

Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news amid the new global Mpox emergency

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The identification of a new strain of the Mpox virus (clade Ib) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the alarming rise in cases across Africa linked to sexual activity, and the potential for a new pandemic led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on August 14, 2024 (<https://www.paho.org/en/mpox>). Between January 1 and September 15, 2024, a total of 6,201 cases and 32 deaths related to Mpox were confirmed in Africa, with the majority occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Additionally, cases of Mpox clade Ib were reported in Europe and Asia in August 2024 (https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/mpox_global).

This situation is further complicated not only by the virus's potential spread but also by the resurgence of public health challenges previously observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the surge of disinformation (deliberate falsehoods intended to deceive), misinformation (inaccurate information shared without harmful intent), and fake news (fabricated news presented as legitimate), all of which undermine the effectiveness of the public health response (1).

Modern society generates a massive volume of information daily, often overwhelming individuals as they attempt to verify sources, assess the accuracy of information, and properly interpret disseminated content. This information overload can undermine the capacity to make informed decisions, a challenge further aggravated by the increasing spread of false

information through media channels, which incites panic and stigmatization, and hampers disease control efforts, including compliance with preventive measures (2).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dissemination of misleading information regarding the origin, treatment, and prevention of the disease exacerbated fear and distrust, resulting in high-risk behaviors such as the rejection of preventive measures and vaccine hesitancy. A similar pattern is now emerging with Mpox. Myths about transmission, erroneously associated with LGBTQIAPN+ communities, doubts about vaccine efficacy, and conspiracy theories linking COVID-19 vaccination to the Mpox virus are rapidly circulating on social media (<https://www.paho.org/pt/noticias/4-5-2023-opas-e-grindr-unem-esforcos-para-fornecer-informacoes-sobre-mpox-comunidades>). However, while social media facilitates the spread of dubious information, it also plays a vital role in disseminating accurate scientific knowledge, which is crucial for mitigating the effects of the infodemic (3).

Misleading information about Mpox can have devastating consequences, undermining public trust in health authorities and leading segments of the population to ignore critical recommendations. Furthermore, it creates fertile ground for stigma and discrimination, particularly when the transmission of the disease is associated with sexual practices and wrongly linked to specific social groups (4). To tackle this new infodemic, it is crucial to apply lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. One effective approach has been the use of digital platforms for real-time

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monitoring of false information. Tools such as the WHO's EPI-WIN (Information Network for Epidemics) (<https://www.who.int/teams/epi-win>) have been widely used to debunk myths and provide evidence-based information about COVID-19.

Partnerships between health authorities, universities, and social media platforms also played a crucial role in combating misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, with the rapid removal of misleading content, alerts about incorrect information, and the promotion of verified information on their interfaces. Additionally, media literacy campaigns and the mobilization of digital influencers were essential in amplifying preventive messages and helping the public identify reliable information sources (5).

To effectively combat Mpox, it is crucial for health authorities and public officials to urgently increase investments in strategies aimed at mitigating the spread of the disease. Empowering individuals with reliable scientific communication is essential for fostering adherence to preventive measures and ensuring a coordinated public health response.

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