

MARCH 16, 2020

People's uncertainty about the novel coronavirus can lead them to believe misinformation, says Stanford scholar

Check health-related information about the coronavirus from established news sources rather than from shared stories in social media, advises Professor of Communication Jeff Hancock.

BY MELISSA DE WITTE

As people increasingly social distance themselves to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, social media is an appealing way to stay in contact with friends, family and colleagues. But it can also be a source of misinformation and bad advice – some of it even dangerously wrong.

Here, Jeff Hancock (<https://comm.stanford.edu/faculty-hancock/>), a professor of communication in Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences and founding director of the **Stanford Social Media Lab** (<https://sml.stanford.edu/>), shares why these deceptive messages are appealing and what people can do to avoid bad advice – including checking information from established news sources rather than social media news feeds.



Stanford's Jeff Hancock shares why deceptive messages are appealing and what people can do to avoid bad advice – including checking information from established news sources rather than social media news feeds. (Image credit: Courtesy Stanford HCI Group)

What are the upsides and downsides of turning to social media during the novel coronavirus pandemic?

Social media is allowing us to learn about information in our social world in extremely rapid and far-flung ways. We can learn about coronavirus news in other parts of the world and our own backyards within seconds and minutes. Social media is also an important way of staying socially connected with one another, which is incredibly important for our psychological health as we all begin to engage in social distancing.

But having access to all this information can raise our anxiety since we tend to pay attention to bad news, and somewhat increased anxiety is a reasonable response.

How can people discern false information about the new coronavirus from accurate, medical advice?

It's important to check health-related information from established news sources rather than from shared stories in social media. A subscription to any reputable news organization is highly recommended, though many news sites (e.g., the New York Times) are offering free access to coronavirus related news.

Are there telltale signs people can look for when trying to discern fake versus real information online?

Compared to real news, fake news tends to include information that is more surprising, upsetting or geared to trigger anger or anxiety. Any information that fits that (and a lot of coronavirus news can) should be double checked. Other cues that should raise suspicion include unknown sources, unusual numbers of endorsements (or likes) and memes that focus on partisan topics.

As a scholar of social media and communication, have you noticed anything new about how the new coronavirus is discussed online?

I think social media communication is very much reflecting our fears and concerns with the virus, and this should be no surprise. As people struggle to learn more about it, to cope with the disruptions and seek to understand how they should deal with it, they are using social media to accomplish those goals and to express their fear and uncertainty.

What leads people to believe deceptive – and even dangerously wrong – information online?

When people are fearful they seek information to reduce uncertainty. This can lead people to believe information that may be wrong or deceptive because it helps make them feel better, or allows them to place blame about what's happening. This is often why conspiracy theories become so prominent. Again, the best antidote here is subscribing to a reputable news service.

Who is typically behind such misinformation campaigns and hoaxes? What is their motivation?

Because media business models are based on attention economics, bad actors create mal-information (which includes fake news, misinformation and disinformation) about the coronavirus in order to get people to attend to their content, and ultimately make money from that attention. Money is the primary motivation.

A second motivation is partisanship and partisans try to lay blame for the crisis with political opponents. The third main motivation is seeking to disrupt and confuse the public. This was the Russian election interference motivation for mal-information and remains their objective along with some other hostile state actors.

What can media platforms do to control mal-information? What can users do?

The immediate solution here has to come from the media platforms to remove this content and prevent mal-information from spreading on their platforms. This is an important responsibility that they simply cannot shirk. Longer-term, people need to be aware of these forms of mal-information, ensuring they check their sources and get their news from authoritative and reputable news services.

Media Contacts

Melissa De Witte, Stanford News Service: (650) 723-6438; mdewitte@stanford.edu (<mailto:mdewitte@stanford.edu>)
