

Infodemic in the times of pandemic: A critical analysis on the role and measures of social media platforms to check the infodemic

PROF.KALAM NARREN, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences
Dept of Mass Communication, Telangana University, Nizamabad, TS
and

PROF.V.VINAY KRISHNA, Assistant Professor,
Dept of Mass Communication, Telangana University, Nizamabad, TS.

Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to the unprecedented rise of the infodemic resulting in chaos and misleading the people with the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on the Covid-19. This has been a global phenomenon ever since the outbreak of Covid-19 and many countries have got difficulties in dealing with the infodemic spread of misinformation and misleading information through the social media platforms. The World Health Organization too has taken this phenomenon of infodemic seriously and pointed out that the spread of false and unauthenticated information was resulting in the worsening of Covid-19 crisis and had stated that the infodemic was turning out to be a big hurdle in the handling of Covid-19 induced health crisis across the globe. This paper analyses the role of social media in the spread of infodemic and the measures initiated by the social media platforms to contain and combat the infodemic.

Keywords: Infodemic, Covid-19 pandemic, misinformation, disinformation, social media platforms, fact-check and fact-checkers

Introduction:

The global community that which is engaged in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic is fighting another battle with the infodemic. If the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak is due to the Novel Corona virus, the infodemic outbreak is due to the misinformation spreaders doing willingly and unwillingly at times.

The people and users of social media platforms are being bombarded with the massive flow of information in abundance. The information is sometimes accurate and at times not accurate. This massive flow of information, mostly false, unauthenticated, misinformation and disinformation is being called as the infodemic.

This infodemic creates a piquant situation and makes it hard for the people what to trust and what not to trust during the distressing times of pandemic. Worried over the massive flow of misinformation the World Health Organization (WHO) has also declared a war on the infodemic and cybercrimes during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The WHO has described the infodemic as “Infodemics are excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. Infodemics can spread

misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.”

Highlighting the serious issue of infodemic, WHO Director- General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated that “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus”

Infodemic denotes that a voluminous increase in the information associated with a particular topic and whose development can occur exponentially in a very short spell of time due to a particular incident or outbreak.

In the Covid 19 pandemic situation, misinformation and disinformation and fake news are spreading like wildfire and are affecting the gullible consumers of that information without verifying the source and authenticity of such news.

The infodemic takes a high leverage of the crisis situation and the distress of the people for the circulation of all sorts of false and misleading information and the spread of rumours.

As most parts of the world are in the middle of an information revolution and the popularity of the social networking sites and their use, the infodemic is taking the advantage of modern communication and social networking sites that have wider reach and can deliver the content to millions of people living in different geographical conditions.

Infodemic Vectors:

The social networking sites like Facebook and Whatsapp with their reach of around one billion users and other sites, which are equally popular, like Youtube, Instagram, share chat and numerous websites with doubtful intentions and the millions of blogs and vlogs. There are conspiracy theorists coming up with all sorts of weird theories that falsely look almost believable.

It was a paradox that the social networking sites and the internet sources that spread news in a very faster way to make the things clear have turned out to be the carriers of this infodemic that put the people in danger. As their reach is wider and their speed is faster, the social networking sites helped the unscrupulous elements to go for the kill through the spread of the fake, false and unauthenticated news.

As the people in most parts of the globe were indoors and as there was a major disruption in the newspapers production and circulation, there was a great spike in the use of social media and other internet-based sources for the news related to the pandemic. The overdependence on the social media for the infodemic news has helped the conspiracy theorists of all sorts to spread the false news and rumours.

There was this conspiracy theory of Corona virus spreading through the 5G towers and got currency in no time resulting in gullible people destroying the 5G towers and other equipment even as the telecommunication authorities’ clarifications went unheeded for sometime in parts of United Kingdom and other European countries.

The spread of fake news regarding the shutdown in cities across the USA has also resulted in the emptying of supermarkets and grocery stores. There was a panic buying and hoarding and there were huge queues in front of the super markets in different states of the USA, which by then did not announce any such shutdown.

As a result and in order to caution the people not to buy the false news that were not authentic, the Massachusetts, USA, Governor famously said that “Everybody needs to get their news from legitimate places, not from their friend’s friend’s friend’s friend.”” He had also advised his state people to get their news from legitimate sources like TV and newspapers believed to be authentic at these pandemic times.

In a study presented in the MIT Technology Review (March 2020), Joan Donovan pointed out that... “Without thoughtful strategies to prevent the spread of bad information, a lot could go wrong. Social-media platforms continue to be dangerous socio-technical vulnerability in times of confusion and crisis. When information is scarce, opportunities abound for media manipulators to trade on chaos and fear.”

There were some conspiracy theories that baselessly pointed fingers at a major development and philanthropic donor like Bill Gates and this resulted in serious objection from many quarters for blaming a noble person, who is heavily funding the medical and health initiatives in different parts of the world in general and the Africa in particular.

The propagation of false and unscientific infodemic related to the prevention of Covid-19 spread by the consumption of alcohol has resulted in the death of more than 300 people in Iran, where the commoners believing the false news to be true consumed raw spirit.

There were numerous fake theories that some herbs and potions cure and prevent Covid-19 and many fraudsters started selling fake drugs to cure the Covid-19 and this has also resulted in the perpetration of many cyber crimes. There were many doctored and old and unrelated videos that tried to spread against some communities.

In the Indian context, the rumours of special trains even before they were started to transport the migrant labourers caused lot of chaotic conditions in cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Hyderabad, where thousands of migrant labourers thronged the railway stations for the ‘special trans’ that were not actually started by then.

The huge migration of migrant labourers from Delhi immediately days after the lockdown for the buses that were not announced to go to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has created a crisis situation in maintaining the crowds and prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Offering miracle cures, spreading the infection news in their neighbourhoods, and their cities, false naming and shaming of people and all sorts of cure and prevention theories were circulated unabated thus leading to confusion and chaos among the people and in many instances had also led to the misleading of the people resulting in the loss of life in some instances and caused untold agony to the victims.

As the social media platforms have the capability to overstate or understate the news and issues, many experts demand that the major social media platforms need to sort, rank and prioritize their news. There must be some arrangements to identify and check the spread of false news links.

Negative impact of infodemic:

The impact of the infodemic is very complex and in varied ways that is causing disturbance to the Covid- 19 warriors and administrators in their decision-making process and the people as well.

The spread of misinformation with an intention to deceive or mislead and the infodemic proportions making it difficult for the people decide about the authenticity of any news related to the pandemic.

There were instances where the fraudsters came up with fake circulars in the name of government agencies to mislead the people.

People are buying false news as true and were behaving and acting accordingly without realising the falsehood of the infodemic false news. This is making the job of health workers and the administrators who are battling the pandemic more difficult.

People are experiencing anxiety and depression and were getting overwhelmed by despair and emotional disturbances due to the misinformation and disinformation flow. The social media and internet is facilitating anybody can write anything and get it disseminated across the globe within no time.

There were also some Covid-19 parties that dangerously promote the spread of infection so as to 'gain the herd immunity' and to emerge as the 'Covid winners.' These type parties have also resulted in the infection to the healthy youngsters and the consequent death of some of the participants in such dangerous parties.

There were many instances of loss of life due to the fake news during the pandemic and there were clashes and discrimination and stigmatization of patients and their parents. There was loss of money in buying the fake drugs and lot of agony due to the mass migration and relocation to other places.

Infodemic-the way out:

Coming under pressure from the World Health Organization and other governments all over the world, major social media organisations like the Facebook, Whatsapp (owned by the Facebook) and the Google and Youtube, twitter, Instagram and other platforms have come up with different strategies to contain the infodemic false news.

They have constituted some special teams and started maintaining their own special windows for the promotion of authentic news on their platforms. The Whatsapp, which boasts of 200 crore users in the world and 40 crore users in India, effectively restricted the number of forwards and limited the massive spread of the false news.

The twitter started flagging the news and started removing the infodemic news related to the pandemic. The World Health Organization has also started organizing webinars involving experts from all over the world to spread the right word and nail the infodemic.

Many governments have also come up with their fact-checker teams to ascertain the veracity of the news and videos and to tell the truth to the people. Many newspapers and television channels have also come up the fact-checking teams and separate space and slots were allotted for the same.

Realising the fact that in the absence of the genuine news, the misinformation fills the void and takes the role of authentic news, many international organizations right from the WHO to the local organizations have started spreading the facts related to the Covid-19.

As the disruption in the newspaper production and supply has ended to a great extent, the dependence on the newspapers and television channels has tremendously increased and infodemic news forwards in the social media has witnessed a decline as the days passed. But the threat is clear and present and is coming in newer ways.

In a study, Eugenia Lostri and Maggie Tennis of CSI (June 2020), pointed out that social media networks must engage in the content moderation and use more proactive filters to end the spread of infodemic and there must be counter narratives to counter the infodemic.

They have also suggested the empowerment of citizens through media literacy programmes to help them decipher the authentic news and not to get affected by the misinformation. They stressed that there must be wide coverage to the authentic sources and called for the cooperation between the governments and the social media platforms and awareness must be created in English and other regional languages.

Conclusion:

The infodemic is a major challenge for those involved in the pandemic fighting and decision-making. It is worsening the pandemic situation by spreading false, fake and unauthentic news and giving credence to the misinformation. The World Health Organization rightly pointed out that we need to fight the pandemic and infodemic at the same time.

In order to end the spread of infodemic and to prevent the further spread of the pandemic, all the stakeholders in the fight against the pandemic need to join hands to launch a simultaneous war against the virus and fake news. Responsible advertising policies by the social media platforms that ban the sale of miracle cures and fake preventive equipment related to the pandemic need to be adhered to religiously.

More responsible and proactive initiatives by the social media platforms and the stricter measures by the governments and agencies at different levels are the need of the hour. Creating avenues for better media literacy and containing the spread of false, fabricated and fake news and videos are critical in containing the infodemic and help the fight to be more effective against the pandemic.

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