



LSHTM Viral
S1E11: Misinformation contagion
February 26, 2020

0:02 [James Barr, interviewer]

Hello there I'm James Barr and welcome to a new episode of LSHTM viral, the podcast bringing you expert analysis of the coronavirus outbreak and explaining the science behind the headlines. Misinformation is making headlines during this outbreak. But how damaging is it? And what can be done to combat it now and in the future, from claims that the new coronavirus was created and leaked from a lab in Wuhan, China to the US alleging Russia is spreading disinformation about the new coronavirus outbreak on social media.

Our guest today is anthropologist Professor Heidi Larson. Heidi is director of the Vaccine Confidence Project here at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Her previous roles include head of global immunisation communication at UNICEF.

Heidi welcome, many thanks for joining us. Misinformation seems to be growing surrounding this coronavirus - what kind of misinformation are we seeing and why are we seeing it?

0:54 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, one of the problems or challenges with coronavirus is that there's a lot still a lot of uncertainty. So we're not even sure sometimes what is misinformation and what isn't, because it's a time of learning constantly. But there are things that we do know that are not accurate like eating garlic and drinking a lot of water will prevent coronavirus, or that actually the virus came out of a nearby lab in Wuhan. There's been plenty of evidence since then that have confirmed that it is absolutely from wild animals. We're just needing to pin down more specifically.

1:36 [James Barr, interviewer]

And what damage do you think this kind of misinformation is having in control of the outbreak?

1:43 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, it affects people's behaviours, it affects the behaviours of markets, it affects the behaviours of economies. We've seen the knock-on effect around the world of the stock market, flights, people's work, schools being closed. So there is a kind of direct and indirect knock-on effect. And also then the issue is when you make choices based on partial information, people may get scared, they may go against the grain. We also saw initially there was a real panic around people getting masks. So there was a lot of mass hoarding in the beginning. And it meant that some of the people that actually needed masks weren't getting it.

2:31 [James Barr, interviewer]

Do you have empathy with people over misinformation? Or who are receiving that misinformation? How can we stop that?

2:38 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, I do have empathy. There's a whole spectrum of mis and dis information and some of it is totally understandable in a time of uncertainty. And there is misinformation out there that is purposefully placed to kind of disrupt and misguide people that I have don't have any empathy for, that's quite damaging. But for people who are caught in this whirlwind of a lot of conflicting information, yes, I do and I also have empathy for people who have been in lockdown and what the anxieties are around that and basic things like you know, getting food in the refrigerator, getting good getting water, really basic survival things.

3:25 [James Barr, interviewer]

I mean, this misinformation is not a new phenomenon. We've seen it during many outbreaks before we see it in vaccines. What are the issues and what can be done about stopping the spread of this misinformation?

3:39 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, I think we need to look at why people believe it. misinformation goes back to the Dark Ages. I mean, it's always been a phenomena in society. We had fake news in the 1800s. So it's, it's not brand new, it moves faster because of social media and can get distorted and be more disruptive. But I think that the important thing though, is to build people's confidence and trust in authorities or in science or in the right sources of information so that they make the right choices in the whole spectrum of information. So it's really looking at the trust behind it and making sure people are believing the right thing to the extent that they know the right thing.

4:30 [James Barr, interviewer]

How do we do that?

4:32 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, I think that every outbreak is an opportunity. I think that these are times where you remember who helped you out the most to give you assurance who guided you who you could count on. So these are real opportunities and important ones for building trust.

4:52 [James Barr, interviewer]

You're director of the Vaccine Confidence Project here at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and even analysing the trends of misinformation and why people around the world have a lack of confidence in things like vaccines. What's your research showing?

5:10 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, our research is showing actually, what we see with vaccines is reflective of deeper trends in society, politics, society, trust, relationships are distrust. And there are disruptive factors. In fact, we're expanding our scope from the vaccine confidence project, to look at confidence in science more broadly. We have issues with trust in climate change science, we have issues in other areas, but to me it reflects a real importance of getting back to building trust in science and in the people who deliver it. And I think that's gonna really start in really younger school age kids.

5:53 [[James Barr, interviewer]

Could school's parents be doing more?

5:56 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Absolutely. And some, some of the younger kids in high school and even younger, they're much more aware of the risks of social media, fake news, false identities - the generation that started with social media as a new toy that could only see the opportunities in it. And we've matured a bit in the sense of our understanding that some of this stuff is risky. And I see an emerging younger generation, I mean, really younger school, who are really starting to embrace science. And I think we need to encourage that from the beginning. Talk to kids in school about really basics about immune systems, and how vaccines actually trigger your own natural immune system. Really get them to understand it, and I think that they'll be our best advocates.

6:53 [James Barr, interviewer]

I certainly never learned that at school – that was a few years ago now but I certainly never learned that's. That's really interesting. It's also the companies as well. There's a lot of controversy about are the social media companies doing enough to combat misinformation? What's your view?

7:08 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, actually we work a lot with and, and collaborate a lot with the tech companies, social media platforms. I think that they get a lot of finger wagging from authorities that they should fix this problem. But actually, they're not content experts. They're really working at the algorithms behind it and I think that there's a lot that they can do in terms of trying to mitigate the amplification of risk and anxiety through their technology. But at the end of the day, we also need to think of the broader ecosystem of information and trust in relationships. So I think they're doing important

work. There's always more they can do but how does that link to other things, because if you shut down a Facebook page or a Twitter handle, that's not going to stop people from having the sentiments they do. They'll just jump to another platform, so we need to think more broadly.

8:14 [James Barr, interviewer]

There's no easy solutions to this, is there Heidi? I saw this morning on Facebook, some public health advice on how to protect yourself against coronavirus. Is that a good example of the sorts of things that social media companies are doing and need to do more of?

8:27 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Yes, absolutely. To the extent that they can and feel that they have access to the right information. I do know that they liaised a lot with the World Health Organisation and other ministries and local health authorities. I think most of those ads are just opportunities to then link them to other sources. And in that sense, they're not putting themselves out as the content expert but really as the as the guide to the right Sources and I think that's really a huge value and contribution.

9:06 [James Barr, interviewer]

It sounds as though everyone's got a role to play from parents to health workers, to scientists to communication specialists. Everyone's got to pull together for this.

9:17 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Absolutely. It's touching all aspects of society.

9:21 [James Barr, interviewer]

Heidi, we're running out of time. Thanks so much for joining us, but we can't let you leave without talking about where we are in terms of a vaccine for this coronavirus. There's a lot of talk about a vaccine the Chinese were mentioning this morning I saw in the media that they might have an oral vaccine. We're a long way off, aren't we?

9:41 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, vaccines are never quick to make, but I have to say one of the benefits or one of the positive outcomes after the West Africa Ebola outbreak was the establishment of CEPI which is a funding mechanism for vaccines and other important outbreak related technologies. It was incredibly quick, they turned around funding for candidates for coronavirus vaccines. And there they are in process. So it won't be next week for sure. And even when you once you have the candidate, you have to make it to trial it and go through all the obvious safety regulations. So things are moving quicker than usual, which is great. But I don't think we can wait for that. But in the time that we have while that's being developed, that's the time to be building the trust relationships. That's the time to be preparing the public for the readiness for the opportunity for a vaccine.

10:49 [James Barr, interviewer]

And Heidi, your work and your the work of your team in the vaccine confidence project. What have you learned that could help us or help the world roll out this new version? If and when it happens?

11:02 [Heidi Larson, interviewee]

Well, I think the preparedness as I mentioned of populations, and really being alert to where the weak spots in the in the society and community are where you already have marginalised or distrusting groups for your normal vaccine uptake might be areas you need to work a bit harder to build the confidence. But we've also learned that you can have a fantastic new vaccine. And in one setting, it goes beautifully. And another setting, total disruption. And it really depends on the political landscape, how much people trust the government because vaccines are always regulated, recommended, and sometimes mandated by government. So if you have any issues with government, it's a challenge. So I think that every setting needs to prepare and don't assume because it goes well in one place. You can take it for granted somewhere else. Working

with local communities, local communities, local health authorities with the public and themselves and school kids.

12:13 [James Barr, interviewer]

Heidi, thanks so much for joining us.

12:13 [Amy Thomas, host]

Thanks For more information, please visit our website lshtm.ac.uk. And stay tuned for our next episode, continuing to explore the science behind the coronavirus outbreak with our experts here at LSHTM. Remember to subscribe to LSHTM Viral and thanks for listening.