

# UK aid to tackle global spread of coronavirus 'fake news'

Dangerous myths about coronavirus which are hampering the global fight against the disease will be challenged thanks to a new initiative backed by UK aid.

The support from the Department for International Development will challenge misinformation in South East Asia and Africa, which is then spreading worldwide, and direct people to the right advice to help stop the spread of the virus.

False claims and conspiracy theories have spread rapidly on social media, touting 'cures' like drinking bleach or rubbing mustard and garlic into your skin. These pose a serious risk to health and can speed up the spread of the virus, by stopping people taking simple practical, preventative steps like washing their hands.

DFID's £500,000 support will go to the Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian (H2H) Network, which has extensive experience addressing the spread of misinformation during epidemics, for example following the 2015 Ebola outbreak.

The work of the H2H Network will complement UK initiatives by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the NHS to tackle misinformation online.

International Development Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan said:

"Misinformation harms us all. By tackling it at source we will help stop the spread of fake news – and coronavirus – worldwide, including within the UK."

H2H will work with partners BBC Media Action and Internews to create verified information in various languages to tackle specific mistruths spreading in South East Asia and Africa. Their work will also support journalists in these regions to write more accurately about the virus using information from the World Health Organization.

Support will also go to Translators without Borders, which monitors false information in various languages and translates validated content from WHO and other health agencies, and Evidence Aid which updates a database of research on diseases each day.

The initiative will analyse social media and online content to identify where the misinformation is coming from and how it is spreading – so victims of fake news can be sent the correct information and directed to official health advice.

H2H will also work with social media influencers – vloggers and bloggers – to help spread accurate health information and reach younger online audiences

that are more susceptible to fake news.

Some of the social media influencers being engaged include:

- Bianca Gonzalez, a health expert and YouTube vlogger from the Philippines with over 7 million followers on Twitter @iamsuperbianca
- Dr Jahangir Kabir, a Bangladeshi health expert and popular TV presenter with over 1 million Facebook followers @DrJahangirkabircmc
- @KlikDokter – An Indonesian health blog with over 4 million Facebook followers

Some of the more damaging mistruths being targeted include:

- ‘Miracle cures’ for the virus, such as drinking chlorine dioxide, an industrial bleach, or urine, eating garlic, gargling saltwater or spreading cow dung and mustard paste. In Myanmar, news websites have reported false claims supposedly from health officials, advising people to sleep next to chopped onions claiming this will “absorb the virus” or to drink ginger juice. It is also falsely claimed you cannot catch coronavirus if you have a mosquito bite. Scammers pretending to be health officials in Myanmar have been selling black pepper seeds as a cure.
- Undermining health officials: In Tanzania, people have received a WhatsApp message claiming to be from the health ministry and telling them drinking warm water every few minutes will prevent infection. The exact same message has also appeared in French throughout West Africa, claiming to be from the Canadian Health Ministry. Messages like this are undermining the efforts of real health officials to contain the virus, damaging trust in official advice and confusing people.
- Promoting violence: Rumours that the virus was created or spread deliberately have already led to reported attacks on Chinese nationals across South East Asia as well as in the UK. A video claiming to show Chinese officials shooting coronavirus victims and alleging tens of thousands were executed went viral on social media sites worldwide, after the celebrity sister of a prominent Bollywood actor in India shared them. The video was in fact edited from four completely unrelated clips, including one of Chinese police shooting a rabid dog.

Public Health England is regularly updating its advice on coronavirus, including how people can help stop the spread of infection. Individuals are also being advised to call NHS 111 or contact the NHS dedicated 111 online coronavirus service if they are concerned about any symptoms or any contact

they may have had with someone who might be infected.

- The H2H Network consists of approximately 50 organisations, which provide specialist services to the humanitarian aid sector, including tackling fake news in the wake of disasters and epidemics. The H2H Network is supported by UK aid and hosted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). This support is a new allocation of UK aid support from the UK's aid commitment.
- The World Health Organization warned in February about an 'infodemic' of false information which risked worsening the spread of the virus
- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport earlier this week announced the creation of a new cross-Government counter disinformation unit bringing together expert teams to help provide a comprehensive picture on the potential extent, scope and impact of disinformation on coronavirus in the UK.
- The DCMS-led unit will have regular and robust engagement with social media companies to monitor interference and limit the spread of disinformation.
- NHS England has also partnered with social media sites and search engines to ensure that official health advice is shown in online searches about the virus, as well as to verify or remove accounts claiming to be from local health authorities
- The new UK aid-backed initiative announced today will complement these efforts, by challenging misinformation beyond the UK, targeting the source of fake news spreading in and from Africa and South East Asia