The United Nations (UN) has launched a new initiative to enlist millions of “digital first responders” to fight misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing the reach of verified, fact-based information.

“Misinformation spreads online, in messaging apps and person to person,” said UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who announced the initiative. “Its creators use savvy production and distribution methods.”

As misinformation is spread through digital channels, it hinders the public health response and provokes unrest, said Melissa Fleming, MSJ, UN Under-Secretary for Global Communication, at the campaign’s launch on May 21. Fighting this disturbing problem on the digital battlefield will require using compelling and sophisticated new communication approaches, she said.

The new initiative, called Verified, is seeking volunteers from around the world to sign up at www.shareverified.com as “information volunteers” to receive a daily feed of verified information to share with family, friends, and others in their social networks. This content is “optimized for social sharing with simple, compelling messaging that either directly counters misinformation or fills an information void,” Fleming explained.

Even though social media platforms have committed to removing or cautioning against dubious information and directing users to the World Health Organization and national health websites, the most “pernicious” misinformation and conspiracy theories are spreading through peer-to-peer messaging apps, Fleming said. Purveyors of misinformation—such as promises of “cures” that lack evidence of benefit or may even be harmful—use narratives preying on people’s fears and their need for answers or someone to blame.

“While misinformation has always had a dynamic in this crisis, there are signs that its role is dangerously increasing,” including a surge in conspiracy theories, Fleming said. “Unfortunately, in the algorithm-driven social media era, the popularity of a post often has more influence over who sees it than whether it is factual.”

For example, a recent study found that 19 of 69 of the most-viewed English-language videos on YouTube about COVID-19—more than 1 in 4—contain misleading or inaccurate information. Government and professional videos featuring solely factual information accounted for only 11% of videos and 10% of views.

There are also efforts to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to target minority groups or promote anti-immigrant messages, Fleming noted, a trend that could worsen with economic and social stresses ignited by the pandemic. To address this, in addition to countering misinformation about the medical and public health aspects of COVID-19, the Verified initiative will offer “hopeful content that celebrates local acts of humanity, the contributions of refugees and migrants, and makes the case for global cooperation,” she said.

The Verified initiative is a collaboration with Purpose, a social mobilization organization that creates participatory campaigns on social issues; it is also partnering with First Draft, an organization that closely monitors the spread of misinformation. It is supported by the IKEA Foundation and Luminate.
"We will not win the communications war with press releases and fact sheets," Fleming said. "We need to empower everyday people to spread factual, trusted information with their friends, families, and social networks."