– A Technical Brief for Breakthrough ACTION Field Teams –

CREATING A REAL-TIME RUMOR MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR COVID-19[1]

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[1]For more information about how to address rumors, see the Breakthrough ACTION Technical Brief on COVID-19 Rumor Tracking.

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Introduction

Risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) are critical aspects of a robust public health response during infectious disease events like the COVID-19 pandemic. One aspect of RCCE is understanding rumors circulating in communities and addressing them through mass media, social media, and community engagement. In this technical brief, rumor management refers to a system to identify, track, and address rumors as well as to monitor how well the system is working to counter rumors. This document includes important considerations and resources to support country programs in creating a functional rumor management system, enabling two-way communication with affected communities. It also includes guidance on obtaining feedback from communities on their beliefs (including rumors, misinformation, and disinformation), disseminating accurate information, and monitoring these approaches. Implementing this system while maintaining physical distancing is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why is real-time rumor management essential?

The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered the spread of misinformation at a time when facts are crucial and lifesaving. While some rumors are harmless, others create a significant public health risk by stigmatizing protective practices or reducing trust in authorities or health providers.

Setting up a rumor management system[2] enables those working on COVID-19 RCCE to craft an evidence-based and effective response by better understanding the misinformation and rumors circulating in The Joint External Evaluation Tool (second edition) includes the presence of a functional "dynamic listening and rumor management system" in their risk communication domain. See also WHO guidance on risk communication related to rumors.

Definition

Rumors are unverified pieces of information transmitted within communities that can take the form of misinformation (spread in good faith) or disinformation (spread intentionally to deceive).

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[2]The Joint External Evaluation Tool (second edition) includes the presence of a functional "dynamic listening and rumor management system" in their risk communication domain. See also WHO guidance on risk communication related to rumors.

Key components of a real-time rumor management system

The comprehensive rumor management system detailed below describes a systematic, three-step approach; teams can select the components of the system that make the most sense for their context and their resources.

The three components of the system are:

1. Collecting community feedback into a rumor tracking database

2. Exploring beliefs through short message service (SMS) or interactive voice response (IVR) surveys

3. Developing, pretesting, and monitoring the communication response .

Consider

Rumor management systems, including collecting rumors, SMS surveys, pretesting, and managing links may require formal ethical oversight. Consider both institutional and country-level institutional review boards.

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1 **Collecting community feedback through a rumor tracking system**

Listening to the community—what they are hearing and saying expressed, to the greatest extent possible in their own words—is key to rumor management.

There are a variety of sources for rumors. Leveraging existing resources and mechanisms are critical for the COVID-19 response. For example:

- Add 1–2 questions to your current monitoring forms to prompt **existing project staff** who are engaging one-on-one with beneficiaries to collect rumors. For example, "What have you been hearing about COVID-19?"

- Engage and train **key informants** to recognize relevant rumors and submit them via WhatsApp, SMS, or a data collection app using their mobile devices.

- Create an online or app-based form with a link that the **general public** can access to submit rumors. Post the link on existing social media networks or promote it through other mass media channels. Do not make the rumors public to avoid amplifying misinformation; rather, simply use the form as a public feedback mechanism. Set an auto-reply that includes a link to accurate information.

Consider

Before proposing a new rumor tracking system, investigate whether the government or partners have a robust and functional system to hear community feedback already. If so, think about skipping to step 2.

Key components of a real-time rumor management system

1. Collecting community feedback through a rumor tracking system   (continued)

- Use a **mobile survey provider** (like Viamo or GeoPoll) to identify a sample of the population; contact them by SMS, IVR, or phone call; invite them to participate in a rapid questionnaire; and ask them to enter unstructured responses to an open-ended question. (See more details on using mobile surveys in below.)

- Provide agents for existing **national hotlines** with a simple log to document rumors mentioned during calls. Provide agents with an easy way to submit the rumors (e.g., a link to an online form or a mobile app). Since hotlines frequently identify callers by sex and location, rumors can be disaggregated according to that information. The frequency of recurrence and the prevalence of certain rumors can also be analyzed.

- Provide a simple [rumor log](#) to **radio stations airing call-in shows** and train and support radio hosts to recognize rumors, use the log, and submit the rumors to the online form or app.

- Conduct **social media listening** using a platform like [Hootsuite](#) to understand what people are saying about COVID-19 based on their public posts.

Some of these approaches can be integrated; for example, by having radio call-in shows use the same link as hotline workers and the general public.

Technical approach to documenting and storing rumors

Once there is a clear understanding of the source of rumors, the team must then decide how to document them in one place. Where rumors are stored and how they will be analyzed depends on the technology and approach used. Ideally, teams can collect rumors in a cloud-hosted, real-time online database and classify them by topic or belief. Social media listening platforms have their own methods for categorizing and visualizing the data. Another approach to collecting rumors from the general public, project beneficiaries, or key informants, includes using a platform with mobile data collection, data storage, and/or data visualization functionalities. Sometimes, one platform suffices; other times, integrating different platforms is preferable (for example, if a particular technology is already in use).

There are a number of **technologies** to choose for collecting, storing, and visualizing rumor data. Every technology has advantages and disadvantages, and the choice depends on the program's needs and resources.

Consider

If a cloud-hosted database accessed through mobile devices is not an option, teams can track rumors using paper forms, Excel spreadsheets, and email. However, a system using these alternate data collection mechanisms may not be considered a real-time system.

Key components of a real-time rumor management system

1. Collecting community feedback through a rumor tracking system (continued)

Platform	Collection	Storage	Visualization
WhatsApp	✓		
ODK/Ona	✓	✓	✓
DHIS2	✓	✓	✓
PowerBI			✓
GeoPoll, Viamo, or other mobile survey providers	✓	✓	
Social listening (e.g., Hootsuite, CrowdTangle)	✓	✓	✓

Seeing a visual display of summary graphics, updated in real-time, on custom **dashboards** is helpful for all stakeholders.

Creating dashboards involves developing topical categories for rumors and assigning them a code; these are then entered into a code book that the team sorting the rumors can use as a reference. Additional codes are included for new and emerging themes. For example, in the early stages of the COVID-19 response, there may not have been rumors pertaining to "quarantine" if countries had not yet instituted this public health measure. The dashboards can display summary graphics or raw data in real time (as rapidly as the rumors are able to be coded). It is useful to understand what types of graphs and tables will be most actionable for stakeholders when creating the dashboard. For example, risk communication actors may want visuals that summarize the total number of rumors on X topic by district or a list of the most common beliefs by week, while data managers may need a list of raw rumors being submitted to ensure consistent coding. See Figure 1 for an example dashboard built on DHIS2.

To set up an online database to collect, store, analyze, and visualize rumors, consider the costs for data collection, hosting cloud-based systems, and staff time to configure and maintain the system, ensure ethical oversight, and analyze data. For example, hosting a DHIS2 instance is USD$150/month. Cost sharing is possible when multiple teams use the same platform. Ideally, the database would allow teams to categorize rumors and prioritize them for a response.

Key components of a real-time rumor management system

1. Collecting community feedback through a rumor tracking system (continued)

Figure 1. Rumor Tracking Dashboard for Breakthrough ACTION in Côte d'Ivoire

Key components of a real-time rumor management system

(2) Exploring beliefs through SMS or IVR surveys

SMS or IVR surveys[3] can provide an approximate understanding of how widespread the beliefs received through the rumor tracker are and among which audiences they are prevalent (e.g., location, age, sex). For example, if five people submit a rumor that COVID-19 *does not* exist, it might be tempting to invest energy in discounting that rumor. However, if 98% of the population believes that COVID-19 *does* exist, it is helpful to know that a small portion of the population disagrees with that belief and that they are motivated enough to share it; however, resources could be better allocated elsewhere. Likewise, rumors related to protective practices may show up (e.g., physical distancing is effective or ineffective). If the majority of people feel that physical distancing is effective, but they have low self-efficacy to perform that behavior, the program can focus on messages that increase self-efficacy rather than spending unnecessary resources to persuade people that physical distancing works.

(3) Developing, pretesting, and monitoring the communication response

Developing the communication response

Based on the findings from the initial community feedback and SMS survey results, programs will need to decide which [communication channels and messages](#) are the most appropriate. For example, the program can develop messages, FAQs, and message guides and also directly address local rumors without amplifying them. Local radio spots and engagement with community leaders were used effectively during the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic. One rapid approach to addressing rumors is to have project staff who are in touch with beneficiaries, local leaders, or key informants return correct information directly to the people that originally submitted the rumors.

Certain rumors are widespread enough or potentially destructive enough that they should be addressed immediately through social media[4], local health authorities, media briefs, or any other available channels.

Pretesting materials and messages

Pretesting materials is critical for ensuring that messages and channels resonate with the intended audiences. WhatsApp can be used for virtual pretesting[5] by sending prototype messages (print or audio) to rumor contributors or through existing social media groups (a technical brief on virtual pretesting is forthcoming). However, the program needs to consider how to prevent participants from saving and circulating materials during and after pretesting.

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[3] Technical Brief on Using SMS and IVR Surveys during COVID-19 forthcoming
[4] Technical Brief on Developing a Social Media Strategy forthcoming
[5] Technical Brief on Virtual Pre-testing forthcoming

3. Developing, pretesting, and monitoring the communication response   (continued)

Monitoring the communication response

Materials created or disseminated by the project online should be tracked through a link management application, such as Bit.ly, to monitor reach and engagement. A link management system allows public health responders to create custom domains for their links, build credibility, and help people identify trustworthy sources of information. These applications can also track reach (e.g., clicks, shares) in a centralized account.

The initial SMS or IVR survey can also serve as a "baseline" for monitoring. Additional surveys can be fielded at regular intervals (every 2–3 months, if funding permits) to monitor the reach and effectiveness of communication interventions.

Consider

If you plan to do multiple rounds of surveys over time, the most affordable option involves an up-front contract that includes multiple rounds of data collection. Involving the same respondents over multiple rounds is usually more expensive because of the need to oversample.

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