Too much information about COVID-19 may be hurting more than helping us

*The tendency to consume news information to mitigate uncertainty is well-known to scholars. But constantly reading the news doesn't make us feel less uncertain about COVID-19. It turns out that such efforts may make things worse. **Seoin Yoon,** together with her colleagues, set out to understand why the news increases uncertainty during the pandemic. She writes that this is problematic for employee performance, leading them to make less progress towards their work goals and to be less creative in their daily work.*

When the COVID-19 pandemic began late in 2019, the world had no idea what was around the corner. As the pandemic evolved, uncertainty rose across many facets of people's lives: uncertainty about how deadly the virus was, uncertainty about the economy, uncertainty about whether one's job would still be there when the pandemic ended, and indeed, uncertainty about whether the pandemic would ever end.

As the pandemic has dragged on, many of us have tried to manage that uncertainty by seeking information. In the US, that may involve visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website, searching out infection rates and deaths in the local community, watching the news as governors argued with news anchors, trying to make sense of rising COVID-19 variants from other parts of the world, or "doom-scrolling" through social media feeds. If this describes how you have spent time during the pandemic, you're not alone—indeed, news consumption has increased dramatically as people have actively sought information to seemingly reduce their feelings of uncertainty.

The tendency to consume news information to mitigate uncertainty is well-known to scholars. Indeed, a prominent theory called Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) holds that in times of uncertainty, people seek information as a way of making sense of a situation. But does reading the news ever make you feel less uncertain about the COVID-19 pandemic? Or, does it often lead to even more questions and uncertainties about the nature of the pandemic and its resultant consequences? It turns out that—contrary to predictions of URT—our efforts to mitigate uncertainty by consuming news about the pandemic only made things worse.

This counterintuitive situation puzzled our research team, and so in a [recently published manuscript](#), we set out to understand why news hurt—rather than helped—uncertainty when it came to the COVID-19 pandemic. We suspected that the difference came down to the context; the idea that news and information reduces uncertainty is based on the notion of a relatively stable environment with reliable information. Yet, during the early days of the pandemic, the situation was anything but stable, with the news often reflecting the volatility (and our lack of knowledge) of the pandemic. This is exacerbated by the tendency of news media to highlight the most troubling scenes of a situation from the "eye of the storm." Indeed, there is a decades-old mantra in the media: "if it bleeds, it leads." This turns out to be a significant problem during a major crisis, as people tend to use vivid examples to gauge the severity of a situation and predict whether they will be personally affected.

The COVID-19 pandemic made this bad situation worse by subjecting people to constantly changing, and often conflicting, messages (if you recall, masks were initially not recommended for the general public, only for that guidance to [later be changed](#)). Additionally, news circulating on social media platforms exacerbated the problem by drawing attention to misinformation about the [pandemic](#). This situation was perfectly encapsulated by the World Health Organization director-general, in his statement that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an Infodemic."

Our study

During April of 2020, we surveyed 180 full-time employees who worked across various organisations and industries three times per day for three weeks. This approach enabled us to capture employees' "lived" experiences as the pandemic unfolded around them and they consumed news to make sense of it. Specifically, at the midpoint of each workday, we asked employees about three types of news consumption: the extent to which they had read news about the COVID-19 pandemic via (1) news media (e.g., newspaper, magazine, Google news, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website), (2) social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram), or (3) instant messaging (e.g., text messages, WhatsApp). At the end of the workday, we asked employees how much uncertainty they perceived. Finally, in the evening, we asked employees to rate their goal progress and creativity on that day—two outcomes that are especially pertinent because COVID-19 not only disrupted people's ability to perform their work tasks, but it also interfered with their ability to generate new ideas and solutions to challenging problems.

As we expected, consuming more news on a given day tended to *increase* perceptions of uncertainty, instead of decreasing them. Put simply, when employees consumed information about a constantly changing situation, they experienced more—rather than less—uncertainty. This was problematic for employee performance, as heightened uncertainty led employees to make less progress towards their work goals and be less creative in their daily work. Even more interesting was that these effects were stronger for employees who reported that they were less anxious about death. Our results suggest that those who are generally less scared of death find daily news about COVID-19 more alarming, resulting in even greater levels of uncertainty. For those with a general disposition towards fearing death, in contrast, the daily news about COVID-19 comes across as being more familiar and less impactful in terms of heightening uncertainty.

How can organisations help employees survive an "infodemic"?

While our study focused on the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, this won't be the last crisis that comes our way. Hurricanes, wildfires, and economic downturns are omnipresent, and each reflects a similar type of unstable and often-changing type of context as did COVID-19 (at least for the people directly affected by it). Organisations need to recognise that their employees may naturally consume news about the situation, and that this news consumption might be counterproductive.

We encourage organisations to be proactive in their communication efforts with employees. First, organisations should convey to employees that in uncertain times, doom-scrolling the news at every opportunity may only make them feel worse. Thus, it is important to make employees realise that they do not need to probe all the unknowns but instead focus on aspects of the situation they can directly control. In conjunction with this, organisations should be a source of truth by providing clear communication via official channels such as emails, message boards, or press releases about how the crisis is affecting the company as well as how the organisation is handling the everchanging situation.

Managers, as agents of organisations, must play a critical role in helping employees cope with uncertainty. First, managers must develop effective communication skills as they navigate through the crisis. Particularly during crises, it is essential that managers communicate plainly with employees and respond immediately to their needs or concerns. To do so, holding information forums every morning and addressing worries or questions employees have will be helpful in addressing any uncertainty that may linger and hinder work performance. Along with this, managers—as the most proximal point of contact for employees—must exhibit compassion. That is, managers should be mindful of struggles and challenges employees are going through and show empathy when communicating with them. While delivering clear and consistent messages to employees, managers also need to take every conversation with employees as the opportunity to foster personal bonds with them and make them feel listened and cared for.

Lastly, these efforts must be augmented with organisational practices that provide resources for managing employee mental health and well-being. Organisations must implement employee assistance programs that provide employees counselling services, resilience training, or mindfulness activities not only in times of crisis but also in normal times and make these resources available to anyone—irrespective of whether they have chronic or momentary mental health concerns. All in all, these proactive approaches that organisations and managers can take will help employees survive the "infodemic" and thrive again.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on [Working Through an "Infodemic": The Impact of COVID-19 News Consumption on Employee Uncertainty and Work Behaviors](), by Seoin Yoon, Shawn T. McClean, Nitya Chawla, Ji Koung Kim, Joel Koopman, Christopher C. Rosen, John P. Trougakos, Julie M. McCarthy, in Journal of Applied Psychology.*
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