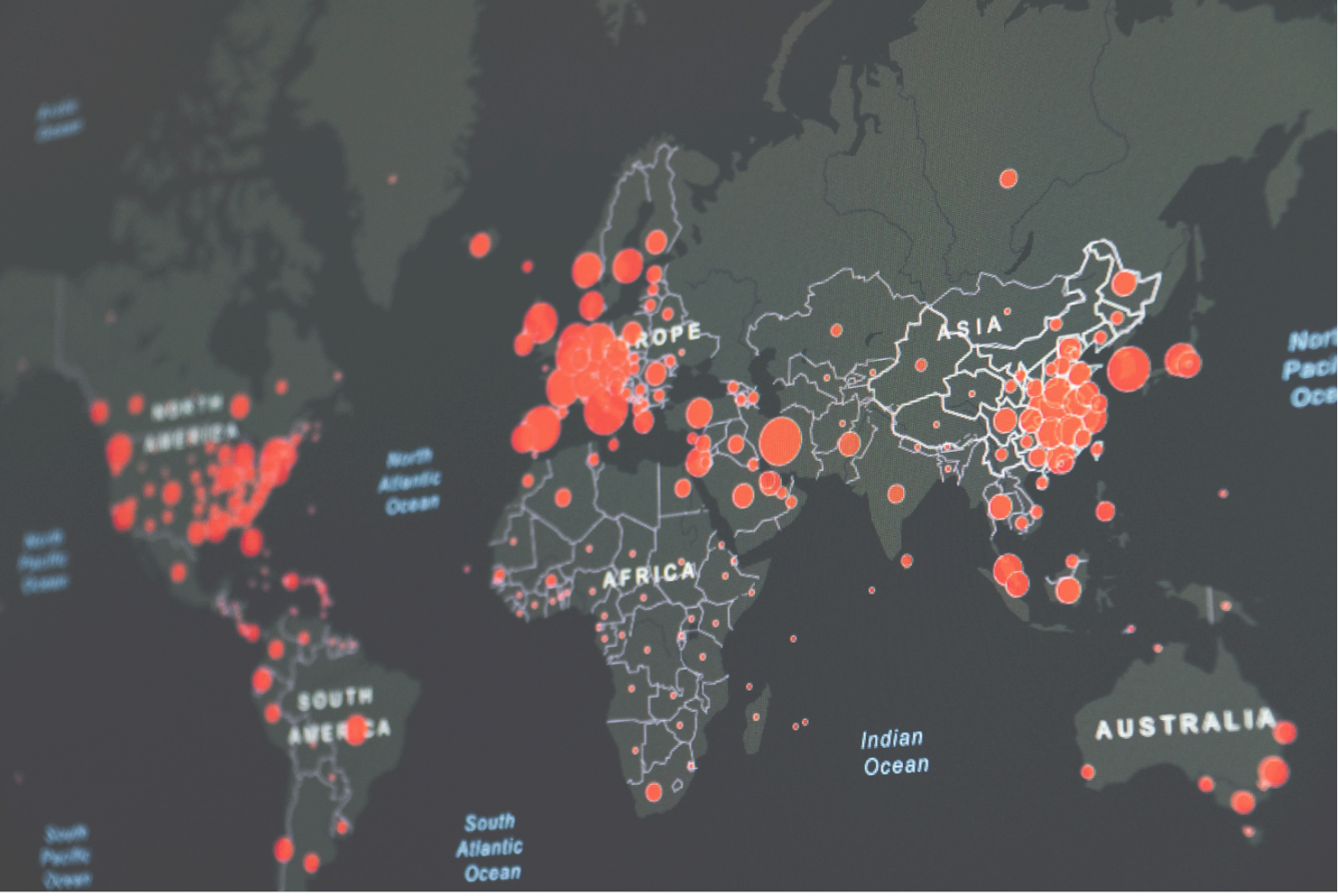


COVID-19 POLICY BRIEF

Misinformation & Freedom of Expression

WORLD WIDE WEB FOUNDATION

webfoundation.org

Introduction

As Covid-19 continues to spread rapidly around the world, it's more critical than ever that people, governments, companies and the medical community have access to timely and credible information. Lives depend on it.

The Web Foundation is especially concerned about the viral spread of misinformation and disinformation, censorship and other interference with legitimate free expression, and the ability for scientists, medical professionals and others to easily share and access knowledge. We also approach these concerns through a human rights lens, underscoring the need for a nuanced approach to balancing public health and safety goals with the right to free expression and privacy.

Concerns around misinformation and censorship — including in the health arena — aren't new. Misinformation has been circulating for centuries in the offline world, and for many years across the web. The 2019 Digital News Report showcased that more than half (55%) of the sample across 38 countries "reported concern about their ability to separate what is real and fake on the internet".

The problem isn't new, but this may be the first time that we face this challenge at such a massive scale: misinformation and disinformation circulating in one country can travel as far and wide as the virus itself. It is also the first time that many of us have experienced first-hand the negative impact that misinformation and censorship can have on individual and public health and safety.

The web is a critical tool to keep people informed about Covid-19. We all have a role to ensure the information it delivers is credible and aids in our response to the virus.

Governments must provide clear, up-to-date information to the public and the medical community, while working alongside companies to reduce the spread of misinformation.

Companies, whose technologies impact the lives of billions globally, must use their power to promote official public health resources and minimize the spread of false content.

And as citizens, we also have a significant role to play. By sharing credible information — and taking steps when we see misinformation — we can help to curb the spread of misleading claims.

These recommendations are based on the Contract for the Web — a global plan of action launched by the Web Foundation in 2019 for an online world that is safe and empowering for everyone.

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Definitions

Fake news: A term made popular by some politicians and news anchors to refer to non-factual information. Most experts recommend against using this umbrella term since it does not account for intentions and is often used to undermine journalists (UNESCO)
Disinformation: Deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda (dictionary.com)
Misinformation: False information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead (dictionary.com)
Infodemic: An overabundance of information — some accurate and some not — that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (WHO)

Policy Recommendations: Governments

Governments across the world face the incredible challenge of managing the Covid-19 pandemic while tackling a flood of misleading information that undermines their mission to protect public health and safety. Governments must proactively publish clear and accessible information to counter misinformation, while protecting the right to free expression.

Challenges

Volume and variety of information: Accurate information encouraging the behavior needed to slow the spread of Covid-19 may be getting lost in a sea of misinformation.

Public trust in government is already low in many countries, so people may be less likely to listen to official government advice and more likely to turn to information from unreliable sources.

Lack of national laws or international cooperation to effectively regulate misinformation, disinformation, and harmful content in accordance with human rights standards.

Governments promoting disinformation: Some state actors might be undertaking campaigns to spread disinformation in other countries, further deepening the existing crisis.

Governments should

Make Covid-19 information widely available and accessible to all

- Publish accurate, up-to-date information about Covid-19 on all official channels and across a variety of mediums, including social media.
- Choose methods that are more likely to reach diverse audiences. For example, younger individuals may be less likely to visit official web pages or mainstream news outlets; governments should consider sharing information on social media platforms especially popular with young people.
- Translate information into multiple languages, so all people living in the community have the information they need to stay healthy.
- Make sure information is accessible to people of all abilities, following web accessibility guidelines.
- Ensure official websites follow the latest guidelines on how best to publish announcements about critical information like public transport closures, quarantine guidelines and testing locations so people can find them quickly on search engines and apps.

Actively counter misinformation

- Governments and international organizations also have a critical role to play in actively rebutting misinformation while respecting free expression. We're encouraged by the UK government's leadership in countering misinformation about Covid-19.

Don’t spread misinformation or disinformation

- Coordinate accurate information across government so all public officials share and reinforce consistent messages about public health and safety.
- Make a public commitment that the government won’t conduct disinformation campaigns locally or within another nation state.

Promote and support open knowledge and open science

- Publish accurate, up-to-date and complete datasets and models so that researchers, medical experts and developers across the world can build on that knowledge to help fight the virus.
- Make publicly funded research on Covid-19 openly available.

Respect freedom of expression

- Governments need to ensure any restrictions are in line with the human right to free expression.
- Don’t censor activists, journalists, or medical professionals who use the web to speak out about challenges in managing the pandemic.
- Don’t prosecute the sharing of misinformation as a first defense against Covid-19 misinformation, and don’t pass new laws criminalizing its spread. Instead, governments should focus on promoting accurate information and reporting.

Policy Recommendations: Companies

With an audience of billions, social media companies in particular have a huge influence over what the world reads, watches and hears about the virus. But they face a number of significant challenges to providing accurate information to the public during this crisis.

Challenges

Content moderation: Many human content reviewers have understandably been sent home, leaving platforms more reliant on AI. Though AI systems can help tackle misinformation and other harmful content, they aren't perfect and don't replace human review entirely.

- Content taken down mistakenly can give the appearance of censorship..
- Errors in AI filtering can allow some harmful content to stay up.

Volume of misinformation: The huge increase in volume of misinformation around Covid-19 makes it hard for platforms to keep up.

Encrypted services make it harder for companies to track and take action on misinformation.

Ads for fake cures: Platforms continue to grapple with ads peddling bogus cures and ads for products that should be directed towards medical workers and vulnerable populations.

Disinformation: Some accounts and actors are purposely spreading disinformation.

Private groups and message boards are becoming breeding grounds for Covid-19 misinformation, and by their nature, are more difficult forums for companies to monitor consistently.

Companies should

Contract for the Web: Companies are asked to carry out risk assessments to understand and minimize risks created by their technologies, including risks associated with online content, such as misinformation and disinformation. *Read more at contractfortheweb.org*.

To mitigate these risks and challenges and help provide the accurate information the world needs to fight Covid-19, the Web Foundation is calling on companies to:

Prominently display accurate health information

- Dedicate space on home pages and other high-traffic areas to promote sources of official Covid-19 information from organizations like the World Health Organization and national public health agencies.
- Use “in-house ads” (i.e., ads on the platform) to promote official health information.

Use "positive nudging" to encourage users to share accurate, credible information

- Research suggests nudges can reduce the amount of misinformation shared by users. For example:
    - Messaging services, even if encrypted, could send periodic generalized (non-targeted) messages directly in the chat function to remind users to check the sources of information they're sharing.
    - Social media platforms could show "fly-outs", "pop ups" or other types of dialog boxes when people are about to post, reminding them to share accurate information with links to official sources.

Limit the spread of misinformation in closed groups and message boards

- Encourage and empower group admins to actively combat misinformation. Provide them advice on how to identify and respond to misinformation, like offering five tips in a local language, or videos in areas of low literacy rates.

Limit the number of times a user can forward a message

- Evidence suggests limiting the number of times a user can forward a message can slow the speed at which misinformation becomes viral, giving fact checkers, media and public authorities more time to provide a factual response to the misinformation.

Dedicate emergency resources to limit the spread of misinformation, and remove content when warranted

- Work swiftly to identify safe ways for human moderators to continue to review content.
- Dedicate emergency engineering and product resources to improve AI-based detection of harmful material while human reviewers are limited in capacity.
- Conduct more frequent reviews of algorithms to detect where they're amplifying misinformation and work quickly to change relevance scores to reduce the spread, and provide transparency around this work.

Make content takedown processes more transparent

- Publish content removal policies and processes, including the appeals process.
- Privately notify individuals who post information that is removed: explain why the content was determined to violate the policy, and explain the appeals process.
- Leave a space where the content was and inform other users that it was taken down (similar to errors 403 and 451 on the web).
- Share content-removal data with the fact-checking community, with a break-down by category.

News publishers should continue to make Covid-19 content free to the public so everyone can access quality information about the pandemic, regardless of their ability to pay. Scientific publishers should do the same so more people have access to quality research, which can be used to debunk misconceptions.

Network providers should offer free data packages so everyone can afford to access the full web and fact-check information online.

All companies should conduct risk assessments to ensure that decisions made are done with a view to any negative consequences for individuals and broader society. We encourage companies to use a new rapid human rights assessment tool designed for evaluating business responses to Covid-19.

Work together to share best practices and exchange information on prevalent viral content, based in human rights: We're encouraged by the example of the European Broadcasting Union's Trusted News Initiative, which enables close coordination and information sharing between academics, platforms and media outlets.

Policy Recommendations: Citizens

It's always been difficult for people to distinguish true from false online, and as we all seek information to help us understand the disease, the stakes have never been higher.

Challenges

Some bad actors are promoting misinformation for their own self-interest or for a group they support. For example, some people are spreading scams for economic benefit and using falsehoods to build up large followings online.

Content shared intentionally to wreak havoc: Some bad actors are motivated by malicious intent. For example, there are trolls who are seeking to derail conversations.

Sharing out of a genuine desire to help others: Perhaps one of the biggest sources of misinformation is people with a sincere desire to share helpful information and warn others about threats. Our natural instinct is to trust friends and family in uncertain times, so when they share misinformation we're more likely to believe it.

Citizens should

The Contract for the Web asks people to be good online citizens, including to be civil to each other, educate the next generation on good digital practices, and stand up for marginalised groups when they're abused or targeted online. *Read more at contractfortheweb.org.*

In the era of Covid 19, we all have a responsibility to fight misinformation that threatens our health, puts individuals at risk, incites racial hatred, and undermines our collective efforts to curb the virus. The Web Foundation is calling on everyone, everywhere to:

Get the facts out

- Share accurate, credible updates and advice from trusted sources like WHO, public health authorities and reputable news outlets.
- Learn the basics of the disease. The more you know about its causes, symptoms and spread, the better able you'll be to identify and take action on misinformation.

Check before you share

- Ask yourself: *Is what I'm about to share accurate information? Am I linking to a credible source?*
- If you're not sure whether the information is accurate, search online to try to verify it.
- You can also check images and videos that may have been taken out of context using tools like Google Reverse Image Search, RevEye and InVid (Politifact).

Help others get it right

- Don't share, quote, or reply to misinformation as this engagement can help it spread further.
- Instead, when someone you don't know shares misinformation, report it and then block them.
- And if your friends and family share false content, message them privately and suggest they remove the post, providing them with alternative accurate sources.
    - Research suggests that people are more open to corrections from friends and family than from strangers.
    - Taking an empathetic approach is just as effective as making corrections that are sharper in tone.

Report it

- Use reporting tools available on social media platforms to report misinformation.
- If misinformation is being shared in private chat groups, contact the administrators and ask them to engage with those sharing it.

Additional Resources

Follow the World Health Organization: Website, Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Whatsapp.

Take our three steps to help fight viral Covid-19 misinformation.

Read Politifact's '7 ways to avoid misinformation during the coronavirus pandemic'.