"Fake News- A Pandemic within a Pandemic"

Priyanka Mishra

Medical Intern, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Datta Meghe Institute of Medical Sciences, Wardha
Email: princypriyanka1996@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

INTRODUCTION-

Misinformation. Hoaxes. Rumours. Fake news- so many terms for the same phenomenon. It is something which is not new and has been going on since as early as any of us can remember. Although recently, it has seen a sudden boom with the advent of the digital world and suddenly everyone seems to have an opinion on everything going on in the world, however ill formed it maybe.

SUMMARY-

In such a situation, how could the single biggest event of 2020- the corona virus or COVID 19 pandemic, be an exception to this trend. All of us have come across some piece of "information" regarding this microscopic being which while staying invisible to the naked eye has proved to be mankind's worst nemesis till date and has brought the world down on its knees. It proved to be an evil which could exist in any form- pictures, videos, text messages, audio messages, news headlines or a simply misconstrued interpretation of something said by a public figure.

There are various reasons responsible for this surge of fake news, primarily the multitude of information available today at one's fingertips coupled with lack of scientific attitude and awareness. The proliferation of social media has democratized access to all types of information and at the same time blurred the line between truth and falsehood. Although there is evidence that social media was used as a channel to disseminate useful information such as common symptoms of COVID infection, need for social distancing etc, the consequences of false information masquerading as verifiable truth were apparent during the peak of the pandemic crisis, with false parallels being drawn between scientific evidence and uninformed opinion.

CONCLUSION-

Fake news needs to be scrutinised harder than ever with the world facing its biggest health crisis in centuries.

Keywords: Fake news, misinformation, pandemic, COVID 19

INTRODUCTION

All of us have heard the famous quote of Alexander Pope which says "A little learning is a dangerous thing." Information is a fundamental resource of all citizens and is an integral part of the functioning of a democracy. It follows the principle of "supply and demand", where supply is made up of the current events and happenings around the country or world and demand is the amount and quality of news that the public consumes. The balance between the two determines various outcomes such as knowledge and awareness of the public, their opinion and even their political inclination[1]. A well-informed nation will make better decisions than an ill-informed one. If used properly, it can bring calmness and certainty, and if

diverted to wrong paths, can also cause chaos and panic. This has proved to be more relevant in the recent past than at any other time in history. The corona virus originated in December last year in China. It severely affected all walks of life including health, education, tourism, economy. India reported its first case almost a month lateron 30th January andit brought with itself a flurry of fake posts, conspiracy stories, claims about its origin, predictions about its spread and ways to cure the disease. Some of them even went as far as circulating doctored audio messages, videos and government orders[2]. There are many studies which describe the different types of fake news. Some examples include Tandoc et al who

described six types of fake news- satire, parody, manipulation, fabrication, propaganda and advertising. Wardle classified fake news into seven categories- satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context and manipulated content. Johnson proposed a slightly different typology for fake news which was as follows- fully false, slanted and biased, pure propaganda, misusing the data, and imprecise and sloppy[3].

MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID 19

If some historical accounts are to be believed, fake news has been in existence evenbefore Jesus Christ lived on this earth. The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439 made it even more widespread and with the lack of resources and technology at the time, it was almost impossible to distinguish it from real news. Also, it has been long associated with various incidences of violence due to the panic and chaos it brings along. The Nazis famously spread a false story about Jews drinking the blood of children, which had led to their persecution in the past. Fake news is most circulated during an emergency or during elections as compared to other times[4].

However, in recent times, fake news seems to find many more conduits to the common man's mind, be it media, politicians or religious leaders. It can be misinformation- false information spreadwithout any malice, or disinformation- false information communicated with intent to deceive. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook have emerged as the biggest medium to spread such news simply due to their ease of operation and mass appeal.As a result, conventional media houses in recent years have seen their audience, income and credibility drop drastically[5]. A pertinent example of the same was seen in the Arab world in 2011 when all major national media outlets were shut down completely and Facebook and Twitter were the sole means of mass communication left functional. The revolution they brought about is now known as the Arab Spring[6].Three components are required for fake news to spread- tools and services for manipulation, relevant social media networks, and motivation for action. Tools and services are available in abundance on social media and information travels at lightning speed on it while the motivation for doing so is mostly political and propaganda driven and sometimes even monetary. But the real measure of how successfully a piece of fake news has spread is in terms of how many people it has reached, and how big an impact it has had on their behaviour and psychology[7].

Despite the government issuing repeated guidelines and running campaigns against spreading misinformation, it continued to spread faster than the virus itself. Many claimed to cure it with kitchen spices, while some said it will die in the summer heat of India. There were also numerous conspiracy theories floating around about how it is all part of an evil plan by China to disrupt the global economy and takeover as the world's only superpower, while the alternative plot was the whole Corona virus pandemicis a hoax to control the entire population and Bill Gates is the mastermind behind it. People watching too many science fiction movies cried that they would be injected with microchips under the pretence of the vaccination program. When PM Narendra Modi asked the nation to bang thalis and light candles, sound waves and light waves were respectively chosen to be the magical cure and WhatsApp messages started making the rounds giving fake names of NASA scientists to back their claims. The limits of absurdity were tested even further when few enthusiastic people went over the top advocating that alcohol and marijuana will keep us safe from corona. The Indian

Council of Medical Research (ICMR) had to intervene asking everyone not to fall prey to any such claims. In the same vein, early April saw rumours emerging about the Indian army taking over the country. These were later quashed by the Additional Director General of Public Information (ADGPI)[8]. President of the USA, Donald Trump was at the forefront of multiple controversial statementssince the beginning of the pandemic. First, he dismissed several claims early on about the severity of the virus calling it a "little flu" and many of his allies labelled the move of a state-imposed lockdown as "unnecessarily panicky" and "politically motivated". In April, he believed that ingesting disinfectants would be a good way to gain immunity against COVID infection[9]. His racist remarks of labelling the virus as the "China virus" also received a lot of backlash. Such a scenario where even official information cannot be trusted is a perfect breeding ground for rumours and fake speculations to thrive.

It is debatable to say whether there is any particular aim in mind of people who are spreading fake news but Dowd and Davidhizar classified rumours based on the intention behind them or the resultant effect they had. Wish rumours paint a wishful and fancy picture of the future to draw attention of the audience. Dread rumours, as the name suggests, usually evoke fear. Wedge driving rumours are used as a tool to polarize the society into different factions. Knapp classified rumours as positive or negative as per the outcomes they predicted[10].

FAKE NEWS- MORE CONTAGIOUS THAN ANY VIRUS?

Coming to the question of why does all this work? Why don't people ask questions and just blindly believe any piece of information that comes their way? Let us try to go deeper into it and analyse the answers.

One, internet literacy is relatively a new thing and with internet services becoming accessible to all sections of the population at a dime a dozen, majority of them do not have the sense to distinguish between authentic and fake news. Most people do not bother to fact check the WhatsApp forwards they read with their morning tea and they keep getting propagated further. This is a greater cause of concern for India compared to other countries because India has grown into one of the largest bases of internet users with almost half a billion people availing the services of social media platforms, putting it on the radar of all major social media companies.

Two, whether we agree or not, India as a nation runs high on sentiment and emotion. Reasoning typically implies unearthing the truth of news content, and misconceptions and/or misinformation frequently thrive by forcing people to be involved with news content in an emotional way rather than follow a logical path. This has been long used as a tool by media and politicians to gain leverage and push their propaganda forward. Emotional reactions of people are more likely to be naïve and immature leading to a higher chance of belief in false informationas opposed to logic and reasoning which would stimulate one to make a sounder judgement[11]. Hence the most sensationalised news sells the most rather than a verified piece of journalism. Add to this poor literacy and lack of scientific attitude in most parts of the country, it doesn't come as a surprise that people do not believe in healthcare advisories issued for their own good. A popular theory which is relevant in the context of fake news is something called the "Echo chamber effect", in which information consumers intentionally self-expose only to content and communities that confirm their beliefs and perceptions while avoiding those that challenge them[5]. A similar concept is the "Social identity theory" which states that people consume

and share news that is acceptable in the part of the society they belong to. This helps them gain social acceptance which is essential for their self-esteem[7].

Three, sloppy regulation of social media combined with the humongous size of population using it makes it worse. Traditional media has also been accused of being partial to one party or another and giving a political or religious angle to almost any issue in the country. The most recent being the TablighiJamat incident in Delhi, post which the whole media was single-mindedly targeting one specific community as the vectors of the virus, making an already difficult battle against an invisible enemy even more complicated. A very sad fact is that nobody seemed to learn from the Delhi riots or the Jamia violence incident, where spreading of messages on social media ultimately triggered huge losses in terms of human life and property[12]. Such incidents are not only limited to India as an exception, rather they have been happening all over the world with varied intensity and frequency. Fabiane Maria de Jesus, a young woman living in Brazil, was beaten to death by a mob while returning to her home from church service. The mob "suspected" that she was involved in child abduction and black magic because of a Facebook post that warned the local residents about a woman who was kidnapping children for performing black magic rituals[13]. This shows how dangerous an instigated mob can be, fuelled by hatred and bereft of logic and reasoning.

Four, it is a very stressful period for everyone. People are worried about their health, their jobs and their family. A large number of working-class individuals were left stranded away from home during the lockdown. All this left them extremely vulnerable and common sense often fails to prevail[7]. As a result, people either reacted too cautiously like hoarding essentials disrupting the supply chainor too

casually like ignoring the health advisories and travelling even when the number of cases were at an all-time high[9]. All of this was worsened by the uncertainty factor associated with the COVID pandemic. As the disease and the organism itself was totally new, there was no pre-existing knowledge bank for reference and it was near impossible to predict how the virus will behave as the time passes. Experts and science were not able to answer most queries, leading to a massive information gap[2].

Five, further complications arise from the "continued influence effect" of misinformation, which states that people may continue to believe misinformation even after it has been debunked. Also, media literacy initiatives are often expensive to develop, slow to roll out, and reactive rather than proactive[8]. Fact checking initiatives often operate on a small scale with very limited resources, employing a very small taskforce which falls way short of the rate at which fake news is produced. Hence, there is always a lag between fake news and its verification[3].

When does this start becoming a problem? When it takes all the attention away from the actual issue and proves to be an obstacle for the frontline workers. A team of medical personnel being pelted with stones because some local leader spread the word that they will be injected with the virus or doctors not being allowed to enter the residential societies they live in because they are "carrying the disease" are all results of lack of awareness and a firm belief in hearsay knowledge. People believed that the virus will stop after the lockdown is over without actually understanding how its transmission takes place. It came as no surprise that the number of cases shot up exponentially as soon as the government lifted restrictions- a step which was taken for purely economic reasons. In some countries, hospitals reported cases of

hydroxychloroquine overdose after the media hyped it as a potential cure for COVID infections. An issue with perhaps even more far-reaching implications, which although is more of a worry for the future, is growing distrust among people regarding the vaccine against the corona virus. Even before it has been launched, there are a million questions being raised on its efficacy, safety and how it is a tactic used by big pharmaceutical companies to earn big bucks. Representatives from the WHO's immunisation department have expressed their concerns about the rampant misinformation about the vaccine could hamper the vaccination drive once it is ready to be used. It doesn't help that there is already an "anti vaxxer movement" in place since years, a group of people which dissuades others from getting vaccinated. They cite various reasons like- there is no need for vaccines, vaccines do not work and people can still get sick, what if I get the disease after getting a vaccine. Some extremists also say children will suffer from autism as an adverse effect, although none of these reasons are backed by medical science. Such individuals not only run a higher risk of contracting COVID but also put others at risk as herd immunity cannot develop.

The ministries in charge have to pass stringent laws regarding spread of misinformation and although it is nearly impossible to stop it completely, those who are proven guilty should be given the appropriate punishment, for example, demonetisation for commercial creators. Guidelines for social media and news channels should be made absolutely clear on how to present themselves[10]. There should be efforts to spread awareness among the common public especially regarding sensitive issues of matters of national concern. If health establishments (e.g., frontline workers) effectively control, educate, and deal with public worries, the level of cynicism among the populace often churn by some social commentators, political opponents, and internet bloggers could be reduced[11]. As social media platforms offer a wider landscape for COVID-19 misinformation for reaching a wider audience, WHO is working in close collaboration with social media firms to battle this challenge. Some methods being used are standardized fact-checking configurations, encouraging precise news content, and making incorrect content very difficult to find. These targets can be achieved by using data mining algorithms which identify specific features of fake news. New channels which promote positive health practices like hand hygiene, social distancing and use of face masks should be established[12]. Although, there is still a question mark on how effective fact checking or debunking of fake news actually is. Many believe that pre-existing notions and beliefs can lead to failure of fact checking as they determine how a news is processed, while others say that too much debunking decreases people's trust in sources and they tend not to believe even the verified news from that source in the future. An interesting observation that many studies have shown is a "backfire effect" where fact checking actually further strengthens the misconception in a polarized group of individuals instead of changing their opinion[14].

We as citizens on the other hand should also act responsibly and take a moment to think about and check any news that we receive before blindly sending the same to someone. We live in an age of free speech where it is practically impossible to impose restrictions on what opinion anyone can have and censorship as a concept doesn't seem to exist. Let us be the masters of the technology which we have developed and not its slaves because an ill-informed society shakes the very foundations of democracy itself. This is an unprecedented situation and it will take extraordinary measures on everyone's part to come out of.

To summarise, there are 3 main steps to counter fake news as suggested by Caulfield and WHO[15]:

1. ***Train people how to identify fake news stories***- The general public, especially the young adults about the correct usage of social media and the also how it can be a double-edged sword. We should always question the source of the information, verify the content of the story and not get swayed by our emotions. Even if we pause for a moment before forwarding any random message we come across without a second thought, it will go a long way in this war. The UNESCO hashtags campaign also advocates #ThinkBeforeClicking, #ThinkBeforeSharing and #ShareKnowledge (UN News, 2020).

2. ***Say no to pseudoscience theories and experts***- These are perhaps the most dangerous form of fake news, as they have an element of believability. The damage they can cause can be massive. Government must show zero tolerance and instead promote claims backed by scientific research.

3. ***Flood the public domain with accurate information***- Many experts believe that the best way to fight misinformation is to flood the landscape with correct information that is useful for the people, can be shared easily and answers most of their queries. Tworek (2020), assistant professor at the University of British Columbia in Canada, tweeted that 'communications in a public health crisis are as crucial as a medical intervention... in fact, communications policies ARE a medical intervention[14]'.

Articles on Covid 19 rumours and fake news reflected on many issues[16-20]. A number of other interesting studies related to actual community and health effects are available [17-22].

CONCLUSIONS:

There is no single solution to curb this menace of fake news which has even been given a new name by the WHO as "infodemic"- abundance of information which contains both verified and unverified news stories. This flow of misinformation can largely impact people's actions as well as the efficacy of the interventions done by the government. It requires various partnerships at the local as well as global level, integrating various resources so that authentic information is passed through different channels.

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