

AN INTERNEWS REPORT

WHAT WORKS

Addressing COVID-19 Misinformation:
Lessons From The Frontlines In 100 Countries



Internews

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SUMMARY

A global COVID-19 vaccine rollout must be coupled with funding and strategies to support trusted local media worldwide.

The experience of communities in countries across the world demonstrates an urgent need to support groups at the local level if misinformation and mistrust is to be tackled effectively.

Internews, a global non-profit, has supported hundreds of small and local news groups, factcheckers and community leaders, as well as national media outlets to provide accurate and trustworthy information on health over the past year. This work, coupled with Internews' experience of tackling previous epidemics and other health crises, reinforces the importance of a multi-pronged communications strategy that ensures information reaches all levels of the population—and responds to their particular concerns.

“Our work in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Ukraine and the Philippines has shown very clearly that combatting misinformation at the local level

is vital to tackle worries about what to do to change behavior and accept health advice,” said Internews CEO Jodie Ginsberg.

“A global plan to roll out vaccines will be ineffective if it is not accompanied by a robust plan to build sufficient trust in individual communities that the vaccines are safe. A top-down, single message approach—or worse, confused messaging—will erode confidence and that will undermine attempts to get this pandemic under control,” Ginsberg said.

Internews' experience of the past year—and from previous pandemics and epidemics—shows that listening to, and speaking directly with, local communities is critical for

dealing rapidly and effectively with health emergencies. Establishing who the trusted local messengers are, understanding communities' concerns, and investing in the best ways to address them is one of the most effective investments to be made in supporting health globally.

As part of its COVID-19 response, Internews supported thousands of organisations that produce COVID-19-related information, in 68 countries in 135 languages. Support included rumour tracking and rumour-countering work, and training community activists on how to listen and address misinformation

about the pandemic.

The key to achieving this level of intensive support was the creation of the Internews Rapid Response Fund. The fund responds directly to the most urgent needs of local media through a small grants program, coupled with the provision of on-tap expertise from a team of health and science mentors. Mentoring helped keep journalists up-to-date on scientific information and strong storytelling techniques.

THE BIG GOAL:

Citizens Heed Health Advice, Including Vaccination

Problem

Lack of trust in government, health institutions, science experts

Solution

“Go local” to rebuild trust in health information



Track unique concerns and rumours in local communities



Invest in local, already trusted media



Mobilize trusted local community leaders



Use social media for good



INTRODUCTION

When crises hit, people's first instinct is to turn to family, friends, and other close contacts for information. Fears and concerns are based in personal experiences and individuals' responses are framed by them. But in a world where people have access to an increasingly wide array of information sources, who to trust—and how to convey trusted information to build confidence—is increasingly challenging.

Internews has worked for nearly 40 years to support news organisations and community activists to provide accurate and trustworthy information.

Our experience with humanitarian crises such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the migrant crisis in Europe, or the Ebola outbreak in West Africa is that misinformation is most effectively tackled when the response is community-led, and where those who understand and who listen to the fears and concerns of the community are able to debunk rumours, because they are trusted within that community.

At the same time, decision-making—especially in a pandemic—is happening more and more on global platforms, and information flows across boundaries easier than ever before.

This mismatch between communities' experiences and global messaging is one of the contributing elements of distrust and, thus, misinformation.

This means local media and other information brokers can play a unique and important role in facilitating conversations with decision-makers focused on people's needs and concerns. In this way, platforms and government bodies can ensure measures they take (such as tackling rumours through content moderation policies) are appropriate in varied contexts.

The world's leading authorities on the next stages of the COVID-19 pandemic—focused on global vaccine rollout and uptake—agree that communication is at the heart of the challenge.

“We’ve been taking for granted the social contract around vaccines for a very long time, frankly without investing a lot in bringing the public along with us,”¹ Heidi Larson, a professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said in an interview in 2020.

Trust is key to this.

“We are in the middle of the biggest pandemic of our lifetime, and we don’t have a coherent communication strategy with the public,” said Saad Omer, director of Yale’s Institute for Global Health. “It’s mind-boggling that we are not focusing on serious investments in demand-side interventions, including trust.”²

TRUST

The question of how to build trust is not new.

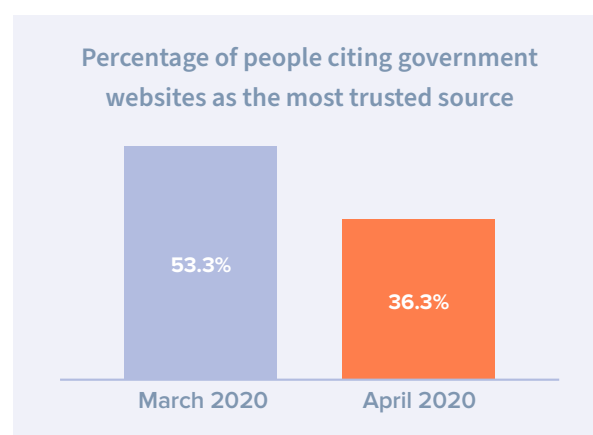
Internews’ experience of the past four decades shows that trustworthy information is not just important—it can save lives.

But, simply providing such information is nowhere near enough. Also vital in this equation is how the information is communicated, who delivers the information and whether it responds to specific public worries.

The challenges to public trust in health crises can come in a variety of forms such as misinformation, disinformation, lack of trust in the organisation delivering information, history of governance in the country, and pressure from other economic factors. These must all be assessed before deciding on the most worthwhile approach with the most impact.

A recent study from the NYU School of Global Public Health surveying more than 11,000 US adults during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic found “trust in government

websites varied by demographic—men and those 40 and older were less likely to trust the government—and faltered over time.”³ The researchers measured a dramatic drop in people citing government websites as the most trusted source, from 53.3% in March to 36.8% in April 2020, suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach to health communications is unlikely to be effective.



“Public health officials need to continually keep an eye on public perceptions and trust, and should adapt their communication strategies as needed so they remain effective,” said Yesim Tozan, assistant professor of global health at NYU and one of the authors of the study. Across—and within—countries, trust levels in governments, often related to the history of the government, and its relationship with its people vary greatly. Trust in science and in the media may also rise and fall, depending on recent events, government controls, and current scandals.

Being aware of all these factors, a community-level understanding of the information ecosystem is crucial to establish who are and are not the trusted media and information providers at any particular time.

“As public health professionals, it’s important that we consider targeting information sources that are used and trusted by certain population groups in order to make sure that COVID-19 information is reaching a diverse audience,”⁴ said Shahmir Ali, lead author of the recent NYU study.

WHAT WORKS?

1 ACT LOCALLY

Understanding local context is key if information is to stick. Historically, international agencies used top-down messaging to confront public health crises, such as Avian flu.

Populations are often resistant to absorbing those command-and-control style messages, especially when they have not been consulted, or the messages fail to take into consideration local circumstances. The experience of the 2003 Avian flu outbreak in Indonesia is an example where calls to action fell flat and cases just kept rising.

“At the time, international agencies were seeking to stop people keeping chickens in their houses as they were carriers of the disease,” said Internews Senior Technical Advisor Sonny Krishnan. “Many people kept chickens inside and they were a primary food source for their families. Theft of chickens often happened at night and so leaving chickens outside the house did not make sense to them, so they were resistant to national campaigns to get them to change.”

As cases steadily rose, and families continued to keep chickens inside despite warnings,





Afghanistan: Debunking Local COVID-19 Rumours

In Afghanistan, a traditional healer was promoting a rumour that COVID-19 could be cured by taking opium mixed with several other compounds. He falsely claimed that drinking the mix and getting high would keep COVID-19 away.

In a society where many women in rural areas get their information from men via word of mouth, and men received that information the same way through Imams, finding a way to speak to those groups to counter the dangerous myth was crucial.

Internews created a one-minute audio recording to debunk the healer's rumour, and then shared that with women's groups and community media partners, like radio network Salam Watandar, so listeners were quickly aware that the healer's story was false.

The second part of its approach was to hold talks with communities, including traditional healers. Sonny Krishnan, Internews Senior Technical Advisor, said what they found successful was identifying peer groups in the community who could bring people together in a community discussion, who could talk about facts and how COVID-19 spreads. "It is important to engage with questions and not put people down, or leave them feeling that their questions don't count," he said.



Democratic Republic of the Congo: Lessons from Ebola on Engaging Communities

In preparing for the challenges of rolling out the COVID-19 vaccines to many countries, the experience of Ebola is highly relevant, as it has important parallels in tackling vaccine hesitancy and health misinformation.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo faced a major Ebola outbreak starting in August 2018. During the Ebola epidemic, Internews worked with different groups to address hesitancy and rumours at a local level. In one case, they identified the Motorbike Riders Association as an organisation that could influence young people, who had been resistant to warnings around Ebola. Internews organised a session with the bikers and invited members to discuss some of their key concerns. As part of this session, one of the members came forward and revealed he had recently carried someone on his bike who was understood to have later died of Ebola, and then asked if Internews could help him get vaccinated. On another occasion, they brought together some local people who had taken the Ebola vaccine to talk to others who were skeptical about it, and to show them that they were well.

Krishnan said what aid agencies failed to take into account was how important the chickens were to a family's financial survival. If someone's chicken stock was culled, they would be left with nothing to eat, and no money, so their resistance to leaving their chickens outside was likely to be very high. "In terms of community engagement, we have to take into account the messaging. It's not a cookie-cutter approach to things. You have to very much look into communities." If you don't, people are not inclined to listen or change their behaviour.

Musa Sangarie, the director of Internews' Information Saves Lives project based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, agrees. "Sometimes agencies think that it's easier for us to just tell people to do XYZ and people have to comply." But, he said, without taking into consideration some of the cultural context or

the environmental context it can be counter-productive, and you are not able to influence people's attitudes.

Unpacking complex language and being able to tell stories to the public using words that are easier to grasp is also vital. "Simple language is crucial because if you interview an epidemiologist from your local hospital, then he or she will use quite a lot of terminology," said Artyom Liss, an Internews Media Advisor based in Lithuania, who led a series of trainings for Russian-speaking health journalists. "And as a journalist in the local newspaper, you are sometimes driven to just quote him or her and to me this will never work. You will never get any sort of audience interest and attraction, unless you can learn to explain this in very simple terms."



2 INVEST IN LOCAL MEDIA



Face-to-face conversations are powerful ways to change attitudes. But local media play a vital role in acting as trusted communicators of information. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), local radio stations, the main source of information in most of the DRC, were a bedrock of Internews' response to Ebola. "For those communities that rely on radio as a primary source of information, it was important for us to invest in local radio, so they did not become part of the misinformation channel," said Musa Sangarie, the director of Internews' Information Saves Lives project based in Goma.

In tackling information about, and attitudes toward, Ebola, Internews organised more than 200 community events, including public debates, roundtables, listening clubs, and individual interviews to understand community concerns. These community discussions were reflected in the Internews daily radio programme, Koma Ebola (loosely translated from Swahili as "Stop Ebola"), produced in French, Swahili and Kinande, the main local languages in the affected area. The same strategies are now employed by local radio partners in DRC to communicate effectively on COVID-19.

200+

community events organized by Internews to understand community concerns on Ebola

Today, engaging local media is more difficult than ever, as the business of local media is more challenging than ever. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many local and national news companies were managing on a shoestring, with advertising disappearing and few other forms of income. For many, the pandemic was a huge blow, with print sales of newspapers in rapid decline as populations stayed at home, and

advertisers moved to social media platforms or cut ad budgets severely as retailers closed their doors.

This drop in revenue came at a time when demand for trusted local information was on the rise.

There is strong evidence that people turned to trusted local news sources during the pandemic⁷ to know more about what was happening in their neighbourhoods, as well as to help them negotiate their way through the crisis.

This placed fresh pressure on newsrooms, which have been stripped back globally, often to the smallest numbers of reporters they have had in their history, and to even smaller budgets. Even national and international news organisations, such as South Africa's Mail & Guardian and the UK's Guardian reported coming under huge financial pressure as advertising disappeared.⁵

The level of the demand was clear in the more than 1,000 applications to Internews' Information Saves Lives Rapid Response Fund, which provided small grants to news outlets and information providers to help them survive and provide vital health information during the pandemic.

Internews awarded more than 180 grants. These were used on projects including specialized local-language health bulletins and community specific websites.

Grants averaged \$3,000, funds which went a long



Rapid Response Funding for Critical but Under-Resourced Media Outlets

United Kingdom: TINIG

Internews provided funding to Tinig, which was a Facebook page focused on the UK's Filipino community, a large number of whom work in health care and a disproportionate number of whom have contracted and died from COVID-19. The UK Filipino community did not have an online news site dedicated to their interests and needs. Tinig was able to launch its own website with Rapid Response funds, increasing its reach, visibility, and service to the community.

Ecuador: GK

GK, an independent media outlet, covers women's rights, the environment, and indigenous rights. Rapid Response funding allowed founder Isabela Ponce to publish a special report on the issue of women who experienced increased levels of abuse because they are now "locked up" at home with their abusers during the pandemic.

way to helping outlets reach many communities who were not being served by national COVID-19 information or for whom the responses of social media platforms were insufficient to address specific misinformation needs.

As well as financial support, improving the skills of local journalists to report on health issues is key. This is especially relevant in situations where the government refuses to provide access to information, and investigative skills are needed to sift through misleading or opaque information.

Internews provided workshops and toolkits to help journalists decipher misleading information and verify government facts and figures.

A good fact-check includes a reality-check. This means checking not just whether something is scientifically speaking "true", but whether the reality on the ground can confirm a statistic. Artyom Liss, an Internews pandemic health mentor, says, "For instance, on excess deaths, maybe look at how difficult it is to find a place at a cemetery" to see if that has changed dramatically.

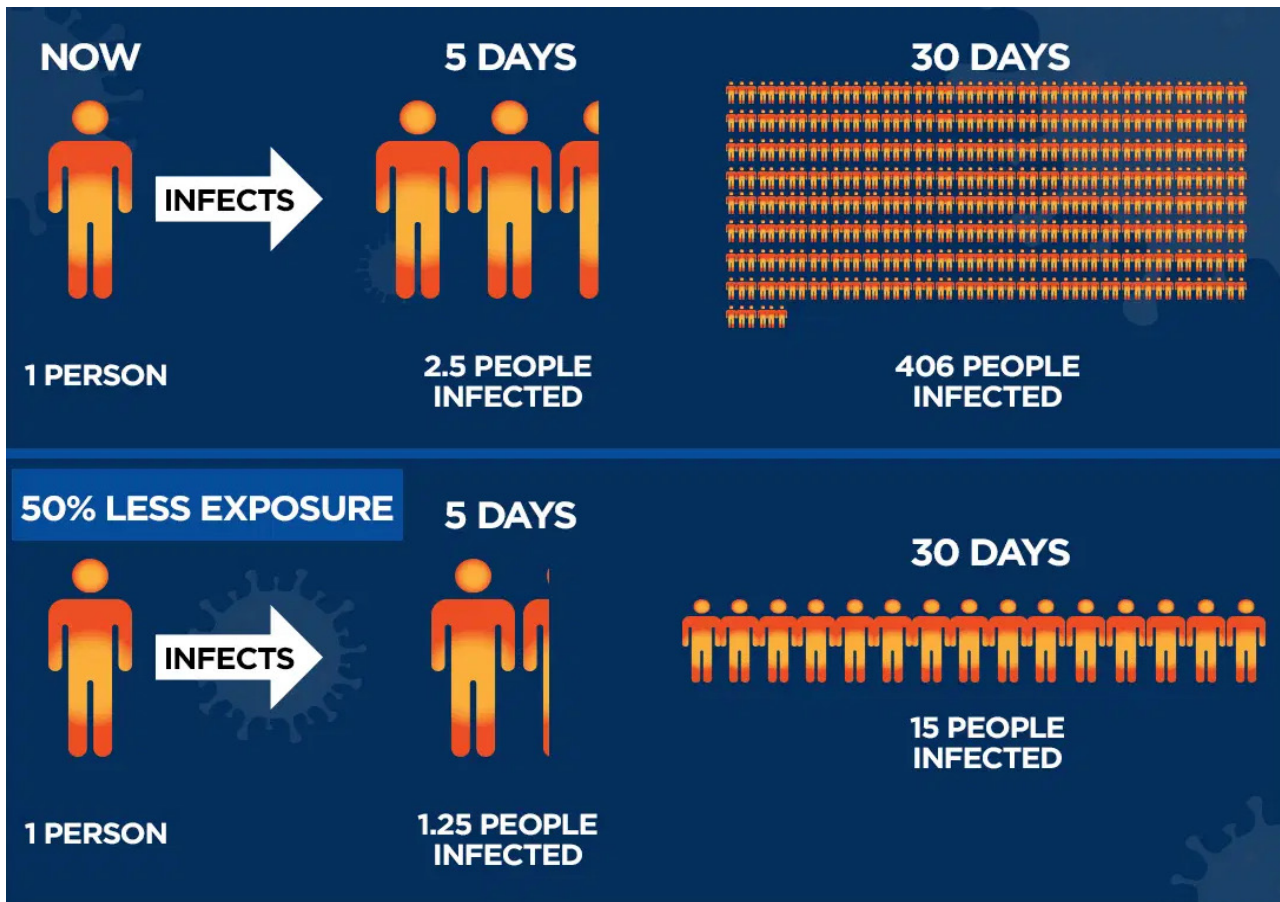
3 USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR GOOD

Social media has been blamed for spreading much of the false information related to COVID-19. Ideas can spread quickly without challenge, and it is difficult to identify ‘trustworthy’ information sources. However, social platforms can also be used successfully to counter misinformation.

In Zimbabwe, much of the media is controlled by the government, leaving citizens with little trust in many news outlets. In 2020, Internews, in conjunction with Harvard University and Kubatana, a local human rights and civic information NGO, conducted testing to see if information delivered by WhatsApp would bring acceptance of public health information about COVID-19.⁸ At least 5.2 million Zimbabwean

citizens use WhatsApp, as it is easy to access via mobile phones, which are widely used. Although social media networks are often criticised for helping distribute misinformation, this was an attempt to find out if they could also be used to address misinformation and change behaviour when science-based health updates were provided.

Low levels of trust in the government were threatening to undermine messages on social distancing and hand washing, potentially leading to high levels of illness. To address this, local organisation Kubatana sent out messages in English, Shona and Ndebele (the three main languages in Zimbabwe), with infographics, through its WhatsApp broadcast lists. Messages



Health-related infographics (above) were sent out through a local media outlet’s WhatsApp channel.



Haiti: Viral Videos Spread Lifesaving Information

In Haiti, Internews has been testing out the value of using videos distributed via WhatsApp groups to tackle misinformation and a rumour that COVID-19 was a disease that wouldn't affect Haitians. Working with Action Pour Le Climat Environnement et la Développement Durable (Adledd), a trusted journalism group with a huge presence on WhatsApp, Internews helped record an interview with a local epidemiologist to talk to Haitians about the reality of the disease.

The video was shared directly with more than 25,000 people on WhatsApp, and possibly many more were shown it by friends and family.

went out to 27,000 people. One example was this: “One myth encourages people to breathe steam or drink hot water to kill Coronavirus. Importantly, neither breathing hot steam nor drinking hot water kills the virus. There is no miracle cure and researchers are doing their best to find something quickly.”

Those who received a message on social distancing or debunking misinformation about unproven cures were 30% more likely than a

control group to follow public health guidance, such as maintaining social distancing practices.

Those who received a message were

30%

more likely to follow public health guidance



CONCLUSION

COVAX, the massive international effort to deliver vaccines to lower income countries, launched with much fanfare earlier this year. Thus far, the challenge facing the effort has been framed primarily as one of logistics—producing and distributing enough vaccine to reach billions of people as fast as possible.

But this global initiative will fail if the communications challenges that accompany it—including vaccine hesitancy brought on by a flood of misinformation—are not addressed locally, country by country, community by community. Doing so will pay dividends, and result in higher numbers of people taking safety measures, and a higher proportion of the population staying well.

Local media organisations operate in challenging economic times, especially with the financial hit that the pandemic has dealt to the news media globally. They need constant support.

Continued investment in local independent media is vital.

Internews' experience shows we must build on a network of strong local media organisations, who are trusted by their readers or viewers, as well as building on information written in clear language which takes into consideration people's hopes and fears. Only then is there a chance that COVID-19 can be controlled.

ON COVID-19: WHAT ELSE DOES INTERNEWS DO?

Pandemic mentoring: Internews has created a group of media experts around the world who can offer advice to journalists. This network offers journalists support in digging deeper into medical and pandemic-related issues so they can convey them to their audiences.

Online training course: The Internews Vax E-Learning Course offers journalists free online modules to help them understand vaccines and vaccination and equip them to ask more pertinent questions and research their stories more thoroughly. The course covers questions such as: How does the virus spread across communities? What can we do to stop the spread of the virus before a vaccine is available? What happens after the virus enters the body? How can journalists report on risk and vaccines in a way that the message is clear to communities? What are the pitfalls of risk reporting and how can journalists overcome them?

Glossary: An online glossary of terms relating to COVID-19, open as a reference source for anyone including journalists and health communicators to use to report on the pandemic. Visit inter.news/COVID-19-glossary

Fireside chats: These are informal gatherings, organised by Internews, with an expert, where journalists can learn about a specific subject. A recent example was a session for Russian-speaking journalists with an expert from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent about the vaccine rollout, giving them an understanding of what would be the key questions to ask your government.



Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2020/09/heidi-larson-on-vaccine-skepticism/>
- 2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/health/coronavirus-vaccine-hesitancy-larson.html>
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- 6 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/06/coronavirus-could-trigger-media-extinction-event-in-developing-countries>
- 7 <https://internews.org/story/countering-covid-19-misinformation-whatsapp-evidence-zimbabwe> and <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0240005>

This Internews report was compiled by researcher and editor Rachael Jolley, 2021.



About Internews

At Internews, we believe everyone deserves trustworthy news and information to make informed decisions about their lives and hold power to account. We train journalists and digital rights activists, tackle disinformation, and offer business expertise to help media outlets become financially sustainable. We do all of this in partnership with local communities—who are the people best placed to know what works.

We support independent media in 100 countries, from radio stations in refugee camps, to hyper-local news outlets, to individual activists and reporters. We've helped our partners reach millions of people with quality, local information that saves lives, improves livelihoods, and holds institutions accountable.

Internews is an international nonprofit with 30 offices around the world, including headquarters in California, Washington DC, London and Paris, and regional hubs in Bangkok, Kiev, and Nairobi. Internews is registered as a 501(c)3 nonprofit in California, EIN 94-3027961, in England and Wales as a Charity no. 1148404 and Company no. 7891107 and in France as Non-Profit Association SIRET no. 425 132 347 000 13.

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