Disinformation and misinformation; a shared threat for veterinary services and law enforcement

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The hazards - false, deceptive, misleading, or manipulated information

Misinformation

False information, spread without knowingly intending to cause harm.

Common, all around us

Disinformation

False information, spread with intent to deceive, mislead, or cause harm.

Less common, greater risks, may be illegal

Lumpy skin disease: Viral cattle disease sends rumours flying in India

21 October 2022

Misinformation about a viral disease that infects cattle is spreading on social media in India.

Lumpy skin disease has already infected over 2.4 million animals and has led to over 110,000 cattle deaths in India, according to latest data from the government.

India is the world's largest milk producer and has the world's largest cattle population, but the infection is threatening livelihoods of farmers in the country. Meanwhile, misinformation has made some people wary of consuming milk. We debunk three false claims about the disease.

Is milk produced by infected cattle safe for human consumption?

Many viral social media posts falsely claim that milk has become unsafe for human consumption due to the spread of lumpy skin disease, and that drinking milk from an infected animal will lead to the development of a skin disease in humans as well. The posts are often accompanied by images of visibly diseased human bodies covered in lesions, meant to create fear.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-63262411

AFP ● Fact Check

REGIONS

An Australian anti-vaccine campaigner has falsely claimed the state of New South Wales has "forced farmers to vaccinate their herd with mRNA jabs" that allegedly led to dozens of cattle deaths. Whilst mRNA vaccines for viral livestock diseases are in development, as of October 11, no such jabs were available or mandated for use for cattle in Australia. AFP has not found evidence the incident described in the posts actually occurred.

"A friend informed me today that her neighbor, a dairy farmer, is now forced to vaccinate her herd with an mRNA vaccine!" reads a portion of a screenshot posted on Instagram on October 2.

"She complied and of the 200 head of cattle, 35 died instantly!"

The post says the incident happened in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state.

https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32KQ68B

The threat

Untreated, misinformation and disinformation can:

- damage lives and livelihoods

- undermine trust

- spread confusion

- consume attention and resources

- cause economic and social damage

Countering animal health misinformation and disinformation often requires joint action by Veterinary Services and Law Enforcement agencies.

Motivations to spread

- Belief in something or desire that it is true.

- Disagreement with something or wanting it to end or be changed.

- Undermine the credibility, trust and reputation of a person, organization or course of action.

- Advance a political, religious, economic, cultural or other goal.

- Make money or gain other financial advantage.

- Get attention, be heard or to gain greater online status.

- For fun … mischief

Enablers – our enclosed ecosystems

Our digital 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' mediate the information we see, watch, hear, and share. We are susceptible to misinformation that may infect and influence us.

Organisations tend to interact in known and safe spaces, so they can easily miss critical debates or lack abilities to intervene beyond their comfort zones.

Most of us, individuals and organisations, are not aware of these threats and we over-estimate our abilities to counter them.

Image: https://theconversation.com/the-problem-of-living-inside-echo-chambers-110486

Enablers – technical innovation

Widely available digital and communication tools can easily create, manipulate and 'virally' share or target messages and images.

'Clickbait', sensationalised headlines link to often misleading information

'Deepfakes', digitally altered audio, images and video that misrepresent people

'Trolls', people using social media to attack and undermine others and their ideas

'Bots,' computer programs automatically disseminate fake news on social media
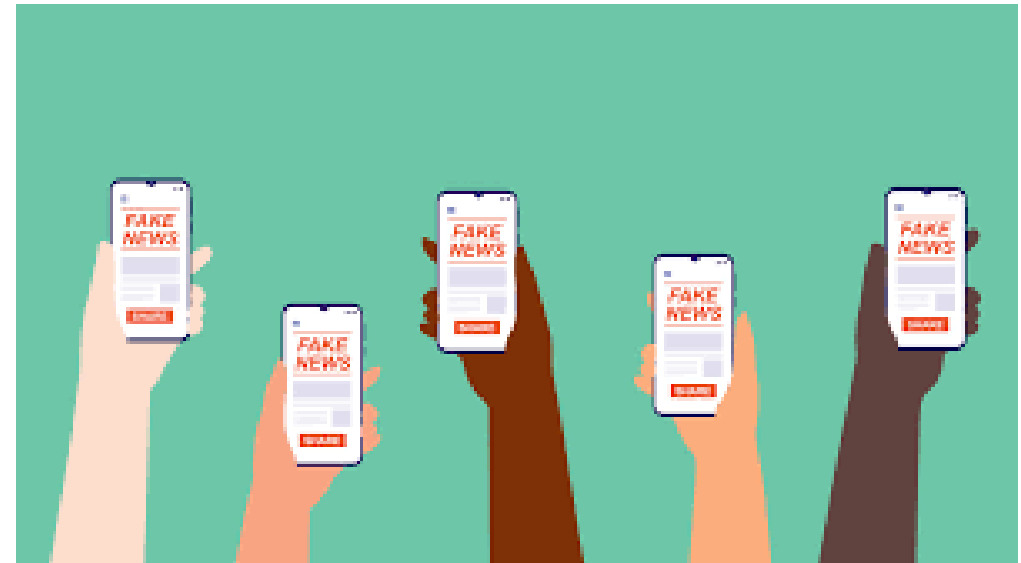

Image: https://news.sky.com/story/prebunking-the-new-tactic-to-help-you-people-spot-fake-news-12811636

Countering the threats

Prepare

Detect

Respond

Countering the threats

Raise awareness and recognize threats, educate ourselves to take timely action, putting in place robust and agile plans, procedures and capacities.

Training, gaming, and other exercises help people understand threats and get prepared.

Coordinate actions across agencies and borders, bringing in specialised skills and networks when needed.

Build '**cognitive resilience**' in people and organisations so they can better manage the threats.

Build **feedback loops and learning** to be better prepared for the next emergency.

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Early actions

Risk planning

1) Communication – engage communities, dynamic listening and gaining trust; 2) Assessment – define hazards and triggers, identify risk pathways, control points, and consequences; and 3) Management – monitoring, surveillance and risk detection, increase the prevalence of true information; decrease the prevalence of false information.

The Myanmar Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation recently developed a plan for risk communication in animal disease outbreaks and emergencies.

Simulating misinformation threats

In New Mexico, 'tabletop' exercises (TTX) of the Southwest Border Center for Emergency Preparedness and Food Protection worked through several animal disease disinformation scenarios.

The aim was to develop and facilitate preparedness efforts across different jurisdictional areas and countries (both Mexico and the United States).

Lessons learned included the need for trustworthy sources, consistent messaging, and to involve everyone, not just public agencies.

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Countering the threats

Reach out: Build **trust and connections** and extend organisational reach, for intelligence-gathering and readiness to act.

Monitor and assess misinformation/disinformation risks and threats and changes over time.

Social listening draws insights from social media and other online forums to hear what people are concerned about, to pinpoint emerging issues, threats, and risks.

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Social listening

Epidemic Intelligence from Open Sources

The EIOS initiative of public health stakeholders – including WOAH – provides a unified early detection, verification, assessment and communication of public health threats using publicly available information.

It collates hundreds of thousands of articles from online media and social media sources, web sites, news aggregators, blogs and expert groups, running them through text mining and analytical modules to point up trends and risks.

https://www.who.int/initiatives/eios

Social listening dashboard

The UNICEF Vaccine Demand Observatory dashboard centralizes misinformation alerts, fact checks, and media data from global and community sources.

This is used by staff to monitor misinformation and respond to it with evidence-based communication strategies.

https://www.thevdo.org

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Countering the threats

Pre-bunking. 'Inoculation' with facts counteracts false messages before they are widely spread. Fill risky 'information voids' in advance of disinformation taking hold.

De-bunking and fact-checking. Challenge and correct the false information.

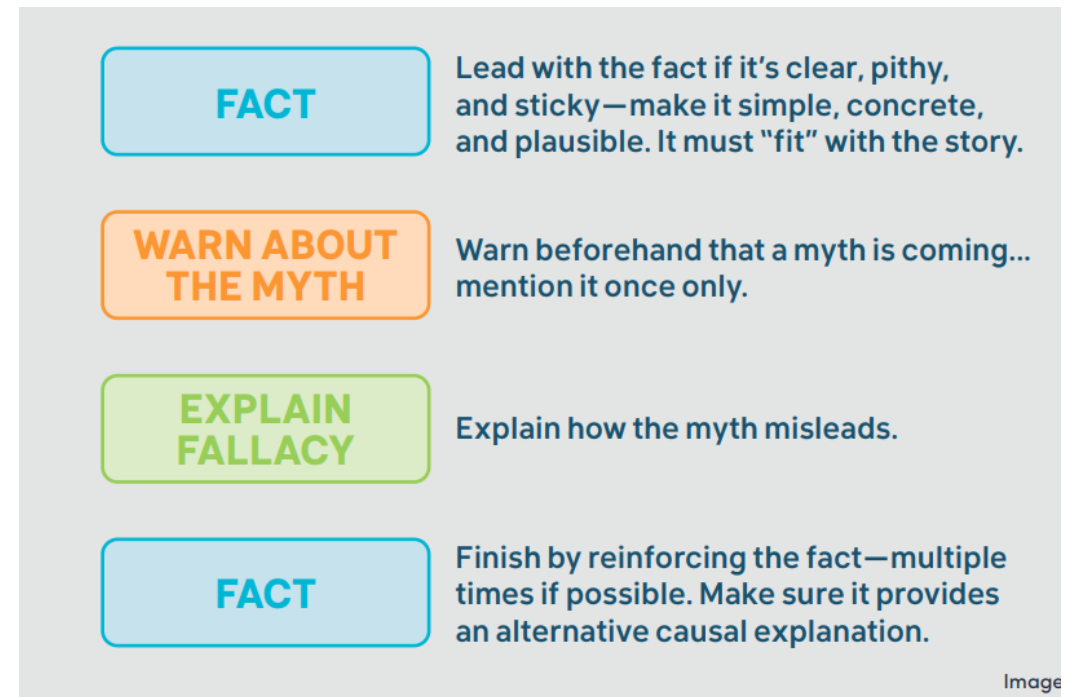**Build alliances** where partners share the load and amplify the impact of counter-messaging.

An important ally is **media** for fact-checking.

Work with social or community '**influencers**' to reach and convince 'distant' audiences, usually in wider **communications campaigns**

The 'truth' sandwich

FACT — Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible. It must "fit" with the story.

WARN ABOUT THE MYTH — Warn beforehand that a myth is coming... mention it once only.

EXPLAIN FALLACY — Explain how the myth misleads.

FACT — Finish by reinforcing the fact—multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative causal explanation.

https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020

Countering the threats

Correct inaccurate information

The United Kingdom Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs runs a 'media blog' to "set the record straight where one or more Defra Group organisations have been misquoted or misrepresented."

https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk

Work with influencers

During the coronavirus pandemic, the UK and US governments and the WHO worked with social media influencers, reality TV and Tik Tok stars as well as local micro-influencers, recruiting them to promote recommended behaviours and to counter anti-vaccine disinformation.

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/01/technology/vaccine-lies-influencer-army.html

https://staffprofiles.bournemouth.ac.uk/display/internet-publication/335200

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Key points

'We' are more vulnerable than ever before / 'They' have great opportunities and tools / national governments start to make disinformation illegal

Our 'resistance' to these hazards can be increased – through resilience-building as well as good planning and real-life simulations

We can better monitor and detect risks and threats – through social listening, stronger analytical capacities, building trust, and forming alliances

We can pre-emptively respond to threats, pre-bunking and inoculating people with facts and early warning

We can counter active incidents with fact-checking, evidence, communications and de-bunking measures

However, we need to 'see' and understand the threats; boost our own emergency preparedness and response capacities; understand when harmful becomes illegal; and build joint actions that integrate intelligence and expertise across diverse agencies.

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