

# Tear Down the Tangled Web of Misinformation with Facts: An Ethical Battleground

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## Ethical Communication Practice

COVID has exposed the crux of fact versus fiction in medical communication. Social media platforms give a voice to medical experts and the general public alike. The problem is sound fact based science captivates the audience the least. How do medical writers untangle the web of misinformation and captivate their audience with facts?

Dr. Fauci, M.D. and Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), is the primary spokesperson for the White House Coronavirus Task Force. That means he is responsible for communicating expert medical knowledge regarding the coronavirus to literally everyone. His audience spans the highly educated, politicians, medical peers, journalists, and the general layperson. Some media claim Dr. Fauci is currently the “most popular person” in the United States (McLeod, 2020). How does he achieve this status regarding medical communication?

Joe McLeod, author of *5 Communication Lessons from Dr. Anthony Fauci*, touts “the nation’s leading expert on infectious disease has also been a deft and effective communicator, bridging the partisan nature of American society to deliver his messages” (McLeod, 2020). McLeod lists 5 lessons that explain his effective communication to reach a diverse audience.

1. He has credibility
2. He simplifies the complex
3. He connects with a younger generation
4. He conveys a calming presence
5. He stays on message

Since the pandemic began, Dr. Fauci’s message has been consistent in all forms of communication. To reach a wide audience, he communicates the same message in the following mediums:

- Government hearings televised to the public
- Livestream events with current mainstream influencers
- Twitter messaging
- Current and relevant published medical journal articles

If Dr. Fauci is the gold standard on medical communication to a wide and diverse audience, how can medical writers incorporate the same practice?

## Drown Out the Noise

In a recent 60 minutes interview on CBS news, former president Barack Obama expressed there is a disconnect in the way journalists and medical writers share knowledge with the general audience. We are a society of sensationalism. Social media gives a platform to the “5 percent (or less) that have extreme views that are in no way, shape, or form indicative of the majority. But because their voices are often the loudest and their opinions so outlandish, they zap up attention and convince everyone else that they are in fact the majority” (Johansson, 2018). So how do we ethically solve this growing problem?

Anna Johansson, author of *Social Media Gives Everyone a Voice – Including the Crazyies*, suggests either unfollowing and ignore misinformation or try to befriend the polluter to gain understanding. However, she states most importantly “We the people have to drown out the noise and focus in on what we know is true: That all people are equal, and that we all have certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (2018).

Anna gives writers medical communicators some general guidance to fight misinformation, but the solution is far more complex. As seen by Dr. Fauci’s success, medical writers should adopt the 5 lessons for effective communication to reach a wider audience. However, these lessons will not overshadow misinformation alone. As medical writers, we need to flood the system as much and if not more with factual information. Medical advice and information should be widely available to the public through all mediums, not just in medical journals. The layperson has access only to the general web which limits a medical writer’s audience mainly to the medical community.

## Possible Ethical Solutions

In the journal article *Valuing Expertise During the Pandemic*, Baniya and Potts state “there is a critical gap in validation mechanisms in the current social media platforms and suggest possible solutions for this urgent problem lies with third-party partnerships” (2020). They feel misinformation has caused science to be viewed as a rumor. However, there are practical and ethical solutions medical writers can take to spread factual information to their audience.

**Verification** is the first step. Twitter, Facebook, and Google have vague verification AI that validates certain pages to be “authentic,” “well-known,” and “commonly accepted” (Baniya & Potts, 2020). Yet there is no distinction for these platforms to be factual or feature a subject-matter expert (SME). Until these platforms work with third party SME’s and improve their AI verification process, medical writers need to post their content on accounts they know are factual, peer reviewed, and supported by SME’s. This might take some homework, but driving factual content is our responsibility.

**Partnership** is the next step. Account owners cannot rely on their personal content alone. Medical writers and SME’s need to partner with third-party organizations because they “have set standards for validating the professional status of experts such as doctors, nurses, journalists, engineers, and other professionals. By working with these organizations, the platforms could prepare a code of ethics for accounts that would help followers to distinguish between social media influencers and experts” (Baniya & Potts, 2020). The American Medical Association, American Bar Association, and the American Society of Journalists are just a few examples of third-party organizations medical writers can partner with.

**Policy** changes is the last step. Medical writers need to get involved with organizations and public officials to change policies on social media platforms. Social media has to become accountable for the flood of misinformation that is wreaking havoc on our society here in the US and globally. This is one of the main reasons the US cannot get a hold of the coronavirus. Conspiracy theorists are finding all of the loopholes in social media to spread misinformation. This creates public distrust in factual information and the governing body.

As technical communicators, we need to have a voice. Join an organization that is pushing the government to create policies that align with your ethics and beliefs. Write or call your local and state public officials to urge them to fight to create new policies regarding misinformation and social media. We have a responsibility to the public to pressure the government to hold social media platforms accountable. That will not happen if we all take a back seat. The time to act is now.

## **No Time Like the Present**

As Baniya and Potts state, this is a call to action for technical communicators. Medical writers are part of this larger network. Will you try to implement Dr. Fauci’s best practices? Will you research third-party organizations? Will you reach out to your local politicians? Will you act now or wait for your peers to take the lead? We have the ability to make change at our fingertips. What action will you take?

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