

Review

Coping with information overload in the COVID-19 age: a compilation of trustworthy information sources

John Hudson

Abstract

The COVID-19 / Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) pandemic has transformed world history within just a few months. Coronavirus was confirmed to have reached pandemic status by the World Health Organization in mid-March 2020, and is now a global phenomenon. The COVID-19 pandemic has been mirrored by a corresponding “Infodemic”, the consequences of which are often problematic rather than helpful. Immense volumes of scientific, medical, epidemiological, statistical, governmental and managerial information have been produced, imposing significant challenges of adaptation for busy health and care professionals, amidst rapid change. This article aims to raise awareness of practical coping strategies and accessible tools which should help reduce the psychological stresses of information overload.

Key words

Coping Strategies, COVID-19, Infodemiology, Information Services, Pandemics, Psychological adaptation, Uncertainty

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a huge ocean of publications this year, a good proportion of which fall into the category of myths, misinformation and fake news; much of which can be discounted and avoided relatively easily.¹ The emerging scientific and professional literature, on the other hand, can itself present something of a potential quagmire, for the simple reason that current knowledge on the topic remains uncertain. No treatment has yet been proven to work entirely effectively, and competing medical / prediction models have their own limitations and risks of bias.² Seemingly authoritative papers are subject to subsequent re-interpretation.³ Supposedly unambiguous statistics are open to question and re-interpretation; albeit with rapidly evolving sophistication.⁴⁻⁶ Epidemiologists disagree over models. Official guidelines are themselves fluid and subject to ongoing refinement in the light of new evidence. An attempt to follow the professional literature alone can all too easily result in the reader suffering from

a sense of “information overload”, struggling to make sense of the deluge of new material. This problem is not about to go away, even with the passing of the “first wave” of the pandemic in some countries. COVID-19 presents a truly global pandemic, meaning that publications will continue to arise from all nations / continents and in several languages.

Steadfast efforts to “Tame the Torrent”

Library and information services staff have not been slow in rising to these challenges. Employees fortunate enough to work at certain institutions in the UK may be provided access to “digests” of key information, produced regularly for current awareness purposes and circulated on behalf of staff. These invaluable bulletin services typically list newly published materials, organised conveniently under broad subject headings, for easy comprehension and rapid access.⁷⁻⁹ This article is addressed primarily to readers who may *not* be so blessed, and for those who may need (or even prefer) to steer an independent path.

An outline generic coping strategy

This brief article is an attempt to provide a simplified roadmap to the more important trusted information sources available, with a view to placing readers back “in control” of where to look for updates themselves, selectively, at a time and pace suited to their increasingly busy workloads. Each of the web links supplied from this point onwards can be selected with a simple mouse-click to obtain the latest updates; you may re-visit each, as frequently as necessary, and - for the foreseeable future - without charge.

A key skill for avoiding information overload, amidst an over-abundance of possible sources, is to be aware of the best places to look. This in turn depends on the type(s) of question the reader is hoping to answer. Some of the more common categories of question, and different user / interest groups, are listed below with a view to aiding the selection process.

General news

Each reader will have a personal preference for coronavirus pandemic news. The following is suggested,

on the grounds of impartial, broad-ranging, international coverage: *BBC Health News*.¹⁰

Information for older people

Health Education England provides links to age-appropriate coronavirus resources for the public, including information tailored for older people.¹¹

Information for the general public

In the United Kingdom, the *NHS* offers basic advice.¹²

Information / Guidance for UK health professionals

Compilations of guidance from **Public Health England** and the **Department of Health and Social Care** are available.^{13,14} The **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)** regularly updates their website with the latest NICE guidance and evidence reviews.¹⁵

Information for geriatricians

The **British Geriatrics Society** has set-up a page of information resources for medical professionals working with the elderly.¹⁶

Information for nurses

The **Nursing Times** has a free-to-access set of online information of relevance to nursing, including mental health nursing and often mental health issues.¹⁷

Advice for local Government and Social Care

Information produced for social workers, employees of councils and care provider organisations is available from *SCIE*.¹⁸ See also category (iii) in the following section.

Information for NHS managers

NHS England and **NHS Improvement** have jointly produced a roadmap to coronavirus guidance for NHS managers, and for clinicians, handily organised by health-care sectors: (i) primary care, (ii) secondary care and (iii) community-based health, social care, mental health trusts and ambulance services.¹⁹

Leading UK think tanks, including the **Health Foundation**, the **King's Fund** and the **Nuffield Trust** are involved with **Imperial College Health Partners** and the **Strategy Unit**, in performing collaborative research concerning a number of COVID-19 topics of relevance to health and social care leaders.²⁰

Publishers' Websites

Many medical academics and researchers tend to have their preferred high-impact journals and journal publishers. The main medical and scientific publishers have each created web pages which give access to aggregated collections of journal articles from their various journal titles. Access is free, for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, at least.

- **British Medical Journal (BMJ)**. BMJ's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Hub: Latest news and resources.²¹
- **Elsevier**. Elsevier's Novel Coronavirus Information Center. Elsevier's free health and medical research on the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and COVID-19.²²
- **The Lancet**. Lancet's COVID-19 Resource Centre, which includes relevant Lancet Psychiatry papers.²³
- **New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)**. Coronavirus (Covid-19).²⁴
- **Oxford University Press**.²⁵

Further information for medical researchers and scientists

Mention should be given to leading UK research bodies and information centres.²⁶⁻²⁸ Similarly some of the major research organisations in the USA and Canada cannot be omitted.²⁹⁻³²

Major public domain databases and aggregator services

Now we move-up a gear. Had we not been struggling collectively in the thick of a coronavirus (COVID-19) "infodemic", these information services would be recommended, unhesitatingly, as the epitome of all that is good; they ordinarily constitute the old-faithful "well-spring" (if you will) of the best trustworthy information as it emerges world-wide, assembled from a range of reputable sources.

PubMed is widely considered to be the world's foremost medical database, commonly used by medical professionals. It is a relatively simple exercise to create a quick pragmatic "catch-all" search to capture recent publications relating to COVID-19 using this source.³³ The most recent items appear first. There are simple one-click filters which can be applied to the results, too; for example, one might choose to view just the reviews, or just the clinical trials, or the material published in any specified language(s). Much of the information retrieved tends to be available freely, as explained earlier.²¹⁻²⁵

Google Scholar is another popular, accessible and useful search engine.³⁴

KnowledgeShare is a subscription-based service from Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals (BSUH). COVID-related content on KnowledgeShare is available to view freely for the duration of the coronavirus crisis.³⁵

Perhaps the main trick to preserving mental equanimity when using the services in this powerful category is to "dip-in" from time to time, as the need and appetite dictates. Linger a moment too long and you'll become swiftly aware that you've been partaking a "genteel sip" from a high-pressure fireman's hose. Step-back promptly, or hang-on to your hat.

Subject-specific searches: pre-defined

A further useful insight, worth sharing, is to be aware that several public-spirited organisations from around the world have already created and shared whole suites of subject-specific searches, utilising *PubMed* and / or *Google Scholar* facilities.^{20,36,37} These pre-defined options can help reduce information overload, and save time, for persons who may only be interested in specific topics and angles at any particular time. They are also relatively easy to modify, and useful as a basis with which to experiment, even when the search for a given unique facet of interest cannot be found directly “off-the-shelf”. Standing on the shoulders of giants, indeed.

Other evidence sources?

Inevitably, there are many more excellent information services and sources of evidence available, too numerous to list here.³⁸

Conclusion

This article has created the much-needed “illusion” of simplicity, to supply readers with an easily comprehensible aid to guiding their information seeking and navigation across the various domains of COVID-19 related publications. Certain overlaps and omissions in coverage may have occurred, which is to be expected. The solution to the problem of information overload (or more accurately, the suite of sign-posted solutions - for there are many), as provided above, may be an over-simplification - to be sure - as the underlying issues are not simple. This article has striven to offer a practical antidote to the danger of drowning passively in the seemingly endless flood of information published. It puts the reader back into the driving-seat.

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