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Guidance for Countering False Information about Coronavirus or the Behaviours which Prevent its Transmission

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Purpose and Summary of Document:

To provide guidance for public sector communications teams on how to respond effectively to misinformation and disinformation in regard to Coronavirus.

Left unchecked, false information can influence public attitudes, intentions and behaviours which prevent the spread of Coronavirus and ultimately undermine promotion of personal protective behaviours, leading to greater transmission and burden of disease.

There are pitfalls to avoid when tackling false information and several guides and toolkits provide a number of effective approaches for different types of misinformation. This guidance synthesises existing evidence and toolkits in to a simple approach based on what we know works. Communications teams can use this guide to combat false information spreading amongst the population.

Document Location: [Website](#)

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1 Purpose and Background

1.1 Purpose

This guidance is for statutory and public sector communications professionals providing public information designed to support population behaviours which prevent the transmission of Coronavirus.

This document sets out a process and the effective actions that communications teams can take to minimise the impact of false information about Coronavirus or the public health measures and public behaviours in Wales aiming to prevent the transmission or mitigate its impact.

1.2 Background

Organisations focussed on preventing transmission and mitigating harms of Coronavirus in Wales, recognise the potential of false information to influence public behaviour and undermine the impact of their efforts. There have been increasing calls for guidance to help more effectively tackle false information online.

False information which could cause harm is not new, whether deliberately created and spread for personal or political gain or whether innocently shared believing it to be true, it has posed a threat to the impact of public health and wellbeing interventions over many decades. The evidence shows that incorrect information can influence the degree to which some people engage in pro-social or health behaviours (Allington et al, 2020). Increasingly, always-on digital media, algorithm-driven reinforcement, psycho-social packaging, improving production quality and the use of relevant, relatable messengers is potentially increasing the reach and impact of false information.

False information has been more prevalent during pandemics and [health] emergencies (Posetti, J & Bontcheva, K, 2020). It has also been shown that the more often people are exposed to a piece of false information, unchallenged, the more that information seems true to them and therefore has more potential to adversely influence their behaviour. The United Nations have described the growing surge of false information during the crisis as “our enemy” and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described a “massive info-demic” as a driver of the pandemic itself (Posetti, J & Bontcheva, K, 2020).

2 Overview of approach to tackling false information

Figure 1 below summarises the recommended approach to take when addressing false information. This framework is discussed in more detail in section 3.

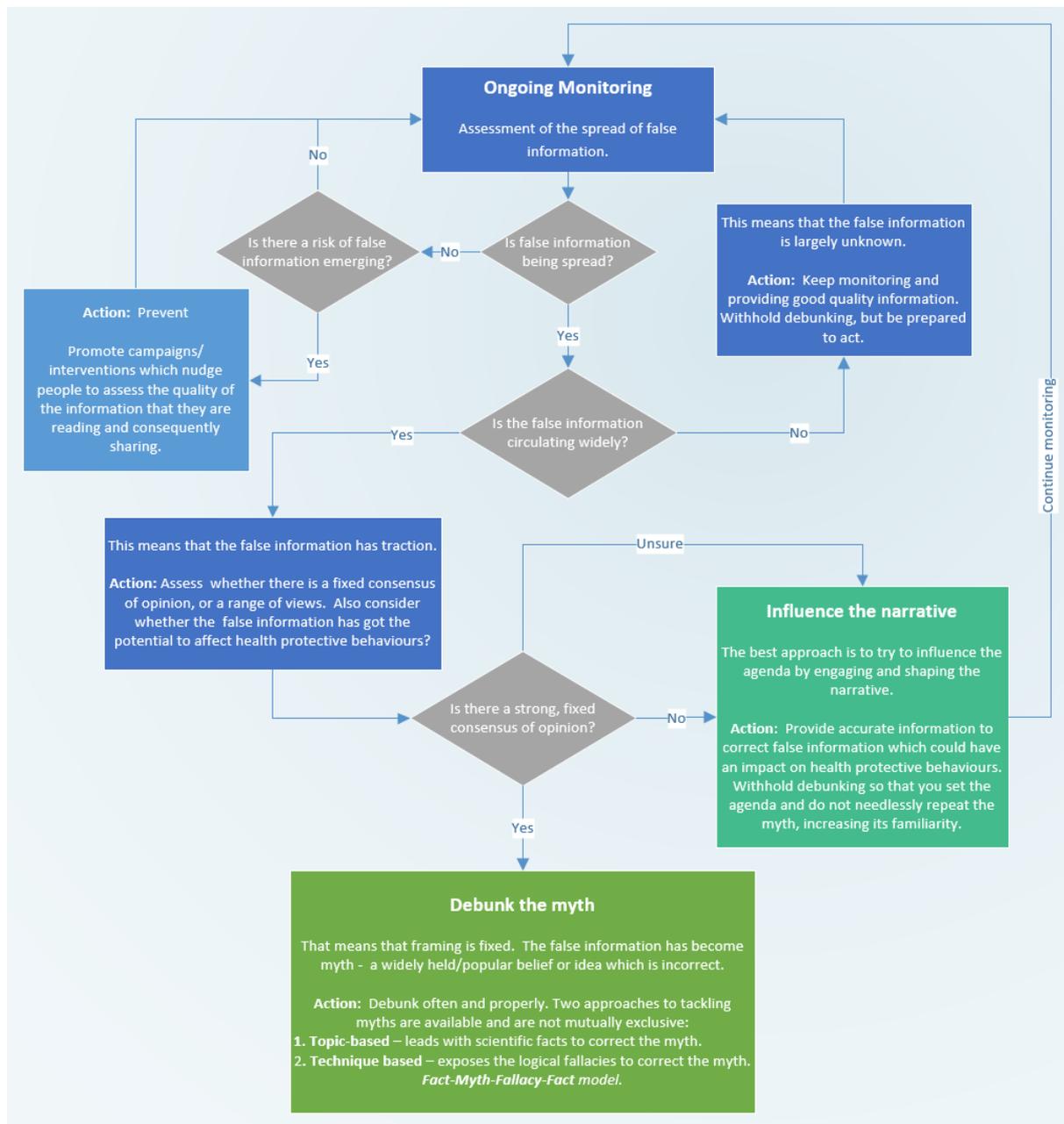


Figure 1: Process for assessing and responding to false information.

2.1 Avoiding common pitfalls

Tackling false information can have the unintended consequence of *increasing* its impact on beliefs and behaviour, referred to as '**backfire effects**' (The Debunking Handbook, 2020). Although backfire effects are not as certain as they were once thought to be, taking the **right approach at the right time** will help ensure you do not inadvertently have a negative impact.

Analysis of the false information, its messenger, status, or likely impact, underpins this guidance throughout (see Section 3). Understanding the false information will enable effective strategies to respond to it and help you avoid important pitfalls.

Don't debunk if it isn't really a "myth". Restating the false information whilst correcting it with the facts can increase the audience **familiarity** with the false information and can lead to the **illusionary-truth effect**. The audience can come away with the belief that there are indeed two sides to a debate, potentially with similar weights, particularly when communicating scientific information where facts are complex or difficult to determine through lived experience.

Picking the wrong battles can *increase* audience beliefs in the false information. Correcting false information with facts or messengers that are in direct conflict with the poster's worldview (e.g. who they trust, their existing values, attitudes, beliefs, self-image, or group norms) can *increase* their belief in the false information. It will also give a greater platform for them to spread counter 'evidence', although those sources of false information usually do not pass quality tests for official use, they may still be consumed by the public through your platform.

Not all false information has to be responded to. In many circumstances public opinion and commentary will challenge and organically correct. Providing "too many" counter-arguments against a false claim may result in **overkill** and also have the opposite effect with some audiences. It is important to be discerning about how, when and if to act.

Do not publicly debate the false information. *If* you believe that a post has the potential to cause harm and if resource allows, contact the individual(s) privately from the account that they commented on. Advise them of 'the facts', the reasons why the facts are true and the consequences of posting that false information again with the reason why. Also advise them of your community guidelines regarding spreading false information. If the posts [are likely to] continue, consider **reporting the posts to the platform provider in order to remove the posts** and if necessary prevent these users from commenting on your output in future. There are guides and resources available to help: [here](#) and [here](#).

It is also recommended that communications teams in Wales develop an ongoing campaign about false information, with the specific call to action (CTA) for people encountering it to report it. WHO have produced this handy resource: <https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/misinformation-campaign/stop-misinformation.gif>

3 Limiting the impact of false information on Coronavirus and preventative behaviours

Figure 2 summarises the steps needed to address false information. The following sections will explore these steps in greater detail. This model has been adapted based on the approach advocated in The Debunking Handbook (2020) and content from RESIST (2019).

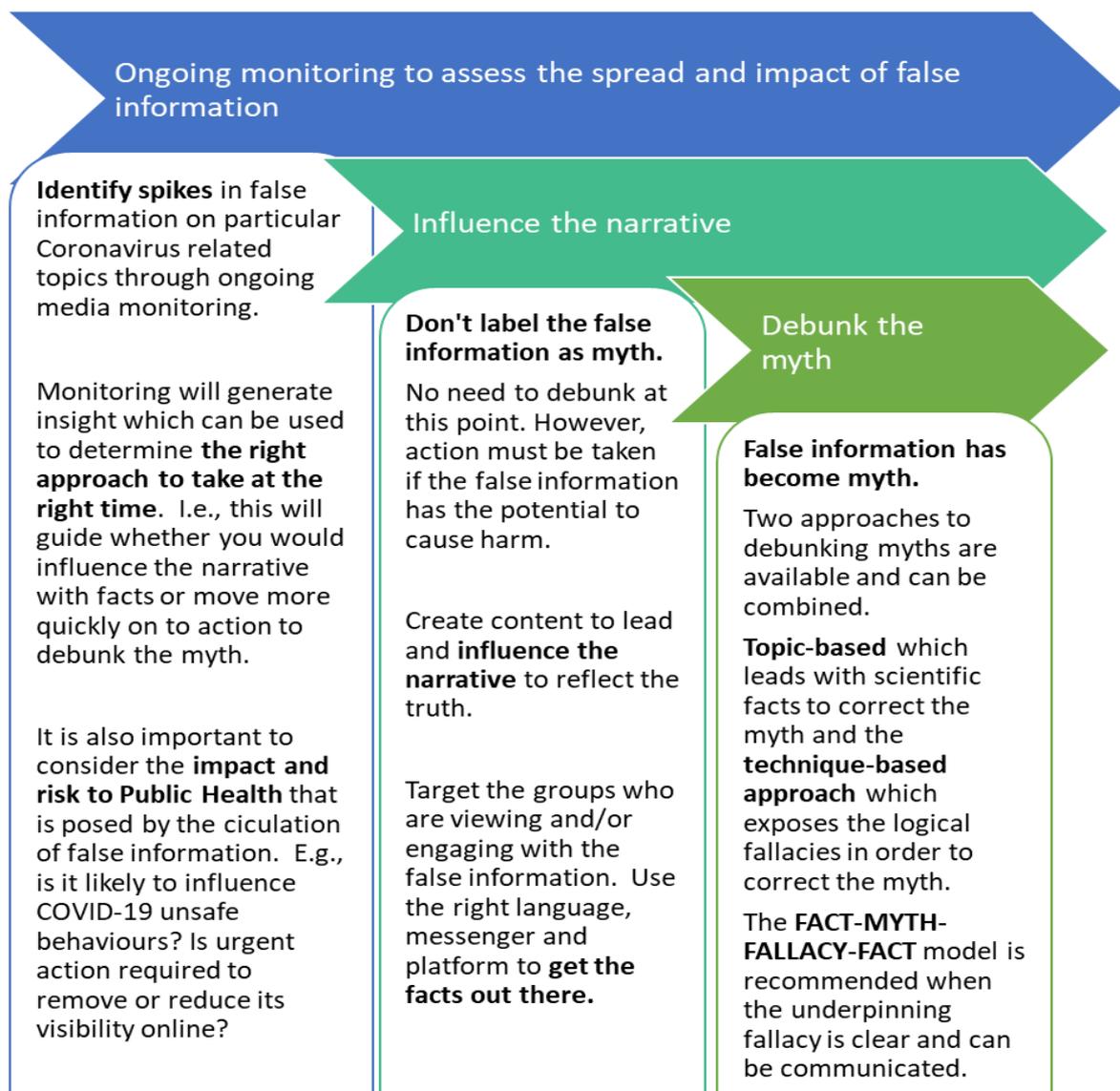


Figure 2: Process for tackling false information

3.1 Assess the spread of false information

Deciding which approach will be most effective for you to tackle the false information and avoid backfire *will* require an understanding of the status of the false information. This will determine whether to:

- Use moderation to **lead and influence** the narrative with facts
- Or use a structured approach to **debunk** the false information that has become myth.

Three broad areas of 'analysis' have been recommended to help decide your best course of action (RESIST, 2019):

1. Monitor the range of media activity in your area for early warning signs that specific false information is increasing;
2. Estimate the impact of the false information;
 - What is the likely goal or effect of the false information?
 - How serious is the perceived threat of this false information if large numbers of people were to believe it to be true?
 - What is the potential reach of the false information?
3. Use insight to assess the status of the false information;
 - Is the narrative fixed or fluid?
 - How frequently and broadly is it spread?
 - What is the degree of consensus in sentiment or belief?
 - Is there significant organic engagement and do you understand your groups of influence (who is sharing and who is listening)?

This analysis does not have to be an exact science, but this step should be taken to help guide decision-making about whether, when, and how to act for the best use of your resources.

Working collaboratively across the communication system in Wales to pool and share available insight will help us all to tackle the important false information in the right way. For example, some organisations in Wales have social listening capabilities which can help to more easily understand if and how false information should be tackled. Pooling knowledge could help identify other sources of available insight for example WHO ["Early AI-supported Response with Social Listening"](#) tool which is free to use.

In summary, if the false information is considered an important enough risk AND there's room to influence the narrative, then do so (section 3.2). However, if the narrative is specific and fixed, representing a high degree of consensus around the false information and it's in wide circulation then you need to take action to debunk the myth (section 3.3).

3.2 Leading and influencing the narrative

This is when false information is circulating and gaining traction AND you consider that the information does pose significant threat to behaviours which could have a harmful effect. HOWEVER, your assessment shows that the narrative is fluid, with no strong consensus and there is organic challenge from others.

Your objective here is to shape and lead the narrative to prevent the false information becoming a “myth” which can cause harm and be more difficult to tackle. This is where your time and effort will have the best impact.

This is about creating content which contains the factually correct information, and the simple reason(s) why it is correct. The information should be accessible, relevant and highly visible to at risk audiences. The same/similar content should be used across the communications system in Wales, running it routinely through multiple channels.

Do not include the false claims with the truth. Putting the truth with the false information can communicate the impression that there’s two equally important and credible arguments and, repeating the false claim can lead to increased familiarity with it amongst the public. Both practices have been shown to increase traction of the false information you are trying to tackle.

False information increasingly relies on the use of psycho-social packaging to increase the power of its messaging. Your creative content carrying the truth should consider the criteria people use when they evaluate the truth. Most of the time they will ask themselves at least one of the five questions below (Schwarz et al. 2016):

- *Social consensus: Do others believe it?*
- *Support: Is there much supporting evidence?*
- *Consistency: Is it compatible with what I believe?*
- *Coherence: Does it tell a good story?*
- *Credibility: Does it come from a source or messenger that is credible to me?*

There are other guides which can increase the power of communications. These are 1) Welsh Government (2021) [Public and Third Sector Misinformation Toolkit](#); and 2) Prevention and Behavioural Science Cell (2020) [Using Behavioural Science in Public Communications to Prevent Transmission of COVID-19 – Supplementary Guidance](#). Public Health Wales.

Example: In response to false information about whether coronavirus is no more deadly than seasonal flu the text below was used to shape the narrative around the topic. (warning: data no longer accurate).

'Coronavirus is more deadly than seasonal flu. Last year about 1,900 people died from flu and pneumonia in Wales. Sadly, since January 2020 we have already seen more than 3,000 deaths involving Coronavirus and unfortunately, more are likely to die. Between January and August 2020 across England and Wales, more than 3 times as many deaths were recorded where Coronavirus was the underlying cause compared to flu and pneumonia.' (From: Welsh Government's online Coronavirus information, Dec 2020 - <https://gov.wales/coronavirus-facts>).

3.3 False information has become myth

You have assessed that false information is circulating widely, there is large consensus and little organic challenge; the narrative is fixed. It is no longer possible to influence the narrative with the facts alone. You need to address the 'myth' and debunk it.

Debunking is the term that is used to describe how we respond effectively to false information that has become myth, correcting it in a way that is shown to be acceptable to the audience believing it to be true, helping them consider and adjust their beliefs.

There are two types of complementary debunking strategies which are commonly used to challenge myths. These are **topic-based**, which present the reader with scientific facts, and **technique-based**, which expose the logical fallacies in the deniers' persuasion technique. Both can be effective, and are not mutually exclusive. It is proposed that for myths which are based on denial of the facts and where the underpinning fallacy is clear then the **technique-based** debunking strategy is likely to be more effective.

3.3.1 Topic-based approach

An example of the **topic-based** approach which focuses on safety is given in Figure 3 on the next page, as used by the WHO in their online myth-busting guide:

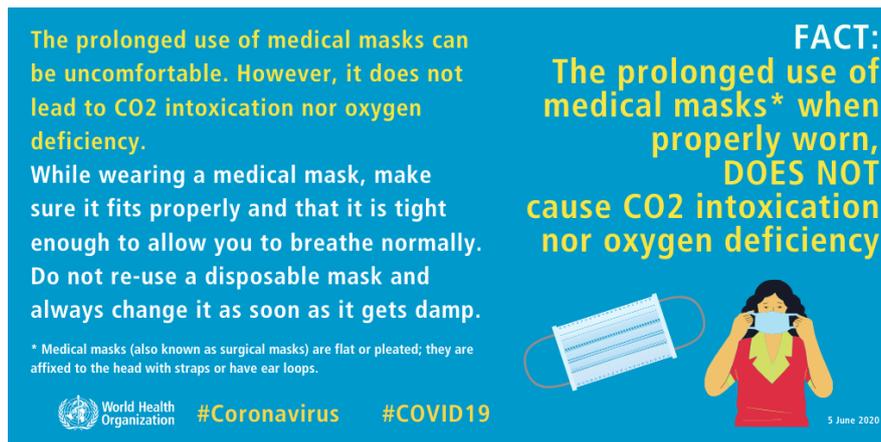


Figure 3: Example of the topic-based approach to myth-busting as used by WHO ((<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters#oxygen>))

3.3.2 Technique-based approach

The technique-based approach to addressing myths which are based on denial of the facts is summarised in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4: FACT-MYTH-FALLACY-FACT; four step model to debunking myths.

When debunking a myth, we need to provide a factual alternative in a way that fills a causal “gap”. Having a causal alternative facilitates “switching off” the inaccurate information in an individual’s initial understanding and replacing it with a new version of what happened.

The process outlined below is a summary extracted from “The Debunking Handbook”.

Step 1: Fact

The fact should be prominent and the first thing the reader sees. Make the *fact* the headline not the myth! Make the fact clear and easy to understand.

Step 2: Warn about the Myth

Warn beforehand that a myth is coming. For example, state that ‘an emerging myth is that ...’ this helps the reader to fit the information into a

'false' narrative which they will have already heard. **One** repetition of the myth is beneficial to belief updating.

Step 3: Explain the underpinning Fallacy

Explain **how** the myth misleads and **why** it is wrong. There are a number of different fallacies which are commonly used which underpin false information, for instance, cherry picking data to support an argument, logical fallacies which use arguments based on false logic, misdirection or misrepresentation, or using fake experts to contradict expert opinion.

Explain why the myth was thought by some to be correct, but clarify why it is now clear it is wrong and why the alternative is correct.

Step 4: Repeat Fact

Finish by reinforcing the fact. The fact should be the last thing people process. Be prepared to debunk repeatedly. Even with detailed refutations, the effects may wear off over time. You can also use the same packaging, amplifiers and influencers to make the messaging powerful as mentioned in the previous section.

Example: 5G networks

***[FACT]** COVID-19 is a virus with natural origins, which like some other viruses before it made the leap from animal to humans in 2019. **[MYTH]** There is a myth that 5G mobile networks are causing COVID-19 or the harm from it. **[FALLACY]** The increase in 5G mobile networks and the emergence of Coronavirus happened around the same time leading some people to question whether there is a link. There is not, there is no link between spread of the virus and the presence of 5G; COVID-19 is spreading rapidly in regions that do not have 5G and in some areas even faster. **[FACT]** Research has confirmed that 5G networks CANNOT HAVE ANY influence over COVID-19, its spread or its effects.*

Example: Vaccine concerns

***[FACT]** Vaccines are safe and will help protect us against serious illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) and help get life going again. **[MYTH]** There is a myth that the Coronavirus vaccines are not safe because they have been developed too quickly. **[FALLACY]** This has led some people to question whether corners have been cut in the rigorous safety testing. They have not; Any COVID-19 vaccine that is approved must go through all the clinical trials and safety checks all other licensed medicines go through. So far millions of people in the UK and Wales have had a COVID-19 vaccine and reports of serious side effects have been very rare. The vaccines were developed and approved more quickly because researchers had already been working on new vaccine technology and, because of the extra resources, extra work and priority queueing. **[FACT]** The coronavirus*

(COVID-19) vaccine is safe and effective. It gives you the best protection against COVID-19.

4 Summary

This guide supports effective countering of false information about Coronavirus or the behaviours which prevent its transmission through an evidence-based framework for how to respond.

Addressing false information and changing people's beliefs and attitudes can be tricky. There are common pitfalls to avoid which this guide outlines. The basis of selecting the effective approach is your analysis of the false information you want to counter.

Prevention is better than cure. Therefore, ensuring that good quality information about Coronavirus safe behaviours is easily accessible and circulating in as many fora as possible will help to increase the familiarity of the facts. Setting the narrative in this way will reduce the rate at which people will believe false information and potentially the rate at which it is shared.

A number of interventions have been shown to be effective in helping individuals to assess the quality and sources of false information and have reduced the rate at which people share it with others. Nudging people to consider the trustworthiness of information sources may be helpful in reducing uptake of false information. As will regular ongoing communications with the call to action to report false information as exemplified by the WHO. (<https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online>).

However, we find ourselves in an infodemic of false information that we need to respond to at scale and pace. The value of developing social listening capabilities and/or sharing insight among organisations to work collaboratively to tackle misinformation cannot be underestimated. The ongoing monitoring and assessment of spread and potential impact of false information can be met with a tailored response. This can be through providing accurate and targeted information in a timely manner, or via a more advanced response based on the FACT-MYTH-FALLACY-FACT model when false information is deemed to be a myth. These approaches will help to reduce the belief in false information in the population.

It should be noted that this is an evolving field, and that this guide is based on current best practice distilled from a range of useful resources, as detailed in the appendix.

5 References

Government Communication Service (2019) RESIST Counter disinformation toolkit. OGL. Crown copyright 2019. UK. [Accessed on 5 November <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/>]

Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Ecker, U. K. H., Albarracín, D., Amazeen, M. A., Kendeou, P., Lombardi, D., Newman, E. J., Pennycook, G., Porter, E. Rand, D. G., Rapp, D. N., Reifler, J., Roozenbeek, J., Schmid, P., Seifert, C. M., Sinatra, G. M., Swire-Thompson, B., van der Linden, S., Vraga, E. K., Wood, T. J., Zaragoza, M. S. (2020). The Debunking Handbook 2020. Available at <https://sks.to/db2020>. DOI:10.17910/b7.1182

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WHO (2020) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Mythbusters. Online resource. Available at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the truth stick & the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), pp. 85–95.

6 Appendix: Useful resources

Government Communication Service (2019) RESIST Counter disinformation toolkit. OGL. Crown copyright 2019. UK. It can be accessed at <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/>

The 'Debunking Handbook' (2020). This outlines how and when to apply the technique-based debunking model. It can be accessed at <https://sks.to/db2020>.

The Conspiracy Theory Handbook (2020). This resource helps the reader understand why conspiracy theories are so popular, explains how to identify the traits of conspiratorial thinking, and lists effective debunking strategies. It can be accessed at <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/conspiracy-theory-handbook/>

Making the truth stick & the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology (2016). It can be accessed at: <https://behavioralpolicy.org/articles/making-the-truth-stick-the-myths-fade-lessons-from-cognitive-psychology/>

The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook (2021). A practical guide for improving vaccine communication and fighting misinformation. It can be accessed at <https://sks.to/c19vax>

How to talk to someone about conspiracy theories and misinformation (2020). This guide provides tips on how to approach communication on a one-to-one basis with people who believe misinformation. It can be accessed at: www.shapingtomorrowworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/flyer_v18.pdf

'Don't feed the beast', a UK government campaign to educate the public on the consequences of sharing misinformation online. It can be accessed at: <https://sharechecklist.gov.uk/>

WHO (2020) How to report misinformation online. This resource provides details on how to report misinformation on social media platforms. It can be accessed at: <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online>

WHO (2020) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Mythbusters. Online resource. It can be accessed at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

Cambridge University's 'Go Viral' is a COVID-19 misinformation gaming app. Previous research has shown that a single play of a similar game (bad news) can reduce susceptibility to false information for at least three months. It can be accessed at: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/goviral>

Full Fact Organisation: This is a UK non-profit fact-checking organisation. It is part of the International Fact Checking Network. It can be accessed at www.fullfact.org and has a section devoted to COVID-19.

WHO (2020) 1st WHO Infodemic Manager training course delivered online in partnership with US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, and RCCE collective service. The handbook and video lectures are available at the link below.

<https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management/1st-who-training-in-infodemic-management>

Welsh Government (2021) [Public and Third Sector Misinformation Toolkit](#). A guide to talking misinformation by Stefan Rollnick.

Prevention and Behavioural Science Cell (2020) Using Behavioural Science in Public Communications to Prevent Transmission of COVID-19 – Supplementary Guidance. Public Health Wales.

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