

CHECKLIST: Debunking Vaccine Myths & Rumours

Journalists play a crucial role in disseminating evidenced-based information. If journalists are unable to tell the difference between fake news, misinformation, disinformation and factual or reliable news, it's unlikely their audience will be able to. Simply put, misinformation is incorrect or unscientific information, while disinformation is the deliberate spreading of information that is known to be false with the malicious intent to deceive people.

How can journalists navigate rumours and fake news about vaccines and other evidence-based health interventions in a digital age, when information spreads rapidly and impacts on the decisions people make about their lives? Science journalist and Internews contributor Adele Baleta has compiled this checklist to help journalists debunk false information and rumours about vaccines.

	ACTION	
	Identify the myth or rumour. What is the specific claim that you are debunking? Once you have identified the claim, you can start to research the evidence to support or refute it. You can also check with credible sources whether the information is false.	
	Research the evidence. Talk to experts in the field, such as public health officials, immunologists, vaccinologists, paediatricians. Consult scientific literature and other reliable sources.	
	Verify sources. Anyone can claim to be an expert in vaccines as we witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Don't be misled. Always verify the credibility of your sources. Reliable sources have a track record of published research and are true experts in the field. Cross reference information from multiple trusted sources to ensure accuracy.	
	Know the field of vaccine research. Reading and understanding clinical research will make it easier to recognise false information quickly.	
	Remember, do not repeat a rumour without debunking it. Your audience will remember the rumour and spread it if you don't counter the false information with the voice of science and health experts.	
	Focus on the facts. Don't fall into the trap of giving equal weight to both sides of the vaccine debate. Most scientists and experts in the field agree that vaccines are safe and effective. More time and space should be given to credible scientists as opposed to anti-vaccine proponents in any interview.	
	Check the facts: Fact-checking websites can be a valuable resource. There are several platforms you can use. These include Snopes, Factcheck, Africa Check and Viral Facts Africa to verify claims and statements.	
	Contextualize the information. Vaccines have been credited with saving millions of lives. They are regarded as the most cost effective and successful medical intervention to date.	
	Tell stories. People are more likely to remember information that is presented in a human interest story format. Share stories of people who have benefited from vaccines, or people who have been harmed by diseases that vaccines can prevent.	

	ACTION	
	Community engagement: Interview members of local communities, religious leaders, and community influencers. Listen to their concerns and reflect them in your reporting so that these can be brought to the attention of health authorities. Provide the community with accurate information in a respectful and empathetic manner.	
	Get to know risk-benefit communication. When reporting on the risks associated with vaccines, for example, be sure to contextualize them by comparing them to the risks of the diseases that vaccines prevent.	
	Acknowledge safety concerns: Listen to and acknowledge vaccine safety concerns that your audience might have and provide evidence-based information about the rigorous testing and monitoring vaccines undergo before they are approved for use. Explain the rarity of severe side effects compared to the benefits of vaccination.	
	Be aware of misinformation tactics: These usually include cherry-picking data, taking information out of context, using emotionally charged language and quoting non-experts in the vaccine field. Understanding these tactics will help you counter misinformation and disinformation more effectively.	
	Words matter: Avoid using language that suggests that vaccines are dangerous or that they cause disease or conditions such as autism. This type of language can be harmful and can discourage people from getting vaccinated.	
	Check accessibility of your reporting. Make it easy for people to find accurate information. Provide links to reliable sources of information about vaccines in your reporting. Encourage your readers/listeners/viewers to talk to their healthcare provider about vaccines.	
	Authenticity of photos and videos. In a time of rampant digital manipulation, photographic images and videos can be deceptive and used to further an anti-vaccine agenda. Frequent yourself with tools and techniques to verify the authenticity of multimedia content. Look for inconsistencies in lighting, shadows, and reflections.	
	Use visuals. Visuals can be a powerful way to communicate complex information and to debunk false information. Charts, graphs, and infographics can help people understand the risks and benefits of vaccines clearly and concisely.	
	Transparency. Explain your methodology and sources when debunking misinformation. Transparency builds trust with your audience and shows your commitment to accurate reporting.	
	Following Up. After debunking a myth or rumour, do a follow-up. Repeat the accurate information, provide updates, and cover lingering misconceptions. Remember repetition can reinforce the evidenced-based facts.	
	Patience and persistence. Debunking fraudulent claims and misinformation can be a long and challenging process. It's important to be patient and persistent, and to keep reporting on vaccines in a way that is accurate, informative, and fair.	
	Working with others. Journalists can play a powerful role in debunking myths and misinformation about vaccines, but it's tough to do it alone. Partner with public health officials, scientists, and other organizations that are working to promote vaccine awareness and acceptance.	