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Infodemic Kills?

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Abstract

‘Infodemic’ is a portmanteau word or a blend of two words: "information" and "epidemic". It typically refers to a fast and far-reaching spread of information, generally about a disease. The information may be accurate or inaccurate, and may often times contain more of rumours than facts. But one thing is clear: it spreads misinformation and fear and anxiety among a large section of the populace about something that, sometimes, may not even be as grave or grim.

Keywords: Infodemic, Epidemic, COVID-19, Mis-information, Fake News

Introduction

Coined by David Rothkopf in 2003 (Washington Post), the term ‘infodemic’ has seen widespread usage in the current Covid-19 pandemic more than ever. While

explaining what exactly he means by infodemic, Rothkopf says:

“What exactly do I mean by the ‘infodemic’? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities. It is a phenomenon we have seen with greater frequency in recent years—not only in our reaction to SARS, for example, but also in our response to terrorism and even to relatively minor occurrences such as shark sightings.”

Similarly, referring to fake news that spreads faster and more easily than this virus, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO, said at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Germany, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an ‘infodemic’.” In fact, since the COVID-19 hit the world, the WHO has been on a regular basis warning us of the challenges

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the infodemic bombards us with. The too much information then turns into massive miscommunication and confusion which leads to the creation of misinformation and disinformation.

Since the term is not common enough, it may be of use to offer an explanation that will help put the word in perspective. The meaning offered by the UN Department of Global Communications on 28 March 2020 goes thus:

“Infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. ‘Infodemics’ can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.”

Since the coinage, the word ‘infodemic’ was not used regularly; it was used only sporadically, so sporadically that we could perhaps count the occasions at our finger tips. Francesco Frangialli, Secretary General of the U.N. World Tourism Organization, for example, criticised the news media for creating an ‘infodemic’ of speculative reports about SARS. (San Francisco Chronicle, 4 Dec. 2005).

Similarly, Sam Gilliland (U.S. Senate) said (in 2009):

“Our country and the world are on sale because the travel and tourism industry is reeling from a perfect storm of crisis, fear and ignorance. In recent months, we've experienced the worst economic downturn in 80 years; a swine flu outbreak that is serious and demands precaution, but has spawned an ‘infodemic’ that has led to unhelpful panic...”

Another instance of the term ‘infodemic’ being used sporadically is when Alison Gillmor Pop, The Winnipeg (Canada) Free Press (16 Oct. 2010) wrote:

“It's a sad comment that the bed bug invasion moved from side-lined news item to massive media trend when bed bugs started to hit the middle and upper classes. There was a kind of indignant shock, for example, when it was revealed that expensive hotel rooms were actually part of the problem, glamorous global travel being a major factor in bed bug resurgence. But the bed bug ‘infodemic’ really comes down to a very primal instinct. Our homes are the physical embodiment of our sense of security and safety. We want to shore them up against danger, disease and unhappiness, but at some level we realize we can never completely succeed. So we look for a place to concentrate our fears.”

Or Susan Mello wrote (on 17 Oct. 2014):
“Two issues concern me with the 24-hour news cycle. First, consistent attention to

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Ebola-related events will likely displace news about other, more pressing health threats like seasonal flu, which affected more than 50,000 Americans last year and can be prevented. Second, relentless coverage could spawn an "infodemic" in which too much information creates confusion and could lead to desensitization among audiences."

It may not out of context to quote a joint report published in October 2020 by the Royal Society and British which goes thus:

"COVID-19 vaccine deployment faces an infodemic with misinformation often filling the knowledge void, characterised by: (1) distrust of science and selective use of expert authority, (2) distrust in pharmaceutical companies and government, (3) straightforward explanations, (4) use of emotion; and, (5) echo chambers," and to combat the ill and "inoculate the public" endorsed the Singaporean POFMA legislation, which criminalises misinformation. The Aspen Institute even started their misinformation project before the pandemic."

What Is Infodemic?

In general parlance, an infodemic is an overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong or inaccurate information either to look down upon the

public health system or advance the hidden agenda of some groups or individuals. Misinformation and disinformation can lead to real problems, for example: it can affect people's health- physical and mental. It can also create stigma thereby threatening the health of the people. Worse still, it can lead to little or no adherence to public safety measures. All these cumulatively can reduce their effectiveness which endangers countries' ability to curb the pandemic.

A joint statement (issued in September 2020) by the WHO, the UNO, the UNICEF and other international institutions read thus:

"The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is the first pandemic in history in which technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, productive and connected. At the same time, the technology we rely on to keep connected and informed is enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardizes measures to control the pandemic."

So, infodemic refers to a huge increase in the size of information associated with a specific phenomenon that is capable of growing exponentially in a short span of time primarily due to a certain incident as the current pandemic. Under such a scenario, misinformation and

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rumours along with manipulation of information with doubtful intent take the centre stage. In the information age, this phenomenon is amplified through social networks, spreading farther and faster like a virus.

Is Infodemic Only Misinformation?

Yes, certainly, infodemic is misinformation because misinformation is false or inaccurate information spread among the masses to cause fear or panic. In effect, there has been so much of oversaturation of news and information that drawing a line between fact and fiction becomes really a herculean task. In the present context when the pandemic has, in one way or the other, affected over 171 million people with over 3.5 million casualties in over 220 countries across the globe (India alone accounts for more than 28 million of cases with over 3.3 lakh fatalities), it can really impact all of us in terms of health, especially the mental health essentially because the searches in the internet has gone up substantially spanning all generations. And the overwhelming rise in the number of people having access to devices such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops etc. with the internet speed as fast as lightning is a great contributor to the spread of rumours. Also, the social media, for example, the Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp etc. play no mean a role in disseminating the misinformation globally thus creating information epidemic

or infodemic. Simply put, we are in a situation with information overload being bombarded at us from all directions without any interruption.

Since people share-either write or forward-the messages without checking the veracity or truthfulness of the content, in most cases, we end up getting incorrect information. Even when some of these pieces of information are searched in the internet, many of them are not accurate or at least biased. In effect, a large chunk of the information found in the internet contains stories which are misleading or fabricated with the sole purpose of getting people's attention. Moreover, many of these stories are shared without any fact check as a result of which they lack authenticity or veracity. The most disturbing issue, however, is that lots of this (mis)information is based on conspiracy theories so much so that some of these stories lead to the mainstream discourse.

The misinformation pertains to all aspects of the disease, for example, the origin of the virus, the factors that cause it, the ways to treat the disease, and most importantly, the agents that help spread the virus. It is, of course, true that wrong messages circulate quickly like wild fire and are absorbed equally fast thereby changing the nature or behaviour of the people. This behavioural change drives people to potential dangers. So the spread

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of rumours and misinformation, in reality, results in a grim situation which also jeopardizes the health, especially the mental health driving a large number of people to be depressed or disoriented.

Drawbacks of Infodemic

Misinformation not only drives people crazy or stressed but also costs lives. The WHO admits “Misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.” When people get some (mis)information about vaccination, they develop vaccine hesitancy, for example, and may die as a consequence. It was very clearly evident in India during the first phase of the vaccination drive covering people over 60 and those over 45 with co morbidities. Many people hesitated to take the jab. The result is many eligible people did not take the vaccine when it was available. Later, when people decided to go in for vaccination, there was a shortage in supply.

Though there is no empirical evidence to suggest the number of fatalities due to vaccine hesitancy, there is no denying the fact that it definitely did create panic, fear, and in some cases, avoidable deaths. Similarly, inaccurate information about a certain medicine or plan or cure or

diagnostic test may at times prove to be fatal. People, in their desperation to fight Covid-19 adopted some unscientific and hearsay prescriptions and are reported to have met avoidable fatal consequences. An example could be the breakneck speed at which people ran to get and hoard CHQ tablets or vials of Remdesivir or cylinders of oxygen without even realising the need for the concerned patient at the point in time. This led to unwarranted inconveniences and also deprivation of the same to those who needed those most (it is possible that some people might have died due to non-availability). It has been pointed out by scientists that CHQs are not effective; Remdesivirs are not necessary for any and every COVID patient; and everybody does not need oxygen.

In recent times, an unusually large number of fake medicines, unproven medical products and unscientific methods claiming to diagnose, prevent or cure COVID-19 were ruling the market. Not only are these medicines or medical products or methods fake and ineffective, they are harmful, even fatal. As early as March 2020, the WHO appealed to people not to try any medicine or method. It also pleaded with its member countries to notify instantly on any false product or fake medicine or unscientific method in an attempt to save lives. Though the rate of fatality on account of incorrect information

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is not too large, it is a matter of serious concern.

It is an irony that the same technology and the media that protect the lives of millions across the globe by disseminating correct and unbiased information, at times, becomes the cause of panic and deaths. Of late, the media has become, as it were, an enabler of infodemic to such an extent that it has jeopardized all the measures leaders throughout the world are taking to curb the rising pandemic. Moreover, it has been observed over the past several months how misinformation has polarized public debate on hot topics such as COVID-19. In fact, there have been too many instances of hate speech, human rights violations, threats to democracies, and risks to social cohesion.

There have been several attempts at the international level to combat misinformation. The UN, for example, launched the United Nations Communications Response initiative as early as April 2020 besides issuing a Guidance Note in May 2020. Similarly, while recognizing that managing the infodemic is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, a WHO resolution (passed in May 2020) pleads with its members to provide credible content relating to Covid-19 and initiate steps to counter the fake news with the help of technology. The WHO also requests several international organizations to address the

fake and unverified information in the digital space and prevent harmful cyber activities which at disrupting health response.

INFODEMIC MAKES THE PANDEMIC WORSE?

It is a fact that infodemic makes it worse than the pandemic itself because people in general browse some media or the other including apps, websites, influencers' blogs etc. to seek guidance and opinions to come out of anxiety, fear, depression etc. Infodemic can have a bearing on the decision-making processes especially at a time when people instantly need answers to several questions troubling them. They feel that they do not have enough time to examine the information and look for the veracity that may lead to wrong decisions being made which consequently may lead to suffering. A case study conducted involving people across the age, gender, geographies may bolster the argument. According to a study conducted by the Center for Health Informatics (University of Illinois) around 550 million tweets included the terms such as coronavirus, corona virus, covid19, covid-19, covid_19, pandemic and also hash tags like #Pandemic and #Flatten The Curve.

How To Fight The Infodemic

Infodemic is a menace and all of us collectively must fight the menace in whatever manner we can. Media literacy is

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one of the ways to curb the infodemic. It is true that media literacy is a relatively new phenomenon but it is an important critical thinking skill necessary to assess and appreciate the ideas behind the media sources. Media literacy, which is not confined to any one medium, helps one discriminate truth from opinion without being carried away by selective hearing. There is another way we can fight infodemic is appeal as was done by over 7,000 individuals and organizations including well-respected pastors, theologians and community leaders. The Christian Statement on Science for Pandemic Times from Bio Logos claims:

“...because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we will: Correct misinformation and conspiracy theories when we encounter them in our social media and communities. Christians are called to love the truth; we should not be swayed by falsehoods (1 Corinthians 13:6). We will actively promote accurate scientific and public health information from trustworthy, consensus sources, and use this information when making decisions for our families, churches, schools, and workplaces.”

Though organizations and people are using their collective expertise and knowledge to respond to the infodemic yet there is an urgent need for stronger action and coordinated approach among all stake holders to curb the spread of mis- and

disinformation via the media. This can be achieved by a multi-pronged approach:

- a) Developing and implementing action plans- both locally and globally;
- b) By promoting the timely dissemination of accurate information based on science and evidence; and
- c) Preventing the spread of incorrect information without, of course, affecting people’s freedom of expression;
- d) Empowering communities and groups to develop workable solutions and resilience against fake news
- e) Encouraging social media experts, researchers and technologists to design and build effective strategies and tools to respond to the infodemic
- f) Involving civil society leaders and influencers to collaborate with the global bodies to disseminate accurate information and prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

The Un Tackles ‘Infodemic’

Infodemics, as has been stated elsewhere, are excessive amounts of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. These infodemics are capable of spreading misinformation, disinformation, fake information, rumours, confusion, distrustetc. during a health emergency thereby hampering the otherwise effective public health infrastructure. Individuals and organisations are trying their best to tackle

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the infodemic but that may not be enough which is why steps by large groups and organisations such as the UNO, WHO are also necessary to curb the menace. Recently, the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming said: "... My global communications team at the United Nations will be stepping up our communications efforts to make sure people have the best, most credible information and also inspiration from examples of global cooperation and viral acts of humanity."

Similarly, the WHO Information Network for Epidemics aims to give everyone access to timely, accurate, and easy-to-understand advice and information from trusted sources on public health events and outbreaks—currently, the COVID-19 public health emergency. Besides, it is also setting up partnerships and collaborations by developing global resources for fact-checking and misinformation management, infodemic measurement and analysis, evidence synthesis, knowledge translation, risk communication, community engagement, and amplification of messages. It is also connecting with influencers through popular social media to help spread factual messages to their followers.

And, a team of WHO myth busters in collaboration with popular social media such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, You

Tubeetc, is engaged in clearing the misinformation such as 'the virus cannot survive in the hot weather', 'taking a high dose of CHQs can protect you', 'consuming large quantities of ginger and garlic can prevent the virus spread' and so on by filtering out medical advice, hoaxes and other fake news that might risk public health. In fact, some social media, for example, Face book and Twitter have gone to the extent of withdrawing post from a head of state that falsely stated that a drug was working everywhere against the corona virus.

Conclusion

Man can surely fight the infodemic by being aware of the events happening around him and also by being resilient to the misinformation being bombarded from all corners day in and day out. We need to filter out the fake news and unfounded information to keep ourselves safe. There have been reported cases wherein people succumbed to fake news, misinformation, unfounded prescriptions and unscientific remedies. The present pandemic must serve as learning for all of us how infodemic can kill more than the epidemic itself.

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