

Why COVID-19 misinformation spread faster than pandemic in early March

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In early March, when the true scope of the coronavirus pandemic was still widely unknown to the public, misinformation was rampant on

social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

A recent study examined two early pandemic myths. Researchers from three universities, including Joseph McGlynn, an assistant professor at the University of North Texas' Department of Communication Studies, studied how long it took before the myths were sufficiently debunked on the same social platform. In this case, Twitter.

McGlynn, along with researchers from the University of Texas and the University of Kentucky, examined two types of coronavirus myths: a diagnosis [myth](#) and a treatment myth.

The diagnosis myth asserted that if you could hold your breath for 10 seconds it was evidence you did not have COVID-19. The treatment myth asserted that an infected person could cure themselves of the coronavirus by gargling a hot liquid or bleach.

Tweets pushing both bogus ideas started ramping up on March 7, McGlynn said.

"They basically got off to a head start that gave misinformation momentum," McGlynn said. "It was a full week before the total amount of debunking responses matched the disinformation tweets. That delay in response allowed misinformation to circulate and spread."

At least one type of psychological phenomenon is at work when dealing with misinformation, disinformation and lies. The illusory truth effect, also referred to as the mere exposure effect, "occurs when repeating a statement increases the belief that it's true even when the statement is actually false," according to PsychologyToday.com.

This effect helps perpetuate falsehoods with the simple notion of repetition, as the saying "if you repeat a lie long enough ... " suggests.

Repeated exposure "to both information and misinformation increases the sense that it's true, regardless of the source's credibility," as PsychologyToday.com reported.

McGlynn and the other researchers found that both myths they studied took off despite vague sources.

"The misinformation messages were much more likely to allude to a general, nonspecific authority source such as 'top medical officials,' or "a nurse friend," McGlynn said. "Essentially using our tendency to trust authority sources against us."

Oftentimes, McGlynn said, the goal of misinformation is not necessarily only about getting people to believe something wrong, but also to create confusion. This is especially true with the kind of [social media](#) tampering the Russian government was caught doing during the 2016 presidential election, according to the U.S. government.

The researchers chose the two myths because they were two of the first widely spread in the pandemic and were so "unequivocally false," McGlynn said.

"They were very prominent," he said. "The problem with a lot of misinformation after studying it is these false claims get embedded with accurate recommendations."

By offering the falsehood among other accurate information, the falsehood is given cover, which makes it easier to gain traction and more difficult for the reader to sort out fact from fiction. Hence, confusion.

"Once someone believes misinformation, it becomes very difficult to get them to change their mind," McGlynn said. "So it's really important to debunk these claims quickly and efficiently."

In March, these two myths had about a week's head start on reality. It took that long for the debunking tweets to measure up to the myth tweets, McGlynn said.

"At that inflection point around March 14, debunking took off and matched the levels of misinformation and misinformation receded," he said.

Without opposition, the misinformation was able to flourish.

"Once (the debunking message) got prominent enough, it's just such a harder place for misinformation to circulate," he said. "Because when there is no debunking it's a one-sided message. Once the debunking is out there and really prominent, then at least people are skeptical. Even if they hear the misinformation they're thinking, 'I think I heard that actually wasn't true.'"

The researchers hope organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, as well as state and local health officials, take a more offensive, vigilant tack with myth busting in the future. In the current climate, potential myths and misinformation about a COVID-19 vaccine are likely on the horizon.

McGlynn hopes such health officials are preparing adequately. Perhaps dedicating personnel to actively seeking out misinformation on social media and debunking it with an overwhelming onslaught of truth and fact. The actual number of messages is important, he said. Just as the repetition of a lie can help it gain traction, the same is true for the truth.

"Organizations should really be anticipating these false claims rather than be surprised by how many there are," he said. "Misinformation is offense, and debunking is defense. So it makes sense that there will be some delay, but it's really important for organizations to plan ahead."

As more became known about COVID-19, much of the public was better equipped to handle misinformation, although disinformation, of course, persists in certain corners of the Internet.

"When people have a lot of uncertainty, that's when they tend to look to authority cues to guide their behavior," McGlynn said. "That's why the use of the nonspecific authority sources was probably very effective for these misinformation campaigns. You take that void where people don't know what to think, don't know what to do, and misinformation steps right in. That's one reason why with COVID-19, the [misinformation](#) campaigns were so effective at creating confusion."

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