

CORONAVIRUSOPINION

YOUTH MYTHBUSTERS NEEDED TO CURB THE VIRAL THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS

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Containing the spread of fake news and myth-mongering, which in turn results in stigmatisation, is an additional and unprecedented challenge. (Reuters)

Since South Africa's first coronavirus case on March 5, President Cyril Ramaphosa has taken quick and decisive action to combat the spread of this deadly virus. But there is another killer that has reared its head during this time: misinformation about Covid-19.

The government's swift, transparent, multisectoral response and respect for health expert advice has been compared to that of Taiwan and Singapore. Many presumed that these Asian countries would be worst hit because of their close proximity and trade ties with China, yet they have effectively managed to contain the outbreak.

Our government is managing several challenges at the same time. The most critical are to contain the spread of the virus, capacitate our health system to cope with the anticipated influx of cases and to ensure the economy can keep ticking given the pressure exerted on it by the pandemic.

Containing the spread of fake news and myth-mongering, which in turn results in stigmatisation, is an additional and unprecedented challenge.

What the World Health Organisation (WHO) has dubbed “[an infodemic](#)” has created a situation where science is questioned and conspiracy theories thrive. Our knowledge of the virus changes almost daily: how infectious and deadly it is, incubation periods and treatment options. It can be argued that the sheer information overload driven mainly through social media has blurred the government’s communication efforts.

Although much has been done through reputable websites and news announcements, more can be done to mitigate the [spread of fake news](#) and the societal dangers it poses. The peculiarity of this crisis forces government communicators to balance creative and practical ways to educate their constituencies. Targeted communication tailored for particular groups becomes crucial.

A case in point: the youth. To effect a youth-focused approach to help flatten the curve, creating awareness and promoting education could prove beneficial in a country like South Africa. Africa has the largest youth population globally, and locally, [Stats SA’s 2019](#) mid-year estimates place youth (aged 18 to 34) at almost a third of the population (17.84-million).

Data released in April by the health department shows that the second group most infected by Covid-19 is people aged 21-30, following those aged 31-40. Youth are just as susceptible to Covid-19 but are more likely to be asymptomatic, which makes them possibly the biggest carriers and transmitters of the virus to unsuspecting, more vulnerable people.

Characterised by unbound freedom and a high inclination towards substance abuse, youth behaviour warrants a bigger push to change in this pandemic.

Given that social media is a breeding ground for misinformation and fake news, and understanding the youth’s proclivity to find expression in cyberspace, it is then appropriate to do our best to galvanise our young South Africans into an army of mythbusters and change agents within the space they feel most comfortable.

[Higher Health SA](#), has historically developed a national network of peer educators at every campus to fight the stigma and myths about other epidemics such as HIV, TB, gender-based violence, teenage and unplanned pregnancies, among others. It is the same cohort of educated young South Africans that should be deployed for the Covid-19 mythbusting and destigmatisation battle.

Fostering symbiotic relationships with community media, in particular, and using youth as a resource to drive educational campaigns would be a strategic move for the government and would strike at the heart of myth-mongering.

Through our high schools, universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and community education and training (CET) colleges as well as our post-school system at large, such partnerships could be effectively fostered.

To be young means the freedom to be: to socialise, travel and engage with the outside world. In the absence of these basic civil liberties, perhaps we should be granting our youth some responsibility and activating their agency during this time as we collectively work towards a solution to this crisis.

In the face of a potential public health disaster, there has never been a more opportune and equally critical time to be proactive and creative in sharing correct information and, indeed, South Africa has risen to the challenge. The national department of health has been efficient – daily media briefings provide a direct feed to traditional media channels, radio being the lead clarion due to its wide and deep reach

On the digital front, the department has been thorough in curating Covid-19 content through its website and the recently launched and well-publicised, zero-rated microsite as a designated repository of information.

To maximise the reach and effectiveness of the portal, all South African websites have been asked to host access to the [coronavirus resource portal](#). Notwithstanding these conscientious efforts, this infodemic requires us all to rally our communication forces and educate the population at the same – or preferably, higher – rate than that at which the virus spreads.

These are unprecedented times, and the role of media to tell and record the story of South Africa as it develops is more important than ever. But it comes at a cost. Advertisers are cancelling campaigns, and our live events have come to an abrupt halt. Our income has been slashed.

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