

DIGITAL INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING COVID-19: CRITERIA TO IGNORE THE IRRELEVANT

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As pandemic-induced social distancing, pushed people to the confines of their own home, social media has emerged as the most powerful tool to get connected to the society virtually. Social media became a vital source of information for all. Many a times it is felt that information disseminated through social media is misleading. Review of literature during the period also supports this. Discusses how social media behaved during lockdown and unlock period in the country. Narrates the incidents that took place during the period and how fake information/misinformation caused damages to the social harmony. The presentation argues for evaluation of digital information available on the social media and describes the criteria adopted for evaluation of such information. Concludes that people are social creatures by nature and social media satisfy their needs. It's essential that one should use these platforms carefully and responsibly. Otherwise, social media will become more dangerous than the CORONA virus itself.

Key words: Digital Information; Social Media; Evaluation; Covid-19; Pandemic Diseases

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a very crucial and critical stage where uncertainty prevails due to novel corona virus. The country has experienced nationwide lockdown in four stages – 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0 and later unlocking in four stages Unlock 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0. Now we have just came out of second wave and probably moving towards third wave!!! Social distancing, keep safe distance from others, Wear mask, sanitize your hands regularly, Stay home - Stay Safe, Download Arogya Sethu, get vaccinated and 'Prepare but don't panic' have become the essential mantras for everyone. As pandemic-induced social distancing, pushed people to the confines of their own home, social media has emerged as the most powerful tool to get connected to the society virtually. It has become a vital source of information for all of us. Many a times we feel that information disseminated through social media is misleading us. But we have reached a stage where confusion and uncertainty remains. Hence, an effort is made in this paper, to evaluate the digital information available on social media.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies have been reported on the topic in a span of one and half years since it has hit us in March 2020. Few notable ones are reviewed here. Lovari (2020) reported on the spread of Covid-19 misinformation in Italy resulting in erosion of trust on public institutions. Pennycook et al. (2020) gave evidences that people shared false information on social media. Limaye et al, (2020) has called for building trust while influencing Covid-19 content in the social media. Nguyen et al, (2020) noticed changes in the digital communication during global pandemic leading to digital inequality. Ahmad & Murad (2020) observed that social media has significant impact on spreading fear, and panic related to COVID - 19 outbreak which caused psychological anxiety among youth.

Bao et al. (2020) argued for increased use of digital media with focus on improved trust, built solidarity, reduced chaos, and educating the public. Bridgman et al. (2020) find that comparatively more misinformation circulates on Twitter and that exposure to social media is associated with misperceptions regarding basic facts about Covid-19. Srivatsava et al. (2020) felt that the rapid spread of misinformation, and stories via social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube became a vital concern of the Government and public health authorities. Cinneli et al. (2020) addresses the issue of diffusion of COVID related information through social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit and Gab. The results indicate that the understanding of social dynamics,

between content consumption and social media platforms help to design more effective communication strategies minimising rumours. Desai (2021) depicts the havoc Covid - 19 fake news created and how it had hit the measures taken by the Governments to prevent the spread of Covid - 19. Ryder, Zhang and Nua (2021) observed that social media has virtually engaged all the visitors during Covid lockdown.

Haryan and Anik (2021) on the basis of a study conducted notes that fear of missing out has focussed on understanding how social media posts about attractive unattended experiences taking place in the physical world. Balakrishna, Ng Kee and Rahim (2021) find that fake news sharing behaviour is determined by different motives which need to be understood in order to work out better possible solutions. Tsao et al, (2021) felt that for COVID-19, social media can have a crucial role in disseminating health information and tackling infodemics and misinformation. Banerjee and Rao (2020) consider social media as a double-edged sword and can either add to the misinformation burden or aid in the awareness and health communication during such a global pandemic. Brindha, Jayaseelan and Kadeswara (2020) conclude that in the Covid period, social media could play an important role in the dissemination of information if the people on social network transmit news from credible sources.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Hence, from the review of literature's inferences, it is thought of how social media in the Indian context behaved during the period and

what consequences happened due to this leading to doubt each and every source of information on social media that disseminated Covid-19 related information. Thus finding ways on identifying credible sources require certain criteria or parameters against which sources could be evaluated. Hence the present study has been undertaken.

SOCIAL MEDIA DURING INITIAL PHASE

From 31st December 2019 (first case from China got reported to WHO) to 29th January 2020 (till no case in India reported), there used to be few messages on the new virus, how it spread in China, what happened in Wuhan city, how China was denying the reality, how it entered Europe, US and rest of the countries. None of us were serious and enjoyed many jokes/ cartoons/trolls on Chinese lifestyle, their eating habits, romantic lifestyle of Europeans, North Koreans way of handling the virus, etc., There were many fake and edited messages regarding the inability of European Governments including USA, inhuman approaches of the authorities of China mainly taken from different English and foreign language movies. Since these were not directly concerned to us, none of us bothered in the authentication of these fake messages. Later on there were postings on social media regarding “What will happen if it hits India?” became very popular for sharing, re-tweeting, forwarding or liking. Again here also there was a kind of mockery about our own Government’s administration and people’s attitude. Meanwhile there were few assurances that Corona will not enter India as it cannot sustain

summer here!!! We blindly believed this and remained busy in sharing, re-tweeting, liking, and forwarding and commenting.

30th January first case of COVID got reported in India. The reported case was a techie unfortunately. And all our anguish went on these techies. We still enjoyed the jokes on techies. However, Indians studying abroad, on visit to other countries on official reasons or personal visits started coming back, worsening situation in European countries – got reflected on social media. More on social media were related to symptoms of Corona, how to avoid corona, how healthy diet could be maintained, whether India has adequate facilities to stop the spreading. As usual the speculations occupied the top rankings in social media. Content on the social media remained the same as in the very initial stage with humorous jokes, ethnic comments, etc.

On 12th March 1st death was reported in India and that is in my own state Karnataka and that too in my hometown Gulbarga – a remote place in the state. He was an old man returning from Mecca. Now all the anguish centred on these pilgrims which got reflected in the social media. On 19th March – Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a call to Indians to observe one day Janata Curfew on 22nd March and at 5.00 pm on the same day asked them to clap, whistle, ring a bell to salute people who are serving the nation tirelessly. His call was welcomed in the social media from everyone and for a moment the entire India seemed to be truly united. A 14-hour voluntary public curfew at the instance of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was observed in accordance with the plan.

The government followed it up with lockdowns in 75 districts where COVID-19 cases had occurred as well as in all major cities. Social media reacted as usual without much deviation. Here and there we could find few rumours, fake news. As usual we neglected them. Social media being still humorous became platform for postings of stupid activities of over anxious citizens on the evening of 22nd March where people came out on the street in groups and deviated the whole purpose of Janata curfew. But nobody's sentiments were hurt; everyone enjoyed the postings, tweets, trolls. More rumours and ethnic discriminations got highlighted and again went out without any significant untoward incidents. Few reports on legal actions also were posted but not noticed significantly. On 24th March nationwide lockdown was declared by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and the social media started showing its true face with its account holders got divided into three groups – one favouring the lockdown and second opposing the lockdown and the third the biggest group – the forwarders. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for 'Diyaa Jalao' on April is a best example to prove how these groups made a mockery of the entire episode.

SOCIAL MEDIA DURING LOCKDOWN

It was observed in a study that first week of lockdown saw an individual spending more than four hours every day on social media. 87% increase in its usage was noticed compared to a week before lockdown. (Nielson's report). Overall a whopping 50X surge in India in social

media usage was observed. Not only Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram seeing increased traffic — Zoom and Skype user numbers have skyrocketed. It was felt that there was no control over social media. It went beyond anybody's guess as it became the primary source of information.

A lot of awareness campaigns were triggered through the social media. It provided an opportunity to everyone sitting at home to keep presence in the digital space. It helped us to stay connected, virtually — on every platform. It was inspirational to see the world connecting, sharing positive stories, tips and ways to get through this. News consumption occupied the top position. Companies have started using these platforms to brand their products. Tracking of COVID-19 and maintenance of public health became easier. It became a tool to help needy persons – Food, medical facilities, emergency issues.

Social media helped accessing recorded story time, online jigsaws, crafting how-to-do videos as well as signposting people to a range of online resources provided by all sorts of organisations. It became a platform to access shared old songs, old memories, etc and became quite a useful tool to access live stream exercise sessions. These also became viable tools to be used for online teaching-learning and meetings. In fact, there is no other sector compared to higher education which has used this platform for online-teaching. Many official meetings at the Government level, and also at the institutional level were successfully held. These became better platforms for the Government to reach the people

through PMs nationwide addresses and Government guidelines during the period.

Like every technology social media also have flip sides. Social media highlighted many incidents that harmed the normal situation. Political oriented misinterpretation of PMs, CMs, Governments decisions, actions were the most popular and criticized incidents that really questioned the very objectives proposed by PM and CMs. It created chaos by circulating misinformation/False information. In fact no other media damaged the coherence among the society, as this media has damaged due to unfiltered, uncensored, edited, bites and clippings.

During the period every individual acted as a disseminator of information, decision maker, judge, news analyst and self spokesperson on behalf of political/religious ideologies / Governments. These were really reflected in the social media leading to many hot discussions. They used to initiate the controversial discussion quite logically but never tried to attempt to end the discussion. This has really harmed the harmony among the society on different points. In fact social media have misled the print media as well as e-media which have on several occasions apologised for giving wrong information. There were many cases of cybercrimes of scams and frauds. Even privacy violation was observed by not scrapping data.

SOCIAL MEDIA DURING UNLOCK

When lockdown gets unfolded and slowly few relaxations were issued even before unlock officially announced mixed reactions were

reflected in the social media. Again the three groups – For, Against and the Forwarders played vital role. The issues that were highlighted include: Interstate train facility, different states adopting different quarantine norms, making available health facilities in private hospitals, low quality PPE kits and testing kits, inefficiency of Government hospitals in combating the disease. Other issues that were the subjects of trolling include: Online teaching, conducting of examinations, announcing of results, reopening of schools, colleges, career placements, job cuts, migration of labours who had returned earlier to their natives, way of cremating the dead bodies without any religious honours, etc. Later deaths of prominent people from film industry, political leaders, heavy rains and its aftermath, political instability in different parts of the country, war like situation in Indo-China, Indo-Nepal and Indo-Pak borders, Ram Mandir Shilanyasa at Ayodhya, Bills on farmers and Agriculture, CBI court decision on the demolition of Babri Masjid took the attention of people on the social media. Real issues like National Education Policy, rapid growth of COVID-19 and increasing death toll due to COVID, economic reforms needed to bring back Indian economy, online education, were sidelined. On the other hand issues like SSR death case, CBI enquiry, drugs – Bollywood, Sandalwood and Tollywood, IPL, unhealthy debates of US presidential candidates got more attraction. Above all the fake and misinformation on healthy medicines, vaccines, home isolation, were on the rampage putting common man into a real chaotic condition.

FAKE NEWS AND ITS DISSEMINATION

Sharing, forwarding, re-tweeting, messages, images, videos, edited videos, animations, audio clippings, edited audio clippings, that went viral have caused many damages. They have developed religious hatredness. In the initial phase it was the pilgrims returning from Mecca became the targets, later the Tablighi Jamaat created havoc among cross section of the society. Though the two significant festivals – Ugadi and Ramzan went peacefully, much fake news about celebration of Hindu festivals in different temples and offering of Namaaz created irritation among people. End result was exchanging of heated words by both wings.

Attack on officials, health warriors, escaped suspects, confirmed but recovered patients have also added to the problem of fake news. Discrimination of people based on ethnicity, nationality, race, profession, area of residence, etc also reported and finally found to be fake. Panic buying (from vegetables to liquor) was highlighted to such an extent that police had to interfere in the matter. The liquor sale was shown throughout the day and projected as if they were the lifters of Indian economy during the lockdown. Fake news about health issues (Heart attack, paralysis, rise in BP level, mental illness) also went viral leading to chaos among people. Migration of labours from one place to another was projected as a failure of different state Governments and Central Government.

SECURITY ISSUES GOT HIGHLIGHTED

Everything was fine with social media till Ministry of Defence, GOI instructed its officers not to use ZOOM for its confidential meetings. Later for all official meetings, conducting online classes these issues were of prime concern even though Ministry of Home Affairs came with guidelines. Even the same held good with ‘Arogya Setu’ App. But we continued to use the same social media to get connected with family members which requires much privacy without bothering security issues. Women actively participated in ‘@challenge accepted’ and @phir muskurayegaindia’ by posting their photos in spite of being aware that they might be distorted and misused.

LEGAL ACTIONS TAKEN

FIR was lodged against a man in Arunachal Pradesh for allegedly posting misleading information regarding its outbreak. An employee of Software Company from Bengaluru was arrested for his social media post that encouraged people to venture out and spread the virus. Three people were arrested for circulating a fake audio clip which suggested that 59 fresh cases were reported in Nagpur, Maharashtra. A 29-year-old woman was arrested in Kolkata for allegedly spreading rumours related to the outbreak by posting fake news on social media. But these did not get much attention from the social media. Still fake news/rumours were being spread.

WHO REFERRED IT AS INFODEMIC

In the COVID context no one is searching any information; information is just flowing in to

their mailboxes. Just open any social media hundreds of messages, news clippings, images, memes, stories, videos, images are waiting for you. These are customized according to the needs of creators not consumer of information. World Health Organization worries that in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, they must also combat an infodemic, “an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” Governor Baker warned against relying on social media who cautioned to use the information sensibly. Here comes the importance of ignoring the irrelevant. Few decades back A. C. Fosket has warned. “The problem faced by contemporary society is not that of information over load but that of telling the people how to ignore the irrelevant”. It is aptly applicable now also in this pandemic period. But the biggest problem is how to ignore the irrelevant.

Social-media platforms continue to be dangerous socio-technical vulnerability in times of confusion and crisis. During any crisis one's information searching behaviour changes due to curiosity and uncertainty. Much of the health related information which is available on the social media is confusing and misleading that people are neither believing Government advises nor the medical practitioners. On the other hand, they believe what is being spread on social media which are neither authentic nor reliable. Spread of such health misinformation is causing more damages to the individuals, families and there by the nation. In the name of immunity many fraud companies have started giving fake

advertisements and are reselling the unused, outdated products in reconsolidated format. Even today it is not officially known when vaccine for Covid disease will enter the market. But already there are many medicines and immunity boosters that claim to be solution providers to the disease. This calls for evaluation of information before using it.

CONTENT EVALUATION – THE ONLY SOLUTION

Information is considered as a resource. In the digital era, it is being created, and disseminated quite easily. It needs to be assessed against certain parameters whether it as an information or misinformation. The following criteria could be used in evaluating the digital information.

- ♦ Credibility
- ♦ Bias
- ♦ Accuracy
- ♦ Currency
- ♦ Relevance
- ♦ Significance
- ♦ Intended audience
- ♦ Usability

Credibility

One has to test the credibility of the information before using it. In order to check the credibility following questions can be put to oneself and make an assessment based on that.

- ♦ How credible or believable is the source?
- ♦ Credentials: Who is the creator and what is his reputation?

- ♦ Arguments: Are arguments for the creator's point of view logical and well reasoned?
- ♦ Documentation: Are facts and arguments supported by references or sources?

Bias

The information should never be biased towards any argument. It must be objective and impartial. The following questions will help us to know whether information is biased or not?

- ♦ Does the source seem to have a hidden agenda or rigidly narrow point of view?
- ♦ Does the source distort other points of view or dismiss them out of hand?
- ♦ Does the source accept advertising? If so, does the advertising appear to bias the information?
- ♦ Is there a conflict of interest? Does the source stand to profit financially or politically from a particular point of view?

Accuracy

The information should be accurate enough and the following questions will help us to know to what extent these are authentic.

- ♦ Does the author give supporting documentation for facts presented?
- ♦ Is the cited documentation reputable?
- ♦ Are significant generalizations supported by facts?
- ♦ Does the information contradict other reliable sources?
- ♦ Does the text include numerous typos?

Currency, Relevancy, Significance, Intended Audience

It is important to know whether the available information is current, relevant, and significant and is meant for an intended audience. Hence the following questions require satisfactory answers.

- ♦ Is the information current?
- ♦ Is the information relevant to your need?
- ♦ Is the information significant?
- ♦ Is the information designed for an audience

Usability

The other most important aspect is to look for whether the information is in usable condition or not. The following parameters will help in knowing to what extent the information is in a usable condition.

- ♦ How usable is this information?
- ♦ For what it can be used?

IMPLICATIONS ON THE INDIVIDUALS

It calls for one need to be information literate. By information literate it means a person "who is able to determine the extent of information needed, access the needed information effectively and efficiently, evaluate information and its sources critically, incorporate selected information into one's own knowledge base, use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and understand the economic, legal and social issues, surrounding the use of information and access and use information ethically and legally".

It is required to create an info literate group around you – family, friends circle, neighbourhood, Colony, Community within. We need to signpost people to reliable sources of information, encourage them to be inquisitive and challenge where they read/see things that don't seem true. Now, more than ever it is vital that people are using reliable sources of information, questioning where their information is coming from and who is saying what and for what reasons.

Google News Initiatives (GNI), Facebook have come out with special drives, with myth busters and literacy programmes. TV channels also not lagging behind – fake/real, sach/zoot, etc.,. For reliable information one can visit WHO official website: CORONA myth busters: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> and Government of India official page: <https://www.mygov.in/covid-19>. All the states also have their portal in their official websites.

Everyone should understand that they do not forward or share or re-tweet unless they find it necessary. They need to be a force for good. It is their responsibility to educate, engage and empower your people. The fight cannot be effective without empowering people and without the full participation of our people.

CONCLUSION

People are social creatures by nature and social media satisfy their needs. It is more likely that they are going to use these social media in the future. This behavioural change will shape the future of social media usage. It is easy to get hung up about the negatives that can be associated with

social media. It's essential that we should use these platforms carefully and responsibly. Otherwise, social media will become more dangerous than the CORONA virus itself. We're all in this together after all. Hence the information on the social media requires careful evaluation.

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