What's stunning about the misinformation trend -- and how to fix it

Opinion by Sheldon Himelfarb and Philip Howard
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(CNN) Coronavirus has killed over 700,000 people in the US and over 4.8 million globally. But it doesn't kill alone, as the deadly effects of this virus are amplified by an effective, relentless, coldblooded and human-made accomplice: misinformation.

Today, living in society means also swimming in an ocean of misinformation. As Facebook’s whistleblower told Congress, the company, on its own, hasn’t been able to cope with the scale and complexity of the problem.

What is different today, and by that we mean unprecedented in human history, is the volume and the velocity with which anyone can spread misinformation around the world. On a bad day, misinformation about coronavirus from the Russian and Chinese governments, for example, can reach almost a billion social media accounts and get better engagement and circulation numbers than content from credible news sources.

As a result, we not only got foreign interference in the 2016 and 2020 US elections. There were also mobs in India, in South Sudan, in Myanmar, and in Mexico attacking and killing innocent people because of rumors and misinformation spread on Facebook, Snapchat and WhatsApp. There has been misinformation motivating vaccine hesitancy, preventing the eradication of polio, and exacerbating the coronavirus crisis.

Add to that a recent study of misinformation during elections which showed that false claims of electoral fraud have a lasting impact on public confidence in elections, causing damage that can’t simply be mitigated through fact-checking on social media platforms. This is a crisis for democracy, and a global crisis, requiring coordinated action.

The vast majority of those dying from coronavirus in the United States are unvaccinated. Given the easy availability of Covid-19 vaccines in the US, the continued proliferation of bad-faith "information" about them and the tenacity of the resistance to getting or
mandating them, a broad consensus has emerged that misinformation is causing many needless deaths.

Together we have researched the relationship between communication technologies and social well-being for more than 25 years. We know very well that truth is often the first victim in international conflicts.

Oxford researchers have found that fear of being misled by misinformation or disinformation, which is the more malicious and deliberately produced type of misinformation, is the single most common fear of internet and social media users around the world. Unfortunately, we don’t know how deep this pool of junk news and information is because lone researchers get limited snapshots of data and are often shut out by the platforms we try to investigate.

Defusing this immense and growing threat demands a coordinated, global approach. That’s a complicated endeavor, one that requires pushing beyond national boundaries, but the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) -- created by the United Nations and which has led the global push to arrest climate change -- provides a strong role model for how that can work.

The world needs an Intergovernmental Panel for the Information Environment (IPIE), and we need it now.

This was the recommendation of a group of experts who assembled a few months ago at the Nobel Prize Foundation’s Solutions Summit. They concluded that as an independent body, an IPIE would help examine the complexity and severity of the misinformation problem and what's driving it. With that understanding, such an organization would, second, shape internet-use norms and policies that can vanquish misinformation in the vital areas where it thrives.

The IPCC was established under similar circumstances -- to determine the state of knowledge on climate change and provide regular scientific assessments on its implications and risks. With 195 member countries, the IPCC is legitimized by government support but is composed of scientists and climate experts who review existing scientific literature and data to establish an international consensus on climate change.

The IPCC then issues neutral, unbiased technical reports based on evidence, rather than politics, that inform government policies without prescribing specific courses of action. Its most recent report, issued in August, raised a worldwide alarm, sparking crucial global conversations about the need for action to combat an increasingly catastrophic climate crisis.

With government backing, an IPIE would likewise convene leading thinkers and scholars in the field: data scientists, misinformation experts, tech leaders, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, journalists and humanitarian activists. Together they would examine the full range of the misinformation crisis and its effects on individuals and societies.
As with the IPCC, these experts could review data and scientific literature to build an international consensus on the scope and impacts of misinformation and begin analyzing potential solutions. Over time, the IPIE could help establish the standards needed for a healthy information environment, just as the IPCC did for carbon emissions and temperature rises.

Some experts, including the US surgeon general, look at misinformation as a problem that can be mitigated by making citizens more media literate. This approach requires betting that we on our own can overcome deliberate information operations on critical issues such as public health, climate change and complex humanitarian disasters.

Closer examination, however, reveals that to be a risky bet. Another popular policy option is to let big social media companies police their own platforms more extensively. Recently, we learned that Facebook has known about its negative effects on users, but has repeatedly failed to address them. Letting social media companies try to fix a problem they enable but cannot control seems imprudent at best.

Civic education and new technology initiatives may make a difference on single issues and in particular countries. But overall, misinformation is the global problem that prevents other global problems from being solved. It is an existential threat to our societies, causing immeasurable deaths and suffering, and addressing it requires a solution that acknowledges the sheer scope and interconnectedness of the fight.

We have considered the full range of solutions to this crisis that have been proposed, from antitrust action against the social media companies to redesigning the architecture of the internet itself -- and dozens of other ideas. But none of the solutions currently under discussion are as comprehensive as the proven model of the IPCC is -- a model that an IPIE can follow.

Like climate change, misinformation is a global problem that disregards borders, so it demands a response that is global in reach and collaboration. The IPIE would use the best evidence possible, establish the standards needed for a healthy information environment, champion practical means of implementing these standards over time, and create the multilateral framework needed for a problem that has so far only been treated on a national basis.

Misinformation is cutting a wide and long swath of destruction and disruption around the world, and no country is immune to it. We must take the vital step of protecting our information environment, in a coordinated way, from the deadly and debilitating impact of misinformation.

The poisoned public square
This is the first in an occasional series of CNN Opinion pieces illuminating the damage caused by misinformation and disinformation and exploring potential solutions.
Misinformation, which refers generally to spreadable falsehoods, and its more craven counterpart, disinformation -- misinformation circulated to serve a political goal -- have poisoned America's politics and its communities. They have empowered denial of the results of the 2020 elections along with the Covid-19 vaccine resistance -- a factor in the pandemic that has sickened millions and killed nearly 700,000 Americans -- and have been weaponized to obscure the pathways forward to address crucial problems, like the climate crisis.

America's social fabric is built on freedom, individualism and autonomy -- and each has been twisted to fuel the spread of falsehoods.