SOCIAL MEDIA AND COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES' AMPLIFICATION OF MISLEADING INFORMATION

By

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has attracted academic discourse in different respects. These studies range from role of social media in information dissemination to effects of COVID-19 outbreak on society. Despite attempts made to investigate the emerging conspiracy theories in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, rarely does literature underscores how social media serve as platform to amplify COVID-19-related conspiracy theories that find social media as platform to viralise the misleading information embedded in the theories. Premised on this, this study was carried out to articulate the place of the conspiracy theories as misleading information pertaining to COVID-19 pandemic on social media platforms. Anchored on public sphere theory, the study argues that misleading information on social media as encapsulated in the theories have negative consequences including non-adherence to scientific measures to address the menace of COVID-19, stereotype of groups or countries, and erosion of trust and confidence in governments and other agencies, and spiraling infections and deaths mainly due to media illiteracy. The study recommends among other things the need for people to discountenance misleading information through media literacy as well as strictly adhere to non-pharmaceutical and scientific measures meant to reduce the rate of infections and deaths worldwide. It also recommends that developers of social media platforms should strengthen effort in deploying fact-checkers to dispel misleading information and make available and easily visible authoritative COVID-19- related content.

Keywords: anti-vaxxers, coronavirus, misinformation/disinformation, public sphere, social media

Introduction

Precisely on December 31**,** 2019, news from the World Health Organisation (WHO) filtered the public realm that there was an outbreak of a novel virus known as coronavirus also called COVID-19. The emerging strand of the coronavirus was not declared as a global pandemic until March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organisation which is recognised as the global body responsible for championing the cause of health-related issues. Its pandemic status was premised on the fact that from the inconsequential beginning of the virus traced to China's Wuhan laboratory, it rapidly spread to other parts of the world. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus alludes to this shortly after the outbreak that over the past two weeks, the number of cases outside China increased 13-fold and the number of countries with cases increased threefold (cited in Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). This signaled a clear indication of further increase if appropriate actions to contain the alarming levels of spread and severity of the virus were not taken.

Predating the emergence of COVD-19 virus were other pandemics. The most severe pandemic of the 20th century has been the 1918 influenza pandemic, caused by H1H1 virus, which affected one-third of the world's population and resulted in 50 million deaths (Tambenbagir & Morens, 2006 cited in Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy & Sengottaiyan, 2020). Duraisammy *et al* (2020) further reveal that human corona virus were responsible for a considerable proportion of upper respiratory tract infections among children, first in the 1960s, and later came to limelight with the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003.

Understandably, information about issues, events, phenomena, and developments is central to individuals and collective existence of societies and the global community. Information outlets for an emerging virus like COVID-19 pandemic include traditional mass media, and of course, social media. The democratic nature of social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WeChat, Instagram and Twitter makes users to be both receivers of information and producers and transmitters of content. Accurate and credible dissemination of right information about the virus causing a pandemic could help in controlling the spread of virus and associated anxiety and depression as well as cushion the economic effect of the pandemic on the population (Sharma, Yadav, Yadav & Ferdinand, 2016). Thus, shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19, information about the probable origin, cause, methods of transmission, and effects dominated media air ways.

Inability of scientists to come up with drugs and vaccines to treat the virus meant that people relied on information about preventive measures. To forestall infection, governments intensified advocacy on social media on the need for social distancing, adherence to basic hygiene like regular washing of hands with soap and water, use of sanitizer, appropriate use of face masks, and restraint from touching surfaces.

Even as sustained advocacy was made, recorded cases of infections and deaths for COVID-19 had been on the rise. Reasons are not far-fetched. Not everybody complied with stipulated rules and directives. In addition, limited testing and isolation centres and facilities greatly thwarted efforts to contain the virus. Despite the assumed sophistication of health systems of advanced nations like United States of America and the United Kingdom just to mention two, the surge in rate of infection and deaths seemingly defiled the acclaimed health systems. Developing countries were left at the mercy of substandard health systems to grapple with the challenge of COVID-19. In addition, illiteracy and ignorance that exacerbated community transmission was bolstered by misleading information. Lack of censor mechanism for social media provided impetus for misleading information which is regarded as fake, untrue, fabricated, and reconstructed information to achieve an aim.

An offshoot of the outbreak of COVID-19 was a plethora of conspiracy theories which social media provided fertile grounds for the theories to survive. Convinced that social media platforms form the basis for crystalisation and amplification of misleading information in different pandemic outbreaks and COVID-19 pandemic in particular, this study interrogates the import of varying COVID-19 pandemic-related conspiracy theories which existence are harnessed and fostered on the social media. The motivation for the study is borne out of conviction that it is unlikely existing literatures dwell on the relationship between social media and theories of conspiracy vis-à-vis COVID-19. A scan on literature shows a range of studies including crisis communication and public perception of COVID-19 risk in the era of social media (Malecki, Keating & Saftdar, 2020), Social media and types, sources and claims of COVID-19 disinformation (Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nelsen, 2020; Pennycrook, McPhetres, Zhang & Rand, 2020), Coronavirus and disinformation (Colomina, 2020), and the impact of social media on panic during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmad & Mustaf, 2020). This implies an existing

research gap needs to be filled. Hence, this paper examined social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theories' amplification of misleading information.

Theoretical Framework

The study made use of public sphere theory attributed to Jurgen Habermas which pre-supposes that in human existence, there always exist an arena that enables people to share ideas, feelings, and opinions or views about issues or phenomena that affect their daily lives. According to Odugbemi (2008) public sphere is a space where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns. This arena could be likened to network for communicating information. Putting this to perspective, Habermas (1997) cited in Adut (2012) writes that "by 'public sphere' we mean first a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion" (p.239). By virtue of this submission, what is regarded as public sphere is not discriminatory and it provides unfettered access and use of the realm for people to willingly engage in public discourse.

The theory gives insights into the eighteenth century saloons to the contemporary physical and virtual spaces where people partake in conversation regarding the common good. Contributing to the theory, Sesen (2011) is of the view that the theory explains the widespread and informed participation. But experience has shown that with the advent of Internet and social media which appear to mask what constitute public sphere in our contemporary time, not only informed participation that characterises it. Both negative and positive contributions filter in the social media for public consumption.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic at the time social media is inevitable makes people easily and freely access messages, create content and disseminate what has been created to public. Much of what is presented on the social media is misleading information; a deviant of information that is necessary for the society. This is the reason public sphere theory is considered applicable for the study.

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Covid-19 and Social Media

COVID-19 virus is an emerging pandemic that first registered its presence on global health map in 2019. Its origin is generally traced to China as having a direct link with China's Wuhan laboratory. Since its outbreak, the human-to-human infectious disease has exponentially spread to almost every country of the world with catastrophic consequences.

COVID-19 pandemic is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered novel strain of coronavirus, SARS-CoV (WHO, 2020a). At the early months of the outbreak, efforts to claim availability of reliable drug or vaccine for treatment did not yield fruitful results. However, the resilience of researchers has given birth to a vaccine, Astrazeneca which has been distributed and its administration begun worldwide. Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever and respiratory illness with no special treatment available. As of August 14, 2020, reported confirmed cases of infections and deaths were 21,072,125 and 757,471 respectively (WHO, 2020b). In a pandemic situation like COVID-19 outbreak, social media have become the most searched avenue for information gathering and to sway public opinion.

The practice of swaying opinion on the Internet is a long-standing issue as malicious actors attempt to push their agenda. Accompanying the advent of the Internet is the social media networking sites and platforms which have become imperative in message creation and dissemination. The social media enhance social interaction, provide opportunity for entertainment, and serve as platform for sharing of productive information including academic and health-related messages. In the same way, they have dramatically increased the degree of credibility of personal opinions and allowed them to spread more rapidly (Orso, Federici, Copetti & Vetrugno, 2020).

In the current scenario of COVID-19 outbreak, social media platforms are crucially disseminating information globally. The social media platforms share information with incredible speed, reach, and penetration. According to Le Garza (2020), governments, health experts and scientists are using social media to directly engage with the public, to share accurate information and discuss awareness, safety measures and emerging research, and community leaders are using it to form networks of publics volunteering to help the vulnerable. To further

buttress use of social media platform in fostering COVID-19 pandemic messages, the WHO (2020) points out that the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organisation (WHO), a large number of healthcare organisations and journals are regularly posting and updating awareness and guidance across a host of online platforms.

However, social media are criticised for facilitating dishonest and unpalatable messages. As Charlton (2020) argues, social media have become a conduit for mushrooming rumours and deliberate misleading information. Many people, organisations and even governments are deploying sites such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Youtube, LinkedIn, WeChat, and Telegram to create a state of panic and confusion with fake news and the spread of misleading information. Charlton (2020) accuses social media for perpetrating misleading or false medical advice about COVD-19 pandemic that travel around the world before anyone has a chance to debunk it. In their submission, Perakslis and Califf (2019) affirm that sharing of misleading information is as old as humanity, and a regrettable concomitant of the current digital scenario is the augmentation and accelerated spread of misleading information. The implication is that use of misleading information predates advent of social media which now exacerbates misleading information about COVID-19. But the World Health Organisation is working with giant social media platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Tencent, and TikTok to provide the public with accurate information on time and eliminate misleading information (Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy, & Sengottaiyan, 2020). This step has potentials of building confidence in public on governments and other stakeholders in handling the pandemic, eliminating fear and despairs in society and ultimately ameliorates the spread of the virus infection and deaths.

Misleading Information in Context

Misleading information, otherwise known as misinformation, can be defined as any claim of fact that is currently false due to lack of scientific evidence (Chou, Oh & Klein, 2018). It can also be regarded as false or inaccurate information circulating as a result of honest mistakes, negligence, or unconscious biases (Soe, 2018; Fallis, 2015). This implies inaccurate information in general. Misleading information could be deliberately promoted or accidentally shared on social media. This brings to focus the idea that misleading information has disinformation as its alternate and their distinction is on the basis of source's intent to deceive. Misinformation related to the

COVID-19 pandemic has gained much popularity and amplified the threat facing humanity about the continuous spread of the virus regardless of one's location. Since misleading information could be accidental or not deliberate with the intention to mislead, people who do not initiate the message but simply re-transmit any misleading information serves as good example of unintentional transmission of misleading information.

Disinformation refers to malicious misleading information deliberately aimed at deceiving others. It may be difficult to identify disinformation since the source of the information does not want people to realise that the information is inaccurate or misleading. Although, the intent of the initiator and promoter is different or impossible to deduct from the information itself, some indicators can be inferred from the contextual circumstances, where it appears or even from the etymology of the term (Hrckova, Siba, Moro, Blaho, Simko, Navrat & Bielikova, 2019). A remarkable indicator as regards place of origin is made pellucid by Fetzer (2004) that the word disinformation was coined in Russian vocabulary as *desinformatsiya* which means false, mistaken or misleading information in an intentional, deliberate, or purposeful effort to mislead, deceive, or confuse people (cited in Hrckova, Siba, Moro, Blaho, Simko, Navrat & Bielikova, 2019). This definition underscores the idea of a conscious and deliberate doing rather than unconscious and accidental action.

Irrespective of the concepts; misinformation or disinformation, it is easy to transmit misleading information. What is required is simply a very little technical skill to create or access and widely disseminate misinformation or disinformation. For example, anyone with Internet access can anonymously insert misleading information into a platform. People disseminating misleading information use a given format. This includes form of reconfiguration, where existing and often time information is spun, twisted, recontextualised, or reworked (Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nelsen, 2020).

In view of the alarming rate misleading information about COVID-19 is peddled on the social media platforms, social media companies are exploring ways of holding those who post misleading information accountable over the content published on their platforms. Niam Yaraghi argues in this direction that over the years, social media companies have designed a set of

automated and human-driven processes to edit, promote or filter published content, as these platforms have become primary sources of information for a large number of users (cited in Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy, & Sengottaiyan, 2020). For example, WhatsApp, along with the government of India has launched the MyGovCorona Helpdesk Chatbot for the first time, wherein the users have to send a text to a designated number: +91-9013151515 to receive verified information on COVID-19 (whatsapp.com). Similarly, Facebook Preventive Health tool provides individuals with vetted guidelines about preventive health recommendations and then directs users to geo-targeted locations where these services are available (Merchant, 2020).

In Nigeria, the Federal Government and its agencies own websites that are accessible to citizenry for inquiry as well as to keep pace with the trajectory of steps government takes to contain the pandemic. For example, https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng and https://ncdc.gov.ng are the websites the Presidential Task Force and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control operate respectively. These agencies also make use of social media platforms like Twitter (@NCDCGov), Facebook (@NCDCGov), Telegram (time/NCDCgov[Telegram]),

The Nigerian federal government took a step forward to come up with relevant laws to check misleading information. One of these laws is the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control Act. This Act which was initiated prior to the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, arrogates NCDC the right to regulate social media with misleading information content. However, Onyemelukwe (2020) argues that, even though the NCDC Act confers the role of communicating relevant public health information to the NCDC, it does not specify the role of the public or address issues relating to misinformation.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

A common feature of any event or phenomena is numerous and varying conspiracy theories that emanate with a view to explaining the trajectory of such event or phenomena. Previous research (Oliver & Wood, 2014 cited in Abaide & Takshe, 2020) has established tendency of conspiracy theories to arise during times of crisis, such as periods of political instability, economic threats, and public health crisis, creating even more chaos and trepidation. Similarly, natural phenomenon attracts conspiracy theories. This is also applicable to disease or virus outbreak like

the current COVID-19 that is rampaging globally. As Lewandowsky, Cook, Ecker and Van der Linden (2020) assert, when people suffer a loss of control or feel threatened, they become more vulnerable to believing conspiracies. The COVID-19 pandemic is a fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories on the social media and many people are inclined to subscribe to these theories depending on the extent they are affected by the spate of the virus.

Various conspiracy theories on COVID-19 pandemic range from the creation of a biological weapon to break-the-economic-supremacy of China against other economically endowed nations like the United States of America to the use of local herbs or products (e.g. coconut oil, ginger, garlic) to cure the virus have been asserted on various social media platforms (Pennycrook, McPhetres, Zhang & Rand, 2020). Premised on this, the study streamlines discussion to the following two prominent theories.

Biological warfare theory

According to conspiracy theorists, the virus outbreak was the result of a biological warfare rather than a natural occurrence (Millett & Snyder, 2017). Two versions exist on this theory. One of these theories claims that COVID-19 pandemic is a US biological weapon in its trade war with China and that Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates owns the patent for the virus (Colomina, 2020). In affirmation of the narratives that the virus was deliberately created with the end goal of getting everyone vaccinated, Goodman and Carmichael (2020) substantiate that one popular Italian video which was narrated by Stefano Montari viewed more than 700,000 times on Facebook has a caption claiming that the pandemic was invented. Even as researchers seem convinced that US, which is fronted by Bill Gates intentionally created the virus, other researchers view the development differently. In the words of Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy and Sengottaiyan (2020), who expressed ambivalence on the exact origin of the theory said the virus, being a biological weapon was created either by the US to destroy Chinese or China to destroy Americans. Despite the rebuttal by the United States Government and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the argument furthers that chemical weapons allegedly developed by the US in a Georgian laboratory was exported to China by US army. A strong link is thus established between the virus and Bill Gates due to his alleged plot to use vaccinations as a pretext to implant microchips into people. Accordingly, Thomas and Zhang (2020) corroborate that it is not only Americans

that hold the belief pointing out that 13% of Australians are convinced that Bill Gates played a role in the creation and spread of the coronavirus; and among young Australians, it is 20%, while protests around the world, from Germany to Melbourne, have included Gates chants and slogans.

Another version of this theory which links the outbreak of the virus to China rather than the US which target is not specifically US but the global community elaborately goes thus:

> China is developing bioweapons. It has the anti-viral medicine for coronavirus. The virus was introduced in Wuhan from its special laboratory there, into the Wuhan wild-life butchery market. Once the virus attain threshold, China will cure its citizens and claim that the endemic is under control. Then it will manufacture the anti-viral medicine and sell to other countries (Okediya, 2020, p.1).

Similar narratives hold that COVID-19 virus not only escaped from a Chinese laboratory, but it was intentionally created by Chinese scientists as a biological weapon. According to Pew Research, nearly three-in-ten Americans believe that COVID-19 virus was made in a laboratory either intentionally or accidentally with the former more popular. In specific terms, 23 percent believe it was developed intentionally, with only 6 percent believing it was an accident (Schaeffer, 2020). Schaeffer stretches that nearly three-in-ten Americans believe COVID-19 virus was made in laboratory. The theory that the Chinese somehow created the virus is particularly popular on the US political scene. Senator Tom Cotton, who amplified the theory, claimed that the Wuham Institute of Virology was linked to Beijing's covert bio-weapons programme.

The sheer coincidence of China's lead Institute studying bat coronaviruses being the same city as the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has proved too convincing for conspiracists to dispel the idea that it was not from China. This explains why people refer to it as 'the CCP virus' which stands for the Chinese Communist Party virus. The theory has now tipped into the mainstream being reported in social media and the conventional mass media like Channels Television, TVC News, Washington Post, The Times (UK), and many other mass media outlets (Lynas, 2020).

Despite the plausible theorising that the original epicenter of the pandemic, the Chinese city of Wuhan also hosts a virology Institute where researchers have been studying bat corona viruses

for a long time, this theory can be easily debunked with unambiguous scientific evidence. Through generic sequencing, the SARS-CoV-2 virus has entirely natural origins as a zoonotic virus originating in bats. On grounds that the virus is intentional seems defective as rarely is the intentionality substantiated. One of these researchers, Shi Zhengli, who spent years collecting bats during samples in caves was sufficiently concerned about the prospect that she spent days in frantically checking laboratory records to see if anything had gone wrong. She admits breathing a sigh of relief when generic sequencing showed the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus did not match any of the viruses sampled and studied in Wuhan Institute of Virology by her team.

Big pharmacy theory

This theory holds that COVID-19 is a plot by established pharmaceutical companies to sell quack products. The basic principle of this theory rests on the assumption that the conspiracists try to convince people to believe that evidence-based (i.e. conventional) medicine does not work and is a plot by big pharmaceutical companies to make people ill. Accordingly, big pharmaceutical companies are a staple of anti-vaccination narratives, so it is hardly surprising that they have transmuted into the age of the coronavirus. Plots and sub-plots seem to involve people like Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci, who became a new target of misleading information. The theorists make several unsubstantiated claims including allegations that vaccine trials will be dangerously rushed or that experts on infectious diseases like Anthony Fauci would block cures to enrich vaccine makers.

Key proponents of this theory is Alex Jones, who urges viewers to buy expensive miracle pills that he claims can cure all known diseases including COVID-19 virus, and Dr. Mercola, a quack anti-vax and anti-GMO medic, who has been banned from Google due to peddling misleading information claiming that vitamins and numerous products he sells can cure or prevent COVID-19 virus (Lynas, 2020). NatureNews, a conspiracist site, sells all manner of pills claims that the pills can cure or prevent the virus. These claims were eminently featured in the social media shortly after the outbreak of the virus. Probably, this inclined Gates (2020) to caution when COVID-19 virus broke out that anti-vaxxers have already started to peddle misinformation about corona virus vaccines before one even exists potentially eroding confidence in what could be humanity’s best chance to defeat the virus. In reference to the New York Times, Lynas (2020)

explains that anti-vaxxers, members of QAnon and right-wing pundits, who viralise this theory have seized on a video of a 2015 Ted talk given by Gates where he discussed the Ebola outbreak and warned of a new pandemic to bolster their claims he had foreknowledge of the COVD-19 pandemic or even purposely caused it. Other perspectives point to the fact that COVD-19 virus is a dastardly Gates-led plot to vaccinate the world's population.

Some truths can be inferred from this line of thought. Vaccinating much of the world's population may well be the only way to avoid an eventual death toll. Example can be seen from use of vaccines to mitigate polio, small pox, and measles among millions of people, who have benefited from it. But anti-vaxxers do not believe vaccines work. Instead, some have spread the myth that Gates wants to use a vaccination programme to implant digital microchips that will somehow track and control people.

The implantation of digital microchips and control of people introduces a dimension to the theory. In addition, the global presumption of compulsory vaccine administration attracts the ire of skeptics, who conclude that mandatory vaccine requirement violates their religious freedom. The spread of misleading information has meant that ID2020, a small non-profit that focuses on establishing digital IDs for the poorer people around the world, has received wide condemnation. More fundamentally, the vaccine misinformation could have a lethal consequence as it has the potentials of leading people to opt for bogus cure instead.

Other COVID-19 conspiracy theories include geographical conditions theory which favours Africa. In Africa, from the onset of the pandemic, there was some misleading information that due to perhaps the geographical conditions (e.g. warm temperatures) of the continent, the causative organisms of the virus would not thrive (Ahinkorah *et al.*, 2020). In addition, conspiracists hold the misleading information that Africans may have strong immune systems to battle the virus (Ryder, 2020). But the surge in number of infections and deaths among Africans in Africa debunk this misleading information. There is a theory of COVID-19 denials which skeptics doubt its existence or reality. They look at the virus as a hoax. But those conspiracists fail to answer the question of serial infections and deaths worldwide. Apart from the foregoing theories is the theory that COVID-19 death rates are inflated. This indicates a shift from theory

of non-existence of COVID-19 to its reality but unrealistic deaths recorded. The hoax theory amplifies the irrationality of people not to observe lockdown regulations or other social distancing measures. Even if there is falsification of deaths, for political reasons, it is curious that China was accused of being conservative or economical with her death rate. On the contrary, other countries including US, the UK, Spain and later Brazil, seemingly recorded inconvenient highest deaths. What appears an awkward conspiracy theory associated with COVID-19 is misleading information that the coronavirus is only a danger to the elderly and the rich. Such spurious content is not necessarily illegal but can directly endanger lives and severely undermine efforts to contain the pandemic. Regular up-to-date information about those infected does not indicate discrimination on bases of age and financial status. It can be argued that most recorded deaths are the elderly; this does not mask the fact that young people are not vulnerable to the pandemic neither are only the rich that die of the virus. Fundamentally, most of reported cases are the rich that are tested at the expense of the poor that lack access to testing facilities. Stretching the dimension of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy and Sengottaiyan (2020) add that COVID-19 is the likely by-product of Chinese foods, like bat soups among other foods; unverified home remedies like vitamin C, cow urine, turmeric, and cure is controlled by government is among the contending conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 pandemic. Another theory is the 5G conspiracy theories, a variant which hallmark is that the latest connectivity technology is responsible for the rapid speed COVID-19 virus spread. They vainly explain that the fifth generation phone network which uses radio waves to communicate weakens the immune system by emitting harmful radiation and, therefore, facilitates the entry of the coronavirus in the body system (Shaltami, 2020). But the 5G already existed in other countries like Denmark and South Africa long before outbreak of COVID-19 virus without unleashing the harmful effect. Besides, the theory does not accuse 5G for originating the COVID-19 virus, but aiding in its spread.

As earlier noted, when an issue or a phenomena occurs, there is bound for different perspectives that evolve to theories to manifest, all in attempt to explain why such things happen, where they happen, why they happen and who and what is responsible for what has happened, the consequences and remedial approach. In this context, these conspiracy theories simply emerged to achieve this objective.

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Effects of Conspiracy Theories on Society

Conspiracy theories are not formulated for their sake but to achieve the agendas of formulators and their adherents. These theories could have socio-cultural, economic, political, scientific, and technological colouration. In spite of the contribution of these theories, some have become polluted with the inadvertent spread of misleading and false information in the form of images, voice messages, text messages, and videos.

The adverse phenomenon led to dislocation of economic activities. Business activities in individual countries stalemated leading to drastic decline in global manufacturing disruptions causing massive supply chain problems worldwide. Given that China was identified as originator of the virus as encapsulated in biological weapon theory, all forms of assaults targeted the Asian community, not just people of Chinese descent, and it accuses both online and offline in the form of anti-Asian violence leading to decline in experts from pharmaceuticals to cell phones (Abaido & Takshe, 2020). This brings down its economy and weakens its global growth and expansion (Mearsheimer, 2014). Even as other countries are not accused of serving as base originating the virus, the global lockdown disrupted their political, educational and business life and ultimately, economic uncertainty. In Nigeria, for examples, academic activities were grounded as federal states and local governments directed total closure of schools at all levels.

In the religious realm, worshippers were embargoed on the number of congregation at a time. Many religious leaders, especially the orthodox religious organisations accepted COVID-19 as a real disease and actively encouraged their followers to accept and practice lockdown and social distancing measures introduced by government (Ibrahim, 2020). This forms the basis to which violators of the restriction order were arrested. Udende, Akpede and Adisa (2020) pointed out that two Imams were arrested in Kaduna State, Nigeria for defying the maximum 50 people gathering order. Similarly, in Ogun State, Nigeria, more than 50 Muslim faithful were arrested for non-adherence to the restriction order for observing Jumat prayer on Friday, March 27, 2020 in multitude (TVC News, March 27, 2020).

Viralised misleading information leads to fear, panic and confusion made possible through exaggerated and unverified claims. This lends credence to Strauss' (2018) suggestion that even

after dissipation of a pandemic in certain countries, the governments, public health authorities, and digital corporations have to not only promote digital literacy, but also combat the irreversible post-truth age spawned by the impact of social media in advancing conspiracy theories.

Although some of the influx of this misleading information may be harmless, others might pose a serious threat by misleading the general population to depend on unjustified and unsubstantiated claims for protection and show preference for them against scientifically proved guidelines (Ahinhorah, Ameyaw, Hagan, Seidu & Schack, 2020). Some of the unjustifiable claims are use of garlic, chewing of raw *okra*, intake of *dogoyaro* concoction, use of coconut oil, ginger, vitamin C, and cow urine.

The widespread misguided COVID-19 information spread the disease quickly and causes xenophobia on African continent (Shimizu, 2020). It certainly leads to stigmatisation of specific countries and religions along with the bolstering of particular agendas or arguments which China and most Asian countries were affected in this regard (Colomina, 2020). For example, some misleading posts on social media depicted Muslims worshipping in mosques in violation of social distancing dictated by COVID-19 virus. Similar posts targeted Christian faithful.

Intra-state and international border closures became eminent especially during the early days of the virus outbreak. Target was on countries heavily inflicted by the virus. In Nigeria for example, immigrants from Spain, China and the UK were temporarily banned from entry. Similar sect stereotype and prejudice found expression in other continents including Europe and America. This explains why national borders were closed following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. In Europe, for example, the immediate response of the far right in France, Germany and Italy was to demand stricter border controls. Marine Le Pen is quoted as attacking the European Union of free movement and demanded the reinstatement of borders that protect citizens in any circumstances even beyond the coronavirus (Colomina, 2020). Similarly, the universal suspension of arrivals from Europe decreed by the US President, Donald Trump in 2020 enshrines the isolation of an administration that faces questions over its underestimation of the coronavirus crisis.

Social confinement has obliged millions of people to stay in their homes. With the outbreak of COVID-19 virus, a key measure to mitigate its widespread was restriction governments placed on movement of people with exception of those on essential services like security personnel and health personnel. Schools, public offices, and business centres were closed. The confinement of all categories of people irrespective of gender, age and social status led to a spike in the use of social media as means of access to information, while online platforms, fact-checkers were reporting millions of misleading information.

Recommendations

Given the numerous dire consequences arising from misleading information as embedded in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 that is viralised on the social media platforms, the following recommendations are made to keep pace with the new normal.

In order to dispel harmful misleading information, developers of various social media should intensify efforts in using fact-checking devices as the case has been with WeChat. Other social media platforms yet to adopt the device should do so without delay. These social media should then be agile in ensuring amplification of right and trustable sources to enable unsuspecting public not to fall prey to unsubstantiated claims as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook has been doing.

Arising from the fact that misleading information capitalises on low media and digital literacy to thrive, it is suggested that governments, policy makers, public health authorities, digital corporations and civil society organisations should take initiatives to upgrade media literacy among the illiterate community that could possibly influence the social media trends independently of any actions by the platforms. As media literacy increases people's ability to recognise and react to misleading information, it will allay public fear, panic and confusion that are likely to remain even after dissipation of COVID-19 pandemic.

Those who promote misleading information on the social media should be tracked by security operatives and prosecuted in competent courts of law where such behaviours are illegal and appropriate sanctions should apply in line with applicable legal norms. If people perpetrate this

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nefarious act through hacking or phishing other people's account, which amounts to cybercrime, social media operators should delete links to spread malware and in conjunction with law enforcement authorities as well as citizens, generate awareness-raising campaigns to raise people's consciousness on misleading information.

Given that viralisation of unsubstantiated health claims in attempt to promote illegal sale of miracle products as preventive or curative measure of COVID-19 amounts to consumer fraud, it is recommended that consumer protection authorities and online platforms should act against such practices with a view to halting it.

Conclusion

This study provides an understanding on some COVID-19 conspiracy theories that amplify misleading information on the social media, the inherent implications on society, and provides recommendations, which if adhered to, will mitigate the damning harmful effect of these falsehoods. The conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that the outbreak of novel COVID-19 pandemic led to emergence of varied conspiracy theories that found social media as fertile environment to thrive. Unfortunately, instead of the theories to contribute towards mitigating the harmful consequences of the deadly virus, the theories, rather worsened the rapid spread of infections and deaths globally due to misleading information.

Based on the discourse, the various conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19 pandemic include disbelief of COVID-19 existence, biological weapon and anti-vaxxers. Topical in the discourse are the last two theories which critics of the theories note that subscribing to the theories spells doom on humanity rather than preserve life. And the vantage position social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram among others assume in viralising public opinion on COVID-19 virus is crucial. As space for public discourse, these platforms will continue to serve as means of information dissemination including misleading information.

It should be noted that people who believe in and promote conspiracy theories on social media do not trust powerful groups, who they consider to be withholding information, such as politicians and drug companies (Millett & Snyder, 2017). If the public does not maintain trust in

governmental organisations, they are less likely to follow any medical advice or procedures and to follow preventive measures. They may have the tendency of using dangerous alternatives as treatments, which will most likely increase the possibilities of the virus spreading and thus endangering more lives (Abaido & Takshe, 2020).

Given the outbreak of novel COVID-19 pandemic that sparked conspiracy theories, and the inevitability of social media platforms for content creation, dissemination and reception, the study makes suggestions which may not completely eliminate, but mitigate misleading information on COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant negative consequences.

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