Think Piece - What actions can we take against the spread of false information?

Mis- or disinformation has fast become a major challenge in public health. Online mis- or disinformation can spread rapidly with just a few clicks and unfortunately can lodge itself deeper into someone's beliefs than the truth itself. Even with the best fact-checking processes or warning labels online, it can still be very hard to contain viral mis- and disinformation once it has spread.

So how can we protect ourselves and those we love from 'falling down the rabbit hole' in the first place? One evidence-based way, is to use the technique of 'pre-bunking' or 'inoculation theory'.

Prebunking is the practice of building psychological resistance against online misinformation strategies before they are encountered. So for example, instead of believing a piece of misinformation online and then having it debunked or proven to be incorrect later on, pre-bunking helps you recognise misleading information when you first encounter it online.

While the ideas behind pre-bunking were developed more than a decade ago, recently published studies have shown the effectiveness of pre-bunking in the current 'infodemic' environment.

One of those studies from a group in Cambridge lead by Dr Sander van der Linden, Head of the Social Decision-Making Lab, uses the pandemic as an example in a game called GO VIRAL! Dr Sander van der Linden explains that "We are aiming to pre-emptively debunk, or pre-bunk, misinformation by exposing people to a mild dose of the methods used to disseminate fake news." So in this game, by positioning yourself as the person who spreads misinformation online, you get to learn about the common tactics employed by these people so when you come across these manipulation techniques online in your own everyday life you'll be better able to see them for what they are.

"By using a simulated environment to show people how misinformation is produced, we can demystify it," says Dr Jon Roozenbeek, co-developer of GO VIRAL! "The game empowers people with the tools they need to discern fact from fiction" and the inoculation effects appear to last up to several months.

Want to give GO VIRAL! a go? Do it yourself or even as a work team challenge to compare your scores afterwards. The higher the score, the better you are at using common manipulative techniques! Good luck!