

Countering the health 'infodemic'

The dissemination of mis- and disinformation in traditional media and on social media has surged in recent years, with wide-ranging consequences in various policy areas – from elections to geopolitics to healthcare. The prevalence of false information regarding health issues threatens to undermine trust in official health advice and institutions responsible for countering threats to public health, potentially posing a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of individuals, a threat exacerbated in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The issue of public health mis- and disinformation

Misinformation (unintentionally erroneous information) and disinformation ([defined](#) by the European Commission as 'verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public') on public health issues are arguably some of the most dangerous types of false information, given the direct impact that they can have on individuals' health and personal wellbeing. Such false information has a long history, dating as far back as the 1860s and the formation of an [anti-vaccination movement](#) in the United Kingdom, which was formed to spread false information regarding vaccination laws in the country. Since then, the way in which health mis- and disinformation is disseminated has evolved, continuing to pose considerable risks to global health. In January this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) made the 'uncontrolled dissemination of misinformation' one of its [urgent health challenges for the next decade](#), with issues such as [vaccination](#), the [Ebola epidemic](#), [cancer treatments](#) and more recently the [COVID-19](#) pandemic all having been accompanied by waves of false information. This can potentially have disastrous consequences for people's health, such as the [drastic rise](#) in measles cases seen in EU Member States, a rise that was attributed at least in part to the rising prominence of anti-vaccine mis- and disinformation. In February 2020, the WHO warned that the '2019-nCoV [novel coronavirus] outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ['infodemic'](#) – an over-abundance 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 impact of digitalisation

The mass popularisation of digital technology in recent years has drastically altered the way in which we access health information. According to a 2018 European Commission [report](#), in 2017 over half of all EU citizens sought health information online, a figure that had almost doubled since 2008. As our reliance on the internet and social media to obtain health information grows, so does our susceptibility to health-related mis- and disinformation. In August 2019, the WHO [specifically warned](#) about the dangers that social media platforms can pose when it comes to health misinformation, whilst a 2018 [study](#) found that 40 % of health-related links posted on social media contained 'medical fake news'. On Facebook and [WhatsApp](#), for example, closed [groups](#) play a key role in spreading unchallenged anti-vaccine messages to their members, whilst YouTube's [algorithms](#) often divert users from fact-based health videos to ones with false information.

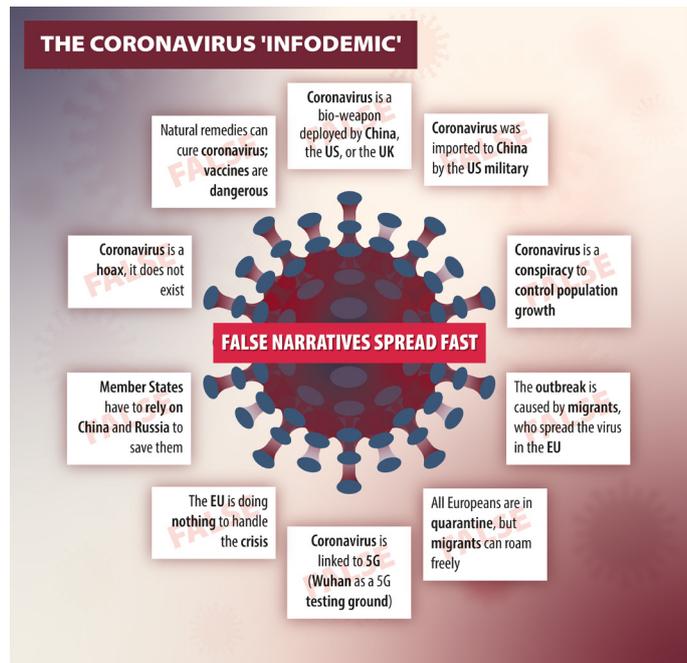
The origins of health disinformation

State-sponsored disinformation campaigns are arguably one of the most prominent forms of health disinformation, with [Russia](#) being at the forefront of such efforts. For instance, a 2018 [study](#) highlighted how Russian Twitter trolls were amplifying false information on vaccinations, promoting both pro- and anti-vaccine messages in an attempt to sow discord and 'erode public consensus on vaccination'. More recently, Russian state media have also engaged in a disinformation campaign regarding the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), using malicious reporting in an attempt to create panic and sow distrust amongst western nations, as well as undermine trust in European health care systems. Russian [tactics](#) include speculating on the true origins of the virus, promoting conspiracy theories and boosting the narrative that the EU is abandoning Member States during the crisis. Russia is not unique in its attempts to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, with similar disinformation efforts also coming out of [Iran](#) and [China](#). [Beijing](#) appears to be [replicating](#)

Moscow's well-known technique of spreading multiple conspiracy theories to confuse and distract audiences – as various countries seemingly attempt to exploit the crisis in order to gain a [geopolitical advantage](#).

Domestic mis- and disinformation

Disinformation from hostile foreign states is not the only form of false health information. Well-meaning individuals concerned about the spread of COVID-19 are forwarding misleading or doctored information on encrypted [messaging services](#). Moreover, various domestic actors are also actively spreading mis- and disinformation. In the United States, a number of politicians – including the President – have [cast doubt](#) over established scientific consensus on vaccinations, amplified health-related [conspiracy theories](#) and attempted to [play down](#) the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, this false information has been further amplified by [mainstream national media outlets](#).



Data source: [euvsdisinfo.eu](#) and EPRS.

A recent Gallup [poll](#) found a decline in the US population's belief in the importance of vaccinations, from 94 % in 2001 to 84 % in 2019. A [poll](#) conducted by Pew Research found that almost half of Fox News viewers see the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'minor threat' to the health of the US population, whilst [research](#) from Marist published in March 2020 found that a majority of Republican voters believe the response to the pandemic to be overblown.

EU efforts to combat disinformation

In recent years, the EU has taken a number of steps to counter disinformation. In September 2015, the EEAS East StratCom task force (ESTF) was [launched](#) to counter ongoing disinformation campaigns by the [Kremlin](#). In April 2018, the European Commission presented the [communication](#), 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach'. This was built upon with the creation of the [code of practice](#) on disinformation – where leading social networks, online platforms and advertisers agreed to self-regulate in order to combat disinformation – as well as with the launch of an [action plan](#) against disinformation, which helped to strengthen the EU's capability to counter disinformation ahead of the European elections, with initiatives such as the [Rapid Alert System](#) (RAS), set up in March 2019.

Specific measures to counter health-related disinformation

In December 2018, the Council of the EU adopted a [recommendation](#) aimed at strengthening EU cooperation on vaccine-preventable diseases, which included an initiative to address vaccine disinformation. Additionally, in spring 2019 a [coalition for vaccination](#) was launched, which works to deliver accurate information on vaccines to the public through combating myths on vaccination. The RAS has been [utilised](#) in recent weeks to counter disinformation efforts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling Member States to share knowledge on such disinformation efforts amid the crisis. Since January 2020, the ESTF has collected over [150 examples](#) of pro-Kremlin disinformation regarding COVID-19. In addition, Parliament's own Spokesperson's Unit is – amongst many other tasks – analysing open source narratives related to Parliament and the pandemic. The European Science-Media Hub (ESMH) under STOA/EPRS is collecting and publishing a regular coronavirus [update](#) of the most relevant information provided by EU institutions and other European and global actors. The ESMH has also launched a series of interviews with leading European virologists and experts. The Commission has launched a [webpage](#) dedicated to fighting disinformation about the corona crisis, and [another](#) with online learning resources for teachers, educators and learners during the outbreak. Moreover, the Commission is cooperating closely with online platforms, encouraging them to promote authoritative sources, demote content that is verifiably false or misleading, and take down illegal content or content that could cause physical harm.

