

Managing Rumors During the COVID-19 Pandemic

FIVE LESSONS AND ACTIONS FROM HEALTH JOURNALISTS IN GUINEA

Introduction: The role of journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented global health crisis, accompanied by a massive spread of rumors, false information, and conspiracy theories that circulated quickly, particularly on social networks. In this context, the public depended on journalists to guarantee access to accurate and reliable information.¹ They continue to play an essential role in informing the public, maintaining transparent communication between authorities and citizens, and combating disinformation.²

As journalists have an increasingly valuable role during public health emergencies, relevant stakeholders in Guinea sought to strengthen the skills of media personnel. With this in mind, Breakthrough ACTION set up several training courses in the country linked to risk communication and community engagement, including rumor management. In 2020, a training course on “Prevention and Management of Public Health Events” brought together 50 journalists. Then, in 2021, the project organized a training course, “Communication of Risks Related to Priority Zoonotic Diseases.” A total of 200 people participated, 80 of whom were journalists. Another course followed, facilitated in collaboration with UNICEF and the World Health Organization, training 90 journalists and media professionals from Nzérékoré at the time of the Ebola epidemic. Finally, in 2023, 47 journalists attended a training course on techniques for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information on the COVID-19 vaccine.

After four years of close collaboration through various training initiatives with these journalists, Breakthrough ACTION wanted to bring them together for a final knowledge-sharing session before the end of the project. This final meeting aimed to take a closer look at the successes and challenges of their work. As a result of this structured day of discussion, the project was able to collect and synthesize the information presented in this brief.

¹ Perreault, M. F., & Perreault, G. P. (2021). Journalists on COVID-19 journalism: Communication ecology of pandemic reporting. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 976-991. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992813>

² Casero-Ripollés, A. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak. *El profesional de la información*, 29(2), e290223. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.mar.23>



Objective: Strengthen journalists' ability to disseminate information reliably

The findings here aim to inform ideas and provide guidance for improving rumor management during emergencies for communications professionals working at the intersection of crisis management, journalism, and social and behavioral change and those working to improve access to reliable information and rumor management during pandemics. This brief summarizes lessons learned from training and evaluation activities conducted by Guinean journalists and offers key recommendations for designing and implementing more effective and equitable communication strategies in times of health crisis.



Although this brief focuses on journalists, it is also relevant to other communications professionals involved in crisis management. These lessons and strategies can also help those seeking to improve journalists' communication skills or facilitate access to reliable information in a variety of contexts. All communication professionals can apply these lessons and actions to improve rumor management and access to reliable information during health emergencies, such as pandemics, thereby strengthening the communities' resilience in the face of health crises.

Key lessons and actions: Strategies for effective rumor management in times of crisis

The knowledge exchange session uncovered crucial insights into how Guinean journalists managed rumors during the COVID-19 pandemic. As these conclusions and considerations reflect the information gathered during the knowledge exchange activities, they are by no means all-encompassing; however, they do provide a useful starting point for further research and investigation.

For each lesson, Guinean journalists identified key actions to improve rumor management during the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions complement existing guidelines for communicating during a health crisis and highlight what programs need to do to better manage rumors and provide reliable information.

Lesson 1: Confidence in expertise

The journalists stressed the need for relying on public health specialists such as the *Agence Nationale de Sécurité Sanitaire* (ANSS; National Health Security Agency). They learned that to guarantee the accuracy of information, there is no substitute for expert opinion. Seeking expertise has reduced the spread of false information and increased public confidence in official channels of communication.

Action: Journalists must systematically consult and quote public health experts in their reports to guarantee the accuracy and credibility of the information they disseminate.

Lesson 2: Information triangulation

Cross-checking information from multiple reliable sources is vital in combating misinformation and guaranteeing the reliability of the information disseminated. By triangulating data, journalists were able to confirm the authenticity of information before publishing it, minimizing the risk of rumors spreading.

Action: Before publishing any information, journalists should always check the facts with several independent and reliable sources in order to confirm their accuracy and minimize the risk of spreading rumors.

Lesson 3: Using official sources

Using official sources of information directly, rigorously checking facts, and ensuring that the information disseminated is relevant and crucial to the intended audience. Journalists stressed the need for using sources that are authorized to provide information and have an official mandate to do so. They also learned to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, which was essential in maintaining the credibility of their reports.

Action: Journalists must establish strict fact-checking protocols, giving priority to official and reliable sources before disseminating any information.

Lesson 4: Transparency and timing

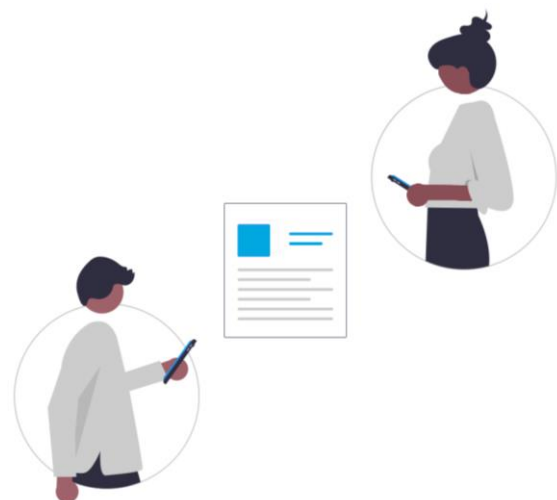
Disseminating information does not only require speed to be effective, it also needs accuracy. Journalists highlighted how delivering the right information at the right time and avoiding premature publications avoids confusion. They also discussed the importance of transparency in communication, explaining how full disclosure of facts and processes has helped strengthen public trust.

Action: Journalists must carefully plan the publication of their news to ensure that media outlets disseminate them transparently, at the most appropriate time, and in accordance with the directives of the health authorities (e.g., the ANSS).

Lesson 5: Collaboration

The journalists identified collaboration as a key factor in the fight against misinformation. Participants valued partnerships with public health authorities and other credible sources to amplify reliable messages and reinforce the impact of the verified information. They also stressed the value of networking with other media outlets and organizations for sharing resources and information, helping create a unified and coherent response to disinformation.

Action: Journalists need to build and maintain strong partnerships with health authorities and other media to share resources, verified information, and cohesive messages to combat disinformation.



Conclusion: Towards improved rumor management in times of crisis

Faced with the challenge of constantly evolving information and disinformation, Breakthrough ACTION Guinea took on the role of improving the quality and reliability of journalism in Guinea and preparing journalists to face future challenges with renewed expertise and unwavering determination. The recommendations from the project's exchange meeting can help programs design and implement rumor management strategies around COVID-19 and for other future epidemics and pandemics, including all types of zoonotic disease outbreaks.

Through the journalists' commitment to accuracy, transparency, and collaboration, they have established a legacy of trust that will sustainably strengthen the foundations of responsible journalism in Guinea. As Breakthrough ACTION draws its COVID-19 work in Guinea to a close, journalists return to their assignments with enhanced skills, transforming the landscape of health journalism in the country. Journalists involved in health can apply these lessons and actions to improve rumor management and strengthen access to reliable information during health crises while preparing for future epidemics and pandemics.

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