



AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

*For science. For action. For health.*

## Call for Proposals: Special Issue about Health Misinformation on Social Media

The American Journal of Public Health (*AJPH*), in collaboration with the National Cancer Institute, intends to publish a special issue focusing on research that can help us better understand and address the proliferation of health misinformation on social media.

If you are interested in contributing to this special issue, please send an extended proposal to Ms. Anna Gaysynsky, Assistant Guest Editor, at [Anna.Gaysynsky@nih.gov](mailto:Anna.Gaysynsky@nih.gov) by 11:59 PM EDT on Friday, August 30, 2019.

### Editors:

- Wen-ying Sylvia Chou
- Eric Walsh-Buhi

### Key Dates:

- **August 30, 2019:** Proposals for manuscripts due (all proposals should be emailed to Ms. Anna Gaysynsky at [Anna.Gaysynsky@nih.gov](mailto:Anna.Gaysynsky@nih.gov)).
- **September 30, 2019:** Authors of selected proposals notified and invited to submit full papers. *Note:* invitation to submit a full paper does not guarantee manuscript acceptance.
- **January 27, 2020:** Full paper submissions due (manuscripts will be submitted via the *AJPH* online submission system at <https://editorialmanager.com/ajph>). Manuscripts will undergo the standard review process by the *AJPH* editors and peer referees as defined by *AJPH* policy.
- **October 2020:** Special issue published.

### Theme:

The field of public health is increasingly challenged by the confluence of misinformation on social media and declining levels of trust in traditional sources of health information. Most Americans are now getting at least some of their news from social media<sup>i</sup> and sharing information with others on these platforms. Meanwhile, the public's trust in traditional sources of information—like mass media, government agencies, and the medical system—is either deteriorating or at best staying at relatively low levels.<sup>ii</sup> Improving our understanding of the



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extent and public health impact of health-related misinformation on social media,<sup>1</sup> as well as what can be done to mitigate possible harm, is becoming an urgent priority.

Despite great potential for harm, the consequences of health misinformation have only recently started to receive systematic attention from health researchers and practitioners. In recent years, the potential repercussions of unaddressed health misinformation spreading on social media have become apparent. From the anti-vaccine views promoted on blogs,<sup>iii</sup> to rumors about infectious diseases such as Ebola hindering effective public health response,<sup>iv</sup> to the consequences of watching misleading videos about alternative tobacco products or cancer treatment options,<sup>v</sup> it is evident that misinformation on these platforms can pose serious problems for health in the real world, making further empirical research critical.

The goal of this *AJPH* special issue is to encourage and highlight work that addresses fundamental questions about health misinformation on social media, including, but not limited to its prevalence and substance (e.g., How many people are exposed to health misinformation on social media? What kinds of misinformation are most prominent in a given online community?), its context and real-world impact (e.g., Which individuals are most vulnerable to misinformation? What are the health consequences of exposure to misinformation?), and effective remedies and responses (e.g., Can we prevent individuals from being influenced by health misinformation? Can we keep certain misinformation from spreading? Are there effective ways to correct misinformation or mitigate its impact?).

The special issue will focus on four main content areas, which were highlighted as research priorities in a recently published *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* commentary<sup>vi</sup>:

- *Health misinformation surveillance*: Millions of users generate a massive amount of data on social media platforms. This special issue seeks to highlight research that demonstrates effective tools, technologies, and methods for monitoring and assessing the nature and extent of health misinformation on social media platforms.
- *Understanding the context of health misinformation*: The spread of misinformation does not exist in isolation; it is motivated and affected by emotions, identity, echo chambers, and other factors. Studies in this area should explore the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and network dynamics at play in processing, sharing, and acting on health misinformation found on social media.

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<sup>1</sup> Social media is operationally defined as any Internet-based form of media that enables user-generated content and interactive sharing of information. Examples include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Pinterest.



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- *Evaluating the impact of health misinformation:* Little is known about the real-world impact of exposure to misinformation. Studies that assess the concrete consequences/sequelae of exposure to misinformation in regard to changes in knowledge, attitude, intention, decision-making, communication, and behavior are encouraged.
- *Developing responses/interventions to address health misinformation:* A key challenge for public health practitioners and researchers is determining when health misinformation requires a response and how to best respond when warranted. Researchers are encouraged to submit work that describes or evaluates interventions to reduce vulnerability to misinformation (e.g., by increasing health and media literacy), correct misinformation, halt the spread of false information, or ameliorate the negative impact of inaccurate/false messages.

Although the special issue will address health misinformation broadly, studies that focus on issues related to tobacco use and cancer control (such as diet, physical activity, sun exposure, HPV vaccination, alcohol use, primary and secondary prevention of cancer, and online discussions about cancer treatment and survivorship) are particularly encouraged.

**Format:**

- Submitted proposals should be 350-500 words.
- All proposals should specify research questions and/or hypotheses, report methods utilized and analyses undertaken (or planned), describe preliminary findings (if available), and discuss implications of the work and how it will improve our understanding or ability to address health misinformation. Include a one sentence summary of the main message of the proposal. *Note:* we are only interested in empirical work at this time; no proposals for commentaries or opinion pieces will be considered.
- Do not include any figures, tables, diagrams or appendices in the proposal.
- In addition to the body of the proposal, the proposal submission must include: Title, author list, author affiliations, references, and funding source (if applicable).
- For information regarding length, reference style, and other formatting rules that will need to be followed for final paper submissions, please refer to the *AJPH* author's guide: <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/authorinstructions>

**Proposal Evaluation:**

Each proposal will be evaluated by the editorial team based on: (1) its potential to advance the knowledge base on the topic of health misinformation on social media, (2) the methodological



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rigor of the research design or approach, (3) evidence of progress (although we do not expect that all submitted proposals will report on completed projects or analyses, proposals summarizing work that is already underway will receive a more favorable review), and (4) the recency of the data, which should comprise data from 2016 or later.

For specific questions on proposal content or orientation, please contact guest editor Dr. Wenying Sylvia Chou ([chouws@mail.nih.gov](mailto:chouws@mail.nih.gov)).

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<sup>i</sup> Matsa K, Shearer E. “News use across social media platforms 2018.” *Pew Research Center*. 2018. Available at: <http://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018>.

<sup>ii</sup> Saad L. “Military, small business, police still stir most confidence.” *Gallup Polls*. 2018. Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/236243/military-small-business-police-stir-confidence.aspx>.

<sup>iii</sup> Meleo-Erwin Z, Basch C, MacLean SA, Scheibner C, and Cadorett V. “‘To each his own’: Discussions of vaccine decision-making in top parenting blogs.” *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*. 2017;13(8):1895–1901.

<sup>iv</sup> World Health Organization. *Ebola: Experimental Therapies and Rumoured Remedies*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO; 2014. Available at: <https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/ebola/15-august-2014/en>.

<sup>v</sup> Albarracin D, Romer D, Jones C, Jamieson KH, and Jamieson P. “Misleading Claims About Tobacco Products in YouTube Videos: Experimental Effects of Misinformation on Unhealthy Attitudes.” *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 2018;20(6):e229.

<sup>vi</sup> Chou WYS, Oh A, and Klein WM. “Addressing health-related misinformation on social media.” *JAMA*. 2018;320(23):2417–2418.