



**Unpacking the Impact of
Health-related
Mis/Disinformation and the
Need for Responsible,
Reliable Journalism During
COVID-19 Pandemic**



**COVID-19
MISINFORMATION**

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Published by



Consumer Unity & Trust Society

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1. Rise of the Internet and an Era of Digital Wildfires

- 1.1 Mass media refers to various tools and technologies, deployed to disseminate information to the masses. While newspapers, radio, magazines, and television are the traditional mass media outlets- in the last two decades, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have entered mainstream media owing to their growing popularity. The rise of social networking sites has added a new dimension to the media landscape. However, social media cannot be clubbed with conventional media like newspapers and television because journalists do not create all news and information on social media, and there are no gatekeepers like editors.
- 1.2 While the role of mass media has traditionally been to circulate verified information to the masses- the spread of misinformation is not new, dating back at least to the early days of printing. Even “fake news”, which has achieved considerable contemporary prominence, was first coined in 1925, when an article in Harper's Magazine, entitled “Fake News and the Public” mourned how newswires were allowing misinformation to disseminate rapidly.¹ With growing access to internet services, there has been an evident shift in the way people consume information. While the internet provides immense opportunities, it also lowers the cost of generating and disseminating information, allowing misinformation and sensationalized stories to propagate. What was once spread locally can rapidly become global, with ideas no longer confined or delayed by geography.
- 1.2 Gaining traction as flagbearers of free speech- social media platforms allow information to spread worldwide at breakneck speed. While the benefits of such hyperconnected communication systems are undisputed, they could potentially facilitate the viral spread of information that is either intentionally or unintentionally misleading or offensive.² This has led to studies analysing the credibility of user-generated content and the cognitive process involved in spreading online information on social and political events, which has highlighted the importance of source credibility, misperception, and confirmation bias, whereby people's views on factual matters are strongly influenced by prior beliefs.

2. Drawing the Lines

- 2.1 Although the terms ‘misinformation’, ‘disinformation’, and ‘fake news’ are increasingly present in our societies; however, their definitions are becoming increasingly elusive owing to the inherent dynamism of the social media ecosystem. Misinformation refers to false information not created to cause harm, including rumors, insults, and pranks. However, when misinformation is deliberately manipulated to harm a person, social group, organisation, or country, it is termed disinformation. Again, disinformation refers to the

¹ Wang, Y., McKee, M., Torbica, A., & Stuckler, D. (2019). Systematic literature review on the spread of health-related misinformation on social media. *Social Science & Medicine*, 240, 112552.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112552>

² https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalRisks_ExecutiveSummary_2013.pdf

deliberate appropriation of private information. Thus, as we move through these three definitions, we go from falseness to an intent to harm.

2.2 While the terms mentioned above are used interchangeably and often clubbed under the umbrella term ‘fake news’, media literacy experts warn against this practice. Deeming the term ‘fake news’ as polarising and dismissive, they encourage the use of proper terminology as. These definitions are critical in understanding the deeper implications of sensational and unverified information and designing relevant mechanisms to counter them.

3. Are we Stupid or is it Technology?

3.1 Any discussion on mis/disinformation would not be complete without analysing the cognitive processes that make false and sensational information appealing. In recent years, the rapidly changing information environment has made it easier for unverified information to enter and spread at unprecedented speed and scale, especially on social media platforms, pay-per-click sites, and search engines. Misinformation tends to spread quickly on these platforms for several reasons.

3.2 First, misinformation is often framed sensationally and emotionally, which connects viscerally, distorts memory, aligns with cognitive biases, and heightens psychological responses such as anxiety. People can feel a sense of urgency to react to and share emotionally charged misinformation with others, enabling it to spread quickly and go ‘viral’.

3.3 Second, product features built into technology platforms have contributed to the spread of misinformation. For example, social media platforms incentivise people to share content to get likes, comments, and other positive engagement signals. These features help connect and inform people but reward engagement rather than accuracy, allowing emotionally charged misinformation to spread more quickly than emotionally neutral content.

3.4 Third, algorithms that determine what users see online often prioritize content based on its popularity or similarity to previously seen content. As a result, a user exposed to misinformation once would see more and more of it over time, further reinforcing their misunderstanding. Some websites also combine different kinds of information, such as news, ads, and posts from users, into a single feed, leaving consumers confused about the underlying source of any given content.³

³ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2021). *Confronting Health Misinformation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment*. US Department of Health and Human Services.

3.5 All these facts demonstrate how systemic and unavoidable mis/disinformation is and why it is not only just limited to the vulnerable and the uneducated sections of the society but also has the educated and the privileged in its grip. This is largely because the entire virtual ecosystem, owing to its complex algorithms, resembles an echo chamber where you get more of what you see. Thus, considering the prominence of false and unverified information- even a single piece of misinformation can lead to one being bombarded by several other such unreliable pieces of information, each more convincing than the previous one, making one question their intelligence.

4. Health Journalism and the Narrative Gap

4.1 Health journalism is one of the prime areas that is highly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation in mass media. While “health misinformation” is increasingly becoming an impediment to public health, it is broadly defined as a health-related claim based on anecdotal evidence, false or misleading, owing to the lack of existing scientific knowledge.⁴ This general definition would consider, on the one hand, information that is false but not created to cause harm (i.e., misinformation) and, on the other, information that is false or based on reality but deliberately created to harm a particular person, social group, institution, or country (i.e., disinformation and misinformation).

4.2 Although, at present, there is broad agreement among researchers, health professionals, and policymakers on the need to control and combat health misinformation, the magnitude of this problem is relatively unknown mainly because there is limited understanding as to why certain individuals, societies, and institutions are more vulnerable to misinformation about health.

4.3 The adverse outcomes of health misinformation have been recently highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the need for reliable health journalism to prevent an infodemic in addition to a global public health crisis. In fact, in September 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO), along with international agencies, like the United Nations (UN) reported that the spread of coronavirus disease had been accompanied by a “massive infodemic”, unleashing an international struggle against misinformation.⁵

4.4 In this situation, the propagation of health misinformation through social media has come under immense scrutiny, especially with people valuing quick information like WhatsApp forwards over expert information. This, in turn, has necessitated extensive research on how scientific medical research outcomes should be disseminated to the masses in keeping with health journalism protocols.

⁴ Suarez-Lledo, V., & Alvarez-Galvez, J. (2021). Prevalence of health misinformation on social media: Systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(1), e17187. <https://doi.org/10.2196/17187>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>

4.5 Given the severity of this problem, fact-checking outlets worldwide — including independent media and fact-checkers, public and civil entities, social media, and tech giants such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube — have been actively engaged in counteracting false and misleading narratives surrounding the pandemic.

5. Misinformation and Chaos in the Wake of a Pandemic

5.1 The entirety of the pandemic, right from the first case detected, to even now, witnessed an unprecedented surge in misinformation on a global scale that was largely fanned and facilitated by digital media and citizen journalism. Given the disproportionality between fact-checking entities and myriad sources of false information — journalists and news agencies everywhere are grappling with a deluge of speculative and fear-mongering content regarding the coronavirus variants, which was further amplified by echo chambers and trust networks.

5.2 In the absence of any restrictions and gatekeeping, popular social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and even instant messaging apps like WhatsApp were used extensively to spread ridiculous conspiracy theories downplaying the pandemic, some even going to the extent calling it a ‘pandemic’⁶ orchestrated by The World Bank.⁷ There were also instances where facts were misrepresented and public figures were misquoted, resulting in them being subjected to severe online trolling.

5.3 For instance, at an event on pandemic preparedness at Georgetown University in 2017, Anthony Fauci, the chief medical advisor to the President of the United States, warned the then Trump government of health threats and surprise outbreaks. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, his words were manipulated to make it seem like he had prior knowledge about the coronavirus outbreak- when in reality, he was simply a senior health expert advising the government on how to plan effectively for future pandemics by looking to the past.⁸

5.4 While the state of affairs was alarming on the global scale, it was even worse in India as people came up with indigenous remedies for curing covid- some being ridiculous and without any scientific basis. Besides that, a deluge of distorted and fear-mongering content circulating on social media about COVID vaccines seriously undermined the government’s vaccine efforts.

⁶ https://brandnewtube.com/watch/ask-the-experts-covid-19-vaccine-now-banned-on-youtube-and-facebook_qIsNohSleSgfz2J.html

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/464769626965707/posts/3090891681020142>

⁸

https://twitter.com/rubeeye127/status/1262779543666003980?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwtterm%5E1262779543666003980%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wusa9.com%2Farticle%2Fnews%2Fverify%2Fverify-fauci-said-trump-would-face-surprise-outbreak-didnt-predict-covid-19%2F65-b5ac71a8-b0d7-458e-af82-acedbf8c6f61

- 5.5 One of the most infamous hoaxes circulated widely when the pandemic broke out was that related to cow-urine, which was believed to be an antidote to covid by a notable proportion of the Indian population. This hoax was baffling on numerous levels, especially when one considers the fact that there is no scientific evidence to establish the COVID-curing abilities of cow urine and also the fact that the ones endorsing this misinformation were godmen and some elected representatives of the country who are revered by the general public and exercised immense influence over significant parts of the country.^{9,10}
- 5.6 Even non-vegetarian diets came under fire as several posts on social media in the context of disease spillover from the zoonotic virus into human populations.¹¹ However, the Hindu Mahasabha took this hoax to another level when they started proclaiming that the covid-19 was not a virus, rather, it was a demon unleashed by higher powers on the meat-eaters, deeming them responsible for the pandemic.¹² Consequently, in the early few months of the pandemic, people stopped eating chicken and poultry farming took a 2000cr hit. This demonstrated the vicious and economywide impact of misinformation.
- 5.7 One of the worst consequences of this COVID-19 infodemic was vaccine hesitancy. While vaccines were subject to much media scrutiny due to safety issues, several facts were twisted and misrepresented during the initial phases of vaccine dissemination, which ended up fanning anti-vaccine protests. People who fell prey to such fear-mongering went to great lengths to avoid getting the vaccine. In this context, the most famous hoax claimed that Covaxin was formulated with newborn calf serum,¹³ which led to several people refusing to take the vaccine. To end this, in June 2021, the Union ministry of health and family welfare (MoHFW) and Bharat Biotech (the makers of Covaxin) had to issue a joint statement debunking these false claims.¹⁴
- 5.8 While there was much confusion in the early stages of the pandemic on the global scale owing to the novelty of the situation - we cannot deny that the resulting blindness towards facts gave rise to several dehumanising incidents especially when we consider the treatment that was meted out to those infected by the coronavirus during the initial phase of the pandemic when scientists and medical experts themselves knew very little about the virus and the masses were more likely to believe WhatsApp forwards over expert opinions.

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https://twitter.com/khan_zafarul/status/1460641493761150976?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1460641493761150976%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5E1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fembedly.forbes.com%2Fwidgets%2Fmedia.html%3Ftype%3Dttext%2Fhtmlkey%3D3ce26dc7e3454db5820ba084d28b4935schema%3Dtwitterurl%3Dhttps%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2Fkhan_zafarul%2Fstatus%2F1460641493761150976image%3Dhttps%3A%2F%2Fi.embed.ly%2F1%2Fimage%3Furl%3Dhttps%3A%2F%2Fpbs.twimg.com%2Fprofile_images%2F1460641493761150976%2Fnormal%2F400x400.png%26key%3D3ce26dc7e3454db5820ba084d28b4935

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/swetatripathi14/status/1238861707168145408>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/lebanesevegans/videos/204405524084290/>

¹² <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/hindu-mahasabha-says-coronavirus-an-angry-avatar-to-punish-meat-eaters-11581864507316.html>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/gauravpandhi/status/1405028182701395969?lang=en>

¹⁴ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1727462>

6. Conclusion

6.1 The quality of media coverage of health has emerged as an area of concern in the wake of COVID. On the one hand, we were overwhelmed by a deluge of information, but on the other hand, much of it was unverified. During the entirety of these two years since March 2020, we saw twisted facts, misquoted leaders, and digital platforms facilitating the spread of false news and increasing its reach. However, this period also witnessed a surge in fact-checking agencies and social media giants like Facebook and WhatsApp, which came forward and joined the fight to counter false news after seeing how their platforms were used extensively to circulate misinformation.