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Covid-19: Misinformation and Information Overload

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As the pandemic spreads, we cannot get away from the Coronavirus: mentally, physically and digitally. Most of us in Europe are in quarantine, stuck within the sphere of 4 walls. Our smartphones now give us one of our only means of escape and contact with the outside world. It is near impossible to escape the fear-provoking news topics surrounding death, suffering and the global path of destruction that the virus takes. The contagion and the pandemonium that proceeds it is dominating our minds and thought as normality has been brought to a swift halt. As a coping mechanism and attempt to have control in an uncontrollable situation, many of us find

comfort in following every news update and development. It is often thought that knowledge is power. This saying rings true more than ever in the era of social media and technology, our access to information is thought to be limitless. However, is there such a thing of having too much knowledge? Can we be over informed?

'Fake News' is a saying all of us are now familiar with. It consists of fake stories and articles that are written usually with political or scare-mongering aims. Fake news spreads through the internet relentlessly like a bush fire, especially during times like these where the world is transfixed on one news story. It is essential that we have the tools to extinguish this blazing fire of misinformation and that we know how to check the legitimacy of what we are reading or hearing.

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Information Overload

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With our relatively young and clued up friend google, we can access more information than ever in the history of humankind. We all recognise the perks of having answers to our questions instantly, without really having to think. At our fingertips is an eternity of knowledge, but this 'knowledge' is not always as it seems. Thanks to Social media, our even younger acquaintance, this 'knowledge' or 'information' circulates rapidly. When it comes to the Coronavirus, articles can travel from China to Europe and America quicker than we can say 19. When the human brain is bombarded with so much information, it is impossible to process it all. A scroll through twitter and we encounter 25 different news reports, from different broadcasters and newspapers all reporting on the same thing. Amidst the panic and helplessness we feel in this crisis, many of us seek to know as much as possible. The attempt to process the ever-growing mass of information can inhibit our brain's function to think critically and can weaken our rationale.

Exposure to this sheer amount of news items can have a number of negative

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effects. Firstly, as we attempt to sieve through the headlines, numbers and buzz words, information bias can arise. We tend to only compute information that is in accordance with our own beliefs and forget to register facts with an open, critical mind. For example, if I was of the opinion that Covid-19 was merely a flu virus and was not at all as fatal as we are led to believe, I would subconsciously neglect any information, no matter how legitimate, that did not fit this narrative.

Secondly, on the flipside, the vast majority of us are very anxious and worried about the current outbreak. Knowing as much as possible is a normal coping mechanism. Before we have even wiped the sleep from our eyes, we are sucked into social media in search of new developments, eager to see how the story is unfolding. Wanting to know as much as possible can be detrimental to our mental health and wellbeing as we can become fixated and almost obsessed with the news. We can neglect other crucial aspects of our lives such as self-care and human interaction (whether that be at 2 metres of distance or through a phone.)

How to Cope?

1 TAKE (AT LEAST) AN HOUR OUT OF YOUR DAY AWAY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA AND ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE VIRUS

Turn your phone off. You could use this time to read, do something creative or simply to just relax in front of the television (as long as it is not showing the news). It is important to focus on yourself and not worry about what is going on around you.

2 LIMIT YOURSELF TO ONE OR TWO RELIABLE NEWS ARTICLE A DAY

Of course this is difficult when our newsfeeds are rife with articles but you should favour quality over quantity. Read one credible article, digest and reflect. Any more and you could start to feel uneasy and anxious.

3 LIMIT YOUR TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA

It goes without saying that this is more difficult than ever now that the days seem endless and we have a lot of spare time to fill. That being said, it is easy to get carried away and spend excessive amounts of time on social media. Try and reduce your screen time each day and plan other ways you could utilise your day.

4 WATCH THE NEWS ONCE A DAY FOR A SCHEDULED TIME (UNLESS THERE IS SOMETHING URGENT)

Watching the news channel can be daunting in these times of uncertainty, we are exposed to upsetting images and stories. Perhaps limit the time you spend watching the news and only watch it at a certain time of day, for example when the prime minister gives an update.

5 ASK YOUR FRIENDS TO STOP SENDING YOU NEW INFORMATION AND ARTICLES

We all send new revelations to our friends as we want them to be as 'informed' as us but perhaps tell your friends to only send you information if it absolutely necessary so you can clear your mind and focus on other things.

6 MUTE WORDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

If you are feeling understandably overwhelmed with the outbreak, you can use tools on your social media to mute certain words so they don't appear on your feed. For example, you could mute the word 'Corona' or 'Covid-19'.

Misinformation

Being misinformed can be catastrophic in a time where being correctly informed is crucial in combating coronavirus and saving lives.

Another problem with this type of media consumption: fake news. This 'infodemic' can be just as problematic as the actual pandemic. Barbara from Brighton could publish a completely false story on facebook just as easily as a BBC reporter can publish a fully legitimate and informed article. In times of panic, it is easy for us to become passive consumers and simply absorb everything we read, our emotions can cause us to think and process less rationally and logically. Not only does this information spread more quickly than the virus itself, it infiltrates its way across platforms into messaging services such as WhatsApp and spreads to telephone and real-life conversations. Being misinformed can be catastrophic in a time where being correctly informed is crucial in combating coronavirus and saving lives. A number of insane rumours have surfaced amongst the Covid-19 chaos. In Iran, 44 people died drinking bootleg alcohol in an attempt to kill the virus.

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How can you ensure that you are correctly informed?

1 ALWAYS CHECK THE SOURCE

If you don't recognise the source it could lack credibility. If you are unsure, do a quick google search and you should be able to confirm if it is credible or not. Non credible sources normally are unknown webpages with an unprofessional format and design.

2 USE RELIABLE AND TRUSTED SOURCES

The most reliable information comes straight from the horse's mouth, for example the World Health Organisation, government statements and credible non-sensationalist news reporters such as the BBC . Remember that not all newspapers and mainstream media outlets, such as The Sun and The Daily Mail (examples from the UK) can be relied upon for non-biased, factual information

3 CHECK THE LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

A tell-tale sign of a fake news story is a badly written article with spelling and grammar mistakes.

4 IF THERE IS NO SOURCE - BE WARY

Facebook statuses, tweets and WhatsApp messages can be written quicker than a 20 second hand wash. John Smith could wrongly post that his local hospital has no ventilators or that his dog has caught coronavirus. Even if John is your family member or friend, he could be repeating false information he was told or exaggerating an unconfirmed story. If there is no legible source or proof, don't believe or share the information.

5 USE A FACT CHECKER

To be certain that a story is reliable, you can use a fact checker such as Fullfact.org. This website highlights common, popular fake stories that are circulating and also provides more tips on how to spot hoax information.

You can also submit information to be checked here:

<https://fullfact.org/health/ask-newcoronavirus/>.

<https://fullfact.org/toolkit/> - includes a comprehensive list of international fact checkers



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