

Social Media and COVID-19 Pandemic: Information or (mis)information

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ABSTRACT

WHO has declared that COVID-19 is going to remain with us as do other endemics (like HIV). Therefore, scientifically validated information and its dissemination is extremely important for the future. The need of the hour is to develop a policy mechanism to deal with the creation and proliferation of such (mis)information without any scientific inputs. The lack of scientific temper among the people leads to panic situations and such unverified information may further increase the chances of nervousness, anxiety and hypertension.

KEYWORDS: Scientific temper, Misinformation, COVID-19, Social media, Infodemic

Daniel Burrus says: “Information is power only if you can take action with it. Then, and only then, does it represent knowledge and consequently, power’. Information has to undergo rigorous trial to become knowledge and power. But action on false and illegitimate information may lead to disastrous situations, especially in case of emergencies. This is best exemplified by the information flow on social media channels during the current spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic caused by SARS-Cov-2 causing the often fatal COVID-19 respiratory disorder spread swiftly throughout the world and has become a cause of concern for more than 200 countries around the world.

COVID-19 is a disease that can be communicated from person to person. Till date it has led to more than 6 million infections causing more than 3.6 lakh fatalities. Much of the

world had to undergo lockdown. Hygiene, wearing of masks, social distancing, and use of soap and alcohol-based sanitizers have become the norms of public discourse.

The media has been flooded with all sorts of information, and misinformation too, which the WHO dubbed as an 'Infodemic'. Social media including all channels of new media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube, Snapchat, etc.), which are quite handy and popular among the public, have been publishing and sharing (mis)information, unauthentic treatment claims, and unverified and unscientific home remedies. These include claim through a video that one should inhale hot air by hair dryer to kill the Covid-19 virus, take Vitamin-C injection in the bloodstream, and take steam inhalation to prevent the viral infection in the respiratory tract.

The most widely circulated information on social media was that the virus is a part of biological warfare and the virus is genetically engineered and is manmade. Japanese Nobel Laureate Prof Tasuku Honjo, who is said to have worked at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was also wrongly portrayed to have supported the idea. Of course, he vehemently denied making any such statement.

There were messages on social media pertaining to several immunity booster food items that could combat the Covid-19 infection. Again there was no scientific explanation or analysis about the ingredients in those food items that could act as immunity boosters. Several concoction were promoted, for instance, drinking a concoction containing turmeric, cardamom, ginger and saffron but the information was not backed by scientific explanation of the use of these ingredients to fight the pandemic. During times of emergency and calamity such as the current pandemic, when the public does not bother to gather rational and validated information, such news flashes easily misguide them.

Another information in circulation on Facebook and WhatsApp was that Israel had not seen any mortality due to COVID-19 because people there have been drinking lemon and bicarbonate (baking soda) tea. To add a scientific touch to the message it was said that the combination of the two alkalizes the

immune system and thus saves from the virus. However, by that time the country had gone into lockdown and there had already been 258 deaths due to the coronavirus.

All such information has been condemned and found false. Such (mis)information does not only mislead the public, it also ruins international relations between countries, while on the contrary it is necessary for scientists around the world to work together to eradicate the virus causing the pandemic.

Often, information spread through social media is not backed by any scientific inputs and is sensationalized so that people easily accept it in such emergent situations. However, such false, unsure, overstated and doubtful claims can cause more harm than benefits. The impact is felt across all sections and even the confidence of the people involved in combating the emergent situation may go down with such hasty and premature statements.

Another factor responsible for such false pieces of information finding their way to people is the 'information vacuum', as in the case of this pandemic where, for some time, less scientific information was readily available even with the experts related to this 'new' virus. In such a scenario untrue information and rumors take the centre stage on social media.

Such unscientific and unintentional claims are often more dangerous causing no benefits for the information users, often in millions, using various social media platforms. Information on social media does not go through the scientific scanner and proliferates quickly to a wider spectrum of the population. Therefore, during the current pandemic it was widely circulated that public should rely on print media (newspaper) for authentic information, since WHO and Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that newspapers carry validated information.

There are many reasons for the spread of misinformation on social media regarding. The reasons are varied with 'information vacuum' related to an emergent situation, especially for lesser-known scientific phenomena, occupying the first place. Another expert says it could be due to an honest mistake. However, often active actors on social media want to do this to some gain

socially or politically. In cases of such emergency situations, the public is starving for information and whatever information fills the gap, whether it is authenticated and validated information, is taken as valid information. James Gleick says, “When information is cheap, attention becomes expensive.” The public these days is overloaded with information which is not peer reviewed by modern scientific rigor. Often popularity and the excitement created by the information become more important rather than accuracy and authenticity, forcing users to redirect the post received on social media.

WHO has declared that COVID-19 is going to remain with us as do other endemics (like HIV). Therefore, scientifically validated information and its dissemination is extremely important for the future. The need of the hour is to develop a policy mechanism to deal with the creation and proliferation of such (mis)information without any scientific inputs. The lack of scientific temper among the people leads to panic situations and such unverified information may further increase the chances of nervousness, anxiety and hypertension.

The words of Gertrude Stein, “Everybody gets so much of information all day long that they lose their common sense” are proving absolutely true during this period of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic.