Fighting Misinformation Where it Happens: Striking First and Often

Misinformation, the accidental spread of inaccurate information, makes it harder for people to find the best, most reliable content online. It can also cause fear, panic and hate, making difficult situations even more challenging. As communicators, we need to get ahead of false narratives, make sure people can spot misinformation before they share it, and target it directly on the platforms where it is spreading.

Insights that helped us fight COVID-19 misinformation with the United Nations

Jen Thomas is the Creative Producer for Verified, a United Nations initiative working to fight misinformation globally.

"Misinformation can feel like an insurmountable problem, something that only tech giants and social media platforms can solve. But actually, we can each take steps to help stop it spreading, and these actions will have a direct impact on our own communities, friends and family. It's empowering to realize this, and find ways to spread that message through our Verified campaign.

As with all effective communications, understanding your target audiences is a vital first step. Misinformation spreads in different ways and for different reasons amongst different communities. While some elements of messaging can be replicated for varied audiences, in our most effective interventions we worked with partners, brands or individuals that can speak to their audiences in their own voice and make the message relevant for their communities."

Get ahead of the narrative.

Misinformation tends to spread quickly <u>in moments of crisis or uncertainty.</u> To stop the spread of misinformation, get ahead of the story.

✔✔ **Be the <u>first</u> to get out the facts. People remember the first information they <u>encounter</u>, so you need to get accurate information out quickly.**

✔✔ **Shape the story. Repeating misinformation can reinforce it. Instead, offer well founded counter-narratives based on accurate information.**

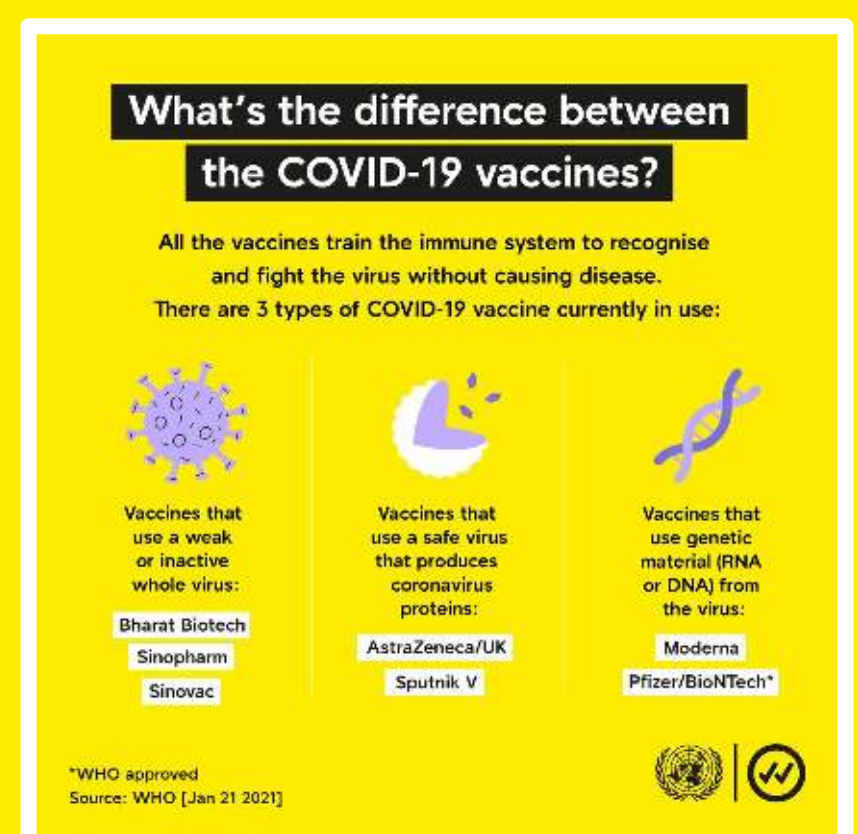## <u>Shaping the narrative through Verified</u>

Verified Explains
What kind of fabric mask is best?

✔ Recommended   ✘ Not recommended

3 layers of fabric   Gater or bandana masks

Washable   Masks with valves

Fits well over nose   Loosely fitting masks
and mouth with no gaps   with gaps

Source: WHO

In 2020, in partnership with the United Nations, we launched Verified, an initiative to cut through the noise and deliver fact-based information about COVID-19. We knew misinformation was causing confusion and increasing the spread of the virus and we wanted to make sure accurate information was reaching people first.

We started with campaigns about how the virus spreads and what we can do to prevent it, such as social distancing and wearing a mask. When vaccines started to become available we created simple explainers in response to some of our audience's most pressing concerns, including **how the vaccines work**, **why we know they are effective**, and **why vaccination is important**.

In order to shape the narrative we promoted accurate information in easy to understand formats, rather than repeating commonly held myths. We quickly distributed this content through social media platforms and messaging apps where misinformation was spreading. In some cases we distributed content directly onto the platforms themselves, and we also used tools that help content to spread organically across platforms such as Giphy and Tenor. This meant people were getting the information they needed, without introducing or reinforcing falsehoods that were circulating about COVID-19.

What's the difference between the COVID-19 vaccines?

All the vaccines train the immune system to recognise and fight the virus without causing disease. There are 3 types of COVID-19 vaccine currently in use:

Vaccines that use a weak or inactive whole virus:
Bharat Biotech
Sinopharm
Sinovac

Vaccines that use a safe virus that produces coronavirus proteins:
AstraZeneca/UK
Sputnik V

Vaccines that use genetic material (RNA or DNA) from the virus:
Moderna
Pfizer/BioNTech*

*WHO approved
Source: WHO [Jan 21 2021]

Increase digital literacy for the people most vulnerable to misinformation.

Digital literacy is a key skill for anyone consuming and sharing content online, and there is room for improvement along all age groups, from digital natives to older adults. As the spread of misinformation becomes more sophisticated, we need to top up our skills in response.

✔✔ People who are sharing misinformation generally **think it is true**. Accuracy prompts in the moment interrupt instinctive sharing, and repeated exposure can help people internalize this practice over time.

✔✔ Tailor your tactics based on what your audience already knows. **Digital literacy** needs differ from country to country and community to community. Age matters too: older adults spread misinformation **for different reasons** than young adults.

Case Study

Increasing Digital Literacy To fight misinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic created an 'infodemic', an overwhelming increase of misinformation that made it more difficult to communicate about important public health measures. To stop the spread of COVID-19 related misinformation, Verified developed content to increase digital literacy and help people to recognise misinformation and stop it spreading. Some of this was regionally tailored, for example our collaboration with Hello Kitty for audiences in Japan. Using trusted brands to share messages meant we were able to reach different audiences.

"Strike a PAUSE!"

Other interventions were globally focussed, such as our campaign asking people to pause before they share information online, which was translated into over 40 languages.

BEFORE YOU SHARE, THINK:
- WHO made it?
- WHAT is the source?
- WHERE did it come from?
- WHY are you sharing this?
- WHEN was it published?

#PledgetoPause

शेयर करने से पहले, सोचें:
- कसिने बनाया है?
- क्या स्त्रोत है?
- कहाँसे आया है?
- क्यों आप इसे शेयर कर रहे हैं?
- कब यह प्रकाशति हुआ था?

#रुकनेकीशपथलें

ANTES DE COMPARTILHAR PENSE:
- QUEM produziu?
- QUAL é a fonte?
- DE ONDE veio?
- POR QUE você irá compartilhar
- QUANDO foi publicado?

#PrometoPausar

Target misinformation on the platforms where it is spreading.

Flood social media platforms with empowering narratives full of accurate information. Globally, Facebook is the [leading source](#) of misinformation, but other platforms dominate in some places.

✔✔ **Find out where your audience is getting, sharing and creating content. Use digital trends reports, such as the United Nations' [International Telecommunication Union](#) or [DataReportal](#).**

✔✔ **Share accurate information through trusted community messengers who can speak to their audience through their own voice. They have an audience who listens to them, making them ideal communicators.**

Case Study

Fighting Misinformation on WhatsApp

Protect Your Community: Get Vaccinated Against Covid-19

Through Verified, we crafted campaigns on multiple fronts that targeted misinformation where it was spreading. One of these platforms was WhatsApp. We wanted to know more about how information is shared on Whatsapp, particularly in misinformation heavy environments like India, Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil. We conducted research in these countries to see how misinformation was traveling through the platform and created a campaign to see if pro-vaccine content would also spread. It did, especially when the content originated on the WhatsApp platform. This demonstrated the importance of making good information prominent in places where misinformation is spreading. There were also regional variations in how content spread, demonstrating the importance of creating campaigns tailored to specific audiences and digital spaces.

Impact

In its first year, Verified created over 5000 pieces of content in 60 languages, reaching over a billion people worldwide with life-saving information. It has become a model for how the UN and our global partners can respond to emerging global challenges: quickly and effectively. The results of our study showed that WhatsApp users were likely to share pro-vaccine messages if they came across them. Building on this, we are proactively putting good information out on WhatsApp and other social media platforms to make sure it is more prominent than myths and misinformation. There were also regional variations in how content spread, demonstrating the importance of creating campaigns tailored to specific audiences.

My friend's uncle's cousin posted this so it must be fine to share

JUST BECAUSE YOUR FRIEND SHARED IT

DOESN'T MEAN IT'S TRUE

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

✔✔ **Being reactive, instead of proactive**

    ✔✔ Don't wait for bad information to come out before you start to combat it. Look ahead, see if you can predict what narratives might take root, and get the information out first.

✔✔ **Repeating misinformation to debunk it**

    ✔✔ Don't give airtime to bad information. Repeating a myth, even if to debunk it, brings that information to a new audience. If you need to cite it for context, make sure to center the accurate information, not the myth.

✔✔ **Not using the right messengers**

    ✔✔ Use community messengers and partners to spread the information you are promoting.

    ✔✔ Micro-influencers can be powerful within their communities, whilst messengers with a larger following can be powerful amplifiers and reach audiences at scale.