

Dealing with a Pandemic of Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

After World Health Organization named COVID-19 pandemic as a “Pandemic of Misinformation”, a common man has to cope with superfluous advices, remedies and, most of all, conspiracy theories, that seem undermining even the genuine recommendations of experts and authorities. This is a high time that timely corrective action, preaching social responsibility, relying on science and technology, and using mass media as channels to communicate the truth, may be used as weapons by the government in the battle against COVID-19 infodemic.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic, COVID-19, Misinformation, Infodemic, Coronavirus.

How to Cite This:

Atif M. Dealing with a pandemic of misinformation. Biomedica. 2020; 36 (COVID19-S2): 26-7.

People are confused. But this confusion has led many to a conclusion: One of the biggest risks any pandemic can pose to public is the risk of “Viral Misinformation”. So big is the risk that UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has to name this as the “Pandemic of Misinformation” in the wake of Coronavirus spread.¹

We know that with any outbreak there comes a plethora of half-baked advices, kitchen remedies and, most of all, conspiracy theories, along with the recommendations of experts and authorities. The same thing happened with COVID-19. On one hand while the experts were very careful and cautions in making statements and suggesting ways to tackle the deadly virus, an “infodemic” of falsehood and incorrect information was unleashed, on the other hand, by rumour mongers and social media trolls. Within no time we were surrounded with every type of misinformation which ranged from the stories about the origin of disease to myths about its diagnosis, its treatment, its social and economic affects, and what not.

This misinformation was propagated by everybody – politicians, celebrities, TV anchors, general public, and even health workers. First came the theory that the virus transferred to humans from eating bats or snakes. Then came the myths that eating garlic, onions, ginger, inhaling steam, drinking bitter gourd juice, gargling with warm water and drinking alcohol are effective against the virus. Some declared it a “bioweapon invented by the West or China to control the world economy”. Other disagreed with this theory because they thought that the spread of the virus was inadvertent as it “accidentally escaped from the laboratory”. Some thought that the world was going to end and the Armageddon had approached. We saw made-up pictures of lions and tigers freely roaming in the streets of Moscow with the caption saying that the Russian government had released the beasts to keep the people inside their home during lockdown. Who can forget the video purporting to show the Chinese authorities executing residents of Wuhan to stop the spread of the disease? Or the leaked phone call of Pakistan’s ruling party politician telling his relative that thousands of people were dying with Coronavirus but the government was concealing the fact. And the latest one that I heard from the person who cleans my car every day: “Government is getting

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money from WHO against each Corona-positive patient”.

Therefore, it is now easy to guess what has led us to confusion. The answer is our lust for more and more information. It is an insatiable hunger and the only way to deal with this issue is to find a credible source of information. You will have to be more skeptical about what you are hearing, reading and consuming. You don't need every bit of information; just keep it to the basics and that too from a very credible source. Internet is not a bad thing but you must know that it is full of scammers, swindlers, tricksters and liars. They can easily gain your attention through myths and false stories as truth is of often more complicated which puts it at a disadvantage as compared to fable.

Nevertheless, we cannot leave it to the people alone. Government has to play its role like it has been done in China, South Korea and Singapore. The government can produce advisories in news media in order to correct rumors and misinformation. Rumors can be debunked through FAQs, interviews of the experts and health authorities. In fact, it is vital that the government should not lose sight of protecting its people from

being 'infected' by rumors and misinformation. Timely corrective action, preaching social responsibility, relying on science and knowledge, and using mass media as conduits to communicate truth are the weapons our government can use in the battle against COVID-19 infodemic. The key is to keep united the people during this turmoil and beyond.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None to disclose.

REFERENCE

1. United Nations. Journalism without fear or favour. 2020 theme: World Press Freedom Day. May, 3rd. Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/press-freedom-day>. [Last accessed on May 19, 2020].

Muhammad Atif has been the Director of Media & Publications at the University of Health Sciences (UHS), Lahore, since 2004. He heads a department responsible for developing communication strategies that help advance the mission of the University. He has keen interest in communication theory and practice and has published articles on current affairs, geo-politics and impact of mass media during warfare. Prior to joining UHS, he served as editor, reporter and producer in leading media outlets including daily Jang and PTV. He holds a Masters degree in Mass Communication with distinction from Islamia University, Bahawalpur.