POLICY BRIEF
Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies (PHEs): Working Together during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Combatting infodemic & effective use of social media
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Executive statement
With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the global community is fighting 2 major enemies: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes COVID-19, as well as “Infodemic” of misinformation, which undermines the effort in fighting against the pandemic. Social media has become part of our life, and the information of COVID-19 is frequently sought on various platforms via the internet. A large volume of information is available, yet the quality of information shared can be questionable for some as anyone can post what they like without fact-checking. The health sector intends to provide timely and accurate information, and infodemic poses significant challenges. Under such circumstances, Risk Communication plays a critical role in an era of social media, which is vital in handling infodemic. There is no “one size fits all” solution, yet there are some good practices and lessons learnt that each country could modify to apply to their countries’ context. This paper aims to provide key messages and a set of recommendations for ASEM Partners to implement effective Risk Communication amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics, especially in relation to combatting infodemic and the effective use of social media.

Key messages and recommendations
- **Work together with the media and journalists**: Media and journalists are strong allies in combatting infodemic. Effective collaboration with them will help you to disseminate real information that suppresses fake news.
- **Use social media to spread key messages**: Use social media to detect fake news, then you can figure out what is a message needed. Spread the truth across different social media platforms and make your message go viral! The use of influencers and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) is also effective to get the public’s attention.
- **Collaborate with online service companies**: Work directly with Facebook and google to mitigate fake news!
- **Leave no one behind**: Work with the local stakeholders who work in grassroots to reach out to valuable populations, such as migrants and ethnic minorities. Remember, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

Introduction
Risk Communication is characterised as “the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being”, which functions to protect people by enabling them to make informed decisions against the risks. In recent years, the internet, including various social media platforms, has made the exchange of information much faster and easier. However, it has also posed a challenge on Risk Communication. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations acknowledged “infodemic”, spreading fake news fast and easy. According

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1. [https://openwho.org/courses/risk-communication](https://openwho.org/courses/risk-communication)
to WHO, infodemic is “an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution” that spreads misinformation, disinformation and rumours amid PHEs. It has a significant negative impact on public health response and a high risk of creating confusion and distrust among the public\(^2\). While social media is a useful tool for risk communication, it can also be a source of fake news.

“There is so much information out there that people do not know what to do. They don’t know where to go and how to get the information that’s relevant to them, and that’s one of our challenges; how do we put the relevant information to people who need the most? (...) We need to find how we can get people to cut through the noise and get the relevant information that’s relevant to them when they need it in a way they can use it.”

Dr Supriya BEZBARUAH, World Health Organization

“Combating Infodemic & effective use of social media”

ASEF PHN hosted its annual Risk Communication conference online looking into the infodemic management and effective use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate a much-needed dialogue, government officials across Asia and Europe with first-hand experience shared their best practices and lessons learnt for handling infodemic while implementing timely and effective Risk Communication, especially concerning social media use.


Recommendations from the online conference day 2
The online conference has highlighted the good practice and challenges in the infodemic management and effective use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Recommendation 1:**
In a battle against infodemic, we need to “win the media” and work with journalists.
Media still plays an important role, although social media appears very powerful. The health sector can brief journalists with correct information via press releases or press conferences, and they will help defeat fake news.

**Recommendation 2:**
Social media is not only a potential source of fake news – use it effectively to disseminate key messages leading to positive behaviour changes.
We can use social media to check on rumours and fake news, then combat those by disseminating consistent and accurate messages via multiple platforms. Some technologies, including AI and software, can help screen misinformation on social media platforms. Engaging famous figures in a country, such as a singer and an athlete, will also increase the outreach of the social media campaign.

The Ministry of Health Viet Nam produced a song called “Ghen Co Vy” (English: Jealous Coronavirus) promoting health-seeking behaviour, such as hand hygiene and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The song became viral with more than 2 M views, a dance battle from the same music imitating handwashing movement was widely shared and participated on social media.

**Recommendation 3:**
Online service companies providing social networking services can also be your allies.
Working directly with the companies such as Facebook and google makes it easier to detect fake news and re-direct the population with relevant and accurate information.

**Recommendation 4:**
Don’t forget the vulnerable population such as migrants and ethnic minorities in your country.
The information needs to be consistent but requires to be more intense for those who most need help. To reach out, collaborating with the organisations working in grassroots is very useful. They know the struggle of this population group, so you can use the information to tailor your message.
How can we include migrants into Risk Communication during the COVID-19 pandemic? An example from France.

At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, France started with a universal mass campaign “designed for all” to ensure everyone could understand it regardless of age, gender, educational or cultural background. They used easy-to-understand texts with images and translated in more than 20 different languages, creating a comprehensive and universal communication framework to inform the largest audience simultaneously with the same key messages. However, they were aware that certain groups might face more difficulties than others. Later on, they provided the tailored versions with additional information, such as living with Covid hostels and free testing. Those who are new to the country may require more assistance to follow public health advice. The viral videos among these populations were assessed, and new videos with accurate information were created to navigate them. Collaborating with popular channels, such as “Africa radio”, also helped, emphasising the use of social media by using informal videos, which resulted in more than 1M views on Facebook. Additionally, they provided educational group activities to increase the level of media literacy, triggering positive behaviour change.

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References/more information


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