

The building blocks of reporting and discussing Covid-19 vaccines

Now more than ever, it is vital for anyone publishing information about immunization and vaccines to be aware of the nuances of our modern information environment. Audiences are now very fragmented, receiving information from many new sources, but they are also highly networked, sharing information quickly across communities, countries, and languages.

With more people than ever getting their news and opinion from social media and messaging apps, information can easily be taken out of context, skewed and weaponized.

It's never been more important to publish accurate information on vaccines, so here are six key building blocks:

Build narratives gradually



Everything we post online stays there. Every word and image slowly forms and builds up viewpoints on vaccines in people's minds. We need to take responsibility for how we are contributing to these ongoing narratives.

Hints:

- Think about your publishing decisions in a longer-term context. How does your information build on what's been published over the last week?

Provide context when reporting on side effects

There are currently online communities actively collecting stories of adverse reactions and seeking press coverage for them. Videos and images of people experiencing side effects are going viral as "evidence" that the vaccines are unsafe. Context is vital when reporting on these instances.

Hints:

- It is important to make it clear in your reporting that some minor allergic reactions are expected with a vaccination program of this scale.
- Remember that over-reporting; or presenting a small number of side effects as "breaking news" inaccurately skews people's perceptions of risk.
- Always independently verify content if using it in reporting. Connect with the subjects of videos directly in order to fact check their claims and experiences.



Answer questions before they've been asked

People turn to misinformation when they are searching for answers and there is nothing else out there. We call this gap in accurate information a “data deficit”. Get there first and fill the voids by pre-empting questions and publishing credible information in advance.

Hints:

- Do a search on Google and YouTube around a particular topic and take note of the results. If there are gaps in quality information, try to fill them.
- Bolster your social media presence and create spaces where people can ask questions and get credible answers from experts. We suggest doing an AMA (“Ask Me Anything”) on Reddit, or talking with your audience on Facebook or Instagram Live.
- Avoid asking open-ended questions on social media. They can lead to comments filled with misinformation. If you are asking questions related to vaccines, have a moderator offer fact checks within the comments.

Take care with images

No words can trigger an emotional reaction quite so powerfully as an image. And images can be easily manipulated and used out of context. This makes emotive visual imagery one of the main vehicles for misinformation.

Hints:

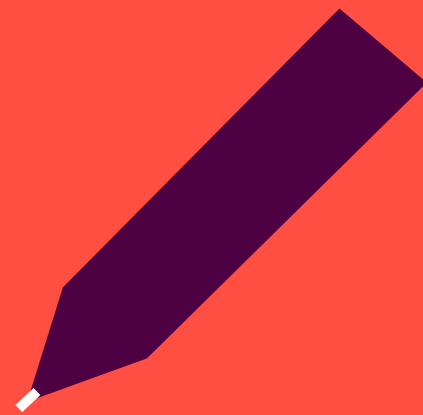
- Think carefully about using provocative imagery that could trigger an emotional reaction, e.g., images of children crying (or even looking overly happy) while receiving a vaccine. Emotive images not only send a strong message to audiences, they can easily be reshared and spun out of context.
- Be equally careful about images shared on your social media accounts. If you have a social media team, make sure they are aware of the challenges of reporting on vaccines in the current information environment.

Write headlines to inform

Headlines are hugely important, as in many cases it's the only thing your audience will see or remember. They should therefore be written to inform rather than to provoke, shock or capture attention through emotion.

Hints:

- Write headlines assuming they are the only thing your audience will see.
- If you have to repeat a rumor, warn the audience before you do, and explain why it's false or misleading in advance.
- Always lead with the truth to avoid amplifying rumors, and try to provide as much clarifying context as you can.



Start with empathy

Avoid ridicule at all costs when it comes to addressing misinformation and conspiracy theories. Even the most far-fetched rumors often have a kernel of truth in them, and history has provided many reasons for certain groups, such as communities of color and young women, to be skeptical that medical institutions have their well-being at heart. Seek to understand your audience and address its concerns. Start from a place of empathy, and understand that existing resentments and anxieties are exploited by disinformation campaigns.

Hints:

- Make sure you are informed about specific historical events and issues of trust in medical institutions, derived from systemic discrimination and inequality in the provision of health care.
- Seek out and listen to the views of communities who have a distrust of medical institutions and practitioners.
- Feature people from these communities in your stories, whether it's interview quotes or supporting article imagery.



For more insights on vaccine reporting visit firstdraftnews.org/vaccineinsights