We have documented rumours related to a fear that coronavirus is ‘airborne’. Rumours about airborne transmission were split relatively equally across languages. While there are a number of common viruses that are considered ‘airborne’ (the common cold and tuberculosis for example), most posts indicate a lack of trust in authorities (suggestions that this information is being covered up).

A rumour posted to Facebook in Tagalog on April 6 cited Philippines President Duterte in claiming that coronavirus is ‘in the air’. The poster of this rumour has over 200,000 followers, and the post received over 2,100 reactions, 1,500 shares, and 404 comments.

Another post stated that coronavirus particles can float in the air for “up to three years”, and claimed that singing and shouting can spread the virus further. This post may be in reaction to a cluster of infections in the US that appear to have been spread between choir members during a rehearsal.

Based on the current recommendations from the WHO, the virus is not considered to be airborne, but airborne transmission may occur through aerosol-generating healthcare treatments of coronavirus patients, for example using nebulisers or mechanical ventilation. This is just one reason why it is so important for healthcare workers to wear masks.

**Examples:**

“I think if they announced this from the beginning in Wuhan that this virus can be airborne, the world would have never been like this. It’s not difficult to check how the virus is transmitted. I don’t understand why they had to conceal this information? And I just knew that the director of WHO is not even a doctor, wondering how he could be in the highest position in the medical world.”

-Thai, Pantip

**Reporting Tip:**

Risk communication in relation to this issue can be challenging as the notion of an ‘airborne’ virus can be very frightening. It (mistakenly) triggers images of a virus being in the air ‘everywhere’ and may contribute to anxiety and a feeling of hopelessness. Helping your audience to understand the difference between ‘droplets’ (liquid larger than 5-micrometers in diameter), aerosols (liquid suspended in gas smaller than 5-micrometers in diameter) and their behaviour is crucial.

To help you report on this challenging scientific question and address community fears and confusion, we have created [this guide for reporters](#).
Interest in face masks continues to surge worldwide, with web searches including the term peaking during the week of April 5 - 11, according to Google Trends. In line with this interest, we have seen an increase of rumours related to the wearing, purchasing and efficacy of face masks over time. Rumours about masks overall increased 20% in April. Over one quarter of these posts related to the use of masks as a prevention measure, but they were often entangled with confusion about the effectiveness of different kinds of masks and possibilities for alternatives.

We documented several rumours that China, which produces a large amount of the world's healthcare supplies and personal protective equipment like face masks, could benefit economically from coronavirus. One tweet written in Chinese speculated that if the Chinese Government deliberately released coronavirus upon the world, they may have planned to hoard medical supplies to sell them at an increased profit to Western countries. A post on Facebook in Tagalog expressed a similar sentiment — that China's economy, including its mask production — stands to gain from coronavirus, so spreading coronavirus may have been deliberate. There is no evidence to support that the virus was manufactured by any government or lab, and the outbreak has also taken an enormous toll on the Chinese economy.

We also recorded rumours about potential dangers and risks of mask-wearing. A rumour in Thai claimed that wearing masks for an extended length of time can cause a person to breathe in too much carbon dioxide, even causing death. While it is possible that a wearer may inhale a small amount of carbon dioxide (i.e. breath in their own exhalation) while wearing a mask, we found no evidence to suggest that there would be any noticeable impact. However, as the virus can live on surfaces for some time, masks should regularly be changed, washed and handled sparingly to ensure they remain safe for use. WHO guidelines on the use of masks advise that single-use masks be disposed of immediately after use, and fabric masks should be washed thoroughly in soapy water and dried before they are used again.

One rumour speculated that cotton masks infused with copper can kill the virus. Copper has broad anti-microbial properties and has already been installed in some hospitals around the world to stop the spread of antibiotic-resistant superbugs. There is preliminary evidence that the virus survives for less time on copper than some other surfaces. While some companies do produce face masks infused with copper that have proven effective on other viruses, there is yet to be rigorous testing on the use of copper face masks for SARS-CoV-2.

Examples:

"Wearing a mask for a long time can cause acidosis because the body receives carbon dioxide. We breathe in too little oxygen. Here are the symptoms that can occur. 1. Muscle and body aches 2. Headache 3. Feel like you have a fever. 4. If a mask is worn regularly without breaks, it can be deadly. The suggestion is N95 masks, wear 4 hours, rest for 30 minutes. Cloth masks, wear 4 hours, rest for 30 minutes." - Thai, Line

"The Chinese side argued that the mask manufacturer of the Communist Party of China means that the Netherlands was stupid and bought the wrong mask. This explanation only confirms the suspicion that the Communist Party is spreading the virus. The virus is exported first, then the fake aid, and the fake mask. Tell you when you find yourself cheated: You are too stupid, give me a chance to spread the virus to you! The Chinese Communist Party is killing all humans with viruses!!! The world should wake up!!!!" - Chinese, Twitter, 8,594 followers

Facts and face masks

April saw an increase in rumours related to face masks

Reporting Tip:

Community comments and questions about the use of facemasks generally point to confusion or misinformation circulating about the topic. Your reporting should work to fill these information gaps with credible, trustworthy information. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Vulnerable groups: How do vulnerable groups access this important commodity when it is in short supply? Are there any government or charity programs to deliver masks to communities in need? What can your community do to ensure these groups also have access to protective equipment?

Production: Where do the majority of masks in your country come from? Are they produced locally, or imported from overseas? Are there local businesses that can explain the production process to you? What kinds of masks do you see for sale in your local market?

Use: What is the correct way to wear, clean or dispose of a mask? Which masks should the general public wear and which should be reserved for healthcare workers? Speak to a local doctor who can explain the process in the language and format your audience prefers.
Ten percent of all our rumours related to treatments or cures reference chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine. These drugs, used primarily for the treatment of arthritis, malaria, and lupus — have been promoted by the US President Donald Trump and some media as a likely effective treatment for coronavirus.

Rumours about these drugs were most prevalent in Simplified Chinese, and Tagalog with just these two languages accounting for two thirds of reports. The remaining rumours were split between Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese. While some posts expressed confusion about the differences between hydroxychloroquine, chloroquine, chloroquine phosphate, and azithromycin, the majority of rumours (92%) related to the use of the drug as a treatment or cure for coronavirus.

In April, we saw a trend in rumours suggesting that injecting chloroquine into the water supply and spraying it out of planes and helicopters would cure coronavirus. There were even pleas to entrepreneur Elon Musk to send planes to diffuse the drug.

Rumours that were labelled as particularly high risk, spoke about access to over-the-counter chloroquine and dosage suggestions. Other risky posts claimed that hydroxychloroquine had already been proven to cure the disease or that the drug had already been approved by official drug agencies such as the US The Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Many of the rumours cited fabricated endorsements from other U.S. officials and Western authorities.

The WHO states that there are currently no approved medications for the treatment of COVID-19 and recently issued this alert for falsified chloroquine products that have been found circulating in the WHO region of Africa. Hydroxychloroquine is not approved by the FDA for use in treating coronavirus, although there have been several trials in numerous countries, with controversial and mixed preliminary results.

See this guide to the scientific studies on the drug so far. On April 24, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) noted that the drug can cause dangerous abnormalities in heart rhythms and issued a warning on the use of hydroxychloroquine in the treatment of coronavirus outside of a trial or hospital.

Examples:
- “The drug in the U.S. that can cure coronavirus is hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug. Its counterpart in the Philippines is chloroquine. Are they one and the same?”
  - Tagalog, Facebook
  - "DRUG TO TREAT VIRUS CORONA IS OFFICIALLY APPROVED! Chloroquine and Azithromycin are approved by the US to treat corona patients, thank God! The good news is, the chloroquine medication we actually deployed in the state of New York resources to be able to be administered to the people"
  - Vietnamese, Facebook, 71 comments 567 shares

These rumours are likely fuelled by community anxiety about the spread of the virus and a hope that a cure or treatment for COVID-19 has been discovered. However the focus on the medication by the US President (and some major US media outlets) has also made a significant contribution. As such, it is important to ensure any risk communication acknowledges both the community's wishes for a cure as well as the immense risk of self medication.

To help you to understand what hydroxychloroquine is, and how to report on it responsibly, we have created this guide for journalists.

This bulletin is produced with generous support from the H2H Network. The network and its fund are supported by UK aid from the UK government. This project focuses on equipping journalists and newsrooms across Asia with the tools they need, in the languages they prefer, to combat rumour and misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis.

For more information, contact: covid-19@internews.org