

## Correspondence

# ‘Europe and United States vaccine hesitancy’: leveraging strategic policy for ‘Infodemic’ on COVID-19 vaccines

Vaccine hesitancy still lingers in Europe and USA. Vaccine hesitancy refers to ‘delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite availability of vaccination services, complex and context specific varying across time, place and vaccines, including factors such as complacency, convenience and confidence.’<sup>1</sup> One of the major problems that impacts greatly vaccine hesitancy is widespread of ‘infodemic’ in Europe and USA contexts.

Critical to the success of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns is the development of strategic approach against ‘infodemic’ or widespread misinformation and conspiracy theories on COVID-19 vaccines. Therefore, this paper proposes to European-US governments to leverage international cooperation for global COVID-19 ‘infodemic’ response through enhanced ‘Information and Communications Technology’ tools, especially on the use of social media. Specifically, there is urgent need for massive global response against ‘myths and conspiracies’ on COVID-19 vaccines through efficient public health information in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, including but not limited to television networks, radio, online news platforms, among others.

In a recent article published in this *Journal of Public Health* (Oxford), the authors analyzed 2060 Facebook posts that disseminated misinformation and conspiracy theories on Facebook weeks before the US government launched ‘Operation Warp Speed’ vaccine development program.<sup>2</sup> It succinctly pointed out that ‘anti-vaccine’ campaigns muddled public health information and hindered efficient rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in US context. In another article, the authors found out that vaccine hesitancy in Austria is linked to the ‘strong relationship between distrust in the vaccine and distrust in authorities.’<sup>3</sup> This implies that vaccine hesitancy is due to lack of efficient public health information to fight ‘infodemic’ on COVID-19 vaccines and lack of trust among public officials.

The RECOVER Social Science study indicates that Europe is confronted with ‘infodemic’ on COVID-19 vaccination programs. ‘Infodemic’ contributes greatly to Europe’s vaccine hesitancy. ‘Infodemic’ refers to an excessive information that spreads rapidly, is deliberately or inadvertently misleading, and

impedes lay publics from taking appropriate action during public health emergencies.<sup>4</sup> Results of the study revealed four (4) policy options for European Union (EU) to consider in addressing ‘infodemic’ such as follows: (1) ‘messages focusing on the many benefits of mass vaccination could be considered’; (2) ‘targeted messages may speak more effectively to certain concerns about safety’; (3) ‘support health care workers to promote vaccination’; (4) ‘work with journalists from a range of media to facilitate accurate and comprehensive coverage of vaccination issues.’ This implies urgent need for strategic policy on the use of Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) tools against ‘infodemic’ during third wave COVID-19 pandemic.

According to research published by EU agency Eurofound, ‘over a quarter (27%) of adults in the EU are vaccine hesitant, with 29% of men and 25% of women indicating that they were either ‘very unlikely’ or ‘rather unlikely’ to take the COVID-19 vaccine, where in Bulgaria 61% indicated ‘very unlikely or rather unlikely to take the vaccine’, and lowest in Denmark, Malta and Ireland, where less than 10% indicated ‘very unlikely or rather unlikely to take it.’ The said study reveals that vaccine hesitancy is linked to the use of social media in EU context.<sup>5</sup> This shows how ‘infodemic’ in social media influenced negatively the willingness of Europeans to be vaccinated.

In a similar way, US continues to battle against ‘anti-vaxxers’ due to widespread ‘infodemic’ against COVID-19 vaccines, especially on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>6</sup> US federal officials are greatly alarmed on the growing ‘myths and conspiracy theories’ against COVID-19 vaccines led by ‘anti-vaxxers’ in social media that contributed to Americans’ vaccine hesitancy. But, US citizens recently show willingness to take vaccine. Evidence on Pew survey revealed that, ‘nearly 70% of the US public intends to get a Covid-19 vaccine or has already been vaccinated, where 83% of registered Democrats are inclined to get vaccinated or have already received a coronavirus vaccine, and 56% registered Republicans inclined to get vaccinated or have already obtained a coronavirus vaccine.’<sup>7</sup> This manifests remarkable progress on COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in US context.

‘Infodemic’ must be totally eliminated not only in Europe and USA but across the world. Therefore, Europe and USA should develop coordinated strategic multilateral cooperation<sup>8</sup> that leverages global COVID-19 response to address particularly ‘infodemic’ or ‘myths and conspiracy theories’ on COVID-19 vaccines.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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