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Countering fake news in the COVID-19 era: The public's opinion on the role of an honest and reliable website

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Abstract

A website and a Facebook page were launched in Malta in March 2020 to disseminate accurate and up-to-date general information and the latest scientific developments vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. The website provides brief, accurate and pertinent information on COVID-19 and serves to dispel misconceptions. The aim of this small research was to obtain feedback from website users on the presentation and layout of the website, to ascertain the level of awareness of the website and to obtain information on improvement for future use.

An anonymous survey was created using Google forms. The survey asked questions about design, presentation, information presented and suggestions for improvement and was open between 22nd May and 31st May. It was shared online through the Facebook page COVID-19: As it happens. There were 51 responses to the questionnaire. The results established the importance of a clean and simple design and presentation. They also outlined the importance of social media in delivering the desired message and confirm that the website is a trusted and reliable source of information. On a local level, COVID-19: As it happens website disseminates trustworthy information both on a local and international level. The major challenge to the scientific and

medical communities in the new COVID-19 reality is that so many people have more access and opportunity to create content, including material that is misleading or false. In this context, COVID-19: As it happens has been created to provide accessible evidence-based research for the lay public.

Highlights

- Just as the coronavirus itself, misinformation has spread far and wide, threatening to drown out credible sources of information.
- A website and a Facebook page COVID-19: As it happens were launched in Malta in March 2020.
- While striving to provide accurate data and information, it does so through a humanistic approach.
- Small study undertaken to collect feedback from website COVID-19: As it happens users on presentation of information on website.
- The results suggest that the website is a trusted and reliable source of information.
- The website's goal - to educate the general public and disseminate trusted and relevant information related to COVID-19 pandemic - is achieved.

Introduction

Truth-distortion, and conspiracy propagation which currently permeate our lives as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads indiscriminately across the planet, make for fascinating and often disturbing reading [1]. Just as the coronavirus itself, misinformation has spread far and wide, threatening to drown out credible sources of information. Over the last few months, posts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Centres for Disease Control (CDC) have cumulatively only achieved several hundred thousand engagements, considerably eclipsed by hoax and conspiracy theory sites, which have amassed over 52 million views [2]. This serves to emphasise the popularity of unverified sources of information. Fake news predates the internet and distorts truth indiscriminately regardless of countries and borders. While science is perceived as potentially offering a haven of truth and an outright refuge for the general public, the perceived rectitude of this pillar is being undermined by post-truth utterances [3]. Coined by Steve Tesich in 1992 [4], post-truth describes a mostly political setting whereby debate is framed

by appeals to emotion, with repeated assertion of half-truths and outright lies, while facts are dismissed. Post-truth is aided and abetted by the peddling of fake news, journalism that comprises deliberate misinformation or hoaxes. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard identified perversion of reality as a key stage in the philosophy of simulation and fakery [5]. More recent categorizations of fake news include false connection, i.e. when headlines or visuals of captions fail to support the content; false content, when genuine content is shared with false contextual information; and manipulated content. Indeed, faith in the sciences is derived from its striving for transparent workings and its inbuilt system of checks and balances [6]. The Austrian philosopher Karl Popper defined science as that which can be proven wrong, i.e. statements, hypotheses or theories that are falsifiable [7]. This lends itself to the accepted demarcation criterion between science and pseudoscience.

Appositely, a website and a Facebook page were launched in Malta in March 2020 to deliver the latest scientific developments on this pandemic to the more discerning and discriminating public. COVID-19: As it Happens was created to dispel myths and to provide evidence-based research (http://www.ithams.com/covid19/). The authors of this paper are committed to close the gap on misinformation while keeping the information on the website relatable to the general public.

The aim of such a website is to provide accurate information to the non-scientific public using a humanistic approach. The website also provides clinical information and guidelines. To help the general public stay informed during this rapidly evolving situation, COVID-19 resources, recommendations and guidelines from different countries and international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), were gathered and analysed. The website, therefore, offers the following features:

- The Home page which includes simple public health advice and facts and other general

information.

- Daily updates with links to latest scientific articles.
- Dashboards to provide daily updates on cases locally and worldwide using a comparative approach.
- Messages from Maltese doctors who are based abroad recounting their experiences during the pandemic. They also convey words of encouragement and hope to the Maltese public.
- General information which includes a section on viruses, FAQs and interviews given to local media by one of the authors. It also contains a section on art including a weekly Siamese cat photo with a message to encourage social distancing.
- A link to a Facebook group *Journaling the Pandemic*.

The website was created with Mobirise. This is a freeware that allows the relatively easy and code-free creation of pages and websites that are based on bootstrap and are mobile-friendly. The page orientation automatically adapts to screen size and aspect ratio.

The website was created on the concept of Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory. Richard E. Mayer is an American educational psychologist whose theory is also applicable to the design of websites. Mayer avers that people learn better when any and all extraneous materials are excluded [8]. To this end, the website followed two fundamental principles in concept and design, best summed up by these two famous quotes.

- Keeping in mind "Less is More" by the renowned architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a founder of the minimalist architecture and design movement [8].
- "Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away", a quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900 -1944), a French writer,

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poet and aviator [9].

Aim

The aim of this small study is to collect feedback from website COVID-19: As it happens users on presentation of information on website, to ascertain the level of awareness of website and to obtain information on improvement for future use.

Methods

The empirical part of the study focuses on the general public's opinion of COVID-19: As it happens website. The target respondents are Facebook users who follow the Facebook page COVID-19: As it happens which is synced to the website and managed by the authors themselves. To address the research questions, an anonymous survey was created using Google forms. The survey asked questions about design, presentation, information presented and suggestions for improvement and was open between 22nd May and 31st May. The survey was kept short to encourage people to participate. Close ended questions were used to facilitate quick responses. The page has over 600 followers. After several promptings by the authors asking Facebook users to participate, the researchers collected 51 responses. These 51 responses contribute to an adequate sample as the main aim of this small study is to analyse the response to information sharing via the website.

Results

These responses give the researchers sufficient feedback on the public's opinion on design and presentation of the website. The open ended question requiring suggestions for improvement and comments yielded adequate feedback. Because websites cannot track their users, the Facebook page proved to be indispensable in this kind of data collection. Facebook users are bombarded with questionnaires on social media and many opt to ignore such surveys, therefore 51 responses in this research is justified as adequate. The results are displayed in Table 1 and 2 and Figure 1

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which illustrates the results in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the results (mean and standard deviation) to a set of questions on a Likert scale (1-5 with 5 being "most satisified"). Results were all ≥4.3.

Table 2 shows where responders discovered the website: the majority from social media.

Discussion

The ongoing coronavirus disease pandemic has demonstrated the volume of information that can be produced in a short period of time. Media sources including newspapers, magazines and news shows have been covering this pandemic with fervour [10]. Indeed, tangible risks of misinformation should not be ignored, as they may lead to ill-informed health decisions [11]. There are however benefits to digitalisation of health media which are being acted upon. The World Health Organisation maintains a live up-to-date COVID-19 website which contains credible information on the outbreak. The U.S. Centres for Disease Control website includes updates on virus status in the United States, travel restrictions and a world map highlighting areas with COVID-19 cases [10]. Johns Hopkins runs a website that provides up-to-date and credible data describing the number of those infected as well as the number of deaths [10].

On this same premise, COVID-19: As it happens website disseminates trustworthy information both on a local and international level. This website however offers unique features. While striving to provide accurate data and information, it does so through a humanistic approach. From the results of this short survey, it emerges that the public finds the website a reliable source of information during the health crisis. The results establish the importance of a clean and simple presentation offering relevant evidence-based information. Furthermore, the results outline the significance of social media in delivering the message, with the majority of the responders (56.8%) stating that they discovered the website through social media or the Facebook page COVID-19: As it happens. The results also suggest that the website is a trusted and reliable

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source of information as respondents comment on how the website "transmits information related to COVID-19 quite clearly" and that it is "reassuring to be able to have a trusted website where information is as accurate as possible". The respondents also claimed that they would recommend the website to other family and friends.

The major challenge to the scientific and medical community in the new COVID-19 reality is that so many people have more access and opportunity to create content, including material that is misleading or false. In this context, COVID-19: As it happens has been created to provide accessible evidence-based research for the lay public. Daily updates on current COVID-19 issues range from prevention, measures on social distancing, updates with regard to the promise of a vaccine against SARS-COV2 and global economics.

Finding connection and resilience during the coronavirus pandemic is paramount as it helps the community to deal with public fear, restrictions on daily life, and the tedious isolation of quarantine [13]. The messages of hope from local doctors based abroad render a humanistic touch to the website, as does the link to a Facebook group Journaling the Pandemic, created by one of the authors, to feature contributions of works of art, photographs and writings from members of the group. The Siamese cat photo encouraging safe social distancing also provides the website with some much needed comic relief from the everyday drudgery of the new reality. We conclude that the website successfully manages a balancing act between evidence-based scientific information and humanism.

Recommendations

While the success of the website needs to be acknowledged, there are further recommendations for improvement. Given the humanistic approach of the website, experiences of recovered COVID-19 patients would give further valuable insight on the disease. Moreover, a forum where visitors can interact, discuss and ask questions will create a better connection with the general

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public and perhaps answers questions which are not found in the articles. While local websites and other social media pages of local Health Authorities deliver daily accurate information on active cases, statistics and mitigation measures, they do not provide information from international sources. COVID-19: As it happens achieves both. The effect of social media on the public cannot be undermined, therefore a supporting page which is synchronised to the main website proved invaluable.

Conclusion

The website's goal - to educate the general public and disseminate trusted and relevant information related to COVID-19 pandemic - is achieved. The fight against this pandemic is not over, and indeed "there is no defined war, no Waterloo to be won against this virus at least in the foreseeable future. For now there will only be yet more battles" [14]. To this end, the authors of this paper will continue to use this website as a useful technological tool to disseminate relevant and accurate research and information vis-à-vis COVID-19.

Declarations

No funding was required for this project.

There are no conflicts of interest, actual or potential.

No human subjects were involved so no ethical approval or data protection was applied for.

No consent was needed.

We give consent for publication of this article.

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Table 1: Results (mean and standard deviation) to a set of questions on a Likert scale (1-5 with 5 being "most satisfied")

Questions asked	Mean	Std. dev.
I found the website to be attractive.	4.5	0.6
The website has a clean and simple presentation.	4.5	0.6
How easy is it to navigate the webpage?	4.5	0.6
Did you find the information you were looking for on this page?	4.3	0.8
How relevant do you find the daily updates on website?	4.4	0.8
How likely are you to recommend the website to a friend?	4.6	0.6
Overall, how satisfied are you with the information presented on this website?	4.5	0.6

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Table 2: Answers to the query where did responders learn about this website

Where did you learn about this website	n	%
Social media	15	28.8
Facebook page COVID-19: As it happens	14	26.9
Friends or relatives	13	25
Online news	3	5.8
Email for this survey	1	1.9
I received the link by email.	1	1.9
Included as part of daily mails	1	1.9
Possibly through university mail	1	1.9
Through Profs Victor Grech's fb profile	1	1.9
Your email	1	1.9
Total	51	100

Figure 1: Graphical representation of results of Table 1.

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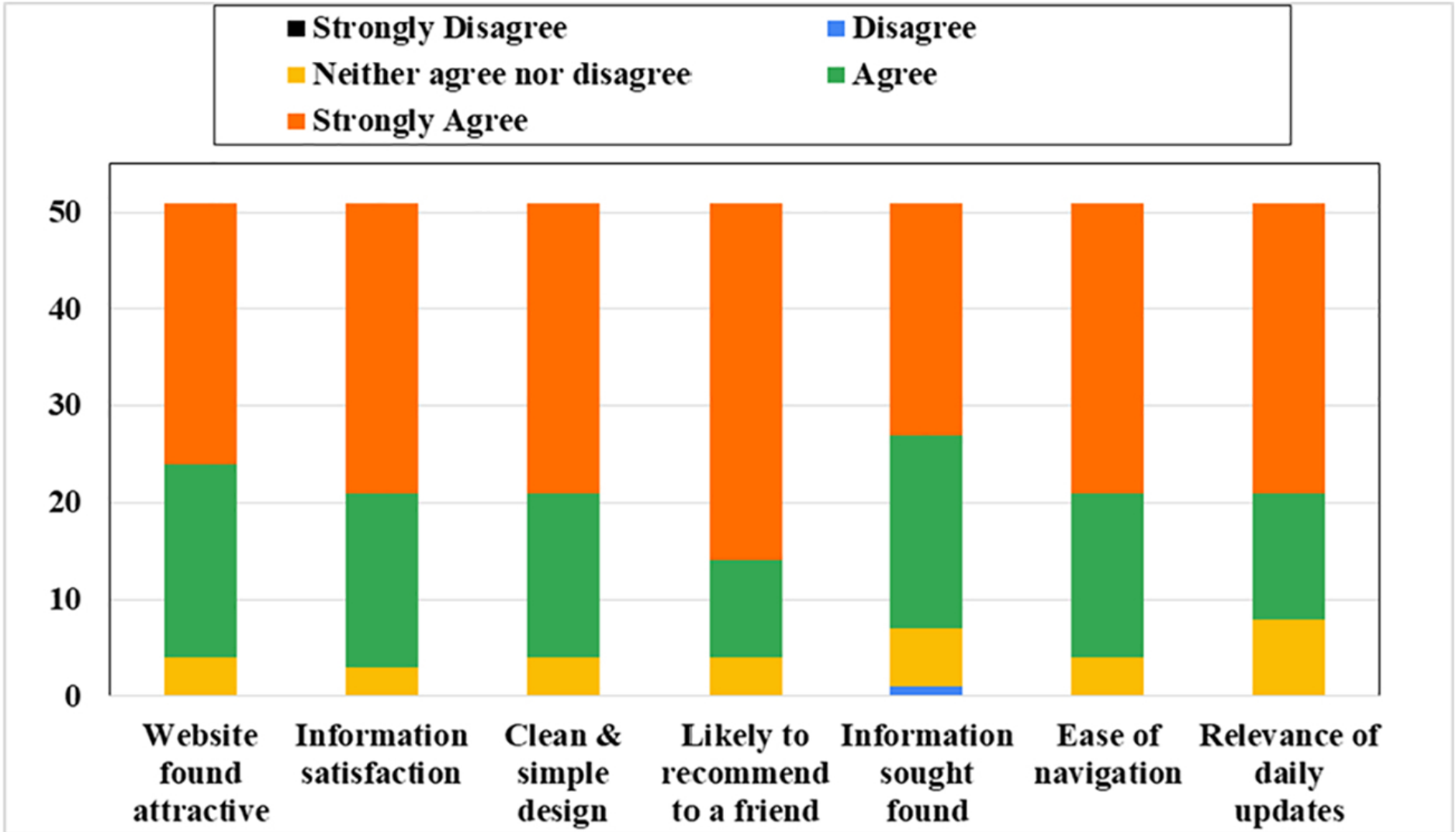
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
50
40
30
20
10
0
Website found attractive
Information satisfaction
Clean & simple design
Likely to recommend to a friend
Information sought found
Ease of navigation
Relevance of daily updates

Figure 1