

Mr. Max Lesko, Chief of Staff  
Office of the Surgeon General of the United States  
Email: COVIDMisinfoRFI@hhs.gov

Re: Impact of Health Misinformation in the Digital Information Environment in the United States Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic RFI

Dear Mr. Lesko,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the prevalence and impact of health misinformation during the COVID pandemic. I write on behalf of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. FABBS represents 27 scientific societies and nearly 60 university departments whose scientific members and faculty share a commitment to advancing knowledge in the sciences of mind, brain, and behavior. FABBS researchers are eager to be a resource, helping to identify and connect when our disciplines have the potential to improve human health.

FABBS is grateful for your efforts to gather data, research, and perspectives to develop a better understanding of the health information environment. The COVID pandemic has most certainly shined a bright light on the health impacts of misinformation and more broadly the evidence ecosystem. These comments focus on two areas of research, science communication and foundational knowledge, with the potential to strengthen the evidence ecosystem.

### **Science communication**

As captured in the below quote, it is important to understand how the initial lack of effective science communication about COVID contributed to the spread of misinformation and virus in the early stages of the pandemic.

“The damage was compounded by singularly inept communication. Even when officials made sound decisions, they often undercut themselves by failing to explain their choices clearly. Their incoherence not only reduced the efficacy of their policies but eroded public trust and confidence, as officials seemingly contradicted themselves or shifted the goalposts. As long as federal officials’ communications are mumbled, confusing, contradictory, incomprehensible, sanctimonious, and disrespectful, they will contribute to the failure of bringing the virus under control.”

Fischhoff, B. (October 4, 2021) [The COVID Communication Breakdown: How to Fix Public Health Messaging](#) *Foreign Affairs* (attached)

On March 24, 2022 the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) hosted a meeting on science communication, hearing from experts: [Jessica Hullman](#), [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#), [Arthur Lupia](#), and [Consuelo Wilkins](#). Several themes emerged from the enlightening presentations including the importance of providing reliable data and information rather than framing information in such a way as to achieve a desired outcome. A second theme highlighted the necessity to be forthcoming about uncertainty and recognize the limitations of

science and the role of values in decision making. A third area of interest was the role of trust – in health care providers, information, and the scientific process – and the opportunities for countering misinformation. Dr. Wilkins spoke of the challenges competing for funding from the National Institutes of Health on topics such as trust broadly, explaining that NIH funding is often disease-specific, consistent with the nature of the individual institutes. FABBS recommends investing in research to better understand all of these aspects of science communication across diseases.

### **Foundational knowledge**

FABBS encourages the Surgeon General to study the context of the consumers of misinformation – including decision makers and media – and the importance of foundational knowledge to help inoculate against the absorption and adoption of unsubstantiated claims. In addition to the importance and value of topic-specific foundational knowledge as raised by Dr. Jamieson at the PCAST meeting, FABBS writes to underscore the importance of knowledge about our own cognitive processes that underly memory, doubt, trust, motivated reasoning, social identity, cafeteria denial and bias - core components of human behavior. Each of the below articles identify aspects of human cognition with potential implications for K-12 education. The proliferation of misinformation begs the question of how teaching science might evolve to reflect advancements in these disciplines.

- [\*Can't We Just Disregard Fake News? The Consequences of Exposure to Inaccurate Information\*](#), Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences 2018, Vol. 5 (2) 232-239 David N. Rapp and Nikita A. Salovich
- [\*A Reasoned Approach for Dealing with Fake News\*](#), Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences 2019, Vol. 6 (1) 94-101 M. Anne Britt, Jean-Francois Rouet, Dylan Blaum, and Keith Millis
- [\*7 Ways to Avoid Becoming a Misinformation Super Spreader\*](#), The Conversation, March 18, 2021, Colleen Sinclair

FABBS encourages additional investments in the research on science communication, foundational knowledge, and also the implementation of the rigorous research already established in these areas to strengthen the evidence ecosystem. Furthermore, FABBS encourages HHS to build on this RFI from the Office of the Surgeon General and to invest in the health evidence ecosystem to most effectively support the production and management of knowledge.

Sincerely,



Juliane Baron  
Executive Director  
FABBS