Misinformation & Media Literacy

Navigating the COVID-19 “Infodemic”
Part 1:

Coronavirus Conspiracies & Other Health Hoaxes
Let’s take a poll

If you feel sick and you’re looking up your symptoms, where do you turn to first?

- What sources?

- How do you access them?
When you see health news on social media or in a Google search, all the sources look the same.

Do you always know who's behind the headline?

- Is it a credible source?
- Is it a group with a hidden agenda?
- Do they work for a company trying to get you to buy a product?
Quiz time: Which sources would you trust?

- Medicine-Today.net
- MedicineNet.com
- Vaccination.co.uk
- Patient.info
- HealthyChildren.org
- ChildrensHealthDefense.org
Quiz Answers: Which sources would you trust?

- Medicine-Today.net
- MedicineNet.com
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- Patient.info
- HealthyChildren.org
- ChildrensHealthDefense.org
The internet is full of health misinformation

11% of the news and information websites Americans rely on publish misinformation about health, such as false claims about vaccines, cancer, and diabetes.

Health misinformation is popular on social media

Websites publishing health misinformation receive more engagement (likes, comments, shares) on social media than those publishing accurate health information.

Source: Newswhip engagement data for websites over 90-day period preceding April 12, 2020
The Coronavirus “Infodemic”

“The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”

The top COVID-19 myths: False claims about its origin

- **MYTH:** “The COVID-19 virus was stolen out of a Canadian lab by Chinese spies.”
  - **REALITY:** Although two Chinese scientists were escorted out of a Canadian lab last July, they left for administrative reasons, and their work had nothing to do with the coronavirus.

- **MYTH:** “A group funded by Bill Gates patented the COVID-19 virus.”
  - **REALITY:** The group in question did receive funding from the Gates Foundation — a philanthropic organization — but its work does not have anything to do with the COVID-19 virus.

- **MYTH:** “5G cell phone technology is linked to the coronavirus outbreak.”
  - **REALITY:** Many scientists and public health institutions have repeatedly found that 5G technology does not pose a risk to human health.

Read more at [https://www.newsguardtech.com/covid-19-myths/](https://www.newsguardtech.com/covid-19-myths/)
The top COVID-19 myths: Phony cures

- **MYTH**: “Colloidal silver can cure COVID-19.”
  - **REALITY**: Colloidal (liquid) silver does not treat any disease, and, in fact, the government has warned that it can cause health problems.

- **MYTH**: “Garlic can cure COVID-19.”
  - **REALITY**: There is no evidence from the 2020 outbreak that eating garlic has protected people from the new strain of coronavirus.

- **MYTH**: “High doses of vitamin C have proven to be an effective treatment for COVID-19.”
  - **REALITY**: Scientific studies are underway to determine if there is any truth to this claim, but the dosage being studied is 60 times higher than the typical amount of vitamin C that most people have in their diet.

Read more at [https://www.newsguardtech.com/covid-19-myths/](https://www.newsguardtech.com/covid-19-myths/)
The top COVID-19 myths: Who spreads it?

- NewsGuard tracks the websites spreading false information about COVID-19 in its Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center.
- NewsGuard has identified more than 185 different websites in the U.S., France, Germany, Italy, and the U.K.
- ...and that’s not even counting the false Tweets, memes, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, chain emails, etc.

185+ Websites publish false information about COVID-19.
The top COVID-19 myths: What are the motivations?

- Money
- Entertainment
- Power
- Sloppiness
Other COVID-19 online threats: Scammers and malware

- Online scammers often use current events, like the coronavirus, to trick people into giving personal information like credit card details.

- The security company Trend Micro has tracked dozens of examples of this practice, with sites using suspicious URLs like:
  - cdc-coronavirus[.]com
  - CoronaDetection[.]com
  - buycoronavirusfacemasks[.]com

Source: Trend Micro
Part 2:

Evaluating Sources

NewsGuard
One method for evaluating sources: NewsGuard’s criteria

NewsGuard is a company run by journalists that fights misinformation by providing ratings of the reliability of sources. Its analysts rate sources by assessing their credibility and transparency.

### Credibility
- Does not repeatedly publish false content
- Gathers and presents information responsibly
- Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly
- Avoids deceptive headlines

### Transparency
- Discloses ownership and financing
- Clearly labels advertising
- Reveals who’s in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- Provides the name of content creators, along with either contact information or biographical information

**Cancer.net**

- This website mostly adheres to basic standards of credibility and transparency.
- A cancer information website owned by a nonprofit that represents oncologists and other medical professionals.
- Score: 77.5/100

**NaturalNews.com website network**

- Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency.
- A network of sites promoting both medical and non-medical conspiracy theories, particularly the false claim that vaccines are linked to autism.
- Score: 5/100
NewsGuard’s Nine Criteria:

Credibility
1. Does the site repeatedly publish false content?

**NewsGuard’s Standard:** The site does not repeatedly produce stories that have been found—either by journalists at NewsGuard or elsewhere—to be clearly and significantly false, and which have not been quickly and prominently corrected.

- While many websites periodically make mistakes, sites that do not promptly correct those errors may be intentionally trying to misinform readers.

- False stories on health sites can range from inaccurate, potentially dangerous health claims to conspiracy theories related to health or medicine.

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This article claimed that eating baking soda will cure cancer, but this is not true.
2. Does the site gather and present information responsibly?

NewsGuard’s Standard: Content providers are generally fair and accurate in reporting and presenting information. They reference multiple sources, preferably those that present direct, firsthand information on a subject or event or from credible second hand news sources, and they do not egregiously distort or misrepresent information to make an argument or report on a subject.

**Gathering information**

News websites gather information in various different ways:

- Conducting original reporting
  - Named sources vs anonymous sources
- Citing other sources
- Republishing articles from wire services

**Presenting information**

Information presented irresponsibly might commit one of the following missteps:

- Misstate facts
- Misquote sources
- Violate journalistic ethics
- Distort information (cherry picking or omitting key details.)
- Rely on anecdotal evidence
This article relies solely on one woman’s story to claim that wheatgrass can change a person’s hair color.
3. Does the site regularly correct or clarify errors?

NewsGuard’s Standard: The site makes clear how to report an error or complaint, has effective practices for publishing clarifications and corrections, and notes corrections in a transparent way.

Even the most conscientious news outlets make mistakes. Correcting errors can be what separates responsible sites from those that purposely spread false information.

- ** Corrections**: When a site updates a story to fix a mistake.

- ** Retractions**: When a site removes a story from its site.

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What is hypermobility syndrome?

**EDITOR’S NOTE**

Dr Sarah Jarvis, 9th October 2019.

It has been brought to our attention that in the original version of this article, we referred to joint hypermobility syndrome, a term which has been replaced by the term **hypermobility spectrum disorders (HSD)** which includes **Ehlers-Danlos**, and mentioned that hEDS is sometimes referred to as type 3 EDS, which is no longer the case.

We apologise for this oversight and have now updated the article to its current form.
4. Does the site handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly?

NewsGuard’s Standard: Content providers who convey the impression that they report news or a mix of news and opinion distinguish opinion from news reporting, and when reporting news, do not egregiously cherry pick facts or stories to advance opinions. Content providers who advance a particular point of view disclose that point of view.

• Some websites only publish opinion stories, and others only publish news. Most sites fall somewhere in the middle.

• Is opinion content labeled and in a separate section?

• What is the site’s point of view? Does the site disclose this point of view?

• Does the site editorialize or cherry pick?
5. Does the site avoid deceptive headlines?

NewsGuard’s Standard: The site generally does not publish headlines that include false information, significantly sensationalize, or do not reflect what is actually in the story.

- A headline tells a reader what’s in the story before he or she decides to read it. Some websites use exaggerated headlines that distort the facts in a story to entice people into clicking and reading an article.

- Deceptive headlines are dangerous because people may only skim headlines they encounter online, and not take the time to read the articles.
NewsGuard’s Nine Criteria:

Transparency
6. Does the site disclose its ownership and financing?

NewsGuard’s Standard: The site discloses its ownership and/or financing, as well as any notable ideological or political positions held by those with a significant financial interest in the site, in a user-friendly manner.

Types of website owners:
- Individuals
- Companies
- Nonprofit groups
- Governments

Website sources of financing:
- Advertisements & sponsored content
- Subscriptions
- Selling merchandise and hosting events
- Donations
- Funds from their owner

Not all sites ending in “.org” are reliable. This site has promoted false claims about vaccines and conspiracy theories.
7. Does the site clearly label advertising?

NewsGuard’s Standard: The site makes clear which content is paid for and which is not.

- **Advertisements**: Pictures and messages that promote a product or service
- **Sponsored content**: Stories that resemble news articles but are paid for by a company to promote its products or services
- **Affiliate marketing**: When a website promotes a product or service and makes money if users buy that product

Some advertisements are designed to resemble stories and trick a user into clicking.

Deceptive advertising: Healthy-Holistic-Living.com
Clicking “Buy Now” leads to the website of a business owned by the founder of Healthy-Holistic-Living.com
8. Does the site reveal who’s in charge?

NewsGuard’s Standard: Information about those in charge of the content is made accessible on the site.

- Owners, editors and publishers should be named, providing biographical and contact information, so that they can be held accountable for their site.

- Readers should be able to understand why someone might have created a site, and what might be their motivation.

- Those in charge should be easy to contact so they can receive feedback.
9. Does the site provide information about its content creators?

NewsGuard’s Standard: Information about those producing the content — including either contact or biographical information — is made accessible on the site.

• Stories should be credited to an author, using their real name, or the site should identify its editorial staff.

• Websites should provide contact information for their authors and editors so readers can ask questions and make complaints.

• Content creators should list bios revealing their backgrounds and any conflicts of interest with what they report.
Part 3: Evaluating Claims
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

I heard about this coronavirus cure on Facebook! Is it true?
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

1. What’s the source?

Wow! The secret to curing coronavirus is getting Vitamin C in an IV!

Vitamin C Successfully Treats COVID-19 Patients | NaturalHealth365
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

1. What’s the source?

naturalhealth365.com

Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency.

A website covering alternative medicine and natural health, which has repeatedly promoted false claims about vaccines and the Wuhan coronavirus.

Score: 0/100

See the full Nutrition Label →

CREDIBILITY

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TRANSPARENCY

- Website discloses ownership and financing
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- The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

1. What’s the source?

2. What do other sources say?

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No, Megadoses Of Vitamin C Will Not Cure Coronavirus - Forbes
Mar 29, 2020 - Vitamin C is being promoted on social media as a treatment for coronavirus. Is there any reason to believe it works? Short answer: no.

People are falsely claiming that vitamin C cures the... - Insider
Apr 3, 2020 - Sales of vitamin C have soared globally, following misleading claims that vitamin C could prevent or treat coronavirus infections.
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

1. What’s the source?

2. What do other sources say?

3. What’s the date?
Evaluating Claims: A step-by-step guide

1. What’s the source?
2. What do other sources say?
3. What’s the date?
4. What’s the motivation?
Part 4:

Exercise

NewsGuard
Your turn to rate a website!

Divide into four groups. Each group will evaluate one of the four websites, starting by evaluating the transparency criteria, and moving to credibility, if you have time.

1. Health.com
2. MedicalNewsToday.com
3. HomeNaturalCures.com
4. DoctorDavidFriedman.com

NewsGuard’s Criteria

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5. Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY
1. Discloses ownership and financing
2. Clearly labels advertising
3. Reveals who’s in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
4. Provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
What did NewsGuard think?

health.com

This website mostly adheres to basic standards of credibility and transparency.

The website of Health, a magazine covering women’s health, fitness, wellness, and beauty.

Score: 82.5/100

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medicalnewstoday.com

This website mostly adheres to basic standards of credibility and transparency.

A website that covers medical and health care news for a general audience, including summaries of new research and a directory of diseases.

Score: 87.5/100

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What did NewsGuard think?

**homenaturalcures.com**

Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency.

A website covering natural remedies that has repeatedly published false and unsubstantiated health claims, including stories promoting unproven cures for the COVID-19 virus.

Score: 30/100

See the full Nutrition Label ➔

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**doctor david friedman.com**

Proceed with caution: This website fails to meet several basic standards of credibility and transparency.

The website for a North Carolina chiropractor that has promoted misleading and unsubstantiated health claims about the COVID-19 virus and genetically modified foods.

Score: 42/100

See the full Nutrition Label ➔

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