

## Letter to the Editor

**Cite this article:** Hosseini M-S and Akbarzadeh MA. Persisting on readability could provoke the risk of misinformation: A COVID-19 pandemic concern. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2021.25>.

**Keywords:**


comprehension; COVID-19; disease outbreak; readability; SARS-CoV-2

**Corresponding author:**

Mohammad-Salar Hosseini,  
Email: [hosseini.msalar@gmail.com](mailto:hosseini.msalar@gmail.com).

© Society for Disaster Medicine and Public Health, Inc. 2021. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

# Persisting on Readability Could Provoke the Risk of Misinformation: A COVID-19 Pandemic Concern

Mohammad-Salar Hosseini<sup>1,2,3</sup>  and Mohammad Amin Akbarzadeh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student Research Committee, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran; <sup>2</sup>Research Center for Evidence-Based Medicine, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran and <sup>3</sup>Iranian Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM) Centre, Joanna Briggs Institute Affiliated Group, Tabriz, Iran

To the Editor,

We read the article by Basch et al. with great interest.<sup>1</sup> As the novel idea of assessing the readability of publicly accessed information available on the Internet is appreciated, we wish to note some points regarding the mentioned research article. The necessity of general information being easy-to-read is indispensable, but we must agree that not all information is simplifiable. The unseen concern here lies in the fact that, while the general populace may not be capable of interpreting every kind of information in a correct and complete way, trying to deliver all information to the general audience may lead to misinterpretation, misjudgment, and misunderstanding. In other words, being uninformed about some questions may be much more harmless than provoking a misconception or misunderstanding among the population.<sup>2-4</sup>

In the study design, a crucial concern was raised regarding the search protocol. Some major websites, such as who.int, were excluded from the results because they are not included in the list of commercial websites (.com and .net), or noncommercial websites (.org, .gov, and .edu), and as we know, these websites play the most important role in informing the general population. The last concern to address is about the search terms, as we repeated the study design with 2 different keywords. Although the search results are definitely based on the location, using the keyword “COVID-19” instead of “Coronavirus”—the less correct and less common word for the purpose—led to remarkably different search results, which may strongly impact the outcomes of the research.

Moreover, we should consider the fact that a substantial proportion of society may not use the Internet and online tools to seek their desired information, chiefly relying on television and public broadcasting. This is especially evident in the less-educated portion of the society. Focusing on instructing the population about how to determine trustworthy references and distinguish reliable and unreliable sources of information may be a more reasonable and generally applicable approach toward dealing with possible comprehension flaws of the general population.

**Funding.** No financial support was received regarding this article.

**Conflict of Interests.** The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. Basch CH, Mohlman J, Hillyer GC, et al. Public health communication in time of crisis: readability of on-line COVID-19 information. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep*. 2020;14(5):635–637.
2. Brennan JS, Simon F, Howard PN, et al. Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation. Reuters Institute. 2020. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>. Accessed March 3, 2021.
3. Cuan-Baltazar JY, Muñoz-Perez MJ, Robledo-Vega C, et al. COVID-19 misinformation on the internet: the other epidemic. *JMIR Public Health Surveill*. 2020;6(2):e18444.
4. Pennycook G, McPhetres J, Zhang Y, et al. Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy nudge intervention. *Psychol Sci*. 2020;31(7):770–780.