

Local news outlets should do more to combat pandemic misinformation

A recent report tracking the public's attitudes and experiences with COVID-19 vaccinations illustrates the extent of misinformation out there as we head into another long pandemic winter.

The Kaiser Family Foundation [COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor](#)—a non-partisan source of health news—found that nearly eight in 10 of the people surveyed are unsure about at least one common falsehood about the disease or the vaccine.

The [falsehoods](#) include that the government is exaggerating the number of COVID-19 deaths (not true), that the vaccine has been shown to cause infertility (not true), that you can get COVID from the vaccine (not true) and that the vaccine contains a microchip (not true.)

Not surprisingly, unvaccinated adults have a lower trust in most news sources compared to vaccinated adults.



Photo from Jernej Furman via Flickr

But there is a bright spot—if not a call to action, among the

findings. Local TV journalism, specifically local TV news, is the most trusted media source for COVID-19 information. Of course that is tempered by the fact that this, like media consumption generally, is polarized.

Vaccinated adults are at least twice as likely as unvaccinated adults to say they trust COVID-19 information from their local TV news station and network or cable news.

The one news source that is trusted by a larger share of unvaccinated adults compared to vaccinated adults is Newsmax, a conservative news and opinion website. (Newsmax's White House reporter recently claimed that vaccines contain "a bioluminescent marker called LUCIFERASE so that you can be tracked." Emerald Robinson went on to tweet, "Read the last book of the New Testament to see how this ends.")

Nearly two years into the pandemic, I find all of this distrust and misinformation demoralizing as a journalist. I no longer have the energy to engage in the debate—at least not outside of the classroom where I teach. It feels like an uphill battle trying to convince readers and new consumers of facts.

Just as Omicron was starting its December surge, an acquaintance from high school challenged a Facebook post I shared from a group of doctors and nurses from Minnesota who were exhausted and overwhelmed. A week later, the original post from the health care workers had more than 4,000 shares and an equal number of comments.

Their message was simple: wear a mask, get vaccinated and test regularly.

But it was lost on this acquaintance who has a well-stated beef against mainstream news and the media in general. He tried to engage me in a discussion about the root cause of the issue, which was not the pandemic, but rather the state of healthcare in America. They are not mutually exclusive. But in

fairness, and because contrary to his narrative about mainstream journalists, I will share his point: “The facts not common in the national media and narrative is that the attrition of nurses is partially due to weak management, stingy compensation, and heavy caseload,” he wrote.

He also took issue when I tried to counter that I had seen a fact-based report, which I have, that nursing and health care worker shortages are not due to vaccine mandates. A single report, he retorted. That’s the problem, he said. There have been more than one, but I frankly didn’t have time to offer a bibliography.

But once again I was reminded of the need for local news outlets to counter the misinformation around COVID-19 and the vaccines, especially with our health care systems being ravaged again.

We need more stories from our emergency rooms, more stories from the health care workers who live in our community, more stories from the doctors and scientists and experts who are our neighbors.

We have to keep countering these false claims and do it from our newsrooms. If our readers mistrust national news, the only way to combat it is with reporting of our own.

I get it. Our newsrooms are stretched. Our readers want local news in their local newspapers.

But COVID-19 remains a local story, especially if elective surgeries are getting canceled again, especially if our hospitals are running out of beds again, especially if our beleaguered health care systems are losing workers—not to vaccine mandates but to a host of issues that undoubtedly include some of the root problem my high school acquaintance raised.

We can’t be distracted. We can’t be deterred.

This pandemic is not going to end if people do not get vaccinated, if our communities do not collectively decide that we are more important than the individual. And while that may be unpopular, if some of our readers may not be convinced, no matter how many facts we deliver, that doesn't mean we can afford to abandon our mission.

Our mission is to tell the truth even if nobody wants to hear it.

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