

Banishing the scourge of fake news during the Covid-19 crisis

By [Vista Kalipa](#), issued by [OnPoint PR](#)

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'Fake news' is a new term for a very old phenomenon. Wilfully or carelessly misleading information, from gossip to propaganda, has always been around, but the advent of social media and the democratisation of content has changed the playing field forever. Not only has this expanded the scope and reach of misinformation, but it has also granted access to technical sophistication that makes it increasingly difficult to tell fact from fiction.

So, naturally, as the Covid-19 pandemic made landfall in South Africa, fake news ramped up on just about every platform, causing widespread panic and paranoia.

This was partly because certain individuals and organisations were purposefully disseminating false information, but it was also because we were in uncharted territory. In such a rapidly evolving situation, media houses often rushed to present breaking news without ensuring that the information they were presenting was complete or even factual. Opinion leaders and government officials also jumped into the fray without being fully informed and frequently responded to issues unofficially. All of this added to a sense of chaos and confusion that was predictably amplified in the social media.

For communications professionals, fake news and sensationalism continue to present an enormous challenge at a time when accurate information is not only essential, but can literally be a lifesaver.

We set out to cut through the noise by first identifying reputable and respected sources of information. We then draw on these to develop content for our clients and always direct readers to them in the content we produce. In the case of Covid-19, we refer primarily to official government communications and the government's dedicated [Covid-19 coronavirus website](#). We also make use of reliable websites and apps, such as those of the World Health Organisation and Worldometers, a well-established international reference and statistics provider.

Further, we emphasise how important it is to take note of government communications, especially briefings by President Ramaphosa and the minister of health, as these provide new and essential information. And, on a broader basis, they provide a roadmap for our journey as a nation through the pandemic. In a country in which citizens have become cynical about government communications, we realise that trust needs to be re-established and we are actively supporting government's Covid-19 communications programme.

Regular, informative updates are as essential at business level, and we advise our clients on how best to do this depending on their specific needs and circumstances. These updates serve to reassure both internal and external audiences by presenting verifiable facts and a clearly defined course of action. They are also a means of encouraging support and unity at this critical time.



Vista Kalipa, co-founder and director of public relations at OnPoint PR

At brand management level, we understand how important it is to keep a finger on the pulse of public opinion and to respond appropriately. And this means more than being reactive to the echo chambers in the social media, it means listening to people from all walks of life and taking into account how they are being affected by the crisis. We find brands that respond with positive, reassuring messages are able to retain the awareness they would have derived from their usual communications programme and to sustain or even improve likeability.

In short, this is not the time for the big message. This is the time for regular, reliable and factual corporate and media communications. Where appropriate, these should be supported by empathetic advertising focused on conveying a positive message and based on relatable human interest stories.

As communications professionals, it falls to us to be trusted actors in a situation for which there is no precedent. It's our responsibility to make sure that the correct information reaches audiences at every level and, in our messaging, we need to do everything possible to minimise the kind of panic and hysteria that will only aggravate an already tense situation. More than ever, we need to be responsible for our words and custodians of real news, not perpetrators of fake news.

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Vista Kalipa is the Co-Founder and Director of Public Relations at OnPoint PR

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