

Committee: World Health Organization

Issue: Combating modified and evolving viruses: misinformation and false narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation online thrives in crisis. Malicious actors capitalize on confusion, fear, and sorrow online for profit and political gain, intentionally spreading falsehoods and conspiracy and stoking engagement among social media users. Though a long-standing practice, this has perhaps never been more apparent than with COVID-19. Simultaneously, ongoing global attention and evolving scientific understanding of the novel coronavirus have created conditions for widespread sharing of misinformation—a problem in and of itself and a problem in the way it aids disinformation producers. Due to the prevalence of disinformation and misinformation on social media platforms, their use has become a health risk during the coronavirus crisis.

There is a need for regulatory action against social media platforms. Effectively addressing online disinformation and misinformation problems will require regulatory change and structural reckoning with the fundamentally predatory elements of current business models.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Disinformation

“false information spread in order to deceive people”¹

Viral evolution

“The change in the genetic makeup of a virus population as the viruses mutate and multiply over time.”²

False narrative

¹ dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disinformation

² aidsinfo.nih.gov/understanding-hiv-aids/glossary/1647/viral-evolution

“A false narrative is one in which a complete narrative pattern is perceived in a given situation, but it is not an actual narrative at work in the situation. The perception of a false narrative can be due to insufficient or inaccurate information or to insufficient or inaccurate assessment. The creation of a false narrative can be due to naturally occurring narrative patterns, transient contextual framing, inadvertent presentation or intentional deception.”³

Misinformation

“wrong information, or the fact that people are misinformed”⁴

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It’s important to note that disinformation and misinformation are not always as straightforward as the sharing of outright lies: Conspiracy, misleading design or framing, opinion presented as fact, old facts presented as new facts, and the bent of each of these issues online toward prejudice and violent speech are also part of these problems. While there are accounts and spaces dedicated to spreading mis/disinformation, these accounts often gain audiences by blending harmful information with legitimate news and innocuous posts or getting harmful messages amplified by more mainstream accounts.

The challenges that social media companies face in turning promises into results highlight a hard truth about tackling widespread mis/disinformation: The problem the country faces is not a binary one of sorting through true or false information about COVID-19 as it evolves, but instead a social, epistemic crisis fueled by changing media and political landscapes—an evolution in which social media platforms have played a central role.

Helping people find trustworthy information about COVID-19 is also complicated by the dynamic social and scientific processes that are unfolding live: This virus is new, uncertainties abound, and scientific understanding is rapidly evolving. Public institutions or official sources are themselves subject to error, manipulation, and politicization.

Unofficial, or interpersonal sources—discussion among friends and family about what’s happening—also play an important role in every social circle for making sense of it all. Crisis informatics expert Kate Starbird terms this process “collective sense making,” which is a key human response to crisis. While the individual interpersonal sources used may not be “authoritative,” group sense making is especially important in a time when the

³ storymind.com/blog/the-false-narrative/.

⁴ dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/misinformation

nation's journalistic institutions are hurting for funding, laying off workers, and or shuttering— due in no small part to social media's capture of the online advertising market.

The inherent challenges in uplifting quality information and dampening coronavirus mis/disinformation will grow more, not less, acute as the nation enters the next phase of the coronavirus crisis, which could last for months or even years. Substantial uncertainty remains about COVID-19, and the public will need to continue grappling with various aspects of pandemic response at regional, state, and local levels. But as these conditions begin to vary more widely over time, it will be increasingly difficult for platforms to have eyes on the sense making process playing out in their spaces. Platforms have struggled to keep pace with national guidance, which has been itself erratic at times, and this challenge will only compound with the growing variation in pandemic conditions. Such on-the-ground variation, combined with a demand for information and a lack of local media outlets, may also facilitate place-based misinformation.

One of the reasons for this issue is the lack of critical thinking. The public is used to consuming each and all information presented to them by the media, without giving it any thought. This problem can be traced back to the technocratic mentality that has been cultivated in today's society.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

China

China being the first country to have to deal with a pandemic in the 21st century can play a leading role by sharing information on its tactics during the crisis. Having dealt with the issue they can provide more knowledgeable and credible data.

United States of America

In the United States, there is no regulation of 'fake news' online, and therefore news hosts such are able to state and post whatever they like, regardless of if their information is fact checked or not. Therefore creating fertile ground for misinformation to blossom, all while leaders have been documented disregarding worldwide viruses further damaging the country's health.

Ethical Journalism Network

The Ethical Journalism Network is listed as a non-profit company and charity with the goal to promote ethical journalism which prioritizes publishing the truth rather than gaining attention through unethical means. They achieve this by researching subjects such as hate speech, ethics in journalism and corruption, taking part in various ethic-related conferences and providing related education.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO), which is at the forefront of the battle against the pandemic, is transmitting authoritative information based on science while also seeking to counter myths. Due to the high demand for timely and trustworthy information about COVID-19, WHO has established the Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) that unites technical and social media teams working closely to track and respond to misinformation by providing tailored information and evidence for action. The UN proposes that all nations should make use of all the available channels and cooperate with popular platforms, so as to spread quality information. Meanwhile, the UN has started partnerships with various business organizations, such as telecommunication firms and social networking platforms, which are crucial in distribution of information. For instance, WHO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), are calling on all telecommunication companies worldwide to join their initiative to help unleash the power of communication technology to save lives from COVID-19 through text messages, especially for the people who cannot access the Internet⁵⁶.

Educating the public about Coronavirus is a very important step towards fighting misinformation. The academic field should be next to citizens in these hard times and provide with resources. For example, in March 2020, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) assisted by other organizations launched the *Ask a Scientist* programme to enable the public to literally ask a scientist any question related to SARS-CoV-2. The site is loaded with information from reputable scientific and public health sources and also contains a chatbot which can answer basic questions. But for more custom-made questions, the public can send an email to a network of hundreds of scientists and get a response back in their inbox. Encouraging such initiatives could really be a way in which every State can fight

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation>

⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01834-3>

misinformation and disinformation within their borders⁷. Meanwhile, on a global scale, the WHO is using all its information channels to help combat myths and lies, having even created a Facebook Messenger quiz to inform about common misconceptions.

Another ally in the battle against disinformation and misinformation in the media is education. While information and ICTs-related education has been implemented in many countries' curriculum, there are sufficient indicators that the provided education is more theoretical and less focused on the informational needs of a citizen in the 21st century. As Van Dijk's research has pointed out, even when students are being taught about the ethics of information and avoiding misinformation on the Internet, the education is somewhat shallow and not enough practical training goes in it. In order to fight misinformation, Member States can invest on education for schools and training programmes or seminars for adults. Education has to play a double role in this situation, as it will both serve as a transmitter for scientific facts regarding the virus and at the same time it can be used to amplify the participants' skill as far as telling real from fake information, such as fact checking, looking up information and recognizing reliable sources.

The Member States should support and promote media literacy projects, critical thinking and digital skills, as well as civil society organisations. It will strengthen coordination among institutions, networks and Member States to share awareness-raising material and best practices. Meanwhile, many States and international organizations, such as the EU, are making a point to protect vulnerable groups, in particular children and young people, who face a higher risk of being misled. The EU has stepped up its efforts to support European fact-checkers and researchers on disinformation. The newly established European Digital Media Observatory will contribute to a deeper understanding of disinformation- relevant actors, vectors, tools, methods, dissemination dynamics, prioritised targets and the impact on the society. These measures are a good example for what more Member States can and should do to fight misinformation and promote trust in reliable sources⁸.

⁷ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-grassroots-effort-to-fight-misinformation-during-the-pandemic/>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/tackling-coronavirus-disinformation_en

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