

Dangerous fake news: it is not true that masks reduce oxygen intake

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Opinion

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2020-05-14T07:33:01-04:00

It is also not true that we generate harmful substances when breathing with them on.

Fake news about the masks that protect us against COVID-19 being extremely dangerous are spreading across 11 countries: Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Spain, Brazil, and France. It is being said that masks can cause hypoxia, a decrease in the oxygen level available to the body's cells. This is a lie, and this is false.

The CoronaVirusFacts alliance database shows that between April 30th and May 13th, at least five fact-checks were published worldwide, explaining—in great detail—that there is no such risk and that it is vital people wear masks during the pandemic.

Animal Político was the first fact-checking media outlet to draw attention to his hoax. On April 30th, they posted, in capital letters, on their website: “NO FACE MASK CAUSES HYPOXIA.” And they wrote: “Although face masks may indeed feel uncomfortable, don't worry, it is normal and wearing one won't cause oxygen deficiency. Hypoxia can result from smoking, inhaling gases, or standing at high altitude, but not from wearing masks or filters.”

This piece of disinformation, however, spread across Latin America and Europe in less than two weeks. On April 4th, the AFP found it was circulating in Chile, Brazil, and France. It published a fact-check showing a total of eight websites and Facebook accounts that had shared this piece of disinformation in three languages: English (1, 2), Spanish (1, 2, 3, 4), and Portuguese (1, 2). The four Spanish posts alone had been shared 24.8 thousand times on Facebook when the AFP fact-checkers conducted the study.

It is quite possible that the fake news spotted by ColombiaCheck and Agência Lupa on April 7th is associated with the previous content. However, it is important to stress that fact-checks published by Colombia and Brazil are based on WhatsApp and Twitter content, which is clear evidence that this fake news about face masks and hypoxia deserves our full attention. This lie is spreading from one platform to another, and it is not restricted to one platform, one country, or one language.

In Colombia, the piece of fake news suggested that repeatedly breathing with the mask on “intoxicates the wearer,” causes “discomfort, loss reflexes and consciousness.” Thus, it suggested wearing the mask only when “standing very close or in front of someone” and “removing it every 10 minutes.” According to medical sources, this is all false.

In Brazil, the fake news stated that the “exhaled air becomes carbon dioxide” and that inhaling it would produce dizziness. This is a lie.

So share this warning before this piece of fake news causes more COVID-19 infections and deaths. The World Health Organization recommends the use of face masks to protect ourselves during the pandemic. It poses no risks to you and your body. Conversely, disinformation and lies do.

This column is part of the Univision News and the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN)/Poynter Institute alliance to combat disinformation. This article is published in English and Spanish