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Collaborative Efforts to Fight 'Infodemic' during Pandemic and Public Opinion on the Role of Media: An Analysis

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Collaborative Efforts to Fight 'Infodemic' during Pandemic and Public Opinion on the Role of Media: An Analysis Abstract: The malignant fake news nexus on electronic media and unregulated content across various social media and other alternative media platforms have rendered the general public in a state of communication crisis during this pandemic. This is because of the trending fakecontenttrans media, sensing the alarm, WHO has referred to this state as "infodemic".

ABSTRACT

The malignant fake news nexus on electronic media and unregulated content across various social media and other alternative media platforms have rendered the general public in a state of communication crisis during this pandemic. This is because of the trending fakecontenttrans media, sensing the alarm, WHO has referred to this state as "infodemic". The fatalities of fake content have diluted the lessons of the post pandemic society. This paper analyses the infodemic crisis and the strategies adopted by the collaborations at national and global level to debunk the fake content with special reference to India. This paper focuses on the initiatives by different agencies (National and International), WHO and Government of India to check the infodemic trajectory in order to drive positive behavioral changes in the society. This paper discusses the communication machinery and collaborations at the global level that have been able to drive the collective faith amongst general public during this corona crisis. The successive versions of lockdown mandates, to avoid the outbreak of the pandemic have ushered crucial behavioral transformation in the society. Although the Indian society has followed the lockdown discipline without much deviation unlike other countries, yet the infodemic has ruptured the communication firewalls, pertaining to low media literacy quotient and vulnerable public. Sensing the alarm, the government has initiated several fact check measures to debunk fake content and to clarify misinformation, a survey was conducted, as a part of the research to evaluate public opinion on government Information management mechanism.

This aimed at knowing the nerve of the people regarding global communication patterns of the fake content.

KEYWORDS

Fake news, Infodemic, Pandemic, COVID-19, Collaborative communication, WHO, Indian Media.

INTRODUCTION

India has fought against many diseases like the outbreak of bubonic plague(Mumbai), Cholera(Gujarat), Swine Flu, Chicken Pox and Polio in the past, which has indeed given lessons to the Indian society to deal with such problems in future, if any.

According to an article published in The Economic Times, **Michael Ryan**^[1], the executive director of the World Health Organization (WHO), has quoted India, as a country, being capable of handling the outbreak challenges pertaining to the prior experience of eliminating various communicable diseases like small-pox and polio through targeted public intervention. The corona dashboard with high numbers is worrisome, yet a positive change in the society is that, the whole world stands united as of now and health has become primary concern in many countries, For example developing county like India has managed to borrow the lockdown days in order to arrange basic health infrastructure, necessary to fight against the pandemic.

The transmedia fake content nexus in India is quite high. The per capita bandwidth usage has acted as a catalyst in infodemic outbreak this time. According to an article published in Economic Times, Jency Jacob, managing director at Mumbai-based fact-checking website BOOM (in collaboration with facebook), has addressed the grave issue by quoting 2019 to the year of fake news. BOOM works on checking stories and tags spreading misinformation on the digital platform^[2].

The Fake content crisis

According to a report published by The Centre for Internet and Society^[3], India titled 'Response to the Draft of The Information Technology [Intermediary Guidelines (Amendment) Rules] 2018', "As the outbreak started, it gave rise to fake content (misinformation, disinformation or mal-information) trans media, that went viral". Owing to the unavailability of any prescribed legal framework, many of the news channels and digital media platforms contributed to the fake content cloud deliberately or non-deliberately. The blanket ban on viral content, or to penalize the media houses for broadcasting fake content is seen as violating the press freedom. The damage caused due to fake news maximized because of the unprecedented growth of internet penetration in Indian market. Low media literacy and credulous public are the factors that have aggravated the situation. Under such volatile conditions, the stakeholders have the dual challenge of controlling the pandemic and infodemic outbreak. The collaborated roles at global level have a strong role in supervising the pandemic preparedness and to pump up the responsiveness of the country. This involves communication-based interventions to promote certain behavioral changes. These behavioral changes are directed at limiting the outbreak of this disease.

India has a rich database of social media users in the world across all digital social media platforms for example people have their accounts on Twitter, ShareChat, YouTube, Facebook Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok etc. Hate speech, Fake content, and rumors are shared and forwarded in volumes, not only on social media, but many news channels, and portals have also contributed to generation of fake content.

According to a study conducted by the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP)^[4], an interdisciplinary research group at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine specializing in public perceptions, it was found that an average of more than 3 million messages related to COVID-19 were shared on daily basis by the record users of approximately 240 million on such platforms by mid March 2020. The study also confirmed that majority of these messages were misleading and were found to be false in their intent.

The pandemic period has been observed as period of going back to the basics, be it the entertainment roll-over of Ramayana and Mahabharata or saying Namaste as opposed to several other options. The government was able to regain their faith amongst public, which gave rise to distinct behavioral changes. While the internet usage was on hike, yet people relied more on communication from WHO, Press Information Bureau, Government press release and other official documents as compared to private news channels and other social networks. So the habit of trusting the clutter posts across various digital platforms took a backseat because of collaborative fact checking and verification at different levels.

Infodemic

The word infodemic was first used in 2003. This is a coined term, which is formed by combining two terms namely info + epidemic = Infodemic. It is the situation, when the misinformation or the fake news overflows during the pandemic outbreak^[5]. The infodemic means when the unreliable information spreads far and wide.

According to an article published in UN COVID-19 response portal, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, in mid- February 2020, said that it is a tedious and alarming task to control pandemic infected with infodemic. He also mentioned that fake news commutes faster and easier than the corona virus^[6].

Adding on to that **Antonio Guterres**, the Secretary-General of the United Nations tweeted on his handle that we have the dual challenge of handling the infodemic/misinformation and the pandemic. The infodemic is dangerous as it may add noise to the entire cycle of communication and hence it may impact the public health response adversely by misleading them. According to the global consolidated database, more than 6500 fake content related to COVID-19 have been found and this data has been consolidated by around 80 fact-checking entities operational in 74 countries.

The Timeline of COVID-19^[7]

1. Dec. 2019- A virus was first reported in Wuhan, China.
2. 1 Jan. 2020- WHO sets up the IMST (Incident Management Support Team).
3. 30 Jan 2020- The outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.
4. January 2020- It was recognized by Chinese authorities as a new virus in January 2020.
5. 11 Feb 2020 - WHO labeled the disease as COVID-19.
6. 11 March 2020- WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.

WHO Initiatives

WHO has introduced a new section on its portal named "Myth busters" which took the initiative to debunk fake content getting viral worldwide. Some of the myths clarified in the section include^[8]:

1. The consumption of liquor/ alcohol does not protect people against COVID-19 and it can be dangerous too.
2. Thermal scanners can only measure temperature; they cannot detect COVID-19.

3. According to this, the WHO has not recognized, licensed any drug for treatment or prevention of COVID-19. Although many clinical trials are still going on, yet there is currently no proof that Hydroxychloroquine or any other drug can cure or prevent COVID-19. The misuse may also bear side effects.
4. Adding pepper to the meals does not prevent this disease.
5. Houseflies cannot be the carriers of COVID-19.
6. Spraying and introducing bleach or another disinfectant into your body will not protect you against COVID-19 and can be dangerous.
7. 5G Mobile networks have nothing to do with this outbreak as viruses cannot be transmitted via radio waves/mobile networks.
8. Viral content on being able to hold your breath for 10 seconds or more without coughing or feeling discomfort was also nullified by the myth busters.

Collaborative efforts to debunk fake content at National level

1. PIB has introduced a Submit Fact Check tab on their official website under COVID-19 fact check portal so as to ensure the debunking of the viral fake content across all media platforms. PIB intended to check the false narratives on social media via this method. This tab enables user to submit their request for which they want to run a check on the suspicious content. The content can be submitted in the form of any graphic or video file.^[9] It has fact checked content related to the circulation of fake UPI account details of PMcares fund, wrong URL circulation of Ayushman Bharat Yojana, exhausting of HCQ (Maharashtra), because of export to other countries (Operation Sanjeevani)^[10] and other claims related to the AarogyaSetu app to be a surveillance app. Apart from that Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and PIB have joined hand with professionals at AIIMS to clarify any doubts related to COVID-19.
2. International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) has launched WhatsApp chatbot in Hindi. On June 11, IFCN has launched its chatbot in Hindi for fact checking on Whatsapp. IFCN has collaborated with 11 fact-checking members in India out of which seven are operational in Hindi. Vishvas News, the fact checking unit of Jagran group has also joined the venture to combat the full-hoaxes and half-truths during this period. As India being the land of regional languages, many media houses have taken the onus in this regard. Vishwas News is one of the wing of the Jagran Group which works solely on the fact checks and verification.^[11] Several other media entities like Fact Crescendo (Hindi, English, Telegu, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam), Newschecker, The Quint, Boom Fact Check (Independent), News Mobile have also joined hands in combating the infodemic in India. IFCN has chatbots in Spanish and English too.
3. Check it before you share it. Whatsapp, in collaboration with the Central Government has recently launched this feature to fight the infodemic during pandemic in the name of MYGOV corona Helpdesk^[12].
4. CheckTheFake is another initiative by **Dr. Anamika Ray**. The Assam Tribune along with the Northeast Now have joined hands collectively to curb fake news related to COVID-19 with the help of cartoon strips.^[13] Hyderabad based cartoonist Shankar Pamarthy's cartoons have also helped in generating awareness on this issue.
5. Google has committed \$6.5 million to fight COVID-19 fake news globally to spot health misinformation.^[14] Under this GNI (Google News Initiative) has set up collaborations with organizations like Data leads and Factshala to debunk the viral fake content across all traditional and digital media platforms in several regional languages. Under this several nodes have been created in terms of trainers, journalists to generate awareness regarding the infodemic across

digital platform.

6. Wikipedia has launched Project SWASTHA. The project has been launched by Wikipedia to check the hoaxes related to Coronavirus Outbreak in India.^[15]
7. 'Spread Joy, Not Rumours' initiative by WhatsApp in collaboration with UK startup BuffaloGrid caters to check the infodemic outbreak in rural India.^[16] Apart from this, the Regional Outreach Bureau (ROB) of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, has also initiated a messaging campaign drive in villages of Maharashtra and Goa.^[17]
8. A wi-fi based community mobile radio station has also been launched for people in Gulur of Tumakuru district, Karnataka, covering 60 villages, covering the reach of 25000 people. The link offers live streaming on Facebook too.^[18] They collaborated with the young volunteers to form a pool of radio experts for debunking the fake content and to create awareness on the issue to drive behavioral changes amongst public in the rural areas.
9. Bytedance in partnership with WHO and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has appointed an India-based grievance officer in collaboration with the Indian Government to review the content of short videos on Tiktok related to the misinformation related to the disease.^[19]
10. Corona Helpdesk Chatbot has been created on its Messenger platform in India to debunk fake news about this pandemic.
11. Some other global initiatives like U.K.'s Anti-fake News Unit, New York based Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) has covered this issue in their Extra (newsletter of media criticism) and radio program CounterSpin. Publications of PolitiFact and MediaWise of Poynter Institute based at Florida have also shared their fact-checks related to the infodemic outbreak.^[20]

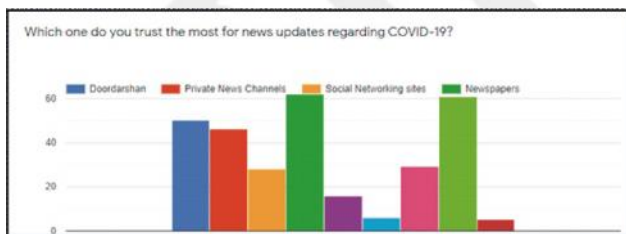
Methodology

Apart from the content analysis on the topic, a sample survey was conducted to gauge Global communication patterns to verify fake content during COVID-19. The survey was conducted online. The questionnaire consisted of 11 close ended questions (Personal information excluded) and more than 180 respondents recorded their opinion by filling the survey form. The respondents belonged to 18-45 age brackets with different educational backgrounds.

Findings

The info graphics of the survey have been appended below. The findings include the most trusted medium of news, the biggest source of fake content and insights on behavioral changes in a post COVID-19 society.

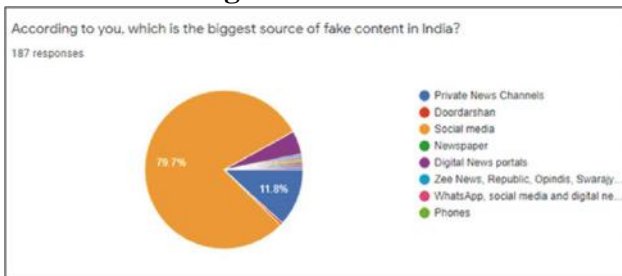
Figure 1



(Source : Primary Data)

On being asked upon the most trusted news source, it was revealed that people still valued newspaper for authentic information, and the most reliable source of information came out to be WHO and PIB. They relied on press release or communication from some government authority regarding updates of COVID-19 situation.

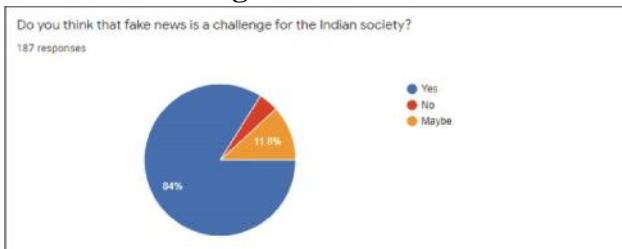
Figure 2



(Source : Primary Data)

According to the data obtained from research, 79.7 % people believed that Social Networking sites were the biggest source of fake content in India, wherein only 11.8% stated that Private news channels circulated fake news

Figure 3

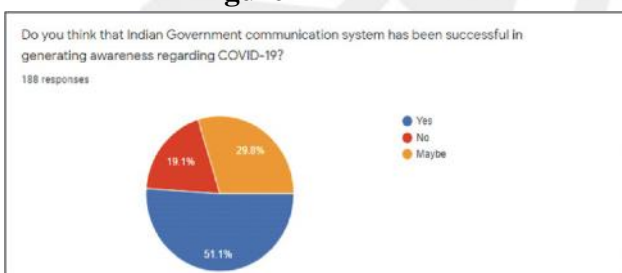


(Source : Primary Data)

The above graph depicts that 84% of respondents felt that fake news is a major challenge for Indian Society. The above data can be reinforced by quoting examples of fake videos that went viral.

There were videos of Tablighi Jamaat patients making vulgar signs, roaming nude inside hospitals. Later on it was found that these videos were fake. They were recorded somewhere else and then were dubbed in Hindi to target communal tensions within two groups during Pandemic. The Ghaziabad CMO claimed these videos to be false and issued statement to UP Police. Another video talked about member of a specific community spitting on the Police officials in the custodial vehicle. Later on it was found that the video was used in the wrong context. The man spat out of rage because he wanted more time to meet his family members outside the time specified, which the officials did not allow. Another wrong context video talked about people spitting in a group on the floor, collectively spat on the utensils, after they finished their food. On fact checking the video it came out to be a tradition which asserts that not even a single grain must be wasted so they are recommended plate licking after the meal. There were videos of infected people spitting publicly in vegetable and fruits market too. There has also been the fake news of money being drooped from helicopters.

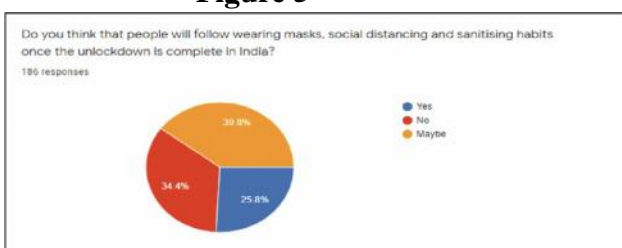
Figure 4



(Source : Primary Data)

As per the figure above, 51.1 % of people think that Indian Government communication system has been successful in generating awareness on COVID-19, however, 19.1 % do not approve of the idea, while 29.8% people are not sure about it. Although the communication channel had the challenge of overcoming the fake content being delivered to individual on their handsets via social media forwards.

Figure 5

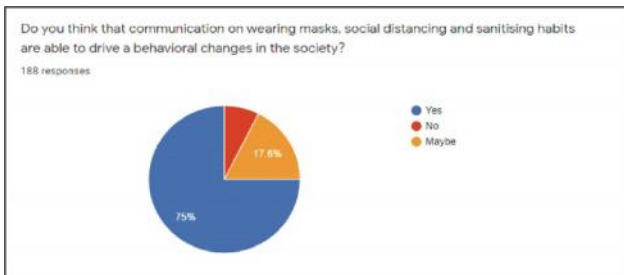


(Source : Primary Data)

Out of all, only 25.8 % of people believed that wearing masks, social distancing and sanitizing habits will be the part of new normal post pandemic. It has been found in the research too that these habits are being cultivated as part of children's behavior. Another 34.4% said that they all will get

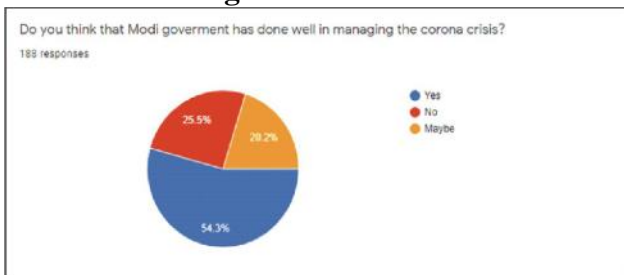
back to their normal routines, once the restrictions get over.

Figure 6



(Source : Primary Data)

Figure 7



(Source : Primary Data)

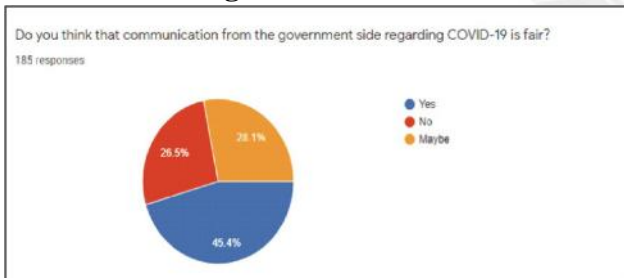
Different communication channels have been able to create a buzz on driving a positive behavioral change on wearing masks and following other norms during pandemic. Accordingly 75% of people support the notion that communication has been able to drive positive behavioral changes in the society.

Asked upon this question, 54.3% of the respondents agreed that the Modi government has done well in managing corona crisis, while 25.5% of them were not much appreciative of the government initiatives. The lockdown phases have been effectively used as a borrowing period to strengthen the health infrastructure of the county.

Owing to the wave of self reliant India during this

pandemic, India has evolved as the second largest manufacturer of PPEkits^[21]. Apart from that the Indian Government has initiated several projects like Operation Sanjeevani, Vande Bharat Mission, launch of COVID Katha apart from wide distribution of ration packets to people of lower economic groups.

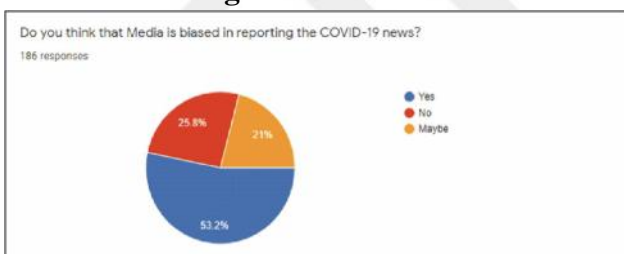
Figure 8



(Source : Primary Data)

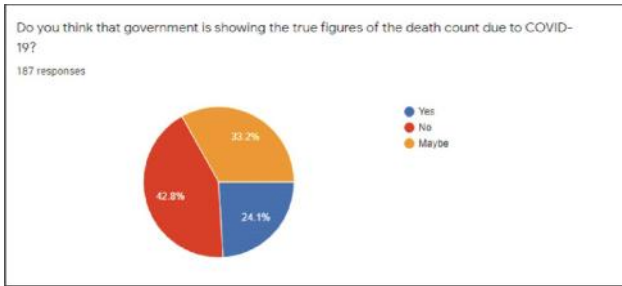
On being asked about the fairness of communication regarding COVID-19 received from government side, 45.5% of the people believed it to be fair, while 26.5% denied the fact and rest 28.1% were unsure to comment upon it.

Figure 9



On being asked about the biasness quotient of media in reporting COVID-19, 53.2% stated that media has been biased in reporting news related to the pandemic. The research says that different channels has their political orientation to which media needs customized while reporting news on pandemic.

Figure 10



(Source : Primary Data)

It is interesting to note here that while half of the people interviewed trusted the way government is handling the pandemic and relied on government sources for COVID updates, 42.8% of the public thought that the government was hiding true figures of death count due to COVID-19 and only 24.1% believed the government figures. However, 33.2% remained unsure of the situation because of the low number of corona checks.

CONCLUSION

Despite so many collaborative efforts at National and International level, infodemic still remains a Pandora box not only for India, but for the entire global setup, which demands the system to identify fake content from its very inception. The public gets deluded between the consciousness and awareness and this has caused snowball effect during this pandemic and has given rise to the unnecessary communal tensions worldwide.

This means the public is aware that fake news is omnipresent but only minuscule of masses know how to fix it and consciously or unconsciously get entangled in the fake forward loop. This research paper has discussed several mechanisms devised to check the fake content, but the mechanism seems to work at the superficial level and has not reached the masses. This means that the awareness of the debunking mechanism must work on the same frequency as that of the fake news network, and then only it will be able to nip the bud. For example Twitter has recently introduced a system which has enabled restricted view for suspected tweets; similarly stop hate for profit campaign has been initiated in US, against Facebook to check its suspected post. Under this the corporate entities have stopped giving advertisement to Facebook as a penalty move. The survey conducted during the research has confirmed that social media is the biggest source of fake forwards, in line with digital media. A substantial virtual policing mandate needs to be introduced by digital media platforms collectively to flatten the infodemic curve, so that we all can act responsibly while sharing and forwarding the content across all media platforms.

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