouraged its use, given findings of heart-complications. But the president hasn’t backed down from his support. A video from seven doctors who also [supported](#) the medicine (despite other experts’ condemnation) was [removed](#) by both Twitter and Facebook. The COVID-19 regulations Barrett mentioned have taken effect online, though they haven’t gotten a tight grip.

“It’s not a social media problem,” Barrett says. “It’s a problem with trust in our institutions.”

Conflicting COVID-19 messages have spurred mistrust and misinformation.

[Dr. Alison Lazard](#) points to that same issue of expert’s messages. As a health communications researcher at UNC – Chapel Hill, she has advised North Carolina Dept. of Health and Human Services Secretary Mandy Cohen for the state’s COVID-19 response. “One of the misinformation problems stems from the top,” Lazard said. She pointed to “mixed messages from authority that we don’t usually have when it comes to health behaviors and guidance.”

Her research on behalf of North Carolina’s COVID-19 messages involved surveys, panels and focus groups which specifically sought out our state’s vulnerable populations. “People are scared,” she reported. Expert guidance has a hand in people’s uncertainty, she explained. “They want clear direction about what to do in a crisis.”

Take, for instance, messages from the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lazard’s research show that many people in North Carolina look to them. But she also pointed out that CDC expert guidance has changed. “We heard one thing and now we hear another,” she said. “Don’t wear a mask, wear a mask. Make sure you wash your hands – no, that doesn’t really matter

News coverage of the CDC’s changing mask guidance.

Image courtesy of *CNN*.

that much.” What we know about COVID-19 changes all the time, and so expert guidance has to change also. On the ground, it can sound like mixed messages.

This step-machine of what experts know also enmeshes journalism in COVID-19 misinformation.

Journalism Has to Play the COVID-19 Game

We’ve mentioned before how misinformation forces journalists to spend time debunking it. This cycle plays out in COVID-19 misinformation, too: national media must keep [disputing hydroxychloroquine](#) and reinforcing the [need for masks](#). Every news site has to debunk [COVID-19 myths](#), though doing that feeds the quagmire of the virus’s online information.

But COVID-19’s urgency also demands quick news about science that needs a long process. “We are learning as we go,” Lazard said, “in ways that we don’t with other health communications.” If you need to give guidance in treating chronic illness, for instance, you’ll have a body of scientific knowledge to draw from. But that body requires years of scholarship. Often, scientists are still catching up to COVID-19.

Journalism, to stay ahead of COVID-19 misinformation, has to move faster than the science it reports.

“The science is quickly evolving,” Lazard said, “because there’s so much pressure to get it out there fast.” Journalism faces that same pressure to report things quickly, given the continued urgency of COVID-19. What news sites put out generally isn’t misinformation, of course. Most journalists do everything they can to accurately present evolving research. But their speed (per the public demand) doesn’t suit methodical scientific inquiry. Lazard added, “We don’t have the time to have the usual arguments, fact-checking, verification, and replication that’s really required.”

The constant, rapid news about COVID-19 can grow confusing.

But the speed of news (which includes revisions and new findings) can disorient audiences. As Lazard explains it, we sometimes expect science to speak definitively right out of the gate. That sets us up for confusion. “The point of science isn’t always to be right,” she said, “it’s to build evidence and sometimes to falsify evidence.” In practice, that mission can mean contradictory findings. “For many consumers, it’s just confusing when things come out and they change.”

This seemingly-mixed messaging from media and government muddies online information on COVID-19. So does any one of the billions of social media users who decides to share their thoughts about those messages. And so the cycle spins on. Journalism, which pursues sound information for the public, has to add its own (careful) input on COVID-19, though that might only confuse people and worsen online misinformation.

What You Can Do

Read news about the virus with a fine-toothed comb, if you haven’t already. COVID-19 misinformation appears in more places than you’d think. Bill Adair, journalism professor at Duke, [warns](#) that online misinformation extends widely: “We just see in every corner of the world, in every corner of our lives, there is just so much information. It pops up in such insidious ways.”

Because COVID-19 misinformation has gotten pervasive, triangulate your information between a few sources. Don’t rely only on the White House [task force](#) or on [CNN](#) alone. Try both, and add in [STAT News](#), the [FDA](#) and the [CDC](#) also.

You might need a few more minutes to weigh all their input. But, given the continuing impact of COVID-19, we likely don’t have to sell you on why it’s important to give those few extra minutes.

COVID-19, Journalism, Misinformation, news media, Refresh the Press

A “Personal Delivery Device” Might Be Coming To Your Neighborhood

MLK’s “I Have a Dream” Speech Has Roots in North Carolina

About author

KEVIN LATORRE (KEVIN LATORRE)

Kevin serves as the associate editor for North Carolina News Daily. He is also a graduate student living in the Triangle Area of North Carolina. He graduated from the Univ. of Texas – Austin with an English degree in 2019, going from there to study strategic communications at the Univ. of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. He received the 2020 Kathryn M. Cronin Scholarship for health and medical journalism.

Though he writes and edits media and health news for NCND, his background includes substance abuse articles, medical marketing advice and public relations campaigns for a variety of brands. You can follow Kevin at @KLaTorre_Writer.

<https://kevinlatorre.weebly.com/>

More posts

JULY 09, 2020

Five Upcoming North Carolina Car Shows and Races

Summer is now in full swing, and although some of the events we’ve looked forward to may be canceled, car...

[READ MORE](#)

JULY 11, 2020

Budding Teen Entrepreneur in the Triangle: Blue Strawberry Studio

Emily Orr, a North Carolina teen entrepreneur, built an impressive hand-lettering and digital art business, Blue Strawberry Studios. How?

[READ MORE](#)

JUNE 23, 2020

Black-Owned Cloth & Accessories Businesses in NC

Whether you’re looking for vintage second-hand items or fresh designs right off the rack, there is a multitude of businesses where you can purchase your wardrobe from in North Carolina. We’ve gathered a list of Black-owned businesses where you can find your clothing and accessories while supporting the

Leave a Reply

Logged in as *Kevin LaTorre*. [Log out?](#)

COMMENT

SUBMIT