

Researchers are tracking another pandemic, too—of coronavirus misinformation | AAAS

By Greg Miller

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When five researchers at the University of Washington, Seattle, launched the new [Center for an Informed Public](#) back in December 2019, they had no idea what was coming. The center aims to study how misinformation propagates and use the findings to “promote an informed society, and strengthen democratic discourse.” Now, just a few months later, the coronavirus pandemic is generating a tidal wave of information—some of it accurate, some not so much—that has saturated social and traditional media.

Two of the center’s founders—sociologist Emma Spiro and crisis informatics researcher Kate Starbird—are watching closely. By monitoring news reports and scraping massive amounts of data from social media platforms, they are examining how misinformation is spreading during the pandemic, and how scientific expertise factors into public perceptions.

“We’re trying to think about questions of how data and statistics are being used and debated in these conversations online, and what is the impact of that on public understanding and the way that people make decisions and take actions,” Spiro told *ScienceInsider* this week.

Spiro and Starbird discussed lessons learned from the spread of misinformation in past crises, and some of the things they’re hoping to learn from this one. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

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