Infodemic Insights on Trust in a Health Emergency: A Narrative Deep-Dive

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Abstract. Trust in authorities is important during health emergencies, and there
are many factors that influence this. The infodemic has resulted in overwhelming
amounts of information being shared on digital media during the COVID-19
pandemic, and this research looked at trust-related narratives during a one-year
period. We identified three key findings related to trust and distrust narratives, and
a country-level comparison showed less mistrust narratives in a country with a
higher level of trust in government. Trust is a complex construct and the findings
of this study present results that warrant further exploration.

Keywords. Trust, social media, COVID-19, infodemic, health emergency

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, high levels of trust in government impacted
positively on vaccine uptake, and infection rates [1]. Trust is built through activities
and actions before an emergency and is a factor authorities can include in preparedness
planning. The impact of trust, and the interplay with different factors during health
emergencies is complex [2]. The infodemic, the overwhelming amount of information,
has been prolific on digital media during COVID-19 [3], and can impact on trust. This
research investigated trust-related narratives on digital platforms over a one-year period.

2. Methods

Narratives about trust and distrust were sourced from publicly available social and
news media data collected from Meltwater and CrowdTangle in English, French and
Spanish from 1 Nov 2021 to 30 Nov 2022. We also wanted to understand how trust in
government interfaced with narratives during an emerging global health emergency
(mpox). We used the Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 as a proxy trust indicator and
compared data from one country in the Trust category (60-100 on the index) and one in

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the Distrust category (1-49 on the index). We limited this search to a month either side of the mpox public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) announcement (23 June – 23 Aug 2022).

3. Results

Data volume of narratives peaked at four time-points during Nov-Dec 2021, Jan-Feb 2022, May 2022, and Oct-Nov 2022. Three key findings were identified: (1) Rumours about move towards authoritarianism and population control, (2) Governments and medical professionals accused of lying about COVID-19 vaccines, and (3) Mistrust in treatment recommendations from government and medical professionals. In the country comparison, in both the 'Trust' country (Country A) and 'Distrust' country (Country B) the peak in trust-related conversation came well before the PHEIC announcement. Many of the relevant media posts from Country A highlighting trusted sources of information, such as opportunities to ask medical experts questions about mpox. This was less evident in Country B, where more narratives were related to mistrust. Country B had higher numbers of posts referencing mistrust in government than Country A.

4. Discussion

This study of social and news media revealed different ways narratives of trust and distrust were expressed in a set time-period and what triggered its peaks. Other studies have demonstrated that greater trust in government is associated with willingness to adopt recommended health guidances [1]. Although there are limitations in interpretation (including the proxy trust measure, data volume and online-only search strategy), the findings in country comparison warrant further exploration.

5. Conclusions

How people express trust on social media, and how that interplays with broader pandemic-related conversations is an underexplored research area. Better understanding drivers and determinants of trust-related narratives during a health emergency can help with future infodemic preparedness and prevention planning.

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