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A PATH FORWARD

Misinformation abounds in time of uncertainty

By STEVEN P. DINKIN

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Across Africa and in other parts of the world, the drug chloroquine is used to prevent and treat malaria. I took it weekly when I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the west African country of Niger in the late 1980s.

Now chloroquine is being stockpiled by some countries and doctors, too, after it was called a potential “gamechanger” in the fight against coronavirus.

My good friend Sali recently posted this impassioned plea to Facebook: “Don’t hoard anti-malarial drugs, depriving those who really need them in malaria-prone countries. Malaria is a serious killer.” Sali knows: She grew up in a village in Burkina Faso, which neighbors Niger.

The World Health Organization states that in 2016, there were an estimated 216 million cases of malaria in 91 countries. The disease is transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito that releases a parasite into the bloodstream.

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A March 27 story in *Politico* says that prescriptions of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine (another antimalarial drug) spiked by 7,000 percent, even as studies about its effectiveness in treating coronavirus show mixed results. Health policy experts warn that far more data is needed before the medicines become the go-to treatment for this pandemic. The speculation led to at least one death in the U.S. and a number of overdoses around the world.

While the consequences are less dire, misinformation has also led to toilet-paper hoarding. It's not just a recent phenomenon, however: In 1973, panic buying of toilet paper ensued when television host Johnny Carson proclaimed that there was an "acute shortage" (there wasn't).

In his video, "The Great Toilet Paper Scare," Brian Gersten says that a climate of fear and uncertainty — precipitated by the stock market crash — fueled the rumor. It created a four-month shortage, during which toilet paper was "bartered for, traded, and even sold on the black market."



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Why are we so vulnerable to misinformation in times of crisis? And why are we so quick to act in over-the-top ways? No doubt, we are seeking two things: comfort (the reassurance that things aren't so bad, after all) and control (the desire to reclaim a feeling of personal power).

Ironically, though, misinformation often leads to conflict, rather than resolving it. We see this daily in our mediations and training work at the National Conflict Resolution Center — evidence that even good intentions can be misunderstood.

We have learned to take measures that can stop the spread of coronavirus. How can we stop the spread of misinformation? A recent article in The Atlantic by Andy Carvin and Graham Brookie is instructive:

1. Consider the source and consider the source's source. Skepticism is healthy, whether you're hearing something from a trusted friend or the president of the United States. Be careful to get the facts right before accepting something as the truth.
2. Check your own biases. We are hard-wired to source information that confirms what we already believe. And we trust others who are like-minded. Seek out other points of view to broaden your understanding.
3. Ask yourself if you're being constructive. The desire to be helpful is strong. So is the power of social media. When you say, "Did you hear," know that your words may be shared (more broadly than you imagined). Will they help, as you intended, or will they make the situation worse?

As we continue to face down this crisis, let's commit to thoughtful, deliberate and honest communication. It's the most direct path to the comfort and control that we are desperately seeking.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based organization working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com

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