



Digital health communication in South Africa during COVID-19

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On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global pandemic as the world experienced the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) to 144 countries (World Health Organisation, 2020a). The disease resulting from the virus – coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – had already overloaded the health systems of many nations. In South Africa, which confirmed its first positive COVID-19 case on 5 March, the pandemic has resulted in extreme measures to prevent its spread, including a national lockdown and various restrictions on movement. It has also resulted in one of the most widespread health communication campaigns since the HIV epidemic during the 2000s.

Terms such as “social distancing” and “flattening the curve” have become part of our communal vocabulary due to the extent of health messaging. The communication on practical preventative solutions, such as hand-washing and alternative greeting practices (Prem et al., 2020), has also been shared widely in an easy-to-understand manner. The WHO specifically emphasises the accurate and timely communication of essential health information as imperative to curbing the spread of the virus, and how important such communication is to shifting behaviours and perceptions (WHO, 2020b). In addition, accurate and authoritative information, which inspires trust, is important in combatting the spread of the virus. This has meant innovation in digital health communication.

Shortly after the declaration of the pandemic, South Africa’s National Department of Health (NDoH) launched COVID-19 Connect, a Whatsapp helpline to provide up-to-date, accurate COVID-19-related information. The platform recorded more than 3 million users in its second week of operation (turn.io, 2020), demonstrating both the desire for accurate information during this health crisis and the extent to which digital health technologies can reach people through common communication pathways such as Whatsapp messaging. The service is available in five of the official South African languages and provides information regarding case updates, myths and prevention methods, among others. The helpline is accompanied by a dedicated COVID-19 government online resource portal (<https://sacoronavirus.co.za/>).

With the progression of the pandemic worldwide, and the multiple sources of information that have arisen in its wake, countries have had to contend with another health problem, termed an infodemic (Zarocostas, 2020). This refers to the overabundance of information, both accurate and not, making it difficult for people to discern and access trustworthy and reliable health resources (WHO, 2020b). South Africa has not been protected from this threat with a range of false news being spread, from claims about contaminated testing kits to speculation about home remedies and cures.

One of the ways in which the NDoH has attempted to mitigate the infodemic, is through the amplification of experts’ voices in its communication with the public. This was most effectively demonstrated in an address to the nation, which was not only broadcast on national television and radio on 13 April 2020, but was also accessible to the public via Zoom, an Internet-based video conferencing and collaboration tool (<https://www>.

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zoom.us/). The address was led by Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the chair of South Africa's Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, accompanied by NDoH officials (SABC News, 2020). The nation was provided with basic knowledge on COVID-19, as well as being informed on the scientific basis for decision making by government. The address was conducted in English and synchronously translated to South African Sign Language (SASL), and included visual aids in the form of presentation slides. This digital address to the nation gave rise to various COVID-19-related webinars which have continued a digital conversation about the disease with various experts in economic, epidemiological and behavioural sciences. Digital technologies have thus allowed an increased reach of trustworthy information. However, questions of accessibility and poor health literacy continue to hamper some initiatives (Paakkari & Okan, 2020).

Poor health literacy is considered a contributor to morbidity and mortality (Mecheal, 2009). In under-resourced, low-income communities, access to health information in an understandable form may be lacking, and digital health presents an opportunity to alleviate some of the barriers to access (Malila et al., 2019). The proliferation of mobile devices in under-resourced contexts has allowed innovations such as *MomConnect*, a project to provide mothers with health-related information, to reach more than 1.7 million South African mothers (Pillay & Motsoaledi, 2018). With innovations like *MomConnect* and *COVID-19 Connect*, the information being shared needs to be communicated in such a way that the target audience may assimilate it to make better health decisions. A misunderstanding of health information, often as a result of language and cultural barriers, limit the impact of projects or even lead to adverse results (Malila et al., 2019). Therefore, innovation in the presentation of health information is as important as innovation in the use of communication channels.

Data-constrained and under-resourced communities will not have been the primary audience of health-related webinars and online briefings in South Africa, but further innovations by the NDoH have attempted to address this barrier. Much of the information communicated in national addresses, has been converted to images, distributed on government social media pages, and televised nationally. There has also been an increase in the translation of health-related content, with the directive from government that South Africa's health data be made available in all local languages, including SASL. Regular text messages have been sent out to communicate both health and regulatory information from government. Clearly, a combination of digital health approaches has been part of the NDoH's pandemic communication strategy and its attempts to reduce the impact of the infodemic.

How digital health communication is leveraged in the coming months, could be vital in dealing with the effects of the disease. In Professor Abdool Karim's address, he described the expected stages of the pandemic in South Africa, as well as its effects, which include increased loss of life and bereavement and the resulting impact on our mental health (Abdool Karim, 2020). These are the realities of dealing with a disease with no cure and many unknowns. Digital communication has, thus far, overcome the physical distancing restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus, and connected individuals to imperative information that could assist in protecting them against infection. As the pandemic progresses in South Africa, further innovation in digital communication could provide ways to support the public in processing the tragedy that has been predicted.

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