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# Lessons earned and lessons learned: What should be done next to counter the COVID-19 infodemic?

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### Abstract

As governments and citizens around the world have struggled with the novel coronavirus, the information space has turned into a battleground. Authoritarian countries, including Russia, China and Iran, have spread disinformation on the causes of and responses to the pandemic. The over-abundance of information, also referred to as an 'infodemic', including manipulated information, has been both a cause and a result of the exacerbation of the public health crisis. It is further undermining trust in democratic institutions, the independent press, and facts and data, and exacerbating the rising tensions driven by economic, political and societal challenges. This article discusses the challenges democracies have faced and the measures they have adopted to counter information manipulation that impedes public health efforts. It draws seven lessons learned from the information war and offers a set of recommendations on tackling future infodemics related to public health.

## Introduction

Democratic governments face a distressing challenge that has been both a cause and a result of the exacerbation of the public health crisis: the COVID-19 infodemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined an infodemic as: 'an over-abundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find

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trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it' (WHO 2020, 2). Democracies have adopted several measures to address this rising phenomenon which impedes public health efforts. In this article, we seek to identify some of the early lessons learned from the COVID-19 infodemic.

Information manipulation is a relatively cheap and easy way to exploit a precarious situation. For authoritarian actors, such as Russia, China and Iran, manipulating information is a reliable tactic frequently deployed at home and abroad to undermine rivals or 'rewrite the present' (Lim 2020). Public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic create fertile ground for the deployment of manipulated information to undermine democratic systems. Indeed, falsehoods and conspiracy theories spread more quickly than public health officials and other relevant authorities can react. Making matters worse, several existing trends and challenges have created a favourable environment for manipulated information to be propagated in. These include a lack of trust in government, democratic institutions, experts and the independent press; disagreement about and the manipulation of facts, figures and data for political gain; and, fundamentally, shortcomings in education.

We argue that we can learn seven major lessons from the measures democracies have implemented to address the COVID-19 infodemic. These include the importance of resilience, a cross-party approach to health crises, transparent communication, the exposure of disinformation, the protection of democratic principles and processes, and growing trust through cooperation. Subsequently, we offer a set of recommendations to tackle similar challenges in the future.

## Lessons learned

### Lesson 1

*Build resilience by piercing information bubbles, filling information voids, and coordinating institutional and national efforts.* Malign actors exploit information voids to interfere in democratic discourse through manipulated narratives, which they utilise to shape public opinion in their favour, against their adversaries, or to suppress information. Crises create fertile ground for information voids as events can move quickly, leaving governments and the press playing catch-up. In the context of COVID-19, as scientists, medical professionals and public health officials were studying the cause and symptoms of COVID-19, and adequate measures to prevent and treatments to tackle it, falsehoods and conspiracy theories were travelling across the globe freely. Among others, authoritarian actors created and amplified manipulated information (Kovalčíková and Tabatabai 2020).

In response, the EU undertook an interinstitutional effort, demonstrating the importance of a proactive communication strategy at the European level to guide the member states. The European Council issued a joint statement vowing to 'resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what [it is] doing

and thus reinforce the resilience of our societies' (European Council 2020, 2). It pledged to do so with the involvement of other key bodies, including the Commission and the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. This was later followed by a Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative to tackle COVID-19 disinformation (European Commission 2020). Though a good start, this effort would have benefited from two additional measures: prompt and more coordinated implementation, at both the EU and national levels; and a more geographically equitable engagement of European representatives in national media.

> *Recommendation*. International institutions, national governmental bodies, public health experts, healthcare workers, academic and research institutions, and the media should 'speak and amplify the facts' and coordinate their responses across national public spheres to be more effective, keeping citizens well-informed and resilient to disinformation.

## Lesson 2

*Public health crises should not be partisan contests.* Though hyper-partisanship in certain democratic societies, such as the US, predates COVID-19, the crisis has added an additional challenge as hyper-partisanship now has a public health impact as well as political implications. Many view basic apolitical issues, facts and data through a hyper-partisan lens. For example, among parts of the American public, masks have become a partisan symbol, rather than a politically neutral tool designed to help curb the spread of a global pandemic. In May and June, only 35% of Republicans reported consistent mask use. A potentially significant factor contributing to their resistance was President Trump's own refusal to wear one (Walsh 2020).

Likewise, in Spain, members of the opposition and some major regional authorities from the same parties have resisted coronavirus-related measures adopted by the government. They accused the prime minister of reacting too late to the crisis and of misleading the public regarding the availability of medical equipment supplies, thus prolonging the lockdown period. Such views were also reflected in the strong push from business leaders hit by the pandemic's economic downturn, who wanted to loosen restrictive measures (Gallardo 2020). The politicisation of the health crisis has contributed to the informational chaos and weakened citizens' capacity to filter out the most critical information pertaining to the virus in this time of uncertainty.

On the other hand, in Slovakia—one of the countries with the fewest coronavirus deaths in the European Economic Area since the beginning of the pandemic (Stewart 2020)—President Zuzana Čaputová has led from the front, wearing a face mask and gloves even during the new government's swearing-in ceremony (Serhan 2020). The images of the ceremony went viral on social media and her leadership has helped to normalise the use of masks from the very beginning across the country (Feldman 2020). Leaders in Europe and elsewhere, including Greece and Japan, have followed a similar

path. To raise public awareness and to counter manipulated narratives about the virus, they have sought to avoid confusion over the necessity of wearing a mask, preventing malign actors from casting doubts on the governments' policies (Timsit 2020).

> *Recommendation*. National leaders should work across party lines and lead from the front to advance a coherent, unifying and effective public messaging campaign designed to avoid confusion and help mitigate the disease in a sustainable way.

## Lesson 3

*Clearly distinguish facts from opinion.* Both traditional media outlets and social media channels are used to spread disinformation, especially during health crises. With mainstream media vilified in some democratic societies, many citizens have turned to hyperpartisan and even fringe outlets and social media content for information. Many such outlets and platforms see the extreme politicisation of all content as a means to increase ratings, leading to a more profitable information environment. In the US, some far-right media outlets and social media profiles with large audiences have dabbled in conspiracy theories and promoted falsehoods about COVID-19, leading their audiences to take the disease less seriously (Ingraham 2020).

Peer-reviewed studies have found that individuals consuming far-right content were more likely to believe conspiracy theories and falsehoods than those who received information from mainstream outlets, for example about possible treatments for the disease (Ingraham 2020). This stresses the importance of the role of traditional mainstream media in achieving two objectives. First, traditional media serve as a conduit between public health officials and medical professionals on the one hand and citizens on the other. Second, they fulfil another critical function as a fact-checking mechanism, promoting accurate information and debunking falsehoods. This allows readers and viewers to recognise false information and potentially serve as force multipliers, as these individuals can then spread accurate information and debunk falsehoods in their communities. Of note is a key upcoming EU policy, known as the European Democracy Action Plan, which aims to make clear the distinction between opinion and fact to protect freedom of speech while preventing the spread of manipulated information (*DW Global Media Forum* 2020).

> *Recommendation*. Both traditional and social media play an important role in sharing and amplifying accurate, timely and relevant information, even more so during a global health pandemic. Media outlets should be cautious and clear when conveying messages to the wider public and should help their audiences to distinguish between what is reported as factual and what is an opinion. Social media platforms should fact-check content more proactively, flagging content that promotes falsehoods about the disease and its cure.

## Lesson 4

*Understand, expose and mitigate authoritarian actors' efforts to exploit existing cleavages between democracies.* The EU and NATO have been among the top targets of the Kremlin's disinformation efforts (*EUvsDisinfo* 2020b). Manipulated and divisive narratives promoted by Russia, China and other actors have been designed to distract from their own failures, increase cleavages between NATO and EU member states, and undermine European unity (*EUvsDisinfo* 2020a). For example, 'Russian narratives' were shared in several Dutch social media groups, alleging 'European divisions and lack of mutual solidarity between countries in Western Europe with regards to Covid-19' (Pieters 2020).

> *Recommendation*. Within the EU, at NATO and among democracies more generally, continued proactive, regular and timely communication and coordination to combat information manipulation is key, especially during public health crises that know no borders. Existing mechanisms in key institutions across the Atlantic can be used to enhance coordination efforts by democracies to empower and project a united approach to infodemics.

## Lesson 5

*Democracies should know better and not fall into authoritarian traps.* Sometimes democracies fall into authoritarian traps and help to undermine their own systems and institutions. By echoing authoritarian narratives intended to undermine democracies and their capacity to tackle the pandemic, democratic representatives play into the hands of malign actors. For instance, in Romania, prominent politicians raised doubts about preventative measures and spread corona-sceptic and anti-vaccine messages on national television (Rosca 2020), while 41% of Romanians had already been identified as being susceptible to conspiracy theories about the virus (Euro Comunicare 2020, 10). Taking advantage of these tensions, the Russian website, Sputnik, repeatedly promoted content that undermined the Romanian government's efforts and amplified content on demonstrations opposing them (Rosca 2020).

> *Recommendation*. Democratic governments, political parties and media outlets should not embrace manipulated information. Disinformation should be exposed by authoritative voices. Actual assessments of the scope of public health crises should be presented at all stages of the crisis and regularly shared with the public by national broadcasters and other trusted and widely followed sources. This is not just critical for transparency and accountability—both key to the proper functioning of democracies and to distinguishing them from authoritarian regimes—but also to governments' ability to effectively mitigate the spread of epidemics and pandemics.

## Lesson 6

*Prepare for safe elections. The safety of citizens comes first, always.* Holding elections is more challenging during public health crises. Failing to make adequate preparations can not only further exacerbate public health crises, it can also delegitimise elections, undermine democracy and lead to an election meltdown. To prepare to hold elections in a safe and secure manner, a number of steps can be taken at the local, regional and national levels.

During the 2020 US presidential primary elections, the state of Georgia experienced a number of challenges, some stemming from or exacerbated by the pandemic. Among these, inadequate preparations by state officials led to a lack of proper support for rolling out the state's new voting system, and local officials' failure in at least one county to recruit a sufficient number of poll workers resulted in long queues as some polling locations were closed due to the pandemic, leading to their consolidation (Fowler 2020).

In Poland, the government intended to hold its recent presidential elections during the pandemic using the postal service, Polish Post, an entity which lacks experience in conducting elections. Concerns over potential data-privacy violations voiced by local and regional authorities led to a review of the security of such electoral changes. In turn, this contributed to confusion over the process in the early stages of voter registration and cast doubt on the government's handling of the adaptations (Wanat 2020). While the idea of using Polish Post was later abandoned and other measures were subsequently undertaken to ensure safe elections, better preparation could have helped to mitigate the mishaps that led to confusion. Indeed, such issues are commonly exploited by malign actors to undermine trust in democratic processes. For example, in February, prior to the US primaries, the Kremlin's network of state media highlighted conspiracy theories on social media about the malfunctioning and 'not properly tested' app used to tabulate and report results in Iowa (Corasaniti et al. 2020) and its alleged murky ties to certain candidates. Confusion around the newly created app and a lack of clear information created fertile ground to cast doubt on the integrity of the process (Brandt 2020).

> *Recommendation*. Adequate resources and preparation are needed to conduct safe and secure elections. Substantial changes made to election procedures should be done in a timely and transparent manner to avoid any doubts about the legitimacy of elections that foreign adversaries could exploit in their disinformation campaigns.

## Lesson 7

*Enhance trust and resilience by implementing multinational and multi-stakeholder tools of cooperation.* Developing interinstitutional relations, increasing transparency and creating collaboration between democratic actors are necessities for a healthy and safe society,

and may mitigate a crisis. In times of crisis, maintaining adequate levels of cooperation on public communication initiatives and security efforts to counter emerging challenges in cyberspace is key. This increases trust and is a viable solution to fighting disinformation in a sustainable way (OECD 2020, 4).

While Russia and China have used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to present themselves as internationally responsible actors, they have also aimed to undermine democracies' capacity to tackle the pandemic adequately. Governments are not equipped to address the global health pandemic and infodemic on their own but together, and alongside other stakeholders who play a role in the fight against disinformation their effectiveness increases exponentially. For example, responses by local actors have been further amplified by NATO coordination mechanisms. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, NATO's principal civil emergency response mechanism in the Euro-Atlantic area, helped coordinate all allies as well as partners (NATO 2020), and facilitated deliveries of medical supplies. Raising public awareness of NATO's role and concrete actions during the crisis has helped to increase understanding of the Alliance's role and capacities and, consequently, public support for it (Vilnius National Foundation 2020). Also, as part of the newly established Paris Call Community on Countering Election Interference, the Canadian government, Microsoft and the Alliance for Securing Democracy have joined efforts in a multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together stakeholders from government, civil society and industry to counter election interference, including manipulated information. Through a series of community workshops, the process has led to a number of recommendations which have gained further relevance due to the additional challenges caused by the pandemic in the information space.

> *Recommendation*. Sharing relevant, accurate and timely information with allies and partners can save lives at home and abroad. Multinational and multi-stakeholder initiatives should be further integrated into crisis-management portfolios for international emergencies in order to detect manipulated information and allow for a rapid, coordinated and systematic response. They should also be regularly assessed for potential expansion or adaptation to enhance societal resilience and trust.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 is the most significant public health crisis that democracies on either side of the Atlantic have faced in decades. It has led to—and, in turn, been exacerbated by—an infodemic that is undermining trust in democratic institutions, the free press, and scientific and public health experts. We have identified seven key lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 infodemic and have provided recommendations for preventing and tackling analogous situations in the future. In addition to the steps suggested above, a number of other measures could help to mitigate public health–related infodemics in the future, and with this, their impact on democracies. Critically, a long-term and structural response is needed.

However, the right balance has to be struck between countering disinformation and protecting freedom of expression. Facts need to be distinguished from opinions, and necessary temporary restrictive measures have to be adopted. But in all this, citizens' safety has to be prioritised over partisan contests, and there can be no backsliding on democratic values and principles. The abundance of manipulated information could lead to an undesirable scenario in which citizens treat 'disinformation' as the new normal, and not as a real threat.

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