July 8, 2020

To: Governors' Offices
From: National Governors Association
Re: Countering Mis- and Disinformation Amid COVID-19

Mis- and disinformation campaigns exploit the emotional nature of major events and societal issues and seek to influence public opinion or sow social discord. Misinformation refers to false information shared inadvertently, while disinformation refers to the deliberate creation of inaccurate information, spread maliciously to deepen societal divides and lead the public to believe false information.[1] These campaigns underscore the importance of governors' role in broadcasting clear and accurate information to the public, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Establishing and maintaining communication channels with the public and staying abreast of emerging rumors is critical to counter-messaging and mitigating adverse public reactions.

This memorandum offers recommended actions states can take to counter mis- and disinformation campaigns, including:
- Implement transparent and timely communication strategies
- Promote trusted sources of information
- Facilitate state communications staff in developing a strategy to counter mis- and disinformation campaigns
- Integrate communication strategy into existing emergency and public health response protocols
- Build public resilience to mis- and disinformation
- Collaborate with industry and social media

The memorandum also examines the types of mis- and disinformation surrounding COVID-19, the role of social media platforms, and what federal resources are available.

Mis- and Disinformation Surrounding COVID-19
In public health, influence campaigns have historically been associated with vaccine hesitancy, targeting ethnically or religiously homogeneous and socially insulated communities, prompting alarming drops in vaccination rates.[2] The COVID-19 pandemic, similar to many major events, has generated an abundance of mis- and disinformation – including campaigns connected to Russia, China, and Iran. The campaigns tend to focus on conspiracy theories surrounding the virus' origin; inaccurate information on its symptoms, treatment and spread; claims undermining its severity; and the manipulation of public emotion.

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[1] https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/SLTTCOVIDToolkit_FINAL_508.pdf

[2]Fournet, N., Mollema, L., Ruijs, W. L., Harmsen, I. A., Keck, F., Durand, J. Y., … van Steenbergen, J. E. (30 January 2018). Under-Vaccinated Groups in Europe and Their Beliefs, Attitudes and Reasons for Non-Vaccination; Two Systematic Reviews. BMC Public Health, 18(1), 196. Retrieved from
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5789742/;
 In recent years, vaccination rates for certain preventable diseases have fallen below the CDC's recommended "herd immunity" threshold, making communities more susceptible to outbreaks. For more information see
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5789742/

Recommended Action Items for Governors

Fear and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 has helped create an information vacuum that malicious actors have been quick to exploit, filling space with false information, spoofing official nonprofit, academic and government websites, and general fear-mongering. Demand for timely, accessible information produced lowered barriers to entry for information, making citizens particularly susceptible to untruths and conspiracy theories in the time of a pandemic.[3]

To effectively communicate accurate information to the public and dispel mis- and disinformation, states should implement a coordinated approach to include communications strategies on traditional platforms, messaging consistent with state and local agencies, engagement of resources such as reporting mechanisms and federal resources, in addition to collaboration with private technology companies and social media platforms.

- **Implement transparent and timely communication strategies.** Governors serve as the face of the state response and, consequently, have the platform to communicate information to the public about the virus response and recovery efforts in a timely, transparent, and clear manner. Such an approach is critical to dispelling incorrect information and developing trust in official sources. Essential components of executive communications strategies to counter mis- and disinformation include:[4]
    o Hold regular press conferences to issue guidance and updated information;
    o Unify messaging across state agencies and local governments to eliminate instances of contradictory information and reinforce what is being messaged to the public; and
    o Communicate any new information, changes in procedure, etc., in a timely and straightforward manner.

- **Promote trusted sources of information**. Governors should seek to elevate and guide the public towards reputable sources of information and expertise. This can be as simple as offering guidance from official sources, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the National Institute of Health (NIH). Governors can also engage and elevate subject-matter experts within the state executive branch, such as providing the state's surgeon general or public health director a platform to communicate directly to the public at a press conference.[5]

- **Facilitate state communications staff in developing a strategy to counter mis- and disinformation campaigns**. Governors can leverage their position to align the various public information officers (PIOs) and other communication specialists across state agencies to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter mis- and disinformation campaigns. Suggested components of statewide communication strategies include:[6]
    o Avoid repeating or reposting of rumors and false information as possible, even if identifying as false. Likewise, avoid refuting specific pieces of mis- and

[3] https://behavioralscientist.org/loose-lips-the-psychology-of-rumor-during-crisis-coronavirus/
[4] https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ecpe/public-health-communication-strategies-covid-19/
[5] https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/29/californias-leading-digital-and-media-platforms-businesses-and-celebrities-partner-with-the-state-to-amplify-covid-19-stay-home-save-lives-public-awareness-campaign/
[6] https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/SMWG_Countering-False-Info-Social-Media-Disasters-Emergencies_Mar2018-508.pdf

disinformation. Focus communications instead on countering the intent behind the message. [7]

- o Encourage state agencies to develop communication response plans in advance of incidents. To facilitate timely counter-messaging, state agencies may develop template responses that reinforce public health guidance and directs the public towards official sources of information.
- o Build relationships with the media so that in the event of an incident, they know who to contact and vice-versa.
- o Monitor social media for rumors and knowledge gaps.

- **Integrate communication strategy into existing emergency and public health response protocols.** Governors can establish a task force or designate a team to track information campaigns gaining traction, develop counter messages, and liaise between state and local officials, the public, and the media.
  - o The **New Jersey** Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness launched a website designed to counter mis- and disinformation in the state. Leveraging intelligence from state and federal agencies, the website serves as a public repository for information and resources on mis- and disinformation campaigns and cybercrime and scam alerts.[8]
  - o The **Maryland** Emergency Management Agency established a Coronavirus Rumor Control page, offering clarity on a range of different topics, including government orders, the 2020 Census, schools and education notices, and guidance for businesses.[9] The site also provides the public with a list of frequently asked questions and links to sources of official information.

- **Build public resilience to mis- and disinformation.** A critical piece to countering mis- and disinformation campaigns is public education on the threat it poses, how to identify and report it, and the importance of not repeating it. Governors can leverage their platform to inform the public, promote digital literacy, and encourage critical assessment of information, fact-checking, and reporting mis- and disinformation to platform reporting hubs.[10] [11]

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[7] Dastagir, A. E. (8 April 2019). Facts Alone Don't Sway Anti-Vaxxers. So What Does? USA Today. Retrieved from https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2019/03/08/vaccine-anti-vax-anti-vaxxer-what-change-their-mind-vaccine-hesitancy/3100216002/

[8] The site also includes:
- A library of official reports documenting mis and disinformation and its sources, as well as intelligence to disprove them;
- Cyber alerts and scam notifications regarding scams targeting citizens and businesses;
- A list of mis and disinformation campaigns affecting citizens;
- Information regarding contact tracing efforts in the state; and
- Links to state and federal partners, including FEMA's Rumor Control website.

Access the site here: https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/covid19

[9] https://govstatus.egov.com/md-coronavirus-rumor-control

[10] https://www.solarium.gov/

[11] Individuals can conduct their own fact-checks and learn how to consume information responsibly at a variety of resources, including:
- News Literacy Project
- Snopes Fact Check
- Facebook's False News Resource Page

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- **Collaborate with industry and social media.** Popular social media platforms and search engines are making a concerted effort to direct users to official, trustworthy sources of information. **California** Governor Gavin Newsom established a partnership with social media companies to support the state's COVID-19 public awareness campaign.[12] The partnership allows California emergency and health agencies to use the ad space and information filters on several social media platforms, including Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Spotify, to share accessible information about state policies, messages from state public health experts, tips to help contain the spread of COVID-19, and a list of resources and available services.

The Role of Social Media

In response to COVID-19, social media platforms and search engines including those listed above and others have committed to making reliable information available and to curbing spread of mis- and disinformation.

- Incorporated into Facebook users' home menus is a "Coronavirus Information Center." When users search "coronavirus," they are directed to health organizations, including the WHO.[13] Facebook has also launched a third-party fact-checking initiative that flags mis- and disinformation. This effort is complemented by the outright removal of conspiracy theories flagged by global health organizations.[14]
- Google searches related to coronavirus display an alert bar followed by the WHO's "do the five" campaign, mainstream news outlets, and information from recognized health organizations and governments. Google also committed to removing inaccurate or misleading information, prohibiting ads that capitalize on the pandemic – i.e., medical masks and respirators – and fake reviews about healthcare locations.[15]
- YouTube pledged to promote verified, informative videos on its homepage and to tighten regulations banning conspiracy videos about COVID-19.[16]

Twitter added a feature that labels misleading, disputed, or unverified tweets relating to COVID-19 and removes those that it believes may lead to harm. The label warns users about the tweets and points them toward authoritative sources like public health organizations and agencies. Tweets with content that may pose a risk to users' health may be removed from the platform.[17] The platform will also provide NGOs with advertising credits to support public health campaigns.[18]

Federal Resources

The CDC launched a "Stop the Spread of Rumors" landing page to address and dispute common myths and rumors with simple and straightforward facts. The Fact Page addresses rumors from the signs and symptoms to susceptible populations, linking to more in-depth CDC resources.

The Food and Drug Administration continues to actively issue warning letters to firms for selling "fraudulent products with claims to prevent, treat, mitigate, diagnose, or cure coronavirus disease

[12] https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/29/californias-leading-digital-and-media-platforms-businesses-and-celebrities-partner-with-the-state-to-amplify-covid-19-stay-home-save-lives-public-awareness-campaign/
[13] 13 https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/coronavirus/#joint-statement
[14] Ibid.
[15] https://www.blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/covid-19-how-were-continuing-to-help/
[16] https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/19/21187413/youtube-coronavirus-covid-19-shelf-homepage-news-authority-misinformation?mc_cid=b97944165a&mc_eid=6919eb05a1
[17] https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html
[18] https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/16/21182726/coronavirus-covid-19-facebook-google-twitter-youtube-joint-effort-misinformation-fraud

2019."[19] On their Health Fraud Scams page, individuals can review fraudulent products, warning letters, and report websites suspected of selling illegal or fraudulent products.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency launched a Coronavirus Rumor Control page clarifying rumors surrounding the federal government's response, such as deployment of the National Guard, distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), and testing questions.

The U.S. DHS Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) released a guide for identifying false and misleading information related to COVID-19, including those pertaining to the virus' origin, its scale, how it relates to 5G technology, the government's response to it, and prevention and treatment.[20] CISA also released a disinformation toolkit for state and local government officials to help raise public awareness to the various disinformation campaigns relating to COVID-19.[21]

Other federal accountability mechanisms include the Federal Communication Commission's Complaint Center, where consumers can report false information intentionally broadcasted over TV or radio.

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[19] https://www.fda.gov/consumers/health-fraud-scams/fraudulent-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-products
[20] https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CISAInsights-COVID-19_Disinformation_Activity_508.pdf
[21] https://www.cisa.gov/publication/covid-19-disinformation-toolkit