

Addressing the misinformation pandemic

Editorial

Back in 2016, as many watched the Internet practically meltdown with continuing coverage of the Ebola outbreak, I remember hearing a news report that claimed the term “Ebola” had replaced “Twerking” as the most popular search term on Google. Nevertheless, despite the availability of accurate information from organizations including the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people still chose to believe and share misinformation, homeopathic cures, and naturopathic quackery. It remains an undeniable aspect of modern society that those persons untrained in medicine, health science, or research, often feel qualified to not only share irrational preventions, but advice others on these measures and cure-alls that are based on nothing more than ridiculous belief and unfounded opinion.

What is striking and should have been learned from the 2016 Ebola outbreak, is that when people willfully choose to ignore science in favor of belief or opinion, the results are often catastrophic. Despite information from infectious disease experts, public health practitioners, and epidemiologists, social media has embraced the background noise, and completely disregards the science. We might ask what the average person should do when bombarded with misinformation?

Educate yourself. More importantly, filter where you get your information and fact check everything. Most likely, if you do not have the real information on pandemic disease or illness, neither do your coworkers. Check your sources. You are not going to check the CDC website for information on how frequently you need to change the engine oil in your car, so do not expect the accurate assessment of public health issues from your garage mechanic, or your electrician, or anyone else untrained in these sciences. Society must realize that information found on the Internet is not regulated for quality or accuracy; this is particularly important for individuals trained in medical or health sciences when attempting to evaluate the value of information on this pandemic or any other infectious outbreak. Therefore, it is critical to ask questions before using resources from the Internet: Start by asking the following questions: Is this information from a recognized medical or public health resource? Are the person’s credentials listed, and are they reflective of this level of expertise? Is the author qualified to write about this particular subject? Is there a link to their homepage, organization, or University? Always look to motive.

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The motives used by those who spread misinformation on social media are generally attempting to accomplish:

1. Spread misinformation to see how far it will go.
2. Promote a political or belief system.
3. Sell a product.
4. Appear to be an expert.

In conclusion, consumers of social media must be cautious of the information that they accept as factual. Websites, mainly social media sites, are susceptible to both accidental and deliberate hoaxes and are seldom fact-checked. Check with known sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and organizations like Johns Hopkins University (JHU).

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