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Understanding vulnerability to health-related misinformation

Misinformation has been one of the dominant themes of the COVID-19 crisis, with inaccurate claims and guidance about cures, vaccines and lockdowns proliferating online. In response to this infodemic, the Turing's public policy programme launched a **project**, funded by The Health Foundation, to understand who is most vulnerable to health-related misinformation. By pinpointing these factors, it is hoped that policy makers will be able to develop more targeted, effective interventions that tackle the root causes of the problem, rather than deploying draconian or overly restrictive policies such as banning content from entire websites.

The team recruited 1,700 participants, using online experiments and surveys to explore people's responses to claims about COVID-19 – some true (e.g. "COVID-19 can spread through the air") and some false (e.g. "COVID-19 can be treated by drinking lemonade"). The results show that people with higher numerical, health and digital literacy tend to be better at assessing health-related statements, and that many traditionally important socio-demographic traits (such as education, gender, and political affiliation) make little or no difference. These are important results as they mean that developing people's cognitive skills and literacies has the potential to make a big difference to their ability to identify misinformation.

The researchers published a **report** on their findings in March 2021, and they are now aiming to feed into government policy-making around measures to counter the damaging effects of online misinformation, both in relation to COVID-19 and more broadly.

"Our work is helping to understand what makes people susceptible to misinformation. This is critical if we're going to find ways to tackle the problem before the next public health crisis."

Bertie Vidgen

Project leader and Turing Research Fellow in Online Harms
The Alan Turing Institute