

The real fake news about COVID-19 | Financial Times

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In February, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, declared that Covid-19 was not the only public health emergency the world was facing — we were also suffering from an “infodemic” of fake medical news. “Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus,” he said, “and is just as dangerous.”

The metaphor of a psychic infection accompanying a physical one fits neatly into the current “post-truth” narrative. Articles from news sources including the Associated Press ran with the metaphor, describing misinformation as a contagion with “no antidote in sight”.

Such reporting has been strengthened by academic papers making startling claims about the human impact of false information. Earlier this month, outlets including the BBC, Deutsche Welle and The New York Times published articles about research that linked coronavirus misinformation to at least 800 deaths. (The validity of this research was later contested.)

There is good reason to be wary of the spread of dangerous and misleading misinformation online. But the conceptual framework of the infodemic, casting it in terms of disease, risks oversimplifying the problem — and letting the politicians and experts off the hook.

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