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COVID-19 and Fake News: India Fights Two Viruses

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been fighting two different viruses: the coronavirus or COVID-19, and the virus of fake news, which has come in the form of a deluge of misinformation about the evolving pandemic. Fake news surrounding the start of the pandemic, its spread, and its changing dynamics has engulfed nearly every country, although with varied intensity. For instance, an influential study by the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP) found that more than 240 million digital and social media messages had been shared globally on COVID by mid-March, with an average of 3.08 million messages daily. Many of these messages were found to be false or very misleading in nature.

According to the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN), fake news on social media can be placed into five categories: content about the cause of the virus, its symptoms, and cures; information about the spread of the virus; government documents and misrepresentation of comments; photos and videos of politicians; and conspiracy theories blaming certain countries, groups, or communities for the spread of the virus. For instance, in January, a fake news story surfaced saying China was bombing its own citizens in Wuhan. This was followed by a flurry of videos of people prescribing "miracle cures," with some faking infection and then using hot water and alcohol to develop immunity to the virus among others. Importantly, in several countries, such fake news and misinformation about the virus has led to violent attacks, often against healthcare professionals, along with the stereotyping of certain groups, stigmatization, and people resorting to unscientific remedies for the disease. This has caused individual countries to make appeals and messages to counter such fake news—even the World Health Organization (WHO) was compelled to name the onslaught an "infodemic" and has appealed to the global public to believe in credible and scientific information.

India's Fake News Crisis

India, a large and diverse country with as many as 376 million regular visitors to social media platforms mainly Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok,   twice as many having access to internet and digital mediums and a mammoth 400 million WhatsApp users, has also seen many of its residents fall prey to fake news and disinformation campaigns. Fake videos and spurious messages spread through WhatsApp and TikTok have triggered violent communal incidents, mob lynchings, and negative stereotyping of certain groups and communities. While these trends exist

under normal circumstances, many could not have imagined the pervasive nature of fake news in a life-threatening pandemic. However, social media platforms and people with ill intent have used the pandemic to push their own agendas and hidden motives.

Miracle Cures: From Cow Urine to Vitamin C

India reported its first COVID case on January 30 in the southern state of Kerala. As soon as this case was reported, the country's social media space experienced a massive spike in all kinds of information in the form of doctored videos, short interviews, movies, and documentaries on a range of issues related to the pandemic. One of the first prominent fake messages touted a home remedy of Vitamin C to ward off the virus. In this regard, several fake videos started circulating in the name of well-known medic Devi Shetty recommending that people take hot water with lemon juice to boost their immunity. The next prominent fake news story to circulate was that eating chicken can cause COVID-19. This story, which spread like wildfire, caused massive damage to the poultry industry as many people stopped eating chicken. The misinformation resulted in hundreds of poultry farmers culling many crores worth of chickens, or in some cases setting them free.

A worse kind of fake news about COVID has been the videos promoting the miracle power of cow urine, or *Gaumutra*, in curing the virus. Promoted by certain pro-Hindutva organizations, this piece of fake news has tricked many people, with some even organizing Gaumutra drinking parties in many cities and towns. This alarmed India's top medical research body, who began to issue repeated appeals to people not to fall prey to such false medical advice. Curiously, the authorities issued a warning to social media platforms and print media houses to desist from spreading rumors and April Fools' Day jokes about the pandemic. Yet, in early April a series of fake videos began circulating about a possible extension of the lockdown, the imposition of a state of emergency by the government, a possible takeover by the army, and so on and so forth. This prompted the Indian Army's Additional Directorate General of Public Information to issue a clarification denying such rumors and fake news stories.

Promoting Islamophobia

The lowest point in the infodemic in India thus far was a flood of fake news stories that circulated on how some members of the minority Muslim community were   involved in spreading the virus in the country. In the wake of a controversial congregation held by Islamic missionary Tablighi Jamaat in mid-March in Delhi's Nizammudian, which led to a huge spike in COVID cases across many parts of India, a number of fake videos began spreading over WhatsApp and other social media platforms depicting the group as a vector for the virus. A prominent video claimed that some Muslims from Indonesia at a Salem mosque in Tamil Nadu were deliberately licking kitchen items to "intentionally spread the novel coronavirus." A well-known fact checking online site AltNews attributed this news to the practice of the Dawoodi Bohra community to lick utensils clean to ensure that not even a single grain of food was wasted.

Similarly, several fake videos were in circulation depicting Tablighi members in quarantine spitting at health workers and deliberately sneezing to spread infection. This was later found to have been doctored by a

prominent political party to polarize the community by depicting the minority as a vector of disease to escalate Islamophobia among the majority. The video inspired the spread of hashtags "CoronaJihad" and "CoronaVillains" across social media platforms, with several prominent personalities joining in, that vilified an entire community for the mistakes of a few. Even worse, a number of fake videos began circulating among the Muslim community which suggested that the government was plotting to infect Muslim youths with the virus in quarantine centers. These rumors and subsequent stigmatization of Tablighi Jamaat led to one of the worst attacks on healthcare professionals in Indore city in early April. In short, there are an endless number of fake videos making the rounds on social media and other platforms that often depict Muslims as irresponsible, violent, and vectors of the pandemic.

To sum up, India has been simultaneously fighting two viruses; one real and the other fake but equally potent. A deluge of misinformation has created major hurdles for the government at all levels in managing the pandemic. Authorities in India have continued to issue periodic clarifications and warnings to keep people away from such rumor mongering and fake news. Since their messages found no takers and fake news on social media channels continued to thrive, the central government was forced to issue an ordinance and some Indian states have invoked National Disaster Management Act, 2005   to tackle the onslaught of fake news, which at this point has not only misled to people refuse to cooperate with tracing and quarantine procedures, but also resulted in several violent attacks and stigmatization against frontline health workers and paramedics. As the existing law under the Information Technology Act 2008 has proven completely inadequate to stem the flow of fake news and misinformation, authorities have been forced to resort to drastic measures including the use of draconian sedition laws. Hundreds have been arrested and several social media platforms have been issued dire warnings. Yet, the fake news surrounding the pandemic continues to flourish and negatively impact country's social cohesion, inter-community relations and its collective efforts against the virus.

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