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## HOW THE COVID-19 'INFODEMIC' TARGETS MIGRANTS

by Marco Ricorda

**One of the more sinister aspects of the global pandemic is the spread of deliberately misleading information online. ICMPD's Regional Office for the Mediterranean considers how disinformation networks work to falsely portray migrants as vectors for the disease.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a threat to health. It has also increased the potential for [panic](#) within societies. Aggressive states and political extremists want to manipulate this for political ends by spreading disinformation — to the extent that the UN has declared a global '[infodemic](#)' alongside the crisis itself. Migrants are a classic and very vulnerable target of such networks, first because the subject of immigration itself generates fear; and second because migrants are [over-represented](#) in the populations of 10 of the 15 countries with [the highest number](#) of COVID-19 cases.

### Fertile ground to misinform

Disinformation is used to sow panic and dismay in the target population, lower trust in authorities and fragment social cohesion. According to the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue \(ISD\)](#), disinformation networks are now trying to combine the low level of public debate on migration with anxiety about COVID-19 to depict migrants as an elevated threat to public health. Typically, the tools used are automated software programmes ('[bots](#)') which spread stylised messages across social media platforms in the hope they will be picked up and repeated.

Some narratives include:

- Suggestions that migration routes, in particular along [the Greek-Turkish border](#), are acting as a vector for the virus to spread
- Speculation that immigrant and minority communities in major cities are using the virus as an [opportunity to riot](#)
- Claims that migrants specifically [ignore lockdown rules](#) and asylum seekers are violently resisting quarantine
- Claims that migrants will use the pandemic as an opportunity to '[invade Europe](#)'

Certain categories of migrants such as irregular migrants in the Mediterranean are particularly affected by COVID-19 -related disinformation since they are already subject to overly simplistic media framing. Under lockdown, Italy and Malta closed their ports in response to the COVID-19 crisis. But irregular crossings in the Mediterranean continue as do tensions over how to handle the people rescued. Disinformation campaigns threaten to inflame this highly sensitive situation, where human rights, security concerns, border control and the essential trust needed to sustain third country cooperation are all in play.

## **Anti-disinformation action**

Cooperation between authorities and media [is not without hurdles](#) and dialogue is often contentious. The Ethical Journalism Network has published specific guidelines on how to [report accurately on COVID-19](#) in response to discriminatory rhetoric and sensationalist media coverage propelling discrimination, very much in line with ICMPD's own Observations on media and migration (released as part of the [EUROMED Migration IV project](#)).

In Europe, the EU institutions are trying to [dispel myths about the pandemic](#) and have condemned statements portraying migrants or specific ethnic groups as responsible for the disease. The Croatian Ministry of Interior has [responded](#) to rumours about asylum seekers allegedly spreading COVID-19 by clarifying that asylum seekers residing in Croatian shelters were not infected. Similarly, the Spanish government [condemned](#) outright any attempt to use the pandemic to spread xenophobia.

Tech companies have a critical role. According to a [special report](#) from the European External Action Service, most online platforms have worked to increase the visibility of the World Health Organisation and other authoritative, reliable sources of health-related content. Facebook [announced](#) it would take down "claims that are designed to discourage treatment or taking appropriate precautions". The company asks third-party fact-checkers and health authorities to flag problematic content and removes posts that fail the tests. Facebook is also offering free ad space to national health ministries and reliable organisations to [advertise accurate information](#) on COVID-19. Twitter broadened its [definition of 'harm'](#) to address content that goes directly against guidance from authoritative sources of global and local public health information and announced it would make greater use of machine-learning and automation to track abusive and manipulative content. Such efforts are key but [research](#) also suggests that there is still a way to go before an effective model is found.

One way to counter such disinformation is to highlight [how migrant workers](#) keep societies functional during lockdown restrictions and spread greater awareness of how countries,

regions and cities are in fact making huge efforts to retain migrants due to their contribution to the COVID-19 response. The [Overseas Development Institute](#) collates hard [information and statistics](#) on this phenomenon, which shows that there is wealth of solid examples and good news stories to draw from.

### **Stronger efforts needed**

Debates over immigration and asylum have always been highly susceptible to misrepresentation, which in turn has often produced sub-optimal policy and hampered integration efforts. In the age of disinformation, it is even harder to achieve a balanced public discussion that is functional rather than antagonistic to effective governance, reconciles evidence with the need for emotional resonance, and achieves a greater understanding about the costs and benefits of immigration. A vital step towards winning space for this in the public sphere will be for governments, institutions, news sources, civil society and the big digital platforms to work together to promote authoritative sources. Otherwise crude, misleading narratives take root and develop a life of their own. That was true before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is even more true, now.

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