

# MISINFODEMIC TRAP: ESCALATION OF FAKE NEWS RELATED TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

**Dipjyoti Das**

Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism,  
Salesian College, Siliguri Campus, West Bengal, dipjyotidas.301@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The global spate of Covid-19 pandemic has led to a misinfodemic (the spread of a crisis expedited by viral misinformation) trap on the social media in India. The challenge surrounding fake news is nothing new in India and the risks attached are simply untenable, especially through prevailing social media apps which have uninterruptedly encouraged such unchecked practices by mischievous and vested-interest groups. Earlier, too, there have been numerous major disastrous events which have been further aggravated by circulation of fake news pertaining to the incident, destabilising sociocultural, ethnic and communal harmony. The current outburst of the pandemic in India has manifold the volume and nature of misinformation and disinformation surrounding the deadly virus resulting in an infodemic crisis, creating perpetual obsession, hysteria and distress among the general public related to Covid-19 and its advisories. The paper attempts to study the profound and unanticipated ascend in the dissemination of fake news associated with the Covid-19 pandemic in India through popular social networking sites. It aims to analyse and comprehend the nature and form of misinformation and disinformation demonstrated across the virtual space and the underlying implications of the same for the general population with relevant examples. It also tries to assess the impact of the remedial measures undertaken by various stakeholders to curb the threat and the need to formulate and implement preventive steps to win the battle against this misinfodemic trap.

**Keywords.** Covid-19, social media, misinfodemic, fake news, disinformation

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## **Introduction**

Globally, mankind is currently subjugated with the widespread outbreak of Covid-19 virus, spreading rapidly and affecting millions. The circumstances are indeed catastrophic for the human beings with survival at stake. Likewise, India, too, is bearing the brunt of the deadly pandemic with rising death tolls and thousands infected on a daily basis.

The Union and respective state governments, health establishments along with medical practitioners are working day and night to curb the threat of the deadly virus and save human lives. However, the battle against the pandemic has only got tougher with online public sphere across the globe witnessing unprecedented volume of misinformation and fake news, creating delusions for citizens. Global health is at serious risk with fake news concerning health on rise in social media apps. For developing countries like India, fake news has significantly contributed to the vulnerability for the digitised public, because many users are new to the technology and believe almost everything they receive through social media—especially when such information is sent or forwarded by family members, relatives, friends or close acquaintances. Few would deny the indispensability of the social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp for not only exchanging casual messages but also for circulating official news and content. It becomes really alarming when the same medium can also be easily used to disseminate rumours, morphed videos, and unverified or false contents, resulting in serious social, political and economic crisis of epic dimensions.

The role of media whether traditional or digital, becomes extremely important in such a state of public health emergency surrounding nations' and the primary objective should be to disseminate unbiased, factual and objective news on the issue and obviate the dangers associated with it for the common citizens, already traumatised by such life threatening events. Undoubtedly, the conventional media has played a pivotal role in creating awareness as well as precautions for the same among the citizens, fulfilling the role of fourth pillar of democracy. Although the internet provides immense opportunities, it also lowers the cost of generating and disseminating information, allowing misinformation and sensationalised stories to propagate. What was once spread locally can rapidly become global, with ideas no longer confined or delayed by geography (Wang, McKee, Torbica, & Stuckler, 2019).

However, the unprecedented situation has subsequently manifested into an information crisis with social networking sites amplifying the already existing health crisis with increased levels of inaccurate and unverified information, adding to people's already heightened levels of fear and panic during an evolving crisis like Covid-19.

## **Objective of the study**

Procuring medicines and bringing about public health interventions for diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria were the objectives of the respective nation states until a few months ago, before the sudden outbreak of a new pathogen, Covid-19. This has challenged the very ability of human's to intervene and manage the crisis it has caused globally. Ironically

the nations are not only fighting the contagion but are also up against the accentuated misinformation trap, which is spreading panic, anxiety and inaccurate perceptions of risk about the deadly virus (Kant & Golecha, 2020). India has been no different with technology enabled social networking sites observing high level of engagement with erroneous and duped contents like herbal cures for coronavirus infection, pictures mimicking government notifications, communal content, audio clips declaring national emergency making it difficult for the government and others to do their jobs in these difficult times (Tewari, 2020).

Although a lot of preventive as well as corrective measures have been employed by both the government and social media companies till date but they have failed to restrict the incessant rise of fake news surrounding the virus. In February 2020 WHO had already warned about massive surplus of information related to Covid-19 outbreak – with a mixture of both accurate and inaccurate information, creating a lot of difficulty for people to find dependable and honest sources especially in such critical events (Pulido, Eugenio, Sama, & Carbadillo, 2020). Misinformation and disinformation have found new and innovative ways to penetrate the common citizens within the virtual periphery, setting a dangerous precedent for the fake news consumption patterns which could ultimately result in serious ramifications for communities and societies. Hence, it is imperative for the readers and viewers to practice caution and avoid forwarding unverified messages on various social media platforms without determining authenticity of the content. A precautionary approach has to be inculcated because any spread of misinformation or disinformation especially during pandemic has the possibility of not only intensifying the vicious circle of fake news phenomena pertaining to health but also might lead to consuming innocent human lives.

### **Research methodology**

A qualitative methodology has been adopted to comprehend the nature of the infodemic crisis prevailing within the social media ecosystem through in-depth discussions and critical analysis of case studies from various virtual media forums and apps like Twitter, Tiktok, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube etc. disseminating Covid 19 misinformation. Content analysis of the specific nature of misinformation reports and data which have emerged from the diverse new media platforms have been performed to ascertain a conceptual framework of the infodemic crisis within the virtual space in India and validate the arguments of the research study. Substantial empirical evidence from various social networking platforms and applications have been quoted and cited to determine the exact cause of misinformation dissemination and reasoned out the corrective measures adopted to curb or eliminate the dangers associated with fake news pertaining to health issues and advisories.

### **Understanding the eventual prodrome of misinformation**

The literature on misinformation spread is growing, but spans disparate disciplines, including communication studies, epidemiology, psychology, and computational science. It is absolutely

necessary now to integrate the different perspectives and methodologies, to understand the characteristics of susceptible populations and to devise interventions that are most effective in countering this spread (Wang et al., 2019).

According to the survey performed by Social Media Matters (social media ninjas working for social change), along with the Institute for Governance, Policies and Politics (a think tank initiative dedicated for public policy research and analysis) during the lockdown imposed from March 24 to July First week has revealed that 69 per cent of people received fake news in India. The survey data further revealed that during the pandemic, the fake news reached an all-time high across India with WhatsApp contributing the highest with 88.4 percent, followed by Facebook 42.5 percent and Instagram reported by 21.96 percent (Express News Service, 2020).

This tendency has made India's digital public space more volatile and prone to the dangers of misinformation because most of the contents are forwarded and shared without proper authentication and verification, which has the potential for detrimental ramifications of epic proportions for the society. To better deconstruct the epidemiology of misinformation, the research study conducted by Vosoughi et al. (125) tracked that around 3 million individuals on Twitter contributed to the dissemination of 1,26,000 rumours. Subsequently the authors found that compared to correct information the diffusion of false information was significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more widespread. The reasons are quite akin because the content was more novel and elicited more disgust, fear, and surprise. The same can be substantiated with misinfodemics too as similar outcomes have been observed related to studies focusing on health misinformation. For example, misinformation about Zika was three times more likely to be shared than were verified stories on multiple social media sites, with half of the top 10 news stories regarding Zika considered to be misinformation (Thompson & Lazer, 2020).

Equipped with popular messaging apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Tiktok, along with cheap data availability, are incessantly communicating and exchanging purported information about the virus's origins, reasons for its spread and false remedies on protecting oneself by consuming a high dose of chloroquine medication, and videos demonising a particular community for the spread of the virus have gone viral among citizens in India. According to a report by the open-source intelligence and fact-checking IT firm Voyager InfoSec., bulk videos are being posted on social media platforms with the purpose to influence Muslims in India against following safe practices to contain coronavirus infection. These videos are primarily posted on Chinese mobile app TikTok with religious instigations against health advisories and fake information regarding coronavirus, adding fuel to the already heightened communal atmosphere of intolerance and hatred (PTI, 2020). Even the nature of fake posts have changed over time since the lockdown was imposed on 24 March 2020.

In the initial days, the nature of misleading information was primarily dominated by unidentified Covid 19 cases, health remedies and so on but gradually it has been redirected into a communal motive with morphed and photo-shopped images depicting large scale violations of lockdown protocols in Muslim dominated regions in India.

Disrupting communal harmony is the new convention by pumping up the circulation of clips and videos of defiled temples or mosques to incite communal violence during the pandemic emerged during the lockdown period when majority of the population were witnessed with increased consumption of digital platforms.

In this age of global communication systems, social networking sites enable faster and farther transmission of false or malafide information than any truth. This seems to be a naturally occurring phenomena, establishing that misinformation trap seems to originate from a misconceived culture of propagating unverified content within the virtual space without the fear of consequences. Majority of the people don't realise the impact of unverified content and are not inadvertently serious enough while encountering any message whether authenticated or unauthenticated in the social networking sites ambience. It's an almost accepted custom among many ordinary citizens to randomly share and forward messages without taking into consideration the veracity of the content, as the nature of the platform inculcates an environment of information overload to continuously engage people with some sort of customary activity to make them feel relevant in the platform. This is undoubtedly a great motivating factor for many individuals to indulge in such unhindered practices and often it turns out to be a habit rather than an error or mistake.

The matter gets further worsened with many politicians and influential public figures promoting bogus information and invoking a culture of public health scare. In a country like India, which still lacks sufficient amount of digital literacy among its population, social media is a very powerful tool to influence the general public's perception and actions. The open ended and unconfined nature of the medium makes it extremely easy for any individual with evil and vindictive intentions to upload, share and tweet messages with anonymity and hoax identity. This deliberately creates a space for unfiltered and unregulated content dissemination from anyone and anywhere without any accountability. The very advantage of free and democratic aspects of social networking sites has made it vulnerable to the dangers of accelerated diffusion of malicious content. It was revealed in a study conducted by a group of scholars from University of Michigan that misinformation circulated in India through social media apps categorised the problem into seven different items with culture, emotions, government notification and doctored videos dominating. Among all the categories, culture recorded the highest number of fake stories with messages primarily targeting a particular community or socio-religious group, closely followed by mal-information around government announcements and advisories. Manipulating common citizens' emotions through misinformation has emerged as the most striking feature, relying a great deal on emotions rather than instrumental facts. The misinformation virus has moved to cultural elements that are harder to verify which has become pretty difficult to debunk. Joyojeet Paul, one of the authors of the study conducted by scholars of Michigan University claimed there are multiple agendas behind such practices; "among them mischief is the most blatant and foremost, there are people who deliberately create and propagate falsehoods because they take pleasure and

satisfaction seeing falsehoods,” “The second is political; managed by those people or groups who want a certain agenda to triumph. Finally commercial profitability is another very important feature on these platforms i.e. the procedure to monetise viral videos (say YouTube), by click-baiting people and making money; this tried and tested formula always works because the more extreme and controversial a piece of fake news sounds, the possibility of someone falling for it will be greater” (Salve, 2020). A certain stereotyping comes into play with majority of Indian population highly sentimental to specific acts and practices, anyone seeing damaging or harming is seen as a potential anti-establishment, anti-religion or anti state. They are extremely vulnerable when acts of religious or cultural malpractices are deliberately distorted and subsequently glorified, cultivating an atmosphere of hate and intolerance among opposite communities.

It must be remembered during any calamity or mishap there is an extensive demand for constant information among general citizens, sudden eruption of Covid 19 has also established a similar situation among ordinary people because the virus is brand new in the health ecosystem which automatically makes people wary and hence they search for answers and regular updates related to the pandemic. The situation has augmented with easy accessibility and availability of social networking sites for the public to garner pandemic related information from these mediums. This also exposes citizens to attend to contradictory information circulating on various social media platforms from multiple sources (both institutional and individual) trying to fill the information gaps (Kant & Golecha, 2020).

This further creates an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt among citizens, already in a panic stricken mode, causing them to fall for a variety of online misinformation—misleading images and videos rousing fear or medical misinformation promoting pseudoscience and invalid treatments. In such an infodemic crisis, the perils of misinformation are far-reaching and carry serious implications. The problem is multifaceted and is not something which has appeared now, but is a part of the larger ecosystem. There seems to be a queue awaiting to take up the mantle of posting and sharing anonymous and unverified content, oblivious about the possible larger conspiracy of fake news syndrome.

### **Perils exhibited within the online networking apps with relevant examples**

With the lockdown now in place throughout the country since midnight of March 24 to curb the menace of Covid-19, the widely prevalent social media platforms has continued to proliferate with people rampantly accessing the platform to garner as much as information regarding the pandemic and its outcome with frequent updates. A fact-checking trainer and journalism educator, Mr Jatin Gandhi, stated that “it is a norm that during an outbreak of any kind of health hazard, particularly if it is unknown, the level of fear and anxiety increases and in order to divert attention from real issues like lack of sufficient governmental measures and no concrete cure for the pandemic yet generates a congenial ambience for circulating misinformation” (Salve, 2020). India has been the epicentre of many fake and rumoured

information with one misreported message claiming that the Union government had announced a list of traditional drugs for preventing virus in January 2020 through WhatsApp, after the virus outbreak was reported initially from China during the month of December 2019 (Palit, 2020). This was probably just the initiation to the already mounting problem of the fake news ecosystem functioning within the realms of the social media sphere. Implementing Corrective measures after the acceptance of misinformation among the general public is quite a difficult task as multiple factors come into play which determine the effectiveness of interventions varying from an individual's personal opinions to the literacy levels as well as socio demographic aspects. This also creates a sense of distrust for the established source of information. A few studies have investigated specifically the psychology of individuals who believe and share rumours. Chua and Banerjee (2017), in their analysis on epistemic belief and its effect on the decision to share rumour, showed that epistemologically naïve users have higher propensity to share online health rumours (Wang, et al., 2019).

Unsubstantiated messages were also provided on the Ebola outbreak. For instance, Fung et al. (2016) examined the role of Twitter and Sina Weibo (Chinese microblog, equivalent to Twitter) in spreading rumours and speculating on treatments. Pathak et al. (2015) found numerous misleading videos online concerning Ebola virus disease (Wang, et al., 2019). There are ample instances within the social networking landscape to drive home the argument that a significant portion of the information shared on the virtual space are unverified and fake on issues specifically related to Covid-19 and its related advisories. For instance, a 30 second fake video with an individual wearing a mask was available in Tiktok suggesting a home remedy for recovering from coronavirus, it recommends gargling with salt-and-vinegar hot water as a cure for Coronavirus and also urges the viewers to spread the message rapidly (Usha, 2020). Tiktok was also found with videos of religious instigations against health advisories and safe practices to protect from the virus. Meanwhile, it was discovered in Twitter from a tweet claiming that India had developed the first-ever coronavirus mattress, and YouTube was found with a video promoting drinking *gomutra* ('cow urine') for safeguarding against the virus. This fake ritualistic message became viral across social networking platforms with few people actually practicing it to yield results. India Cyber Crime Coordination Centre has also submitted a report stating it is difficult to trace the origin of such videos because the users delete the accounts immediately after uploading such contents. In the first week of April, a message supposedly furnished by the apex global health advisory body, the World Health Organisation (WHO) went viral across WhatsApp and multiple social networking sites claiming that in order to control the fatal virus from spreading rapidly across citizens, the WHO has laid down specific lockdown protocols for the global community in an official declaration. The matter got worse since the drafted letter carried the stamp of the international body. The message read as followed, outlining the lockdown parameters and maintained they should be observed accordingly—"one-day ban followed by a 21-day ban, then a 28-day ban after a 5-day hiatus, then a 15-day day after another 5-day hiatus. It also points out that the first two steps are

similar to the steps taken by the Indian government—Janta curfew on March 22, followed by the ongoing 21-day ban which is to end on April 14. If the viral message is to be believed, the curfew will end for good on June 10.” (Kinjal & Mehta, 2020). The message got circulated rapidly across platforms fetching huge number of viewers and raising panic of continuous lockdown and its subsequent impact. However, the fake letter claiming to be issued by WHO was finally debunked by “altnews” (an Indian non-profit fact checking website) informing citizens and ordinary public that no such notification has been furnished by WHO and the drafted letter was completely fake. Even WHO refuted and categorically stated the letter was fake by corroborating that the message contained plenty of grammatical errors and disorderly sentence formations. On April 5th, WHO South East Asia notified from its official twitter account that the “WHO has not laid down any lockdown protocols and the messages that are circulated on social media are completely false and ungrounded.” (Kinjal, & Mehta, 2020). The viral message widely circulated across WhatsApp and other social networking platforms were actually based on unconfirmed media reports and a study published by students of Cambridge University, UK.

Boom, another Indian based fact checking website did a survey which carried out 178 fact checks on Covid-19-related misinformation/disinformation from January to May, 2020 with topics like prediction theory, bio weapon, economy, health, politics, Italy, China, cure/prevention/treatment, lockdown and communal were the top trending between this specific period. The month of April witnessed a disproportionate spike in communal rumours in India specifically targeting the Muslim community, mostly related to the Tablighi Jamaat incident at New Delhi (Web desk, 2020). The study also pointed out that around 35% of disinformation/misinformation were spread through fabricated videos with a clip targeting Muslim vendors for allegedly spitting on food items to spread the coronavirus pandemic while approximately 4 percent consisted of doctored quotes by celebrities along with their pictures being shared in the form of text messages. Online conspiracy theories claiming Muslims are responsible for the spread of the virus have led to violence in various parts of the country is possibly very perturbing (Dore, 2020). The most astonishing feature of the study conducted by Boom is that, as the number of Covid 19 cases surged in India so did the volume of fake news related to the pandemic. All these examples only exemplify the rampant fake information, messages, and videos in circulation among the modern digitised public platforms, raising concerns about the credibility and content validity within the domain of social networking sites.

### **Examining the requisite measures enforced against unauthenticated content dissemination**

Few would deny that there is an avalanche of misleading information and fake posts about coronavirus pandemic, since the declaration of the nationwide lockdown from March 24 onwards. In response to this growing menace, all concerned stakeholders be it the government, the media and general public have been encouraged to join hands and combat the deadly virus due to the advent of misinfodemics (the spread of a particular health outcome or disease facilitated by viral misinformation). The Indian government has also issued an advisory to

digital platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp and Twitter to take responsibility and forbid the spread of misleading content that could cause harm to the society in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak. On their part, virtual networking forums are relying on users to report misinformation and also continuously substantiate and trace the origin of any rogue information. This will go a long way to stop and remove it immediately, before any wrong notion or disbelief arises out of these suspicious and unconfirmed reports.

The Central Government's "mygov.in" portal has clearly defined guidelines prescribed by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare by uploading information and frequently asked questions on its website to counter myths and misinformation. The 'MyGovCoronaHelpdesk' and a chatbot has been launched by the Indian health ministry in collaboration with WhatsApp to provide credible assistance, accurate information and also respond to important queries across the country both in English and their specific regional language pertaining to the Covid-19 crisis, ensuring greater transparency and mitigate the threat of misinformation. The chatbot in WhatsApp has limited the message forwarding to one WhatsApp group or an individual at a time and this restriction is imposed once a message has been forwarded on the concerned platform five times (Tewari, 2020). Meanwhile, an India based grievance officer has also been appointed by Tiktok to prevent misinformation and also remove videos faking information about the virus. Facebook and Instagram have strictly prohibited commercials or selling of coronavirus related products like masks and sanitizers through their respective platforms.

Social media platforms are also accountable for curating all the contents and messages on their respective platforms if it violates acceptable safety for the public under the Information Technology Act of India. Authorities have asked social media companies to save and share details of uploaders of vitriolic content with the law enforcing agencies.

The law enforcing agencies of various states have enforced the existing provisions of the Disaster Management Act 2005 and the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 till now to register cases against those indulging in such unlawful activities (Palit, 2020). However, the scale at which the spread is happening is beyond the control of state governments since it becomes very difficult to identify and trace the origin of a fake information in the virtual space because of the technological complexities and loopholes.

## **Conclusion**

The role of social media has been counterproductive in dealing with the biggest public health emergency of the country contributing to paranoia in a country with more than 500 million internet users and majority inclined towards garnering information about the virus from the said platform. In spite of the measures undertaken on behalf of the government and social media organisations, it hasn't been sufficient enough to tackle the imminent danger with perpetual exchange of unauthenticated content and needs comprehensive measures to create a safe and secure environment for credible flow of information within the periphery of the

virtual sphere. However, the big challenge is neither the administration nor the social media sites can exercise blanket ban or censorship on content, since it violates the freedom of speech and expression enshrined in the Indian constitution. But still more can be done and efforts can be intensified to a greater degree. They ought to be more proactive in countering the threat of fake news and act responsibly by bringing in flexible and meaningful guidelines and norms assisting the netizens while accessing any form content to distinguish between real and fake. Higher degree of filtering related to veracity of a content as well as moderation of content shared inadvertently by common netizens. It is essential to pause, trace and cross verify any form of content on social media platform from reliable sources stated by authorities before sharing or forwarding within our personal network or news feeds; “scepticism” may be a very critical benchmark to imbibe by not spreading/forwarding contents that provoke fear and intolerance without acknowledging the consequences.

Research has revealed that a lot of the public health policy and guidelines are framed taking into account the feedback received from social media sites and other virtual apps. Although there are positive inference of social media apps to substantially reduce or increase the effectiveness of programs, campaigns and initiatives aimed at citizens’ health, awareness and well-being during an epidemic outbreak like the Aarogya Setu app launched by the Union government is meant to facilitate real time information sharing, surveillance and diagnostics to identify prospective symptoms of a carrier or infected. However, the negative implications outweighs the relevant information exchange process by severely denting the prevalent content of the public health care system by cumulating fabricated and misleading information (Pulido, et al., 2020). The evidence of rampant spread of misinformation on the fatal virus and subsequently obscure the truth particularly in India has made it amply clear that greater self-regulation and content control are two essential pre-requisites for the social networking sites and concerned administration.

The citizens on their part need to take ownership while reading, viewing or sharing any anonymous content on the digital media and cross verify from mainstream platforms if required. The Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health’s India Research Centre’s dashboard on coronavirus has proposed the “THINK twice” mantra for individuals to follow. They have suggested that before forwarding or sharing any messages, everyone should ask these questions: Is it truthful; how it helps; does it inspire; is it necessary and is it kind. (Kant & Golecha, 2020) If any suspicion arises it should be immediately reported to the competent authority to eradicate the threat before it turns into a massive social endemic. The road ahead is long and will continue to resurface in different forms, so all stakeholders need to act responsibly to combat the phenomena of fake news. The need of the hour is to protect the resilience of our information systems by curbing misinformation.

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**Dipjyoti Das** is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at Salesian College (Affiliated to University of North Bengal), Siliguri, West Bengal, India. He holds Post Graduate degrees in Mass Communication as well as Advertising and Journalism and has qualified UGC-NET. He also possesses more than three years of experience in the media industry. He has published research articles and book chapters in reputed international journals and edited volumes, respectively. His research interests include social media and digital journalism.

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