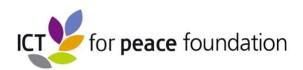# When going viral can be lethal:

The need for reliable information in the wake of Covid-19

By Anne-Marie Buzatu[1]

In these uncertain Covid-19 times, most of us have been scrambling to find reliable information about the virus to better protect ourselves and our loved ones. To be sure, there is plenty of virus-related information available online—so much so that it can feel overwhelming. However, what is less clear is which stories and sources of information we can really trust. Unfortunately, the current pandemic has not been immune to misinformation, sensationalism and conspiracy theories, a concern that the WHO has called an "infodemic." However, in a shift from past practices many of the top social media platforms have undertaken specific measures to try to stop misleading and potentially dangerous information from going viral. While this can be seen as a welcome development, these efforts also raise concerns about freedom of expression, the right to accurate and up-to-date information and what this could mean for other important challenges post-pandemic.

A quick Google search about Covid-19 brings up results that look and feel a bit different from pre-pandemic times. Flagged by a red "SoS Alert" banner, it shows information resources from the WHO, government agencies and mainstream news outlets. This is reportedly due to a "state of emergency" imposed on their search results, where human-selected results are being shown instead of algorithmically-generated ones. Google is also blocking ads that aim to capitalize on the pandemic, even announcing a temporary ban on all advertisements for respirators and medical masks. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter have adopted similar advertisement policies, and are rerouting posts and hashtags about the coronavirus to public health organizations. Other popular social media platforms including TikTok, Reddit, SnapChat and Pinterest are also part of this wave of more
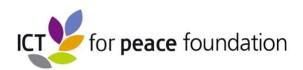
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responsible social media curation, putting in place measures that either label or block potentially misleading information. Along similar lines, while it is unable to monitor the content of messages due to its end-to-end encryption structure, WhatsApp has taken additional measures to curb mass forwarding of messages, a practice which has been a [vector for mis/disinformation](#) in the past, and one to which [older persons seem to be particularly vulnerable](#). On April 7 [WhatsApp announced it would restrict forwarding of messages to one chat at a time](#). In short, social media companies seem to be getting on board the "providing reliable information about the pandemic" bandwagon.

In the era of "Fake News," these measures sound reassuring. These companies whose business models depend on our sharing information and seeing their ads are now foregoing some revenue in the name of promoting public health. Even before the pandemic, some companies were taking measures to fight disinformation around the upcoming US presidential election. For example, Twitter had banned all political ads and Google had taken some measures to limit political ads. However, Facebook (which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp) took a different stance, stating in January 2020 that [it would continue to allow targeted political advertising](#) on its site without monitoring content for truthfulness, despite calls from members of US Congress for it to do so. In fact, Rob Leathern, Facebook's director of product management overseeing the advertising integrity division said that in the absence of explicit legislation regulating content on the site, Facebook would abide by the policy that "[people should be able to hear from those who wish to lead them, warts and all, and that what they say should be scrutinized and debated in public.](#)" Nevertheless, a couple of months later it seems that those "warts" do not include unchecked mis/disinformation about the coronavirus. More importantly, Facebook's about-face indicates that they have decided that providing information about the virus from reliable sources is better business policy even in the absence of explicit regulation to do so.
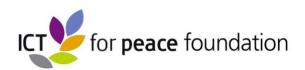
At the same time, we need to ensure that people raising credible alarms or sharing other important information are allowed platforms to express themselves, even if these messages go against official political lines. Reports of governments [suppressing](#) or [downplaying](#) warnings about the danger of

the novel coronavirus have led to assertions that more could have been done to stem the tide of the pandemic and prevent many infections if those warnings had been heeded earlier. The freedom to share information about the progression of the virus on publicly available platforms can also help in the fight to find better treatment options and better health outcomes. Reports of frontline healthcare professionals turning to platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share findings and carry out medical research in real-time underscore the importance of social media in this crisis. Unfortunately, less scrupulous sites use this information as fodder for spreading conspiracy theories, contributing to the infodemic.

And yet, beyond the current urgent need to protect our health and well-being, other concerns will soon come to the fore. As the pandemic progresses, it will be important to have reliable sources of information regarding what invasions of privacy, restrictions on our freedom of movement and right to assembly make sense. Many governments have imposed restrictions on these rights, and so long as they are lawful, necessary and proportionate to help reduce the spread of the virus, they are right to do so. As part of these efforts, a number of apps and mobile phone location data are being used to track the whereabouts of users, including whether they came in contact with an infected person. These are sometimes complimented by CCTV, facial recognition technology, and even use of drones to get visual confirmation of persons' locations and associations with others. However, as the threats diminish, we need to ensure that the restrictions and invasions of privacy also diminish. Having access to reliable information about the state of play of the crisis is essential for citizens to be able to hold their representatives to account, and to prevent overbroad restrictions on our rights.

The pandemic highlights the importance of separating the wheat from the chaff in the current media onslaught, but this responsibility is not only incumbent on social media platforms. We as netizens and consumers of online information bear an important responsibility to demand reliable information from online sites. While this may seem like a lot of work, there are resources to help. Several organizations have developed standards and methodologies for evaluating the accuracy of information, and in many cases they are working hand-in-hand with some of the bigger online platforms to

help fact-check stories and reduce the spread of false information. At the same time, we as individuals should develop the reflex to consider online content and information through the lens of healthy skepticism--even if the story "seems right" to us.   We need to ask the following questions: Is the story published by a partisan source? Where does the site's funding come from? Who stands to gain from this post? Becoming more savvy purveyors of online information is not only smart, it could also save lives.

Looking ahead to times when the pandemic is no longer dominating headlines, it is safe to say that the online world--in particular social media platforms—will feel the effects for a long time to come. Certainly, online platforms have demonstrated their ability to reduce mis/disinformation, as well as to be forces for the common good, even when it cuts into their bottom lines. As their consumers, we will need to demand that they continue to play this important role. In similar fashion we as individuals will need to put the skills we have developed to find reliable health information online to good use, particularly as there will still be many crises looming that we will have to navigate.

As for right now keep (reliably) informed, don't take any unnecessary risks and stay safe.

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