Because It Can Help Us Build an Effective Infodemic Response

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By Anna Harvey, President, Social Science Research Council

The World Health Organization defines an infodemic as the spread of "false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response." The U.S. Office of the Surgeon General has declared health misinformation to be a significant public health challenge. In a December 20, 2021, interview on PBS NewsHour, outgoing National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins expressed regret over the U.S. response to COVID-19 misinformation: "Maybe we underinvested in research on human behavior. I never imagined a year ago, when those vaccines were just proving to be fantastically safe and effective, that we would still have 60 million people who had not taken advantage of them because of misinformation and disinformation that somehow dominated all of the ways in which people were getting their answers."

Yet, despite widespread concern about the potential impacts of mis- and disinformation on health outcomes, we know little about the magnitudes of those impacts nor about their differential effects across sociodemographic groups. We also know little about cost-effective interventions that may mitigate those impacts and increase the spread and uptake of accurate health information.

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For us to be able to respond more effectively and equitably to the new challenges posed by infodemics, we need investment in research that can provide policy-relevant evidence about the effects of mis- and disinformation on health outcomes and about the efficacy of interventions that may counter the effects of mis- and disinformation and increase the spread and uptake of accurate health information.

The Mercury Project, a three-year global research consortium recently launched by the Social Science Research Council with funding support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, will build the evidence base for an infodemic response informed by social and behavioral science.

Named after the Roman god of messages and communication, the Mercury Project will fund research projects that estimate the causal impacts of mis- and disinformation on online and offline health, economic, and social outcomes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including estimating the differential impacts across sociodemographic groups and quantifying the global costs of those impacts; and estimate the causal impacts of online or offline interventions in the United States, Africa, Asia, and Latin America to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccines and other recommended public health measures by countering mis- and disinformation. (In this context, "online" is defined as social media/search platforms, while "offline" is defined as other media such as email, mail, and SMS messages.) The Mercury Project will also provide a suite of research-sharing and policy-development activities for grantees and other invited organizations to enable more effective policy and regulatory responses to future infodemics.

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Why social science? Because it's clearer than ever that a healthy society requires a healthy information environment. As we prepare for the next pandemic, we need social and behavioral scientists and public health experts to work together to advance the behavioral science of infodemic response. Through the Mercury Project, the Social Science Research Council will fund researchers to build on the existing knowledge base and discover new, evidence-based, data-driven tools, methods, and interventions to counter mis- and disinformation and to support the spread and uptake of accurate health information. These solutions will be an essential resource for global policymakers and for social media and technology companies as they build an information ecosystem that supports the sharing of accurate and effective health information.

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