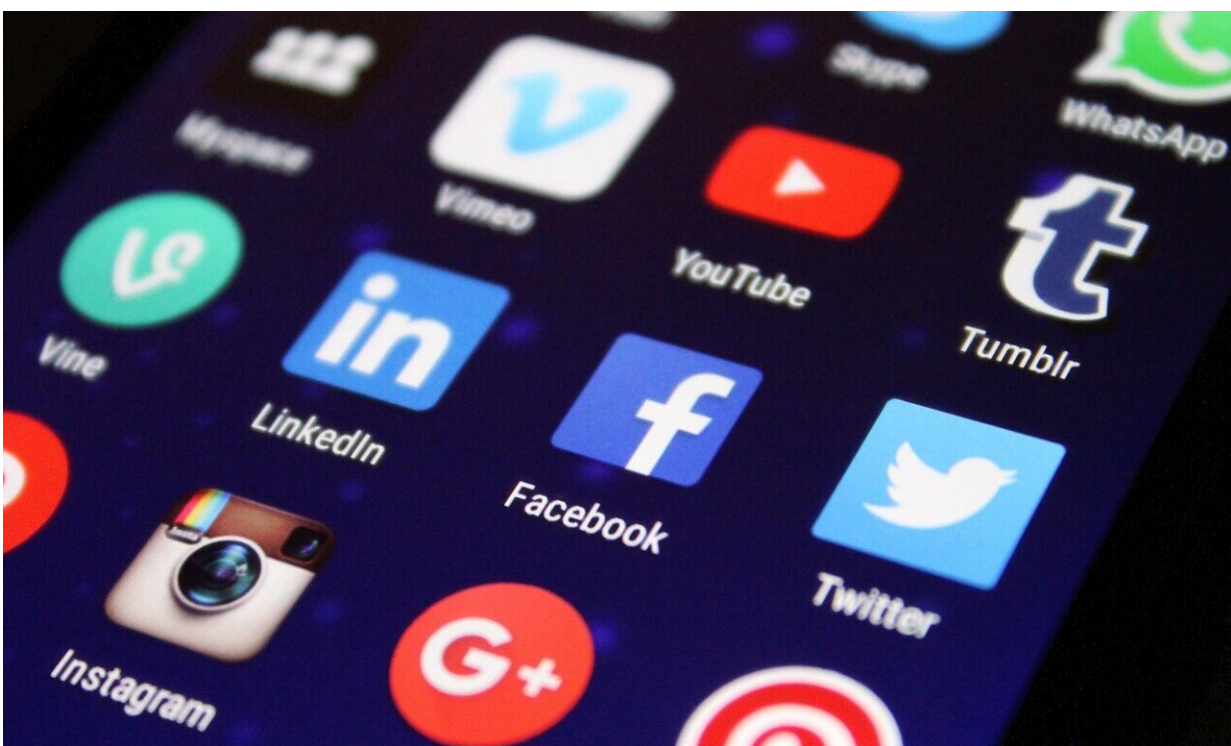# Welcome to the first social media pandemic. Here are 8 ways you can stop the spread of coronavirus misinformation.

March 20 2020, by Jessica Guynn

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The alarming messages ping our laptops and phones and parachute into our social media feeds, text messages and private chat groups.

Be prepared for a national quarantine. Martial law is coming.

The coronavirus was cooked up in a bioweapons lab by the CIA, or the pharmaceutical industry, or was funded by the the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to boost vaccine sales.

Sip water every 15 minutes, gargle with ethanol or eat raw garlic to ward off infection.

None of it is true, but, as public fear and uncertainty grow with the rise in deaths and confirmed cases across the U.S., we are becoming increasingly susceptible to these wildly false and sometimes hazardous claims that tap into our urgent need for the latest information about how to protect ourselves and our families.

Too often we pass along the misinformation we pick up, unwittingly exposing our loved ones to a flood of conspiracy theories, hoaxes and falsehoods that could mislead or even harm them.

So much misinformation is being transmitted from person to person that the scale is unprecedented, public health experts say. Unlike localized disasters such as hurricanes or mass shootings, the coronavirus outbreak is dominating the public conversation on every single social media platform.

COVID-19 is the world's first social media pandemic

"This is our first social media pandemic," says Carl Bergstrom, a professor of biology at the University of Washington who researches disinformation. "This is the first time we've had a pandemic where the population is relying heavily on social media for information."

Shelter-in-place orders and other restrictions on our daily lives have only

exacerbated the [spread of misinformation](link), [public health experts](link) warn.

Hunkered down in their homes and isolated from their jobs and communities, people are connecting with friends and family on social media as they search for answers in a rapidly-evolving global public health crisis.

What they encounter instead: profiteers hawking "cures," cyber thieves trying to steal their [personal information](link), ideologues who distrust science or troublemakers intent on sowing confusion and distrust.

"There's a high degree of uncertainty and obviously a lot of fear and that creates a kind of perfect storm," says Peter Adams, senior vice president of education at the News Literacy Project. "Really well-intentioned people are trying to make sense of this and help friends and family to the greatest degree possible so they just sort of share everything they see and that turns into this over abundance of information, a lot of which isn't true."

The World Health Organization was so alarmed that, in February, it warned of a massive "infodemic," shorthand for information epidemic, "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."

The 'life-and-death consequences' of misinformation during coronavirus

"This is a moment where misinformation can have real consequences, beyond what we have seen in elections," says Dhavan Shah, the Louis A. & Mary E. Maier-Bascom professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, director of the university's Mass Communication Research

Center and scientific director of the Center for Health Enhancement System Studies. "This is a moment where misinformation can have life-and-death consequences."

Kathleen M. Carley, who directs Carnegie Mellon's Center for Computation Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems, has been researching the spread of coronavirus misinformation since January. She has identified three types of misinformation so far:

- Fake cures or preventative measures such as taking colloidal silver, steroids, acetic acid, essential oils and cocaine; gargling with salt water; spraying chlorine on your body and avoiding ice cream.
- False information about the nature of the virus such as COVID-19 is just a cold or a normal flu and children cannot catch it.
- Conspiracy theories such as COVID-19 was bioengineered by a Russian bioweapons lab or was caused when an infected rat bit a student in a bioweapons lab in China.

Carley expects new sorts of misinformation to emerge around topics like coronavirus testing " to incite panic and sow confusion."

Who's fighting back against coronavirus misinformation?

Groups like Carley's are analyzing the waves of misinformation and informing the public. Fact-checking groups are debunking fake coronavirus cures, false news reports and conspiracy theories.

The WHO is working with Facebook, Twitter and other platforms to crack down on coronavirus misinformation. Influencers on Facebook-

owned Instagram and Google-owned YouTube are being drafted to spread accurate news about the virus.

On Monday, Facebook joined seven other platforms—Google, Microsoft, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and Microsoft's LinkedIn—in pledging to crack down on coronavirus misinformation as a direct threat to public welfare. And CEO Mark Zuckerberg told reporters Wednesday that Facebook is launching an information hub that will appear at the top of everyone's news feeds to counteract misinformation with facts about COVID-19.

Also on Wednesday, Facebook-owned WhatsApp announced it would give $1 million to support the International Fact-Checking Network in its fight against COVID-19 misinformation.

"The top priority and focus for us has been making sure people can get access to good authoritative information from trusted health sources," Zuckerberg said.

So, how can you practice better information hygiene? Here are some tips:

Arm yourself with the facts

We are all susceptible to misinformation. As the saying goes, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." The peddlers pushing false or misleading content prey on our biases and our behavior, especially in a crisis.

"As people turn from traditional media sources, governmental agencies, NGOs to whatever is flying around this hour on social media, we feel like we are getting better and better information because it's more recent, but we are actually getting much worse information because it

hasn't been adequately vetted," Bergstrom says. "The hunger for knowing what's happening up to the minute is driving people into the arms of people who are spreading rumors and disinformation on the internet."

Turn instead to public health officials such as The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization for information on the virus. What are the symptoms? How does it spread? The more information you know, the easier it will be to identify misinformation.

Treat anything not clearly attributed and linked back to one of those organizations with suspicion. "Above all else, what we are really urging people to do is consider the source," Adams says.

Take 20 seconds to research before sharing

Just like washing your hands for 20 seconds, take 20 seconds to research each piece of information you come across before passing it on.

"You can do a lot in 20 seconds when you encounter something in a social media feed," Adams says. "Check the comments to see if anyone has posted a link to a fact check of the claim or open a new tab and do a quick Google search for the claim 'does garlic help prevent coronavirus' and you will quickly turn up fact checks from credible fact-checking organizations."

Do not spread misinformation about prevention or cures

Bogus tips on how to prevent or cure coronavirus are blazing across social media. Some tips are harmless, like eating raw garlic to prevent

infection. Others are dangerous and potentially life-threatening. You can debunk these tips by checking with the CDC or WHO. Don't share posts that could physically harm others.

Beware posts that traffic in fear

Research social media posts and messages that deliberately incite fear, strain credulity or are just too reassuring or comforting to be true. Ask yourself: Why is someone trying to make me feel this way?

Don't trust everything you see

We instinctively trust images and video, but they can be taken out of context, edited or digitally manipulated to mislead us. So check with trusted sources of information such as health experts. Or do a Google search or a Google image search to research if images and videos have been manipulated.

Don't join the crowd

Misinformation needs a crowd, the bigger the better. Sure, Kremlin-linked operatives produce shady content. Bots pepper social media with automated posts. But effective [misinformation](#) campaigns thrive by recruiting unsuspecting members of the public who don't realize they are amplifying and legitimizing falsehoods or posts seeking to inflame tensions or disrupt American life. Cross check information with the CDC or WHO before sharing it with others.

Keep partisan politics out of it

We live in a deeply partisan world with bitter divisions between the political right and left, especially in the run-up to the 2020 presidential

election. Be wary of efforts to downplay or exaggerate the threat of the coronavirus to attack one side or the other.

Uncertainty sucks, get used to it

Scientists are learning more each day about the virus and its spread, but it may take weeks, possibly months, for them to responsibly answer all of our questions. Don't fill the vacuum with unreliable information, Bergstrom advises.

"My hope is as this progresses, people will realize, 'Boy, I get burned every time I follow some credible-seeming anonymous thread on the internet, but when I read an article in U.S. TODAY, I haven't been burned yet," he said. "I hope that people would eventually start to figure that out."

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