



– A Technical Brief for Breakthrough ACTION Field Teams –

COVID-19 RUMORS AND MISINFORMATION

September 10, 2020

This is a short technical brief with important steps and resources on how country programs can track and address rumors around COVID-19 (as needed). The guide includes a number of great resources and links while also sharing nuggets from global, collective thinking around rumors.

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What are Rumors?

Rumors are **unverified information** that spread rapidly through a group or population. They can either be true or false. Often there is a bit of both in a rumor. Rumors are a natural response to uncertain or threatening times (Bugge: Rumour Has It, 2017).

Rumors often emerge when there is a **lack of accurate, credible, reliable information** or **too much of it**, resulting in conflicting information or an overload of information. In that case, it is hard to separate fact from fiction.

There are different kinds of rumors (*CCP, GHSA Ethiopia: One Health Rumor Tracking 2020*):

Reports of events and/or risky behaviors

such as “people becoming sick with COVID-19 after eating Chinese food” or “the country has closed certain borders or shops.”

Misunderstood or incomplete information

that is spread without ill intent but that may lead to the practice of risky behaviors or negative perceptions. For example, “black people are immune to COVID-2019” or “COVID-19 does not spread in hot climates.”

Disinformation or false information

that is spread with an intent to cause harm or take advantage of a situation. For example, “COVID-19 was developed by the West as a form of biological warfare” or “someone is going around deliberately infecting people in community Y.”

Why is rumor tracking important?

The motivations for creating, sharing and amplifying rumors may vary from something as simple as trying to be helpful to needing to feel some sense of control in stressful times to wanting to position oneself as being “in the know” or even intentionally misleading (for economic or political gain). Whatever the motivations may be, rumors thrive when there is less certainty about an issue.

Rumors are a “social barometer” that can give us insight into how people are thinking or feeling about COVID-19. We can ignore them as unimportant, but as a Northern Nigeria polio immunization program discovered in 2003, **not listening to and addressing rumors can be expensive**. Rumors about the vaccine stopped people from vaccinating their children resulting in an outbreak response that cost nearly \$500 million more than anticipated.



How can we start tracking and addressing rumors?



STEP 0 Coordinating

Bringing together partners working on similar issues to share information and avoid duplication or possible message conflict is an important start. Ideally, the local and central government and a representative from the WHO should be a key part of this coordination so they feel consulted/engaged and are, in turn, fully aware of and supportive of the efforts to track, verify, and address rumors. Tasks could even be split up on the comparative strengths/geographical presence of different partners. This way information-gathering and outflow can be more coordinated and impactful.

For example, the Eastern and Southern Africa regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) coordination hub is organizing a region-wide [community feedback/rumor tracking mechanism](#) led by Sharon Reader/IFRC.



STEP 1 Discovering the Rumors

Broadly speaking, rumors are spread by a few routes: word of mouth in **communities**, **news media** (print, radio, television, outdoor media, and internet), and **digitally** through mobile phones and online platforms. Therefore, there need to be different ways of listening and understanding what is being said. Community conversations, chats with key informants, tracking, and following media reporting, messaging, social media posts, and discussions about COVID-19 can be triangulated to better understand what people are talking about.

Keep in mind:

- Build on existing and trusted relationships and use their networks to listen. People may be reluctant to share rumors they have heard with people they do not trust. Partner with civil society, local media, community based groups, teachers, and health workers to help you listen and track.
- Create a rumor log. This can be a printed log filled in by hand, electronic log, or both. This allows you to listen to and track the basic details of what the rumor is (content), where it is coming from, date and mode of transmission, frequency of repetition, whether or not it is true, and more. (See examples of a [rumor log](#) and a [rumor tracker form](#).) If all partners have the same log format, it will be easier to collate, process, and make sense of the information.
- Train those who are listening for rumors about how to detect a rumor. This [Rumor Tracking Guidance for Field Teams](#), developed by Breakthrough ACTION lays out the process with examples.

How can we start tracking and addressing rumors?



STEP 1 Discovering the Rumors (Continued)

- If you have the resources, create a toll-free hotline the public can call to either report an event or suspected case, request assistance, ask a question, share a rumor, communicate other information, or receive information. Côte d'Ivoire developed a dynamic, two-pronged information capture and analysis system through IVR and WhatsApp. (See [a description and lessons learned](#).)
- If a toll-free hotline is too expensive, use a central website, social media page, phone number, or email address where people can write or call-in with questions, hearsay, and rumors for clarification or reporting. Constantly monitor these sources for new or recurring rumors.
- Listening to rumors on social media is another important way to monitor what is being said. (See this useful [guide to social listening](#).)
- Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform created [this brief](#) on considerations relating to online information, mis- and disinformation in the context of COVID-19. This was identified as a key issue by the Social Science Working Group of the WHO Global Research Roadmap for COVID-19.
- Assess the potential consequences of the rumor. (Adapted from Bugge: Rumour Has It, 2017)
 - Could cause harm: “Drink bleach to prevent spread of COVID-19”
 - Could stop people accessing services: “Clinics will make your infection worse”
 - Could cause conflict: “This is a biological weapon made by community X or country Y”
 - Could result in risky behavior/put your staff, family, or community at risk: “You don’t have to follow social distancing as long as you have not traveled out of the country or been in contact with someone who has”
 - Could put certain groups put at risk: “You can hug your grandmother as long as you are not showing any symptoms of COVID-19”
 - Could pose a risk to an organization or group’s reputation: “Organization X is sharing information Y because they are a puppet of Z donor”
- Discuss rumors with colleagues and partners to get their added perspective
- Prioritize your response on risk assessment (low, moderate, or high-risk) rather than whether it is widespread. If it is widespread but harmless, don’t waste your time. Here is a tool to [assess the risk level of rumors](#).

How can we start tracking and addressing rumors?



STEP 2 Verifying the Information

Once you have listened and determined the risk is high enough to warrant addressing, you need to verify the content. It is important to find out the facts behind the rumor and unpack why it came into being in the first place.

Know where and who to check with to verify the rumor. Your own country may have issued guidance around COVID-19 communication. That is a good place to start. Next, there are a few sites that are reliable sources of up-to-date information on COVID-19. The sites below include sections on FAQs and myth-busters.

- <https://www.epi-win.com/advice-and-information>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

Reliable information on reported new cases globally, fatalities, and recoveries can be found at the [Johns Hopkins University interactive map](#).

In addition to these sites, you can also connect with the RCCE coordinating mechanisms, especially if a sub-committee exists tasked with looking specifically at rumors and misinformation. (See the [RCCE Rumor Factsheet](#).)



STEP 3 Engaging the Community

Once you have verified the content and gathered the correct information, you need to engage with the community. Understanding the issues and concerns highlighted by the rumor, overtly and implied, can help shape the response. There should be a short turnaround time from collecting information to acting on it. While it may be tempting to call out the rumor as “wrong,” it will likely create defensiveness and a lot of “taking sides”. Instead, it may be better to develop and deliver a new narrative to replace the rumor. To do this quickly and effectively you will need to:

- Accurately identify the key audience that needs to be influenced. Here is a guide to how you can [identify your priority audiences](#).
- Use language the audience is most comfortable with and cite sources. Use quotes or testimonials from people that the audience trusts/identifies with. This will make the content more compelling. Content should be pretested with the key audience for comprehension, acceptability, and appeal.
- Once you develop the new content, ensure you have the support and buy in of the government and partners in your coordinating network.

How can we start tracking and addressing rumors?



STEP 3 Engaging the Community (continued)

You may need the help of your partners and their networks to disseminate this information. [Assess available communication channels](#) and then [match your audience to the right channel](#).

You can amplify your message with the help of [influencers and spokespeople](#). It is very important to accelerate accurate information about transmission and actions people can take to give them a better sense of control and reduce their sense of uncertainty.

Check if the messages and the new narrative are being received, understood, and believed. You can track progress in your rumor log (see examples of a [rumor log](#) and a [rumor tracker form](#)) or adapt the form to better suit the features of your system and interventions.

If the rumors are fairly complex, a more sophisticated SBC approach may be needed, like the “[Dey Sey](#)” campaign for Ebola rumors in Liberia.

Community-based partners can be a great resource in countering rumors. See the [COVID-19 community guidance for social mobilizers volunteers](#).

CCP Resource Persons

- Liberia: [Anna Helland](#)
- Ethiopia: [Simon Heliso](#) and [Betemariam Alemu](#)
- Côte d’Ivoire: [William Benie](#) and [Cori Fordham](#)
- DRC: [Heather Forrester](#)
- [Kathryn Bertram](#) and [Stephanie Clayton](#)

Online Resources

- <https://covid19communicationnetwork.org/featured-resource/rumors-misinformation/> (Breakthrough ACTION, 2020)
- <https://covid19communicationnetwork.org/covid19resource/technical-brief-covid-19-rumor-tracking-guidance-for-field-teams-2/> (Breakthrough ACTION, 2020)
- [Rumour has it: A practice guide to working with rumors](#) (CDAC Network, 2017)
- Global Health Security Agenda: Ethiopia Risk Communication Activity Key Findings and Recommendations or Strengthening One Health Rumor Tracking (Johns Hopkins CCP, 2020)
- [Disinformation and Disease: Social Media and the Ebola Epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019)
- [How to fight an infodemic](#) (The Lancet, 2020)
- [“Dey Sey” rumor tracking for Ebola in Liberia](#) (HC3 and USAID, 2016)
- [Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context](#) (Internews, 2019)
- [SBCC for Emergency Preparedness Implementation Kit](#) (HC3, 2016)
- <https://thecompassforsbc.org/trending-topics/coronavirus> (Johns Hopkins CCP, 2020)

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Paula Bronstein, Getty Images, Images of Empowerment. India: women gather in their neighborhood area in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. August 17, 2015. <https://www.imagesofempowerment.org/pa0050683-77/>