Research Report

COMMITTEE : World Health Organization
ISSUE : How to combat misinformation in times of health crisis ?
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How to combat misinformation in times of health crisis ?

INTRODUCTION

In a 2018 study published by Science magazine, researchers, after studying true and false news stories distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, concluded that false news and misinformation, spread farther, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information online. Even after accounting for robot activity, the results remained the same, suggesting that it is humans, not robots, that are spreading this information.

Misinformation qualifies false or inaccurate information when shared unconsciously without intention to cause harm. This is not to be confused with disinformation, that is, false information that is shared consciously to inflict harm. In recent years, with the growing importance that the internet has upon our lives, the spread of misinformation has grown at an alarming rate. It has become remarkably easy to publish false and unverified information on the internet and even more astounding is how easy a seemingly vast majority of users accept that information as fact without any further scrutinising.
People tend to believe information that reinforces their own pre-existing beliefs, allowing for echo chambers to develop, which are forums/chats/message boards etc, where every participant agrees with the agreed-upon information and where no questioning of these beliefs and manners of thinking is allowed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation and abundance of misinformation found on social media have given many experts cause to be alarmed. The Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 pandemic is going through an "infodemic" of misinformation. The internet has become the fastest and most used source of health information worldwide, as it allows a great number of the world's population to remain informed at low costs. However, the information shared is not always trustworthy and/or accurate.

KEY WORDS

Misinformation : false information often spread with good intentions, or originating in ignorance.

Disinformation : false information spread in order to cloud the recipient's understanding and alter their perception of a given topic.

Echo chambers : insular/restricted communication spaces on the internet, and more specifically social media websites/forums where everyone agrees with the presented information and no exterior output is given and/or accepted.
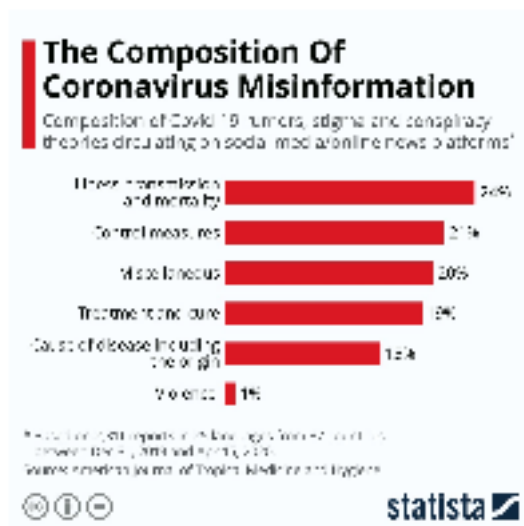
Infodemic : overabundance of information that makes finding trustworthy information harder.

Conspiracy theories : unverified statements, claims and theories questioning the standard explanation for events and occurrences.

Rumors : unverified and doubtful information currently circulating by word of mouth or on the internet.

Stigma : a socially constructed phenomenon through which a person is directly or indirectly labeled by their illness, exposures, travel history, and ethic descents that further led to negative actions and discrimination.

OVERVIEW

SOCIETY

Rumors and myths surrounding COVID-19 preventative measures and remedies have been abundant on social media since the beginning of the outbreak. These false rumors, that can easily disguise themselves as credible guidelines, may cause a lot of harm to those that follow them, and, by doing so may discredit evidence-based guidelines published and propagated by reliable scientific outlets. In Iran, approximately 800 people have died whilst 5000 were hospitalised following the consumption of highly concentrated alcohol that was rumored to kill the virus. In addition to alcohol as a false way to boost up the immunity and cure the virus, some rumors focused on drinking tea and cow urine in India, camel urine with lime in Saudi Arabia, and medicinal plants in Africa.
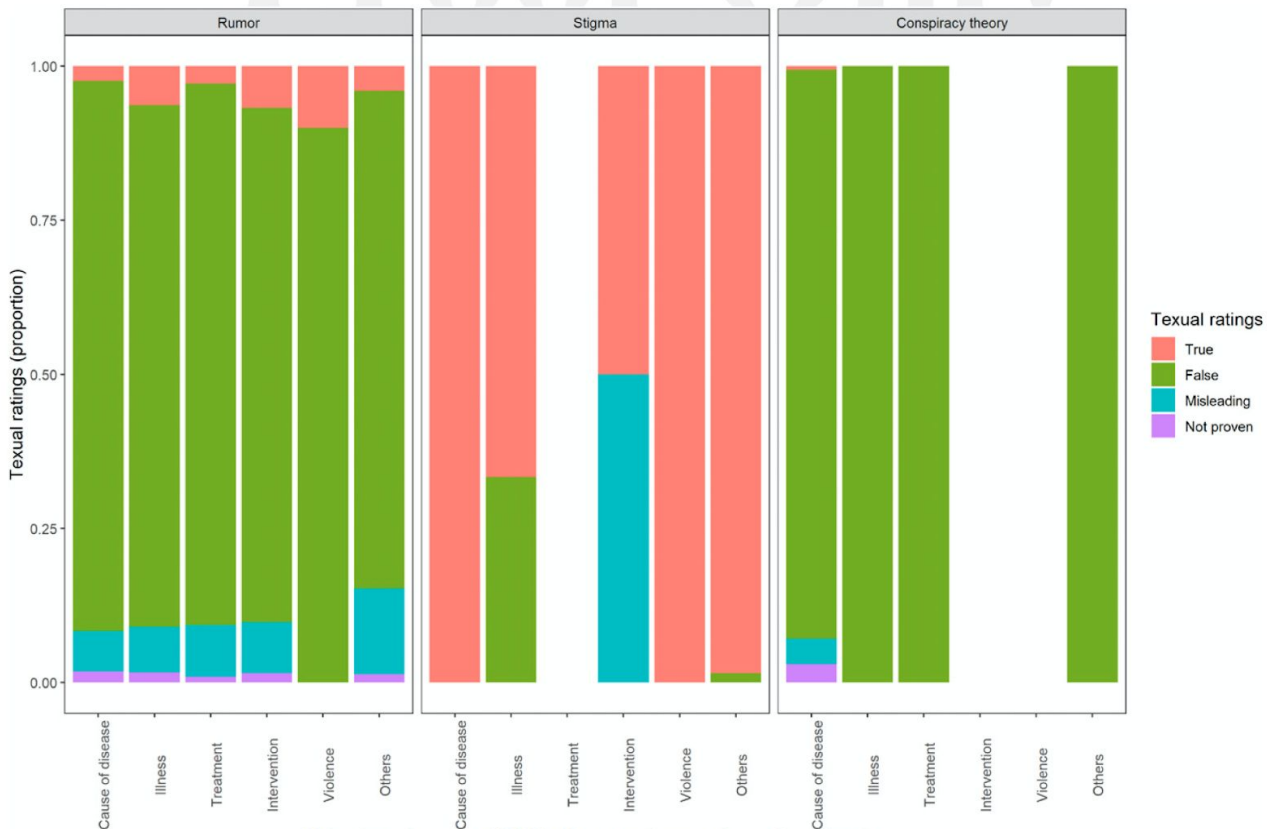
Furthermore, information related to at-home COVID-19 self-diagnosis was muddled by unverified and untrustworthy sources.

As the virus began to spread around the globe, people of Eastern-Asian descent experienced discrimination and blame. High profile people in certain areas of the world referred to the virus as the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus". The Wall Street Journal published an article entitled "China is the real sick man of Asia". Numerous reports of verbal and physical racial discrimination against Chinese people occurred globally. This may have contributed to healthcare-associated infections as people infected with COVID-19 may hide their symptoms or exposure histories when visiting hospitals, resulting in healthcare workers treating patients with minimum personal protective equipment that triggered healthcare-associated infections in Bangladesh.

GOVERNMENT

Rumors as well as conspiracy theories have the potential to decrease the population's trust in their government and in international health agencies. One instance of this is a conspiracy theory that suggested that COVID-19 was created by international agencies as a bioweapon. It was also argued that many countries had manufactured and spread the coronavirus as part of an economic and psychological warfare against China. And on the other hand, other conspiracy theories suggested that the virus was manufactured by Chinese scientists as a bioweapon.

Factual accuracy of rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories linked to COVID-19 causes of disease, illness, treatment, and control

The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH) reviewed over 2276 reports of misinformation linked to COVID-19 between December 31st 2019 and April 15th 2020. The graph above shows that of those 2276 reports, in all three categories, 1856 claims were false (82%), 204 were correct (9%), 176 were misleading (8%), and 31 were not proven (1%).

ECONOMY

Misinformation, especially during a health crisis, affects not only individuals in a society but core parts of it, including the healthcare system. Rumors of a complete lockdown, with no way of buying necessities, sparked panic-buying in several countries. This caused shortages and drove up prices for essential goods such as face masks, hand sanitizer and toilet paper. As misinformation may cause a prolongation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and result in quarantine, the world's economy will continue to suffer through a recession until the issue is properly addressed by world leaders.

MAIN INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

CHINA

In a report published by the European Union, foreign influences, including China, were found to have launched targeted disinformation campaigns concerning the COVID-19 pandemic in the EU, neighboring countries and around the world. The European Commission mentioned China and Russia as one of the foreign actors engaged in these disinformation campaigns.
Domestically, under China's criminal law, spreading misinformation that disturbs public order via an information network or other media is punishable by up to seven years in prison. In November of 2019, the Cyberspace Administration of China passed a law that rendered passing off deep fakes and other artificial intelligence created media as legitimate a punishable offense.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States Department of Defense's (DOD) website has a section dedicated to debunking rumors, myths and conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) website provides factual and accurate information based on scientific evidence for the public to consult. However, high profile individuals in the US government have spewed unverified information to the public on numerous occasions without consulting their scientists.

WHO

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has partnered with numerous social platforms during the current pandemic and in the past in order to counter misinformation on the internet. The WHO, through the Vaccine Safety Net, has partnered with Pinterest to tackle online vaccine misinformation. The WHO has also launched a Facebook Messenger version of the WHO Health Alert Platform developed in partnership with Praekelt.org. This version offers instant and accurate information about COVID-19 and is currently available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

IFCN

Launched by the Poynter Institute, a non-profit journalism school and research organisation, the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN), promotes good practises and exchanges

between the various fact-checking organisations. Their code of principles is targeted towards fact-checking organisations and associations, allowing them to retain the same set of goals and standards.

TWITTER
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Twitter, along with other social media platforms such as Facebook, have been fighting against misinformation and disinformation related to the pandemic. They display verified information from credible scientific sources, such as the WHO, on their front pages and flag or remove any posts they deem is unverified or misleading.

Misleading Information	Label	Removal
Disputed Claim	Label	Warning
Unverified Claim	No action	No action*
	Moderate	Severe
Propensity for Harm		

During the past few months, Twitter has removed tweets and posts from high-profile individuals propagating false information on their platform. Several tweets from US President Donald Trump spreading COVID-19 disinformation have been deleted by Twitter. These re-tweets contained unverified claims about unproven treatment methods for the coronavirus, including the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine. This table shows the punishments inflicted upon different information and claims depending on their predisposition for harm.

TREATIES

2018
The European Union Code of Practise on Disinformation is the first worldwide self regulatory treaty that aims to fight disinformation on social media platforms. As of June 2020, Facebook, Twitter, Mozilla, Google, Microsoft and TikTok have joined the code. The Code of Practise aims to achieve the objectives set out by the Commission's Communication of April 2018, whose objectives are to raise awareness about disinformation, its consequences, and how to to address the issue effectively.

2020
During the 73rd World Health Assembly, discussing the COVID-19 response, the final resolution addresses the topic of misinformation and how Member States must address the proliferation of misinformation as well as disinformation. The resolution also calls upon the Director-General of the WHO to support countries in their efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation.

TIMELINE

2003
During the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), people of eastern-asian descent faced discrimination and stigmatisation as a result of global media reports of dramatic stories from Asia, in newspapers, on television, and on the internet. Asian people, and those who

resembled them, were feared and discriminated against, regardless of their nationality and recent travel history. As a result of this, in the USA, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), formed a team that dealt with implementing a rapid public health strategy with the objective of documenting, monitoring and assisting in the diminishing of specific problems associated with fear and stigmatisation in relation to the SARS outbreak.

In the end, the team was able to assist in mitigating the fear, stigmatisation and discrimination upon the Asian-American community.

2014

During the Ebola outbreak in Western Africa, many doctors and other medical professionals feared wearing medical gear in public because of the rampant harassment and violence in those areas. The Womey massacre was one such instance of this violence, that resulted in eight members of a team of healthcare workers, journalists and government officials losing their lives. This attack was a direct result of the mistrust and miscommunication between the villagers and their government. Many citizens believe, falsely, that the epidemic response teams sent into their areas are the ones responsible for the spread of the Ebola virus. In an effort to curb this mistrust, local governments, with the help of foreign associations, are displaying billboards and pamphlets aiming to spread true information and dispel the stigma and fear against healthcare workers.

Children look at a billboard providing information about Ebola outside the newly constructed MSF (Doctors Without Borders) Ebola treatment centre in Goma in Democratic Republic of Congo.

2016

On February 1st, 2016, the WHO declared the Zika virus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Around the same time, misinformation and conspiracy theories about the Zika outbreak had spread throughout the internet and on social media. Theories that genetically modified mosquitoes introduced the Zika virus in Brazil, or that the vaccines distributed by the Brazilian government were the ones that caused microcephaly in infants were spread in Brazil.

These rumors and conspiracy theories reinforced the pre-existing lack of trust of the Brazilian government from its citizens, as many pregnant women were now hesitant to get their necessary vaccines and shots.

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POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There are easy and manageable ways to prevent and counter misinformation from the comfort of your own home. Ensuring that sources are reliable is one of the most primordial and important steps in checking a piece of information's validity. This can include things such as verifying its author, date of initial publication, reading the text/article in its entirety and comparing this source with other sources.

Enacting laws that would make it illegal to willingly share false information pertaining to major domestic and international events could potentially dissuade people from deceiving others in real life as well as on social media platforms. However, enforcing those laws on social media platforms may prove difficult as the abundance of information being shared on social media may hinder those efforts.
Nonetheless, one must keep in mind of the possible exploitations and abuse that governments may utilize, if, laws such as the one mentioned previously are put in place (such as limitations on freedom of speech and unjustified censoring of information a government may deem as "false").

Frequently promoting scientific backed websites and sources of information to the public at large will help them maintain safe actions in their daily lives and will limit the stigma and rumors they would be exposed to.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7ORAKULel4&list=PLZB2BJAH8aN-ChXVjdbBnBpBIwr drwg91&index=3
The Code of Practice
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/with-more-than-1100-dead-congos-ebola-outb reak-is-only-getting-worse-now-doctors-are-forced-to-go-undercover/2019/05/16/b7e15d80-77 12-11e9-a7bf-c8a43b84ee31_story.html?noredirect=on
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3322940/
https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-commitments-of-the-code-of-principl es
https://eufactcheck.eu/about-us/eufactcheck-guidelines/

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http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/as-brazil-confronts-zika-vaccine-rumors-shape-per ceptions/

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/19/why-the-brutal-murder-of-eight-ebola-workers-may-hint-at-more-violence-to-come/
https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation
https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-launches-a-chatbot-powered-facebook-messenger-to-combat-covid-19-misinformation
https://www.who.int/vaccine_safety/VSN-partnering-Pinterest/en/
https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3077664/coronavirus-discrimination-against-asian-americans
https://www.newsweek.com/twitter-donald-trump-coronavirus-misinformation-1520912
https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/coronavirus-41-doctors-10-nurses-infected-68689