Coronavirus outbreak: Social media platforms scramble to contain misinformation

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Hoaxes about the coronavirus are spreading as fast, if not faster, than the actual virus on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and the social media

platforms are scrambling to contain the global outbreak.

Some of the stories making the rounds: The virus originated in a seafood and meat market in Wuhan. Parents abandoning their children in an airport. FEMA proposing martial law to contain the coronavirus. The U.S. patented a vaccine years ago for the coronavirus.

All false and all examples of [misinformation](#) posted on the internet and shared on social media or on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp.

Health topics are a common target of misinformation peddlers looking to mislead people with dubious information. Misinformation about disease outbreaks is even harder to control because of the intensity of public interest and fear and the flood of posts and videos.

Twitter says it has begun steering users to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, surfacing "authoritative health sources" when users search for terms related to the coronavirus.

"We've launched a new dedicated search prompt to ensure that when you come to the service for information about the #coronavirus, you're met with credible, authoritative information first," the company said in a blog post Wednesday. Twitter has also stopped auto-suggest results that direct users to bogus content.

Facebook says it's placing warning labels on falsehoods—including some posts hawking treatments—and sending notifications to users who have shared debunked content. In some cases, the content is being shared in private Facebook groups that popped up after the virus began spreading, The Washington Post reported.

Google says it's promoting authoritative sources such as health experts, public health institutions or [media outlets](#) at the top of search results and

in "watch next" panels on YouTube. Google says it puts even more emphasis on authoritative sources when it comes to sensitive topics such as health information.

YouTube has invested heavily in prioritizing videos from legitimate sources to reduce the [spread of misinformation](#), Google said. Because it can take time to produce high-quality videos containing verified information, YouTube is showing short previews of news articles about the coronavirus outbreak in search results on YouTube.

Even TikTok is not immune.

BuzzFeed is keeping a running list of debunked coronavirus claims on social media from its origin to treatments to fabricated government communications.

Axios reported that "nearly 13,000 posts across Twitter, public Facebook pages, and Reddit between January 24 and January 27 had spread conspiracy theories, including that the virus "may be a bioweapon or a depopulation method."

Part of the challenge: the growing volume of social media posts, legitimate and not. Twitter says it has seen 15 million tweets in the past four weeks, and "that trend looks set to continue."

How to avoid spreading coronavirus misinformation

- Sharing is not always caring. Don't pass along social media posts to friends and family before making sure they are accurate. Turn to public health institutions and authoritative news sources to verify posts.
- Beware social media posts that traffic in fear or strain credulity. If it sounds too crazy to be true, it probably is. So take a deep

breath, then do your homework.

- Don't blindly trust the internet. Disinformation is often tough to spot because sometimes it's not technically false. Instead, social [media](#) posts dangle half-truths or twist facts with something made up or offer up information that is completely out of context.

- You can't always trust what you see or hear. People instinctively trust images more than words, and misinformation peddlers often try to use that against you. Watch out for images, videos and even audio that have been digitally manipulated, taken out of context or mislabeled. When in doubt, do a Google search or a Google image search.

- Misinformation needs a crowd. Effective campaigns rely on recruiting unsuspecting [social media](#) users to amplify and legitimize falsehoods.

- Seeing too much misinformation? Change the mix of content in your feed by seeking out reliable sources of information that offer viewpoints that are different from your own. And, if you do share something that turns out to be false, own it and correct the record.

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