

Abusage & Opprobrium of Social Media: Exploring the Roots of the COVID-19 Infodemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only reshaped our world but also redesigned our everyday lives. Since the pandemic broke out, there has been an audacious mushrooming of both disinformation and misinformation. While a layman might confuse disinformation and misinformation to mean the same, an informed eye can analyse that such is not the case. The former implies information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country, the latter stands for false information not created with the intention of causing harm to anyone.

Both forms of information, however, share a common and popular medium of dissemination, which is social media. In both cases, various popular social media platforms have been found aiding and abetting ignorant, irresponsible citizens spreading unverified news, and false information. In the absence of lack of regulation and restrictions, the two have snowballed into an Infodemic of never seen before proportions.

This Infodemic has today engulfed the pandemic, proving to be a more lethal and long-term threat. The paper argues that the social media have driven, and fuelled, COVID-19 Infodemic we suffer today, has its genesis much before the breakout of the actual pandemic, and if left incontinent, shall outlast it as well. For ease of understanding the paper is divided into three main sections.

The paper begins with a theoretical part in which the term 'Infodemic' is explained, and its genesis is traced back. This section explores the role that social media plays in spreading misinformation and disinformation. The second section analyses how countries like India are combating the Infodemic by enacting special provisions in their existing laws.

The concluding part of the paper is advisory in nature. The research contends that the ongoing Infodemic is the result of a larger malaise affecting society, which is ignorance and irresponsibility. This moral and ethical malaise cannot be checked by laws alone, but by a larger, nationwide media literacy campaign.

The only solution available to us is to cultivate mass media literacy, both for social media platforms and citizens who use them regularly, so that everyone involved in creating, consuming, and sharing information is held accountable.

Keywords: *Social media, media literacy, Infodemic, pandemic, media awareness, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

Covid 19 and the Birth of the 'Infodemic'

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first of its kind and shall not be the last of its kind if scientists are to be believed. Reviewing the last two decades alone, the current COVID-19 virus is the third of its kind documented spill over of an animal-based pathogen piggybacking to humans that have resulted in a major epidemic [1].

However, it is not just the virus that we need to worry about, but the copious amounts of factually incorrect data, news and information surrounding it. In fact, the World Health Organisation (WHO) did not mince its words, when it clearly warned one and all "*We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic*" [2].

For the unversed, an 'Infodemic' is a colloquial term that stands for an 'information epidemic'. It made headlines for the first time on February 2nd, 2020, when the WHO introduced it in their 13th 2019-COVID Situation Report. In the words of the report, an 'Infodemic' is, "*an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it*

¹ Cf. A.E. GORBALENYA, S.C. BAKER, R.S. BARIC ET AL., The species severe acute respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus: classifying 2019-nCoV and naming it SARS-COV-2, in «Nat Microbiology», 5, pp. 536-544.

² WHO Munich Security Conference 2020, Feb 15, 2020.

hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it [3].” In the same breath, the Organization went on to advise all governments to be wary of it.

The same fears have since been voiced many times over by WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus who cautioned, “*At WHO, we’re not just battling the virus; we’re also battling the trolls and conspiracy theorists that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response*”. To put things in an even more clear perspective, he is famously quoted as saying, “*Misinformation on the corona virus might be the most contagious thing about it*”. The sentiments and fears of the Director General stand justified today, with both, the viral and information epidemic showing no signs of abating.

A 2020 study from the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP) reported that since the outbreak of the virus more than 240 million texts have been shared worldwide, the majority of which are dangerously inaccurate and deceptive [4]. A recent survey by *Agence France-Presse* revealed that almost 100 Indians had been detained on charges of spreading misinformation [5].

However, it is not just confusion and rumour-mongering that this infodemic breeds, it also builds an unjustified fear psychosis, and works as a stumbling block in the way of implementing constructive public health measures to contain the pandemic.

Social Media and its Role in creating the Infodemic

The word ‘*Media*’ is the plural form of the word ‘*medi*’ borrowed from Latin which means “middle” [6]. It came to mean “intermediate agency” between the government and its people when the term was first applied to newspapers two centuries ago [7]. From being a watchdog, to be a mirror, the media plays a crucial role in the development of any country by acting as a reality check for both, its government and society.

Media’s importance was highlighted first in 1789 when it was given the status of being the fourth estate by the eighteenth-century English political philosopher Edmund Burke, and this title was further reflected upon by Thomas Carlyle, the famous British historian in his writings. Today, the media has emerged as one of the four necessary pillars of any democracy, the first three being the Judiciary, the Executive, and the Legislature.

The role of the media is primarily to ensure all citizens are aware of the workings of the other three organs of the state. Its second role remains to ensure transparency in the administration of the other three systems by holding them accountable. Lastly, the media stands for communication. In a democracy, it is the media that acts as a bridge, or a link, between the representatives, elected, and those who chose them.

It is this role of the media, wherein it serves as an honest, factual, transparent source of information both, among citizens themselves and, between the citizens and their governments that guarantee the successful handling of crucial social, economic, and political upheavals and disasters such as the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. It is in such situations, much like the present, that the public trust and depend upon the media for credible news and information.

The same has been corroborated by several researchers and their studies. However, the research of Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin De Fleur deserves special mention. In 1976, they put forward their *media dependency theory* wherein they noted that audience dependency on the media increased with the rise in social conflicts, resulting in greater chances of the media’s potential effect [8]. This was further supported by the work of Xiao, whose research showed the importance of media during epidemics, especially in its role of spreading awareness and aiding disease mitigation efforts [9].

However, the advent of the digital age and the ruthless onslaught of technology on all spheres of our life, has distorted and corrupted this traditional role of the media. In its inherent hurry to ‘break news’, the media has been forced to move on from reporting factually correct news and information to often, sensationalizing it and reconstructing it to suit

³ 1st WHO Infodemiology Conference. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/06/30/defaultcalendar/1st-who-infodemiology-conference> (Accessed on 22 October 2020.)

⁴ Prasad Banerjee, ‘*Covid misinformation curve shows no signs of flattening*’, LIVEMINT, Apr 27, 2020.

⁵ *Asia cracks down on coronavirus fake news*, THE STRAIT TIMES, Apr 10, 2020.

⁶ Online etymology dictionary

⁷ Macmillan Dictionary

⁸ Lin, Y. (2020). Media dependency theory, Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/>: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/media-dependency-theory>

⁹ Xiao, Y., Tang, S., & Wu, J. (2015). Media impact switching surface during an infectious disease outbreak. *Scientific Reports*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep07838>

their ratings. This false news and fake information is then circulated by ignorant citizens who lack the cognitive awareness and technical skills to verify their veracity.

And this is where the real danger lurks, for the control of the media over the heads and hearts of its audience has been well documented. Cultivation theorists such as Professor George Gerbner, who in the mid-1960s started a project called 'Cultural Indicators' to study how television viewing influences viewers' ideas, and their perception, of how the world is or ought to be. Essentially, their theory suggests that television is responsible for shaping or 'cultivating' viewers' conceptions of social reality. The combined effect of massive television exposure by viewers over time subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals and, ultimately, for our culture as a whole [10].

They, thus, argue that heavy exposure to mass media mediums such as television creates and cultivates attitudes more consistent with a media-conjured version of reality than with what actual reality is. In the words of Gerbner himself, mass media like television are "*not a window on or reflection of the world, but a world in itself*" [11]. Cultivation theorists have since argued that mediums of mass media such as television undoubtedly have "*long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant*" [12].

With the number of media platforms from digital to social, to print, multiplying each year, there has emerged dangerous competition within the media to manipulate, sensationalize, and even falsify facts and information to keep its audience hooked. Nowhere is this more visible than in the case of India, a country which has done well to bridle the viral epidemic but is still struggling to contain the infodemic accompanying it.

India, a case in point

India accommodates the world's second-largest internet population, with over 687 million regular internet users, of which the majority are mobile-only, first-time internet users. Even its smart phone user base is projected to increase to a staggering 829 million by next year. The country also holds the dubious distinction of hosting the largest user base for popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp with more than 324 million and 400 million active users online respectively as of now [13].

Not surprisingly then, a 2019 Reuters India News Report found that over half of the respondents surveyed got their daily news from social media, while one-fourth of them chose social media as their main source of news. The report noted that in fact popular social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook were the most widely used for news (52 per cent), followed by Instagram (26 per cent), Twitter (18 per cent), and Facebook Messenger (16 per cent) [14]. The report concluded that it was this increasing reliance on social media platforms as a chief source of information that has largely aided and abetted the infodemic in India. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

To find out why people of all ages, gender, and education levels, across the urban and rural divide, are falling prey to this infodemic, FactShala conducted a user study, in consultation with the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) in 2020. Among other findings, three stood out. Firstly, majority of their respondents did not question the source of the information, or even assess if the source or the sender is a credible authority on the subject.

Secondly, it was found that respondents usually did not verify information from alternative sources on the web. In fact, majority of them were unaware of existing strategies to evaluate evidence or verify online content. Thirdly, most of the respondents did not fathom the extent of manipulated content they came across online daily. Lastly, but most alarmingly, the study found a "*great deal of trust in mainstream media, to the point that respondents blindly trust information misattributed to mainstream media*" [15].

Against this background, it becomes clear that media illiteracy can lead to very real, negative, and dangerous consequences. In short, the demand for media literacy or media awareness has increased manifold in the last two years alone. More informed and concerned voices have given calls to tackle this infodemic of misinformation by empowering citizens, with skills required to critically analyse online content and navigate their way through the information overload they are subjected to daily.

Need for Social Media Literacy in India

¹⁰<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/cultiv.html>.

¹¹ Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on media effects* (pp. 17–40). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹² Mcquail, D. (2005) *Mass communications theory*. Fifth edition. Sage publications.

¹³<https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/whatsapp-announces-2-billion-users-worldwide-11581516342061.htm>

¹⁴ Reuters Institutes' India Digital News Report - https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/India_DNR_FINAL.pdf

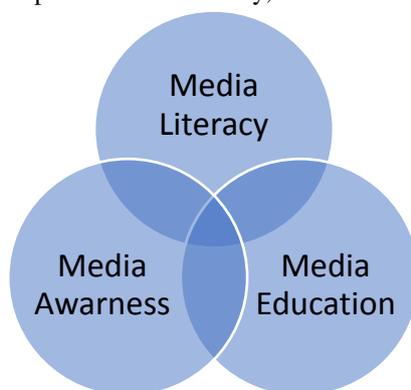
¹⁵ Executive Summary, FactShala User Study, 2020, India Media literacy Network, Pg 4.

The call for a stringent media literacy campaign was first given in India in 2020. As rumours, pseudo cures and fake news around COVID-19 virus took centre stage, the Supreme Court of India in the *Alakh Alok Srivastava v. Union of India* [16] observed, “panic due to misinformation about the pandemic will destroy more lives than the virus itself and asked the Centre to set up a portal for dissemination of real time and verified information to counter the panic being spread” [17].

And this was not the first time that the country’s Apex Court had called for taking effective action to address the menace of misinformation and disinformation. In fact, in the *Facebook v. Union of India* [18], the court had ordered the authorities to devise effective recommendations for minimizing the manipulation of social platforms [19]. Hence, establishing the fact that the infodemic had started much before the viral pandemic, as hypothesized.

Put simply, ‘media literacy’ means “the ability or skills to critically analyse for accuracy, credibility, or evidence of bias the content created and consumed in various media, including radio and television, the internet, and social media” [20]. Today the terms, media literacy, media education and media awareness are used interchangeably. Rightly so, as all three contribute to the same larger purpose, which is to help us decisively analyse media messages, their implications, and intentions, and most importantly, how to react to them appropriately.

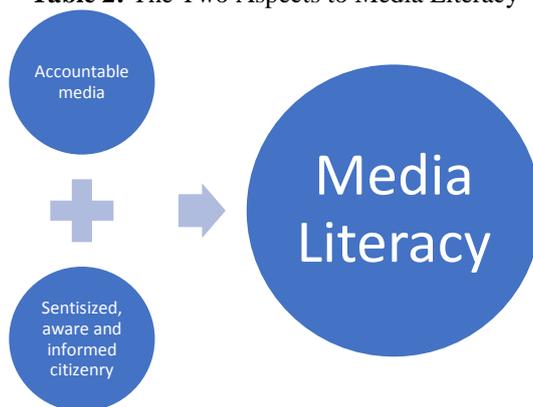
Table 1: Overlapping concepts of Media Literacy, Media Education & Media Awareness



Source: Author created

Considered a movement today by many, media literacy aims to do two things. Firstly, make the media more responsible, by holding them accountable for what they broadcast and put out as news. It intends to give power back to the viewers, the readers, and consumers of information, be it print, digital or social. Secondly, it aims to educate and empower citizens with the requisite knowledge, skills, and tools for rational thinking which they can then independently apply to any information or news they come across.

Table 2: The Two Aspects to Media Literacy



Source: Author Created

¹⁶ Alakh Alok Srivastava v. Union of India, Writ Petition(s)(Civil) No(s). 468/2020(India).

¹⁷ Executive Summary, FactShala User Study, 2020, India Media literacy Network, Pg 1.

¹⁸ Facebook v. Union of India, Writ Petition(s)(Civil) No(s).1943-1946/2019(India).

¹⁹ Dr. Subir Kumar | Mr. KabirJaiswal | Ms. Arunima Singh "Beyond the Glittery Façade of Headlines: Examining the Infodemic of Misinformation" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development(ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-5 | Issue-2, February 2021, pp.311-316, URL:www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd38428.pdf

²⁰ Dictionary.com

For its part, the Indian government has risen to the challenge and chosen to directly engage with its citizens, by dispelling speculations about the pandemic through their official Facebook & WhatsApp handles. For example, a text on +9190131 51515 will make the WhatsApp chatbot, 'MyGov Corona Helpdesk' resolve numerous COVID-19 FAQs such as virus signs, virus precautions, helpline numbers, national and state advisories for affected cases [21]. It has till date responded to more than 2 crore queries.

As for state governments, Maharashtra stands out as the only state, which has enacted specific orders concerning the COVID-19, permitting only the government to sanction any information regarding the virus before it is disseminated [22]. The order forbids any efforts to inflame distrust toward state officials or their actions to slow the transmission of Coronavirus and other communications which pose a threat to public health or safety or civil order [23].

Private and government run fact checking squads have also been set up. As part of a collaborative attempt to thwart myths and misconceptions about the virus, a team of Indian scientists have come together as a coordinated effort. The Hoax Busting Squad is just one of several initiatives that have been structured under the Voluntary Pan India- Effort: *Indian Scientist's Response to COVID-19 (ISRC)* [24]. In Karnataka, the State Police in partnership with *Check4Spam*, has taken quick steps to combat misinformation in the COVID-19 led pandemic by initiating a website to see how credible a specific news item is [25].

Legislation and Social Media in India

Unlike India, many other countries facing a similar avalanche of fake information on the virus have issued stringent legal laws towards rumour mongers, arguing the infodemic to be a national security threat. One need only look around our Asian neighbourhood to see examples of this. If the Philippines passed an emergency law to battle the pandemic along with detention of people sharing false data [26], the National Assembly of Cambodia adopted a similar state of emergency law [27] that, allows it wide-ranging powers to track, gather and analyse information from all telecommunications media, to regulate its dispersal.

In Singapore, the newly enacted Protection from Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act (POFMA) has been used to charge individuals sharing COVID-19 falsehood on social media, which carries maximum imprisonment of 10 years or/and SGD1 million (USD735,5000) fine. In Thailand, from January to June 2020, around 40 cases were charged under the Computer Crime Act (CCA) for creating or spreading misinformation, including cases related to COVID-19. In April 2020, Vietnam introduced a new decree that criminalises fake news with a hefty fine of VND10-20 million (US\$426 - US\$853) [28].

However, in India, there are no such direct legislations expressly dealing with false news or disinformation, although certain legal requirements do exist to counter the infodemic [29].

A good example of the same is the advisory issued by the Ministry of Electronic & Information Technology referred to in Section 79(3) (b) of the IT Act [30] that makes it mandatory to delete all incorrect rumours on social networks about COVID-19.

The same advisory also instructs media platforms to carry out due diligence and take prompt measures to disable or delete dubious information that was hosted on their network. This includes them running educational programs for members not to post or share any such false information [31]. In addition to this, Section 69(A) 43 of the IT Act authorizes the central government to provide guidelines for blocking public access to any material found fake.

²¹WhatsApp chatbot MyGov Corona Helpdesk sees over 2 crore users, DIGITAL INDIA (Apr 12, 2020), <https://digitalindia.gov.in/content/whatsapp-chatbot-mygovcorona-helpdesk-sees-over-2-crore-users>.

²² 'COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker', International Centre for Not For-Profit Law (ICNL).

²³ Mumbai Police Issues Warning on Fake, Derogatory Content On Social Media, NDTV, Apr 10, 2020.

²⁴ Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19 (ISRC), VAJIRAMIAS, Mar29 2020.

²⁵ Karnataka Police launch fake news busting platform, OUTLOOKINDIA, Apr 10, 2020.

²⁶ Republic Act No. 11469 signed on Mar 24, 2020.

²⁷ Cambodia: State of Emergency bill violates the rule of law, INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF JURISTS, Apr 08, 2020.

²⁸ Nuurrianti Jalli, COVID-19 Infodemic in Southeast Asia, ASEAN Focus, Sept. 2020, Pg 26-27

²⁹ Dr. Subir Kumar | Mr. KabirJaiswal | Ms. Arunima Singh "Beyond the Glittery Façade of Headlines: Examining the Infodemic of Misinformation" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-5 | Issue-2, February 2021, pp.311-316, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd38428.pdf

³⁰ IT ACT sec.79 cl.(3)(b).

³¹ Advisory by Ministry of Electronic & Information Technology to All Social Media Platforms, 16(1)/2020-CLES, Mar 20, 2020

Further, the parliament has amended the IT Act 2000 to render or communicate misleading information as an act of forgery in Section 464 of the IPC [32]. As a result of this, all information transmitted electronically now stands classified as a document, and the individual transmitting or communicating the information shall be found punishable, should it be found misinformation under Section 474 of the IPC [33]. Armed with this legal remedy, the Maharashtra police have already detained more than 37 people and reported at least 196 cases of baseless pandemic news stories [34]. More arrests are anticipated in the coming days.

However, for every person caught spreading misinformation, perhaps ten go free. This is why for these legal remediations to matter in the long run, they must be supported by a larger nationwide, collaborative media literacy and awareness programme, much like the hugely successful all India '*jan andolan*'s of the past - the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*.

Recommendations

On October 20, 2020, in view of the upcoming festivals and the opening up of the economy, the Honourable Prime Minister launched the '*Jan andolan*' campaign for COVID-appropriate behaviour. This low-cost high-intensity campaign was launched with the key message of wearing a mask, following physical distancing, and maintaining hand hygiene. Participants were made to take a pledge for the same [35].

Using the COVID pandemic as a catalyst, it is suggested to develop this successful and ongoing *jan adolan* forward by launching a similar all-India campaign for building media literacy and awareness. The same has been tried and tested by the Australian government, through its '*Stop & Consider*' campaign to address the diffusion of political misinformation in their country [36].

A similar campaign or *jan andolan* is suggested for cultivating media literacy to prevent infodemics from escalating. Following are some recommendations for the same:

1. Simple, multi-lingual automated messages to reach every Indian citizen
2. Dissemination of multi-lingual advertisements on all media platforms
3. Multi-lingual banners and posters at all public places
4. Involve local and national influencers to drive home the message
5. Running mobile vans for regular awareness generation
6. A media awareness pledge of '*verify before sharing*' to be taken by all
7. Carry out official surveys, to find and educate specific target groups that are found contributing the most to the infodemic.
8. Suggest the creation of pertinent laws in the five most specific areas of technology infrastructure, data privacy, provision of fines or punishments for breach of regulations, access to technology and ethical standards [37].
9. Create partnerships with social media giants (such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Instagram, and so on) to assist with monitoring misleading information about COVID-19, provide access to reliable information and promote responsible roles of social media platforms [38].
10. Universities should establish chairs in the field of Infodemiology, similar to epidemiology, and foster fellowships for research in public health and communication [39].
11. Embed infodemiology education into school and university curriculums. This may range from incorporating 'how to spot fake news' to the basics of public health modules in school education to the creation of citizen-systematic reviewers in older adults [40].
12. Creation of a National Task Force or Council for Media Literacy tasked to firstly, predict and prevent the proliferation of misinformation and secondly, coordinate between public and private agencies, media platforms and government bodies to establish long-term and, quick response mechanisms in place. These measures may result in a well-informed citizenry capable of thwarting impending infodemics.

³² Indian Penal Code 1860 § 464.

³³ Indian Penal Code 1860 § 474.

³⁴ Maharashtra Cyber Police Registers 196 Covid-19 Related Fake News Cases, 37 Arrested, NEWS18, Apr 14, 2020.

³⁵ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-to-launch-jan-andolan-campaign-for-covid-appropriate-behaviour/story-0oTx8B9SAq62g6i54iQq6O.html>

³⁶ Michael Jensen, *Fake news is already spreading online in the election campaign – it's up to us to stop it*, THE CONVERSATION, Apr 24, 2020.

³⁷ Ahinkorah BO, Ameyaw EK, Hagan JE, *et al.* Rising above misinformation or fake news in Africa: another strategy to control COVID-19 spread. *Front Commun* 2020;5:45.

³⁸ Limaye RJ, Sauer M, Ali J, *et al.* Building trust while influencing online COVID-19 content in the social media world. *Lancet DigitHealth* 2020;2:e277–8.

³⁹ Chrousos GP, Mentis A-FA. Medical misinformation in mass and social media: an urgent call for action, especially during epidemics. *Eur J Clin Invest* 2020;50:e13227.

⁴⁰ Chrousos GP, Mentis A-FA. Medical misinformation in mass and social media: an urgent call for action, especially during epidemics. *Eur J Clin Invest* 2020;50:e13227

CONCLUSION

With the next wave of the epidemic upon us, time is of the essence and it is crucial that policymakers capitalize on the ongoing citizen *jan adolan* for COVID prevention and turn it into a catalyst to cultivate media literacy in the country. Not to be taken for granted it needs to be seen and promoted as a vital skill for all citizens to survive, thrive and contribute in their modern digital environment.

To conclude, in the famous words of Prof. Dr. Alexander Fedorov, winner of the UNESCO sponsored, Global Media and Information Literacy – 2019, *“I am firmly convinced that media literacy education is the key to understanding the modern information society: today, a person is simply obliged to be media-competent, otherwise, he or she will not only become an easy victim of numerous media manipulations but will not be able to fully enter the differentiated world of media culture”* [41].

⁴¹https://www.academia.edu/43390072/_Media_Education_is_the_Key_to_Understanding_the_Modern_Information_Society_Interview_with_Prof_Dr_Alexander_Fedorov