

Internet used to track emerging infectious diseases

Online news outlets, government web sites and discussion forums used to track emerging infectious diseases.

A study published in the open-source journal *PloS Medicine* shows that it is possible to use unconventional sources on the Internet, such as online medical news sources, government web sites and online discussion groups to gather information about emerging infectious diseases.

Researchers from the Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical School developed HealthMap as a freely accessible and automated system that monitors and organises information on emerging diseases in real time. The existing network of traditional surveillance systems managed by health organisations and multinational agencies has wide gaps in geographical coverage and often suffers from poor information flow across national borders.

Although these new sources are potentially useful, triggering most outbreak verifications now carried out by the World Health Organization, it can be difficult to cope with the volume of information and to distinguish "signal from noise."

HealthMap continually collects reports of new and ongoing outbreaks of infectious disease and then uses software similar to spam filters to integrate and filter the information to provide online summaries.

It currently gathers reports from 14 sources, including Google News and expert discussion sites, which summarise information from more than 20 000 different websites. The search criteria include disease names, symptoms, and keywords.

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