



COVID-19 INFODEMIC IN INDIA: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

At this pandemic situation where the global response to fight the COVID-19 pandemic through the co-operation of the general public, the negative shade of internet connectivity has been revealed, with the overload of misinformation which is being spread about the virus and management of outbreak are increasing day by day, may pose a greater risk to public health.

These widespread of misinformation, rumours and fake news is termed as Infodemic by the WHO (World Health Organization), these massive content of misinformation makes it difficult for people to obtain the information from the trustworthy sources. With hope hanging on the vaccine, the scepticism and false information being rapidly developing towards it, would cause another health crisis. Getting correct and accurate information via reliable sources, especially the information which is provided by the official institutions and organs of governments could help in decreasing the apprehension among the public. With this insight the paper aims to review about the infodemic, its implication and hindrances to combat Covid-19 in India.

KEYWORDS : COVID-19, pandemic, public health, infodemic, misinformation

INTRODUCTION:

The first outbreak of novel coronavirus was originated and identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China from the throat swab sample of a patient, which was abbreviated as 2019-nCoV temporarily by WHO (World Health Organization) on 7th January 2020¹ and the β -coronavirus strains was found to be the cause for severe respiratory distress.² This pathogen was again renamed as Covid-19 by the WHO on February 11th 2020 and announced Covid-19 as pandemic on 11th March 2020 by WHO.³

At this time where the global response to fight the Covid-19 pandemic through the co-operation of the general public, the negative shade of internet connectivity has been revealed, with the overload of misinformation which is being spread about the virus and management of outbreak. Misinformation's which are spread instantly and internationally through mobile phones and social media could pose a greater risk and develop reluctance to the public when control measures and interventions are promoted by the health authorities. The widespread of misinformation, rumours and fake news were termed as *Infodemic* by the WHO,⁴ these massive content of misinformation makes difficult for people to obtain the information from the trustworthy sources. When users are constantly hit by the same information during their time of browsing or scrolling makes the users rely on the information and spread it in turn, which indeed makes them informationally infectious agent.⁵

Studies shows that the fakely reported news and misinformation spread more rapidly when compared to the fact-based news.^{6,7} The misinformation may vary depending upon their time, theme, reach and scope; these pieces of information may affect the negative people's psychology, behaviour and daily life. Some information may trigger the worries of people and may have the chance of developing cyberchondria in them.⁸ With this insight WHO has added Infodemics to its Preparedness and Response Progress report as a research priority.

Infodemic In India :

Utilization of Broadcasting and Non-broadcasting media plays a pivotal role in India. In which, social media had

become a conduit for growing numerous rumours, fake news and hoaxes which are being spread regarding the aetiology, transmission, treatment, prevention and cure for the Covid-19. Fake news and claims spread on the social media platform led to religious-based attacks and violence against health care workers, were driven by the fear and stigma circulating among the public.⁹ The rumours upon false reporting of Covid-19 cases fueled up the situation even more.^{10,11}

With hope hanging on the vaccine, the vaccine has now been scheduled by MOHFW (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare) to roll out in India from 16th January 2021.¹² Now, the scepticism and false information towards it are rapidly developing could cause another health crisis. As people are quickly drawn to infodemic, vaccination denial has started growing exponential by the spread of misinformation among the social media.¹³

Combating Infodemic:

Finding the facts from the false are always challenging, now it has become even harder during this pandemic situation. People are ready to write or share information about science, but they aren't ready to validate or interpret the evidence of the information they spread. Trust, but verify which has now turned into verify and trust in the midst of the current situation. With misinformation circulating, people continue to take incorrect health-care steps, downplay the severity of the epidemic, or try dangerous and untested "cures" or "prevention" measures at home; all this leads to more harm than good.¹⁴

To debunk these kinds of false information, reinterpreting and checking the links we came across are from the reliable sources,^{15,16} could probably be a good sign of being trusted. Instead of browsing random sources on the internet for information, visiting authentic or official government sites information could be trustworthy. Watching news related to Covid-19 information updates could also cause fear or stigmatization, watching them at a specific timing, once or twice daily could prevent fear and anxiety.¹⁷

Notifications have been made in the search engines so that the users get reliable information about the COVID-19 or

terms related to it, which directs them to the sources from the WHO website or to their ministry of health or public health institute or centre for disease control they could rely on.¹⁸ A new health alert notification program has also been made in collaboration with Facebook and Whatsapp which will help the individuals to get answers for their respective questions about the virus with the dedicated messaging services in Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese.¹⁹

To curb the spread of false news and misinformation the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India had passed an advisory (No: 16 (1)/2020-CLES) on 20.03.2020 stating the users not to host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, update or share information that may affect public order or unlawful in any way. Currently, India has no clear legislation to deal with fake news and misinformation; we still have legal provisions under the Indian Penal Code 1860etc, which could be invoked.

To combat the impact of fake news stopping the dissemination of unverified news and misinformation which are being rapidly spread and immunizing people by educating them to identify false from the facts would be more ideal.

DISCUSSION:

As Infodemic being continuously spread, the WHO sees itself as they are fighting a two-front war. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus the Director-General of WHO stated that "We're not just fighting an epidemic; We're fighting an Infodemic".²⁰ A continues flow of assured information is required to resolve and stump out the false claim and fake news which are being spread. WHO has partnered with the major social media companies, namely Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Google, Microsoft, LinkedIn, Reddit, foursquare, Periscope to promote the updates regarding the illness reports, disease and its spread.

People could keep in mind that the vaccine has been validated by substantial research and trials. Facebook Inc. has also revised its coronavirus crisis misinformation policies to cover vaccine-related material, while the platform seeks to continue the battle against allegations will now begin to eliminate fake claims and conspiracy theories regarding Covid-19 vaccinations that have been debunked on Instagram and Facebook²¹.

CONCLUSION:

In this pandemic situation, there may not be any other way to overcome the Infodemic rather than self-care from the fake news and misinformation, which will be an effective measure against the panic of the disease. Similar to washing off hands taking at least twenty seconds of your time to re-search the information you came across through before passing or believing it. Above all, educating both the sides of people who are in seek of information and the individuals who are known to provide the information should be promoted with science, facts and health-related literacy. We must also try to cultivate the optimism, unity over the despair and division at this period of time.

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