

Social Media Use During Social Distancing

Brenda K. Wiederhold, PhD, MBA, BCB, BCN

As COVID-19 continues to spread, so does the information—and misinformation—around it. Much of our public knowledge about the pandemic comes via advanced technology, through new media that has never before been tested during a disaster of this scope and size. Because of this, we are learning more every day about the potential benefits and pitfalls of these technologies and their use during a global emergency.

Both in the United States and around the world, governmental agencies and hospitals have specific plans in place to handle the population's physical health needs during a pandemic such as this. Yet, resources for mental health care are often ignored, or are given too little attention. Though physical health needs may be a more immediate priority at first, mental health issues in the surviving population can have far greater and longer lasting impacts. After all, in most disaster scenarios, the number of fatalities is small relative to the number of people whose experiences may have left them anxious or traumatized.¹

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) warns that fear and anxiety around a disease can be “overwhelming and cause strong emotions.” Especially vulnerable are those who have preexisting mental health conditions, children, and first responders or health-care workers.² In addition, patients with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 may experience fear of the consequences of their illness, and those in quarantine might feel boredom, loneliness, and anger, among other emotions.³ In fact, mental health organizations worldwide are beginning to see an increase in calls and inquiries due to the pandemic.^{4,5} It is clear that this crisis is already impacting our collective mental health.

Information seeking in the face of danger can be an adaptive behavior. It allows us to make informed decisions about keeping ourselves safe, like looking for possible escape routes when we are faced with a threat. History has shown that during a disaster such as this one, TV viewership typically explodes, as consumers use it not only to stay informed, but also to pass the time.⁶ This appears to be holding true for the current emergency. In recent weeks, media companies have noted increases in gaming data usage,⁷ total TV usage,⁶ and social media usage.⁸ Verizon marked a sharp 20% increase in web traffic between March 8 and 15, 2020.⁷ Incorporated in this increase is people checking social media more often to keep up to date on current information. According to a Global Web Index survey, approximately a quarter of U.S. and British Facebook and Twitter users have increased their use of these social media platforms over the past few weeks.⁸ Shelter in place or quarantine orders are likely to boost digital media con-

sumption across the board as people spend more time at home and less time communicating face to face.⁹

All of this communication has led to a wealth of information about the pandemic, all available at the touch of a keyboard or click of a mouse. However, while much of this information is factual and helpful, some of it can be incorrect or even harmful. For example, on the popular social media platform WeChat, COVID-19 has repeatedly been called the “killer virus,” perpetuating the sense of danger generated by the disease.³ And there are the posts and Tweets likening COVID-19 to common forms of influenza, minimizing the serious consequences of this virus, and encouraging people not to follow social distancing protocols. What we see on social media is shaped by algorithms that typically highlight the content that will draw the most attention, not necessarily the content that is verified as correct. This attention to popularity over accuracy may be partially responsible for the spread of misinformation online.¹⁰ Not only is social media shaped by our very human reactions and interests, but it also shapes our individual mind-sets in turn.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has coined a new term to highlight this phenomenon: infodemic. An infodemic is “an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”¹¹ An infodemic can make people feel powerless, like there is so much information that the threat is unknowable, so it can strike anyone at any time. This feeling of powerlessness can lead to imagining the worst outcome, or “catastrophizing,” contributing to feelings of anxiety and dread in an already anxiety provoking period.⁵

So how can we combat the infodemic, staying informed and connected while protecting our mental health at the same time? It is a tall order, but it can be done. For one thing, technology companies are stepping up to help. Their solutions range from promoting verified information to removing misinformation to attempting to avoid posting misinformation in the first place.¹² Facebook, for example, has said they are working to block ads that try to exploit the situation, while providing the WHO with “as many free ads as they need.”¹³ Google is also supporting the WHO by posting a special notice with WHO updates when people search for information about the virus.¹⁴ Twitter has added a warning label that links to the CDC when a user searches “coronavirus,”¹³ and TikTok and YouTube issue an alert encouraging users to look to “trusted sources” for information.¹³ Even the WHO itself has assembled a coronavirus mythbusting page.¹⁵

We can also take matters into our own hands, which contributes to a sense of control over the situation, improving our mental health. Consumer Reports recommends using the SIFT technique when faced with a new piece of information.^{12,16} The first step is to *Stop*. Take a breath before you take anything as a fact. Next, you *Investigate* the source—who is providing this information? After that, you *Find* better coverage. Cross-check the information with trusted sources. Finally, you *Trace* claims, quotes, and media to the original context. In other words, click back to find the original source of the information. You can find more information about SIFTing at <https://infodemic.blog/>. By confirming that the information we are consuming is accurate, we can begin to overcome the feeling of powerlessness created by the infodemic, and move away from catastrophizing.

Beyond information seeking, we can also use technology to improve our mental outlook directly. The Internet provides means to connect in a time of isolation. According to the American Psychological Association, maintaining our social networks in times of upheaval can lend a sense of normalcy while providing an opportunity to share feelings and relieve stress.¹⁷ If you are feeling anxious or lonely, reach out to family, friends, or even a health-care provider. Use technology to access what you enjoy, to practice your hobbies, and to help maintain a sense of calm.

Technology may help shape us, but do not forget that we help shape it as well. We can use it to be creative. We can use it to be kind. We can use it to be together.

References

1. Wiederhold BK. Use VR handhelds in mass casualty disasters. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 2010; 13:119–120.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): manage anxiety and stress. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html> (accessed March 22, 2020).
3. Xiang YT, Yang Y, Li W, et al. Timely mental health care for the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak is urgently needed. *The Lancet* 2020; 7:228–229.
4. Kirton D. Chinese public dial in for support as coronavirus takes mental toll. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-mental/chinese-public-dial-in-for-support-as-coronavirus-takes-mental-toll-idUSKBN2070H2> (accessed March 22, 2020).
5. Peischel W. Mental health professionals are preparing for an epidemic of anxiety around the coronavirus. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/mental-health-professionals-are-preparing-for-an-epidemic-of-anxiety-around-the-coronavirus/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
6. Perez S. Nielsen explains how COVID-19 could impact media usage across the US. <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/17/nielsen-explains-how-covid-19-could-impact-media-usage-across-the-u-s/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
7. Slisco A. Americans binged on video games, shrugged off social media as pandemic restrictions kicked in, Verizon says. <https://www.newsweek.com/instead-working-home-most-americans-are-using-self-isolation-catch-video-games-1493129> (accessed March 22, 2020).
8. Mander J. Coronavirus: how consumers are actually reacting. <https://blog.globalwebindex.com/trends/coronavirus-and-consumers/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
9. eMarketer. The biggest business impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. <https://www.emarketer.com/content/the-biggest-business-impacts-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-according-to-business-insider-intelligence> (accessed March 22, 2020).
10. De La Garza A. How social media is shaping our fears of—and response to—the coronavirus. <https://time.com/5802802/social-media-coronavirus/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
11. World Health Organization. Novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV): situation report—13. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf> (accessed March 22, 2020).
12. Waddell K. Fight against coronavirus misinformation shows what big tech can do when it really tries. <https://www.consumerreports.org/consumer-protection/fight-against-coronavirus-misinformation-shows-what-big-tech-can-do/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
13. Ghaffary S, Heilweil R. Facebook doubles down on removing coronavirus conspiracy theories. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/1/31/21115589/coronavirus-wuhan-china-myths-hoaxes-facebook-social-media-tiktok-twitter-wechat> (accessed March 22, 2020).
14. Toth M. Facebook, Google and Twitter crack down on fake coronavirus “cures” and other misinformation. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/31/tech/facebook-twitter-google-coronavirus-misinformation/index.html> (accessed March 22, 2020).
15. World Health Organization. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: myth busters. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters> (accessed March 22, 2020).
16. Infodemic. Sifting through the coronavirus pandemic. <https://infodemic.blog/> (accessed March 22, 2020).
17. American Psychological Association. Five ways to view coverage of the coronavirus. <https://www.apa.org/help-center/pandemics> (accessed March 22, 2020).

Brenda K. Wiederhold
Editor-in-Chief