



## Communicating Research in an Era of Misinformation

Last year, *AJPH* hit a milestone. The article by Broniatowski et al., “Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate” ([bit.ly/2TnBA8f](https://bit.ly/2TnBA8f)), published in the October issue was the 18th—among millions—most read academic article of 2018, according to Altmetric ([bit.ly/2QKpR1k](https://bit.ly/2QKpR1k)). To the American Public Health Association communications team, this was no surprise. When reading the article before publication, we knew it had popular appeal and scientific clout. It also fed into a hotly trending political narrative and addressed a timely public health challenge. It made a great news story. Broad interest from the media ensured that the public heard about its findings.

It also illuminated a central challenge facing us today: how can evidence-based public health messages compete against more attention-grabbing trolls, tweets, and myths, particularly when they undermine science and sow discord? Fittingly, this *AJPH* study, along with others, led Dictionary.com to designate “misinformation” as its 2018 word of the year ([bit.ly/2Qk1Ttv](https://bit.ly/2Qk1Ttv)).

Broniatowski et al. concluded that the best way for public health to push back against misinformation is to not directly confront the messengers or repeat their misinformation (or, in Internet speak, “feed the trolls”) but instead to look for other ways to assert the truth.

As communications professionals working in public health, our strategy has been to go on the offense with our messages. Instead of playing defense to antievidence voices, we push the research published in *AJPH* out to the press, making sure they have the latest cutting-edge public health information to report on. We coordinate embargo deadlines with authors and their institutions to ensure timely release of findings. We use social media to get data out to

the public in an easily digestible and shareable form.

The high volume of media outlets reporting on the work of Broniatowski et al. shows that the public is still consuming evidence, research, and facts despite emerging threats. Readers wanted to know more about a solid piece of health research and to hear the truth straight from *AJPH*, a credible source of public health information.

High-quality public health research independently published in *AJPH* not only is of interest to the media but is increasingly used by academics as well. New data ([bit.ly/2C4qCcT](https://bit.ly/2C4qCcT)) from *Journal Citation Reports* last year found that *AJPH*'s impact factor is growing. It showed that scholars are citing the journal's research at a higher rate in the year after the research is published and that there is a marked increase in the number of citations over time.

We hope to see more research in the vein of this article. It is important that we identify misinformation threats, whether they are Russian bots, industry narratives, or outspoken skeptics. It is also important that we understand the most effective ways to counter those threats and to shore up public trust in long-established institutions and facts, for example, that vaccinations are safe and efficacious. [AJPH](#)

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## 17 Years Ago

### Rural-Urban Differences in the Public Health Workforce

Rural public health personnel [in our study] were less likely to have formal public health training and experience and more likely to be employed part-time. Perhaps more important, rural public health personnel had a much smaller team of people with whom to interact and a much narrower range of public health skills represented in the local office. . . . For these professionals to be effective . . . they must be connected with other professionals at the local, regional, and state levels. Our impression is that where the state plays a large role in organizing and running the system, local public health workers feel much more to be a part of something larger than themselves. Where state involvement is less pervasive, local health department staff feel much more uncertain and alone.

From *AJPH*, July 2002, p. 1104

## 20 Years Ago

### The Public Health Workforce: Is It Prepared to Ensure Public Health Success?

At the heart of all successful public health activities—in government agencies as well as in the private and voluntary sectors—are public health workers. They focus on populations and communities, and, in their efforts to ensure quality and accessibility of health services, they apply their knowledge of epidemiology and biostatistics and their ability to build coalitions and support systemic change. . . . There is reason to be concerned, however, that the current public health workforce may not be fully prepared for the work that is required and will continue to be necessary in the [future].

From *AJPH*, May 1999, p. 660